

# Alibaba, Facilitating Engagement without being Exploitative

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## ABSTRACT

As Science and technology develop at a remarkable speed that humans' ancestors might have never foreseen, it is sorrowful but true that people are excessively reliant on social media in the modern world. Admittedly, technology is useful and convenient, but sometimes it is also dangerous. It seems that social media is creating a paradox effect: While rendering people illusions of a variety of opportunities and dreams, social media hinders people's perception of real life. This paper is aiming to address the question—how Alibaba facilitates engagement without being exploitative. The paper will be primarily focus on two areas of study: Behavioural Economics and Evolutionary Biology. It will cover the consequences of covid-19, the pet attachment theory, humans' evolved preferences, and digital nudging.

**Keywords:** *Alibaba, human-pet relationship, technology, digital nudging*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Alibaba, one of the biggest Chinese online shopping platform organizations, launched the game, Taobao life, in May 2019. Players can access the games by logging onto Taobao. They are empowered to create and customize their virtual avatars, decorate their virtual houses, or even “visit” or “interact” with other Taobao players. Similar to any other online game, some initial coins and assets are automatically given to new players, but as time goes on, players ought to acquire virtual coins in order to level up and progress their online status. To do so, players need to complete daily missions by either checking in at a certain time, watching an assigned merchant's live stream, spending a few minutes scanning through a brand's website, or even buying a particular product. Users are also encouraged to invite their friends to join the game, which allows them to play with their friends or make new friends through a swiping feature that Taobao created [1].

This paper explores the psychological manipulating strategies that online platform often utilizes, so the focus of the article is on theories of Behavioral and Experimental Economics, as well as exanimating the online addiction trend and effects. The goal of this investigation is to examine the strategies that social media employ to affect individuals' mindsets.

Information and data within this paper are mostly based on experiments carried out by former experimenters.

The significance of this research is to dive into the perspectives of online users and product promoters through capturing this real-life example that portrays the concepts of Behavioral Economics. Meanwhile, the finding of this research will reflect upon the marketing tools that make use of people's emotions, and the disclosure of what is behind the scene may ultimately alter readers' notions regarding modern-day marketing means.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1 The Effect of Covid-19

According to Daniel Luu, the founder of Nookazon in Washington D.C., the Covid-19 pandemic “really opened a lot of people's eyes, even non-gamers, to what games can do to bring people together”[2] Gaming has skyrocketed during the pandemic. However, the explosion of online gaming during Covid-19 implies that humans are social animals who desire interactions amongst themselves. Before the pandemic, gaming was a growing way for people to keep in touch with each other. However, the pandemic causes people to become increasingly reliant on social media to connect with their friends, partners, and families. Mark Griffiths, a professor at Nottingham Trent University, published a

study in 2013, asking individuals to identify one favourite thing about playing video games. 11,000 players of the online role-playing game Everquest said that their favourite part of the game was connecting with other players [3].

Taobao seized this opportunity and hitched the ride of the technological advancements brought by the pandemic. Thus, the game Taobao Life was successfully launched in May 2019, when the pandemic surfaced in China.

### 2.2. Human-animals Relationship

For generations and generations, animals have co-evolved with humans. Because animals have secured solid bonds with humans, they have gradually become what people call “pets”. According to the baby schema (Kindchenschema) theory, the notion that humans are willing to accept animals into their daily lives is based on their vision that they think animals are cute, which is not unusual. Certain physical features, big eyes and round face, for instance, are so irresistibly cute to humans, in a way that prompt many people to have the desire to take care of those cute creatures.

However, many underlying pieces of evidence argue for the reasons why humans and pets can develop such an intimate relationship. Starting off with the human-pet attachment, the human-pet relationship can be relatively simple and secure. Many pets’ qualities satisfy humans’ needs to be loved, cared, and valued. Gradually, humans and certain animals become friends because those

animals are always there when humans desire emotional support. According to Garrity et al., 1989, the satisfaction that individuals get from interacting with their pets can help release depression and loneliness, increasing happiness in general. Scientifically said, people’s oxytocin levels shoot up when they interact with dogs.

The experiment conducted by Smolkoic, Fajfar, and Mlinaric (2012) [4] analyzes the differences by demographic variables between various pet owners (Figure 1). The results have shown that owners who have owned their pets for three years or more have a higher mean Owner-pet Relationship Scale (OPRS) compared with those owners who owned their pets for less than three years. In addition, dog owners experience more intimate relationships with their pets (dogs) than cat owners. Besides, owners who live in the countryside have a higher score than those living in the town. This phenomenon draws in the explanation that people are receiving greater daily physical health benefits from pets by meeting their pets’ daily requirement of exercising and going outside (e.g. walk the dog). According to a paper published in The Journal of Physical Activity and Health, dog owners are more likely to walk for leisure purposes than both non-pet owners and people who own pet cats. For those living in the countryside, there are more routes/opportunities they can take their dogs to. Because of the greater amount of time pet owners and pets have spent together, the two feel more attached to each other over time.

Statistics and differences by demographic variables between pet owners on the OPRS questionnaire

Demographic variables	N	M	SD	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Cohen's d	
Owners' gender	Male	35	41.34	6.825	3846.5***	-3.253***	0.62
	Female	330	45.45	6.505			
Length of ownership	< 3 years	167	45.94	6.350	14228.5*	-2.297*	0.25
	> 3 years	198	44.31	6.790			
Location of living	Countryside	175	45.92	6.920	14415.5*	-2.197*	0.15
	Town	190	44.92	6.270			
Chosen pet	Dog	268	46.20	6.134	8524.0***	-5.030***	0.65
	Cat	97	41.90	6.980			
Pedigree	With	157	47.04	5.870	11654.5***	-4.666***	0.52
	Without	209	43.57	6.870			

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 1 Statistics and differences by demographic variables between pet owners on the OPRS questionnaire.

Evolutionarily, much like wolves and many gregarious animals, the fact that people have developed strong emotional bonds with animals is one strong evidence about humans having a social nature rather than being isolated individuals who only depend on themselves as companions for living. In fact, dogs are also interdependent and social animals because their ancestors, wolves, dwell in groups just like humans: dogs performed well on tests involving cooperative communication (e.g., the ability to follow a pointing

finger). The theory behind why dogs and humans developed similarly in social behavior is that both species have evolved under the “survival of the friendliest”, meaning that evolution and survival favored the more socially cooperative individuals. Another point is that many dog-owner relationships mirror human parental bonds with children, and Topel, a leading canine researcher who is based at the Institute for Psychology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, points out that “In my view, pet dogs can be regarded in many respects as

‘preverbal infants in canine’s clothing (Topel, 2009) [5]’. Overall, those studies turn out that dogs are very attuned to humans because dogs are socially intelligent as they pay close attention to subtle changes in humans’ faces, thereby dogs recognize humans’ expressions and adjust their attitude accordingly.

**2.3. Meeting Gen-Z’s Needs: The Online Addiction**

Although a majority of people prefer watching TV and movies at home, gaming is the favorite media and entertainment activity for Generation Z [6]. According to the inhibition effect, people’s confidence and comfort level are higher when they are online because they are not judged by their looks, age, sexuality, or other external characteristics. In addition, people do make real friends online; “Our social connections provide a lot of things for us. The most tangible example is social support, just having somebody who can listen to us, or offer advice to us, or just be there when we want to cry” [7] said Natalie Pennington, a professor of communications at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. Furthermore, individuals can simply get a better sense of a picture of the other party directly by simply going through others’ profiles and getting a good understanding of other people’s personalities, hobbies, and their social/political/economic/philosophical views. Thus, being online is a preferred way of socializing for many people, and this is one of the reasons why Taobao created this game, which is to adapt to this nowadays preference.

**2.4. Digital Nudging**

Digital nudging is an effective method of attracting users’ attention online. It involves any intended intervention element in digital environments that attempt to influence people’s judgement, choice, and behaviour. Digital nudges use familiar online technologies-- SMS text messages, email, push notifications, mobile apps, or gamification-- to encourage people to take desired actions. These powerful digital tools make use of individuals’ social biases, habits, and social decision-making while preserving individuals’ freedom of choice. That is to say, the digital nudging method enables nudgers to increase the visibility of their messages and help them to achieve their goals because it takes into account employees’ tendencies to act and think, utilizing classical conditioning to create positive reinforcement. The study, “Digital Nudging in Social Media Disaster Communication” conducted by Mirababaie, Ehnis, Stieglitz, Bunker, Rose (2020) examines which types of digital nudging were the most effective in influencing people’s behaviours [8]. By looking at the average retweet frequency per tweet in the dataset without considering other variables, it was found that Anchoring and adjustment, striking visual, and status quo bias digital nudges were the most effective ones. In the case of Taobao life, the virtual avatars and pets are a reminder for gamers to log onto Taobao every day because the avatars and the pets are digital nudges that attract users’ attention.

**Table 3** Occurrence, retweet count and average retweet frequency of the digital nudging categories

Digital nudge in social media	Total frequency of occurrence	Absolute retweet count	Average retweet frequency per tweet
Anchoring & adjustment	16	4358	272
Striking visual	130	31,649	244
Status quo bias	5	1167	233
Visual cues	40	7232	181
Framing	191	28,409	149
Position of crucial information	61	8970	147
Social norms	12	1507	126
Messenger effect	105	13,043	124
Simple to process visualisation	22	2440	111
Emotive wording	61	6562	108
No nudge	51	3523	69
Monetary incentives	4	217	54
Commitment cues	3	136	45

**Figure 2** The Occurrence, retweet count and average retweet frequency of the digital nudging categories

**3. CONCLUSION**

As to summarize, the paper addresses the concern – how does Alibaba facilitate engagement without being exploitative. Alibaba captures human psychology to hold onto its user’s attention. Indication: this paper is purely based on objective opinion with supporting evidence found in articles and existing papers that were published. It does not represent the perspectives of all. For points of

disagreement should the user’s further research on his/her own.

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