

Soft power Document: Grown-ups aren't the usual market for cuddly novelties, but in an era of catering to an anxious generation desperate to soothe its 'inner c....



Soft power; Document: Grown-ups aren't the usual market for cuddly novelties, but in an era of catering to an anxious generation desperate to soothe its 'inner child', manufacturer in particular is finding its cute characters in high demand pandemic and global conflicts, soft-toy manufacturers find themselves with everything from smiley cakes to teddy-strewn trousers. One British with premium price tags. Susie Measure unpicks the Jellycat phenomenon

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Body

Before an exclusive new toy cake was launched with Harrods, one Friday in early November, Olivia **Fortescue** had been happy with her cherry plushie collection. She owned four - or five, if the velveteen cherry garnish on **Fortescue's** Marin Chocolate Milkshake toy qualified it as part of the gang. But then up popped Jellycat's Cheryl Cherry Cake, a tiered pink ombré design, on someone's Instagram, and she was besotted.

There was just one hitch: by the time **Fortescue** heard about Cheryl, the smiley-faced toy was sold out at the Knightsbridge store. 'I'm desperate for her,' says 23-year-old **Fortescue**, who lives in Nottingham. With zero clarity from Harrods or Jellycat on when - or if - shelves would be restocked, she tried to resist the temptation to go nuclear, which in Jellycat fanland means hitting 'buy' on sites like Vinted and eBay, where the palm-sized novelty could be hers for a premium. While writing this, I watched five Jellycat-crazed bidders push one eBay auction beyond £205, around four times the original (already pretty expensive) price tag.

'These scalping prices are a joke. I'd consider paying them as a last resort, but I don't appreciate it when something has only just been released,' says **Fortescue**, who has 68 Jellycat toys. Other fans were more blunt, branding it an 'absolute disgrace' that people who don't even like or collect the toys were cashing in on the release of a limited-edition design, buying up stock to resell.

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But that is the magic of Jellycat, a Londonbased soft-toy maker that has outgrown its status as producer of something cute to splurge on for a newborn. Adults are now as likely to be the ones clamouring for a new model as children, a phenomenon that is turning the toys into cult status symbols. When Bill Nighy was collared at a film premiere in October by a reporter and asked to cuddle a stuffed fox, the venerated actor recognised the brand, declaring himself a 'big, big Jellycat customer'.

Peanuts, peaches and pastel-coloured macarons are signature toys - like Cheryl Cherry Cake, they all sport smiling faces and two

stubby legs, which identifies them as part of the Amuseables range, launched in 2018. 'For me, it's an aesthetic thing and I like the fun factor. I mainly collect the objects with faces,' says 30-year-old Joe McFawns, who lives near Perth. He likens the fad to Lego for adults, pointing out the expense, and how retro designs like the disco ball (£100) and cassette tape (£35) 'aren't directed at a younger audience'.

For Jellycat, which celebrates its 25-year anniversary in 2024, is leaning into the evergreen 'kidult' trend, in which adults not only embrace their inner child but spoil it rotten, spending hundreds of pounds on stuffed bunnies or playful it-bag charms from designer labels such as Prada and Anya Hindmarch - whose googly-eyed accessories are in very high demand. Jellycat's own bag charms range from miniature versions of its signature Bashful Bunnies to smiling tennis balls and croissants. Many of its innocent designs even come as bags: from a tiny Amuseables coffee-to-go bag to a full-on Bartholomew Bear tote bag.

What's next? Jellycat jeans, in the manner of US fashion label Le Rêve Nazam's 'plush pants'? These feature 200 miniature stuffed animals sewn on to the front of each pair, and are an online fashion hit, despite the £520 price tag. Or perhaps Jellycat furniture, inspired by Bottega Veneta: designer Matthieu Blazy based the Italian luxury brand's spring/ summer 2025 collection on the concept of childhood. Attendees watched the show from animal-shaped leather beanbag chairs in the form of dogs, bunnies, chickens, elephants, and more. Cute has never been so fashionable.

When my own 10-year-old daughter asked for a giant Jellycat bunny last Christmas, I was worried it wouldn't be worth the investment. Not only did I cringe at spending £75 on a soft toy, but I also wondered how long her bunnycuddling bedtime era would last. Indefinitely, would be Margot Robbie's response - or, as the actress put it in a TV interview in 2021, 'Please, no one psychoanalyse the fact that I'm 30 and I sleep with a bunny rabbit every night.'

One year on and my daughter's request looks prescient: demand for Jellycat designs is soaring so fast that her bunny - a big Bashful Luxe Luna - might turn into an actual investment, especially given that she's stopped sleeping with it because she doesn't want to ruin the super-soft fur.

'That's why a lot of us buy two now. One for display and one for back-up,' says Aria Babow, a California-based superfan who estimates she

has more than 2,700 Jellycats. 'It becomes expensive,' admits Fiona Bannister, 48, who started collecting them around five years ago. 'I sometimes feel a little bit silly, I suppose, that I collect so many at my age,' she adds. The pair became friends two years ago via Facebook, where Bannister, who lives in Ulverston, Cumbria, oversees several groups for Jellycat fans and collectors. They've watched - and helped - the privately owned company expand from being something set up to disrupt the stale soft-toy market to becoming the fastest-selling toy brand at places such as Selfridges, where year-on-year sales are up by 215 per cent.

Popular designs, such as the brand's Amuseables Peach, a small plush fruit with Angoralike fur, sell out for months on end, leaving those 'DISO' (desperately in search of) paying more than double its original £23 price tag on sites like eBay. Rather than deterring shoppers, steep prices help to drive demand. 'This position in the market means Jellycat taps into a phenomenon that's commonly known as the "lipstick effect" - during times of financial insecurity, consumers seek opportunities to reward themselves with small indulgences,' says Retail Week writer Blaise Cloran.

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The brand's origins date back to 1999, when brothers William and Thomas Gatacre, both former oil-industry executives, felt the toy market was 'tired, bare, and a little bit taxidermy', as

William put it in an interview in early 2021. And so Jellycat was born, named after a suggestion from Thomas's son, Jack. 'We seemed to get a loyal customer base quite early on,' said William, explaining the company's growth from a stall at a trade show. 'And then what felt like great victories began - deals with John Lewis, Paul Smith, Selfridges, The Conran Shop, Colette in Paris. They were little moments of joy? not huge projects commercially, but very exciting.'

These days, the company, which only joined Instagram two years ago but has 1.1 million followers, rarely allows interviews with its founders, and keeps its plans for new designs or launches under wraps - or that's the theory. In practice, stockists have leaked pictures from advance catalogues, via social media. Not all the excitement is over new products. Buzz was building among fans in late November over rumours Jellycat planned to re-release some of their old cheese-themed designs, such as brie and blue cheese, along with new designs for mozzarella, Parmesan and camembert.

'We try not to consider possible limitations so as not to restrict our imagination. There's also nothing that shouldn't influence our designs: art, books, music, architecture. We spend our time watching the world. Is it going urban, or is it going Laura Ashley? Whichever way it's going, that's where we'll be. We have to be constantly moving and evolving with the times,' William Gatacre has said.

Since 2022, the company has been run by Arnaud Meysselle, who joined from Ren Clean Skincare, where he spent five years as chief executive, following previous roles with beauty and alcohol brands. Jellycat's latest accounts filed at Companies House show that revenues rose 37 per cent to £200 million in the 12 months to 31 December. Pre-tax profits increased 24 per cent to £67 million as the company sold more of its products through wholesalers and online, as well as achieving 'consistent growth in its key markets of Europe, North America and Asia'.

The result was a proposed bumper payout of £58 million in dividends, up from £9 million the previous year, for Jellycat's owners. The company's majority shareholder - with at least 75 per cent of the shares and voting rights - is Jellycat's parent, Jellycat Toy Company Limited, which is in turn controlled by two partners at R&H Jersey, an offshore service provider. The ownership structure minimises both potential scrutiny and the pressure to

grow fast that comes with the territory for publicly listed companies. This has worked for Jellycat - so far - and it now has 1,500 stockists in the UK and Ireland alone. 'Jellycat are the number-one fastest-growing traditional plush-toy manufacturer in the UK,' comments Melissa Symonds, executive director of UK toys at consumer research group Circana. 'They've successfully expanded their appeal to older age groups - teens and adults - while still

remaining popular with the core kids' market.'

The boredom and anxiety of lockdown boosted the market for playful collectibles, and Jellycat, like other cultish toy brands like Lego, benefits from creator content on Instagram and TikTok, which stokes demand for hard-to-find items. The kidult trend is hardly new - the Japanese have celebrated 'kawaii' culture for decades, as documented at the Somerset House exhibition *Cute* earlier this year - so

there's been a bit of luck to the current rush on Jellycat characters.

Then there is the sensory aspect: such toys tap into the basic appeal of super-soft fur. They are engineered to be almost addictively touchable. I turn to an expert, Tom Lovelace, creative director of Hawthorn, a London-based clothing manufacturer. After examining his wife's Jellycat plush (she collects the sausage dogs), he identifies the fur as a 'high-end version of the polyester fabric family'. He adds: 'The high-density, low-denier fibres are incredibly fine, even finer than a human hair. If you were to examine them under a microscope, you would see that they are extremely smooth. In fabric terminology, 'denier' refers to the thickness of the fibre; a lower denier indicates finer fibres, which ultimately contributes to a softer feel.'

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Which is why, when visiting the Jellycat section of Selfridges London store, I meet two visitors from Shanghai who admit to only popping in for a cuddle. 'I like coming here to feel them. They're super cute! You need to see them in person,' one tells me. Jellycats are 'company for us international students, living here alone, away from home', says the other, plus: 'They remind me of my childhood.'

That quest for eternal childhood is driving an increasing number of adults to seek solace in toys, soft or not. One in five toys and games are now bought by over-18s for themselves, according to Circana's latest research. 'When we were little, we had teddies and soft toys to comfort us. Now we are adults, a lot of our anxieties come from the little person in us. People have

teddy bears to soothe that inner child,' says Alivia Rose, senior psychotherapist and spokesperson for the UK Council for Psychotherapy, adding: 'We are only just beginning to come out of the pandemic; people are quite traumatised and are feeling more insecure. Whatever works, on a dark night. But you might want to find out why you're anxious and need a teddy.'

Or even a slice of pizza: Jellycat has produced a series of food-themed 'experiences' in three department stores around the world, selling menus of plushie delicacies. New York has a diner; London a fish-and-chip van; in Paris, a chic patisserie. One recent Sunday afternoon in the French capital, I watched shoppers deliberate over Collette Tarte au Citron, Brigitte Brioche or Max or Mona Macaron with as much anguish as if they were having actual afternoon tea in the Salon Proust at the Ritz Paris.

Decision made, a server, buttoned up in chef whites, used silver tongs to lift their choice from the shelves to the counter, where he painted it in imaginary butter before finishing it with icing - or pretending to. Each item was then wrapped in tissue paper and placed in a blue box, for the all-important unboxing video that would inevitably follow on social media.

The foodie-themed events have been a huge success, drawing vast queues. But they have also provoked controversy, with some fans frustrated at missing out. Joe McFawns compares the resentment to the furore over the Harrods cake. 'There is a growing, not anger, but dislike that that's the only place you can get

these things,' he says. The worry is that 'resellers' pounce on the stock, flogging hard-to-get designs at inflated prices. 'It's rubbing a lot of people up the wrong way,' he adds.

It's only once I'm back in London that I realise the Amuseables madeleine I bought - for its literary connotations - is only available in Paris, which means it is selling on eBay for twice as much as I paid. If I'd thought to stash a few more in my suitcase, I could have paid for

another Eurostar ticket. But then I'd be the guilty one, ripping off innocent collectors, or that's how the argument against resellers goes.

And what about the true innocents? I'm talking, of course, about the likes of my young daughter, whose Christmas requests will go unmet if entrepreneurial adults are the ones sweeping the shelves clean. Nicola Tompkins has stocked Jellycat for the last five years at her children's store, Whippersnappers, in Deal, Kent. She describes watching resellers swoop on new stock: 'Some new lines sell out in a matter of days. These sales are definitely to collectors as they are looking out for the new lines to go live on our website. Jellycat keeps supply really tight as well, and die-hard fans know that if they don't buy lines as they launch, they may not get a second chance. Sadly, there are customers who take advantage of the scarcity and buy to resell at massively inflated prices on auction sites.'

One issue parents struggling to help out

Father Christmas may have is finding Jellycat toys in the first place, with the company seemingly less keen on online-only retailers, as Tompkins discovered when she shut her bricks-and-mortar store this year: 'All of the orders I had in the pipeline were immediately cancelled and my account was closed. Just like that,' she says.

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Other retailers are even less impressed with Jellycat. David Middleton runs Midco Toy Planet, an independent toy store with outlets in Burton upon Trent and Derby. He complained about poor treatment from Jellycat reps at a trade fair earlier this year. 'Apparently their products don't fit well in toy shops? better off in gift shops,' he posted on LinkedIn. And one influential toy industry insider declined to talk to me about Jellycat, citing their arrogance and snobbery.

Buying novelty toys to make money is a gamble. The ones that are worth the most are those out of stock, like the Cheryl cake, or that have been 'retired', which now seems to be happening with some of the brand's old favourites, as well as newer models. 'The trend is for Jellycat to retire more designs,' says Aria Babow, who is a stockist as well as a superfan: she works at a gift store in San Francisco. 'It's like stocks. You have to sell something when it's hot.'

For now, though, the value of Jellycat plushies is as much emotional as financial, which is why so many people were willing to pay over the odds to get their hands on a Cheryl. One week after berating the resellers for scalping fans, Olivia messages me to say she managed to get one - for £95 plus postage. And yet, on the same day, an email from Harrods reveals that, given the popularity, they are expecting more Cheryl deliveries, including 'large drops' in mid-December, when 'a number of units' will be available online. By which time, it's anyone's guess what the must-have Jellycat will be.

'There are some that will suddenly take off. All it takes is for someone to ask, "Have you got one of these?"' says Fiona Bannister, which is its own sort of magic.

Adults are as likely to be clamouring for a new model as children 'Now we are adults, a lot of our anxieties come from the little person in us'

Graphic

VENETA BOTTEGA OF COURTESY NAZAM, R?VE LE NAZAM/ CHAD IMAGES, GETTYLeft: Danish label (Di)vision's spring/ summer 2025 show. Above, from left: Le R?ve Nazam's stuffedanimal trousers, ?520; beanbag chairs at Bottega Veneta, s/s 2025JellycatFrom left: the Jellycat patisserie experience in Paris; self-proclaimed Jellycat customer Bill Nighy on the red carpet; street style at Copenhagen Fashion Week earlier this yearIMAGES GETTY MTVUK, JELLYCAT, OF COURTESY

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