

The Analysis of Post-COVID-19 Kidult Consumption of Jellycat

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Abstract. After COVID-19, the mental health of young people has become a growing concern all over the world, with negative emotions such as anxiety, loneliness, and helplessness increasing significantly. Due to academic pressure, unstable employment and uncertain social environment, some young individuals relieve their pressure and seek emotional comfort by purchasing and using toys. Plush toys, with soft materials, appealing appearance, and emotional experience, have become a representative choice in this trend. Jellycat, a well-known plush toy brand, stands out from its competitors. This paper will take Jellycat as a case study. This research found that young consumers choose Jellycat not only because its high-quality material has a warm and soft touch, which plays a role in soothing emotions and relieving anxiety, but also because of its innovation in creating immersive experiences. Jellycat offline stores often create immersive and interactive scenes, which make consumers not only "buyers" but also "participants" and "story builders" in the shopping process. Such experiential interactions encourage consumers to play the role of "caregivers", and regard plush toys as objects that require nurturing. Then they can gain emotional value and psychological satisfaction. The combination of tactile comfort, emotional engagement, and identity construction constitutes a unique competitive advantage of Jellycat within the plush toy market.

Keywords: Jellycat, Kidult, Pressure.

1. Introduction

According to the data collected by Gallup, a research company, negative emotions (i.g. stress, sadness and anger) continued to increase globally after COVID-19 since 2006 (i.e. from 2019 to 2022) [1]. On November 13th, 2024, BBC News noticed adults buy children's toys to escape the global turmoil. According to the data of Circana, a toy industry research organization, purchases of toys and games by individuals aged over 18 now represent one-fifth of the total toy market consumption [2]. Researchers have found that adults may use nostalgia of childhood to escape the pressure in the real world. People call these individuals kidult. Kidult is a combination of "kid" and "adult", which refers to those consumers who have grown up but still have a strong interest in childhood culture (such as cartoon characters, toys, animations, plush toys, etc.). They even would like to spend money to purchase, collect or participate in related activities. Instead of resisting growing up, they use childhood elements to help them escape pain from the real world.

Jellycat was created and established in London in 1999, and its goal is to develop new and unique plush toys with luxury fabrics. Jellycat's product range has a wide variety of designs, including animals, plants, and desserts. All products are characterised by appealing forms, a soft tactile quality, and the use of skin-friendly materials. Besides, all Jellycat products are strictly tested according to British, American, European, and Australian safety standards, and they carry both the European Conformity (CE) and UK Conformity Assessed (UKCA) marks to show that they meet these requirements. Because the toy is not irritating, does not shed and is hypoallergenic, users can enjoy maximum comfort and safety. Even after washing, the toy does not fade or lose its shape. Jellycat's comforting appeal and high-quality standards have made it popular worldwide, especially in China.

However, what truly triggered the Jellycat craze in the Chinese market was short videos showing "Jellycat packaging" which went viral on the Chinese version of TikTok in September 2024. According to the data from Endata, between January and September 2024, the number of posts related to the topic of "Jellycat" on social media increased by 366% year-on-year, while interactions increased by 314% [3]. In September 2024, both the number of posts and interactions on social media of Jellycat reached the highest levels for the year. The key word for this month is "offline experience store".

According to the contents posted by Jellycat consumers on TikTok, staffs in the Jellycat offline store disinfect their hands before packing the Barcelona bear, and personify the Barcelona bear. For example, they wake up the Barcelona bear by rubbing its eyes, combing its hair and pinching its ears. In this process, staff acts as a communication mediator between the bear and the viewer, acting as the toy's spokesperson to convey the bear's expectations and admiration for its "new owner". After that, staff pretend to "squeeze cream" onto the cupcakes held by the Barcelona bear, and even operate according to the demand of consumers (i.g. the amount of cream, the taste of cream). Videos with "Jellycat packaging" tag have been viewed more than 17.757 million times as of July 2025.

This paper will investigate the phenomenon of kidult consumption by examining the behaviors of adults who purchase Jellycat products offline. It will explore the relationship between the role of stress-relief function of plush toys, and the emotional value provided by in-store interactions in the motivations of kidult consumers in engaging in such consumption.

2. Literature review

2.1. Psychological stress

Researchers worried that the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 has caused unprecedented damage to global mental health. Compared with the pre-pandemic rate, the prevalence rate of public adverse mental outcome symptoms has increased. During COVID-19, relatively high levels of stress and mental health issues were reported in the general population in eight countries [4]. In Jiaqi et al.'s research, participants from the young group (≤ 40 years old) showed more pronounced depressive symptoms. Studies investigating COVID-19 patients have found elevated levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS)(96.2%), and a significant increase in depressive symptoms ($P=0.016$) [5]. According to Zhang et al., the prevalence of mental health issues related to the COVID-19 outbreak, including anxiety, depression and insomnia, which were 25.5%, 16.9% and 26.2% respectively. Patients with pre-existing mental health conditions also reported a worsening of symptoms [6]. Pierce et al. compared mental health data collected before the pandemic (2018–2019) with data from the peak of the pandemic in April 2020 [7]. Using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire, they found that the average scores for individuals aged 18–24 were 2.69 points higher than the pre-

pandemic trend, and scores for those aged 25–34 were 1.57 points higher. It indicates a deterioration in mental health among adults aged 18–34 following the COVID-19 outbreak [7].

2.2. Plush toy consumption

Young adults often attempt to deal with stress through the consumption of plush toys. When consumers experience stress, they seek strategies to manage it [8]. Researchers have identified two main coping approaches: problem-focused and emotion-focused [9]. The former emphasizes addressing the source of stress, while the latter aims to alleviate negative emotions through other means. When individuals feel unable to resolve the source of stress, they tend to adopt emotion-focused consumption. For example, some consumers may overeat to reduce anxiety when they feel unsafe. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, human behavior is driven by a range of needs, including physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs [9]. Consumption of plush toys is primarily driven by safety needs, as defined in Maslow's framework. This type of consumption is emotion-focused, satisfying emotional needs and effectively reducing stress.

Plush toys are typically made of soft materials. Studies have shown that hugging a huggable communication medium can reduce cortisol levels in saliva and blood. Furthermore, 15 minutes of inactive contact with inanimate objects such as plush toys can lower stress hormone levels [10]. Researchers suggest that tactile interaction with inanimate objects like plush toys may decrease cortisol levels and increase oxytocin, thereby alleviating stress associated with social exclusion [11]. The use of plush materials can further reduce stress levels in adults and relieve feelings of loneliness. All Jellycat products use soft, skin-friendly plush materials. In addition, all products undergo testing and certification according to several countries' safety standards, ensuring that users can enjoy both comfort and safety.

3. Research method

Since Jellycat primarily reaches a young audience on social media, domestic students, international students, and young businessmen account for 75% of its consumer base [3]. The Barcelona Bear is one of Jellycat's most popular products in China. According to research by Soochow Securities (2025), the Barcelona Bear consistently ranked first in single-item sales on Jellycat's official Tmall flagship store in 2024, while its quarterly sales account for 7.7% to 13.2% of total revenue throughout the year [12].

Based on this, the study selected a 22-year-old female student who purchased a Barcelona Bear for an interview. The interview focused on two main aspects: her experience in the offline store and the emotional impact of the toy. The interview was conducted in the form of face-to-face dialogue, lasting about 15 minutes, and the whole process was recorded.

4. Results

4.1. Experience with plush toys

The interviewee regards that, compared with other brands, Jellycat toys are more comfortable. She described the fur as "very soft but not easily tangled" and the toy as lightweight. As she mentioned, "its filling is neither too firm nor too hard", which makes it pleasant to touch and suitable for sleeping with. Holding the toy was likened to "being gently embraced by the sun," and she found the act of hugging the Jellycat "highly comforting."

In addition, the interviewee highlighted that the tag on the toy, which reads “please take care of me,” had a strong emotional impact, making her “want to treat it gently” when seeing it.

4.2. Experience in the offline store

The interviewee considered the offline experience to be highly positive, as it provided emotional value and instilled a sense of responsibility. She mentioned specific interactions, such as staff saying, “the cupcake is its (Barcelona Bear’s) favorite food,” gently rubbing the toy’s ears, and providing a “birth certificate card.” These details, framed through anthropomorphism and a caregiving context, created a quasi-parenting scenario. Throughout the process, the consumer gradually assumed the role of a “caregiver” or even a “mother.” As she stated, “I really felt a sense of responsibility at that moment” and “I finally had something I could take good care of.”

The interviewee also describes purchasing the toy in-store as a ceremony of welcoming a “new life,” which is “very warm” and “healing.” During the packaging process, staff would “take care of the toy while speaking to it, gently rubbing its ears and writing a birth certificate on the packaging card.” This sense of responsibility also motivated her to purchase additional clothes for the toy on multiple occasions. The interviewee viewed the toy not only as an emotional companion, “a friend to share my thoughts with,” but also more broadly personified it as “my own child” or “baby.”

5. Discussion

This study finds that adult consumption of plush toys is not only a straightforward purchasing behavior, but rather constitutes a form of “ritualized consumption” closely linked to emotional stress and psychological needs.

Firstly, in the context of increased psychological stress following COVID-19, the popularity of Jellycat toys can be understood as an emotion-focused consumption strategy adopted by young adults to deal with negative emotions. During the interview, the participant described choosing a Jellycat toy as a “companion” or “emotional anchor,” which is in line with Duhachek’s findings that consumers engage in self-soothing through consumption under stress. In this sense, Jellycat plush toys function not only as play objects but as tools for psychological regulation, providing emotional support to consumers.

Secondly, unlike traditional toy consumption, Jellycat purchases are characterized by a pronounced sense of ritual and interactive features. Through the “packaging ritual,” consumers establish a relationship with the toy within a designated space. This process integrates contextualized performance, anthropomorphic language, and role-playing elements, transforming consumers from passive purchasers into active “caregivers” or “mothers”. Through specific actions such as “waking up” the toy, “piping cream,” and issuing a “birth certificate,” dolls are endowed with life-like characteristics, and the consumption experience becomes a symbolic quasi-parenting ritual. It creates a safe, gentle, and controllable environment, which fulfills emotion-centered needs, reinforces Maslow’s self-actualization, and motivates individualized consumption.

In conclusion, Jellycat toys are more than playthings. They serve as symbolic media through which adults can regain a sense of control and tenderness in their lives. They exemplify the post-pandemic “healing economy” and the commodification of emotions, highlighting how playful consumption can provide both emotional regulation and experiential satisfaction in contemporary consumer culture.

6. Conclusion

This study finds that young adults' purchase of Jellycat is driven by more than the soft and comforting texture of the plush toys after COVID-19, which helps alleviate stress and anxiety. Besides, an immersive offline store experience provides interactive rituals and anthropomorphic performances, which enable consumers to actively participate in the creation of a "caregiver" identity. By engaging in actions such as "waking up" the toy, "piping cream," and receiving a "birth certificate," consumers are transformed from passive buyers into active participants in a quasi-parenting scenario. This process not only provides emotional comfort and a sense of responsibility, but also allows consumers to construct meaning and control within a safe and playful environment. In this sense, Jellycat consumption exemplifies ritualized, emotion-focused consumer behavior, highlighting the symbolic and therapeutic functions of plush toys in contemporary culture.

However, this study still has limitations, primarily due to its small sample size. Future research should consider expanding and diversifying the sample to include participants of different genders, regions, and income levels. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ritualized toy consumption functions as a strategy for emotional regulation and identity construction in diverse populations.

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