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Chasing the Ghost: An Autoethnography of Scarcity, Fandom, and Value-Making in the Hunt for Labubu

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Abstract: The global rise of the "blind box" art toy phenomenon, led by brands like Pop Mart, has sparked intense consumer frenzies. This autoethnography offers a close analysis of one such craze: the hunt for the highly sought-after Labubu V3 collectible in Kuala Lumpur. The study explores how a mass-produced object gains extraordinary cultural and economic value through collective consumer practices, moving beyond corporate marketing to frame value as socially co-produced. Drawing on several weeks of immersive fieldwork, the researcher's personal journey—from curious consumer to committed "hunter"—serves as the core analytical lens. Findings reveal that value emerges through three mechanisms: 1) the formation of insider knowledge systems to navigate scarcity; 2) the performance of affective labor, where emotional and temporal investments generate the object's "aura"; and 3) the ritualization of the restock event, which sacralizes the object and fosters intense, temporary community. The study concludes that the Labubu craze is not just consumption but cultural production. It contributes to cultural and consumer studies by showing how the "aura" of mass-produced goods is re-enchanted through embodied practices and emotional labor, asserting that what consumers feel is central to value-creation in contemporary hype culture.

Keywords: Autoethnography; Consumer Ritual; Affective Labor; Hype Culture; Cultural Value; Art Toys

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1.Introduction

On a sweltering Tuesday afternoon at one of Kuala Lumpur's newest malls, the air buzzed with the quiet tension of collective anticipation. A silent crowd fixated not on the colorful Pop Mart displays, but on a plain stockroom door. For many, including myself, this was merely the latest episode in a multi-day vigil. We were a diverse group—students, professionals, tourists, and resellers—united by one obsessive aim: to catch the unannounced restock of Labubu V3, a series of vinyl art toys. This scene from my fieldwork was not an isolated case. From Beijing to Singapore, this ritual is fervently re-enacted by Millennial and Gen Z consumers. Pop Mart's global rise and its "blind box" (盲盒) craze signal a shift in consumer culture, turning toy purchases into high-stakes acts of chance, collection, and community. These are not just toys—they are "hype culture" artifacts, their value amplified by social media and manufactured scarcity. Labubu, a mischievous monster with oversized ears, now stands at the pinnacle of this craze, rivaling luxury sneaker or streetwear fandom.

This research dives into the heart of this frenzy. It asks: How does a $15 mass-produced toy become an icon worthy of such intense emotional and temporal investment? What social and affective mechanisms in the Pop Mart store enable this

transformation of value? Rather than broad market analysis, this study offers an on-the-ground ethnographic account, showing Labubu's value is neither inherent nor dictated solely by corporate strategy. Instead, it is co-produced by consumers, fans, and speculators through embodied practice, emotion, and ritual.

To develop this argument, this research employs an autoethnographic methodology. I analyze this process through my journey from curious consumer to active Labubu hunter. This method explores the affective experience of hype culture—its anxiety, thrill, shared anticipation, and resale-market ambiguity. I argue Labubu V3's value emerges from three key forces. First, consumers develop an insider knowledge system to counter the brand's strategy of randomized scarcity. Second, fans perform affective labor, their emotional and temporal investment binding to the object's aura. Third, the restock becomes a consumer ritual, a moment that sanctifies the object and builds an intense, temporary community. This research contributes to cultural, visual, and consumer studies. It presents a timely case of hype culture in the growing art toy market, a relatively under-analyzed sector. Focusing on Kuala Lumpur, it offers a Global South perspective on how global trends are locally reinterpreted. Through autoethnography, the study foregrounds how emotion and lived experience are as vital as thought or purchase in modern consumption.

The research unfolds as follows. Section 2 reviews key literature on consumer culture, fan studies, and autoethnography. It engages concepts like Benjamin's "aura," Baudrillard's "sign value," and Durkheim's "collective effervescence." Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including rationale, site, data collection, and analysis. Section 4 presents the core findings. It narrates fieldwork around four themes: decoding the hunt, affective labor, scalper economy, and restock ritual. Section 5 places these findings in dialogue with the theories from Section 2. It analyzes how the Labubu case confirms and extends understandings of value, community, and ritual. Section 6 concludes by summarizing findings, limitations, and future research directions.

2.Literature Review

This study requires a framework that bridges macro consumer dynamics with micro-level embodied experience. This section weaves together two distinct but complementary strands of scholarly inquiry. The first section explores seminal theories in consumer culture that address the enigmatic nature of value, scarcity, and the cultural life of objects themselves. The second section turns inward, examining the methodological and theoretical tools that allow us to access and analyze the subjective, emotional, and performative dimensions of human experience that lie at the heart of this research. Together, these two perspectives provide the necessary lens through which to analyze the findings of this autoethnographic study.

2.1 The Object's Aura: Value, Scarcity, and the Social Life of Things

At the center of this study is a fundamental paradox: how does a mass-produced plastic toy acquire a value that wildly exceeds its material and production costs? To address this, we must first turn to Walter Benjamin's foundational concept of the "aura" (Benjamin, 2018). For Benjamin, the aura of a pre-modern art object stemmed from its authenticity, its unique existence in time and space, and its embeddedness in ritual and tradition. He argued that mechanical reproduction shatters this aura, creating identical copies that lack a unique history. The Labubu figure is a textbook case of such a reproduced object. However, this study contends that Benjamin›s framework also provides the tools to understand its re-enchantment. The collective «hunt,» the queues, and the high-stakes unboxing are nothing less than modern, commercial rituals. These rituals wrench the object out of its anonymous, mass-produced context and bestow upon it a new kind of cult value, one based not on its creation but on the unique, unreplaceable story of its acquisition. My own weeks-long stakeout was a process of manually re-inscribing a unique history onto an object, thereby laboriously recreating its aura.

While Benjamin helps us understand the object's quasi-sacred status, Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard et al., 1976) provides the language to dissect its social value. Baudrillard argues that in consumer society, objects are consumed less for their use-value (what they do) or exchange-value (their price) and more for their sign-value (what they signify). The Labubu V3 is a potent signifier. To possess it is to signal one's status as being "in the know," fashionable, and a dedicated member of a discerning subculture. The astronomical prices on the secondary market—such as the 800 MYR offer I received—are not merely inflated exchange-values; they are the monetary quantification of this immense, sought-after sign-value. People are not just buying a toy; they are purchasing a tangible piece of cultural capital.

Building on these ideas, Arjun Appadurai's concept of "the social life of things" offers a dynamic framework for tracing the object's journey through these value systems (Appadurai, 1986). Appadurai argues that commodities, like people, have social lives and that their value is not inherent but is produced and contested as they move through different hands, contexts, and "regimes of value." A Labubu V3 figure is not one single thing; its meaning and value are radically transformed along its path. In the factory, it is a mere commodity. On the Pop Mart shelf, it becomes a prize. In the hands of a dedicated fan, it is a cherished trophy imbued with affective history. In the hands of a scalper, it reverts to a pure financial instrument, its "aura" converted back into exchange-value. This study traces this very social life, demonstrating how the object's value is constantly in flux, actively shaped by the intentions and interactions of the human actors who desire it.

2.2 The Subject's Experience: Autoethnography, Affect, and Performativity

While the above theories explain the object's journey, they miss the human experience behind it. To access this subjective realm, this study embraces autoethnography as its core methodology. Scholars such as Carolyn Ellis (Ellis, 2004) and Tony E. Adams (Adams et al., 2015) have championed autoethnography as a powerful research method that purposefully uses the researcher's personal experience to understand a broader culture. It tells evocative stories that connect the personal to the cultural, showing how social forces are lived and negotiated. By placing my own embodied experience of the hunt at the center of the analysis, I can move beyond a detached description of events to explore the rich emotional and sensory tapestry of the phenomenon—the very data that traditional "objective" methods often exclude.

A key dimension of this subjective experience is emotion, which can be analyzed through the concept of affective labor. Originally developed by scholars like Arlie Hochschild in the context of service work (Hochschild, 2007), and later expanded by political theorists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Hardt & Negri, 2001), affective labor refers to the work of producing or managing emotions. My findings show that the Labubu hunt is saturated with such labor. The management of anxiety during the long waits, the performance of excitement upon a successful purchase, the cultivation of community through shared feelings—these are not passive emotional states but are a form of unpaid, yet highly productive, work. This emotional investment by consumers is not a byproduct of their consumption; it is a vital input that directly generates the product's cultural buzz and, consequently, its economic value.

Finally, the actions of the hunters can be understood through the lens of performativity. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler (Butler, 2005), who argued that gender identity is constituted through repeated, stylized acts, we can see how consumer identity is similarly performed. "Being a fan" is not an internal state of being but an identity that is actively and publicly constructed through a series of performances. The act of queuing for hours, the ritualized unboxing videos posted on social media, and the careful curation of a collection on a display shelf are all performative acts. They are how individuals signal their identity and affiliation to both themselves and to the broader fan community. These performances are what give the Labubu's sign-value its social power and visibility, completing the circuit between the object's cultural meaning and the individual's lived identity.

3.Methodology

This section outlines the rationale for this methodological choice, details the research setting and timeline, clarifies my dual role as both researcher and participant, and describes the specific methods used for data collection and analysis.

3.1 A Rationale for Autoethnography

In this study, we adopted an autoethnographic framework. While the first author conducted the fieldwork and wrote from a personal perspective, the study reflects collaborative conceptual framing, supervision, and methodological refinement by the co-authors. This study is, at its heart, an exploration of how cultural value and personal meaning are created through collective consumer practices. To access this process, it was necessary to move beyond detached observation. We chose autoethnography as the primary research framework because it uniquely positions the researcher's personal experience as a primary lens for interpreting the cultural context. As articulated by Ellis (Ellis, 2004) and Adams (Adams et al., 2015), autoethnography intentionally blurs the lines between the personal and the academic, using a researcher's own feelings, actions, and reflections as legitimate data to illuminate broader social phenomena.

My desire to buy Labubu V3 was not a bias but the gateway to this culture. It granted me authentic access to the emotional

highs and lows of the "hunt"—the frustration, the anticipation, the community, and the ultimate satisfaction—that a mere observer could never fully grasp. Embracing subjectivity enabled me to analyze the experience from within. This approach allows for a "thick description," in the Geertzian sense (Geertz, 2017), that is rich with the details, emotions, and embodied knowledge that give the Labubu craze its texture and significance. It answers the call to produce research that is not only analytically sound but also evocative, accessible, and resonant with human experience.

3.2 Field Site and Duration of Observation

The primary field site for this study was the official Pop Mart retail store located within The Exchange TRX, a large, modern shopping mall in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This site was strategically chosen for several reasons. Firstly, as a newly opened and prominent mall, it attracted a diverse, international clientele, making it a microcosm of global consumer trends. Secondly, according to informal fan networks on social media platforms like Xiaohongshu, this specific branch had a reputation for being one of the most frequently restocked locations for Labubu V3 in the city, making it a natural epicenter for the "hunting" activity.

My fieldwork was conducted over a concentrated period of approximately three weeks during the peak of the Labubu V3 craze in 2025. This short-term immersion was intentional. It allowed me to observe the full cycle of the phenomenon, from periods of scarcity and rumor to the climactic restock events and their aftermath, all while the subculture's practices and norms were at their most visible and potent. I visited the site almost daily, with visit durations ranging from brief check-ins of thirty minutes to extended stakeouts lasting over five hours.

3.3 My Dual Role: Navigating as a Participant-Observer

Throughout this research, I occupied the classic ethnographic role of the participant-observer. However, the autoethnographic approach requires a transparent reflection on the nature of this dual role. I was both researcher and consumer. My initial motivation was personal: I wanted to own a set of Labubu V3. This "participant" status was my passport into the community. It allowed me to authentically engage in conversations, share in the collective anticipation, and experience the frustration of a missed restock on a personal level. I asked questions from shared interest, not clinical distance.

Simultaneously, my "observer" role, guided by my training as a cultural researcher, was always active. I carried a small notebook at all times, discreetly jotting down key observations, snippets of dialogue, and sensory details. Immediately following each visit to the field site, I would retreat to a nearby café or my home to write extensive, detailed field notes. This process involved "writing up" my shorthand notes into a full narrative, but also engaging in initial, reflexive analysis. I made a conscious effort to document my own feelings and biases—my growing impatience, my excitement upon seeing a signal, my internal conflict when confronted by a scalper. Acknowledging and documenting this subjectivity was not a weakness of the method, but a core analytical strength, allowing me to understand how my own positionality shaped my interpretation of the events unfolding around me.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

To build a holistic picture of the Labubu subculture, I employed a multi-modal approach to data collection, consistent with contemporary ethnographic practice.

1) Field Notes: This was the primary corpus of my data. My notes captured a wide range of observations, including detailed descriptions of how the physical space was modified, such as the setup of the queue system; chronicles of key events , such as the power outage and specific restock moments; and profiles of key actors , including the scalpers, a mother, and several tourists. Most importantly, they documented the verbal and non-verbal interactions between participants.

2) Informal and Unstructured Conversations: I did not conduct formal interviews. Instead, I engaged in dozens of informal, spontaneous conversations with other people in the store. These naturalistic dialogues, emerging from the shared context of waiting, provided rich insights into the motivations, strategies, and feelings of other participants. I recorded key quotes and paraphrased conversations in my field notes as accurately as possible immediately after they occurred.

3) Material Culture Analysis: My analysis extended to the non-human elements of the scene. I took notes on the design of the Labubu toys themselves, their packaging, the assertive font on the «Out of Stock» sign, and the cold metal of the queue stanchions. These artifacts were active agents in shaping meaning and behavior.

4) Supplementary Digital Ethnography: Recognizing that the on-site experience was deeply intertwined with online discourse, I passively monitored the Chinese-language social media platform Xiaohongshu. I tracked hashtags related to «#Labubu" and "#PopMartKL" to understand how information was disseminated, how fans coordinated their efforts, and how they showcased their successful "hunts" online. This digital dimension provided crucial context for the physical events I was observing.

My process of data analysis was ongoing and inductive, beginning from the very first day of fieldwork. Grounded theory guided me to avoid fixed hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Instead, I allowed themes and concepts to emerge directly from the data. Each evening, as I wrote my field notes, I would jot down emerging ideas and potential patterns in the margins. After the fieldwork period concluded, I read through my entire set of notes multiple times, engaging in a process of thematic coding. I highlighted passages related to recurring ideas—"strategies for prediction," "emotional responses to waiting," "interactions with scalpers," "rituals of restock"—which ultimately solidified into the four analytical themes that structure section 4 of this research.

4.Findings & Analysis

This section presents the core findings of my autoethnographic immersion into the Labubu subculture. Moving beyond a simple description of events, it chronicles my own transformation from a curious outsider to an informed participant-observer within the unique ecosystem of the Pop Mart store at Kuala Lumpur's The Exchange TRX mall. Through a narrative reconstruction of my multi-week fieldwork, I analyze the intricate social dynamics that transmute a mass-produced plastic toy, the Labubu The Monsters-Exciting Macaron series (Labubu V3), into an object of intense desire and a catalyst for complex value-making practices. The findings unfold across four interconnected themes: the gradual decoding of a hunt, the profound affective labor of waiting, the symbiotic shadow of a scalper economy, and the climactic ritual of the restock day.

4.1 Decoding the Hunt: The Production and Practice of Insider Knowledge

Figure 1. The Object of the Hunt: The Labubu The Monsters Collectible Series. Pictured from left to right are figures from the Zimomo (V1), Forest Concert (V2), and the highly coveted Exciting Macaron (V3) series. (Source: Author's photograph).

As shown in Figure 1, the Labubu series consists of multiple collectible versions, with V3 emerging as the most coveted among fans and speculators alike. My first forays into the world of Labubu V3 were marked by a profound sense of powerlessness. I would arrive at the store guided by hope, only to be met with the same placid, non-committal response from the staff: "It's uncertain, the restock is random." This official narrative of strategic randomization was, I now understand, a key corporate tactic. It fostered a climate of constant, low-level anxiety and cultivated an aura of scarcity that made the product seem all the more unattainable and thus, desirable. For days, I was adrift in this sea of uncertainty, my time and energy yielding nothing but frustration. It was in this state of initial failure that my methodology was forced to evolve from passive inquiry to active, systematic observation.

My breakthrough came not from a single revelation, but from a gradual accumulation of seemingly disparate details. I

started noticing patterns, subtle shifts in the store's atmosphere and operations that seemed to correlate with the rumored appearance of the coveted toy. This was the genesis of my understanding that a shared, yet largely unspoken, insider knowledge system was at play, a vernacular language of cues and signals used by seasoned players to navigate the official fog of uncertainty. Mastering this language was the first step in moving from a state of being hunted by FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) to becoming a hunter myself.

The code, as I came to understand it, consisted of four critical environmental cues that, when appearing in concert, signaled an imminent restock with near certainty. The first and most simple was the disappearance of the "Out of Stock" sign. A large, prominent signifier of lack, its removal was the store's first, subtle admission that the situation had changed. My accidental conversation with a friendly staff member—"If the sign is gone, it means a restock is imminent"—was a foundational piece of the puzzle, transforming a mundane object into a key analytical clue. The second signal was more theatrical: the establishment of the "S-shaped" queue area. On normal days, the store's metallic stanchions were neatly tucked away. Their reappearance, meticulously arranged into a long, serpentine path that snaked through the store and sometimes spilled outside, was a dramatic restructuring of the physical space. It was a clear performative signal, a piece of stagecraft that publicly announced the management's anticipation of a crowd. It was a preparation for what I can only describe as an impending, yet highly organized, chaos. More subtle was the third cue: the shift in cashier staffing. I trained myself to count the black-clad figures behind the counter. Two was the norm, even during the busiest weekend hours. But the appearance of a third cashier, often moving with a quiet urgency, was an unmistakable tell. This seemingly minor adjustment in human resources was, in fact, a crucial provision for the anticipated transactional peak that would last no more than thirty minutes. It was a detail invisible to the casual tourist but a blaring siren to the initiated.

The final and most definitive signal was the convergence of "scalpers." As I will detail later, I soon learned to distinguish these professional resellers from the genuine fans. They moved with a different kind of energy—less wonder, more focused intent. They rarely browsed, instead fixing their gaze on the stockroom door. When three or four of these individuals, who I had come to recognize, began to materialize in the store simultaneously, often exchanging terse nods before taking up strategic positions near the checkout, the hunt was on. Their collective presence, informed by channels of information I was not privy to, was the final confirmation. To master this code was to gain a sense of control, a feeling of empowerment that stood in stark contrast to my initial helplessness. It was a powerful reminder that within even the most top-down consumer cultures, participants actively generate their own knowledge and tactics, embodying the proactive spirit of a "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006).

4.2 The Waiting Game: Affective Labor and Bodily Performance in the Stakeout

Figure 2. The Ritual Begins: Participants engaged in the "waiting game," queuing outside The Exchange TRX mall before opening hours. (Source: Author's photograph).

If decoding the hunt was an intellectual exercise, the physical act of waiting was its deeply emotional and embodied counterpart. The long hours spent on-site were not a passive void in time; they were a rich tapestry of affective labor (Hardt & Negri, 2001) and bodily performance (Butler, 2005). Figure 2 captures the early stages of this ritual, with participants forming queues before the mall opens, embodying the bodily commitment required by the hunt. The investment of my own time, my physical comfort, and my emotional energy was not merely a cost of acquisition; it became an integral part of the product's perceived value.

The emotional landscape of the stakeout was volatile. In the beginning, the dominant feeling was the sharp sting of frustration. On at least two occasions, I left the store for a brief meal only to learn minutes later via a flurry of social media posts that I had missed the restock. This wasn't just disappointment; it was a form of self-recrimination that fueled a desperate "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) (Przybylski et al., 2013). This fear drove me to extremes, compelling me to spend entire afternoons and evenings loitering, my body aching with fatigue, my mind caught in a draining loop of boredom and hyper-vigilance.

Yet, this grueling ordeal was punctuated by unexpected moments of connection. The waiting, I discovered, was a social crucible. It was during these long lulls that I struck up conversations with my fellow hunters. I met a mother who was on her fourth attempt to find a specific character for her seven-year-old son, her stories painting a picture of a city-wide network of Labubu enthusiasts. I fell into easy camaraderie with several Chinese international students, our shared language and common goal instantly forging a bond. We would pool our intelligence, share snacks, and collectively lament the brazen tactics of the scalpers. This formation of a temporary community, a tribe defined by a singular, immediate purpose, was a powerful antidote to the alienation of the wait. The act of waiting transformed from a solitary burden into a shared struggle, a quest for belonging.

Our physical presence was itself a form of performance. I recall one particularly dramatic afternoon when the entire mall suffered a power outage. In the dim, emergency-lit corridors, a queue began to form outside the darkened Pop Mart. We waited for hours, speculating that the restoration of power would trigger a compensatory restock. It did not. The most poignant image from that day was of two tourists I had been chatting with, their large suitcases beside them. It was their last day in Kuala Lumpur, and they had dedicated it to this final, fruitless hunt. As they departed for the airport, their shoulders slumped in defeat, their story underscored the immense sunk costs—not just financial, but temporal and emotional—that this game demanded. Their visible disappointment, in a strange way, made my own subsequent success feel all the more significant.

The ultimate emotional dividend was perfectly encapsulated by my student friend after we had both, finally, succeeded. Clutching her box, she beamed and said, "I haven't eaten all day, but I'm so happy and satisfied." At that moment, physiological needs were rendered secondary to the intense psychological fulfillment of the successful hunt. It became clear to me that the emotional labor we had invested—the anxiety, the boredom, the shared hope—was not a byproduct of the experience; it was a central part of the value-creation process, mystically reinvested back into the plastic object itself, imbuing it with a renewed, hard-won "aura" (Benjamin, 2018).

4.3 The Co-existing Shadow: Encountering the Scalper Economy

Within the confines of the Pop Mart store, a parallel universe existed. This was the world of the scalpers, a ruthlessly efficient shadow economy operating in plain sight. They were the symbiotic, darker twin of the fan community, sharing the same space but driven by a starkly different logic. My encounters with this world, and my own brief temptation by it, provided a jarringly clear lesson in how an object's cultural and symbolic value can be instantaneously and coldly converted into pure exchange value (Baudrillard et al., 1976).

My initial identification of the scalpers was ethnographic in its purest form—based on observing patterns of behavior. They didn't browse; they scanned. They didn't marvel; they calculated. The revelation that a separate collectibles booth on an upper floor was run by the very same men I saw daily at Pop Mart cemented my understanding. This was not freelance opportunism; it was an organized, multi-layered business network. There, on their shelf, sat an opened Labubu V3, its box discarded, priced at 199 MYR—nearly three times its retail price. It was a museum-like display of their entire business model.

The true impact of this shadow economy became personal when I finally acquired my own set. Walking out of the store, heart still pounding with the thrill of success, I was approached by one of the regulars. "800," he said, gesturing to my bag. The offer—a nearly 100% markup on the 420 MYR I had just paid—triggered a moment of profound cognitive dissonance. I found myself caught in a sudden, dizzying internal debate. Was the exhaustion, the hours of my life, the emotional rollercoaster I had just endured, worth precisely 380 MYR? The scalper's offer had stripped the object of its narrative, of my story, and presented it back to me as a naked commodity. It was a forced confrontation between my identity as a collector, driven by passion and personal meaning, and the logic of a speculator, driven by detached profit.

This clash of logics was thrown into its sharpest relief by the rare appearance of a "chase" or "secret" figure. I witnessed a young woman's unadulterated joy as she unboxed one, her squeals drawing a small, admiring crowd. A scalper swiftly made a generous offer, which she dismissed with a wave of her hand, clutching the figure to her chest. She was a true collector; for her, its value lay in its rarity and the story of its discovery. The scalper, unfazed by the rejection, simply turned and, within minutes, successfully negotiated the purchase of three regular, full sets from other customers. Their interaction perfectly illustrated the divergent paths these objects could take in their "social life" (Appadurai, 1986).

The line between these two worlds, however, was not impermeable. My student friend, having used a second purchase slot, also found a chase figure. Overwhelmed by the moment, she sold it to a scalper for an astonishing 2000 MYR. The cash in her hand was tangible proof of the hype, but her subsequent attempts to replicate the success were fruitless. She confessed that the "fun" felt different now, tinged with a new pressure. Her story was a powerful vignette of how the intrusion of high-stakes financial logic can fundamentally alter the nature of participation, transforming playful consumption into something far more precarious.

4.4 The Peak Moment: Collective Effervescence and Ritual on Restock Day

Figure 3. Collective Effervescence in Action: The serpentine queue forming inside and outside the Pop Mart store on a restock day. (Source: Author's photograph).

When the disparate signals finally coalesced and a staff member wheeled a trolley laden with brown cartons out from the stockroom, the atmosphere inside the Pop Mart store underwent a phase transition. The air, thick with anticipation, crackled and then ignited. This climactic moment was far more than a simple retail transaction. It was a highly structured, emotionally charged, and socially significant event that can only be understood as a modern consumer ritual (Rook, 1985).

A low murmur swelled into a collective gasp. Bodies surged towards the checkout counter, not in a chaotic mob, but into the pre-ordained serpentine queue. The gravitational pull was so strong that it drew in curious onlookers, their casual shopping abruptly forgotten as they were swept up in the unfolding drama. In these moments, the store ceased to be a mere retail space. As Figure 3 illustrates, the serpentine queues at the Pop Mart store visually encode the ritual structure of the restock event,

transforming physical space into ceremonial order. It became a temporary temple, and the boxes of Labubu V3, stacked behind the counter like offerings, were its sacred objects. Everything else in the store—the shelves of other colorful characters, the elaborate displays—faded into irrelevance, serving only as the backdrop for this singular, unifying ceremony.

What was most striking about this ritual was its astonishing ability to create a temporary, yet powerful, sense of unity out of diversity. Looking down the long queue, I saw a cross-section of globalized Kuala Lumpur: local Malay youth, Chinese tourists, Western expatriates, and fellow international students, all speaking different languages, all temporarily bonded by a single, overriding desire. Social distinctions of race, class, and nationality seemed to dissolve, replaced by the shared, unifying identity of "Labubu V3 hunter." This intense feeling of shared emotion and purpose, this sensation of being part of something larger than oneself, is a perfect illustration of what sociologist Émile Durkheim famously described as collective effervescence (Durkheim, 2016). It is a social energy that creates solidarity and reaffirms the values of the group—in this case, the value of the hunted object.

The ritual's climax was the transaction itself—the moment of finally taking possession of the box. This was not a purchase; it was a coronation. It was the tangible evidence of a successful hunt. For the young woman who had unboxed the chase figure, the ritual extended beyond the sale; she was surrounded, asked for photos, her "win" celebrated by the community. In that moment, she was endowed with a huge amount of social capital (Bourdieu, 2018), a status recognized and valued by everyone present. The proof of this entire ritualistic structure came with its abrupt dismantlement. Weeks later, after the company changed its policy to require online registration with a local ID, the frenzy vanished. I walked into the store one day to see stacks of Labubu V3 boxes sitting calmly on the shelves, available to anyone. The magic was gone. The object was the same, but the social conditions that had made it sacred had been removed. This stark contrast provided the final, irrefutable evidence that the value of Labubu V3 was never inherent in the plastic itself. It was forged in the fires of the hunt, consecrated by the collective emotional investment of the wait, and ultimately realized in the high drama of the consumer ritual. We were not just buying a toy; we were buying a ticket to an extraordinary, ephemeral, and intensely social performance.

5.Discussion

The preceding chapter offered a narrative chronicle of the hunt for Labubu V3, detailing the intricate practices, social dynamics, and emotional currents that defined the experience. This chapter moves from description to theoretical interpretation, placing these ethnographic findings into a direct and critical dialogue with the scholarly concepts outlined in section 2. The central task here is to answer the crucial question: "So what?" What do the frantic queues, the secret codes, and the shadowy scalper economy at a Kuala Lumpur Pop Mart tell us about the nature of value, community, and ritual in our hyper-commodified, digitally mediated world? I will argue that the Labubu phenomenon is not simply a case of clever marketing but a vivid illustration of how consumers actively participate in the re-enchantment of the mass-produced object. This process is achieved through three interconnected mechanisms: the re-creation of "aura" through ritualized labor, the negotiation of identity within a participatory fan culture, and the complex interplay between affective and economic value systems.

5.1 The Re-enchantment of the Plastic Object: Aura, Ritual, and Affective Labor

Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2018), in his seminal essay, famously argued that the age of mechanical reproduction leads to a decay of the art object's "aura"—its unique presence in time and space, its history, its authenticity. The Labubu V3, a factory-made vinyl toy produced in the tens of thousands, is the quintessential mechanically reproduced object. Yet, my findings demonstrate that "aura" is not irrevocably lost; rather, it can be powerfully reconstituted through modern consumer rituals (Rook, 1985). The entire "hunt" for Labubu was, in essence, a prolonged and elaborate ritual designed to strip the toy of its mass-produced anonymity and imbue it with a unique, personal history.

My multi-day stakeouts, the shared anxieties, the physical exhaustion—these were not mere transactional costs. They constituted a form of pilgrimage. The "high drama" of the restock day, with its organized queues and palpable tension, functioned as the ritual's climax. This was not a simple purchase; it was, as described in my findings, a "coronation." In this context, the ritual serves the precise function Benjamin identified for pre-modern art: it embeds the object in a tradition, even if that tradition is brand new and centered around a vinyl figurine. The Labubu I finally acquired was no longer identical

to the thousands of others in the production run; it was my Labubu, a trophy whose value was sanctified by the labor, both physical and emotional, I had invested. This confirms that the aura of an object in the 21st century is less about its production history and more about the narrative of its acquisition.

This process is fueled by what can be understood as affective labor (Hardt & Negri, 2001; Hochschild, 2007). The intense feelings experienced during the hunt—the FOMO, the camaraderie, the elation—are not side effects; they are the very substance of the value-creation process. Consumers are no longer passive; they are active co-producers, laboring to create the feelings that make the product desirable. The declaration of my friend, that she was "so happy and satisfied" despite not having eaten, is a testament to this logic. The emotional reward derived from the arduous process supplanted basic physiological needs, demonstrating that the product's ultimate value was affective, not material. The company sells the plastic toy, but the community, through its collective emotional investment, sells the "experience" and the "meaning."

Furthermore, the climactic restock scenes align powerfully with Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence (Durkheim, 2016). The convergence of a diverse crowd into a single, focused entity, pulsating with shared emotion, created a moment of intense social energy. In this state, the Labubu V3 figure was elevated from a mere commodity to a sacred object—a totem for the temporary tribe of hunters. The sudden disappearance of this frenzy once the purchasing mechanism was changed to a sterile online lottery proves Durkheim's point: it was the ritual assembly of the "clan" itself that generated the sacred energy, which was then projected onto the object. Without the public ritual, the object's sacred aura deflated.

5.2 Hacking the Hype: Agency and Identity in a Participatory Culture

While it is easy to view participants in such crazes as victims of manipulative marketing, my findings suggest a more complex dynamic of agency and resistance. The development of the "insider knowledge system" was a direct response to the company's strategy of randomized scarcity. It was a bottom-up attempt to impose order on a deliberately chaotic system. This practice of "decoding the hunt" is a perfect example of what Jenkins identifies as a key trait of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Fans were not just consuming a product; they were actively pooling knowledge, sharing intelligence (via Xiaohongshu), and developing collective strategies. They were transforming consumption into a collaborative problem-solving game.

This act of "hacking the hype" is a form of consumer agency. It challenges the top-down power of the corporation and creates a space for participants to feel skilled, knowledgeable, and in control. To know the four signals was to possess cultural capital within the micro-community of the stakeout, distinguishing the "insider" from the "tourist." This resonates with Michel de Certeau's notion of "tactics"—the clever ways in which ordinary people navigate and appropriate the systems of power ("strategies") that structure their daily lives (Certeau, 2005). The fans' intricate system of observation was a tactic to reclaim a degree of predictability and power from Pop Mart's overarching strategy of scarcity.

My own journey from novice to "expert" hunter was also a process of identity negotiation. Successfully acquiring the Labubu V3 was not just about owning the object; it was about validating my identity as a competent and dedicated member of the subculture. The object itself functioned as a proof-of-participation, a physical token of the knowledge and perseverance I had demonstrated. This highlights how, in contemporary consumer culture, identity is often performed and solidified through the acquisition of culturally significant goods.

5.3 The Two Logics: Navigating Affective and Economic Value

The constant presence of the scalpers introduced a second, competing value system into the ecosystem, creating a space of profound tension. This tension can be understood through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's hierarchy of value (Baudrillard et al., 1976). For the devoted fan, the Labubu's primary worth was its symbolic value—it signified taste, dedication, community belonging, and cultural timeliness. My internal conflict upon being offered 800 MYR for my set was a clash between its newly acquired personal symbolism and the scalper's aggressive assertion of its exchange value (its price on the open market).

The scalpers functioned as ruthless agents of commodification, stripping the object of the affective narrative that the fans had so painstakingly woven around it. Their logic was purely economic, as seen when one was unfazed by being rejected for a chase figure but immediately pivoted to acquiring fungible regular sets. They treated the toys not as elements of a collection

but as assets in a portfolio, their social life defined by rapid circulation and profit maximization (Appadurai, 1986).

My student friend's decision to sell her chase figure for 2000 MYR represents a fascinating and complex moment where these two logics collided within a single individual. In that transaction, she momentarily adopted the scalper's logic, converting the immense symbolic and affective value of "luck" and "rarity" into cold, hard cash. Her subsequent feeling that the "fun" had changed suggests that participating in both value systems simultaneously can be problematic. It can corrupt the perceived innocence of fandom, replacing the joy of participation with the pressure of financial optimization. This reveals that hype-driven markets are not simply composed of "fans" and "scalpers" as distinct groups but are complex spaces where individuals may fluidly and ambivalently navigate between these two competing logics, constantly weighing the affective rewards of belonging against the economic temptations of the market. This internal negotiation is, perhaps, one of the defining characteristics of being a consumer in late-stage capitalism.

6.Conclusion

This study began with a simple scene: a crowd waiting for a toy. It concludes by arguing that this seemingly trivial event is, in fact, a rich and complex microcosm of contemporary cultural and economic life. Through an autoethnographic immersion into the hunt for the Labubu V3 collectible, this study has sought to unravel the intricate processes by which a mass-produced object is imbued with extraordinary value. The core argument posited and defended throughout this work is that the "aura" of a modern collectible is not a pre-existing quality but is actively and collaboratively produced through the ritualized labor, collective intelligence, and affective investment of the consumer community itself.

The key findings of this research demonstrate that consumers are not passive pawns in a corporate game of manufactured scarcity. Instead, they are active agents who develop sophisticated systems of insider knowledge to "hack the hype," creating their own pockets of predictability and control. The study underscores the centrality of affective labor, revealing that the emotional journey—the anxiety, the community, the thrill—is a primary ingredient in the object's value. Furthermore, this work has identified the modern consumer ritual as a powerful mechanism for generating collective effervescence, a social energy that transforms a mundane retail space into a temporary sacred site and an ordinary product into a coveted totem. Finally, by examining the tense coexistence of dedicated fans and profit-driven scalpers, this study has illuminated the constant, often-uncomfortable negotiation between symbolic and economic value systems that defines participation in hype culture today.

The contribution of this research is threefold. Firstly, it provides a timely and deep empirical analysis of the burgeoning art toy market, extending theories of hype consumption beyond the well-trodden grounds of sneaker and streetwear culture. Secondly, by grounding the study in Kuala Lumpur, it offers a vital perspective from the Global South, demonstrating how global cultural phenomena are localized and given unique texture. Most significantly, its autoethnographic approach champions the value of lived, embodied experience in understanding consumption, arguing that the rich tapestry of human feeling is central, not peripheral, to the logic of contemporary capitalism.

Of course, this study has its limitations. As a personal, site-specific autoethnography, its findings are not intended to be universally generalizable. The conclusions drawn are intimately tied to a specific product, a specific location, and my own specific subject position. A different researcher in a different city might have witnessed and interpreted events differently. This specificity, however, is also the study's primary strength, offering depth and texture where broader surveys might offer only abstraction. The avenues for future research stemming from this work are plentiful. Comparative ethnographic studies could explore how the Labubu craze manifests differently across various cultural contexts, for instance, comparing the community dynamics in Kuala Lumpur with those in Shanghai or Tokyo. Quantitative research could survey the demographics of blind box consumers to better understand their motivations and spending habits on a larger scale. Furthermore, a deeper digital ethnography could trace the "social life" of a Labubu toy as it travels from an unboxing video on TikTok to a resale platform and finally to a collector's shelf, analyzing how its value is narrated and transformed at each stage of its journey.

In the end, the small vinyl figure of Labubu, with its enigmatic smile, serves as a powerful symbol. It reflects back at us a profound, and very human, paradox. In an age of seemingly infinite mechanical reproduction and digital alienation, we are working harder than ever to make our objects unique, to embed them with stories, and to find, in the shared quest for them,

a fleeting but powerful sense of community and meaning. The hunt for Labubu, ultimately, is a hunt for a connection—to a tribe, to a moment, and to ourselves.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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