

Leveraging Kidulting for Brand Growth: A Case Study of Jellycat'S Emotional Marketing

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Abstract. With the global spread of the “Kidulting” trend—where adults seek childhood-like comfort to alleviate life pressure—and the rise of emotional consumption, plush toys have shifted from children’s items to adult emotional companions. This paper uses the case study analysis method, outlining how jELLYCAT, a UK’s high-end plush brand, aligns with Kidulting psychology to drive success. jELLYCAT’s brand background includes its positioning shift to “all age groups” and strengths in design, quality, and sustainability. This study discusses the underlying reasons for the brand’s success. The brand’s success drivers include capturing adult emotional needs (childlike and compensation psychology), scenario-based/limited-edition products, in-store “healing” services, and multi-channel marketing. In addition, this study identifies challenges like high prices, counterfeits, and competition, and proposes solutions (AR/VR experiences, customizable accessories). The study concludes that jELLYCAT’s core strength lies in transforming products into “emotional partners”, offering a model for brands leveraging Kidulting trends in the emotional economy.

Keywords: Kidulting; jELLYCAT; Emotional Marketing.

1. Introduction

The new term “Kidulting” is a blend of “Kid” and “Adulting” [1]. It refers to people who seemingly have become adults but do not want to grow up or act like adults. This phenomenon has grown increasingly widespread globally, driven by today’s fast-paced life. Adults face constant pressure, and Kidulting offers a precious chance to unwind. Whether it is collecting old toys or putting on cartoon costumes, it allows them to go back to the innocence of childhood and find simple joy again [2]. It also ties closely to emotional value, a concept now central to consumption; adults willingly pay for products that bring them good feelings, giving rise to trends like the “doll economy”.

In the past, items like plush toys were seen as “for children only”. Today, however, adult demand for such products has surged. That is because these items now mean more than just something to play with—they carry emotional comfort and stand for something special. This shift makes brands like jELLYCAT—whose brand concept highlights “love” and “attention”, with each toy boasting a unique persona, story, and hobbies—ideal for exploring Kidulting’s link to consumer behavior. This paper uses a case study method to examine how jELLYCAT’s brand marketing aligns with Kidulting psychology, aiming to clarify how the brand meets adults’ emotional needs and helps drive this growing consumption trend forward.

2. Case Description

jELLYCAT is a premium gift brand founded in the UK in 1999 by brothers William and Thomas [3]. It first became popular for its plush toys, which stand out for their unique design that breaks away from the industry’s traditional focus on “realistic animal mimicry” [4]. A typical example is its iconic Bashful Bunny—with overly long, soft, drooping ears—which not only does this make it look different from real bunnies but also fits to consumers’ desire for cuteness and comfort. That is why both kids and adults find jELLYCAT irresistible [4].

The brand has made a key change to how it targets the market. Initially, it targeted only infants and toddlers, positioning its products as “comfort toys” closely tied to early childhood development and attachment needs. In 2014, however, jELLYCAT officially revised its positioning in its annual

report. It rebranded itself as a high-end gift brand for all age groups, from 0 to 100 years old [4]. This change allowed it to tap into a much broader consumer base. It was not just a marketing adjustment; it reflected a recognition that its products resonated beyond young children.

jELLYCAT stands out from other plush toy brands thanks to several key advantages. First among these is its unique and creative design. Unlike toys that aim to copy real animals, jELLYCAT prioritize imagination—such as a slender, less hair-texture plush dog—making them appealing to both kids and adults [4, 5].

Second is its focus on quality. It uses premium fabrics and fine craftsmanship, ensuring products are soft, durable, and safe for even young children [5].

Third is its diverse product range, extending beyond plush toys to include home decor items such as cushions, children's apparel, and seasonal gift sets—all keeping its cute, playful design style [5].

Fourth is its commitment to sustainability. It uses recycled materials for packaging and explores greener material sources for its toys. This practice not only reduces environmental impact but also reinforces its brand value as socially responsible, aligning with modern consumers' environmental concerns [5].

jELLYCAT's core users are mainly young urbanites aged 18 to 35, a demographic known for valuing emotional consumption and lifestyle-driven purchasing. This group values fashion, creativity, and fun in products. They are willing to pay more for high-quality items and enjoy the pleasure of shopping [4]. Many of them are active on social media—they share photos of their jELLYCAT toys online, chat with other users, and even form a community of collectors. Some rare or vintage jELLYCAT pieces have become high-value collectibles, driving a thriving global collector scene [5]. There is also a secondary user group: parents. When buying jELLYCAT toys for their kids, parents often recall their own childhoods, leading them to purchase toys for themselves too [4].

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Key Reasons for jELLYCAT's Success

3.1.1 Psychological level: capturing adult emotional needs

jELLYCAT taps into adults' "childlike psychology" and "compensation psychology". It accurately fills their emotional gaps and thus becomes a core driver of consumption.

From the perspective of childlike psychology, contemporary adults face workplace pressure and social anxiety, such as tight project deadlines, high-performance expectations, or interpersonal relationships with colleagues. To alleviate these negative emotions, they often seek "transitional objects" that offer comfort without pressure. jELLYCAT's soft and cute dolls do this well: they evoke sweet childhood memories, such as the attachment to plush toys. They also provide "stress-free companionship"—unlike human relationships that require emotional effort or compromise, a jELLYCAT doll can sit on a desk during a stressful workday, be hugged after a tough meeting, or quietly placed on a nightstand—functioning as symbolic substitutes for interpersonal support. In this way, they fill the emotional void when family members or partners are not around [6].

From the perspective of compensation psychology, the brand has launched a "full-size product matrix" (including large dolls, medium-sized decor pieces, and small pendants). This matrix meets adults' desire to "compensate for not having enough toys in their childhood". For example, they might purchase a tiny plush keychain or a bag charm to carry a piece of nostalgia with them every day.

Meanwhile, when parents buy jELLYCAT products for their children, their own childhood memories trigger "self-consumption". This creates a "parent-child dual-user" scenario, which significantly expands the scope of intergenerational marketing. For example, a mother may buy a doll for her child first, then buy a smaller version of the same doll for herself—keeping a small, joyful link to both her child and her childhood.

3.1.2 Product level: scenario-based & limited-edition design

Scenario-based products and limited-edition products tie dolls to “emotional commemorative scenes”, which in turn stimulate consumers’ ritualistic consumption behaviors and significantly boost their willingness to buy. jELLYCAT launches limited-edition products for specific occasions, turning plush toys into tangible markers of memory. These include holidays (Christmas editions, birthday editions) and life milestones (fried egg dolls with wedding veils, fried egg dolls with doctoral caps). These products turn dolls into symbols of ritual sense, making the scenes and moments feel more intentional and memorable.

Furthermore, limited-edition products use a “limited time + limited quantity” strategy. This strategy taps into consumers’ “fear of missing out (FOMO)”, pushing them to buy immediately. At the same time, it increases the products’ collectible value.

Scenario-based design gives products the attribute of “meaningful consumption”. Limited editions, on the other hand, strengthen scarcity. Together, these two factors drive users from casual buyers into dedicated collectors; turn the attitude from “needing” a product to “wanting” it [7].

3.1.3 Service level: in-store performance experience

Offline-store clerks’ “cherishing attitude” toward Jellycat dolls conveys and amplifies the brand’s warmth; they treat dolls like “valued partners”. For example, they carefully tidy the dolls’ fur. They also pack the dolls in exclusive gift boxes, enhancing consumers’ perception of premium service. Besides, they tell customers, “These dolls love sunlight—you need to take good care of them.” [8]. These advices view the doll as a living, caring companion rather than just a product, allowing consumers to feel like they are joining a community that values warmth and care.

A standout example of this service-driven approach is the “Healing Hut” in Shanghai’s Jing’an flagship store, consumers can try the “Doll SPA” experience. The immersive activity retains customers for up to 45 minutes, significantly increasing the likelihood of impulse and experiential purchases. It also boosts the purchase rate to 70%. Plus, users in this experience have a 41% higher repeat purchase rate than regular customers, so it shows that the emotional bond formed during the SPA keeps them coming back [7].

Service details turn “transactional behavior” into “emotional interaction”. This has become a key barrier for the brand to gain a differentiated competition advantage [8]. While other brands might sell similar plush toys, few invest in turning every in-store moment into a chance to build trust and affection. This makes jELLYCAT’s service a unique competitive advantage that keeps consumers loyal.

3.1.4 Marketing level: multi-channel online marketing

First is jELLYCAT’s user engagement and social media interaction. The brand actively engages its audience on social platforms and has a large number of followers on various social media platforms. It shares user-generated content, which serves as digital word-of-mouth, and encourages consumers to share their jELLYCAT experiences, amplifying the brand narrative. This builds a sense of community and emotional engagement. What’s more, jELLYCAT encourages consumers to create secondary content like emoticons and memes based on its products [6]. Also, jELLYCAT sets up columns like “Jelly Journal” on the official website to strengthen emotional projection. The brand even has immersive experience stores. For example, Shanghai’s experience store with the theme of “Jellycat cafe” from September 2024, London’s “Jellycat’s Fish&Chips” in July 2025, and the latest in August, New York’s “Jellycat’s Dinner”. Shop assistants interact with customers through performance without physical objects and provide personalized packing services [3].

jELLYCAT also invites lifestyle Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) and celebrities to promote its products. Top stars like Zhao Lusi and Song Yuqi share their purchases, leveraging celebrity endorsement to amplify parasocial connections, triggering fans’ buying desire. It also signs top athletes as spokespeople—Fan Zhendong was invited to promote Olympic co-branded models, integrating sports culture with plush toy consumption. What’s more, the kind of “doll daily life” content updated by KOLs, such as dolls accompanying people to work overtime or visit parks, has

over 690 million exposures on Rednote and 570 million on TikTok, respectively. This exposure substantially enhanced brand visibility and reinforced jELLYCAT's position within digital consumer culture [4].

At the same time, jELLYCAT collaborates extensively with other brands. There are many successful co-branding cases. It collaborated with BEAST on limited-edition flower series dolls and even had a collaboration with Arc'teryx, where the combination of "Jellycat ski goggles × Arc'teryx Outdoor Jacket" became popular in the trendy circle. These collaborations break the boundary of the "toy category". They help reach non-core potential users.

In addition, social media ads by jELLYCAT focus on "healing content", directly aligning with young consumers' demand for emotional reassurance. For example, some short videos show dolls helping ease anxiety. This content precisely matches the interests of the 18-35 age group (the target audience). Compared with hard-sell ads, these healing ads have a higher click-through rate [7]. Also, jELLYCAT taps into the "emotional economy". It launches specific product forms targeting "healing economy", "loneliness economy", and "gift economy", deeply integrating products into emotional scenarios such as workplace, travel, and living alone, making the purchase reason more rational and continuously penetrating life scenes.

Multi-channel communication forms a "exposure-interest-conversion" loop. This loop not only boosts brand awareness, but also drives sales growth.

3.2. Impacts of jELLYCAT's success

For consumers, jELLYCAT products have become a means of emotional expression and self-identification. When users build collections of jELLYCAT dolls, they're not just buying toys; they're curating pieces that reflect their personal tastes and lifestyle attitudes. These toys also serve as personalized companions, helping users express and regulate their emotions by symbolizing companionship and security. Hugging a jELLYCAT toy can ease anxiety, meeting consumers' emotional needs at a deeper level. This deep emotional connection is even amplified by user-generated content (UGC). For example, netizens used eggplant dolls to create the same dark circle emoticon package for office working people, which is funny and versatile. The UGC from netizens has a strong sense of immersion and is easier to resonate with people and strengthening consumers' bond with the brand [4].

For the brand, jELLYCAT has established a "high-premium + high-repurchase" business model. First, the brand's products are inherently "collectible", thanks to their diverse designs and frequent limited-edition releases—and this encourages repeat purchases. A consumer who buys one Bashful Bunny may be motivated to collect all the different color variations. This drives up sales volume. The brand's high-end positioning, combined with the emotional value it offers, enables it to command higher prices, thus increasing profit margins. Moreover, through its "healing" and "companionship" brand image, jELLYCAT has created a distinct brand identity in consumers' minds, differentiating itself from competitors.

Socially, jELLYCAT has played a role in promoting the "Kidulting" consumption culture, where adults adopt childlike behaviors as a means of stress relief and identity expression. It has broken the traditional stereotype that "only children play with toys", making it more acceptable for adults to embrace their childness. This shift in perception has made it more socially acceptable for adults to prioritize joy and comfort in their purchases, opening up a new market for "Kidult" products. Additionally, jELLYCAT has drawn attention to adult mental health. Their marketing campaigns, like the "Embrace Your Emotions" initiative on World Mental Health Day, emphasize how their products can alleviate anxiety, raising awareness of mental health issues in society [7].

3.3. jELLYCAT's core marketing strategies

3.3.1 Storytelling marketing

jELLYCAT employs storytelling marketing to enhance the emotional connection with consumers. The brand gives each doll a unique backstory. jELLYCAT personalizes the doll's story. There are

some cute characters—a little bear that plays the piano, an eggplant that cooks, a bunny that jumps squares, eggs, and a sun that basks on the beach. There is also a popular Bunny toy. It has soft fur and long limbs. jELLYCAT gives this Bunny a personality. This personality makes the Bunny like to roam the city. It also likes to sit anywhere to read and draw, which reflects urban young people's expectation of a free life [9].

jELLYCAT also shares real-life user stories. One example is how a jELLYCAT doll helped someone get through a difficult time, demonstrating the therapeutic role of symbolic companionship. These stories highlight the emotional value of the products.

Brands need to design entry points for story participation. These entry points help turn consumers from listeners into co-creators [10]. jELLYCAT shares real-life UGC stories, like how a jELLYCAT doll helped someone through a difficult time, highlighting the emotional value of the products.

3.3.2 Emotional marketing

Emotional marketing is at the heart of jELLYCAT's approach. They target the “loneliness economy”—a growing trend where consumers seek products that mitigate solitude and foster emotional connection. Their marketing messages clearly convey that “even if you are not a child, you still deserve to be comforted.” This simple, empathetic statement validates a quiet need many adults have--the desire to feel cared for, without judgment. The brand uses interesting stories in its marketing materials. It creates a narrative. This narrative connects with consumers by highlighting the toy's traits and adventures. These traits and adventures help build an emotional bond. Many jELLYCAT users give names to their plush toys. They take these toys on trips. They also take them to classes. They celebrate the toys' birthdays. Some even create accounts for the toys. These actions may seem a bit childish. They are like the classic “role-playing” games people played in childhood. Such behaviors are highly contagious within online communities. This kind of power touches a chord right away; it hits the “childish” part in many adults' hearts.

jELLYCAT also designs many of its products in a certain way. This way makes people feel nostalgia and tender feelings. The products have a timeless texture. This texture brings up positive emotions. These emotions are linked to childhood and companionship [9]. Under this marketing idea, jELLYCAT's toys are no longer just practical items. They move closer to having meaning and value, which attracts many consumers.

These two marketing strategies also help jELLYCAT build strong emotional resonance with its target audience—this resonance goes beyond the product's practical features. This resonance is what turns casual buyers into loyal fans: when a consumer sees their jELLYCAT doll not just as a toy, but as a companion that “understands” their loneliness, celebrates their small joys, and brings back happy childhood memories, they're far more likely to stick with the brand. This emotional connection then drives repeat purchases--whether it's buying a new doll to add to their collection, gifting one to a friend who needs comfort, or repurchasing a favorite doll if it gets worn out. In the end, jELLYCAT doesn't just sell plush toys; it sells feelings—and that's what makes its emotional marketing so effective.

3.4. Potential problems faced by jELLYCAT

3.4.1 High prices

jELLYCAT's high-end brand positioning results in relatively high prices. A single doll that is 9-31 cm can cost between 199-279 RMB [6], a price considerably higher than average plush toys in China. This price point deters price-sensitive consumers, such as students, those with lower disposable incomes, and maybe families seeking affordable gifts for children. These groups may admire jELLYCAT's design and emotional appeal but ultimately opt for cheaper alternatives because the brand's prices exceed their budget. As a result, the brand's potential customer base is restricted, limiting its market penetration among certain demographic groups.

3.4.2 Counterfeit products

jELLYCAT's widespread popularity—fueled by its social media presence and cult following among “Kidult” consumers—has attracted a flood of counterfeit products in the market. These knock-offs use low-quality materials, which not only feel rough but may also be harmful to the skin. A customer who unknowingly buys a fake jELLYCAT may form a negative impression, believing that the real products are of poor quality, undermining brand trust, and reducing long-term loyalty. This can seriously damage jELLYCAT's brand image and erode consumer trust [8].

3.4.3 Competition from similar products

jELLYCAT also faces growing competition from both domestic and international brands offering similar products in the market. With the growing popularity of plush toys, other brands are also launching products with similar cute designs and emotional appeal [6]. Some local brands have introduced “Jellycat-like” products at lower prices. Although these products may not match jELLYCAT in terms of quality and brand storytelling, their localized pricing and cultural resonance attract budget-conscious consumers. So, they still pose a threat to the brand's market share, as they can attract price-sensitive consumers and those who are simply looking for a similar aesthetic.

4. Suggestion for jELLYCAT

To help jELLYCAT further use of the Kidulting trend and strengthen its connection with adult consumers, the following suggestions focus on enhancing immersive interaction and personalized engagement.

4.1. Integrate online+offline AR/VR experience

jELLYCAT should develop and launch AR (Augmented Reality) and VR (Virtual Reality) features on its website online or pop-up stores offline. These tools will address a common pain point for adult consumers: uncertainty about how a plush toy fits into their daily lives. For AR, users could scan their living spaces (e.g., beds, sofas, or desks) with their phones to see a digital version of the plush toy in that real environment. This helps consumers visualize the toy as a “companion” or a “partner” rather than just a product, making their purchase decision more confident [10].

For VR, the brand could create a virtual “jELLYCAT World” based on the unique backstories of its plush toys. For example, users might “join” jELLYCAT's toy adventures through VR headsets or phone-based VR modes. This immersive experience lets consumers actively participate in the brand's stories, rather than just hearing them or viewing them on the website. When consumers explore this virtual world on their own, they form deeper emotional ties to the toys; they may start to see the plushies as “friends” they want to bring into their real lives. Over time, this will strengthen jELLYCAT's brand image as a provider of emotional comfort and playful escape, not just plush products.

4.2. Design and launch customizable outfits and accessories

jELLYCAT should expand its product line to include small, mix-and-match outfits and accessories for its plush toys (e.g., tiny sweaters, glasses, scarves, hats, or backpacks). These items will let adult consumers “dress up” their plushies in styles that reflect their own personalities. This customization taps into the “IKEA Effect”, a psychological phenomenon where people value products more when they contribute to creating or personalizing them [12].

When consumers spend time choosing and match accessories for their plush toys, they inject personal emotion into the process of DIY. This not only gives them a sense of achievement but also deepens their sense of “ownership” of the toy. Over time, this builds stronger user loyalty: consumers move from simply “knowing” the brand to “liking” it because it reflects their identity, and finally to “relying” on it for emotional comfort [10]. Additionally, these accessories can evoke nostalgia--many adults remember dressing up dolls as children--further aligning with the Kidulting trend. The brand

could even release limited-edition accessory sets (e.g., seasonal outfits for holidays) to keep consumers engaged and encourage repeat purchases.

Both suggestions can help deepening emotional resonance. AR/VR by turning passive brand engagement into active exploration; and customizable accessories by letting consumers “co-create” with the brand. By implementing these strategies, jELLYCAT can not only retain existing customers but also attract new ones who seek personalized and meaningful connections with the products they buy.

5. Conclusion

This case study focuses on the Kidulting trend—which reflects modern adults’ needs for stress relief and emotional comfort—and explores how jELLYCAT aligns its strategies with this trend to drive success in emotional-driven consumption.

First, the research results identify three core shifts: Kidulting meets adults’ psychological need to ease pressure; consumers now prioritize emotional satisfaction over just material functions; and toys have evolved from children’s items to symbols of emotional connection and self-expression. From these results, the study draws key conclusions: jELLYCAT stands out not only for high-quality plush toys but also for its ability to shift product value from function to emotion. It uses cute designs, scenario-based experiences, emotional storytelling, and empathetic service to capture consumers’ hearts, turning dolls into “emotional partners” that bring small joys amid stress. The brand also faces challenges like high prices, counterfeits, and competition. To address these and deepen engagement, two suggestions are put forward: integrate online-offline AR/VR tools to let consumers visualize and interact with toys in immersive ways. Additionally, launch customizable outfits/accessories to let consumers co-create and build stronger emotional bonds via the “IKEA Effect”.

The study’s significance lies in filling gaps in understanding how brands leverage Kidulting psychology—jELLYCAT’s success sets a clear model for emotional-driven marketing. Looking ahead, as emotional consumption grows, more brands will shift focus to emotional value. For jELLYCAT, addressing price barriers and counterfeits while expanding personalized experiences will help it maintain competitiveness. Ultimately, brands that deeply grasp consumers’ emotional needs will thrive in the emotional economy.

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