

Balancing Functional and Emotional Value: A Case-Based Analysis of Emotional Consumption Strategies

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Abstract:

Emotional consumption has become an important phenomenon in the contemporary consumer market, especially in the Generation Z and millennial groups. However, most of the existing studies focus on the description of the phenomenon level, and lack of systematic comparison of different types of paths and an in-depth discussion on the sustainable development of enterprises. This paper selects four typical brand cases, representing respectively “healing” (Jellycat), “stimulating” (Pop Mart), “sensory” (Jo Malone/Fauvism), and “personalized social” (Casetify), and systematically analyzes the different modes of emotional consumption. The results show that these brands generally achieve the improvement of market premium and user stickiness by embedding emotional value, but they also face the risks of over-marketing, consumer impulse, and emotional value virtualization. On this basis, this paper puts forward the following suggestions: first, enterprises should maintain a balance between functional value and emotional value, and avoid relying solely on emotional symbols; Second, enterprises should pay attention to product innovation and brand narrative, and internalize emotional value into long-term competitive advantage; Third, enterprises should build a trust relationship through the interaction between community management and users, to achieve the long-term and sustainable development of emotional marketing.

Keywords: Emotional Consumption; Healing Economy; Customized Fragrance Brand

1. Introduction

With the accelerating pace of society and the rising pressure of life, consumers' shopping motivation is

gradually shifting from functional demand to emotionally value-driven, especially among young consumers. Emotional consumption has become mainstream [1]. This trend is closely related to the rise of

the “healing economy” and “experience economy”. Enterprises can effectively stimulate consumers’ psychological investment and brand loyalty by building immersive experiences and creating emotional resonance [2].

In recent years, scholars at home and abroad have discussed the phenomenon of emotional consumption from different angles. For example, Schmitt emphasized that experiential marketing highlights “experience” over utility. Research on aesthetic emotional consumption and brand rituals explains how symbols and rituals construct emotional attachment [3]. Studies on compensatory consumption and shopping compulsion help explain short-term excitement and post-purchase letdown patterns typical of blind-box behavior [1,4]. Meanwhile, Gen Z’s identity expression via personalized products has been highlighted in e-commerce contexts [2]. By combining the relevant literature, it can be seen that emotional consumption involves not only psychological compensation mechanisms but also sociological identity expression.

However, the existing studies still have two major deficiencies: first, most of the existing studies focus on the description of a single brand or industry, lacking cross-case comparison; Second, the existing studies are more at the phenomenon level, and lack discussion on how to maintain a balance between functional value and emotional value and achieve sustainable development.

Based on this, this paper uses the case study method to select four representative brand cases for analysis. By horizontally comparing the four modes of emotional consumption, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: how do the different paths of emotional consumption form? How does each path affect the relationship between consumers and brands in practice? How should enterprises optimize their strategies to achieve long-term sustainability of emotional consumption?

2. Theoretical Framework of Emotional Consumption

2.1 Concept and Development of Emotional Consumption

Emotional consumption is a high-frequency concept in consumption research in recent years. It refers to that consumers not only shop for practical purposes, but also use it to meet emotional needs, such as obtaining psychological comfort, self-identity, or social recognition. Traditional functional consumption emphasizes whether the product is “easy to use”, while emotional consumption is more concerned with “good feeling”. In other words, functional consumption solves “use value”, while emotional consumption emphasizes “emotional value” and “symbolic meaning” [3].

Taking Jellycat as an example, its popularity is not only due to its soft touch and safe materials, but also because it is endowed with the symbolic meaning of “accompany” and “cure” by consumers. Consumers often express their emotional state by sharing Jellycat’s daily companionship. This “personification” empowerment further enhances the brand’s stickiness.

With the development of the Internet and social media, the impact of emotional consumption has been significantly amplified. In the form of a short video, live broadcast with goods and e-commerce planting grass, emotional symbols can quickly spread and form a community effect. Consumers not only buy goods themselves, but also reproduce and redistribute emotions in the process of sharing and communicating. Therefore, consumer behavior is no longer just an economic exchange, but gradually becomes an emotional expression and cultural participation. This trend also shows that emotional consumption has become the core variable of brand marketing strategy, rather than an additional phenomenon.

2.2 Perspective of Consumer Psychology

From the perspective of psychology and consumer behavior, the formation mechanism of emotional consumption mainly includes the following three points:

First, in compensatory consumption, individuals are more likely to experience purchase impulses under negative affect or deprivation and use shopping to relieve anxiety and restore self-worth [1]. Blind-box consumption is a typical case. In the process of “removing the blind box”, consumers enjoy the excitement brought by strong uncertainty. The instant satisfaction of this emotion can temporarily offset anxiety and loneliness.

In addition, emotional consumption can bring a consumer’s identity. Therefore, it is also the embodiment of social currency. In modern society, consumers not only consume the functions of products, but also consume the social significance attached to them. For example, Chen pointed out that Casetify’s customized mobile phone case provides users with a “tagged” way of self-expression [2]. Users can get attention in the circle of friends or on social media in this way, so as to accumulate “social currency”. This identity projection and group identity make the product not only a tool for use but also a medium for self-construction and social interaction.

From the psychological and neural perspective, emotional consumption constructs a dopamine and reward mechanism. Third, uncertainty and variable rewards can heighten arousal and short-term gratification, reinforcing repeat behavior in blind-box formats [4]. Pop Mart and other brands use this mechanism to create a cycle of “open box addiction” through variable rewards. Consumers form psychological dependence between expectation and loss, thus enhancing their stickiness to the brand.

2.3 Consumption of “Providing Emotional Value” and “Healing Economy”

In recent years, “healing economy” has become a hot topic in academic and business circles. It emphasizes psychological repair and comfort through products or services to help consumers cope with stress, loneliness, and anxiety. Previous studies have shown that consumers’ demand for “healing consumption” increased significantly during the epidemic, such as fragrance, plush toys, health drinks, etc., which have become hot commodities [1]. This phenomenon shows that consumers pay more attention to mental health and emotion regulation functions than just material satisfaction.

At the same time, the “experience economy” theory also provides a new interpretation framework for emotional consumption. The theory holds that consumers are willing to pay for the “experience itself”, not just for the final product.

For example, Jo Malone’s fragrance is not only a chemical smell, but also creates a ceremonial lifestyle through scene narration and immersive store experience.

When consumers “use” products, they also complete “emotional participation”, so fragrance has become a dual tool for emotional regulation and identity expression.

To sum up, emotional consumption has expanded from individual demand to a social phenomenon. Emotional consumption is not only about personal psychological comfort, but also deeply embedded in all aspects of group culture, consumption scenes and brand strategy

3. Case Verification and Strategy Demonstration

3.1 Healing Strategy: Take Jellycat as an Example

This secondary creation has even derived a “social culture of plush toys”, making the product not only a doll, but also an “emotional partner”. Jellycat, with its soft touch and humanized image, provides consumers with a “sense of companionship”. On social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Instagram, a large amount of UGC content, such as “jellycat sleeping” and “taking jellycat on a trip”, shows how consumers endow it with emotional personality. This secondary creation has even derived a “social culture of plush toys”, making the product not only a doll, but also an “emotional partner”.

The advantage of this strategy is that it strengthens the brand stickiness and premium ability, and consumers are willing to pay a price far higher than the cost for “emotional value”. However, the risk is that if people excessively rely on the “cure” label and ignore the functional value (such as material safety and durability), it will easily

lead to “emotional hollowing out” [3]. Once consumers find it difficult to maintain emotional value, they may lose it quickly, and the brand will also face a crisis of trust.

3.2 Stimulating Strategy: Take Pop Mart as an Example

Pop Mart stimulates consumers’ desire for collection and emotional compensation through the blind box mechanism. Research shows that the satisfaction of blind box consumption tends to peak at the moment of opening the box, but the resulting gap may also cause negative emotions [5,6]. Many young consumers will share the “box opening” process on social platforms and exchange roles through second-hand trading platforms, thus forming a “blind box community culture”.

This strategy can rapidly accumulate users and sales in the short term, and form continuous discussion with the help of the community atmosphere, but the long-term risk lies in the addiction effect and price bubble. Once scarcity is decoupled from price, consumers will feel a significant gap, and may even trigger “Consumer Regret”, resulting in a decline in brand reputation.

3.3 Sensory Strategy: Take Jo Malone Fragrance as an Example

Jo Malone emphasizes that “scent is memory,” and connects fragrance with daily emotional regulation through scene narration. Odors can evoke powerful psychological and physiological responses. Supporting this, Harvard Gazette, Memoir, and Scentt all highlight how scent operates as both a personal experience and a carrier of memory and emotional projection [7-9].

The advantage of the sensory strategy lies in the mobilization of the five senses, which can form an immersive experience. However, the risk lies in the over-commitment to “healing effect”, and the lack of scientific basis may cause consumers to question. If consumers feel that “emotional value is inconsistent with experience”, the brand may be questioned as “selling emotional anxiety”.

3.4 Personalized Social Strategies: a Case Study of Casetify

Casetify’s success lies in its “customization+social” dual logic. Users can not only design unique mobile phone cases, but also display personalized choices on social platforms, forming the communication effect of “consumption is identity”. Its cross-border co-branding with Disney, NBA, and other brands has also continuously enlarged the social topic and attracted young users to participate in “Circle Recognition”.

This strategy meets the psychological needs of Generation Z, but if excessive emphasis is placed on showing off and labeling, it will easily lead to anxiety about comparison.

Some users will be under pressure due to the high price of “exclusive” and “co-branded” products, which and even cause negative social comparison, which will eventually weaken the functional value and actual use experience of the product [2].

Through the comparison of four cases, it can be seen that the four emotional consumption paths have actually been verified. These cases not only show how emotional value can be transformed into brand advantage, but also reveal potential risks, including emotional hollowing out, addiction cycle, over-marketing, and comparison effect.

4. Countermeasures and Enlightenment

4.1 Optimization of Healing Strategy

The contemporary consumer market, especially in the Generation Z and millennial groups. However, most of the existing studies focus on the description of the phenomenon level, and lack of systematic comparison of different types of paths and an in-depth discussion on the sustainable development of enterprises. This paper selects four typical brand cases, representing respectively “healing” (Jellycat), “stimulating” (Bubble Matt), “sensory” (Jo Malone/Fauvism), and “personalized social” (casetify), and systematically analyzes the different modes of emotional consumption. The results show that these brands generally achieve the improvement of market premium and user stickiness by embedding emotional value, but they also face the risks of over-marketing, consumer impulse, and emotional value virtualization. On this basis, this paper puts forward the following suggestions: first, enterprises should maintain a balance between functional value and emotional value, and avoid relying solely on emotional symbols; Second, enterprises should pay attention to product innovation and brand narrative, and internalize emotional value into long-term competitive advantage; Third, enterprises should build a trust relationship through the interaction between community management and users, to achieve the long-term and sustainable development of emotional marketing.

4.2 Optimization of Stimulating Strategies

Stimulating consumption relies on surprise and uncertainty to create pleasure, but the risk lies in addiction and the emotional gap. The direction of brand improvement is to improve transparency and avoid blind investment. At the same time, it will extend the value experience by combining community points or member rewards, and control the new rhythm within the brand to prevent fatigue caused by frequent stimulation.

4.3 Optimization of Sensory Strategy

Sensory consumption focuses on five senses experience and ritual sense, but over-commitment to the “healing effect” of the product may lead to doubt. The brand should enhance its credibility through scientific research and strengthen the situational and differentiated narrative in the product, so that consumers can get a real emotional regulation experience in real life.

4.4 Optimization of Personalized Social Strategies

Personalized and social display consumption can meet consumers’ identity expression and circle recognition, but if the brand excessively strengthens the label, it is easy to aggravate the comparison and social anxiety. Brand improvement in this field should be reflected in balance and guidance. On the one hand, it can reduce the pressure of competition through lightweight customization and popular participation products, while retaining high-end customized series to meet differentiated needs. On the other hand, the brand should guide users to highlight storytelling and positive expression in sharing, so that social display can not only stay at the level of showing off, but also be transformed into the sharing of values and lifestyles. The most important thing is that the personalized products of the brand must give consideration to both function and aesthetics. For example, the mobile phone case not only has a unique appearance, but also has reliable protective performance, so as to improve the satisfaction of long-term use and brand trust.

5. Conclusion

By comparing the cases of Jellycat, Bubble Mart, Jo Malone, and Casetify, this paper reveals four typical paths of emotional consumption: healing, stimulation, sensory and personalized social. The study found that these paths played a positive role in meeting the psychological needs of consumers and enhancing the ability of brand premium, but also brought risks such as emotional hollowing out, consumption addiction, over-marketing and comparison anxiety.

From the perspective of enterprises, the core challenge of emotional consumption is how to grasp the “degree”. On the one hand, emotional elements can indeed improve user experience and brand loyalty. On the other hand, if the emotional value is separated from the functional value, the brand will easily fall into the dilemma of “short-term popularity and long-term loss”. Therefore, enterprises need to find a balance in product development, marketing, and community construction, and internalize emotional value into long-term competitive advantage.

From a social perspective, the phenomenon of emotion-

al consumption reflects the young generation's demand for emotional regulation in a fast-paced life and stressful environment. How to guide consumers to remain rational while enjoying emotional consumption and avoid the psychological and economic burden caused by excessive consumption is an important issue worthy of further discussion in the future.

Future research can be carried out in three directions: first, cross-cultural comparison. There may be differences in the psychological mechanisms of consumers in emotional consumption under different cultural backgrounds. For example, the eastern society pays more attention to "group belonging", while the western society pays more attention to "individual independence". Second, empirical research. It can combine quantitative questionnaire, eye movement experiment and behavioral data tracking to reveal the causal relationship of emotional consumption more systematically. Third, explore new forms. With the emergence of artificial intelligence partners, virtual fragrances and meta universe scenes, the boundary of emotional consumption is being redefined, and more consumption patterns that integrate virtual and reality may be derived in the future. All these provide new research topics and development directions for academia and industry.

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