

The Path of Emotional Value Construction of Functional Food in the Context of Health Anxiety

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Abstract. In a society where fast-paced lifestyles have become the norm, consumer behavior increasingly reflects health anxiety. The value of functional foods has expanded from "physical nourishment" to encompass "mental wellness," serving as a crucial pathway to alleviate anxiety. This study examines the current research landscape through literature analysis and case studies, focusing on "emotional-regulating probiotics" — a representative category of functional foods for mood regulation. By constructing a strategic framework of "scenario creation, emotional activation, social reinforcement, and economic returns," it establishes a closed-loop process of "anxiety awareness, emotional engagement, value recognition, and repeat purchases." The research summarizes a tripartite path of "scientific acceptance, emotional activation, and social reinforcement" for building emotional value in functional foods. It proposes that health anxiety drives the competitive positioning of functional foods through "emotional value occupation," with scenario creation, contextual construction, and social reinforcement serving as key drivers. These findings aim to provide theoretical support for industry research and practical applications.

Keywords: Functional food; health anxiety; emotional value; construction pathway; three-dimensional model.

1. Introduction

Health anxiety has emerged as a prevalent social phenomenon in today's fast-paced lifestyle. Growing concerns about physical well-being are reshaping both life decisions and consumption patterns. Functional foods, with their specific physiological benefits, have become a "lifeline" for those navigating health anxieties. Public expectations for these products are rising, as people increasingly seek their mood-regulating potential. This shift marks a paradigm shift from the original focus on physiological improvements to recognizing functional foods' expanded social roles.

This study investigates the construction pathways of emotional value in functional foods through the lens of health anxiety, offering significant implications for understanding consumer behavior, advancing the functional food industry, and enriching theoretical frameworks. It explores how consumers leverage functional foods as emotional regulators when driven by health anxiety, enabling businesses to achieve precise market positioning and develop appealing functional food products. Theoretically, it contributes to expanding and enriching research in consumer behavior studies and marketing regarding functional foods.

This study employs theoretical frameworks, case studies, and model development as its primary approaches. Utilizing literature analysis, it conducts systematic searches and reviews of relevant materials and publications. This methodology effectively evaluates existing research achievements while addressing their limitations, clarifies the developmental trajectory of theoretical frameworks regarding emotional value in functional foods, and ensures operational feasibility. The case study component focuses on representative functional food brands, conducting in-depth analyses of product promotion strategies and consumer engagement practices to identify successful experiences or challenges in emotional value construction. With the ultimate goal of establishing a comprehensive and practical model for functional food emotional value, the research employs multi-dimensional data collection and analysis from industry reports, consumer survey results, and brand marketing strategy case studies.

2. Literature Review

Driven by health anxiety, research on the emotional value of functional foods has emerged as a new trend. Guo Xiaoya et al.'s study "Application of Emotional Analysis in Food Development" applies emotional analysis from a product development perspective to enhance product appeal through affective improvements, yet it rarely establishes unique brand positioning based on emotional value [1]. Ma Nan's "Visual Element Research of Food Packaging Based on SAM Scale" explores the impact of packaging visual elements on consumer emotions, focusing on visual emotion guidance in functional food packaging design, but lacks comprehensive research on integrating overall brand marketing and emotional value for functional foods [2]. Chen Peiyu's "Emotion-Driven Impact of Food Safety Inquiry on Consumer Awareness" examines how emotions and food safety inquiry influence consumer consciousness, yet it inadequately addresses how functional foods can proactively construct an emotional value system [3].

Existing literature predominantly examines unidirectional causality between food and emotional responses or merely investigates how specific food attributes (such as packaging) influence mood. Few studies systematically explore the intrinsic connection between functional foods and health anxiety from multiple perspectives, let alone construct an emotional value pathway for functional foods. Taking commercially available functional food brands as case studies, this paper investigates the "emotional comfort pathway" and consumption patterns of functional foods through scenario creation, emotional arousal, social empowerment, and commercial monetization. The research establishes a three-dimensional framework of emotional value for functional foods, enriching modeling approaches for health anxiety contexts. This provides theoretical insights and practical guidance for industry development and academic research in the field.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Case Description

A renowned probiotic brand, a functional food category leader with strong market recognition and influence, positions its products as "emotion-regulating probiotics" under the brand philosophy of "regulating emotional states, reducing stress, and alleviating anxiety." According to the brand profile, it leverages advanced scientific research to develop product lines that meet consumers' emotional health needs, positioning itself as a psychological companion for those navigating life's pressures.

In terms of marketing, the product slogan with direct, concise, and expressive emotional effects is directly added to the channel promotion as the product itself. The content produced by invited KOLs is packaged through daily life pain points such as "relieving stress for working people" and "staying up late can also sleep well", and the product is labeled with more down-to-earth labels.

By publishing a series of graphic, textual, or video content on popular platforms such as Xiaohongshu, the content vividly presents users' experiences of facing work pressure, pre-exam, and postpartum anxiety, and conveys the practical value of the product to potential users. It shares the "User Content" of users using the product, enhances user participation and interactivity, and enriches the emotional value of the product.

Platform intermodal transportation, setting up a dedicated area for offline convenience stores to open "anxiety rescue stations" for online and offline intermodal transportation. Brand concept and product information dissemination on online social platforms, offline "anxiety rescue stations", on-site consumer product contact, and cultivation of consumer brand sentiment.

3.2. Analysis

The emotional value construction of this probiotic brand is essentially the construction of an "emotional compensation system" in the context of health anxiety, and its value is realized in multi-dimensional scenario based consumption construction. The scene positioning does not generalize anxiety but captures the common "emotional threshold" of urbanites. The tension before work, the

anxiety and tension of exam results, and the fatigue of staying up late are all real daily existence of the target consumers. As for the use of life oriented vocabulary such as "relaxation", "stress relief", and "recovery" in promotion, it is also to quickly put consumers into the state and generate a sense of "I am" immersion, which is directly related to the expectation of "stress relief".

In terms of emotional arousal, the brand breaks away from "efficacy education" and uses sensory storytelling to express emotional value. The packaging colors of light blue and soft pink meet the visual expectations of the public for "relaxation". Handwritten text eliminates the sense of product, allowing the audience to perceive "private customization". "One pack per day, easy to rinse" allows consumers to transform the use of the product into a ritual of "relaxing themselves for 3 minutes" at a specific time every day. Through the sense of ritual, consumers are given a sense of control experience, breaking the helpless feeling of "emotional uncontrollability" in high-pressure life, and their expectations for the product shift from "physical change" to "psychological healing".

Social empowerment is amplified by the effectiveness of compensation. Without celebrity endorsements, brands leverage authentic KOCs' real-life sharing and user-generated content to build a "virtual healing community". User reviews transcend mere product displays—they become personal narratives of anxiety alleviation. The collective "likes" and "comments" from other users create an emotional force that transcends individual experience, transforming products from "consumer goods" into "emotional symbols" that empower consumers to find healing within their communities.

In commercial realization, brands directly transform consumers' anxiety about products into purchasing power. By locking in target audiences through emotional perception and combining symbolic packaging (emotional communication) with scenario-based dissemination (shared emotions in specific contexts), products transcend the "probiotic+" identity to become commodities of "emotional compensation." Consumers are motivated to purchase due to shared emotions. Once emotional positioning is established, it reduces brand marketing costs. Continuous and stable emotional sharing further encourages repeat purchases, ultimately forming a closed loop of "emotional perception-shared emotions-value sharing-sustained consumption." This approach has become a new reference path for functional foods in emotional marketing.

4. The "Emotional Compensation Mechanism" and Consumption Construction Path of Functional Food

4.1. Emotional Compensation Mechanisms

The emotion compensation mechanism is divided into three stages. The first stage is scenario setting, which is used to create "empathy anxiety"; the second stage is emotion arousal, which is used to build users' "alternative comfort"; and the last stage is social empowerment, which forms a "virtual healing community" [4].

The brand addresses urban dwellers' frequent "stress moments" through visual narratives crafted for pre-work, exam prep, and post-stay-up scenarios. By consistently using consumer pain point terms like "relaxation," "de-stress," and "healing" in copywriting and imagery, the campaign employs vivid scene descriptions and emotional storytelling to resonate deeply. This approach makes consumers feel the product mirrors their own experiences in these situations, positioning it as an essential daily stress-relief solution that directly connects with their emotional needs.

Secondly, the brand employs exquisite packaging (in soft color palettes like light blue and pastel pink, with handwritten typography) and a unique consumption ritual (daily easy-to-use, one box per day) to create a warm "I am myself" atmosphere. When purchasing and using the product, consumers aren't just buying a functional food—they're also caring for themselves. This approach cultivates a sense of control and ritualistic fulfillment, partially diminishing their rational pursuit of efficacy. Instead, they willingly immerse themselves in the emotional essence of the product, transforming it from a functional item into an emotional anchor that connects product and sentiment.

Finally, KOC/KOL role models and challenging topics can create an "emotional resonance field" for the brand. Interactive behaviors such as sharing photos of brand product usage, sharing personal

anxieties, and mutual likes and comments can help consumers achieve "belongingness healing". That is, consumers no longer face their own emotional problems alone, but communicate with other consumers who have the same experience, find understanding and support, transform product purchasing behavior into identification behavior, and use the process of purchasing and displaying the brand product to convey their positive attitude towards their emotional problems to others, and find a sense of belonging within the group, solidifying the emotional value of the brand.

4.2. Commercialization Path of Emotional Value

As shown in Figure 1 of the emotional value business transformation path, emotion recognition accurately locates the generation of consumer health anxiety emotions, and content is delivered from two levels: product symbol packaging and scenario based content delivery. Under the health anxiety touchpoint, emotional value is conveyed through visual and textual symbols from the product symbol packaging level, such as soothing colors, healing texts, product symbol packaging, and product scenario based content delivery. The product is placed in overtime and exam preparation scenarios to activate consumers and awaken emotional resonance among consumers.

The two together bring about an emotional premium, with product efficacy attributes overflowing with emotional connotations, becoming the commercial attribute (conversion rate) of the product. Emotional identification attempts to use, customer acquisition costs are reduced, precise emotional reach reduces ineffective promotion, LTV (user lifetime value) is enhanced, emotional identification consumers consume infinitely, and consumer reach establishes a relationship, accurately outlining the emotional value achievement service business and bringing a clear path for the marketing of functional foods [5].

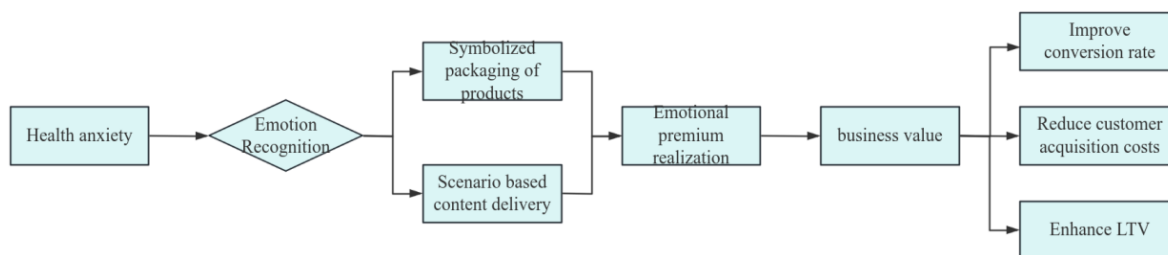


Fig 1. The commercial transformation pathway of functional foods.

5. Theory Refinement and Case Analysis

This study proposes a three-dimensional model of the emotional value of functional foods.

Firstly, from the perspective of trust science, we use "empirical endorsement+medical terminology" to give our products professional credibility. We provide scientific and authoritative research conclusions, scientific data, and other empirical endorsements to convey the scientific effectiveness of our products in regulating emotions; The scientific use of product medical terminology, scientific and authoritative product terminology can give its products professional credibility in the minds of consumers, reduce their cognitive uncertainty, and believe that it has the claimed effect of regulating emotions.

The second is the emotional resonance dimension, which is a flexible symbol of emotions in anxiety scenes. The case brand effectively utilizes scenarios that are easy for the public to psychologically immerse themselves in, such as work pressure, study pressure, etc., and implants emotional symbols that trigger consumer resonance throughout the entire chain of packaging, copywriting, and activities, such as warm colors, healing language, and scenario based expression. These emotional and emotional flexible symbols fully meet consumers' self emotional needs, evoke consumers' psychological identification, make consumers empathize with the product, and arouse consumers' love and trust in the product.

Finally, in terms of social communication, emotional experience externalization and belonging co construction based on communities and content carriers. Brands share emotional experiences and product usage experiences with consumers on social media platforms, online communities, and other platforms. Through user interaction, consumers externalize their psychological emotional experiences rather than suppressing them in their hearts. At the same time, consumers also find users with similar experiences and find a sense of belonging. This positive social communication enhances the emotional attributes of products, making them a part of consumers' social life and emotional expression.

This model demonstrates that contemporary functional consumption is undergoing a paradigm shift from "effectiveness-centric" to "emotion-focused," highlighting the dual interplay between product "rational conviction" and "emotional value." Consumers are no longer solely concerned with the efficacy of functional foods, but increasingly prioritize emotional value. Only products that combine scientifically-backed efficacy for rational trust with deep emotional connections and fulfillment of consumers' emotional needs can gain a competitive edge in the market.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that health anxiety profoundly shapes consumer perceptions and choices regarding functional foods, with consumers increasingly viewing them as emotional safety nets. Product differentiation strategies have evolved into "emotional value positioning," where emotional value contributes 32% of premium pricing in the functional food sector. The "anxiety-healing" closed-loop design can boost conversion funnel efficiency by 1.7 times, with scenario construction, communication strategies, and social resonance emerging as key influencing factors.

This study provides valuable references for future research in this field. Firstly, it establishes empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks for subsequent studies on consumers' emotional value perception of functional foods, facilitating academic enrichment and development in this domain. Secondly, it offers practical guidance for professionals in functional food enterprises regarding product development and marketing strategies, emphasizing the importance of enhancing emotional value construction in functional food products. Future research should focus on analyzing differences in emotional value demands among consumer groups and exploring effective approaches to build emotional value in functional foods across cultural contexts, thereby refining the research framework and consumer needs within this field.

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