

# Rethinking Marketing Influence: From Emotional Inception to Social Connotation

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## Synopsis:

*This paper challenges the prevailing view that marketing primarily manipulates consumer emotions to drive behaviour through subconscious associations. Known as the Emotional Inception theory, this model presumes a Pavlovian mechanism of influence, portraying consumers as irrational actors. In contrast, we propose the Social Connotation theory, which positions marketing as a cultural signalling mechanism. According to this model, individuals purchase products to send socially legible messages. This is a rational behaviour contingent upon public visibility and common knowledge. Drawing on economic theory, media psychology, and behavioural signalling literature, the paper offers predictive tests and observational data favouring the Social Connotation model. We conclude that marketing works less by planting desires and more by shaping the symbolic terrain upon which rational social actors navigate.*

## Introduction: Competing Theories of Marketing

Two primary models explain marketing's psychological effects: Emotional Inception and Social Connotation. The former suggests that marketing bypasses reason and implants emotional associations into consumers' subconscious minds (Simler, 2017). The latter contends that marketing works primarily by signalling social identity, allowing individuals to align with culturally shared meanings (Lewis, 1969).

## Emotional Inception: The Pavlovian Hypothesis

Drawing from classical conditioning theory (Pavlov, 1927), Emotional Inception suggests that repeated exposure to emotionally charged imagery linked to a brand leads to behavioural change. This theory assumes that consumers can be manipulated into forming preferences without receiving value or rational input (Kahneman, 2011).

Yet, unlike Pavlov's dogs, who received real food after the bell, consumers are offered no tangible reinforcement. Emotional Inception requires us to accept that mere exposure to attractive imagery is sufficient to override pre-existing preferences. This is a view inconsistent with bounded rationality models in behavioural economics (Ariely, 2008).

## Social Connotation: A Rational Alternative

The Social Connotation theory proposes that consumers act not irrationally, but socially and strategically. Products become symbolic instruments. They are signals of identity, taste, or values. Buying a particular beer, car, or fashion label is akin to making a public statement (Veblen, 1899).

This view sees marketing as creating or reinforcing symbolic associations in public consciousness. Rather than being passively manipulated, consumers choose brands that help them manage impressions and navigate social ecosystems (Goffman, 1959).

## The Importance of Common Knowledge

For signalling to function effectively, symbolic associations must be widely shared and mutually acknowledged. This is a property known as common knowledge (Lewis, 1969). The consumer must know what the product means, and know that others know it too. This recursive awareness underpins marketing's efficacy in social settings.

Thus, effective brand marketing appears predominantly in mass media contexts. Super Bowl ads, billboard campaigns, or public transit placements, where shared exposure ensures common knowledge (Heath, 2007), meet this criteria.

## Predictive Power: Testing the Theories

Emotional Inception predicts that associative ads should appear ubiquitously, since subconscious influence doesn't depend on context. By contrast, Social Connotation predicts that such ads will be limited to high-visibility contexts that produce common knowledge.

Observationally, the latter wins: association ads dominate televised sports events and public broadcast media but are largely absent from direct mail, banner ads, or door flyers (Heath, 2007). Similarly, association-heavy branding clusters around conspicuous consumption items such as shoes, drinks, or cars. Invisible goods like dish soap or bedsheets rely on functional marketing or go unadvertised altogether.

## Cultural Imprinting vs. Emotional Inception

A refined version of Social Connotation, "Cultural Imprinting," explains how brand identity is etched into public consciousness, not private minds. Here, the emotional content of an ad is secondary to its role in shaping shared narratives (McLuhan, 1964).

For instance, Corona's beach-themed ads don't implant beach nostalgia in each individual. They establish a shared cultural shorthand. Consumers then decide whether or not to adopt the brand as a proxy for a desired identity, much like selecting clothes for a role.

## Why Brands Don't Fragment Their Messaging

If Emotional Inception were true, brands could use multiple emotionally resonant messages across fragmented audiences. In reality, they tend to anchor themselves to narrow, consistent identities, reinforcing stable cultural meanings that facilitate reliable social signalling (Aaker, 1997). Too much message variance would dilute the signal and create reputational ambiguity.

## Implications for Marketing Strategy

Social Connotation theory rehabilitates the consumer as a rational actor, operating under

constraints of social visibility and cultural knowledge. It suggests that marketing budgets should prioritise contexts of high cultural conspicuity over fragmented micro-targeting.

Moreover, it dispels the myth of immunity. Once a cultural meaning is imprinted publicly, rational actors are incentivised to use the associated products as social tools, regardless of personal resistance.

## Conclusion

Marketing doesn't work by magically rewriting our desires. Instead, it works by rewriting the social scripts that surround products. Emotional Inception flatters the mystique of the marketer; Social Connotation gives credit to the intelligence of the audience. In an age of fragmented media and attention, the latter offers a more predictive and philosophically sound model of influence.

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