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Emotional Polarization and Consumption Value Differences in Pop Toy Consumption: Based on Weibo Comments on Pop Mart

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Abstract. Taking POP MART as a case study, this research uses a computational communication approach that combines sentiment analysis (DistilBERT) and topic modeling (BERTopic) based on 302 user comments from Weibo, aiming to explore the emotional representations and differential mechanisms of the younger generation's consumption views under the influence of designer toy culture. The findings shows that: (1) Weibo comments display a clear pattern of "sentiment polarization": positive comments account for 60.3%, negative comments account for 34.1%, and neutral comments make up less than 6%; (2) Negative comments can be clustered into five topics: "blind boxes and co-branded consumption," "failure of the game business," "decline in consumption experience and interest," "second-hand trading and IP reselling," and "price drop below issuance for new LABUBU products"; (3) The split in sentiment orientation essentially reflects a shift in consumption values: "emotion-driven" consumers use "like it or not" as their value criterion, whereas "rational evaluation" consumers base their judgment on "whether it is worth it"; (4) The core mechanism driving this shift in designer toy consumption values is the "externalization of reference frames" in value judgment: consumers' purchasing decisions increasingly rely on secondary market price signals, brand cross-over capability, and long-term IP prospects, rather than solely on personal preferences and budget. This study provides empirical evidence based on social media data to understand Gen Z's shift from "utility to symbol" in their consumption views and confirms the applicability of the computational method combining "sentiment analysis and topic modeling" in consumer culture research.

Keywords: Collectible toy culture, consumer attitudes, sentiment analysis, topic modeling, Pop Mart

1. Introduction

In recent years, the designer toy industry has experienced explosive growth in China. In 2025, the designer toy market size grew to reach 87.7 billion yuan, maintaining an average annual compound growth rate of over 35% [1]. Within this rapidly expanding industry, Gen Z forms the core driving

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force of consumer spending, contributing over 68% of total consumption, with the 18-to-25-year-old age group spending the most per customer, accounting for 42% of total sales. Taking the industry leader POP MART as an example, its annual revenue reached 37.12 billion yuan in 2025, representing a year-on-year increase of 184.7% [2]. The cumulative number of registered members in mainland China reached 72.58 million, with member sales accounting for 93.7% of total revenue [2].

Along with the growth of the market, there has been a radical change in the consumption values among the younger generation. The 2025 Gen Z Emotional Consumption Report released by the Shanghai Youth Research Center indicates that the rate of those willing to pay for emotional value rose by over 16 percentage points to 56.3% in 2025 compared with 2024. In reference to the consumption needs of the new generation, relevant research from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences reminds people that it is moving from pragmatism to high quality, personalization, and experience. Young consumers are willing to indulge their own needs like companionship, self-pleasing stress relief, personal expression, and other psychological needs within their means. Theoretically, this change resonates with the celebrated thesis of Baudrillard on consumer society: a consumer's attention is not only paid to the use value of the product, but also to the symbol which the product represents, like personality, identity, status, or taste. Designer toys are therefore not actually about their uses but the emotional and symbolic elements that make them attractive [3].

Previous research has examined the phenomenon of "designer toy consumption" on several fronts. On the individual level, consumer psychology has been identified as one of the main drivers of the game, including gambling psychology, the need to belong, and fear of missing out (FOMO) [4, 5]. At the individual differences level is some studies have found that cultural values (PDB) moderate blind box preferences [6]. On the symbolic consumption side, researchers have developed temporal frameworks of narratives; it has been found that the consumption of young designer toys has a three-fold temporal structure: "emotional compensation, identity construction and value anticipation" [7].

However, current studies do have some drawbacks. First, data sources are mainly interviews and experiments, and there is not enough consideration of the way consumption is viewed in real social contexts. Second, existing research is very much concerned with "why people buy" but has neglected a structural and chronological analysis of the change in consumption views over time. Third, in terms of methodology, few studies use the user-generated content (UGC) produced on social media for the analysis of views of consumption. The spontaneous user content about designer toys is collected on social media platforms like Weibo and Xiaohongshu.

In view of the background and research gaps mentioned above, the user comments on the Weibo platform about POP MART were chosen as the main data sources in this study. This paper intends to answer the following two research questions: (1) What is the distributional characteristic (positive, negative, and neutral) of consumers' sentiment in their social media posts about products from POP MART? (2) What is the distributional characteristic of the topics discussed by the consumers in their social media posts about products of POP MART? (2) What are the differences in consumption views expressed in texts of different sentiment orientations?

The aim of this study is to show how the themes of positive and negative comments differ in detail and what concrete representations can be identified in the changing perspectives on consumption as a result of the designer toy culture.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Psychological motivations and driving forces behind pop toy consumption

As a globally emerging marketing model characterized by randomness as its core feature, the blind box economy has garnered sustained scholarly attention due to the psychological mechanisms underlying its consumption behavior. Existing research primarily adopts perspectives from marketing and behavioral economics to explore how the blind box economy challenges the traditional assertion that "product certainty enhances purchase intention." However, relatively limited attention has been paid to the social and psychological dimensions of consumer behavior. To address this gap, Wei and Yu, guided by the Interactive Ritual Chain Theory and Self-Determination Theory, conducted semi-structured interviews and thematic analyses with consumers at UK POP MART stores, systematically examining the group interactions and psychological motivations associated with blind box consumption from a consumer perspective [4].

At the level of group interaction, Wei and Yu identify three core dimensions: physical co-presence, shared symbolic repertoire, and the generation of emotional energy [4]. These three dimensions constitute an interactive ritual chain for trendy toy consumption: consumers gather in physical spaces such as physical stores and exhibitions, form communities centered around shared IP symbols, and complete the circulation and reinforcement of emotional energy through ritualized behaviors such as unboxing, sharing photos of their toys, and exchanging items. This finding expands trendy toy consumption from an individual decision-making behavior to a collective emotional practice, where consumers purchase not merely the product itself, but also a ticket to participating in an emotional community.

From a psychological motivation perspective, both gambling psychology and the desire to belong are seen as two major psychological motivations behind British consumers' buying of POP MART blind boxes [6]. Gambling psychology is a state of mind that is the thrill that comes from the fact that blind boxes are random. People buying do not know what they will get when they enter the market, and this uncertainty is the essence of the consumption process. The need for belongingness, however, is aligned with one of the basic psychological needs of Self-Determination Theory, in that blind box items create a sense of social identity and belongingness and place collectibles at the center of bringing individuals together with their community. Later research also advanced people's understanding of this motivation, with some authors providing insights into how the psychological mechanisms of blind box consumption are linked to factors such as the gambler's fallacy and perceived scarcity [8, 9], and other studies examining the strong motivation of uncertain consumption from the viewpoints of consumer innovation motivation and sensation seeking.

Overall, the research papers give insight into the psychological underpinnings of the consumption of fads through different lenses. The Group Interaction Theory is the theory that explains how consumers' behaviour is created in and sustained in social communities. Gambling psychology has revealed the appeal of the unknown, and the desire for belonging has brought to light the sociological background behind the actions of consumers. Taken together, these three points all lead to a general understanding: fads in toy use are related to emotional, social, and experiential needs, rather than functional.

2.2. Moderating role of individual differences on trendy toy consumption

Purchase responses of the consumers are not uniform when it comes to trendy toys. He et al. highlighted the lack of empirical research that has not yet thoroughly explored the variability in

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consumer reactions, so they carried out six experimental research projects to systematically investigate the influence of power distance beliefs on blind box preferences [6]. Power distance beliefs are a person's attitude towards unequal power distribution in society. He et al. discovered that those with a low power distance belief had significantly more positive responses to blind boxes than those with a high-power distance belief [6]. These two types of consumers, those with LPD beliefs and those with HPD beliefs, have different process-oriented and outcome-oriented mindsets, respectively, and the process of opening the box may provide sources of consumption value for LPD consumers, but not for HPD consumers. In particular, if they had the product they wanted and if the product was a good value for money. Therefore, blind boxes have a greater impact on consumers with low power distance beliefs. He et al. found it interesting that adding hidden variants in a blind box can also increase the consumer's interest if the consumer has a high-power distance orientation: the hidden variants are a high-value outcome and can satisfy the high focus on results characteristic of the high-power distance consumer [6].

He et al. investigated individual differences at the values of culture level, but another viewpoint was provided by Whyke et al. from the perspective of behavioral patterns [3, 4]. They reviewed the domestic blind box market in China and performed a qualitative analysis of the buying, selling, and redeveloping activities of the consumers, offering the idea of "probabilistic and elastic producer-consumer dynamics" to understand how Chinese BLB consumers participate in meaning production and identity negotiation in their mediated practice [3]. They classified consumers into three categories of behavioral orientations: collecting-oriented (satisfying the sense of "completing the full set"), exchanging-oriented (accumulating social capital through interaction with the community), and reselling-oriented (trading with cultural assets of "trendy toys"), and indicated that each orientation had its own methods of constructing meaning in consumption [3]. This type is similar to the classification done by Phan and Hoai that distinguishes motivational types [6].

Using a sample of 442 Vietnamese collectors from the POP MART Labubu collection series, Phan and Hoai employed a partial least squares structural equation modeling approach to examine the interactive relationship between scarcity cues, individual motivation, and consumer behavior [6]. The study found that scarcity cues significantly enhance consumers' FOMO emotion, which in turn significantly positively influences their willingness to pay a premium [6]. More importantly, both self-expression motivation and self-presentation motivation exerted opposite moderating effects on this relationship: self-expression motivation weakened the effect of scarcity cues on FOMO, as consumers driven by the desire to "express themselves" exhibited lower sensitivity to scarcity-based marketing. Conversely, self-presentation motivation amplified this effect, such that consumers driven by the desire to "shape their image in front of others" were more likely to experience FOMO triggered by scarcity-related information [6].

He et al. explained that different individuals exhibit varying preferences for blind boxes, attributing these differences to disparities in both process-oriented and outcome-oriented mindsets at the level of cultural values [6]. Whyke et al. shifted the focus to the different individuals who engage in trendy toy consumption, with these differences manifesting in behavioral patterns such as collecting, exchanging, or reselling [6]. From a motivational perspective, Phan and Hoai further argue that identical scarce information elicits different responses across individuals, identifying these variations as stemming from distinct motivational orientations [5].

Overall, individual differences are evident at least three levels: the level of cultural beliefs, the level of behavioral orientation, and the level of psychological motivation. This suggests that consumers can be segmented according to multiple dimensions of individual differences when studying the consumption of trendy toys.

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2.3. Symbolic consumption, temporal narratives, and identity construction

Toy consumption is, in more than an economic sense, a process by which symbolic meaning is shaped. In the theoretical perspective of the consumer society, people pay attention to the symbolic meaning of commodities rather than their usefulness. The logic of buying trendy toys is a typical case of a movement from a use value to a symbolic value and emotional value. It is not a singular behavior on its own, but rather a typical example of subcultural consumption among youth in the digital world, which marks a radical transformation of the consumer society from material satisfaction to spiritual identification.

Hua and Zhang explore Labubu consumption behaviour among young adults by introducing an analytical framework focusing on the symbolic consumption embodied in the temporal story. They discover that the consummatory behavior of these trendy toys has a specific temporal three-layered structure: the self-healing process takes place in the form of emotional compensation in the past, the identity construction process is performed in the present, and the process of forming group belonging is carried out in the future in the form of symbolic interaction [7]. This approach puts the phenomenon into a time continuum, making an important point: the change of consumers' mindsets does not happen overnight but develops in a progression over a period of time, from "entering the hobby" ("Ru Keng" in Mandarin) to "sustaining" to "exiting" ("Tui Keng" in Mandarin). Therefore, there can be significant differences between the motivations for consumption and the evaluation criteria in these different phases.

There has been much scholarship to consider the symbolisms and identity-construction role of trendy toys from a wide variety of theoretical lenses. Researchers have approached the global phenomenon of LABUBU from the perspective of youth subculture and systematically unraveled the mechanisms driving the process of youth cultural identity construction in the context of the craze [10]. The analysis results indicate that four factors are the main reasons why young people are interested in using POP MART: the entertainment function as the basis, POP MART as the medium of communication, the gamification effect on desire, and the additional value added to the commodity other than normal [10]. The emotional logic of the popularity of POP MART is related to the latent desire of the youth for emotional compensation after the hyper-competitive environment, the sense of group identity formed by the subcultural circle effect, the ease of understanding and feeling empathy without relying on traditional geographical and ethnic narratives, and the resonance of cross-cultural experiences across ethnic and geographical lines [10].

Studies based on the approach of material culture (Daniel Miller) and emotional practice, using participant observation and in-depth interviews, examine the emotional practices of the POP MART community from the perspective of material as medium [11]. These results reveal that the use of materials and textures connects reality with romance in consumption processes: they enable the creation of a pleasurable, ritualistic, and nurturing aesthetic that offers emotional healing and conjures up fluid kinship at the level of self-identity [11]. This view emphasizes the symbolic nature of culture in the encoding of IP figures, as well as of the tactile experiences and aesthetic practices of the materials.

The literature helps to clarify the symbolic significance and the processes of identity formation of popular toy consumption in different theoretical models. Hua and Zhang provide a temporal narrative that is expanded to encompass the changing attitudes of consumers over time [7]; youth subculture analyses emphasise the relationship of these toys with emotional compensation and group identity [10]; material culture analysis focuses on material realities and how they create symbolic meanings [5]. All of these studies converge to a fundamental conclusion that the essence of the

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consumption of trendy toys is the symbolic meanings, emotional values, and identity-constructive functions they carry. This core proposition offers strong theoretical support for the shift of consumer mindset from utility to symbol and serves as the foundation for analyzing variations of consumer expressions through social media text analysis.

2.4. Review of research methods

Methodologically, the existing literature on the consumption of trendy toys can be broken down into the following three approaches.

The first is qualitative interviewing. In order to gain in-depth qualitative insights into consumers of UK-based POP MART, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were used [4]. Likewise, Whyke et al. used qualitative analysis of collecting, swapping, and reselling behavior to uncover the meaning-making processes of Chinese blind box consumers [12]. Hua and Zhang used a symbolic consumption framework of "temporal narrative" to qualitatively explain the Labubu consumption practices [7]. These qualitative methods are great for uncovering the meaning of what is happening subjectively for the individual and psychological reasons. The number of participants is usually in the dozen to a few dozen range, meaning that the external validity is questionable.

Second is experimental methodology. He et al. carried out six experiments to examine the effect of power distance belief on preferences for blind boxes [6]. To uncover the neurocognitive mechanisms driving the effects of various types of scarcity on impulse buying, Tang and Zhang conducted three studies using event-related potential (ERP) trials [13]. Experimental approaches have several advantages for establishing causation and controlling for confounding variables, but in laboratory settings the nature of the buying environment can differ from that of the field, and convenience sampling may not be as ecologically valid.

Third is survey research. Using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), Phan and Hoai examined the relationship between scarcity cues and personal motives, and how these factors influence buying behavior among 442 Vietnamese Labubu collectors [5]. While survey approaches are able to provide larger numbers of participants for testing statistical relationships, they are also self-reported methods.

The use of computational methods based on social media data has been a recent development in consumer behavior research. For example, the research on public opinion about consumption that analyzed more than 140,000 Sina Weibo posts combined LDA topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and Granger causality tests to monitor the changes in public opinion. Sentiment analysis has been used in a variety of ways in the methodological aspect of analyzing user-generated content (UGC) in social media to determine the actual perception of consumers regarding the product and brand. At the same time, topic modeling can be used to automatically derive the main discussion topics from large text corpora.

However, there are various strengths and weaknesses for each of the existing methodologies. Qualitative interviews are depth rather than breadth; experimental designs are causal rigour rather than ecological validity; and quantitative surveys are excellent for statistical testing, but not dynamic and real-time tracking. In contrast, computation-based approaches based on social media data have distinct merits in terms of sample size, ecological validity, and temporal tracking, but they are not widely applied in the study of trendy toys. The aim of this study is to complement methodological approaches in order to grasp consumer mindsets more accurately as they are expressed and differentiated in natural environments.

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2.5. Research gaps and research questions

The literature reviewed earlier has offered a wealth of insights into the consumption of trendy toys from the perspectives of psychological motivation, individual differences, and symbolic consumption. However, there are some key areas of unmet need.

Data collection is mainly based on interviews and experiments, which lack adequate understanding of consumer mindsets in a natural social context. The existing studies are almost exclusively semi-structured interviews or lab experiments, which are useful in identifying and describing psychological mechanisms at an individual level, but whose external validity has not yet been proven [5, 12]. There can be discrepancies between people's responses as they report them in an artificial experiment situation and their spontaneous responses in the social situation.

The current results support the explanation of why people buy products, but do not provide any structural and temporal analyses of how consumer mindsets change over time [4, 5]. Research predominantly focuses on immediate behavioral outcomes, such as purchase intentions or impulse buying, with only a few studies examining long-term cognitive changes, such as price sensitivity, spending priorities, and willingness to pay.

Methodologically, few studies use social media UGC to assess consumer mindsets. There are many trendy toys chatted about on social media platforms that offer a window into real consumer opinions. However, there has been little work done on these data sets so far, and common applications of the computational tools such as sentiment analysis and topic modelling are in their early stages in popular playground studies.

To address these gaps, this study poses the following research questions: (1) What is the distribution pattern of sentiment orientations (positive, negative, and neutral) among consumers discussing POP MART products on social media? (2) How do the expressions of consumer mindsets differ across texts characterized by different sentiment orientations?

This study is designed to show the actual expression of the change of consumer mindsets in light of the trendy toy culture by comparing the positive and negative reviews of the toy product. It aims to give empirical and data-based answers to the transition "from utility to symbol" in today's consumption practices of Generation Z.

3. Methodology and research design

3.1. Research subject and case selection

This study selects POP MART as its benchmark case. POP MART is a leader in the trendy toy business in China, with its total revenue reaching RMB 37.12 billion in 2025. The brand has gained a total of 72.58 million registered users on the Chinese mainland, of which member sales make up 93.7%, and a following of over 5 million on Weibo. Many of its flagship IPs like Molly, LABUBU, and Skull panda often gain massive popularity and spark lots of discussions on social media platforms; POP MART is a perfect example to study the trendy toy consumption values [4, 7].

The basic level of analysis is the user comments on Weibo concerning a product of POP MART. Weibo is one of the most important social media platforms and a key platform for young Chinese users to express consumption attitudes and emotional experiences, offering a real-time and transparent environment for convenient data collection. As for social media data mining methodologies, analyzing the user-generated content (UGC) can help to reveal consumers' authentic perceptions of brands and products [3-5]. Social media UGC has been used as a treasure trove of

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organic data for gaining insights into consumer emotion and cognition, and this platform data has been used extensively to conduct systematic studies of consumers' behavior [3-6, 14].

3.2. Data collection

Weibo comments related to "POP MART" were scraped in this study in July 2026 with Octopuses. Must include the words "POP MART". The primary language should be Chinese. Obviously posted ads, duplicate posts, and meaningless characters were removed. Text with at least 5 characters in length and containing valid text was prioritized [4, 5, 7]. After filtering, there were 302 valid comments left. From the perspective of sample size, this dataset offers a representative distribution of sentiment of social media users towards POP MART and also has a sufficient amount of text for the clustering of topics [4-6].

3.3. Analytical methods

This study employs two computational approaches to conduct a quantitative analysis of social media comments [3-6].

First, it is Sentiment Analysis. In previous social media UGC related studies, sentiment analysis is broadly used to assess consumer emotional attitude and to uncover true brand perceptions [4, 6, 14]. For each of the collected comments, the sentiment polarity was annotated using the DistilBERT multilingual sentiment model (lxyuan/distilbert-base-multilingual-cased-sentiments-student). This model is robust for Chinese text processing, fine-tuned the DistilBERT architecture for multilingual tasks, and can be used to classify the comments with positive, neutral, or negative polarities. Therefore, it has the ability to capture the user's emotional attitudes towards POP MART [4, 6, 14].

Second, it is Topic Modeling. Topic modeling is an automated method of identifying the main concerns and focal points of consumers from large sets of text [4-6]. In this study, the BERTopic model was used for topic clustering for the comments that were categorized as negative. BERTopic is a state-of-the-art topic modelling method based on Transformer embeddings and hierarchical clustering to discover hidden topics in unstructured text collections. From a mechanical perspective, the framework can be used to generate word embeddings using BGE-M3-Chinese [4-6], to reduce dimensions using UMAP, and to cluster the core themes automatically using HDBSCAN [7-9]. One of the most significant benefits of this method is that it does not require any initial number of topics – the algorithm automatically decides the optimal number of clusters that will form based on the characteristics of the data.

These two modes of computation can be combined to provide a multi-dimensional, quantitative observation of consumer emotion and cognition in naturalistic social contexts. Sentiment analysis can provide a coarse-grained perspective on the distribution of emotions, and topic modeling can provide fine-grained granularity in terms of themes [4-7]. This methodological approach has confirmed the practicability of using sentiment analysis along with topic modeling in the field of computational communication studies on consumer behavior [4-7].

4. Results

This section reports the empirical results in regard to the research questions. The purpose of Research Question 1 is to trace the range of sentiment polarity expressed in social media user comments on the POP MART. Q2 aims to reveal the polarities of values in divergent consumption. A macro-level overview of sentiment distribution was obtained by annotating all the comments into

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three sentiment categories (positive, negative, and neutral) with the help of a sentiment analysis model. Second, negative comments were used to perform topic modelling for the underlying themes that fuelled critical discourse. Last but not least, this study draws specific manifestations of diverging consumption values from the thematic foci of the positive and negative feedback [4, 5, 14].

4.1. Distributional characteristics of sentiment polarities

The sentiment analysis results (see Table 1) indicate that out of the 302 valid comments, 182 (60.3%) were positive, 103 (34.1%) were negative, and 17 (5.6%) were neutral.

First, public sentiment is mostly positive, although there is a non-negligible proportion of negative sentiment. More than half of the comments are favorable, indicating a relatively good reputation of POP MART on Weibo. However, over one-third (34.1%) of the user base showed clear dissatisfaction. It is a very important indicator that requires strategic attention.

Second, there is high polarization in users' attitudes. When positive and negative comments are added together, they make up 94.4% of the corpus, while neutral comments make up only 5.6%. This means that the number of users who are indifferent is very low. In the case of trendy toys, a consumer's emotional expression is likely to be very intense, either positive or negative, with few moderating tones [4, 14].

Table 1. Sentiment polarity distribution

sentiment category	number of comments	percentage (%)
positive (+1)	182	60.3%
neutral (0)	17	5.6%
negative (-1)	103	34.1%
total	302	100.0%

4.2. Divergence in consumption values across sentiment polarities

The positive comments were spread out in a non-meaningful way for statistical analysis. This study is based on the five thematic clusters identified by the negative comments. The inverse inference method is used in this work to compare the focus of negative and positive feedback and shed light on underlying consumption values that underlie various sentiment stances [4, 5, 7, 14].

The 103 negative comments were automatically grouped into five different topics by using BERTopic modeling. The characteristics of keywords, document frequencies, and consumption value of each topic are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of negative topics and analysis of consumption value divergence

topic	keywords	sample size	key insights
topic 0: blind box & co-branded consumption	blind box, co-branding, donation, unpalatable	44	primary pain point: dissatisfaction centered on blind box mechanics and poor co-branded product quality.
topic 1: failed gaming venture	dream home, service termination, self-developed	13	cross-industry risk: shutting down the self-developed mobile game raised doubts over the company's investment strategy.

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Table 2. (continued)

topic 2: experience deficits & waning interest	regret, aesthetic fatigue, reluctant to buy now	11	churn signal: long-term users are exhibiting signs of fatigue and interest decline.
topic 3: secondary market & IP merchandising	building blocks, difficult replacement parts, demon Slayer	11	quality & after-sales Issues: quality control and support deficits are pronounced in non-core product lines (e.g., building blocks).
topic 4: price depreciation of new LABUBU releases	premium drop, fall below retail price	10	market bubble risk: secondary market speculation cooling down around flagship IPs.

Concurrently, emotional value seeking and critical analysis of the quality of experience. Positive comments tend to focus on concepts of emotional value, including "cuteness," "healing," and "exquisite design," and on emotional satisfaction gained from buying. On the other hand, Topic 0 shows that if the actual product/service does not meet expectations, these consumers express deep dissatisfaction. This indicates that "paying for emotion" is not an indication of not wanting to sacrifice product quality. Instead, emotionally involved consumers are more susceptible to experiencing negative repercussions when their expectations are not met, thereby creating greater negative backlash [4, 6, 7].

A change of emphasis from "consumption" to "investment" and the financial aspects. Topics 1 and 4 go beyond the experience of the product in use to question corporate cross-industry investments and show anxiety about the depreciation in the secondary market. This means that some consumers consider designer toys to be cultural assets, which they consider not only based on the immediate "value for money" but on the "brand value and asset allocation". When new LABUBU releases come out at a discounted price, loss aversion outweighs the desire to purchase. For these consumers, the "value" of a trendy toy, by definition, involves a desire to keep it safe, secure, and valuable through liquidity and scarcity, more than any other expectations of utility or emotional satisfaction [5, 13].

Prolonged decision cycles and the activation of post-purchase regret mechanisms. In Topic 2, the behavioral change of long-term buyers is illustrated as they transition from admiration to reluctance to buy today. Rational questioning is available to consumers when they have to deal with high-priced new entrants, especially since trending toys are non-essential products. This phenomenon suggests a dynamic willingness to pay, which changes over time and in response to market signals. If it is less accepted to pay the retail price, mechanisms of regret are triggered. Regret of trendy toy consumption is not a "cognitive dissonance that is felt upon the instant of purchase" but rather a "slowly accumulating cognitive dissonance" [4, 5, 7].

Externalization of decision-making reference frames. In Topic 3 and Topic 4, it is revealed that consumer purchases are no longer determined subjectively by whether they like something or not but are increasingly based on external "secondary market price signals." The value assessment system of "Product–Price" consumers of popular toys has been converted from a binary mode to a multi-dimensional value assessment system, which includes the secondary market value expectation of consumers, as well as the long-term brand value of the toy. This outsider-based judgment criterion is among the most basic ways that a trendy toy culture permeates contemporary consumer values [4, 5, 13].

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5. Discussion

This study combines sentiment analysis and topic modeling of the user comments of "POP MART" on Weibo and uncovers the distribution characteristics of sentiment in the consumption of trendy toys and the internal mechanism of the differentiation of the consumption values. The next section will address four key findings, which will be discussed in dialogue with the existing theoretical scholarship.

First, sentiment polarization is an inevitable byproduct of non-functional consumption. The empirical results show that 60.3% of the comments were positive, 34.1% negative, and only 5.6% neutral. It contrasts greatly with the sentiment morphology of functional product consumption, in which consumers tend to bundle around "satisfied" or "average". The negative sentiment proportion is extremely small in traditional commodities. Wei and Yu note that the main motives for blind box purchases are "gambling psychology" and the "need for belonging", and that not only is the physical product bought, but also the expectation of excitement, surprise, and affiliation with the brand [4]. Emotional responses to these affective experiences are high when they are gratified, but they are strong when they are not. This explanation is supported by Yan et al., who showed that the positive effect of uncertainty in hedonic consumption situations is only felt when experience quality is adequate to the baseline [14]. Marketers continue to promote "surprise," "emotional healing," and "collectible value" promises, continually raising consumers' expectations. If the actual experience does not meet this higher standard, then a feeling of betrayal results in strong negative expression.

Second, the divergence of consumption values primarily manifests in the "externalization of reference frames" for value assessment. This study confirms that the evaluative model of the "product and price" has been changed into a multidimensional evaluative model of "product, price and secondary market expectations" in the minds of the consumers of fashion luxury products, which corresponds with the model of changes of consumers' evaluation proposed by Hua and Zhang, where the consumers of fashion luxury products take part in the capital conversion process during "anticipatory symbolic reproduction" and consumer decision-making obviously involves not only the immediate pleasure but also the future value expectation [7]. It is an externalization that is distributed at three different levels: Price Reference, Brand Evaluation, and Identity Construction.

Third, willingness to pay (WTP) exhibits dynamic volatility, rendering the scarcity effect time-sensitive. Topic 2 reveals that there is a gradual shift from early admiration to current reluctance to buy (reluctant to buy now) across long-term users. This discovery calls into question the tacit assumption of "relatively stable willingness to pay" that lies at the heart of traditional theories of consumer behavior. Tang and Zhang suggest that limited supply creates impulse buying, which leads to an increase in WTP in the short term [13]. However, the boost effect may be a time-limited phenomenon, as suggested by the evidence in this study. As scarcity signals fade away, or when consumers learn through successive purchases how to respond rationally to pricing strategies, the price they are willing to pay for an offering gradually returns to its normal level. Phan and Hoai also show that scarcity has a weaker correlation with fear of missing out (FOMO) when motives of self-expression are present, but a stronger correlation when motives of self-presentation are present [5]. This additional dimension of "emotional fatigue" is proposed by Wang and Huang, and this affective exhaustion is not only a result of capital manipulation, but also a result of continuous exposure causing cognitive dissonance [5-6].

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6. Conclusion

Drawing on Weibo comments regarding POP MART, this study applies sentiment analysis and topic modeling to investigate the emotional distribution of trendy toy consumption and the value divergences underlying distinct sentiment stances.

First, the sentiment polarization of toy consumption is very strong, meaning that while one group is enthusiastic about the trend, another group is more skeptical. Of the 302 comments analyzed, 60.3% are positive, 34.1% are negative, and less than 6% are neutral. This distribution highlights the non-functional character of the consumption of designer toys. The consumer gets to feel anticipation, surprise, and a feeling like part of the family, which leads to much emotional investment and emotional rebounds.

Second, divergences in sentiment polarities reflect underlying splits in consumption values. Positive commenters tend to have an emotional consumption orientation, which emphasizes the subjective (like it or not?). Negative commentators prefer a rationally evaluative consumption orientation, decisions on which are based on objective value (is it worth it?). These conflicting positions have differing systems of reference for the evaluation of value.

Third, the "externalization of reference frames" functions as a fundamental mechanism through which trendy toy culture reshapes consumer values. The concept of evaluative paradigms has grown from the binary "product–price" measures into multi-dimensional measures. Purchase decisions are no longer made just on the basis of personal taste but at the same time actively based on secondary market price signals, corporate cross-industry competence, and long-term IP development prospects.

Fourth, consumer disengagement (exiting the trend) is a radical shift in consumption values. The shift from entry to exit is not a linear curve of emotions but is a cumulative progression as consumers are constantly exposed to the brand and make ongoing value judgements.

From a methodological standpoint, this study aims to show that sentiment analysis and topic modeling can be successfully coupled in the field of computational communication inquiries into consumer behavior. It is theoretically able to capture unique mechanisms in the consumption of fashionable toys; for instance, externalized reference frames and volatility in WTP, which it provides empirical evidence for in order to understand Gen Z's move from utilitarian to symbolic consumption as it can be seen in social media.

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