

The Interweaving of Cultural Logic and Capital Logic: A Study on the Construction Mechanism of Emotional Value in the Contemporary Consumer Market

Yiqiu Xiang*

Institute of AAA, Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance, Shanghai, China

**Corresponding author: Yiqiu Xiang.*

Abstract

The current study aimed to explore how emotional value is constructed in the consumer market and the roles of culture and capital in this process. Consumers of different age groups are investigated through questionnaires and offline interviews. The marketing content and methods currently in the market have been analyzed. It also includes the study of typical cases such as PopMart. The consumers' emphasis on emotional value has shaped the positioning and marketing strategies of both businesses and the market for products. Emotional value consumption is the result of the joint construction of cultural logic and capital logic. Cultural logic provides the foundation for demands and the discourse resources, while capital logic completes the transformation and amplification of commodities. The interaction of these two-dimensional logics not only meets some emotional needs but may also exacerbate emotional alienation. Consumers should enhance their judgment skills and consumer awareness to avoid excessive consumption and emotional exploitation. Businesses should create products based on genuine culture and conduct appropriate marketing to prevent excessive stereotyping.

Keywords

emotional value, cultural logic, capital logic

1. Introduction

In today's world, the basic needs of the majority of people in most countries have been met. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, when basic needs are fulfilled, people start to pursue psychological needs [1]. Therefore, the consumption began to transition, and the phenomenon of emotional value consumption has emerged. As the research has been published before, "In particular, emotions play a key role during brand-consumers relational exchanges and academics and practitioners agree that whilst positive emotions lead to a successful brand value co-creation, the reverse is also true" [2]. However, based on current research, there is a lack of in-depth study on the construction mechanism of emotional value in the market. Therefore, this research will deeply discuss how emotional value is constructed in the consumer market. What role does the cultural logic play in the underlying code and

dissemination of emotional value? How does the capital logic convert emotions into tradable commodities? Why are consumers willing to pay for emotional value? How do their psychological needs match the market supply? How should people confront the increasingly prosperous trend of emotional consumption? By exploring these issues, the author aims to guide healthy emotional consumption and optimize emotional marketing strategies, focusing on the emotional well-being of consumers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Arrival of the Emotional Era and the Highlighting of Emotional Value

In the past, people paid more attention to the functional performance of products when making purchases and regarded it as the primary factor for evaluating a product's value. In recent years, besides practical utility, people have increasingly valued the emotional significance contained in a product. Campbell, who proposes the concept of “proposition of the desire for pleasure”, suggests that modern consumerism is driven by consumers' ongoing pursuit of pleasurable experiences, which explains the popularity of the blind box economy [3]. Campbell posits that the core of consumption lies in the pleasure evoked by the imagination of consumption, which often arises from fantasies and expectations prior to the act of consumption itself, rather than from consumption itself. For example, in the case of the blind box economy, recent years have seen widespread attention and affection for blind box brands led by Pop Mart, and the blind box economy continues to grow. One motivation for purchasing blind boxes is the sense of surprise and excitement brought by the unknown. When consumers receive the product they desire, their joy multiplies, whereas receiving an undesired product can trigger feelings of dissatisfaction, prompting them to try again. Consequently, consumer spending behavior has shifted from “paying for functionality” to “paying for emotional value,” and emotional value has become a widespread and strong demand for payment.

In contemporary society, the pace of work and life continues to accelerate. Under the advocacy of the concept of independence, an increasing number of young people are choosing to live alone. Contact between individuals and society, as well as with others, is constantly decreasing, and people often feel lonely and lack a sense of companionship. Consequently, they use products to compensate for emotional deficiencies. Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz, in her work, proposed the concept of “emotional capitalism” and revealed how capitalism utilizes, processes, and produces consumers' emotions [4]. While emotions themselves become commodities that can be bought and sold, capital injects emotions into products to satisfy consumers' emotional needs. When contemporary young people first enter the adult world, they face many uncertainties and social pressures, which gives rise to a strong demand for emotional support. At the same time, the anonymity of the online space allows young workers to express themselves with fewer concerns, without worrying about the exposure of their identity and evaluation. When emotional support is lacking in real-life society, online services provide a compensatory mechanism, making up for the deficiency of real-world emotions [5]. Therefore, the loneliness economy, healing economy, and companionship economy have emerged. The essence of emotional consumerism is the disciplining and manipulation of the emotional realm by capitalist logic, bringing about threefold harms: emotional alienation, consumption alienation, and labor alienation [6]. At the same time, with increasing social competition pressure, consumers also use certain products as markers to demonstrate their personality and social class, in line with the theory of symbolic value proposed by French thinker Jean Baudrillard [7].

2.2 Presentation of Cases and Demand Tracing of Emotional Value Consumption

Contemporary emotional value consumption can be categorized into four types. First, the emotional attachment to material goods, exemplified by products such as Jellycat plush toys, which provide a sense of “companionship” through anthropomorphic design, and blind boxes, which stimulate emotional investment through the excitement of uncertainty and the pleasure of collecting. Second, emotional provision through virtual services, including online emotional services such as “confession rooms,” “wake-up services,” “virtual lovers,” and “compliment groups,” where consumers pay per session or by time to obtain emotional interaction. Third, emotional healing through experiential consumption, such as meditation apps, immersive theater, and aromatherapy, where consumers pay for the “process” and the “experience.” Fourth, emotional comfort

through content consumption, including healing short videos, slow live streams (such as study room live streams and hotpot live streams), and ASMR, which trigger pleasurable or relaxing emotional responses through audiovisual stimulation.

Taking Jellycat as an example, the brand endows each plush toy with an anthropomorphic role—each toy has a name, a personality setting, and even an “ID card.” On social media, content such as “taking toys on trips” or “celebrating the toy’s birthday” reinforces the narrative of companionship, meaning that consumers are purchasing not just a toy but an “emotional companion.” Compliment groups, on the other hand, are a type of online paid service where users pay to enter a group chat, and members take turns sending compliments, providing a brief but intense positive emotional experience.

The core demographic of emotional consumption shows three main characteristics. First, it is primarily urban young adults living alone, female white-collar workers in first-tier cities, and Generation Z. Second, the consumption motivations are driven by the threefold forces of “self-reward,” “compensation for loneliness,” and “stress relief.” Third, consumption behavior exhibits the coexistence of “small-amount, high-frequency” spending and “ritualization”—on the one hand, the amount spent per emotional consumption is often low, facilitating quick decision-making; on the other hand, consumers create a sense of ritual around emotional consumption to enhance the emotional experience.

The popularity of cultural discourses such as “self-pleasure,” “healing,” “relaxation,” and “emotional freedom” provides legitimizing rhetoric for emotional consumption. These discourses, spread through social media and co-opted by commercial forces, have transformed from “individual feelings” to “social trends” and ultimately to “consumer motivations.” “Self-pleasure” originally carried connotations of feminist liberation, emphasizing women’s freedom from the gaze of others and attention to their own feelings, but in a consumerist context, it has been simplified to “spending money for oneself.” “Healing,” once a specialized psychological term, has evolved into a generalized consumer label, with any product that brings temporary comfort being branded as “healing.” The generalization and appropriation of these discourses lend moral legitimacy to emotional consumption, so that “spending money for happiness” is no longer seen as indulgent or wasteful but understood as a necessary investment in oneself.

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin, by utilizing algorithms to capture emotional vulnerabilities, create a cycle of “emotional display—emotional comparison—emotional consumption.” Key opinion leaders (KOLs) define “what is worthwhile emotional consumption” through their emotional narratives. When users encounter “healing” content, they experience emotional resonance and the desire to imitate; the algorithms then push similar content based on interaction data, ultimately converting vague emotional needs into specific consumer behaviors. Social media not only amplifies existing emotional needs but also shapes new ones—users discover that they “also need” certain emotional experiences, even though they had not been aware of them before. Thus, it is evident that social media amplifies the intrinsic emotions of consumers, creating a sense of emotional deficiency through comparison with others. Under the influence of numerous external factors, emotional needs are transformed into constructed desires.

2.3 The Commodification Path of Emotional Value

From an overall perspective, the commodification of emotional value is also a combination of the logic of consumerism and emotion. Its process also aligns with the three major strategies for combining consumerism and emotion, namely, the production of landscapes and manipulation of empathy, the temptation and control of media technology, and the superposition of consumer culture and economic rationality [8].

The primary operation of capital is to endow commodities with emotional significance, that is, symbolic encoding. The anthropomorphic design of Jellycat plush toys—where each toy has a name, a personality setting, and even an “ID card”—transforms them from ordinary stuffed toys into “living companions.” Pop Mart blind boxes emphasize the “surprise of unboxing” during the sales process, turning the act of purchasing itself into an emotional experience. This symbolic encoding concretizes and commodifies the abstract notion of “emotion” making consumers believe that by simply purchasing the product, they can obtain the corresponding emotional value. Some products even carry unique stories; for

example, in Pop Mart's "Twinkle Twinkle" series, each toy comes with a distinctive emotional backstory, thereby attracting consumer purchases.

Secondly, the dual scenarization of physical and virtual spaces provides venues for emotional consumption. Offline "therapeutic" cafés create a "slow life" atmosphere through warm lighting, wooden furniture, and soft music; meditation apps construct an "immersive and mindful" environment through guided instructions, background sound effects, and visual design. The core logic of scene creation is to detach consumers from their routine, organized lives and bring them into a controllable and predictable emotional space.

Subsequently, the platform economy allows emotions to be quantified and calculated. Users' time spent on social media, likes, comments, and search keywords become digital traces for inferring their emotional states. When algorithms determine that a user is in a state of "loneliness" or "anxiety", corresponding "healing" content and product links are pushed to them. For example, a user frequently searching for "insomnia" or "loneliness" late at night may encounter ads for sleep aid apps the next day. This mechanism achieves a shift from "meeting demands" to "creating demands"—anxiety is identified, and the remedy is immediately offered, forming a precise "problem-solution" match.

Finally, fan communities and interest circles constitute a collective for emotional consumption. Within these communities, members gain a sense of belonging and recognition through sharing consumption experiences; the consumption behavior itself becomes a medium for emotional communication. Members showcase newly acquired Jellycat toys or reveal the results of blind box unboxing, receiving interactions and recognition from like-minded peers. Consumers simultaneously become disseminators: the emotional reproduction in UGC content further amplifies the social propagation effect of emotional consumption. The existence of these communities transforms emotional consumption from an individual activity into a collective ritual, strengthening the legitimacy and sustained motivation for consumption.

3. Key Finding

Culture and capital have formed a positive feedback loop. Cultural logic and capital logic do not operate independently; rather, they intertwine and reinforce each other. Cultural logic provides a "raw material pool" for capital logic, transforming the emotional deficits in the social psyche into market demand, while popular discourse offers narrative resources for product marketing. Conversely, capital logic amplifies, reshapes, and even manufactures cultural demand through advertising and algorithms; originally marginal emotional needs are magnified into mainstream consumption trends. Through symbolic coding, vague feelings of "loneliness" are converted into tangible "companion services." The interaction between the two not only jointly drives the expansion of emotional consumption but may also undermine the authenticity of emotions through the standardization of feelings by capital. When "self-pleasure" becomes a social consensus, businesses can seize the opportunity to introduce the "self-pleasure economy"—ranging from beauty and skincare to affordable luxury experiences, all falling under the category of "self-pleasure." When "loneliness" becomes a common experience, capital responds with "companion services"—virtual lovers, confession platforms, companion chatting, and similar businesses emerge. Their synergy forms a positive feedback cycle of "cultural demand — capital supply — demand reinforcement — supply upgrade." Each act of consumption not only satisfies immediate emotional needs but also reinforces the cognitive model that "emotions can be resolved through consumption." Capital exploits emotional deficits to create corresponding products and commercial chains to profit from them. This interactive relationship constitutes the core driving force for the continuous production and diffusion of emotional value consumption. Thus, the cultural demand positive feedback loop is formed.

However, when emotions are standardized and formulaic, their "healing" effect is diminished. The alienation of emotional labor is reflected in that when "companionship" becomes a service charged by the minute, and "therapy" becomes a replicable commercial template, consumers perceive the erosion of emotional authenticity caused by commodification. Many consumers report that the satisfaction brought by emotional consumption is fleeting, and after consumption, they often fall into deeper emptiness. This tension drives capital to constantly upgrade strategies—from standardized services to "customized" and "personalized" services, attempting to simulate genuine emotion, but fundamentally unable to resolve the core contradiction

between commodification and authenticity. Moreover, excessive algorithmic intervention can lead to the emergence of addictive emotional products in the emotional market. Algorithmic recommendations irrationally amplify emotional needs, causing users to genuinely become addicted to these “addictive products.” In fact, when this phenomenon reaches a certain extent, algorithmic platforms can even unconsciously engage in mental colonization of users, turning them into instruments of capital [9].

Emotional value consumption has dual social and cultural consequences. On the positive side, it provides atomized individuals with an alternative channel for emotional comfort, alleviating feelings of loneliness and anxiety to some extent; it also promotes social attention to mental health issues, making “taking care of one's emotions” an acknowledged value orientation. On the negative side, it may simplify emotional needs into acts of consumption—people increasingly tend to respond to emotional fluctuations by “buying” rather than seeking real social connections.

This compels us to deeply consider a question: can emotional consumption replace genuine human connections in reality? I believe the answer is “no.” Emotional value consumption can only temporarily fill emotional voids; it cannot substitute for real-life connections. When emotions themselves become commodities, consumers lose the ability to obtain emotional fulfillment without consumption, gradually eroding the capacity to engage meaningfully with the real world.

In the process of emotional consumption, a further issue is that when consumers purchase products with emotional value, consumers are always on the receiving end, gaining satisfaction. However, both giving and investing of emotion are equally important. Over time, this gradually diminishes the capacity to invest emotions, meaning consumers may feel fearful and helpless when faced with the relational efforts required in real life, thus avoiding genuine emotional connections with others. The prosperity of emotional consumption, while seemingly abundant, in fact reflects the scarcity of emotional support systems in contemporary society. Li Zhaoyue further pointed out that emotional value consumption gives rise to multiple concerns: capital manipulates emotional needs through the symbolic production of pseudo-emotional value products and addiction mechanisms; the degradation of emotions leads to the hollowing out of real emotional cognition and expression abilities; and the surrender of privacy exposes emotional data to algorithmic exploitation and security risks [10].

4. Discussion

4.1 Research Application

To avoid excessive emotional consumption, the entire society should make concerted efforts. The public should enhance media literacy and conscious consumption to avoid falling into the vicious cycle of “retail therapy”. Consumers should recognize that emotional consumption is a product constructed by the market, rather than a fundamental means to resolve emotional issues. When faced with marketing language such as “pleasure” and “healing”, it is important to maintain critical reflection: Is purchasing this product driven by genuine emotional needs, or by impulses triggered by algorithms and advertisements? It is recommended that consumers actively invest in authentic social connections—engaging in deep conversations with friends, participating in community activities, and cultivating non-consumptive hobbies—to fundamentally alleviate emotional deficits.

Businesses should base their emotional marketing on genuine cultural insights and avoid overly formulaic approaches and emotional exploitation. The sustainable development of the emotional consumption market depends on consumers' ongoing trust in the authenticity of emotions. Short-sighted practices such as excessive marketing, standardized “emotional templates”, and creating demand through anxiety will ultimately erode consumer trust and lead to market contraction. It is recommended that businesses return to in-depth insights into the real emotional needs of target groups, providing products and services that are warm, differentiated, and respectful of consumer agency, rather than merely replicating labels like “healing” or “companionship”.

The entire society should improve the public emotional support system and reduce excessive reliance on consumption as an emotional solution. The prosperity of emotional consumption is, in essence, a market response to the lack of public emotional support systems. Governments and social organizations should increase investment in non-commercial emotional support channels, such as community psychological services, public helplines, youth social platforms, and public cultural spaces, thereby reducing the marginal cost for individuals to obtain emotional support. At the same time, commercial ethics and regulations should be strengthened, calling for ethical reflection and necessary regulation of algorithmic recommendations and targeted marketing to protect emotional privacy, prevent excessive emotional exploitation, and reduce harmful or erroneous emotional guidance and malicious comparative competition.

4.2 Research Limitation

This study systematically analyzes the construction mechanism, commodification pathways, and social consequences of emotional value consumption, but several limitations remain. First, the case selection mainly focuses on typical business formats such as Jellycat, blind boxes, and praise groups, failing to comprehensively cover emerging fields like the pet economy and AI emotional companionship, so the generalizability of the conclusions needs to be tested. Second, the research methods are primarily literature analysis and theoretical interpretation, lacking first-hand data support from large-scale surveys or in-depth interviews, resulting in insufficient exploration of consumers' subjective experiences and meaning construction. Third, this study is based on the contemporary Chinese social context and does not incorporate a cross-cultural comparative perspective, leaving the similarities and differences in emotional consumption under different institutional and cultural backgrounds unclear. Finally, the emotional consumption market is evolving rapidly; this study mainly conducts a cross-sectional analysis of the current phenomenon, lacking tracking of long-term evolutionary trends.

4.3 Future Research Direction

Future research can be deepened in the following directions: First, mixed research methods can be employed, combining surveys to validate the “cultural demand–capital supply–emotional consequence” mechanism model proposed in this study and using in-depth interviews to reveal consumers' emotional narratives and resistance strategies. Second, longitudinal tracking studies can be conducted to observe changes in emotional consumption needs of the same group at different stages of life and the iterative upgrading of capital strategies. Third, a cross-cultural comparative perspective can be introduced to compare emotional consumption in East Asian societies, Western societies, and other societies, further testing the boundary conditions of the “cultural logic–capital logic” framework. Finally, attention can be given to new business formats such as AI emotional companionship and metaverse therapeutic spaces, exploring how technological iteration reshapes the construction and commodification logic of emotional value and the resulting new types of emotional alienation risk.

5. Conclusion

This article systematically analyzes the rise, types, commodification pathways, and social impacts of contemporary emotional value consumption. In the context of a fast-paced and atomized society, consumers' willingness to pay has shifted from “paying for function” to “paying for emotion”, as evidenced by the flourishing of business models such as blind boxes, Jellycat, and virtual companionship. Emotional consumption can be categorized into four types: emotional attachment to material goods, emotional provision through virtual services, emotional healing via experiential consumption, and emotional comfort through content consumption. The core groups are urban single youths and Generation Z, with driving forces including self-reward, loneliness compensation, and stress relief. Capital converts vague emotional needs into purchasable commodities through symbolic coding, spatial scenarization, platform-based quantitative calculation, and the construction of community collectives, forming a positive feedback loop of “cultural demand—capital supply—demand reinforcement”. However, this commodification also brings about emotional alienation: standardized and formulaic emotional services result in fleeting satisfaction, often leaving consumers feeling deeper emptiness afterward, unable to replace genuine interpersonal connections. Long-term reliance on emotional consumption may further

weaken individuals' capacity to invest emotionally and engage in real relationships, reflecting a deficiency in the societal emotional support system. Therefore, all sectors of society should take action: consumers need to enhance media literacy and invest in non-consumptive genuine social interactions; businesses should offer products with warmth based on authentic cultural insights; and society as a whole should improve public emotional support systems and implement ethical regulation of commercial practices such as algorithmic recommendations. In doing so, it would be possible to transcend the emotional market and rebuild authentic emotional connections, enabling both society and individuals to have useful and healthy emotional experiences.

References

- [1] Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396.
- [2] *Journal of Business Research*, Volume 109, March 2020, Pages 310-320
- [3] Campbell, C. (1987). *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*. B. Blackwell.
- [4] Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity Press.
- [5] Guan, J. (2021). The driving factors and cultural changes behind the commercialization of emotion. *People's Tribune*, (Z1).
- [6] Zuo, L., & Zhu, L. (2025). The trap of emotional consumerism: Critical perspectives and breakthrough paths. *Journal of Southwest Petroleum University (Social Science Edition)*, (2).
- [7] Baudrillard, J. (1970). *La société de consommation: ses mythes, ses structures* [The consumer society: Myths and structures]. Denoël.
- [8] Lin, B., & Deng, Q. (2020). An examination of emotional capitalism: How consumerist logic and emotion become increasingly entangled. *Journal of Southeast University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, (2), 18-25.
- [9] Ma, C. (2025). On the new alienation of affective labor in digital capitalism and its resolution. *Marxism Research Network*. Retrieved from [URL unavailable]
- [10] Li, Z. (2025). The concrete representations, realistic concerns, and guiding approaches of Generation Z's emotional value consumption. *Preprints Platform for Philosophy and Social Sciences*.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

Open Access

This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

