

Tariffs, Toys, and Transnational Youth: An IPE Analysis of Pop Mart's Labubu Dolls Amid Rising U.S.–China Trade Tensions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the unexpected popularity of Pop Mart's Labubu dolls among American youth amidst intensifying U.S.–China trade tensions and escalating tariffs on Chinese imports. Situated within an International Political Economy (IPE) framework, the study challenges conventional assumptions that tariffs suppress demand by raising prices. Instead, it explores how emotionally resonant, symbolically rich cultural goods can thrive under protectionist constraints—particularly when circulated within digital economies that reward affective expression and algorithmic visibility.

Employing a qualitative, document-based methodology, the article draws from trade policy data, corporate financial reports, sentiment analysis, and digital culture literature. It argues that Labubu dolls operate not just as toys but as affective commodities embedded in rituals of collecting, sharing, and online performance. The study shows that tariffs, rather than diminishing demand, amplified the dolls' symbolic appeal by enhancing perceptions of scarcity and emotional value.

By integrating concepts from affect theory, platform capitalism, and cultural political economy, the article contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to understand consumption as a site of identity formation and soft resistance. In doing so, it proposes a revised framework for analyzing trade politics—one that recognizes the emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions of economic life. The Labubu case illustrates how cross-border cultural flows persist—even intensify—in the face of geopolitical friction, and offers new insights into how youth consumption reshapes the global trade imagination.

Keywords: International Political Economy (IPE), Labubu dolls, U.S.–China trade tensions, affective economies, platform capitalism

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, the global trade landscape has undergone a notable transformation. Multilateral institutions and trade norms that once underpinned globalization have been steadily undermined, culminating in a visible resurgence of protectionist practices—most prominently between the United States and China. After China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, trade between the two powers expanded rapidly, giving rise to what some analysts dubbed the “Chimerica” era (Ferguson & Schularick, 2007). However, this deep economic integration also unleashed a host of tensions. Concerns over intellectual property violations, forced technology transfers, and industrial overcapacity began to overshadow the benefits of globalization, especially under the Trump administration. Between 2018 and 2020, Washington levied tariffs on more than \$370 billion worth of Chinese imports, including a broad array of consumer goods and toys, invoking Section 301 of the 1974 Trade Act (Bown & Kolb, 2021).

While existing literature in political economy has heavily scrutinized how these tariffs affect sectors like agriculture, semiconductors, and heavy industry, comparatively little attention has been given to their impact on cultural commodities and symbolic forms of consumption. The case of Pop Mart—a Beijing-based company specializing in collectible blind box toys, particularly the character Labubu—offers a telling exception. Despite facing tariffs of up to 25% on Chinese-made toys by 2021 and the threat of further increases by 2025, Pop Mart’s products have gained traction among Gen Z consumers in the United States. These uniquely styled dolls, often described as a blend of the grotesque and the cute, have become viral sensations across social media platforms such as TikTok, featured prominently in “unboxing” videos that garner millions of views.

This trend presents an important puzzle for scholars of International Political Economy (IPE): why would symbolic cultural imports from a politically adversarial nation surge in popularity at

a time of escalating trade tensions? What role do emotional identification, aesthetic appeal, and digital community belonging play in shaping consumer behavior that seemingly defies classical economic rationality?

In exploring this question, the present article situates Labubu's rise within broader debates on trade protectionism, cultural globalization, and the emotional undercurrents of political economy. It proposes that emotionally resonant, culturally coded goods often escape or even thrive under the constraints that typically suppress standard consumer demand. Contrary to expectations, the imposition of tariffs may actually enhance the allure of niche products like Labubu by cultivating scarcity and symbolic exclusivity—dynamics particularly potent in the age of algorithmic visibility and digital identity-making. Drawing on a mixed-methods analysis that integrates trade data, corporate filings, and digital discourse, the study offers both conceptual and empirical insights into the affective and semiotic contours of contemporary IPE.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Protectionism, Geoeconomics, and the Strategic Role of Tariffs

The recent resurgence of protectionist trade measures has reenergized IPE debates around the motivations behind tariffs and their broader distributive effects. Classical accounts have long framed trade barriers as the result of interest-group lobbying and domestic sectoral pressures (Grossman & Helpman, 1994). However, more recent approaches emphasize how such policies function as tools of statecraft, used to signal sovereignty and reassert control over strategic sectors (Hopewell, 2022). The unfolding of the U.S.–China trade conflict exemplifies this evolution: tariffs were not merely economic instruments but expressions of geopolitical rivalry and containment of technological ascendancy (Bown & Irwin, 2019; Hameiri & Jones, 2021).

Yet, much of this scholarship focuses on industrial goods—such as rare earths, microchips, or steel—and largely sidelines the consequences for consumer products, especially those laden with symbolic or cultural significance. This study seeks to broaden that focus by examining how protectionist measures intersect with the circulation of affectively and culturally saturated commodities, arguing that standard price elasticity frameworks offer limited explanatory power in such contexts.

2.2 The Affective Turn in Political Economy

An emerging body of work has challenged the assumption that economic decisions are exclusively rational. The “affective turn” in political economy posits that emotions—ranging from desire and nostalgia to anxiety and hope—are not peripheral but fundamental to market dynamics (Clough & Halley, 2007; Massumi, 2015). Sara Ahmed (2004) emphasizes how

emotions “stick” to particular objects, imbuing them with layers of cultural and personal resonance that go beyond their utilitarian function.

This insight is particularly useful in contexts of crisis. During periods of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for emotionally comforting, aesthetically pleasing “small luxuries” often intensifies (Illouz & Finkelstein, 2021). Pop Mart’s offerings operate precisely within this realm, serving as affective anchors that provide routine, surprise, and tactile pleasure in unsettled times. Their appeal extends beyond the physical toy to encompass emotional rituals of collecting, gifting, and online sharing.

2.3 Symbolic Consumption, Scarcity, and Digital Economies

The theoretical contributions of Baudrillard (1998) and Bourdieu (1984) remain central to understanding how goods accrue value through meaning and distinction rather than function. In particular, Baudrillard’s notion of “sign-value” and Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” help explain how aestheticized consumer goods become markers of identity and belonging.

In the blind box economy, rarity and unpredictability are essential features, not bugs. The thrill of chance, especially in the pursuit of elusive “chase figures,” transforms each purchase into a game of emotional investment. Yu (2023) describes this as a form of “affective infrastructure,” where excitement, community, and storytelling converge around commodity circulation. These dynamics are amplified by digital platforms, where content that is emotionally rich and visually engaging gains algorithmic advantage (Bishop, 2020).

This paper builds on such insights to argue that products like Labubu derive additional value precisely because of the constraints imposed upon them—such as import tariffs. In these cases, scarcity enhances desirability, and platform economies provide the visibility and narrative infrastructure needed to turn goods into icons.

2.4 Youth Culture, Trade Nationalism, and Platform Visibility

Parallel research on “trade nationalism” has shown that consumer behavior increasingly serves as a space for expressing political and cultural identities (Kayali & Kahraman, 2023). While older models might predict boycotts or nationalist substitution, today’s youth often respond with ironic consumption. Rather than reject foreign goods from adversarial nations, they may appropriate them in ways that resist dominant narratives or reframe cultural affiliations (Lewis, 2021).

This dynamic is especially pronounced among Gen Z consumers, who navigate identity through platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Here, aesthetic coherence, emotional expressivity, and narrative shareability determine a product’s visibility and cultural traction (Abidin, 2020; Zulli &

Zulli, 2022). Pop Mart's Labubu succeeds not only due to its physical form but because of its "platformability"—its capacity to generate content that resonates, circulates, and accumulates symbolic value.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, document-based methodology that synthesizes insights from existing empirical research, institutional data, industry reports, and digital cultural analysis. The goal is not to produce new datasets but to reinterpret existing knowledge through a cultural political economy lens—highlighting the symbolic and affective dimensions of trade.

Rather than relying on conventional econometric models or large-scale statistical inference, the study integrates interpretive and discursive methods. This allows for a deeper examination of how U.S. tariffs intersect with cultural consumption patterns, particularly among American youth engaging with Pop Mart's Labubu collectibles. The analysis foregrounds emotional infrastructure, symbolic value, and platform-based circulation.

3.1 Integration of Empirical Sources

The empirical strategy rests on triangulating material from four core sources:

- **Trade Data and Policy Reports:** Foundational information on tariff timelines and scope is drawn from established institutions such as the Peterson Institute for International Economics (Bown & Kolb, 2021), the Congressional Research Service (2023), and the U.S. Census Bureau (2024). These sources provide clarity on how trade policies evolved and what categories of goods were affected.
- **Industry and Firm-Level Reports:** Corporate disclosures from Pop Mart, including annual reports (2022, 2024), press briefings, and third-party analyses from outlets like Bloomberg and TechNode, offer granular detail on the firm's strategic positioning, revenue streams, and geographical sales performance under tariff constraints.
- **Social Media Analytics and Sentiment Studies:** Drawing on Meltwater's 2025 Q1 sentiment analysis and existing academic work on digital platforms (e.g., Abidin, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022), this study contextualizes how Labubu circulated emotionally across networks like TikTok and Instagram.
- **Academic Literature on Consumption and Affect:** The conceptual framework is enriched with contributions from cultural theory, political economy, and media sociology—particularly in the areas of symbolic value, youth consumer practices, and emotional capitalism (Ahmed, 2004; Lewis, 2021; Yu, 2023).

3.2 Analytical Strategy

The analytical approach unfolds in three interrelated stages:

1. **Trade Chronology and Contextualization:** An overview of the political and economic context in which U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods escalated, especially focusing on how consumer-facing sectors like toys were targeted.
2. **Corporate and Cultural Profiling:** Analysis of Pop Mart's strategic adaptation to these trade barriers, including distribution tactics, product marketing, and localization strategies within the U.S. market.
3. **Affective and Symbolic Discourse Analysis:** Examination of digital content, sentiment data, and user practices to understand how Labubu's affective presence was amplified in a politically fraught trade environment.

3.3 Methodological Scope and Limits

While this study does not introduce new field data or surveys, its methodological contribution lies in reframing disparate empirical sources through a cohesive theoretical lens. It demonstrates the value of interpretive synthesis in International Political Economy, especially when analyzing under-theorized commodities like collectibles. The focus is on meaning-making processes, emotional dynamics, and digital visibility—elements that often elude standard IPE methods.

4. Trade Tensions and the Toy Economy

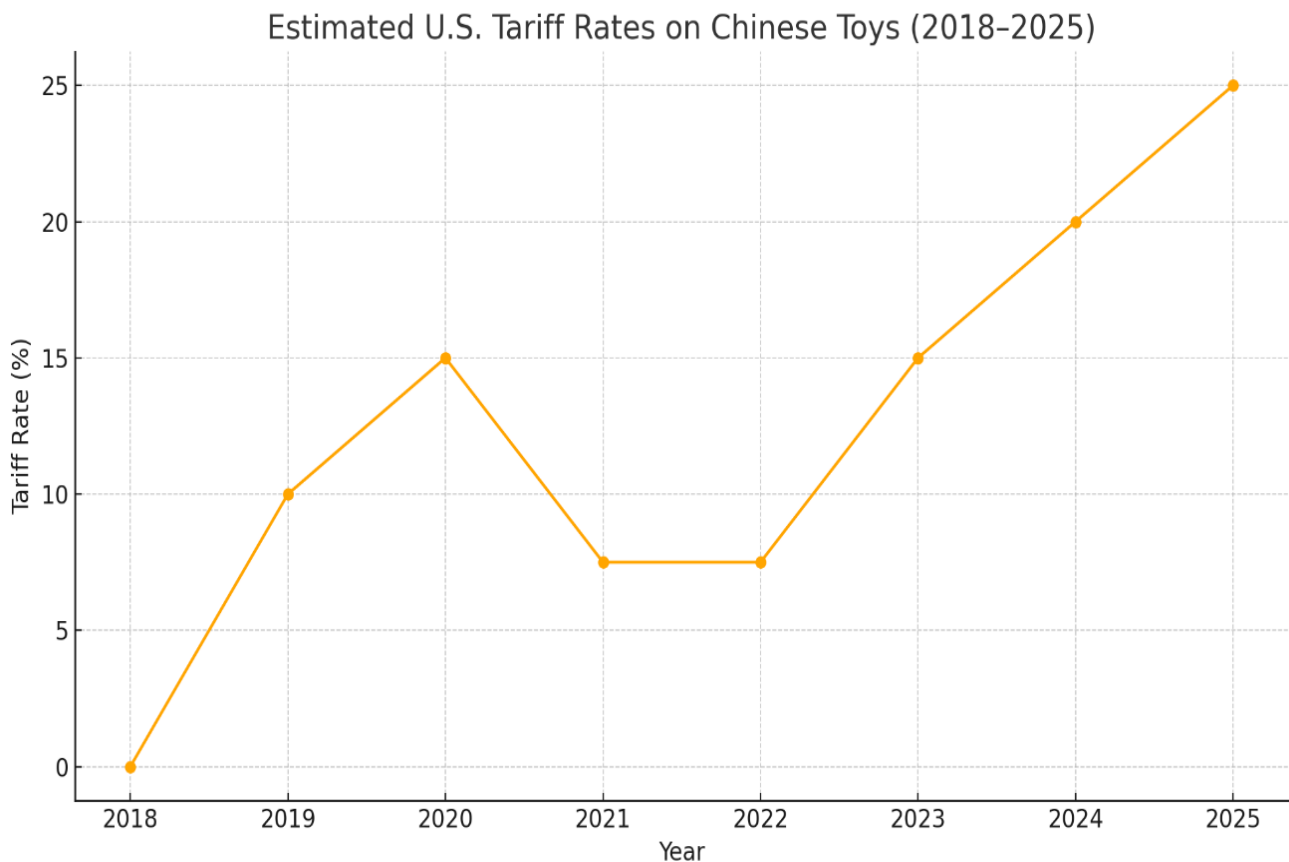
The U.S.–China trade war initiated under the Trump administration in 2018 disrupted long-standing assumptions about liberal globalization. While media and policy attention gravitated toward strategic industries—microchips, solar panels, rare earths—the imposition of tariffs on consumer-facing sectors, especially toys, has received far less scrutiny (Bown & Kolb, 2021).

Initially spared in the earliest tariff rounds, toy imports from China (categorized under HS Code 9503) were brought into the scope by late 2019. Most Chinese toys were hit with an additional 15% duty, subsequently lowered to 7.5% following the “Phase One” agreement in early 2020 (Bown & Irwin, 2019). Combined with existing MFN tariffs ranging from 0% to 6.8%, these increases created a new pricing landscape for importers and consumers alike (USTR, 2023).

Although there was some expectation that the Biden administration would reverse these measures, tariffs have largely remained in place. Citing the need for industrial resilience and reduced dependency on China, the U.S. government has sustained a protectionist approach (CRS, 2023). As of 2025, Chinese-made toys can face duties of up to 30%, though actual rates vary

depending on classification and exemptions. Industry advocates such as the Toy Association argue these tariffs ultimately harm American consumers without achieving reshoring goals (Toy Association, 2024). (See Figure 1 for an overview of tariff escalation.)

Figure 1. Tariff Levels Based on HS Code 9503 (compiled from public sources) (2018–2025).



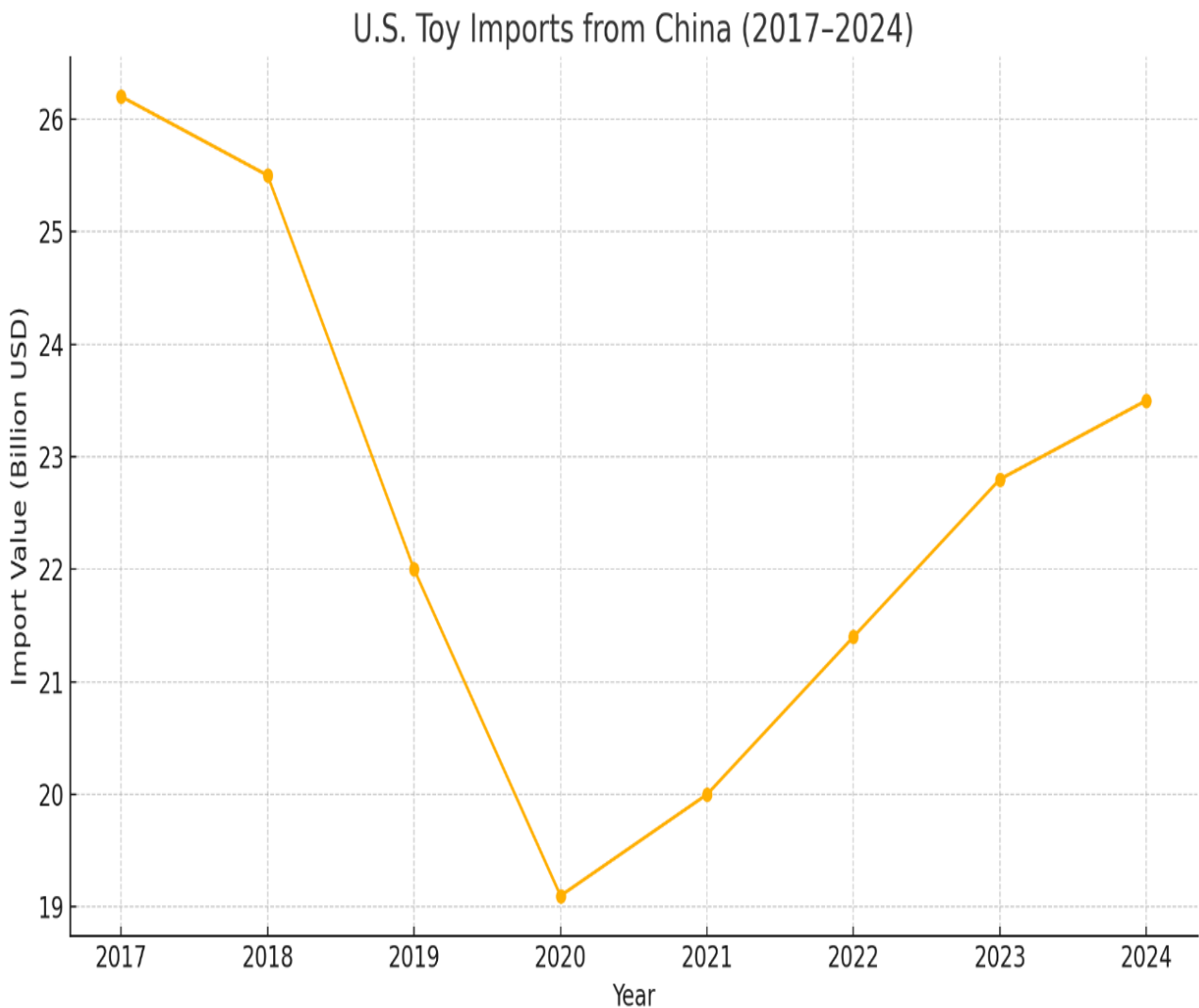
Source: USTR (2023), Congressional Research Service (2023), compiled by the author based on Section 301 policy updates.

4.1 Shifts in U.S. Toy Imports

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that toy imports from China declined by about 14% in value between 2018 and 2020. (See Figure 2 for annual U.S. toy import values from China.) The post-COVID period saw some recovery, but the drop was uneven: plush toys and action figures were more severely impacted, while collectibles and designer toys showed greater resilience (IndexBox, 2024) (See Figure 3 for the changing share of toy subcategories.).

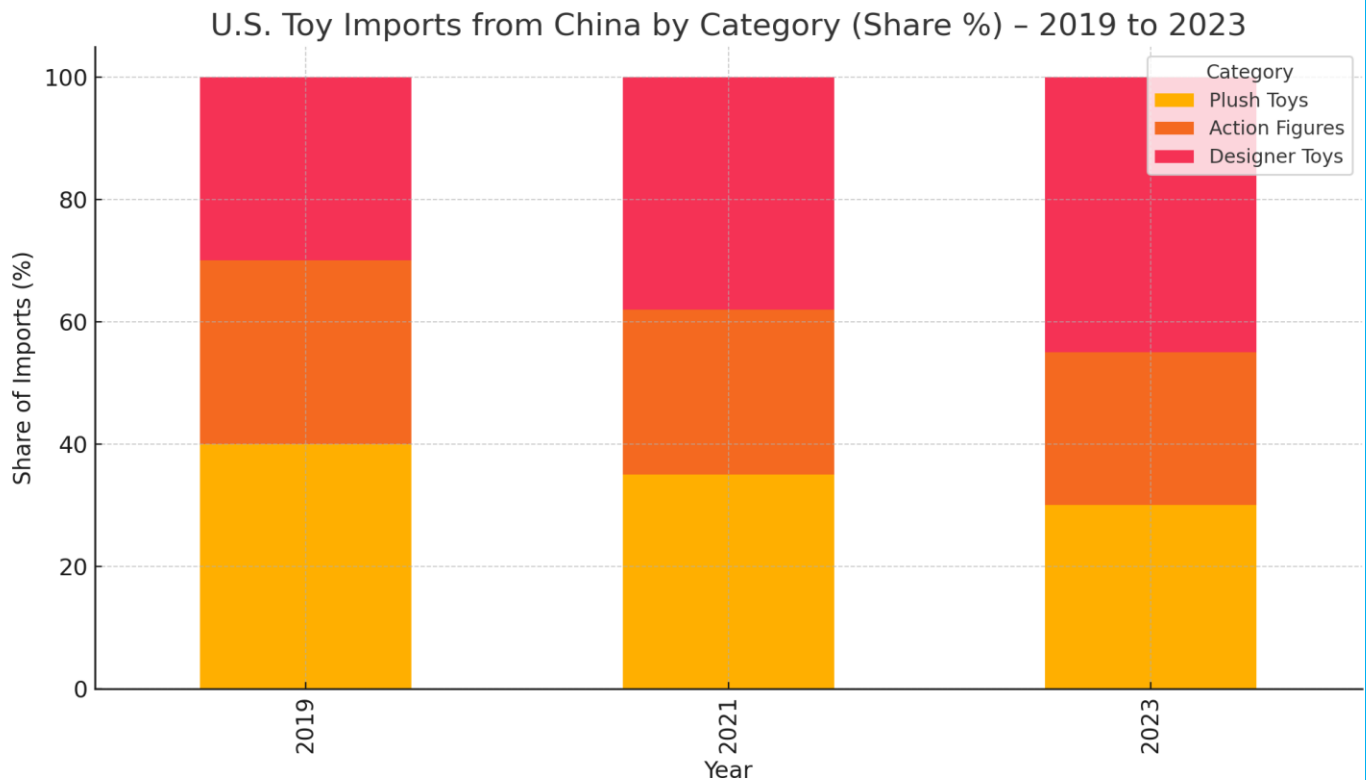
This divergence suggests that symbolic value and emotional resonance influence elasticity. While utilitarian or traditional toys may be more price-sensitive, collectibles like Pop Mart’s Labubu dolls appear to operate under a different logic. Retailing at \$12–\$20, often positioned as lifestyle items rather than simple toys, these figures were less susceptible to demand suppression despite rising costs.

Figure 2. U.S. Toy Imports from China (2017–2024)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2024), compiled and visualized based on import statistics for HS Code 9503.

Figure 3. U.S. Toy Imports from China by Category (2019–2023)



Source: IndexBox (2024), U.S. Census Bureau trade data. Compiled and categorized into plush toys, action figures, and designer toys.

4.2 Pop Mart’s Response to Tariff Pressure

Pop Mart’s expansion into Western markets, particularly the U.S., took place during the height of trade frictions. Far from retreating, the company adapted aggressively. Between 2022 and 2024, its North American revenue grew by 129% (Pop Mart, 2024) (See Figure 4 for Pop Mart’s regional revenue growth.). This growth stemmed from a combination of strategic decisions:

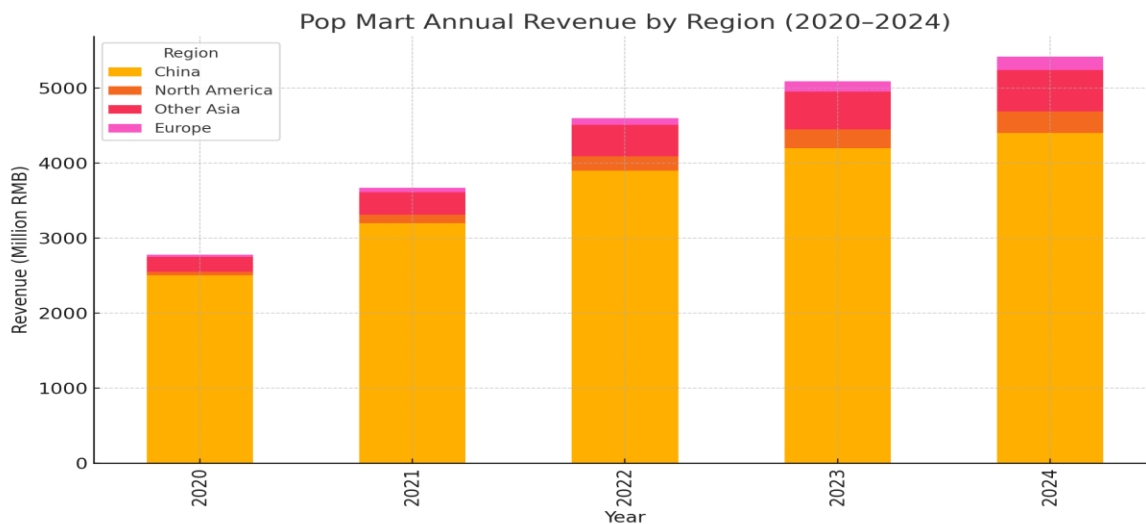
- **Localized Distribution:** Pop Mart partnered with U.S.-based retail chains such as Urban Outfitters and Hot Topic, and installed vending machines in malls, reducing direct import costs and tariff exposure through local inventory models.
- **Platform-Driven Marketing:** The company leaned heavily into TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels—platforms where Gen Z consumers encounter and co-create

product narratives. The aesthetic style and surprise element of unboxing suited these media formats (TechNode, 2024).

- **Perceived Exclusivity:** By creating scarcity through limited availability—partly due to tariffs and partly due to deliberate design—Pop Mart amplified the desirability of rare figures, known as “secret editions.” These items sell for as much as \$200 on secondary platforms like StockX and eBay (SCMP, 2024).

These tactics suggest that companies producing symbolically charged goods may not only survive trade friction but use it as narrative leverage. The case challenges conventional assumptions that tariffs discourage consumption across the board. For emotionally resonant cultural goods, scarcity becomes a feature—not a bug—in value creation.

Figure 4. Pop Mart Annual Revenue by Region (2020–2024)



Source: Pop Mart Annual Reports 2021–2024. Data represents gross revenue (in million RMB) from key geographic markets, highlighting growing sales in North America and other non-China regions amid global expansion.

5. Affective Economies and the Labubu Craze

The success of Labubu collectibles in the U.S. amid a backdrop of trade antagonism illustrates the workings of what Ahmed (2004) termed an “affective economy.” In such contexts, consumer choices are guided less by cost-benefit calculations and more by emotional investment, symbolic alignment, and digital storytelling.

5.1 Emotion as Infrastructure: Nostalgia, Surprise, and Everyday Comfort

Labubu dolls function as more than objects of entertainment—they embody emotional attachments that offer stress relief, aesthetic satisfaction, and routine joy. As Massumi (2015) and Illouz (2007) argue, affect is a crucial component of modern consumer culture, shaping how individuals relate to objects and each other.

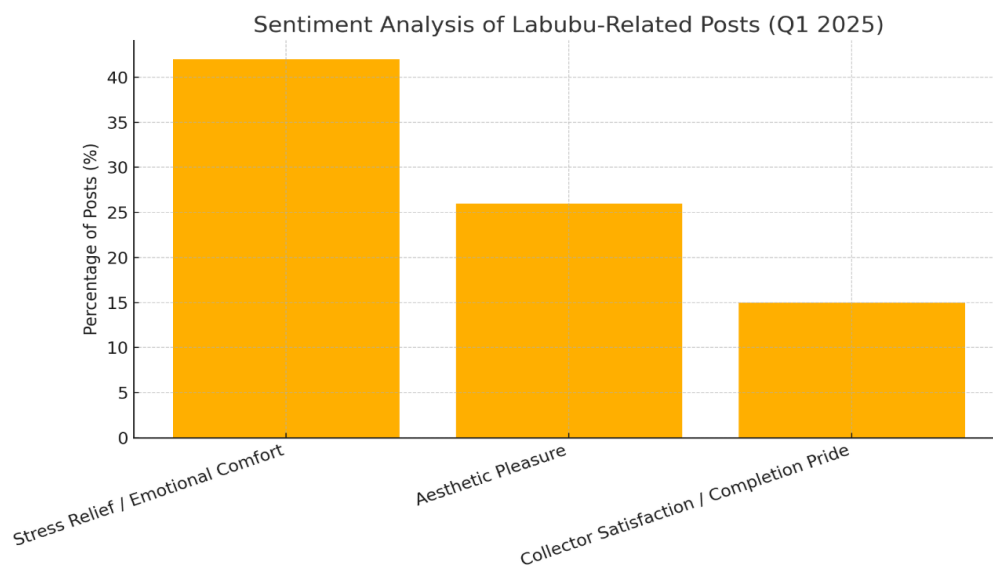
Meltwater’s 2025 Q1 report analyzed over 800,000 global posts featuring hashtags like #Labubu and #PopMart. Of these, 83% expressed positive sentiment, with dominant themes including (See Figure 5 for a breakdown of emotional themes in Labubu-related social media posts.):

- “stress relief” and “emotional comfort” (42%)
- “aesthetic pleasure” (26%)
- “collector satisfaction” or “completion pride” (15%)

(Meltwater, 2025)

The character’s grotesque-yet-cute design—dubbed an “emotional support goblin” in fan communities—aligns with broader kawaii and “comfort creature” aesthetics that challenge conventional beauty standards (Ngai, 2012; Robertson, 2018). These toys are not neutral items; they are emotionally coded devices for self-regulation and symbolic expression.

Figure 5. Sentiment Analysis of Labubu-Related Posts (Q1 2025).



Source: Meltwater (2025), analysis of 800,000+ global posts on platforms like TikTok and Instagram

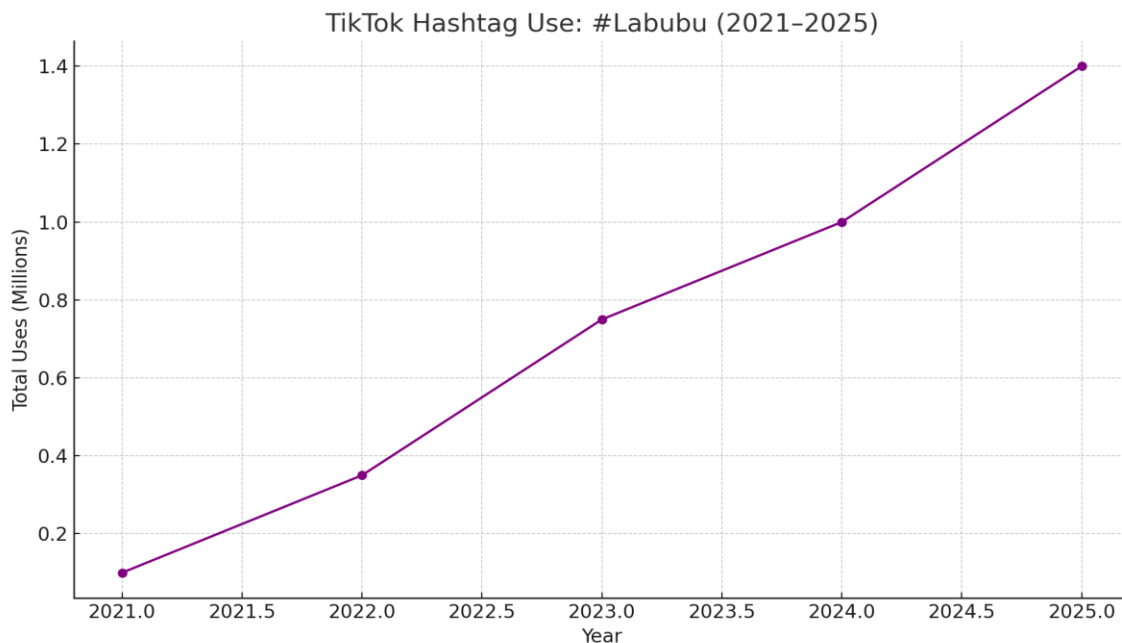
5.2 Rituals of Sharing: Blind Boxes, Platform Capital, and Community

One of the most compelling features of Labubu’s appeal is the ritual of unboxing. The randomness of blind boxes introduces a game-like suspense that heightens emotional engagement. Yu (2023) frames this as a “gamified affective structure,” where anticipation and rarity elevate otherwise ordinary consumption.

The unboxing ritual has become a genre in itself on platforms like TikTok. As of April 2025, the hashtag #Labubu had over 1.4 million uses, with top videos reaching 20+ million views (SCMP, 2024) (See Figure 6 for growth in TikTok hashtag usage.). These videos are stylized with soft lighting, relaxing music, and scripted anticipation—effectively turning consumption into performance.

Zulli and Zulli (2022) show that TikTok’s recommendation algorithms prioritize content that elicits emotional response. Labubu’s visual and narrative qualities match these criteria, making it an ideal vehicle for algorithmic circulation. Thus, consumption is not just affective; it is also highly visible and socially performative.

Figure 6. TikTok Hashtag Use: #Labubu (2021–2025)



Source: Meltwater (2025), South China Morning Post (2024), and platform-reported public engagement data. This figure shows the rapid increase in Labubu-related content on TikTok, indicating viral growth and affective traction.

5.3 Consumption as Cultural Subversion?

Some scholars suggest that affectively driven consumption can also function as soft political resistance. While not explicitly activist, the choice to embrace a Chinese collectible during a period of U.S.–China hostility may signal defiance of dominant geopolitical narratives. As Lewis (2021) and Banet-Weiser (2012) argue, Gen Z often performs identity through paradox and play—global yet ironic, attached yet critical.

Labubu’s popularity in the U.S. may therefore be read as a subtle form of aesthetic cosmopolitanism—a refusal to reduce cultural consumption to nationalist binaries. As Nguyen (2023) notes, the act of “consuming the other” can destabilize cultural borders and offer alternative modes of engagement with the global.

6. Symbolic Resistance and Platform Cosmopolitanism

In a global environment increasingly shaped by political polarization and economic decoupling, consumption becomes more than a matter of personal preference. It becomes performative and, at times, political. The popularity of Labubu dolls among American youth—despite their Chinese origin and the trade barriers attached—offers an illuminating case of symbolic resistance enacted through cultural consumption.

6.1 Consuming the “Other’s” Product

Traditional trade theory often assumes that consumers behave as rational agents who respond predictably to price changes. Yet, this logic fails to account for the way youth today integrate purchases into broader identity performances. Rather than boycott foreign goods in response to nationalist rhetoric, many young consumers deliberately engage with products in ways that mock, appropriate, or subvert those messages (Lewis, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2012).

In this context, buying a Labubu blind box in 2025—despite high tariffs and anti-China sentiment—can be interpreted as an aestheticized act of cultural disobedience. It’s not necessarily a direct political statement, but it challenges simplistic binaries of domestic versus foreign, ally versus adversary. Nguyen (2023) argues that such practices reflect a reimagining of global identity, wherein consuming a Chinese product is not exoticization but a refusal to be confined by cultural nationalism.

This dynamic often plays out through humor. In Meltwater’s 2025 sentiment dataset, American users frequently posted captions like “I know I’m funding my enemy, but look at him!”—a tongue-in-cheek reference to Labubu’s Chinese origins. Such posts exemplify Abidin’s (2020) concept of “networked ambivalence,” where emotional investment coexists with ironic distance.

6.2 Platform Cosmopolitanism and Generational Irony

For Gen Z, cultural fluency is developed through algorithmically curated feeds rather than geographic proximity. On TikTok, one might encounter Korean skincare, Chinese designer toys, and Scandinavian furniture in the same scroll. These aesthetics are consumed, shared, and recontextualized in ways that transcend national identity while remaining emotionally intimate (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

This phenomenon aligns with what Jenkins (2006) described as “participatory culture”—a system where meaning is generated by users as much as by producers. In this model, Labubu becomes more than a toy; it becomes a canvas for storytelling, humor, and emotional connection. Its meaning is shaped by the creators who unbox it, meme it, and narrate its significance within their own social networks.

As such, Labubu’s circulation disrupts the assumption that trade barriers will automatically reshape cultural flows. On the contrary, the emotional and symbolic power of such products allows them to traverse geopolitical divides, propelled by the algorithmic architecture of social media.

6.3 From Commodity to Cultural Code

The trajectory of Labubu—from a physical product to a symbol of aesthetic identity and emotional fluency—mirrors Baudrillard’s (1998) concept of “sign-value.” Its appeal lies not merely in design or scarcity but in what it allows consumers to express: taste, humor, defiance, comfort, and global awareness.

Its paradoxical qualities—cute yet grotesque, accessible yet rare, Chinese yet globally beloved—enable multi-layered identification. For many young consumers, engaging with Labubu is a way to craft and perform a cosmopolitan self-image, one that embraces contradiction and emotional complexity.

In this way, Labubu is not just consumed but lived. It functions as an affective artifact, embedded in rituals, aesthetics, and relationships. This transformation from commodity to cultural code exemplifies how even small, playful objects can become sites of meaning-making in a global economy shaped by both friction and flow.

7. Discussion

The Labubu phenomenon underscores a pressing need to rethink foundational assumptions in International Political Economy. This study has shown that culturally embedded, emotionally

resonant goods can challenge the expected outcomes of protectionist trade policy. The implications of this case span three critical dimensions.

7.1 Rethinking the Efficacy of Tariffs

Classical models of IPE conceptualize tariffs as instruments designed to shift trade balances and protect national industries (Krasner, 1976; Hopewell, 2022). These models presume that rising prices will dampen demand for foreign products. However, the sustained (and in some respects, increased) demand for Labubu dolls—even amid tariffs of up to 30%—calls that logic into question (USTR, 2023).

As luxury market research has long shown, scarcity and exclusivity can actually amplify demand (Bourdieu, 1984; Han et al., 2010). For emotionally charged products, higher costs may reinforce perceptions of uniqueness and status. In the case of Labubu, tariffs became part of the product’s narrative, feeding into its symbolic value as a rare, emotionally loaded object.

7.2 Affective-Symbolic Trade Logics

What emerges from this case is a different economic logic—one shaped by emotion, identity, and visibility rather than rational calculation. Platform capitalism rewards emotionality, and consumers respond by investing in products that align with their self-expression and social positioning (Abidin, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Pop Mart succeeded in the U.S. not despite tariffs but because its products tapped into this emotional-symbolic logic. Its collectibles offered “sticky feelings” (Ahmed, 2004): attachments that are personal yet performative, nostalgic yet forward-looking, ironic yet sincere.

This invites a broader reframing of IPE questions: not just why consumers defy tariff logic, but what kinds of goods inspire attachments so powerful that they override material deterrents.

7.3 Expanding the IPE Toolkit

This case supports calls within the field for a more expansive IPE framework—one that accounts for cultural meaning, emotion, and media infrastructure (Best, 2020; Roberts, 2021). Traditional analyses remain crucial, but they must now be complemented by methods that grasp how value is produced not just in factories and boardrooms but in digital communities, emotional circuits, and aesthetic economies.

Three key contributions emerge:

- **Cultural Political Economy of Trade:** Cultural products behave differently under conditions of geopolitical tension, often generating value through symbolic and emotional resilience.
- **Digital Platform Sovereignty:** Global cultural flows increasingly bypass state control, shaped instead by algorithmic governance and participatory content creation.
- **Generational Aesthetic Economies:** Youth consumption is shaped by identity, affect, and irony—creating hybrid logics of value that elude classical IPE predictions.

8. Conclusion

This article explored the unexpected popularity of Pop Mart’s Labubu dolls among American youth at a time when U.S.–China trade relations were marked by hostility and rising tariffs. By analyzing trade policy, corporate strategy, and digital sentiment, the study illuminated how cultural goods with high emotional and symbolic value can defy the economic logic of deterrence.

Rather than curbing demand, protectionist tariffs may inadvertently reinforce the desirability of certain imports—especially when those goods are embedded in digital aesthetics, youth identity, and ritualized consumption. Labubu is not simply a Chinese toy; it is a conduit for emotional connection, cultural play, and symbolic distinction in a transnational marketplace.

In doing so, this case offers both a critique and an extension of prevailing IPE paradigms. It foregrounds the need to analyze trade not only in terms of flows and balances but in terms of meanings, affects, and symbolic economies. Cultural commodities like Labubu are shaped as much by TikTok feeds as by tariff codes. They remind us that global economic life is not governed solely by price and policy, but by emotion, community, and imagination.

As digital platforms continue to reshape consumption patterns, future research must trace how economic nationalism interacts with platform cosmopolitanism—and how cultural goods continue to “overflow” the borders drawn by state agendas. Labubu may be small, but its implications are vast.

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