The frenzied, gamified chase for Labubus



On Thursday night, I toggled endlessly between a TikTok Live stream and a shopping app in anticipation of 9:30PM. For 30 minutes, I hunted for an available listing; many expletives were uttered. I exhibited bot behavior and got iced out of the app multiple times. I tapped so many times my thumbs got sore. This is Labubu drop night.

Something that’s lost in the Labubu mania is that actually buying one from the source is, in one word, maddening. There are, of course, countless fake options (“Lafufus”) that some collectors have come to embrace. But if you want a guaranteed real one, you have to go to the source. Pop Mart, the Chinese toy company that sells Labubu products, has created a series of Sisyphean tasks to subject shoppers to, a humiliation ritual with the chance of getting a little figurine at the end. Unlike many other rare, trendy, or collectible items, the

barrier to entry for Labubus is not the cost of the item ($27.99) — it's everything you need to learn how to do before you buy them.

I spent about a day researching *how* to actually purchase a legit Labubu from Pop Mart. It's not a straightforward shopping experience of simply clicking "check out" faster than everyone else. Pop Mart has created a digital frenzy that somewhat resembles what shopping in-person on Black Friday is like: interactive illustrations show display cases stocked with up to six boxes of Labubus. Seconds after they hit the site, all of the boxes are grayed out, meaning someone has at least temporarily claimed them. If you haven't secured a Labubu, you must scroll through a seemingly endless list of display cases, looking for the rare box up for grabs; more often, though, you must tap constantly, looking for a gray box with a timer that is about to expire, at which point it will be released and available again. You have to play what is essentially a mobile game to even get a chance to buy a Labubu.

The complexity and finickiness of the Pop Mart app mean that there is no shortage of content with tips, hints, and hacks for securing a Labubu. Some influencers have racked up millions of views almost exclusively making videos about how to score popular Pop Mart products. Some of the tips I studied ended up helping me: when I tapped too many times and was blocked by the app, turning Wi-Fi on and off did indeed fix the problem. But other suggestions from collectors were impossible to follow. Some fans swear by camping out on Pop Mart's hourslong TikTok live streams, waiting for the host to randomly list Labubus for sale on the platform's shopping page; the auctioneer-style monologues were simply too much for me to listen to.

After about 30 minutes of uninterrupted two-handed tapping, close encounters, and error messages, I finally spammed a gray box right at the moment it was released. The mystery Labubu

was mine. I “shook” the virtual box, which gave me a hint as to what color character was inside: it was not orange or green (I didn’t have a color preference, but other shoppers might at this point abandon a box that Pop Mart says does not contain their color of choice). After checkout, I opted to reveal which Labubu I had purchased — it was the blue one, named “Hope.”

It’s not entirely surprising that Labubus have taken off like this: the more you are forced to look at them, the cuter they become (maybe). They’re not the first so-called blind box toy to gain a cult following, and there’s a somewhat dark comparison to be made between Labubus and gambling — for serious collectors, the thrill is in the reveal, the chance that you hit the rare color that Pop Mart says is in one out of 72 boxes. It’s addictive, plain and simple.

But the longer I spent on Labubu forums or on the Pop Mart site, the more I understood that the toy at the end is almost beside the point: legit Labubus represent the time and effort that came before the unboxing, along with the pure luck of what’s inside. A friend who has scored dozens of Labubus for their network told me flipping the dolls isn’t even worth it unless it’s an unopened box or a rare color — the margins are too low to make real money. The pervasiveness of Lafufus no doubt helps to push prices down. The real value of Labubus is in the ridiculous hoops you have to jump through to get a shot at something collectible.

According to Google Trends, search volume for “Labubu” is as high as it’s been. The TikTok livestreams will drone on, the bots will be deployed nightly, and the viral unboxings will pull in views. The hype will die down only when it’s no longer torture to buy one, when the little guys (who are actually canonically girls) are just a toy, not a stand-in for your effort. When that will happen is anyone’s guess; my Labubu is scheduled to ship out in September.

https://www.theverge.com/analysis/710047/labubu-pop-mart-blind-boxes-scarcity-marketing