Study on the Operation Problems of Konami's Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in the Chinese Market

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Abstract. The market prospect for trading cards game in Japan and China is very positive. With the increasing popularity of the official Yu-Gi-Oh competitions in China and the excellent performance of Chinese competitors, Konami has gradually begun to pay attention to the Chinese market. Yu-Gi-Oh trading cards have certain commercial sales modes in China. The most important means of sales is offline store sales. And other ways are online sales, which are usually combined with offline store sales. There are also transactions with each others, but this approach carries some risks. Also, Yu-Gi-Oh has some potential challenges, the most threatening is compete with other types of trading cards, like Magic the Gathering. Yu-Gi-Oh faces some difficulties in China. Specifically, the simplified Chinese version of Yu-Gi-Oh Cards is slow to update, the market price is not stable and there is a lack of specialized stores. This paper would analyse the situation of Yu-Gi-Oh by analyzing the causes of these plights and then giving suggestions according to the situation.

Keywords: Trading card game, Yo-Gi-Oh TCG, Konami, Marketing.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Current State of the Trading Card Games in China and Japan

Card games are popular all over the world. In China and Japan, the more popular type of card games is the trading card games [1]. Japan has a stable group of trading card game players. Since 2017, the market scale of trading card in Japan has been increasing year by year. In 2019, the cumulative sales revenue of trading cards in Japan was 112.3 billion yen, with a year-on-year growth of 12.4%. As of 2021, the Japanese trading card market has reached 59 billion yen [2]. Due to the consistency of toy preferences between China and Japan, there also a huge demand for card toys in China [3]. In September 2020, the official version of Yu-Gi-Oh card was introduced to the Chinese market, and Konami licensed the original version to Shanghai Yingdie Film & Television Culture Co. LTD. Official Yu-Gi-Oh! Card game for Chinese consumers [4].

1.2 The History and Current State of Yo-Gi-Oh

Kazuki Takahashi is a famous Japanese cartoonist and author of Yu-Gi-Oh! In 1996, Yu-Gi-Oh began to be serialized in weekly comic named Shonen Jump and received great praise. In 1999, the card game Yu-Gi-Oh was made into a trading card game by Konami Company and named Yu-Gi-Oh OCG, which quickly set off a craze of card games among Japanese teenagers. In 2000, Yu-Gi-Oh has become a big hit popular comics and began to an animation. At this time, Yu-Gi-Oh TCG began selling in 1999 by the Japanese Konami company. June 11,2011, more than 25.1 billion pieces of cards were sold in the world, created the world's highest sales record for card games in the Guinness World Record [5]. With the development of the franchise, Yu-Gi-Oh TCG has expanded new rules and projects, which has attracted continuous attention.

2. Marketing state of Yu-Gi-Oh cards in Chinese local market

2.1 Marketing Channels

Yu-Gi-oh TCG's marketing channels abroad are divided into two categories, mass market retailers and game stores. Sales at mass market retailers (i.e., Walmart, Target, etc.) tend to be younger
(children ages 6-14), and sales at game stores tend to be older adults (age 16 +). The marketing management of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China has gone through two stages. The first stage is the “one south and one north”, double wholesalers before 2014, and the second stage is the general agents in China since 2014.

Around 2000, China began to sell Yu-Gi-Oh TCG. Due to the lack of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG agency, the sale of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG places are few. At that time, the popular product in China was the pirated Yo-Gi-Oh TCG. Compared with the genuine version, the pirated version was in low price, in large quantity, and could be seen everywhere, especially in the large-scale wholesale market. Therefore, most Yu-Gi-Oh players bought pirated Yu-Gi-Oh TCG at that time. The sales amount of pirated Yu-Gi-Oh TCG is more than 200 million yuan. Although a large number of low-priced pirated Yu-Gi-Oh TCG were flooding the domestic market, due to the large sales volume and rapid diffusion, the popularity of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China was enhanced, laying a foundation for the development of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China.

Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in the early development in China, because there was no official agent, the domestic Yo-Gi-Oh TCG products mainly come from Shenzhen and Beijing two wholesalers. Wholesalers between north and south shop respectively for the latest Yo-Gi-Oh TCG products. From the beginning of the sales to 2014, many stores and wholesalers had long-term cooperation, maintained a good relationship. On August 12, 2013, Huang Xin'en, a 24-year-old player from Taiwan, won the 11th Yu-Gi-Man World Competition by beating players from all over the world for three consecutive games. Therefore, Konami decided to publish Chinese Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, and the first Chinese version of Yu-Gi-Oh was released on January 29, 2014. With the release of Chinese Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, more teenagers became interested in Yu-Gi-Oh TCG and bought card packs, which made Yu-Gi-Oh TCG further explore the Chinese market.

In 2014, Hong Kong Mingjia Digital Co., Ltd. acquired the sales agency of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China and became the official agent of Konami Co., Ltd. They were responsible for channel development, market development and event holding at offline stores. With a formal agent, more and more cities began to sell legitimate Yo-Gi-Oh TCG, many areas had one or more brick-and-mortar stores. Although the price of pirated Yu-Gi-Oh TCG is low, due to poor paper, unclear printing, translation errors, and inability to participate in official competitions, most players begin to buy the legitimate Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, which makes the sales of the legitimate Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China begin to rise. Card stores can not only obtain products from agents, but also hold official competitions if they are officially certified. Official games are very attractive to players, many players participate in official games, but also in the store to buy products. In order to attract more players to participate in the competition, the Hong Kong Mingjia Digital company increased the number of officially certified stores from 42 to 75 from June to August in 2015. Yu-Gi-Oh TCG has seen growth at China.

2.2 Sales Mode

In China, the sales mode of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG are store sales mode, online purchase mode, and the transaction between players. The most common sales mode is store sales mode, which is also the main way for players to buy Yu-Gi-Oh TCG.

2.2.1 Store Sales

Traditional consumer goods are sold to customers through retail stores, so this type of sales is also called "store sales". With the change of consumers’ consumption habits and purchasing behavior, the retailers' business model and channel functions are undergoing great changes. Retailers are effectively integrating their upstream suppliers to form a more stable and competitive channel system. So the store sales mode occupies the main position.

Retail is the main sales mode of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China. As the agent, Hong Kong Mingjia Digital Company distributes Yu-Gi-Oh TCG products produced by Konami Company to offline stores in various cities, that is, card stores. In addition to shipping products, agents are responsible for the promotion of products and competitions. Offline stores generally have two forms of sales. One is pre-sale. When a new product is released in each issue, the content of the new product will be
disclosed bit by bit on the magazine or official website. In the pre-sale, public need to pay a booking fee. The other is spot sales, each issue of the product has an official release date. The retailer's stores will be on the day of the release of the goods on time. However, due to the fast update cycle of card products, the purchase degree of the old supplement bags that have been sold is far less than that of the new supplement bags, so there will not be too much stock of the previous supplement packs in stores generally.

2.2.2 Online Selling

Online selling can be attributed to a kind of direct selling. Online purchasing mode is more popular in China. The Internet provides consumers with a new shopping environment - online store. Consumers through the network online shopping, online payment, saving the time and space of customers and enterprises, greatly improving the transaction efficiency.

![Figure 1. Online selling [6]](image)

Yu-Gi-oh, TCG has adopted online trading mode in Chinese marketing. Although many areas in China have one or more than one Yu-Gi-Oh TCG offline stores, but these stores are generally in Guangdong, Beijing and other first-tier developed cities, some areas do not have Yu-Gi-Oh TCG offline stores. Due to the rise and gradual improvement of online shopping platform in recent years, online purchase has become a channel for some players to obtain Yu-Gi-Oh TCG. In China, due to the low entry threshold of selling Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, many merchants start their sales from shopping websites such as Taobao. Therefore, most of the offline stores are also sold on the Internet, forming a model of offline stores and online stores operating together. As a result, businesses with offline stores also derive a large part of their turnover from online sales. In addition to the card products issued by Konami, the online store also sells other goods issued by the card. Compared with offline stores, online shopping also has some disadvantages. The first is the time that players have to wait to get the product they want. When a player is in urgent need of a card to participate in a match, a slow delivery company will inconvenience the player and delay the match. Secondly, because Yu-Gi-Oh TCG products are paper products, it will be easy to produce damage in the process of transportation with a little careless. But in general, the problems generated in the processes of transportation cannot find the shop to compensate, it’s also a loss for players.

2.2.3 Transaction Between Each Others

As a trading card game, player-to-player transactions are common. Transactions between players are not reflected in the card packs issued by Konami, but in the single cards obtained from the purchase of the card packs. Since the use value of each card will change with the release of new products and the game environment, the price of each card in Yu-Gi-Oh TCG is generally not fixed. And players often buy or exchange with each other according to their own needs. Most players will make exchange purchases on the trading platform, but the transaction mode cannot be guaranteed on
the online platform. Some bad players cheat other players out of money or expensive cards by stealing other players' trading photos online, etc. There is no way to investigate the players who have been cheated. They would make their bad behaviorist be known to the public through social platforms, so that the majority of players will be vigilant and careful to be cheated.

2.3 Challenges Assessment

Since its release, Yu-Gi-TCG has sold a total of 84 supplement packs, 44 small box supplement packs, 38 initial sets, 16 match packs, 16 special card packs, 18 arcade special card collections, and 29 other card packs. The variety and quantity of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG are beyond comparison with other card games. Yu-Gi-Oh TCG plays an important role in trading card games due to its high game difficulty and rigorous game rules [7]. At present, newly entered card games are much inferior in card types, game difficulty and competition organization. Therefore, the threat of new entrants is low. Yu-Gi-Oh TCG enjoys high popularity in the world, with frequent events, rich competition types and a hot single card market. What can be used as a substitute to threaten Yu-Gi-Oh TCG is the pirated Yu-Gi-Oh TCG. However, the pirated Yu-Gi-Oh TCG has poor paper, unclear printing, and incorrect effects, and only cards marked with Yu-Gi-Oh Official card game can be used in regular large-scale tournaments. And replacement cards are prohibited. All pirate Yo-Gi-Oh TCG cannot participate in the regular competition, and pirate Yo-Gi-Oh TCG has no collection and use value. Therefore, the threat of substitutes is low.

As the originator of trading card games, Magic has a large number of players around the world and has consistently ranked first in the sales of trading card games in the world [8]. As early as 2003, the Chinese National Sports Commission certified Magic the Gathering as a sports project, so that the popularity and sales of Magic the Gathering in China rapidly increased [9]. In addition, Magic the Gathering, as a new card game, Japan's "Force OF Will" has attracted the attention of players all over the world just after its release. Moreover, the Chinese version of FOW-TCG International has a strong advantage in the sales of the mainland. Soon after its release, card stores around the world began to hold FOW-TCG competitions. In just a few months, FOW-TCG has become the fourth largest card seller in the world, so the threat can’t be underestimated.

3. Plights encountered by Yu-Gi-Oh Cards in China

In the sales process of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China, due to the lack of professional management, it has produced problems such as oversupply, price speculation by dealers, and difference in shop level.

3.1 Slow Update

As official Konami company agents, domestic entities shop usually order from Hong Kong famous digital Yu-Gi-Oh of TCG latest product. But due to the agent transport is slow, the products cannot be sent to the entity shop on time. Leading to goods cannot be sold at first time. Also, it would inconvenient players to buy products. In turn, players are forced to buy from other stores or online, thus reducing sales in offline stores.

Although Konami Company issued the traditional Chinese version of Yu-Gi-Oh, the release speed of the traditional Chinese version of Yu-Gi-Oh could not keep up with the total card pool. So that players could not play the game with pure Chinese cards, and when using the latest cards, they had to check the card information, which brought inconvenience to the reading of the game. Thus reducing the fun of the game. The slow updating of traditional Chinese version of Yu-Gi-Oh, also hindered the promotion of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China.

3.2 Unstable Market Price

Yu-Gi-Oh TCG has a low threshold to sell, and some vendors will stock up in large quantities but when supply exceeds demand, a large amount of inventory will be generated. In order to deal with these stockpiling, some vendors will lower the price of goods for sale. Because of the low price of
these vendors would affect the normal price of sales merchants. In order to sell goods successfully, merchants also lower their prices. Resulting in the low market price of the whole Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, thus causing a great impact on the market price of the Yu-Gi-Oh TCG.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Card</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elemental HERO Glow Neos</strong></td>
<td>$12.99</td>
<td>+453.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STON-EN036</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strike of Neos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ultra Rare)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Rose Dragon</strong></td>
<td>$7.73</td>
<td>+354.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSOC-EN039</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossroads of Chaos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ultra Rare)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSY-Framelord Lambda</strong></td>
<td>$7.00</td>
<td>+89.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLHR-EN051</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battles of Legend: Hero’s Revenge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Secret Rare)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Figure 2. Unstable card price [10]

Since the single card of TCG card games has a great profit, card dealers often have a large number of single card goods. Through speculation, the price of many single cards far exceeds the value of use. Therefore, it is difficult for players to acquire rare cards as the price keeps rising. In order to meet the needs of customers, some shops buy these rare cards at a high price, but due to the difference between the use value and the purchase price, the shops cannot sell these cards successfully. Resulting in a serious backlog of cards. Then, no market price, hit the enthusiasm of the shop to purchase loose cards.

3.3 Lack of Specialized Shops

No matter what industry, professional marketing channels are an important link, and the official certification of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG stores in China needs to be improved. By comparison, Hasbro Inc. ‘s Magic the Gathering licensed stores in China look professional. Magic The Gathering’s authorized stores in China are divided into three levels, namely entry level, core level and premium level. The higher the level, the higher the competition, the more matches and the more prizes. Magic The Gathering not only has professional licensed stores, but also board game stores and convenience stores that sell Magic the Gathering. In contrast, Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in the domestic sales channel is single. Card stores are the main sales channels. In addition to these, some stationery stores and game stores also sell them. Although this shop jointly sell Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, in addition to the official certified card stores, the remaining stationery stores and game stores are not officially certified, unofficial certified stores can not hold the official competition.

Although the original Yu-Gi-Oh TCG sales and sales began to rise in most cities, but there are some players still buy pirated Yo-Gi-Oh TCG These players just for the sake of entertainment on weekdays, does not take part in the official game, only to experience the game fun. So they choose the cheaper pirated Yo-Gi-Oh TCG. Therefore, the pirated Yu-Gi-Oh TCG is still sold in China.

4. Causes and Suggestion of the Plights

4.1 Causes of Plights

4.1.1 Economic and Cultural Differences Between North and South

The sales of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China mainly rely on offline stores. According to the pre-selection announcement of the 2015 Celebrity Digital Points Competition in August, a total of 75 brick-and-mortar stores have been officially certified. Of the 75 brick-and-mortar stores, Guangdong ranked
first with 13, followed by Jiangsu, Guangxi and Beijing tied for third. The reason why there are more brick-and-mortar stores in the South than in the north is inseparable from the strong economic system and diverse culture in the south. The reform and opening up made the economy of the southern cities develop rapidly, and the opening up policy made the western culture enter the south prematurely, so that the economic development and cultural level of the south have been greatly improved. In that case, comparing with the development of north, there is still a lot of difference.

4.1.2 Conflicts Between Agents, Wholesalers and Retailers

Since 2014, Hong Kong Famous Digital Company has taken over the business of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China, which includes regular promotion, holding events, supplying retailers, and providing benefits provided by Konami Company for retailers, etc. Before 2014, the products of China's domestic Yu-Gi-Oh TCG were mainly provided by wholesalers in Shenzhen and Beijing, and the long-term cooperative relationship made most retailers more willing to cooperate with the original wholesalers. Agents can not get enough orders from retailers, so that the famous digital repeatedly raise the purchase price. Result in more retailers refuse to buy from agents. But Celebrity Digital can bring retailers official store certification, official competition qualification, official competition points, and official offers of prizes and gifts. So most retailers adopt the wholesale agent minimum quantity, just to get the official benefits. In 2015, agents increased the welfare system for wholesale products, and more and more retailers are willing to sell wholesale products to agents. However, the arrival date of the products provided by the agents is synchronized with the release date, while the wholesalers will arrive half a day or even one day ahead of the agents, which makes many retail stores that support the agents suffer from the embarrassment that other stores have been put on the shelves but their own stores have not yet put the products in place.

4.1.3 Distribution Mode of General Agents

Although the Hong Kong Famous Digital company as the official agent of Konami company, due to regional problems, it can not fully manage the mainland market. So there is still no agent in mainland China. China has a vast territory, and the channels of an agent are limited, so it is difficult to cover the whole market. The depth of the market is not enough to take into account the market demand. The sales growth is slow, which affects the market development and fails to lead the synchronous development of the whole Chinese region. Therefore, if an agent is unable to develop Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China, there will inevitably be chaos in the domestic market of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, lack of professional shops, and insufficient promotion of products and competitions.

4.1.4 Lack of big domestic competition events

In foreign countries, Yu-Gi-Oh TCG tournaments are often held, which are usually large tournaments with more than 400 participants. For example, the U.S. YCS Regionals and Japan's regional CS are almost once a month. Major Yu-Gi-Oh TCG tournaments sell products that allow players to buy the cards they need, therefore boosting sales. The price of Yo-Gi-Oh TCG single card not only have connection with the Yu-Gi-Oh TCG's new products, but also with the Yu-Gi-Oh related games. In the United States or Japan, because the frequency of large-scale competitions is very stable, the single card with useful value can be steadily put into the competition to play, so the price of the single card tends to be stable in the region where large-scale competitions are often held. In contrast, in China, there are only CNC and Kaine Cup in large-scale Yu-Gi-Oh TCG competitions. And these two competitions only happen once a year and are concentrated in August, which makes the price of single card unstable.

4.2 Suggested Solutions

Every industry needs constant improvement, and so does the card industry. Combined with the problems and reasons existing in the development process of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China, the following countermeasures are put forward.
4.2.1 Increasing New Agents

There are a lot of people in China, and Yu-Gi-Oh TCG sells and makes publicity in nearly 30 provinces and cities, so new agents are needed to distribute domestic products and promote the competitions [11]. One agent cannot meet the needs of the market supply, but two or three agents could make up the market blank. For example, the magic the gathering card game agents. Hasbro set up two agents in South and North respectively, both of them obtained good effect. So the development and training agents is a top priority. The agent is responsible for the timely delivery of products to advertise the competition. New agents must deliver products to offline stores at the first time in strict accordance with the release time of products, and reasonably distribute products to each offline store according to market demand. Secondly, agents need to assist offline stores to improve store quality and stabilize market prices. Finally, agents must have strong economic strength [12].

In Yu-Gi-Oh TCG sales, although there are fewer candidates for middlemen, there are several middlemen active in each city. The main characteristics of the intermediary merchants are that they do not pay the shop rent and do not need the welfare provided by the agents. In order to meet the minimum purchase quantity of wholesalers, these intermediate merchants often sell products to customers at a low price or even at the cost price, which makes the profits of retailers shrink dramatically. In order to avoid these bad influences, the agent should distribute the supply of products reasonably. First of all, the agent should actually investigate whether the receiving party is qualified to sell the product. After that, the company will supply products according to the actual situation of offline stores after confirming the qualification. Agents need to provide enough goods for offline stores to order and replenish goods. They can also adjust the minimum wholesale goods according to the past cooperation relationship of each physical store and the actual number of people in the competition. It is also less likely that supply will outstrip demand, ensuing that retailers will stock up on products, or they will sell them cheaply, leading to market chaos.

4.2.2 Strengthening the Specialization of Offline Stores

The main marketing channel of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China is offline stores, so professional offline stores are an important foundation for the rapid development of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China. Domestic offline stores lack professional management. Taking the authorized stores of Magic The Gathering for example, agents review domestic offline stores through a series of indicators and eliminate some offline stores with too low indicators. The agents could raise the threshold to filtrate the stores of good quality. In order to improve the specialization of offline stores, agents could conduct professional training for the remaining offline stores including product knowledge training and training on how to organize competition activities.

At present, some offline stores in China have not been officially certified. Because of the small number of players, some stores have to created the competition system to cater the consumption habits of local players. Some places has not been developed, so they need to slow down the pace of development. They need to adjust the marketing methods, adopt differentiated strategy according to the local situation so that more players would be willing to contact Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, enjoy the joy of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG.

4.2.3 Establishing Professional Social Platforms

Establishing professional social platform like Weibo, post bar, BBS as the core platform to spread the information such as the latest product news, card store location and gameplay experience, so that stores can let the players know the latest information and then communicate with players through the social platform. In this way, it could be Conducive to the promotion and marketing of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG.

The competition is a great way for players to communicate with each others, not only to improve their skills, but also to meet more like-minded players, and even to develop close friendships. Therefore, the game for Yu-Gi-Oh TCG is an indispensable link. Through the publicity before the competition, sponsor can know the approximate number of people in the competition. So as to arrange the venue and organization process of the competition, avoiding that the players cannot participate on the day of the competition.
4.2.4 Improving the environment of the stores

Comfortable store environment is conducive to players to enjoy more the game. At present, the environment of stores is relatively comfortable. The interior stores is bright, the seats are comfortable, the bathrooms are clean, and they provide drinks and food. Compared with stores, the physical store of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG is quite different. The store area is small and the tables and chairs are not enough to bring the best game experience to players. Therefore, improving the store environment can help Yu-Gi-Oh TCG bring the best enjoyment to players in the service.

Stores would put the Yo-Gi-Oh TCG’s latest products, some passing teenagers will be attracted into the store, if have professional staff to guide the curious teenagers, let them know Yo-Gi-Oh TCG, so interested in the Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, become a member of the player. Sales to Yu-Gi-Oh, TCG will also improve. Therefore, store staff should be trained in quality and marketing ability to improve the professionalism of the game, so as to improve the overall level of offline stores.

5. Conclusion

This article has four parts. These four parts clearly describe the market state of Yu-Gi-Oh TCG in China and Japan, the marketing channels and sales modes in China, the challenges faced by Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, the difficulties faced by Yu-Gi-Oh TCG, the causes of the difficulties and the proposed solutions respectively. This case study analyzes the little-discussed area of sales and development of trading card game. Therefore, it can help people who are interested in card toys and trading card games to have a clearer positioning of trading card game in the Chinese market. In addition, it can let more people have a preliminary and systematic understanding of the trading card game, and better spread the trading card game culture. Further more, through this study, we can know that the development and marketing of a trading card game in foreign countries are very likely to face many difficulties. Other companies of trading card games can take this as a reference and take initiatives to avoid the plights according to their own circumstances. However, this article has several limitations. First of all, Chinese situation may be different from the situation in other countries. Trading cards, such as Yu-Gi-Oh, are also sold in Europe and Korea. Other regions may need to consider other commercial factors under the influence of different comprehensive factors. Second, most of the emphasis is placed on the supply side of the market. The demand side, such as the factors about players, buyers and card collectors, is not taken into account. Based on the above, the new paper can study these shortcomings.

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