



Childlike Narratives in Postmodern Consumption: Emotional Marketing in the Luxurification Process of Adult Toys

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Abstract. The current consumer behavior is transforming into postmodern consumption. Emotional marketing research has overlooked the cultural mediation of childhood narratives in toy luxury's emotional premium, focusing on functionality within traditional frameworks. This study explores adult toy luxurification's emotional marketing in postmodern consumption, to analyze brand Jellycat's. However, the existing research on the emotional premium of toy luxury goods is still limited to the traditional marketing theoretical framework, focusing on product functions while ignoring the cultural mediating role of childhood narratives in brand value construction. Therefore, this study investigates emotional marketing in the context of adult toy luxury in postmodern consumption. The research methods are unfolded as follows: Firstly, to restructure Jellycat's path of building emotional luxury, the brand activates human protective instincts through baby-like designs and creates symbolic scarcity through the "retirement system" scarcity strategy and limited editions in specific regions, and through UGC content co-creation, it transforms users' emotional investment into unpaid structural labor. Secondly, it reveals three paradoxes: identity-value-behavior. This study, from an interdisciplinary perspective of cultural sociology and marketing paradigms, fills the theoretical gap in this field, provides strategic references for traditional brands seeking "emotional upgrading", and emphasizes the integration of business logic and the authenticity of users' emotions.

Keywords: Emotional Marketing; Postmodern Consumption; Cultural Sociology

1 Introduction

In the context of postmodern consumption, the paradox between material abundance and spiritual alienation has given rise to a distinctive "resurgence of childlikeness." As Chinese society transitions into a stage of high-quality development, rapid urbanization has intensified existential pressures and emotional voids, driving adults to reconstruct self-healing spaces through "therapeutic consumption." Brands like Jellycat, emblematic of the luxurification of plush toys, have successfully transformed children's playthings into emotional vessels for adults by deploying anthropomorphic design ethics

and emotional value-embedding strategies. Through tactile materials, standardized smiling expressions, and other sensory healing systems, Jellycat forges affective bonds with consumers. Its immersive "playhouse" marketing tactics—exemplified by themed pop-up stores—reconfigure the ritualistic value of toy consumption. Post-00s generations now constitute the core consumer base for plush toys (43%), reflecting a collective psychological mechanism where adults compensate for stress through "infantilized" consumption [1].

Current academic research exhibits dual theoretical gaps. First, existing studies predominantly focus on product functionality, neglecting the cultural mediating role of childlike narratives in brand value construction. Jellycat's strategy of erasing age boundaries via "de-aging" designs repositions plush toys as "emotionally significant others" for adults—an approach aligned with postmodern symbolic healing and the luxury industry's trend toward emotional capitalization.

This study transcends conventional marketing paradigms by employing a cultural sociology lens to deconstruct three paradoxes in adult toy luxurification: the identity tension between immaturity and maturity, the value contestation between utility and symbolism, and the behavioral contradiction between private emotion and public performativity. By elucidating how Jellycat transmutes plush toys into "emotional luxuries," this research offers novel theoretical insights into childlike narratives within postmodern consumer society while providing interdisciplinary implications for traditional brands seeking emotionalized upgrades.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Postmodern Consumer Culture & Therapeutic Turn

Postmodern consumption is characterized by the commodification of emotions, where individuals increasingly seek symbolic meaning over material utility [2]. The "healing economy" emerges as a cultural response to societal acceleration, with adults adopting infantilized consumption as a coping mechanism for alienation [3]. This aligns with Jellycat's success in leveraging tactile nostalgia—soft textures and whimsical designs that evoke a childhood sense of security.

2.2 Emotional Marketing & Luxury Theory

The luxurification of mundane objects hinges on embedding "affective capital" [4]. Luxury brands increasingly utilize hyper-personalized narratives to transform products into identity markers [5]. Jellycat's strategy mirrors this logic: its standardized yet customizable plush toys (e.g., naming each toy) create parasocial intimacy, blurring the line between mass production and exclusivity. However, existing studies under-theorize how non-traditional luxury sectors (e.g., toys).

2.3 Critical Gaps & Theoretical Positioning

While prior work examines UGC's role in brand co-creation, its emphasis on user agency overlooks the structural power imbalances in emotional marketing [6]. Jellycat's "curated childlikeness"—such as photographable accessories and sharable packaging formats. (e.g., visually optimized accessories for online sharing)—reveals how brands engineer "spontaneous" consumer engagement. This critiques the neoliberal myth of consumer empowerment, situating UGC within corporate-controlled affective labor [7].

Furthermore, explaining Jellycat's success underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches. By integrating cultural sociology and critical marketing theory, this study constructs a triadic paradox model to analyze the dynamic interplay among emotion, power, and symbolic value in postmodern toy luxurification.

3 Case Analysis: Jellycat's Formation Pathway of "Emotional Luxury"

3.1 Brand Origin and Product Evolution

From children's plush toys to adult-oriented emotion-driven products. Founded in London in 1999, Jellycat initially positioned itself as a high-end gift brand targeting young children. However, this demographic served as a demonstration to expand into diverse consumer groups, making it an important gifting medium across different age brackets. Jellycat's marketing aligns with the current "childlike fun economy," conveying brand concepts of "love" and "value"—each doll's tag bears the phrase "please look after me." Under this strategy, consumers are inclined to endow the toys with meanings beyond their material value, thus transforming them from mere objects into vessels of emotional support. When adults face life pressures and spiritual emptiness, the emotional significance attached to these toys provides the necessary support.

Age-neutral product styling (color, shape, naming). Jellycat's toys feature uniform bean-shaped eyes and healing smiles, evoking psychological attachment to cuteness while maintaining high brand recognition. Products are designed based on real-life objects, ranging from common fruits and animals to sports items and Christmas limited editions. The overall color scheme employs low-saturation tones such as beige, light brown, light yellow, and smoky pink, which convey a warm and soothing feeling through their soft and elegant hues.

3.2 Immersive Marketing Spaces

Constructing "ritualized consumption" through pop-up stores, display art, and scenario-based experiences. In Jellycat's offline pop-up stores in Shanghai, staff employ "pretend play" sales techniques to enhance the purchasing experience, significantly boosting emotional engagement and immersion among consumers, particularly young adults. Jellycat has also collaborated with the Waldorf Astoria Hotel to create a high-end afternoon tea inspired by the Bunny Rabbit series. Additionally, its partnership with the

youth-favored home decor brand Beast led to the opening of a 520 limited-time flower shop in Beijing's Sanlitun, generating extensive social media engagement and creating a hard-to-find craze nationwide.

3.3 Content Co-creation Mechanisms

Standardized yet customizable naming for dolls (e.g., Bashful Bunny) While Jellycat dolls have official names, User communities frequently discuss personalized naming, and some outlets even offer custom embroidery services for added uniqueness, and some outlets offer custom name embroidery services on the dolls. This naming flexibility allows consumers to imbue products with personalized emotional meanings, transforming standardized items into unique emotional companions.

Encouraging UGC (e.g., doll travels, role-playing) as brand communication content Jellycat actively promotes user-generated content (UGC) by encouraging consumers to share stories and purchase experiences on social platforms, forming a UGC-driven communication ecosystem. As of 2025, commercial posts related to Jellycat on Little Red Book have reached 300,000, Douyin videos under relevant hashtags have accumulated 2.87 billion views, and Weibo topics boast over 160 million impressions, demonstrating the viral spread of user-created narratives.

4 Case Analysis: Jellycat's Triple Paradoxes and Cultural Logic

This case analysis employs a triple paradox model—"identity-value-behavior"—to interpret the brand's cultural logic:

4.1 Identity Paradox: Infantilized Consumption among Adults

"Regressiveness" and self-healing in adult self-identity. "Regressive self-identity" refers to the phenomenon where individuals construct self-cognition through psychological regression (reverting to childhood or early psychological states), essentially serving as a defensive coping mechanism against real-world pressures. Adults' purchase of Jellycat is fundamentally a complex psychological compensatory behavior within the context of postmodern society: people adopt regressive self-identity to confront stress, while proactively engaging in self-healing. Adults long to regress to the "childhood safety zone" as a response to modern existential dilemmas. In high-pressure societies, young people seek temporary escape by purchasing and touching infantile, cute toys, reverting to childhood to rebuild secure attachments. Additionally, they reject societal evaluation standards for adulthood (e.g., rationality, restraint). Taking their "babies" (dolls) to meals, trips, and photo check-ins, and naming them, young people not only heal themselves through cute toys but also declare rebellion against social discipline norms. Jellycat's use of baby-grade, soft materials awakens primal memories of skin contact, stimulating dopamine secretion and producing psychological comfort and relaxation.

How infantile aesthetics serve as a symbolic antidote to modern anxiety. Adults' high preference for Jellycat's infantile aesthetics and eagerness to purchase its products exemplify a coping mechanism rooted in emotional self-regulation transforming consumption into a defense against modern anxiety—people numb themselves with infantile aesthetics to combat anxiety. By "raising" Jellycat dolls, adults simulate care-giving behaviors to gain emotional comfort, acquire a sense of control through role-playing, and escape real-world pressures via pretend-play.

4.2 Value Paradox: Functionality vs. Symbolism

Non-functional products with exorbitant brand premium. Jellycat, essentially a toy, serves no practical purpose for adults, yet its pricing far exceeds that of ordinary plush toys. In a modern society where time is money and efficiency is paramount, the brand creates scarcity through marketing strategies like emphasizing each doll's uniqueness and implementing a "retirement system" for product lines, while launching region-specific limited editions and collaborating with high-end scenarios. Through hunger marketing and value identity construction, Jellycat has transformed these non-functional items into status-symbol commodities through artificial scarcity and emotional marketing.

Symbolic value transformation through emotional anchoring. Jellycat's "non-functional items" achieve symbolic value transformation—evolving from mere commodities to spiritual symbols—by first triggering protective instincts through the soft touch of high-density polyester fiber and healing-oriented designs. Brand marketing then positions these dolls as weapons against mental stress, converting emotional attachment into tangible symbolic capital.

4.3 Behavioral Paradox: Private Emotion vs. Public Performance

As "emotional companions," dolls are inherently private emotional projections, yet platform mechanisms drive consumers to proactively display them in public spaces for social validation. Dolls should serve as intimate toys reflecting unique personalities and inner worlds, but influenced by brand operations on Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and the proliferation of UGC topics, people voluntarily share stories about their dolls, alienating private emotions into attention-seeking currency. This creates a modern paradox of "loneliness being publicly consumed"—where emotional intimacy is transformed into performative content for social approval.

5 Theoretical Refinement: The Construction Mechanism of "Emotional Luxury" in Postmodern Consumption

5.1 Proposing the Three-Stage Model of "Infantilized Narrative—Symbolic Healing—Emotional Co-creation"

Infantilized Narrative: Breaking age boundaries and symbolizing 'security'. The development of the internet has given rise to diverse subcultures, among which the cute culture represented by Jellycat stands out. As a form of subculture, "cute culture" has expanded its audience to all age groups [8]. Jellycat's dolls feature rounded contours, innocent bean-shaped eyes with a "ugly-cute" charm, healing smiles, and short limb proportions—characteristics highly similar to human infants. Psychological research indicates that the "dull-cute style," as a form of subconscious expression, lacks intense emotional responses and is associated with "healing." This style typically evokes feelings of innocence, simplicity, slow rhythm, and emotional healing [9]. Such designs thus trigger the brain's dopamine reward mechanism, eliciting affective responses linked to nurturing tendencies and emotional warmth. For example, the initially popular Jellycat eggplant doll is perceived as adorable due to its bean-shaped eyes and smiling expression.

Symbolic Healing: Establishing emotional anchors through material, facial design, and intimate naming. Jellycat's design fosters emotional anchoring and healing through material texture, facial features, and personalized naming. Touch, as a key mode of interaction between consumers and dolls, elicits distinct tactile experiences and psychological responses based on material properties [10]. The softness of high-density polyester fiber and filling cotton in Jellycat products triggers involuntary healing sensations—this tactile experience activates neural pathways associated with security, alleviating stress by mimicking the comfort of a physical embrace.

Additionally, Jellycat's facial designs adhere to the "baby schema," a set of physical traits (e.g., large eyes, rounded cheeks) that innately elicit caregiving instincts. Psychological research confirms that baby schema triggers inherent preferences, leading individuals to perceive such features as purer, more attractive, and worthy of heightened attention [11]. Upon encountering a doll's expression, consumers instinctively feel compelled to nurture it, forging an emotional bond rooted in protective instincts.

Finally, online communities abound with owners naming their Jellycat dolls—a practice that imbues toys with unique identities and personified characteristics. This act strengthens emotional ties: over time, interactive rituals (e.g., talking, dressing the doll) deepen the connection, solidifying the emotional anchor. By transforming inanimate objects into personalized companions, naming converts consumption into a symbolic act of emotional investment.

Emotional Co-creation: Users form intimate labor relations with the brand through UGC. In Jellycat's brand operation, users establish intimate labor relations with the brand through user-generated content (UGC), a dynamic that not only drives brand communication but also enables deep participation in shaping brand culture. Users share stories about their dolls and create creative content on social media, essentially

engaging in free promotion for the brand—similar to "word-of-mouth marketing," but with higher user engagement and initiative.

Through this UGC, users form a massive online community where they exchange experiences, and brand officials actively participate in discussions, strengthening the bond between the brand and its audience. Owners and the brand collectively create the emotional value that dolls provide on social media platforms, reinforcing the intimate labor relations characterized by mutual content co-creation. This mechanism transforms consumers from passive buyers into active contributors. It blurs the line between consumption and brand-building labor.

5.2 Rethinking the Illusion of "Emotional Empowerment"

Brands guide "spontaneous communication" through algorithmic control and content templates. Brands release formulaic topics on social media that ostensibly encourage users to share freely, but in reality, they dictate content production through visual templates and narrative frameworks. Social media platforms utilize big data analytics to target users drawn to themes of cuteness and emotional healing with algorithmically curated content thus increasing brand visibility and user engagement metrics. This mechanism transforms "spontaneous sharing" into a strategically engineered process, where user autonomy is overshadowed by algorithmic manipulation.

Emotional marketing as aesthetic manipulation and structural emotional labor. Jellycat's emotional marketing essentially converts users' emotional investment into unpaid structural labor through fixed healing aesthetic paradigms. When users create UGC related to Jellycat, they effectively provide free advertising for the brand, saving it substantial marketing costs. Meanwhile, consumption data exposed in these posts—such as purchasing habits—are harvested for brand and platform consumer insights. In this model, users passively accept the infantile aesthetic of "healing" while performing emotional labor, unwittingly participating in the commodification and exploitation of their own emotions under the illusion of "self-healing."

6 Conclusion

This article, through the integration of sociological perspectives on culture and marketing paradigms, fills existing theoretical gaps and expands the cultural research path of emotional marketing. And also reveals the non-functional shift of toy commodities toward "luxurification," and critically reflects on the power structures and capital logic behind "healing consumption." By unpacking Jellycat's formation path of "emotional luxury," it provides strategic references for traditional brands seeking "emotional upgrading," while emphasizing that brand narratives should resonate deeply with users' psychological structures rather than pursuing traffic blindly. Finally, this study has not conducted empirical studies with consumers nor explored the cultural adaptability of such models in non-Western contexts. Future research could focus on further refinement of these aspects to facilitate in-depth exploration of the topic.

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