

From Commodity to Companion: Storytelling and Emotional Labor in Jelly Cat's Social Media Marketing

Ronghan Li

*Beijing World Youth Academy, Beijing, China
jeffery_li2025@163.com*

Abstract. Jelly Cat is a British plush-toy brand popular among youth for their unique branding strategies worldwide. This paper aims to understand how they use social media promotion on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) to turn common merchandise into emotional companions. By comparative thematic analysis of videos from the brand's official, physical-store, and user-generated accounts, this study discerns two complementary narrative modes. The official account uses fantasy-based storytelling to anthropomorphize the toys in order to generate intimacy and affection, while store and user accounts use realism to stress the authenticity of the real products, quality, and rational consumption. Combined, this collective story creates a marketing chain that incites desire, trust, and purchasing decisions. The results show that Jelly Cat effectively synthesizes both emotional and functional appeals on Douyin, and how narrative and affective labour can be deployed to localize global brands in China's digital consumer culture.

Keywords: Social media, marketing, branding, affective labor

1. Introduction

In recent years, the British plush toy brand Jelly Cat has achieved remarkable success in the Chinese market, emerging as a symbol of cuteness, comfort, and emotional warmth across diverse age groups. Beyond its soft textures and minimalist design, the brand has become a phenomenon of emotional branding, representing the idea of "companionship without condition." A key driver of this popularity is social media storytelling, particularly on Douyin, where Jelly Cat has transformed from a foreign commodity into a relatable cultural symbol.

On Douyin, the storytelling is not all about corporate selling. The brand's official account, store accounts, and user-generated accounts create an interconnected web of Jelly Cat and ensure its visibility as well as its emotional connection to users. The official account anthropomorphizes the plushies, drawing animations and inviting viewers to view them as vibrant "friends." Store pages draw on product quality, value and realism to influence logical consumer choice. User accounts, meanwhile, interweave authenticity yet affect, including both personal experience and playful creativity. These stories create a continuum between fantasy and realism in the sense it shows the ways Douyin enables both affective experiences and rational acts of consumption. In this study, we explore how these different account types deploy storytelling as means to construct brand meaning and emotional intimacy, and how these strategies are manifested in disparate ways of audience

engagement. Through comparison of narrative styles and popularity metrics across official, store and user accounts, the present research exposes the dual function of storytelling as both a promotional engine and a cultural mechanism to commodify intimacy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Storytelling in social media marketing

Storytelling has become a central strategy in digital story telling. It serves to turn products into emotional characters for the audience. Escalas [1] claims that narrative processing allows consumers to incorporate brand stories into their self-concepts, and Woodside [2] defines brand storytelling a narrative logic inducing affective identification.

On short-video platforms like Douyin, such storytelling logic is articulated by multimodal cues, encompassing animation, sound, and performance, allowing products to act, sense, and connect. Jelly Cat's official account on Douyin illustrates this evolution. While Jelly Cat plushies weren't created as animated characters, the brand's short videos give them human-like actions such as dancing, gardening and watching television. These are creative situations through which Jelly Cat creates a story about commodities and companionship. As Muniz and O'Guinn [3] argue, brand communities usually rely on shared stories that elicit identification and emotional attachment. Jelly Cat's storytelling puts its plushies within the category of "living friends," bringing the comfort and warmth to users who frame it in a way which supports daily life.

This storytelling method epitomizes the "emotionalization of consumption" as described by Illouz [4], whereby affect becomes part of the process of marketing. By anthropomorphizing its products, Jelly Cat turns emotional companionship into a branded experience, imploring users to spend both money and affection on the product. The aim of this model could equally be perceived as an emotional as well as commercial account and with these brand narratives, consumers could both use the artificial object for intimacy and care and to grow trust with the brand.

2.2. Authenticity, user storytelling, and affective labor

Storytelling on Douyin is not just for marketing. User-generated accounts also build stories that interweave personal story with brand significance. Abidin [5] calls this type of self-expression "calibrated amateurism" where authenticity and relatability is a weapon of persuasion. In the user videos, Jelly Cat plushies are on display everyday with "showrooms" showing how average users play into the brand's storytelling universe. These videos merge emotional narrative with practical information (pricing, getting advice about buying a product) to connect emotional with rational consumption.

In contrast, accounts in physical stores take a more realistic promotional tone, with a focus on affordability and product accuracy. Less narrative-driven, these representations of unedited items strengthen consumer trust and practical decision-making. Jelly Cat's social media branding has a spectrum between fantasy and realism, represented through the official, store and user accounts — combined. The official account evokes an emotional connection; store accounts hold authenticity; user accounts weave two dimensions into an interactive narrative.

Previous literature on narrative marketing [1,2] and brand communities [3] supports narratives' role in forming emotional pathways. But there is limited research on how such narrative techniques work in the fast-moving, algorithmically shaped environment of Douyin. Furthermore, while influencer studies [5] and affective consumption literature [4] explore authenticity and emotional

labor, little is published on how non-human characters, like plush toys, enact intimacy and friendship in brand narratives. The gap is apparent here, and it would seem that fantasy and realism as narrative modes of short-video marketing are the ones deserving further attention in short-video marketing.

Cultural analyses of cuteness aesthetics [6,7] also reveal that “cute” objects bear social connotations: they can blur the lines between emotion, playfulness, and desire. When we bring these to bear on Jelly Cat’s Douyin platform, we can find the way in which both cuteness and companionship are commodified through the telling of stories made available via various platforms. Drawing from the literature above, this study seeks to explore the role of storytelling as a narrative and emotive form in Jelly Cat’s social media marketing.

Specifically, I ask:

RQ1: What narrative strategies frame the storytelling surrounding Jelly Cat’s official, store, and user accounts on Douyin?

RQ2: What narrative structures help build and communicate the emotional and functional meanings of the brand?

RQ3: How do fantasy- and realism-based storytelling approaches affect viewers’ emotional investment and perceptions of authenticity when they are seen through a fantasy or realism-based storytelling lens?

This study also enriches understanding of the way in which brand storytelling across Douyin through a qualitative thematic or content analysis, and explores the influence of brand storytelling on consumer perception and digital intimacy by providing insight into the role of creativity, emotion, and realism in the context of brand storytelling on Douyin using this digital context.

3. Method

3.1. Data selection and sampling

This study focuses on three representative types of Douyin accounts related to the Jelly Cat brand: the official Jelly Cat account, physical store accounts, and user-generated accounts. These three account types were selected because they each embody a distinct approach to promoting Jelly Cat products online.

The official account adopts an imaginative, story-driven strategy that uses animation to emphasize the cuteness and emotional appeal of Jelly Cat plushies, thereby stimulating viewers’ affection and purchase desire. The physical store accounts highlight product authenticity and cost-effectiveness, emphasizing value and quality through realistic video portrayals. In contrast, the user accounts focus on practical and emotional engagement, demonstrating how Jelly Cat products can be incorporated into everyday life and how users derive warmth and companionship from them. Together, these three forms of content form a complete marketing chain for the brand that spans interest generation, rational consumption, and emotional reinforcement.

3.2. Sampling procedure

To ensure both depth and representativeness, 11 videos were selected from each account type, resulting in a total of 33 videos for analysis. This sample size was sufficient to capture the major variations in narrative and visual presentation across different accounts, covering a range of elements such as storytelling techniques, rhythm, tone, and visual composition. Analyzing a consistent number of videos across account types also allows for balanced comparison and

identification of recurring themes that characterize Jelly Cat's overall marketing strategies on Douyin.

3.3. Coding and analytical approach

Each video was examined using thematic content analysis, following Braun and Clarke's [8] six-step framework for identifying and interpreting patterns across qualitative data. Fifteen analytic dimensions were initially coded, encompassing both quantitative metrics (likes, shares, comments, collections) and qualitative attributes (composition, rhythm, theme, presentation method, storytelling technique, and visual impact).

Special attention was given to three interrelated themes: 1) Narrative structure investigates how stories unfold across fantasy and realism. 2) Presentation style studies including animation, editing, and tone. 3) Thematic emphasis delves into emotional versus informational appeal.

Through iterative comparison, thematic patterns were distilled to reveal how each account type constructs distinct forms of emotional labor and consumer guidance. The analysis also incorporated engagement metrics to contextualize how narrative strategies influence visibility and audience response, linking the textual content to broader platform dynamics.

4. Result

4.1. Storytelling as a marketing-channels narrative strategies

Jelly Cat's official account tells its story in a way that is just as creative as the original accounts — but balanced amongst three different kinds of accounts, there is actually no story more about creativity than this one. Jelly Cat product was never intended as animated characters but animation is present in nearly everything created on the official page. And it gave Jelly Cat functions that are not applicable on the screen: for dancers, for gardeners and fashion showgoers - just a good time. Two fundamental reasons for Jelly Cat product packaging are: Jelly cat packs consist of the 2 main reasons why Jellycat makes Jelly Cat stand out to Social Media marketers. 1- Jelly Cat had always been marketed as one of the most cute things to be a part of. Yet, if users see only product images or unedited videos, they will likely perceive this feature as superficial. Incorporation of animations and clearly assigning cute behaviors to Jelly Cat products greatly improves users' perception and recognition of their cuteness and their purchase intention. Second, Jelly Cat products are not only quite charming, but also associated with companionship and provide unparalleled emotional value to users—which is also shown in the animated videos on the official account. For example “watching movies together on Friday nights,” maintaining a late-night hangout and “weekend wake-up calls” often feature in these videos, suggesting that Jelly Cat products can walk with a person as they pass through their life. These scenes do more than imply camaraderie: They're a reflection of a wider cultural thing in which consumer products are endowed with emotional labor. In scripting Jelly Cat plushies as lovers and caregivers the official account redefines both sides of the commodity and companion, inviting audiences to invest not only in funds but also affect in the brand. We can use this image to help audiences picture Jelly Cat as an item that combines both fantasy and reality -- which means that how they picture their purchase decisions might be influenced. It is one of the three core account types, and this official account has served mostly as an attractive example of Jelly Cat to potential users. Through creative animations and thematic content, this account has been able to persuade consumers that Jelly Cat offers a good product. They leave the product firmly in their memory for good reason. In animations which ascribe delightful actions to Jelly Cat products, the

brand constructs a narrative of charm and life. Instead of just showing plush toys, the official account situates them as something to share with in daily life, encouraging audiences to picture types of intimacy and care that reach past the material object itself.

On the contrary, the videos posted by Jelly Cat's physical store accounts are less narratively compelling. They miss the warm support Jelly Cat products are supposed to offer in people's fantasizing too much. Instead, the content is simple, often with original images or unedited videos of Jelly Cat products that are shared online in a form that helps users grasp the products directly without any embellishments. The videos that are not as polished and/or sophistic stylistic show a practical understanding of Jelly Cat products. By showing Jelly Cat products live online without using animations or anything, this prevents target users from going to that place where they expect more for the product than if they only watch promotional animated videos for a while, and they become disappointed when they find out that it really isn't what they think it is. A certain version of idealized promotion is needed for Jelly Cat, but users should also create a realistic impression of the products. This will inspire them to go much deeper into the products and make informed product decisions according to their real market needs and preferences. What do they mean? How are they important?

A different important aspect in the descriptions presented in the videos presented by physical store accounts is the price of the Jelly Cat products. By showing the real look of the products in combination with their prices, the accounts also help prospective consumers make a good decision about buying products because the price is one of the most important factors of the purchase. Physical Store accounts are the least narrative focused of the three Jelly Cat promotional accounts because they help potential users better understand the products.

As Jelly Cat users go through three categories of accounts, user-generated accounts are the best drivers for storytelling by telling their own stories that lead both directly and indirectly to Jelly Cat promotion. They typically include their own user experiences, e.g. visiting Jelly Cat stores in person, private collections displayed at home, or scenarios involving Jelly Cat (for example, "cooking with Jelly Cat food-themed plushies"). This method combines features of the other two promotional methods, creating a single, well-rounded view of Jelly Cat products. While in these videos, users do not show too much cut and tear at the products' image, they further emphasize the cute characteristics of Jelly Cat through bodily actions (like stroking the stuffed animals) and expressive language, where behavioral and verbal cues are used to amplify the products' charm. The intentional decision not to change the physical appearance of the products will give potential users a more honest perception of the Jelly Cat products, enabling them to be guided instead of blown up by a heavily exaggerated or inaccurate portrayal.

Moreover, user videos share experiences from their own purchases, including those of various Jelly Cat items. Although this may appear to portray the products as budget friendly, it nudges viewers to purchase on official channels and motivates rational consumption according to personal conditions. Users are able to create an emotional, yet pragmatic experience that engages (but also convinces) viewers to be sure they are able to correctly assess the look and feels, price and other key aspects of a product. By telling good stories they can simultaneously generate emotional connectivity and foster knowledge.

4.2. Fantasy narrative: the anthropomorphism and emotional companionship

While Jelly Cat account's fantasy storytelling can be a challenge compared to the actual store's reality-influenced promotion techniques, the two are, in most ways, creative extensions of the same creative objective of driving consumer demand and emotional appeal through very different story

strategies on Douyin. Each one emphasizes what's most compelling about various things about the product, and that gives audiences the opportunity to experience the brand's top features. This mutuality serves as the backbone of Jelly Cat's overarching brand popularity in social media marketing.

In the official account's clips, Jelly Cat plushies perform human-like activities like dancing, making "glasses" for other toys, serving as morning alarms, or watching TV. In these magical situations, the toys seem "alive." This approach serves a twofold promotion role. It first vividly illustrates Jelly Cat's main selling point: its visual and emotional appeal. For instance, the Bashful Bunny series seems charmingly clumsy at its "dance" numbers, sometimes with playful background music at the soundtrack. And such audiovisual cues bring even more cuteness to the toys, promoting love or purchase even among the audience. Second, the anthropomorphic portrayals carry with them a more subtle emotional implication. By explaining human actions in terms of inanimate toys, the videos imply that Jelly Cat plushies can serve as companions and thus share in users' everyday lives. In night-related clips, for example, the plushie stays with its owner while watching TV or flipping through a phone. These moments reinforce Jelly Cat's promise of warmth and emotional solace. Though this layer is a subtler meaning, it fortifies viewers' own identification with the brand by equating Jelly Cat to 'lifeless yet more than alive.' So, in deviating from realism and drawing the product most visually appealing, the official presentation, which distils a much more realistic image of the product into fantasy elements, is an extremely powerful marketing tool.

4.3. The realism story - authenticity and logical consumption

Instead, physical store accounts use a more earthy style that showcases authenticity and utility. That said, believing this type of their content is completely unadorned is misguided. There are two kinds of their videos, which are what we call pricing-focused and non-pricing content. Pricing-related videos tend to consist of either lower-priced items within a series, or products that provide a balance between design quality and price. This reinforces Jelly Cat's proposition and its cost-effectiveness, which is critical for an active consumerist. Non-price videos, conversely, prioritize authenticity while retaining mild "beautification" techniques. Content makers will frequently adjust camera angles that serve to highlight texture or emphasize embroidered details, with clips featuring the beat of trending background music. Less polished than the official account's streamlined storytelling, these aesthetic decisions subtly raise the toys' appeal. They also enable the readers to create more informed shopping opportunities by showcasing specific products they will not only appreciate but are also more relevant to their tastes or budgets. In that respect, store accounts don't just sell Jelly Cat products; they help to direct spectators to rational and content consumption.

Taken together, the official Jelly Cat account and the actual store accounts build two rival promotional stories that together keep a brand at the top of mind. The former stimulates emotional imagination through anthropomorphic storytelling, whilst the latter legitimizes authenticity and consumer trust by practical demonstrations. They enable people to appreciate Jelly Cat's twofold existence: as a beguiling fantasy item and a real, high-quality item, promoting affective bonding and enhancing its market position.

4.4. Critical perspective: intimacy's commodification in storytelling

On Douyin, the brand's prospective consumers are the most affected people by the emotional labor of Jelly Cat's storytelling. This dynamic functions at three interconnected levels.

First, official Jelly Cat account uses creative narratives to build emotional impact and cultivate curiosity. These fantasy-based stories make it possible to not just emphasize the toys' visual value, but also form the affective impressions users leave them with which they can move from passive spectatorship to purchase intention.

Second, the more the audience interacts, the more they start breaking down the subtext of emotional complexity in these stories. But, after repeated exposure, users can begin to realize that the brand's anthropomorphic storytelling alludes to companionship. In Jelly Cat plushies, they "get to" live life with their owners, enjoying both happiness and solitude. Indeed, in this practice companionship is commodified, repositioned as a separate item in the product tool box rather than an effluent of emotional projection.

User-generated and store-based narratives also perpetuate this consumption cycle. Store accounts are concerned with affordability and practicality, guiding rational purchasing, and user accounts spread authentic testimonials that frame ownership as emotionally rewarding and financially wise. These layers all create a closed marketing loop between interest stimulation, emotional involvement, and rational consumption. This storytelling ecosystem helps Douyin commodify intimacy. What starts off as affective connection becomes a symbolic function of the brand at large, showing how Jelly Cat's narratives transform emotional labor into economic value, and how consumers willingly engage in the commodification of companionship.

5. Discussion

A look at Jelly Cat's Douyin experience highlights a different hierarchy of visibility and engagement among account types. User accounts get the most traffic, frequently getting tens of thousands of likes per video, followed by official accounts with moderate engagement, and physical store accounts with the least visibility. This is not only the case of algorithmic amplification, but also of clear communicative goals.

The official account is that entry point for new audiences and delivers the brand's core message of "cuteness and warmth." It successfully turns an emotional appeal into consumer interest by imagining Jelly Cat plushies as companions, a key factor in converting unfamiliar viewers from interested consumers to potential customers. Store accounts, on the other hand, are all about high-quality product, cost and realism. Their limited reach indicates that the nature of informational content builds trust but lacks the kinds of emotional hooks that lead to virality on Douyin.

However, aesthetic choices, financial status and the ubiquity of shopping online further minimize their appeal to the mass market audience. The success of user-generated content is because it mixes affective closeness with reality. As representatives of the public at large, users are credible middlemen who have firsthand experience of buying the brand's stories. Their videos capture public opinion and aesthetic more than official or commercial reports. Not only do these users reaffirm Jelly Cat as an emotional identity, they elevate the brand, by creating acts of affection through their everyday use of Jelly Cat goods.

Theoretically, such findings are consistent with narrative storytelling [1,2] and affective labor [4], showing emotional storytelling as a bridge between fantasy and authenticity. On Douyin, emotional engagement is a dominant currency of attention as users take part in shaping corporate branding through grassroots narratives. The intersection of affect, relatability, and platform dynamics illustrates how social media infrastructures co-produce emotional value in parallel with economic exchange.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how Jelly Cat's success on Douyin exemplifies the interplay between fantasy, realism, and emotional branding in China's digital consumer culture. By comparing the official, store, and user accounts, the research reveals how storytelling operates as both a marketing strategy and a cultural practice. The official account constructs imaginative narratives that invite affection; store accounts ground the brand in realism and trust; and user accounts bridge the two through participatory authenticity.

Together, these narrative modes form a coherent promotional ecosystem that transforms "cuteness" from an aesthetic quality into an emotional economy, one in which intimacy and companionship become commodified brand assets. The analysis also highlights how audience engagement metrics correspond to varying narrative strategies, suggesting that emotional resonance and perceived authenticity drive visibility and influence on Douyin more than traditional advertising appeals.

Beyond the case of Jelly Cat, this study underscores the broader significance of storytelling as emotional labor in digital marketing. It demonstrates how social media platforms enable brands to cultivate affective intimacy across cultural and linguistic boundaries, reshaping the ways in which global products localize within the Chinese market. By revealing how storytelling functions simultaneously as connection and commodification, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of digital consumer culture in the age of algorithmic attention and transnational branding.

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