

# Shanghai Disney Resort and the LinaBell Dolls: Hunger Marketing Controversy

Huijing Zeng

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4263-4119>

*Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University Joint International College, China*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The LinaBell figurine has had an influential presence on social media platforms since her debut in Shanghai Disneyland in September 2021. Due to this success, the series it belongs to, the Duffy family in Shanghai Disneyland, was often in short supply of their cartoon products. This shortage from the official sales channel generated a strong demand on the secondary market where the same dolls were resold at much higher price prices, making many netizens its hunger marketing strategy. Although it has always denied such marketing practices, the online registration and offline purchase system they put in place for the 2021 Duffy and Friends Christmas Collection generated heated debate online about the hunger marketing strategy and the frustrations it engendered. Netizens criticized the fact that regular visitors could not make online reservations to purchase the products, `ticket-scalpers` took this opportunity to buy the goods and resell the products on second-hand platforms at extremely high prices, and more than 5,000 people waited in line to have a chance to buy the series.*

## BRAND BACKGROUND

Founded on Apr. 2, 2011, Shanghai International Theme Park and Resort Management Co., Ltd. is a Sino-foreign joint venture mainly responsible for the operation of Shanghai Disneyland. Shanghai Disneyland (hereinafter referred to as Shanghai Disney), located in Chuansha Town, Pudong New Area, Shanghai, is the first Disney theme park in mainland China and one of the most significant Sino-foreign cooperative projects in China's modern service industry. The relevant state departments approved its application report on Nov. 4, 2009, and construction officially began on Apr. 8, 2011. On Jun. 16, 2016, Shanghai Disneyland officially opened.

The theme park business model can be divided into several parts: park operations, supporting entertainment and resort facilities, off-park branding, and intellectual property management. The profit source of the park operation includes admission fees, in-park restaurants, and stores, the profit source of the supporting entertainment resort facilities is the supporting resort, and the profit income of the intellectual property operation comes from a series of innovative products developed with the theme park as content.

Shanghai Disney has been performing very well among the world's six Disney theme parks. In 2017, the Disney Group announced that Shanghai Disney was profitable in its first full fiscal year, exceeding the company's expectations for its first fiscal year to break even. In 2019, the annual revenue of Shanghai Disneyland reached 7 billion yuan, which made it the most profitable theme park of the Disney Group in the world.

Before the official opening, Shanghai Disney was predicted to be unprofitable for 20 years. However, this was not the case. Based on the localized park design, Shanghai Disney adopts diversified marketing strategies to make efforts in communication channels, story expression, industrial chain, creative techniques, and other aspects to expand people's perception of Disneyland from both offline and online aspects. In addition, Disney often sets up marketing hotspots in its public relations communication and forms an excellent social communication effect by using the celebrity effect, association with hot social topics, and city tourism image. According to the feedback from multiple social platforms, most of the public has positive comments on Shanghai Disneyland and is satisfied with its service quality.

## **THE CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE**

In Shanghai Disney's sources of profit, the sales of derivative products around the original characters account for a large proportion. The famous series, Duffy family's seven doll characters have become a significant guarantee of the park's profit income. Unlike Mickey and Minnie, the Duffy family doll characters do not have the support of story and content, however, they attracted significant attention and popularity among the public. A typical example is the Duffy family's new member, LinaBell, who debuted at Shanghai Disney in September 2021. Before her appearance, Shanghai Disney did some publicity for her, but only the original Shanghai Disney fans paid attention to the message. On Sept. 29, LinaBell officially appeared in Shanghai Disneyland. On that day, the park opened for the sale of many related products. Some Weibo users said they had to queue for three hours to buy LinaBell-related products (XinkeDu, 2021).

After being out of stock, these goods were resold online at a high price. This phenomenon is no surprise for some of the Duffy family's most popular characters, who have a huge second-hand market dynamic for their merchandise. Many scalpers will buy these sought-after goods and resell them for a high price. In this regard, Disney said consumers should be rational because LinaBell products would be constantly restocked. However, at the same time, many celebrities appeared on social media platforms with LinaBell's photos, making LinaBell-related topics the trending hashtag. Many people began to pay attention to the cute pink fox and the demand started to rise. However, it was just the beginning.

LinaBell was trending on Weibo almost every day since, and netizens were scrambling to show their photos with LinaBell (Future Think-tank, 2022). In addition to other social media in China, such as RED, TikTok, and Kwai, the topics related to LinaBell were also very hot, and the content was getting more attention. Netizens showed their own bought LinaBell products and interaction with LinaBell dolls and related facilities. There were also many top topics related to LinaBell, such as LinaBell emoticons, the

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