

From Opposition to Collaboration: The Evolution of Participatory Culture in The LinaBell IP Generation

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ABSTRACT

The rapid rise of LinaBell has been a carnival driven by online user participation. It not only reflects the active agency and creative initiative of audiences in participatory culture but also advances the development of participatory texts, transforming the relationship between producers and recipients from opposition to collaboration. Throughout this process, both parties benefit and fulfill their respective needs. Creators generate higher commercial value with lower production costs, while recipients experience immersive and interactive aesthetic enjoyment through their engagement. The success of LinaBell popularity is also related to the unique form of fan culture in China. Furthermore, it ingeniously addresses the long-standing copyright issues that have hindered user participation in creative processes. However, it is important to acknowledge that this type of storyless intellectual property (IP) has both advantages and limitations.

KEYWORDS

LinaBell; Participatory Culture; IP; Interaction; Henry Jenkins

INTRODUCTION

LinaBell, a pink-colored fox, was introduced as a new original local IP by Shanghai Disneyland in September 2021. It belongs to the "Duffy" family. Due to Shanghai Disneyland's location in Chuansha Town, Pudong, LinaBell has humorously been nicknamed "Chuansha Daji^①." Within a few months of its launch, LinaBell quickly became the most popular plush character at Shanghai Disneyland, with its IP merchandise constantly commanding high prices. The price of a single plush toy soared to thousands of yuan, and there were instances of it being sold out. On social media platforms, LinaBell frequently trended and garnered high levels of discussion, making it a recent sensation and rising star. The remarkable popularity of LinaBell is attributed to the incredible viral power of internet and new media, allowing people who haven't personally visited Disneyland to experience the charm of this plush character. Furthermore, the active participation and creativity of internet users have played a crucial role in the success of this storyless IP. In contrast to

^① "Daji" is a character from Chinese mythology and folklore. In literature and art, Daji is often depicted with fox-like features.

previous Disney characters like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and the Disney Princess series, which all have corresponding film or animation works, LinaBell belongs to the "Duffy family" and is part of Disney's recent creation of a "storyless IP" series. These IPs lack a specific narrative and only consist of a character and a brief introduction. For instance, LinaBell is introduced as a friend of Duffy Bear, whom Duffy Bear encounters when he gets lost in the forest and helps him find his way home. Therefore, the story and personality of LinaBell are generated through interactions with visitors. This storyless IP empowers the audience with great creativity and can be seen as a delegation of cultural authorship. From the perspective of social development, this is in line with the characteristics of the "fourth consumption era" that tend to share and attach importance to the connection from things to people (FENG, 2022).

Participatory culture, as proposed by communication scholar Henry Jenkins, refers to the active creation and sharing of media texts and content by all internet users through identity recognition in the Web 2.0 era. It represents a new form of media culture characterized by freedom, equality, openness, inclusivity, and shared participation (亨利·詹金斯, 2016). The emergence of participatory culture has provided a more positive stance towards fan culture, shaping fans as highly creative and positive figures (王玉王, 2021). Over time, participatory culture has evolved from the involvement of a small group of individuals to the deep engagement of users in the current converged media environment (梁晨, 2021). In the original concept of participatory culture, Henry Jenkins borrowed Michel de Certeau's notion of "text poachers" to describe fans, emphasizing their reworking and reconstruction of the original text. Existing research on participatory culture still remains in its interpretation and explanation, and does not notice the changes that quietly take place within the culture with the development of society and culture. The emergence of the case of LinaBell may indicate a certain evolution and change in the internal mechanism of participatory culture. The term "poaching" highlights the creativity of the audience while also implying a position of opposition to the producers. The audience's interpretation may be seen as a form of resistance against the creators. However, in the case of the dissemination and popularity of storyless IPs like LinaBell, the audience's participation plays an essential and indispensable role. Therefore, we can argue that participatory culture, in the promotion of contemporary audiovisual narratives through online channels (江常 and 明邓树, 2020), has shifted the relationship between recipients and creators from opposition to collaboration.

This article aims to analyze the video texts of LinaBell, which have been spontaneously disseminated by fans on various video platforms. It explores how audiences, within the context of participatory culture, create the character and story of the LinaBell IP. Furthermore, it demonstrates the evolution of the relationship between recipients and creators from opposition to collaboration in participatory culture. Additionally, through this study, we will summarize the advantages and limitations of storyless IPs.

RESEARCH METHODS

The "Duffy Family" and Storyless IP Behind LinaBell

LinaBell comes from Disney's "Duffy family," an animal family whose initial member was a small bear named Duffy. Duffy was a gift from Minnie to Mickey, and with the help of Tinker Bell's magic, he came to life. Originally, Duffy did not have a name and was simply referred to as the "Disney Bear." It wasn't until 2005 when Disney added a sailor outfit and named him "Duffy" in Japan that the character gained widespread popularity. Since then, new plush characters have been added to the family, such as ShellieMay, Gelatoni, and LinaBell, who is the seventh member of the Duffy family.

Overall, the design of the Duffy family features a cute and charming aesthetic, aligning with the East Asian "kawaii culture" dominated by Japan. Studies have shown that the interaction between "kawaii culture" and consumers has a positive impact on advertising and word-of-mouth communication (沈玢 et al., 2019). Furthermore, the dissemination of "kawaii culture" through social media empowers subcultures through media technologies (郭沛沛 and 杨石华, 2020). Therefore, "kawaii culture" is widely represented on various social platforms. Apart from the adorable design, a notable characteristic of the Duffy family is the lack of a story behind their IP characters. Unlike traditional Disney cartoon characters that have corresponding animated works, which provide them with stories and enrich the IP's content, the Duffy family has only basic character settings. Through repeated dissemination on the internet, these virtual images are symbolically conveyed and deeply rooted in the public consciousness (耿婉玥, 2018). When storyless IPs are introduced, they emphasize their visual characteristics, while the related IP stories are formed through interactions with the audience.

The Online Dissemination of LinaBell IP

LinaBell is displayed and interacted with by only a limited number of visitors at Shanghai Disneyland. However, its widespread popularity is largely attributed to the power of online platforms, especially short videos. According to the latest statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center, China has reached a scale of 1.011 billion internet users, with the user base for online videos (including short videos) reaching 944 million^②. In China, marketing communications initiated by short videos often achieve amazing traffic and results (Wei and Haiyan, 2023). Based on this context, this research will select highly popular LinaBell-related content from representative Chinese short video platforms such as Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou for text analysis. The analysis will encompass both the content of the videos themselves and user comments. The video content typically consists of descriptive narratives that describe LinaBell's actions or depict interactions with visitors. Through this analysis, we can summarize the main storylines associated with LinaBell. User comments, on the other hand, provide feedback and reflections from the audience's perspective, reflecting their perceptions and views of LinaBell. These comments contribute to the development of LinaBell's character. The stories and character traits of LinaBell, shaped and completed through user participation, enrich the core of the IP.

The sample of this study comes from the video of LinaBell interacting with tourists spread on the Internet. Due to the different algorithms and mechanisms of each platform, the selection criteria of this study are also different. On the Douyin platform, we selected 18 videos with a significant number of likes (more than 50,000 likes). On the Kuaishou platform, we selected 15 videos with a high number of views (more than 1 million views). Additionally, we collected popular comments from these videos to reflect users' sentiments. Popular comments refer to comments that get more likes from other users. The more likes, the more people support this comment. Therefore, it is representative to select popular comments as research samples.

Considering that the textual descriptions accompanying the video releases also relate to the video content, and the fact that most LinaBell-related videos are created by fans (although there may be some guidance involved), we included them as part of the acceptance aspect. Therefore, we collected a total of 389 comment-like texts to analyze. In short, the research samples we selected included the video content (image), the copy corresponding to the video, and the comments made by other users under the video.

^② http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzjy/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/202109/t20210915_71543.htm

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results: The Generation of The LinaBell IP in Participatory Culture

Story Generation

Based on the collection of 32 videos, we have identified the main stories associated with LinaBell, which can be categorized into conventional interactions and unconventional interactions. Conventional interactions refer to LinaBell's responsive behavior towards visitors, aligning with its adorable and cute appearance. It will willingly respond to visitors and show affection towards them. On the other hand, unconventional interactions involve some "anti-stereotype" actions by LinaBell. Instead of complying with visitors' requests, she takes on a more assertive role, showcasing a contrasting cuteness that goes against her initial image.

Table 1. Analysis of the content of popular short video stories between Linabell and tourists

Interactive nature	Story content	Quantity (N=32)
Regular interaction	Cute interaction with visitors	8
	Comfort and encourage visitors	4
Unconventional interaction	Exchanging banter with tourists	7
	LinaBell's clothes and the stories surrounding them (lifting the dress, new clothes, etc.)	7
	Visitors intentionally misnaming LinaBell	4
	Other	2

From the content of the videos, it is evident that in conventional compliant interactions, the most common behavior exhibited by LinaBell is showcasing an adorable demeanor through physical actions, such as acting cute and being self-indulgent. Through these interactions with LinaBell, viewers experience a sense of warmth and cuteness. LinaBell also provides comfort and encouragement to visitors, delivering positive and uplifting emotional feedback, creating a healing experience for the visitors. Additionally, LinaBell strives to fulfill the wishes of visitors and actively responds to the emotions conveyed by the audience, offering comfort and encouragement in return.

However, LinaBell is not always obedient and compliant. Many times, she engages in unconventional interactions with visitors, such as when visitors enthusiastically call her name, she responds with a startled reaction. When visitors request a large heart, she presents a small one, playfully asking the audience to continue pleasing her. When LinaBell changes into a new outfit, she joyfully showcases her attire, sometimes even playfully lifting her skirt. Another interesting aspect is when visitors intentionally mispronounce or misname LinaBell, she pretends to be angry and insists that they correctly say her name before she relents.

These behaviors provide visitors with a refreshing experience, breaking the traditional and expected perspectives, and serving as a subversion of previous understanding. Furthermore, these slightly dramatic and unexpected stories or plot twists enhance the viewing experience and emotional engagement for visitors and viewers of the videos.

This stark contrast in the stories not only reflects the diversity of the LinaBell IP's narrative content but also implies and sets up the contrasting attributes within the character's personality, making its image more three-dimensional and no longer just singular and flat. This contrast itself attracts young people who seek novelty and uniqueness, aligning with Disney's target audience primarily composed of Generation Z.



Figure 1. Word Cloud of High-Frequency User Comments

Personality Generation and Image Formatio

By conducting a high-frequency word analysis on user comments, we have generated the word cloud shown as Figure 1. From this word cloud, we have selected relevant vocabulary related to personality and image formation, which can be summarized as follows:

Table 2. High-frequency words related to the personality and image of the LinaBell IP

Related to personality generation of the IP		Related to image formation of the IP	
High-frequency words	Count	High-frequency words	Count
cute	66	like	21
hahaha	56	daughter	8
character	6	Female star	7
Get angry	6	fox	7
treason	5	baby	5
naughty	5	beautiful	5

It can be observed that the most prominent aspect of LinaBell's personality is "cute," and the frequent occurrence of "hahaha" indicates that many viewers are entertained and happy by LinaBell's actions. Users also actively mention and discuss LinaBell's personality. On the other hand, terms like "angry," "rebellious," and "mischievous" are playful evaluations from users. Thus, the contrast in LinaBell's personality emerges, which is co-created by the participation of visitors. Therefore, it can be said that the personality of LinaBell is not solely defined by the doll itself, but rather an intentional object formed by the desires and interactions of the visitors.

Based on the personality and stories, LinaBell's image gradually emerges. Firstly, the term "like" expresses the users' positive attitude towards LinaBell's image. Secondly, the defining terms for LinaBell's image include "young lady," "celebrity," "fox," and "baby." This demonstrates the significant tension in LinaBell's image, presenting both the gentle and adorable image of a "young lady" or "baby" and the glamorous image of a "female celebrity" or "fox." LinaBell, being a pink fox with a cute and lovable design, defies the slightly negative connotation associated with the fox image in traditional Chinese culture, especially when associated with the female gender. This is the diversity and uniqueness that the new media era has shown after colliding with Chinese culture (Qian, 2022). Overall, the distinctive characteristic of the LinaBell IP, from character story to personality and image, lies in its sense of contrast.

Discussion: From Opposition to Cooperation--Mutual Benefit in Participatory Culture

Producer: Low Investment, High Returns Innovative Model

Previously, Disney's main development approach was the IP expansion of live-action and animated films, using remakes and sequels as the primary means of cross-media operations. However, this approach tends to be conservative in IP cross-media development, as the repeated use of IP content can lead to aesthetic fatigue. Additionally, the instability caused by the pandemic poses more potential risks and unknown factors to this production method. In contrast to the traditional approach of creating a series of film and television works for an IP, the low-investment, high-returns model of IP like LinaBell requires minimal initial investment, only needing to design a basic image and foundation, while leaving the rest to be developed by visitors in the process of dissemination. This production model greatly reduces development costs, shortens development cycles, and provides more possibilities for the product, allowing it to be timely tested by the market. Similarly, the traditional IP development logic focuses on expanding and extending into various fields only when the original IP has a certain market popularity and development value. This approach ensures that the IP can maximize its value across different aspects and ensure its popularity and acceptance. Due to its nature, a no-story IP, such as LinaBell, relies on physical actions to express its emotions and thoughts since it lacks the ability to produce sounds. Of course, the design of a no-story IP also caters to the preferences of users. For example, the overall "cute and lovable" image of the Daffy family, to which LinaBell belongs, caters to the aesthetic traits of Asian culture.

In addition to the low production cost, as it doesn't require a film or television production but is presented as a derivative product, IP like LinaBell also has low dissemination costs. Animated movies usually require paid viewing in theaters, while the cost of online dissemination is extremely low. Furthermore, the widespread dissemination of online videos reflects the changing characteristics of participatory culture, where the focus shifts from individuals to communities and from a minority to a majority. It also fosters close connections between individuals and society (石颖 and 李博, 2021). Online platforms bring like-minded people together at a faster pace and provide them with a broader space for

expression. This is why we can observe different interpretations of the same content from various audiences.

Based on the existing results, the returns from such low investment are indeed substantial. For example, we have seen the tremendous sales of Stellanou, which sold in quantities equivalent to 119 Mount Everests, and the high-priced merchandise associated with LinaBell. Additionally, the close contact and intimate interaction with these dolls will lead to increased visitor traffic at Disney theme parks.

Recipient: "National Producer" Type of Immersion and Interaction

For direct visitors and users who indirectly engage with the IP through videos, they become the driving force in the process of storytelling and shaping the IP. They take on a role that can be seen as "producers" in participatory culture, where user agency is emphasized in the process of engagement (刘国强, 2020). The concept of "producer" emerged from talent shows, reflecting a shift in the fan identity. Fans no longer passively idolize celebrities, but actively participate in the creation of their idols. This "producer" behavior, empowered by active involvement, provides users with a sense of immersion and interaction. Users support their favorite contestants through voting and rankings to determine their fate. However, this approach has led to significant negative effects over time, such as malicious capital intervention and negative influences, as exemplified by the "milk-flipping incident" that caused talent shows to be completely suspended last year. In this context, the emergence of characters like LinaBell seems to provide a new emotional outlet for these viewers. From this perspective, LinaBell is unique as it coincides with the changing landscape of idol culture in China and expands the scope and audience of virtual idols. Generally, virtual idols refer to "2D" stars that emerge from digital platforms and new media contexts. Fans actively participate in the creation and dissemination of virtual idols, disrupting the traditional fan-idol relationship (陈晓云 and 王之若, 2021). Compared to real-life idols with uncontrollable factors, virtual idols seem to better satisfy fans' imagination and offer a greater sense of control. Virtual idols have no shortcomings and are not subject to risks such as scandals or controversies.

LinaBell's representation of virtual idols can be seen in two aspects. Firstly, LinaBell embodies the image of a virtual idol that is constructed and completed through fan-driven participation. This reflects a "producer-consumer convergence" where consumers voluntarily join the production process, blurring the boundaries between producers and consumers (阿尔文·托夫勒, 2018). This phenomenon is also a typical characteristic of digital labor. However, it is worth noting that this kind of fan-led production may be a result of capital leadership, creating an aesthetic illusion through the participation of idols and fans (叶大扬, 2021). Secondly, users' perception and views of LinaBell also carry an idol-like quality. As observed from the analysis of high-frequency terms earlier, a significant portion of users refer to LinaBell as a "female celebrity." Even during major controversies related to LinaBell, discussions among fans exhibit distinct characteristics of fan communities, demonstrating their understanding of marketing and promotion strategies.

The Change of The Creative Subject Eliminates The Copyright Problem

Under the empowerment of the Internet, the role of fans in content creation and interactive participation has transformed from a previous "poaching" and "nomadic" approach to a more righteous identity. With this shift, the characteristics of participatory culture have also changed. It now carries a strong producer-oriented nature and high production capacity, granting fans greater rights. This transition has moved the entire process of text production from the margins to the mainstream (宋雷雨, 2019). The key factor that has driven

participatory culture from opposition to cooperation is the resolution of copyright issues. Prior to this, fans interacted through practices such as "text poaching" and "user-generated content" (姚睿 and 黄汀, 2021). In other words, fans had to engage in fan fiction or derivative works to interact with their beloved objects. On one hand, these creative transformations by fans presented more possibilities, but on the other hand, they also gave rise to actual copyright infringement. Copyright issues have always been a major challenge in fan fiction. Even if fans initially engage in these activities out of love, the problem of unauthorized use and the blurred line between original and derivative works cannot be ignored (卞娜娜 and 王鹏飞, 2019).

In the case of LinaBell, the videos circulated through online platforms were actually filmed by fans at the Disneyland park. Therefore, the issue of copyright infringement is addressed at the source. The transformation of consumers into creators cleverly eliminates the problem of disseminating copyrighted material. Upon searching major online platforms, we found no official certified accounts dedicated to LinaBell or related content. The dissemination of LinaBell's materials across the internet relies solely on the efforts of fans. Within the fan community, these materials are shared among individuals with a shared love for the same object, allowing for everyone to contribute their own understanding and creativity based on this shared foundation.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical contribution of this study is to point out the new dynamics of the concept of participatory culture in a new socio-cultural context. This plays an important role in updating and rethinking the theory. The study found that the positions of authors and fans in participatory culture have moved from antagonism to cooperation. In summary, the LinaBell IP, constructed by fans' participation, embodies a mutually beneficial model between capital and audience, where the decentralization of cultural dominance eases the previous antagonism and conflict between producers and consumers. Participatory culture has also developed within this context, as fans or recipients transition from "passive poaching" to "active creation" in cultural production. Because it does not encroach upon the fundamental interests of the capital side and even serves as a promotional tool, the relationship between the two parties has shifted from opposition to cooperation.

Based on the results of the study, we will make corresponding recommendations for the development of related cultural industries. From the perspective of cultural production and consumption, this is an innovative model that benefits multiple parties. However, it is worth noting whether this fan-driven culture is truly good culture, especially as it becomes increasingly mainstream. Can it effectively guide the direction of society in a positive manner, or is it merely a transient phenomenon lacking aesthetic value? This type of IP design and consumer psychology operate at a fast-paced, easily replaceable rhythm. When the next more interesting or popular character emerges, audiences may readily transfer their enthusiasm and adoration to a new object. Due to its surface-level storytelling, it is challenging to delve into deeper themes or convey profound messages. Therefore, cultural creation should not focus mainly on this kind of IP, but should create more classic stories and images with rich connotations.

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