



# Analysis of Lego Storytelling Marketing Strategy and Bilateral Relationship Business Model

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**Abstract.** LEGO, as a world-famous toy brand, has a history of 90 years. This paper will analyze the marketing strategy of "story making and telling" of LEGO from the perspective of art economics and the related theories of culture and art marketing management, and discuss the business model of the "bilateral relationship" of LEGO with the help of "bilateral relationship" market model of a marketing company and customer relationship. "In addition, the development of LEGO in the Chinese market will be further discussed, the current problems of LEGO in the Chinese market will be discussed and corresponding suggestions will be given.

**Keywords:** LEGO; story making and telling; bilateral relations; Co-creation; China

## 1 Introduction

LEGO is an abbreviation of the two Danish words "Leg Godt", meaning "play well", and in Latin "I combine" [1]. In 1932, Danish carpenter Ole Kirk Christiansen founded the LEGO company in Billund. From its beginnings as a wooden hand-carved toy to its free-form, brightly colored plastic bricks, to its IP co-branded series, LEGO has always maintained the idea that "good play is the cornerstone of children's creative lives". From a small carpenter's toy workshop to a global multinational company, LEGO's success is based on its successful product marketing strategy and overall business model. This paper chooses to analyze LEGO's marketing strategy of "making and telling stories" and business model of "bilateral relationship", combine the relevant theories of culture and art marketing management, explore the reasons for LEGO's success, as well as analyze LEGO's development in China, and offer thoughts and suggestions on the problems LEGO currently encounters in China.

## 2 Story making and telling

Named "Toy of the Century" by Fortune magazine in 2000, LEGO has gone from a small carpenter's workshop to a leading toy manufacturer to a global multinational company. For nearly 90 years, LEGO has maintained its core philosophy of "inspiring

creativity and imagination" and has expanded its business in response to the globalization of the economy, thus providing itself with a high degree of compatibility [2]. From basic DIY bricks to thematic sets, from children's toys to adult collectibles, LEGO has built an identity through its "story making and telling" strategy [3]. Through this identity, LEGO has gradually become compatible with different national markets, different age groups, and different IP followers, and in this compatibility, LEGO has crossed different fields, broken down industry barriers, and engaged in cross-disciplinary cooperation [4].

Identity is usually constructed and identified in two ways, one is a kind of adult-oriented, memories of the good things of childhood. The other is by influencing behavior and cognition, for example, LEGO for children is an identity of self-knowledge and learning that is enlightening [5]. In addition, for some consumers, LEGO is also a social identity, a demonstration of their economic power and social status [6]. It is through these two parties that LEGO builds up the identity of different groups.

The "story making and telling" is the "implementation strategy" (RTS) proposed by the LEGO Group based on its strengths and combining economics, psychology, and sociology. on the interpretation and perception of myths in marketing [7]. Joseph Campbell saw myth as an attractive way of communicating information, one that resonates emotionally with people in their real lives and inner spirits [8]; and also as a rhetorical technique that symbolizes the message that is intended to be conveyed so that when people read, they unconsciously relate the ideas conveyed to their daily life experiences [9]. Based on Joseph Campbell's theory, LEGO wants to convey with consumers' existing experiences and perceptions to weave a story, and in the process of storytelling, it wins consumers' identity through the brand [10], but this emotional resonance and identity established through the story are highly metaphorical, so consumers are unconsciously involved in the story by substituting the constructed identity. Therefore, LEGO constructs identities according to different cultural circles in the thematic series, and the stories are shaped by anthropomorphic techniques, and the stories are full of guiding values, and the images in the stories are the best way to build up consumers' identities, which can help consumers enter a situation quickly; and also help consumers to accomplish ideas that cannot be realized in the real world.

In 1999-2000, LEGO introduced the Bionicle series, as the third generation of LEGO toys, it became an important turning point in LEGO's history, making it into the top five toys in the United States for the first time [4]. Behind the success of the Bionicle series is precisely the storytelling marketing strategy of LEGO, which uses stories as an emotional link to connect with consumers and resonate with them through stories, thus enabling them to build an identity through the product [4][11]. "Story making and telling" is used to market all LEGO products, whether they are basic square blocks or thematic sets. Consumers personalize their expressions through the building blocks they put together, a process of LEGO "story making and telling" and a way for participants to recreate their self-awareness and spirituality [12]. For example, observing children playing with LEGO in a nursery setting, it was found that the toy world children build with LEGO bricks becomes a place for storytelling, a

place that reflects the child's understanding, perception, and imagination of the world around them and helps them to explore the wider world [12].

LEGO has a clear and explicit user picture in the series of products, and the image will change the packaging of the product, the color of the bricks, the role of the theme, and other elements according to the cultural background, gender age, and the theme IP plot of different countries, to achieve the construction of different identities [13]. For example, LEGO will launch different series of products for boys, girls, men, and women according to gender and age. LEGO® speed champions are launched for men who already have spending power, and the overall price of this series is higher than other series, and sometimes even limited according to the brand of the sports car. However, it is worthwhile for men to pay an affordable fee to enter the story of the supercar and realize their dream of a supercar; LEGO®flower bouquet is facing women launched, catering to women's love of moving roses, containing a beautiful plot bouquet.

### 3 Bilateral relations

A "bilateral relationship" is a behavioral relationship in which marketer and customer behavior are reinforced by each other, and the value of a product is often influenced by the bilateral relationship between the customer and the marketer [14]. LEGO uses the "making and telling of stories" as a motivating force for consumers to design and create products with LEGO, thus maintaining the "bilateral relationship". In the "bilateral relationship" market model of the marketing company-customer relationship [15]. In this model, LEGO helps consumers to have comprehensive information about the product, using "stories" to "guide them to bring in their existing experiences," and to stimulate their emotional resonance, thus helping them to make the "right" decision [16]. LEGO's guidance is a conscious, personalized guidance that creates a sense of pleasure and satisfaction for the consumer. Through this guidance, LEGO profits from meeting the needs of consumers [17].

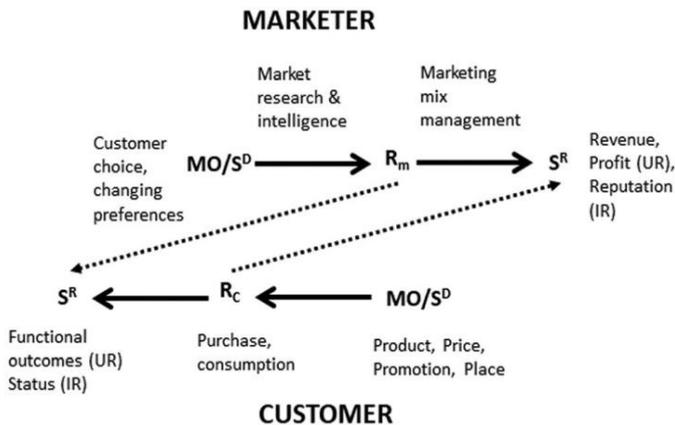


Fig. 1. The bilateral contingency between the marketing firm and the customer [15].

In this "bilateral relationship" model of the market, consumer preferences are reflected in LEGO's products and help determine the direction of the market. Consumers respond to LEGO's products by purchasing or rejecting them, thus achieving or hindering LEGO's financial goals [18]. Therefore, LEGO designs products according to consumer preferences, which can well maintain consumer satisfaction with the products [17][18].

In a "bilateral relationship" market model, the price of the product is the bridge between the company and the consumer [18], and it is usually the brand that sets different target pricing according to its specific situation. For example, goals related to profit, sales, competition, corporate image, etc [19]. LEGO earns profit revenue through the price of its products and customers get enjoyment and satisfaction through consumption, therefore, price is the equilibrium point to achieve the equity of both parties [17]. For example, LEGO will customize the products at high prices according to the high-quality corporate image, this price, not only reflects LEGO in shaping the strict and serious, high-quality corporate image. but also a kind of identity of consumers to their social status. It is a reflection of parents bringing quality education and entertainment services to their children. After forming a specific pricing target, LEGO also selects different pricing methods by considering many factors such as product cost, consumer spending power, competitors, and market segments [17].

With the advancement of society, consumers' individual needs for products have become the focus of companies' attention, so the co-creation model has emerged as an opportunity to facilitate "bilateral relationships". Co-creation is an extension of the "bilateral relationship" and is the basis for value creation, requiring companies to move away from a product-centered mindset and to share the role of producer with consumers, using each other's services as the basis for economic exchange [20]. In co-creation firms create a favorable environment and conditions for the participation of consumers, who provide ideas for the development of the product so that it can enter the market successfully, expand its share in the market and increase its competitiveness in the market[16][21].The producer-consumer co-creation model allows consumers to fundamentally change the dynamics of the market, which plays an active role in product creation and competition, becoming the center of new productivity as well as value creation and value extension for the firm [20]. In co-creation, LEGO combines the marketing strategy of "story making and telling" with the behavioral perspective of consumers through the study of their ideas and actions [16][21], thus involving them in the design of the product and their willingness to contribute to its design. design and willingness to pay for it.

#### **4 LEGO in China**

As an experience-oriented non-essential product, the demand for LEGO products is mainly influenced by a variety of factors. Therefore, we take the Chinese market as an example to analyze LEGO's market model of "bilateral relationship". Although LEGO entered the Chinese market late, it is paying more and more attention to the development of the Chinese market. During the epidemic, LEGO's Western European and

North American markets were hit hard. While the Asia-Pacific region, especially China, saw significant growth, at the same time, LEGO is paying more and more attention to the development of the Chinese market.[1].

First of all, the Chinese market provides a good business background for LEGO, which is the basis for LEGO's rapid development in China. Among the many factors affecting the demand for LEGO, economic base and intellectual property protection play a decisive role. On the one hand, LEGO is a non-essential product, the spiritual experience, and feeling pursued need to be based on economic development. The impact of the new crown epidemic (COVID-19) has reduced GDP growth in all regions of the world, but the Asia-Pacific region is expected to experience the smallest decline in GDP [22]. On the other hand, from the level of IPR protection, IPR has been considered an important cornerstone of LEGO's development and a way to enhance market competitiveness. In October 2019, the Chinese State Council officially announced the Regulations on Optimizing the Business Environment. The Chinese government's efforts to build a good business environment and intellectual property protection provide an ideal business environment for LEGO to be able to develop better in China in a sustainable way.

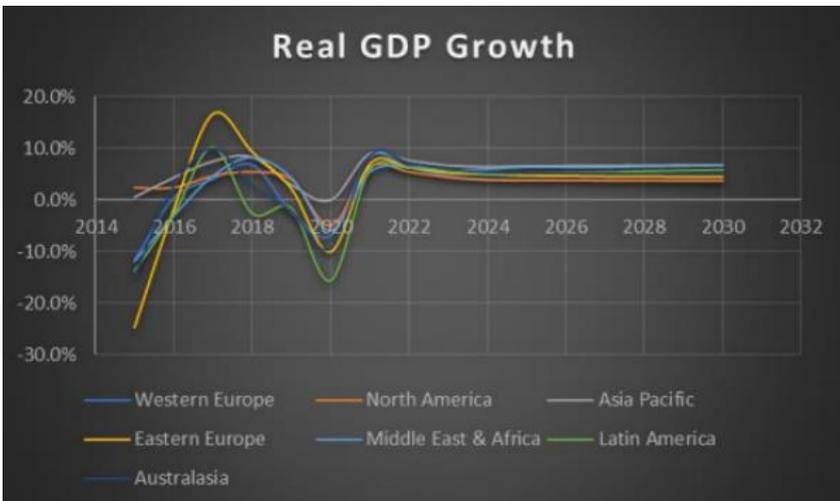


Fig. 2. The global GDP development affected by the new crown epidemic [1]

Secondly, LEGO focuses on promoting its "bilateral relationship" business model through co-creation and storytelling marketing, but because of the special characteristics of the Chinese market, LEGO's "bilateral relationship" is currently broken in the Chinese market. Taking the "bilateral relationship" market model of marketing company-customer relationship as an example, analyze the "bilateral relationship" between LEGO as a producer and the Chinese market as a customer [15].

In this "bilateral relationship" between producer and brand influence on consumers, LEGO's efforts to build Chinese consumer identity through the integration of traditional Chinese culture and the telling of traditional Chinese stories can be seen. For

example, in May 2020, LEGO launched the LEGO® Monkey King series, which is rooted in China's four traditional cultural masterpieces Journey to the West, which helps Chinese consumers to build an identity, and inspire different generations of Chinese people to "Wukong" childhood feelings [6]. In May 2022, LEGO launched the LEGO® Orchid. In Ancient China, orchids is one of the "Four Gentlemen" of flowers, and it was regarded as a symbol of purity and elegance. Confucius once praised orchids as "the fragrance of kings", which shows the importance of orchids in traditional Chinese culture. Whether by inspiring the sentiment of "Wukong" or by using the beautiful symbolism of "orchid", LEGO is trying to use the excellent traditional culture of China as a bond with Chinese consumers, hoping to help Chinese consumers build their identity through LEGO products. This effort of LEGO is successful and effective. An analysis of LEGO's Taobao sales data in April 2022 shows that due to the epidemic, most of LEGO's product sales were low, but after LEGO announced its latest plant series at the end of April, LEGO® orchid sales increased greatly and became the top of the sales chart.

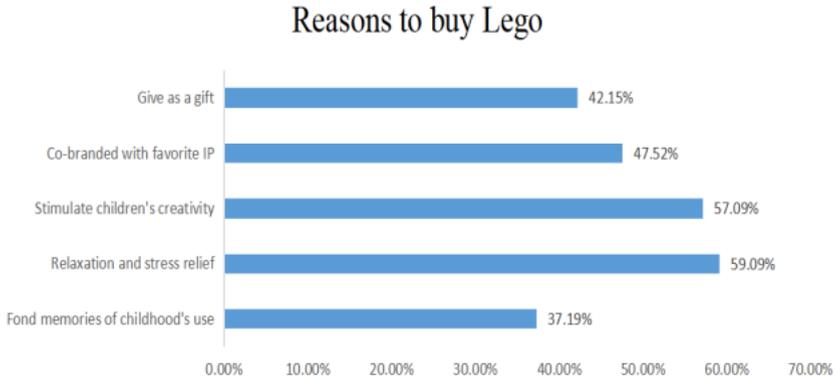


**Fig. 3.** LEGO® Orchid and LEGO® Monkey King series

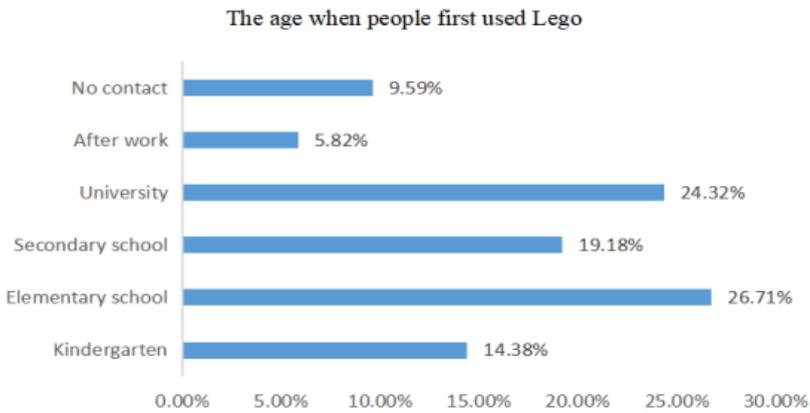
Ranking	Chart	Name	Selling Price	Number of parts
First		10311-Orchid	Domestic price:499RMB	Number of parts:608
Second		10309- Succulents	Domestic price:499RMB	Number of parts:771
Third		42127-The Batman - Batmobile	Domestic price:999RMB	Number of parts:1360
Fourth		42130-BMW M 1000 RR	Domestic price:1799RMB	Number of parts:1920
Fifth		10298 - Vespa 125	Domestic price:999RMB	Number of parts:1106

Fig. 4. Analysis of April 2022 LEGO sales data (Figure credit: original)

However, LEGO's efforts are a remedy for the current "bilateral relationship" break in the Chinese market. Although LEGO is a brand with nearly 100 years of history, it is still very young in China. In 2013, the general manager of LEGO China, Mr. Yao Shipeng, mentioned that children today are the real "generation of LEGO people" in the Chinese market because when they grow up and become parents, they will bring the fun of LEGO blocks to the next generation. so LEGO is trying to cultivate the "first generation of LEGO people" in the Chinese market. According to the questionnaire on "reason for purchasing LEGO" and "age of first use", 57.02% of LEGO consumers in China are willing to purchase LEGO as a creative and intellectual toy for their children, which also contributes to the fact that more than 60% of people first played with Lego when they were students. However, these "LEGO people" are still mainly in the student stage and do not have independent economic resources, so they cannot "feedback" to LEGO very effectively. And those who bought Lego because they had childhood memories of it accounted for only 37.19%, which is lower than the other four purchase needs like to relax and relieve stress. Therefore, LEGO is currently lacking "LEGO people" with a sense of emotion in its "bilateral relationship" with the Chinese market.



**Fig. 5.** Questionnaire about the reasons to buy Lego (Figure credit: original)



**Fig. 6.** Questionnaire about the age when people first use Lego (Figure credit: original)

In this "bilateral relationship" path where consumers influence producers and brands, we can see that LEGO pays great attention to the maintenance of the "bilateral relationship" and can use consumers as a new productive force, focusing on the development of consumer participation. However, LEGO is facing other problems in the Chinese market. With today's booming technology and digital media, toys are not a necessity. LEGO as a traditional toy and physical game industry is facing new challenges initiated by electronic technology and digital media, for example, computer manufacturers, Game developers, consumer electronics stores, etc [3]. These new competitors of LEGO are not becoming competitive with LEGO due to the products themselves, but they are becoming competitive with LEGO in terms of the time spent on the products. people are investing more time in electronic media, which directly compresses the time spent on family fun [3]. In a new market like China with huge potential to be exploited, the challenge posed by electronic technology and virtual networks to LEGO cannot be underestimated. In addition, LEGO in China also faces

the problem of "bilateral relationships" broken by cultural differences and technical barriers, for example, due to Chinese legal constraints and restrictions, LEGO is currently unable to provide the Chinese market with its own developed program applications in digital experience. In particular, some of the designed game activities require a VPN connection to open. This makes it difficult for LEGO to have an active, clear, and continuous dialogue with consumers, leaving Chinese consumers without a co-created personalized experience [20]. In addition, LEGO hopes to guide fans to build their identities through storytelling methods so that they can realize their ideals. With this guidance people no longer see LEGO as just a building block toy, but as an artistic medium or a cultural community and window for like-minded people. Consumers attend LEGO exhibitions, participate in building competitions, build blocks in their spare time, and share them as a way to interact socially on Facebook, Google, Twitter, and other platforms [23]. However, due to cultural differences, LEGO has not established a fan community in China, so it is difficult to ensure the diversity of consumer groups [20].

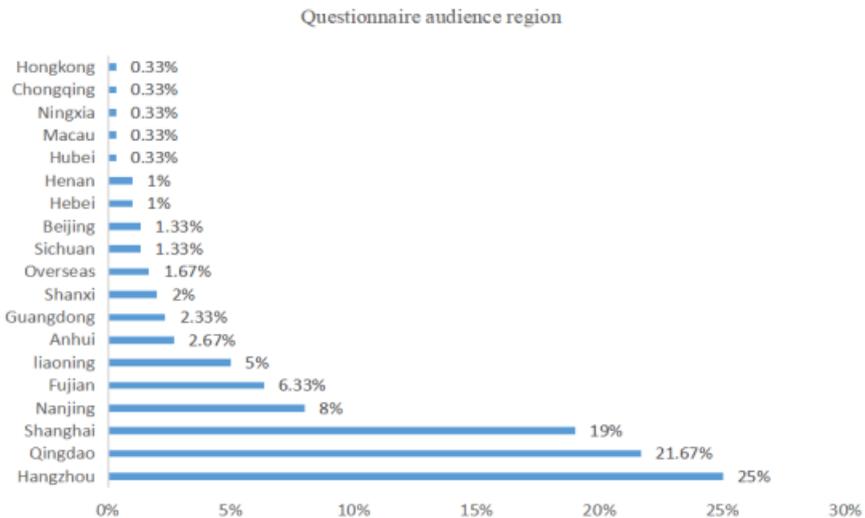


Fig. 7. Questionnaire audience region (Figure credit: original)

In the "bilateral relationship", price plays a crucial role as a bridge between companies and consumers [18]. The market positioning of LEGO products is high-end building and educational toys, which corresponds to a relatively high price. For example, the price of an identical block in the LEGO High Tech series is 60-80 Euros in the European and American markets, which is reasonable for the household income of local consumers; whereas the price of the same block in China is about 650-850 RMB, excluding other additional costs such as currency exchange rates and import duties, LEGO's pricing in the Chinese market is slightly higher than that in the European and American markets. In the Chinese market, if a family's monthly income is only a few thousand yuan, this box of blocks will take up about 1/10 of the family's monthly income. The questionnaire survey also shows that the questionnaires are

mainly filled in Hangzhou, Qingdao, Shanghai, Nanjing, and other major first- and second-tier cities, and more than 40% of these consumers already think that LEGO's pricing is high. In addition, according to the consumer survey done by LEGO toys in China, the monthly income of a family needs to reach more than 10,000 yuan to be able to continuously buy LEGO products. Combined with LEGO's market pricing, LEGO toys in the entire Chinese market to implement a uniform price, will not be due to regional differences in the implementation of differentiated pricing strategy, so the consumer power requirements of the buyer will not change depending on the city in which they are located, then LEGO in China's third and fourth-tier cities will have certain limitations to the development.

## 5 Discussion

"Storytelling" is a LEGO marketing strategy. A quick and simple colorful plastic block has been given a new value by LEGO through the "story making and telling" method, which not only stirs consumers' emotional resonance through "story" but also helps them build their identity. Taking the Chinese market as an example, we can see that LEGO's "story-making and telling" is indeed an effective marketing strategy.

LEGO takes the excellent Chinese traditional culture as the core of story making and telling, which is an opportunity to break the deadlock of LEGO in the Chinese market and let consumers understand and subtly accept such a foreign brand, instead of a passive indoctrination. In addition, the marketing strategy of "story making and telling" is also helping LEGO to cultivate the "first generation of LEGO people" in China. LEGO attaches such importance to the cultivation of "LEGO people" because LEGO has a clear positioning and perception of itself, focusing on the cultivation of adult fans and making them an important audience for the company. However, because LEGO entered China late, the first generation of LEGO people still do not have independent economic resources, so it does not bring obvious corresponding benefits at present, but will be rewarded in the future

The "bilateral relationship" is the core business model of LEGO, which focuses on co-creation with consumers. This "bilateral relationship" is a strong competitive advantage for LEGO. For example, LEGO's LEGO® Creative Series invites consumers to make DIY creations and select the most popular products for production. This approach can cater to consumers' preferences for targeted and favorable production, and can also serve as good publicity and promotion. However, it also has potential risks, for example, in the Chinese market, because of the low aggregation of fans and the low awareness of consumer participation, which becomes a major obstacle for LEGO to co-create with Chinese consumers. Secondly, this "bilateral relationship" is unstable and influenced by external environmental factors. For example, in China, due to legal constraints and restrictions, LEGO can only display information related to the products it sells, while other extended contents, such as games for digital experience and fun classroom contents, need to be opened through VPN connection, otherwise Chinese consumers cannot experience and feel the rich fun of LEGO. Therefore, in the process of developing "bilateral relationship", LEGO not only needs to establish a

close relationship with consumers, but also needs to pay attention to the dynamic changes of the external environment and make timely adjustments according to the changes to prevent the "bilateral relationship" from breaking down.

## 6 Conclusion

In nearly 90 years, LEGO has grown from a small carpenter's toy workshop to a global multinational company. Behind this transformation are LEGO's strategy and transformation in response to the different challenges in various industries. Today, LEGO is also facing new opportunities and challenges from the times. The epidemic has completely changed people's lifestyles and mindsets, and people pay more attention to the pursuit of quality of life and have more leisure time for relaxation, but the rapid development of electronic technology and the virtual world created by online media are competing with LEGO for consumers' time. Therefore, in the face of these new opportunities and challenges, LEGO should inherit and develop its successful marketing strategy and business model, combine the impact of the current epidemic on people's mindsets, and make the story more in line with people's hearts and minds, and help people rebuild their pursuit and aspiration for beauty under the epidemic through narrative. At the same time, LEGO should also strengthen the risk prediction and plan preparation for the business model of "bilateral relationship", reduce the impact of the external environment.

For the Chinese market, firstly, LEGO should not only continue its efforts to learn and integrate China's excellent traditional culture but also follow the trend of China's cultural development and understand the preferences of Chinese youth. Because culture is constantly changing and developing, what people admire and love is not necessarily traditional content. Using traditional culture that resonates as a doorway to opening the market is feasible, but not a long-term solution. In particular, on June 27, 2022, the LEGO Group announced its decision to increase product prices due to rising costs of energy, logistics, and raw material initiatives. In this regard, many senior Chinese LEGO fans said that some of LEGO's hot products are, in a way, not purely commodities, but have become a financial products with a certain appreciation space. For example, there are some IP co-branded models of LEGO products sold out of print, so some enthusiasts will stock up in advance, then trade like a work of art. Therefore, LEGO should consider the development of the product in the Chinese market, as well as young people's preference for fashionable games and the collectibles associated with them. Secondly, Although LEGO's higher pricing is to match the corporate image, LEGO's prices are not conducive to maintaining a "bilateral relationship" with the Chinese market for the currently immature Chinese market. Therefore LEGO can take advantage of the unique advantages of online shopping in the Chinese market. With the development of e-commerce, online shopping has become one of the main consumption channels in the Chinese consumer market, especially for young consumers. So LEGO could improve its online sales platform, stationed on Taobao, Tmall, and other major e-commerce platforms, increase its online promotion efforts, participate in the live broadcast of major online celebrities, and leverage the

live broadcast of online celebrities to promote its products on China-specific consumption festivals, such as Double 11, 618, etc. Price subsidies and concessions, timely diversion of offline consumer objects that may be lost to the line. This marketing approach namely maintains the corporate image and meets the psychological expectations of Chinese consumers.

This paper focuses on the analysis of LEGO's business model and marketing strategy and analyzes the reasons for LEGO's development into a global multinational corporation by combining the relevant theories of culture and art marketing management. We also analyze the development of LEGO in the Chinese market as a case study of global cultural cooperation to provide ideas and methods for other global multinational companies and cross-cultural enterprises. In future research, we will focus on other influencing factors in LEGO's "bilateral relationship" business model and analyze how LEGO maintains "bilateral relationships" in different market environments.

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