

A sociological study of the formation of modern fandoms on the digital platform Threads: A case study of Labubu doll collectors among Generation Z students at the University of Mazandaran in 1404

Somayeh Bolboli-Ghadikolaei¹

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Extended Abstract

Purpose

The present study seeks to sociologically examine the formation of modern fandoms on the digital platform of Threads with a case study of Labubu doll collectors among Generation Z students at the University of Mazandaran. In fact, this research pursues three main goals: 1) Identifying students' tendency to collect Labubu dolls, 2) Analyzing how these students redefine their identity through the act of collecting, and 3) Examining the role of the virtual platform of Threads in the formation of fan communities (fandoms). This study seeks to understand an important paradox in which Generation Z consumers have turned to buying products whose final contents they cannot control (the contents of the lucky boxes), and this uncertainty has itself contributed to the product's global success.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The present study was conducted by adopting a qualitative approach and using a combination of two methods: netnography and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Netnography was used as the main method to collect rich data from interactions between collectors on the Threads platform and enabled the analysis of content, opinions, and actions of users in cyberspace. In addition, 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with female students who collect Labubu dolls at the University of Mazandaran to complete and validate the netnographic data. Data analysis was also conducted using thematic analysis. The theoretical framework of the study is based on four main axes: "Symbolic Consumption, Scarcity, and Digital Economies", "Brand Culture", "Consumer Identity", and "Brand Society".

Findings

Thematic analysis of the data revealed three overarching themes:

A) Participatory culture

Labubu collectors on Threads are not merely passive consumers, but are actively engaged in creating their own ideas and narratives. This theme itself includes four orga-

1. Assistant Professor of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran. Email: bolboli@umz.ac.ir

nizing themes: social connectedness, interaction with other user-generated content, creation of user-generated content, and resale of products. The formation of online communities and solidarity among collectors is realized through the sharing of the act of collecting on Threads.

B) Unbridled consumerism

The findings show that the mechanism of lucky boxes, by combining scarcity and unpredictability, creates a kind of “instant gratification” and the “gambler’s fallacy,” or “Monte Carlo fallacy,” potentially leading consumers into a spending trap, which leads to irrational consumer behavior. The thrill of luck, and especially finding rare items, has turned every purchase into a game of emotional investment. However, short-term satisfaction is replaced by long-term regret; after consumers calm down, they realize that financial investment does not correspond to emotional returns.

C) Emotional value

For collectors, Labubu dolls have become symbols for reducing the pressures of adulthood and returning to the simple joys of childhood. The responses of the activists emphasize the diverse emotional role that Labubu collecting plays among collectors; ranging from a sense of uncertainty to a sense of achievement and reduced stress and tension. The dependence on virtual social platforms through recommendation algorithms and facilitating social interactions has reinforced users’ instant consumption and has transformed consumer behaviors from purely economic acts into expressions of identity.

Research Limitations/Implications

This study is subject to certain limitations:

The geographical and demographic focus on female students at the University of Mazandaran limits the generalizability of findings.

Reliance on qualitative methods, while enabling in-depth exploration, does not allow for quantitative measurement of the prevalence of these behaviors.

The Threads platform faces accessibility restrictions and filtering in Iran, which may have influenced the nature and scope of the studied community.

The research primarily focuses on consumer experience, with less attention paid to the producers’ side and Labubu’s marketing strategies.

Suggestions for future research

Conduct comparative research among different digital platforms (Instagram, Telegram, TikTok);

Examine the role of influencers in shaping consumer fandoms;

Study the long-term sociological and psychological consequences of the consumption of lucky boxes;

Research the economic dimensions of the secondary market for these products in Iran.

Practical implications

The results of this study have several practical implications:

- For cultural and educational policymakers, it is essential to be aware of the mechanisms of surprise and scarcity in lucky boxes that are structurally similar to gambling in order to prevent obsessive behaviors in consumers.
- By creating art centers and creative startups, universities can shift students’ emotional capital from pure consumption to producer-consumption.

- For marketers and brand managers, this study shows that the success of Labubu is not based solely on product quality, but also on the construction of social interactions on digital platforms and the creation of symbolic and emotional values.
- The concept of “second home” that interviewees applied to Threads indicates the capacity of digital platforms to replace traditional institutions of socialization (family and school).

Social Implications

This research has profound implications for Iranian society:

First, the formation of digital fandoms around global brands such as Labubu reflects a shift in the identity patterns of the new Iranian generation, a generation that redefines its identity not in traditional institutions, but in online consumer communities.

Second, this phenomenon is a reflection of the globalization of consumer culture in Iran, which has crossed cultural-political boundaries and is pushing Generation Z's consumer tastes towards transnational brands.

Third, the unbridled consumption of lucky boxes can have negative financial consequences for students and their families and promote an unsustainable consumption pattern.

Proposed policy: Develop a national “digital consumer literacy” strategy in the higher education system that familiarizes students with the psychological mechanisms of digital platforms and the marketing techniques of lucky boxes. It is also suggested that a “strategy of directing emotional capital towards creative production” be put on the agenda: creating academic platforms to channel attachment to characters towards productive-artistic activities (such as creating indigenous narratives, handicrafts, and creative startups) can reduce the burden of unbridled consumerism. These strategies can play an effective role in solving the cultural problem resulting from the confrontation between global consumerism and indigenous-national values.

Originality/Value

The innovation of this article is reflected in several aspects:

- This research is one of the only studies conducted so far on the phenomenon of collecting Labubu dolls in the context of Iranian society and focusing on Generation Z students.
- The methodological combination of netnography and in-depth interviews offers an innovative approach to studying digital fandoms in Iran that covers both natural and untargeted data from cyberspace and deep individual narratives.

The audience and beneficiaries of this research include: the academic community and researchers in the field of sociology, the country's cultural and educational policymakers, brand managers and digital marketing activists, as well as consumers and collectors themselves who, by being aware of the hidden mechanisms of this phenomenon, can make more informed choices.

Keywords: Fandom, Digital Platform, Threads, Labubu, Generation Z