

From Collectibles to Experiences: Beijing's POP MART Theme Park Venture

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Abstract

This study explores POP MART's theme park, POP LAND, and its marketing strategy, user enrichment efforts, partnerships, and practical implications. This study also discusses how initiatives such as “passports”, partner collaborations, and stamp collecting can not only boost visitor engagement but also lay the foundation for long-term interaction with POP MART's intellectual property. This case analysis focuses on various secondary sources, including company reports, press releases, marketing materials, and media coverage related to POP MART and POP LAND. POP LAND's success serves as a model for businesses seeking audience connections through a blend of physical and experiential elements in a themed amusement park industry. Apart from collaborative strategies, POP LAND employs a variety of communication tactics that work together to create online and offline buzz while exploring ways to increase user engagement. POP MART has redefined the entertainment landscape, setting the standard for immersive and engaging experiences in the theme park industry.

Keywords

POP ART, POP LAND, Engagement, Collaboration, IP, Campaign

1. Introduction

Founded in 2010 by Wang Ning, POP MART rapidly evolved into a prominent toy brand in China. Initially as a modern and trendy stationery retailer, it opened its first physical store in EC Mall, Beijing. Later, in 2015, Wang Ning was inspired by the sales of the Japanese mystery box intellectual property (IP), “SONNY ANGEL”, and hired designer Wang Xinming, resulting in the creation of the

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character “MOLLY” and the launch of the first mystery box series, “ZODIAC MOLLY” in 2010. Since then, the brand has evolved from a stationery retailer to an IP producer and operator, achieving revenue of 385 million dollars in the first half of 2023, an increase of 19.3 percent compared to last year (Lau, 2023). Constantly expanding its brand and image in international markets, 13.4 percent of its revenue comes from the international market, representing an increase of 138.8 percent compared to 2022 (POP MART International Group Limited, 2023).

The brand captured over 8.5 percent of China’s toy sales, leading among Chinese pop toy companies. Despite its association with children, its primary target comprises eighteen to twenty-four-year-old students (32 percent) and twenty-five to twenty-eight-year old urban white-collar workers (26 percent) (Whiddington, 2023; Guinaudeau, 2023). As of June 30, 2023, POP MART operates 432 physical stores and over 2328 Roboshops, toy dispensers/toy vending machines, allowing people to purchase blind mystery boxes from various locations (Jitpleecheep, 2023).

The core of POP MART’s success lies in its concept of “blind mystery boxes” containing mini figurines with identical exteriors, but unique designs crafted by various artists. The process of completing a particular series or line of POP MART, resembles a game of chance, as buyers remain unsure what the figures they have purchased are until they open their blind boxes, which cost on average 10 dollars each. Presently, POP MART boasts a portfolio of over ninety-three intellectual property rights and licenses, consisting of twelve proprietary IPs, twenty-five IPs under exclusive licenses, and fifty-six IPs under nonexclusive licenses (Ng & Ng, 2020).

The brand’s success is rooted in its multifaceted approach encompassing distinctive designs, marketing, and collaboration strategies with emerging and well-established firms as well as global market expansion. Some of POP MART’s most successful collaborations have been with established brands such as Disney and Sesame Street, as well as Chinese designer and artist Luo Li Rong, who specializes in crafting realistic sculptures, resulting in the widely popular blind box series, “PUCKY”. In addition to collaborating with established identities, POP MART acts as a central platform for nurturing new talents by actively engaging with emerging artists.

These dual strategies of collaboration not only elevate novice artists but also inject the market with new and distinctive designs. Moreover, POP MART’s global success has been driven by its focus on creating culturally relevant products. For example, the popular “MONSTER TOYS” series, featuring creatures inspired by Southeast Asian folklore, was created in collaboration with Singaporean artist, Daniel Yu.

In today’s digital era, POP MART leverages social media to its advantage, with an official Weibo account with over twenty million followers. Regular posts featuring the latest releases, collaborations, and behind-the-scenes content not only sustain consumer engagement but also foster the establishment of a branded

community.

Expectations are high for POP MART's continued success. A research report conducted by Yihan Ma in September highlights the sustained rapid growth of China's pop toy market, anticipating an average annual compound growth rate of 24 percent in the industry between 2022 and 2026. The report further predicts that retail sales in the pop toy sector will surpass 110 billion yuan (approximately 15.32 billion dollars) by 2026 (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

In recent years, the global entertainment and theme park industry has experienced unprecedented growth and innovation, as various players have endeavored to captivate audiences and reinvent the visitor experience. According to the latest research conducted by Maia Research (2023), the global Amusement and Theme Parks market size in 2022 was valued at USD 51646.0 million and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.13 percent, reaching USD 69742.2 million by 2028. POP MART, a company that has transcended conventional norms by introducing POP LAND, an immersive theme park designed to revolutionize the intersection of art, entertainment, and consumer engagement, is one notable entrant that has garnered significant attention.

The research is critical for understanding theme park transformation and its potential impact on consumer experiences. POP LAND's influence shapes trends in the broader entertainment sector, in addition to its immediate industry. By examining POP LAND's marketing strategies, user engagement initiatives, and partnerships, this study gains insight into how POP MART promotes its theme park. This includes understanding the methods they use to attract visitors, engage with their audience, and collaborate with other businesses or organizations to enhance the overall experience of the theme park. By exploring the practical implications of Pop Mart's theme park venture, we aim to contribute valuable insights to the evolving fields of experiential marketing and themed entertainment. The importance of this research is highlighted by the transformative change it captures in the landscape of experiential marketing and themed entertainment. As Pop Mart transcends its traditional role in the pop art collectibles industry to embrace the immersive realm of theme parks, understanding the motivations, strategies and successes of this transition becomes critical. POP LAND's exploration becomes critical for anticipating industry shifts and ensuring continued growth and relevance as a catalyst for change in the theme park domain. In addition to contributing to the academic discourse, the study offers practical insights for companies navigating the evolving landscape of entertainment and consumer engagement as well as serving as a resource for practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts by extracting valuable insights from POP LAND's success. The article is structured as follows: introduction, research method, case analysis, practical implications, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Research Method

The aim of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of POP LAND's

marketing strategies in relation to its entry into the theme park business through a qualitative approach. The case study approach is valuable because it examines a phenomenon in its real context (Rowley, 2002). Our research involves a thorough analysis of various secondary sources, including company reports, press releases, marketing materials, and media coverage relating to both POP MART and POP LAND.

3. Case Analysis: POP LAND

By recognizing the strengths of its IPs, POP MART expanded its unique concept and content by introducing its first immersive IP amusement theme park, “POP LAND” at Chaoyang Park in Beijing in September 2023.

3.1. Marketing Campaigns and Empowering Blind Box Products

POP LAND’s marketing strategy aligns the theme park with POP MART’s core blind box product line, leveraging the established popularity and recognition of its IP collectibles to create a seamless connection between the physical park and the existing product line. But how did POP LAND establish this connection with its visitors?

On the day of the park’s opening, POP MART revealed through the Weibo platform that POP LAND spans 40,000 square meters and includes four distinct zones within Chaoyang Park. To generate excitement before the launch, POP MART hosted an announcement livestream on Tmall, a business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce platform, in late August, offering 100 preview tickets as a giveaway (Team, 2023).

POP LAND’s four zones include:

- Pop Street: a vibrant space where interactive installations blend with shopping experiences.
- LABUBU Adventure Forest: a haven for “THE MONSTERS”, a group of characters associated with “LABUBU”, offering engaging games and activities.
- MOLLY’s Castle: a central attraction featuring diverse restaurants, providing visitors with a culinary journey amid POP LAND’s whimsical charm.
- Deviating from conventional thrill rides, the park also offers an immersive experience, allowing enthusiasts to interact with the toy maker’s flagship characters, “MOLLY”, “DIMOO”, and “THE MONSTERS” against various backdrops, including a European-inspired white castle and a charming tree house.

At the same time, the hashtag #POPLAND (translated from the Chinese: #泡泡玛特城市乐园) garnered thirty-one million views and 72,000 interactions on Weibo, contributing to a total of 100,000 visitors during POP LAND’s first month, underscoring the brand’s social media popularity (Team, 2023).

In addition to its empowering brand image, POP LAND distinguishes itself from globally acclaimed theme parks, such as Disney, Universal, and Legoland,

by adopting a more modest scale and investment approach. POP MART prioritizes lightweight immersive experiences with IPs over a high ratio of thrill rides. Hu Jian, the general manager of POP LAND, emphasizes the provision of interactive opportunities for visitors to engage with their beloved IPs, fostering interest and innovation in the trendy toys and figures associated with the brand (Wang, 2023).

Geared toward consumers in their 30s who are embarking on family life, POP LAND has received positive feedback as a new and trendy destination. Hu Jian envisions the park's midscale and IP-centric theme injecting fresh vitality into local tourism. He notes that ticket expenditures are likely to drive increased retail sales of park-exclusive toys. POP MART has expressed the possibility of expanding park areas for more interactive rides in the future if the current business deems successful.

3.2. Improved User Experience through Deepened IP Content

Upon visiting POP LAND within its first month, visitors received a unique "passport" that enabled them to explore seven designated locations within the park where they could collect stamps. MOLLY's Castle featured special-colored stamps for avid collectors. Another highlight was the opportunity to engage in the mission of finding 100 blind boxes scattered throughout the park. Visitors who successfully uncovered all 100 boxes had the opportunity to receive surprise gifts from POP MART.

Furthermore, alongside the opening of the theme park, POP LAND officially launched the explosive "POP LAND" series, encompassing renowned IPs such as "SKULL PANDA", "MOLLY", "DIMOO", "HIRONO", "HACIPUPU", "BUNNY", "PUCKY", "SWEET BEAN", "LABUBU", "BOBO", and "COCO". The rare "MOLLY" character in this series boasts a scale of 1:120. This focus not only enriches and expands the content associated with POP MART's IP but also establishes a strong foundation for an immersive theme park experience. POP LAND also offered a discount program for the duration of the opening day until November 30, 2023, to enhance visitor satisfaction.

3.3. Collaborative Partnerships

Loong Air

On November 16, 2023, Loong Air of Zhejiang (China) took off from Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport with its specially painted "POP LAND City Paradise" Airbus 320-200 with 174 passengers to Beijing. This collaborative initiative was part of Loong Air's celebration of its 10th anniversary in the aviation industry. By collaborating with POP MART, the airline sought to infuse its brand with a heightened sense of excitement and trendiness.

The POP LAND City Paradise plane is mostly red and sports ten different POP MART characters, including "DIMOO" and "MOLLY". The primary goal of the designated POP LAND airplane is to offer a fun experience to people of all

ages, aligning with POP MART's slogan of "To Light up Passion and Bring Joy". Before the flight, at Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport, a dedicated check-in counter exclusively for the "POP LAND City Paradise" aircraft was set up. It featured POP MART characters and a scale model of the aircraft, providing passengers with unique photo opportunities.

Exclusive activities were offered to passengers during the flight. For example, each passenger received a miniature model of the "POP MART City Paradise" aircraft and participated in an interactive quiz with enticing prizes, including POP LAND theme park tickets. In addition, the aircraft's interior was adorned with POP MART-themed decorations, ranging from bins to tables, enhancing travelers' overall travel experience (Sohu, 2023).

NetEase Cloud Music

To further promote POP LAND, POP MART collaborated with NetEase Cloud Music, a Chinese freemium music streaming service (SocialBeta, 2023). Together, NetEase Cloud Music and POP LAND launched the POP LAND theme song "Now, Go to the Paradise!", which is played daily in the park as well as in its stores to create a more themed atmosphere. The co-branded song by NetEase Cloud Music and POP LAND is available on NetEase Cloud Music Mobile, car, and TV apps. By showcasing the theme song's artwork along with themed backgrounds, users are provided with a personalized and diverse visual experience, allowing them to enjoy their music.

4. Practical Implications and Discussion

POP LAND's practical implications extend beyond its immediate success. Firstly, the theme park's ability to attract 100,000 visitors in its first month demonstrates its widespread popularity and a significant positive impact on local tourism. Secondly, innovative initiatives such as "passports", stamp-collecting missions, and the integration of renowned IPs contribute to a one-of-a-kind immersive visitor experience. These strategies not only enhance the appeal of existing Blind boxes but also lay the groundwork for long-term engagement with POP MART's IP. Thirdly, the success of POP LAND serves as a model for other entertainment or retail enterprises seeking to forge meaningful connections with audiences by combining physical and experiential elements within a themed environment. Finally, the launch of the POP LAND airplane associated with the POP MART brand created a visually appealing design, which included collaboration on promotional activities and exclusive content, such as themed games/quizzes, social media campaigns, and special onboard experiences. These activities resonate with passengers and pique their interest and their enthusiasm. Overall, these implications encompass economic impact, customer engagement strategies, and potential influence on the broader industry in terms of thematic and immersive experiences.

To maintain its competitive advantage in the entertainment industry, POP MART must anticipate future trends in the amusement park industry, such as

the increasing demand for immersive, personalized, and interactive experiences as well as the integration of popular technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR). These tools can serve as a powerful means to deliver personalized content, enhance visitor engagement, and create immersive narratives, inclusive of interactive and dynamic storytelling and games that bring attractions to life.

The incorporation of AR and VR within POP MART's thematic attractions offers a compelling avenue to enhance user experiences and empowers the product's immersive and engaging experiences by providing a tailored personalized content according to individual preferences and behaviors. This vision resonates with industry leaders, such as Walt Disney CEO Bob Iger, who considers AR pivotal for future attractions. AR's unique capacity to blend the real and virtual worlds aligns with POP MART's commitment to innovation (Brennan, 2017).

Implementing a dedicated AR mobile application could revolutionize the visitor experience at POP LAND. Like Pokémon Go, the app could offer an interactive map allowing users to explore the park by integrating and showcasing AR effects in guidance information, 3D characters and attractions. The visitors could also engage in gamified experiences, complete missions, and earn rewards like coupons, discounts, or exclusive content by achieving certain step milestones. This not only enhances visitors' interactivity and entertainment but also encourages their exploration and participation, adding a new layer of excitement to their park visits.

Besides AR, VR can also significantly enhance engagement at POP LAND by providing virtual tours and VR games or creating interactive and personalized storytelling experiences into existing attractions. Additionally, virtual POP LAND parades, shows, and VR elements can contribute to a sense of magic and wonder, extending the park experience beyond its physical boundaries. As the company explores ways to elevate user engagement, the application of AR and VR within its amusement park stands out as a promising endeavor.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the launch of POP MART's POP LAND represents a strategic and multifaceted approach to entertainment and market presence, showcasing innovative marketing approaches, user-centric enrichment, and strategic partnerships. These unique initiatives not only increased visitor engagement but also paved the way for ongoing interactions with POP MART's IP. Serving as an industry model, POP LAND demonstrates the potential for creating meaningful connections through a harmonious blend of physical and experiential elements within a themed environment. POP LAND's innovative marketing strategies highlight the importance of embracing creativity and technology to increase brand visibility and engagement, urging brands to prioritize a cohesive and immersive experience. Furthermore, the introduction of a POP LAND airplane brought promising prospects, including enhanced brand visibility and customer

attraction. These practical implications highlight the park's multifaceted impact, spanning economic influence, strategic customer engagement, and the potential to shape industry trends in thematic and immersive experiences. POP LAND exemplifies POP MART's commitment to reshaping the entertainment landscape and setting a benchmark for engaging immersive experiences in the industry. In essence, POP LAND's success through strategic partnerships suggests that brands should seek out collaborations that are consistent with their image to broaden their reach and improve the overall customer experience.

POP LAND's ability to adapt to industry trends emphasizes the importance of keeping up with consumer preferences and technological advancements. Furthermore, POP LAND's role as a change agent demonstrates the importance of pushing boundaries and encouraging industry innovation for long-term growth. Overall, other brands can learn from POP LAND's multifaceted success to improve their offerings and strategies while adapting to the ever-changing landscape of the entertainment industry.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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