

A Study on Empathy-Based Communication Strategies in Pet Marketing within the Context of the Healing Economy

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the healing economy, the role of pets in providing emotional comfort has become increasingly prominent. Using pets as an emotional link between consumers and brands has emerged as a new marketing approach. Consequently, many brand marketing strategies have deeply integrated pet-related emotional elements to evoke consumers' emotional resonance and further enhance brand awareness. This study applies the theory of empathetic communication to explore the emotional strategy construction mechanisms of pet marketing within the context of the healing economy. The findings suggest that brands should carefully manage the emotional connection by establishing feedback mechanisms and building community platforms to facilitate emotional interaction. These measures can help strengthen the market competitiveness and user loyalty of pet brands amid the growing healing economy.

KEYWORDS

Healing economy; Pet marketing; Empathetic communication

1 Introduction

In response to the fast-paced and high-pressure development model of modern society, individuals increasingly experience feelings of weariness and loneliness due to the burdens of daily life. Consequently, the healing economy has emerged, emphasizing a range of products, services, and experiences designed to alleviate stress and enhance well-being. According to statistics, the market size of China's pet industry reached 592.8 billion yuan in 2023, representing a year-on-year growth of 20.1%, and it is projected to further increase to 811.4 billion yuan by 2025 ^[1]. Pets serve as emotional companions that provide psychological comfort, with consumers investing emotional value in their pets to improve life satisfaction. Therefore, pet marketing has become a significant component of the healing economy. Within this context, the focus of pet marketing has shifted from product functionality to consumer psychology. By leveraging consumers' affection for their pets, pet marketing uses pets as a medium to build emotional resonance between consumers and brands, thereby enhancing user loyalty. This study adopts the framework of empathy communication theory, combined with case analysis, to explore how pet marketing can maximize brand benefits through the four dimensions of empathy theory: affective, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral empathy ^[2]. It aims to examine how interactions between brands and consumers facilitate the accumulation and transmission of emotional energy. By understanding the trends in healing economy brand marketing, this research aims to further optimize strategies for emotionally driven brand communication.

2 The necessity of emotional development in pet marketing

2.1 Broad prospects of the pet consumption market

According to the "2025 China Pet Industry White Paper (Consumption Report)," the pet market has experienced minor fluctuations over the past decade but demonstrates an overall steady growth trend. In 2024, urban consumption in the dog and cat market expanded by 7.5%, reaching a total market size of 300.2 billion RMB, indicating strong growth momentum ^[3]. This trend is further confirmed by the "2024-2025 China Pet Industry Operation Status and Consumption Market Monitoring Report," which states that the market size of China's pet industry reached 592.8 billion RMB in 2023, representing a year-on-year growth of 20.1%, and is projected to rise to 811.4 billion RMB by 2025 ^[1]. Both reports emphasize the increasing share of pet service consumption and highlight the broad prospects of the pet market. This signifies a shift in the pet economy from basic survival needs toward consumption characterized by quality and emotional engagement, reflecting the ongoing rise of the "it economy."

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2.2 The emotional and healing aspects of the pet economy

Behind the market expansion lies not only an increase in purchasing power but also profound changes in social needs. In his book *Lonely Society*, Miura Noboru introduces the concept of the "Fifth Consumption Era," describing how contemporary individuals, pressured by a fast-paced and high-stress society, develop feelings of weariness and loneliness^[4]. Additionally, the growing number of single, living-alone young adults and dual-income-no-kids (DINK) households, alongside China's declining birthrate, shape a demographic with relatively strong economic capacity and heightened demands for companionship. For many, pet ownership has become a significant source of emotional support.^[5] This emotional compensation aligns closely with the core ideas of the healing economy, which uses products and services to alleviate contemporary pressures and enhance well-being. Consequently, the pet economy transcends traditional material consumption, evolving into an important medium through which people establish emotional connections. On this foundation, the healing economy is gradually shifting from a niche concept to the mainstream market, emphasizing new products, high-quality services, and positive experiences that help individuals relieve stress and improve happiness.

2.3 Challenges in the development of the pet economy

As the "it economy" and healing economy gain momentum, pet marketing has become a crucial component of the healing economy. Consumers invest emotional value in pets to enhance life satisfaction, viewing pets as emotional companions and psychological comfort providers. Simultaneously, brands imbue pets with marketing attributes, driving current marketing trends. However, as market competition intensifies, pet marketing faces multiple challenges. These include how brands can differentiate themselves in a market saturated with similar products, how to effectively uncover and address consumers' emotional needs, and how to implement emotional marketing strategies that achieve psychological healing for consumers. Addressing these issues is essential for promoting sustainable brand development.

3 Analysis of emotional strategies in pet marketing

3.1 Emotional brand interaction—ffective empathy

The theory of empathy communication describes a process in which recipients of information form emotional connections with the sender by perceiving, understanding, or responding emotionally within a specific context. According to scholar Wu Xiao and colleagues, empathy can be divided into four dimensions: emotional, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. Among these, affective empathy serves as the foundation; it refers to an individual's ability to sense another's emotional state and generate a corresponding emotional response, or to evoke emotions in others. In the current era marked by the rise of the healing economy, pets have evolved beyond being household members to becoming emotional anchors and sources of comfort for individuals. Sharing pet-related content, driven by its rich emotional communicative value, increasingly serves as a novel social practice for pet owners to express affection and share warmth. In order to help pet owners alleviate the anxiety and longing of pets during the holidays, the pet food brand Instinct Natural Balance launched the "Send Your Pet to the Big Screen" campaign. Through various platforms, the brand encouraged pet owners to share warm moments with their pets along with blessings, offering participants the chance to win festive gift packages or have their pets' photos displayed on subway screens. This campaign skillfully integrates the brand's warmth and positive attributes in a subtle manner, deepening the emotional bond between pet owners and their pets while enhancing consumer identification with Natural Balance. Furthermore, by motivating users to share pet moments, the campaign sparked widespread emotional resonance and discussions among pet communities on social media. This promoted broader societal awareness of pet welfare. Such a pet-centered branding strategy has undoubtedly garnered greater consumer favor and trust for Natural Balance. Mutual emotional needs form the basis of emotional resonance and are crucial to emotional marketing. Merely conveying brand values without addressing consumer needs risks communication failure. In the "Send Your Pet to the Big Screen" initiative, the brand integrates affective empathy into the campaign by enabling users to express their longing through shared images and texts. While effectively enhancing the added value and competitiveness of products, it also enhances emotional resonance with users and fosters greater customer loyalty.

3.2 Emotional brand philosophy—cognitive empathy

Cognitive empathy refers to an individual's capacity to understand others' perspectives, motivations, and emotional states, enabling them to think from another's viewpoint. This represents a deeper level of empathy distinguished from affective empathy's emotional response by emphasizing rational comprehension of others' feelings and behaviors through logic and reasoning. Recognizing the psychological comfort and emotional needs pets fulfill amid today's high-

pressure lifestyles, pet brand Pidan considered how to foster positive, reciprocal emotional feedback between humans and pets. In 2022, Pidan collaborated with director Bi Gan to produce its first brand short film, *The Broken Heart of the Sun*, a fairy tale-inspired narrative illustrating a love story between a person and a cat that transcends verbal communication. The film stimulates reflection and dialogue on human-pet relationships. Pidan's film appeals to pet owners to show greater respect and care for their animals. The narrative critiques the contemporary phenomenon of impulsive pet ownership followed by abandonment once novelty fades, emphasizing that pets are not only companions but sentient beings with independent emotions and intrinsic worth, deserving of equal treatment and appreciation. Relying solely on emotional cues to enhance empathy is insufficient. Successful emotional marketing requires brands to adopt consumers' perspectives and effectively communicate empathetic messages. The film employs metaphorical storytelling and refined audiovisual elements to create an empathetic environment, evoking viewers' cognitive empathy by encouraging rational understanding and critical reflection on emotional interactions between humans and pets. By integrating cognitive empathy into the brand film, Pidan conveys its values softly, elevating brand communication beyond mere product promotion to a discourse on values that inspires contemplation of human-pet bonds.

3.3 Emotional dimension of brand collaborations — motivational empathy

Motivational empathy refers to the internal drive that compels individuals to care for others, feel compassion, and take actions aimed at improving others' situations when confronted with their emotions or difficulties. In the current era of rapid growth in the healing economy, brand communication must transcend mere transmission of product information; it should foster emotional resonance and connection with consumers. To address the separation anxiety of customers traveling without their pets, Atour Hotel partnered with the pet brand Pidan to introduce pet-friendly rooms that accommodate cats. These rooms are equipped with essential items to support cats' daily needs. Additionally, Atour places pet-related healing literature in public spaces to promote the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and animals. Atour Hotel's motivational empathy stems from the understanding of the emotional needs of pet owners, leading it to collaborate with Pidan to create a practical solution addressing users' pain points. This innovative pet-friendly experience not only strengthens emotional bonds with customers but also establishes a distinctive competitive advantage in the market. Brand collaborations enable optimal resource integration and sharing, leveraging complementary strengths to explore new markets. Pidan's brand philosophy is thoughtfully embedded in every detail of the pet-friendly rooms, allowing consumers to experience the product's functionality and quality in a multi-dimensional setting. The partnership between two brands uses motivational empathy to create an industry model. This approach demonstrates the brands' profound understanding of consumer emotions and exemplifies social responsibility and humanistic care through concrete actions. The collaboration represents a mutually beneficial outcome in terms of brand value and consumer emotion, setting a benchmark for cross-industry cooperation. Looking ahead, as the pet economy continues to grow, emotional strategies in brand collaborations will become essential tools for enterprises to succeed in the marketplace.

3.4 Emotionalization of service experience — active empathy

Active empathy refers to empathetic behavior expressed through concrete actions that demonstrate care, support, or assistance toward others. In today's pet healthcare market, merely providing professional medical services is insufficient to satisfy consumers' evolving expectations. The industry faces critical challenges, including alleviating pet owners' anxiety during their pets' illness and meeting their strong demand for transparency and participation throughout the treatment process. Therefore, the transformation of the pet medical market is imminent. The "Zhang Zheng Team Pet Clinic" medical team exemplifies active empathy by understanding pet owners' emotional attachment to their animals and responding with healing-oriented measures to optimize their operations. They offer personalized medical plans tailored to each pet's unique characteristics and improve the clinical environment to minimize pets' pain and fear during treatment. Recognizing that pet owners often experience negative feelings when their pets are sick, the team has established multi-dimensional emotional connection mechanisms. The team actively communicates with pet owners, providing real-time updates on treatment progress and addressing concerns. This approach not only alleviates owners' worries but also increases their satisfaction and loyalty toward the medical team. This dual focus on the well-being of both pets and owners vividly illustrates the concept of active empathy. Moreover, the Team manages a short video channel to share classic pet disease cases to convey the concept of scientific pet raising and strengthen the authority of the brand. By deeply integrating active empathy into medical services, the Zhang Zheng Team sets a new standard for the pet healthcare industry through tangible actions that demonstrate care for both pets and their owners, effectively addressing the new challenges in the market.

4 Emotional reflection and recommendations for pet marketing

4.1 Managing emotional connections and establishing feedback mechanisms

Empathy-based communication strategies aim to create emotional resonance with consumers, thereby strengthening the bond between the brand and its audience and encouraging purchasing behavior. In contemporary society, emotional marketing is a preferred approach for brands. Skillful use of empathy can effectively deepen the emotional connection between a brand and its consumers, rapidly bridging the gap, especially in the context of pet marketing. However, emotional marketing can be a double-edged sword. Misapplication may provoke consumer resistance, while excessive emotional appeals can lead to empathy fatigue, resulting in negative emotions such as weariness and indifference. In such cases, the intended empathetic communication may become counterproductive. Furthermore, if a brand's conveyed emotional values conflict with reality, consumers may develop aversion, potentially damaging the brand's image^[6-7]. Therefore, brands must exercise caution and carefully gauge the appropriate intensity of emotional marketing techniques. During the initial planning phase, emotional resonance should be built on sincerity rather than transient sentimentality or opportunism. In the mid-stage of campaign development, it is crucial to consider consumers' emotional tolerance, avoiding overly aggressive or exaggerated strategies—such as excessive idealization of pets' loyalty or deliberate portrayal of their suffering—that may alienate consumers. For post-campaign evaluation, brands can employ AI-driven data models to collect consumer feedback and develop quantitative scoring systems. Metrics such as the ratio of positive to negative comments, sentiment scores, and purchase rates can provide clear insights into consumer acceptance of marketing efforts. When negative emotional responses arise, brands should respond proactively through social media, customer service channels, and timely strategy adjustments.

4.2 Building brand community ecosystems to unlock the emotional codes of pets

Human nature inherently involves a need for communication. Interaction within communities fulfills needs, generates emotional resonance, and fosters value identification. The dissemination of emotional value is central to community management. In the new era, communities serve both as outlets for emotional expression and as vital channels for brands to understand consumer needs^[8]. Brands can enhance or develop pet social platforms by creating multidimensional interactive scenarios that meet pet owners' demands for socializing, information, and emotional support. Offline, brands may organize regular events such as pet sports meets, adoption days, and public welfare lectures to strengthen interactions and emotional exchanges between pets and owners. Participation in or sponsorship of public welfare activities can highlight the brand's social responsibility, elevating reputation and achieving a dual benefit of economic and social impact. Online, brands should establish community management mechanisms that encourage pet owners to share daily pet experiences and exchange care advice, fostering a positive and supportive pet community atmosphere. Providing professional guidance on pet care not only helps owners but also enhances the brand's authority and consumer trust. Empathy is an innate emotional drive. When empathy is triggered, recipients decode messages based on emotional congruence, which can expand to group identification^[9]. Pet brands can transform public empathy into private empathy through community operations, leveraging empathetic concern to stimulate intrinsic motivation for spontaneous sharing. This process attracts more pet owners, enlarging the community and deepening emotional energy convergence. Consequently, a continuous emotional feedback loop is established. Through this approach, brands not only deepen emotional connections with consumers but also create a self-sustaining community ecosystem. This empathy-based community management strategy is poised to become a key advantage for pet brands competing in the digital era.

5 Conclusion

Within the context of the healing economy, emotional strategies in pet marketing have become a crucial approach for brands to enhance their market competitiveness and foster user loyalty. This study, grounded in empathy communication theory, first analyzes the necessity of emotionalization in pet marketing by examining market demands and consumer psychology. It identifies the growing dependence on and attention to pets among contemporary consumers as the primary influencing factors. Pets have increasingly become emotional anchors for individuals, thereby serving as an emotional bridge that brings brands closer to their consumers. Secondly, through case study analysis, the paper presents multiple examples of pet brands and explores their emotional marketing strategies in depth across the four dimensions of empathy communication. Despite these advances, emotional marketing in the pet industry faces several challenges. Overuse of emotional appeals may lead to consumer empathy fatigue, and a mismatch between emotional messaging and actual brand behavior can damage brand image. Therefore, brands should accurately gauge consumer receptiveness and utilize big data to collect emotional profiles of consumers, establishing feedback mechanisms to timely optimize

marketing strategies. Additionally, building community platforms can facilitate two-way communication, further deepening emotional connections and promoting sustainable brand development. Overall, as the integration between the healing economy and pet marketing deepens, the appropriate application of emotional strategies can significantly improve brand competitiveness and user loyalty, opening broader prospects for the pet industry. Future pet marketing efforts should continue to explore innovative and optimized emotional approaches to adapt to the evolving market demands.

About the Author

Ying Wei, female, Master's Degree, Assistant Professor, Her primary research interests include Journalism and Communication.

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