Designing Emotion: How Emotional Design Shapes Consumer Behavior

And Why We Need New Ethical Frameworks

Emily Armbruster
Quinnipiac University | ICM 518

December 2025

Table of Contents

Introduction

In an era where value is quickly becoming determined not by the quality of an actual product but by the value of the experience it brings, emotional design has emerged as one of the most powerful forces shaping current consumer behavior. Digital interfaces, retail environments, and simple, everyday objects are becoming more orchestrated to evoke specific emotional responses. This means that the boundary between a true, authentic experience and one that has been thoughtfully engineered is becoming harder to differentiate. Think about every time you pay $7 for a latte at your local coffee shop. The price is far more than the amount that the ingredients and labor costs, but you're not paying for only the coffee. You're paying for the feeling of that coffee shop. The warm glow from the Edison bulbs overhead, the curated, soft playlist coming from the speakers, the polished marble countertop, and the comfortable feeling of belonging that the space has provided are all included in that seemingly expensive latte without you thinking about it. That moment in the coffee shop illustrates the thesis of this paper: Emotional design is reshaping consumer behavior in ways that require new ethical frameworks.

Designers have known for a long time that emotions influence attention and decision making (Norman, 2004). However, the rise of the Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), has increased the use of emotional triggers to not only make consumers happier, but also to guide, persuade, and sometimes manipulate

consumer behavior. Now brands and companies are beginning to rely on emotional design strategies to help differentiate themselves in competitive markets. However, it's becoming necessary to also critically examine the psychological mechanisms behind these new approaches due to the ethical challenges they are beginning to introduce.

This paper argues that while emotional design enriches human experience and engagement, it also raises concerns about autonomy and emotional exploitation. Using Don Norman's three levels of emotional design as the foundation and Pine and Gilmore's Four Realms of Experience as economic context, this paper explores the mechanisms behind emotional influence and shows their impact through the example of the expensive coffee shop. Ultimately, this paper shows that emotional design's growing sophistication is creating an ethical cross-roads; designers must adopt new frameworks that ensure emotional influence enhances, not exploits, the consumers' experience.

Apple Stores are designed with the customers' experience at the forefront.

Foundations of Emotional Design

Emotional design is built on the understanding that a human will respond to a product or experience in a layered and, in many times, a subconscious way. Don Norman's (2004) model of visceral, behavioral, and reflective design provides a foundational framework for knowing how people respond emotionally to designed items and spaces.

Beautiful latte art strikes the senses before a person has even thought about it.

Visceral Design

The visceral level represents the most automatic of the three systems. It's the immediate sensory reaction to visual, auditory, and tactile cues. Color, form, sound, and texture make an instant impression long before it registers in the brain. This is the level where warm lighting creates comfort, bright colors mean playfulness, and minimalist design signals sophistication. In the context of the $7 coffee, visceral design is the reason that the latte art and ambient lighting make you feel something immediately. Research in affective design confirms that sensory cues can significantly influence a person's mood, perceived quality, and willingness to pay (Desmet, 2003).

The iPhone's clean UI design was designed for seamless interaction for all types of users.

Behavioral Design

Behavioral design pertains to how well a product or environment supports usability, control, and pleasure during use. Norman (2013) emphasizes that intuitive interaction, whether using a smartphone or ordering in a cafe, reinforce positive emotion when there is menial friction. In the coffee shop, the smooth flow of the line, the easy-to-read menu, comfortable seats, and quality WiFi all contribute to behavioral satisfaction. Hassenzahl (2010) argues that behavioral pleasure is a key component in shaping both digital and physical experiences by turning routine actions into emotionally meaningful ones.

Nostalgic items, like old photos, hold value and make us reflect on the past and shape who we are.

Reflective Design

Reflective design involves making meaning from something; how users interpret experiences, how objects connect to an identity, and what they communicate socially. This is where emotional design becomes deeply intertwined with a person's personal narrative. The cafe becomes "your cafe". The latte becomes a symbol of comfort or productivity to you. Norman (2004) notes that reflective design is often what drives brand loyalty and long term attachment to experiences. Reflective level emotions are particularly relevant within the Experience Economy, where consumption is not only about a functional utility but also about shaping and expressing one's identity.

These three levels of emotional processing reveal how thoroughly design can influence human behavior. When combined with the economic forces that prioritize experience over solely function, their power becomes even more profound and more ethically complex.

From Products to Experiences: The Rise of the Experience Economy

The shift from a goods-based to an experience-based economy has transformed the role of design from creating objects that exclusively function well to creating moments that emotionally resonate with a person. Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced the Experience Economy to describe a landscape where companies differentiate themselves by making memorable experiences rather than just offering a product or service. In this instance, emotional design becomes not just a tool but a non-negotiable for businesses.

Today, consumers are increasingly valuing intangible qualities like ambiance and atmosphere. These elements are traditionally associated with storytelling and performance rather than commerce. As Schmitt (1999) notes, experiential marketing leverages emotion to create holistic brand experiences that go beyond a product's features. Carù and Cova (2003) argue that experiences offer consumers a sense of escape, personalization, and emotional fulfillment.

This shift is fundamentally changing purchasing behavior. The $7 latte is no longer judged only on its utility, but also by the experience that ensued. The price is justified through emotional, sensory, as well as, sensory value. In the current economy, emotional design becomes a powerful driver, but also a potential vehicle for subtle manipulation.
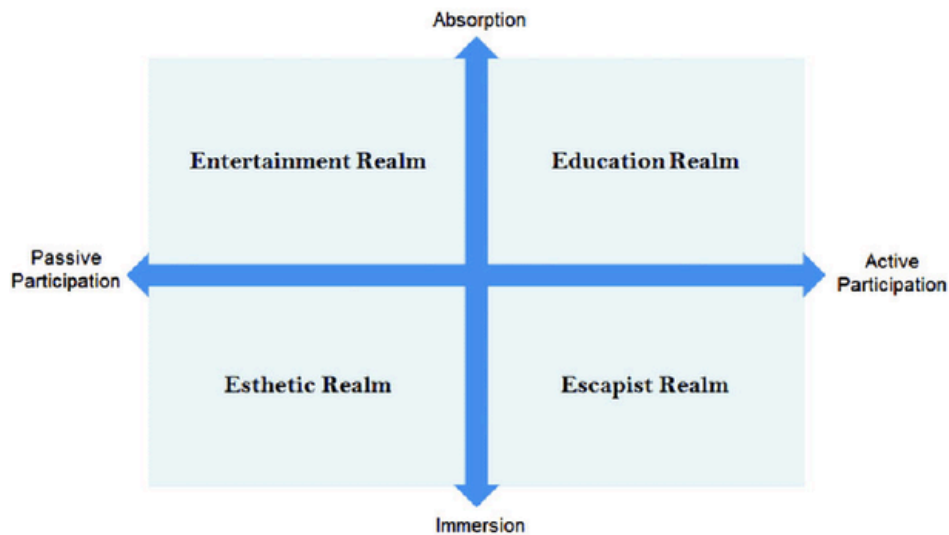
Pine & Gilmore's Four Realms of Experience

Emotional Design Across the Four Realms of Experience

Pine and Gilmore's (1999) Four Realms of Experience - Entertainment, Educational, Esthetic, and Escapist - provide a lens for understanding how emotional design operated across different forms of engagement.

Entertainment Experiences

Entertainment experiences rely on sensory pleasure and immersion. Visual spectacles, interactive installation, and media heavy environments capture attention and stimulate positive emotions. Emotional design plays a central role; color, movement, tempo, and spatial composition create moods that are meant to hold the audience's interest. Museums, streaming services, and social media platforms all leverage visceral triggers to create enjoyable and engaging experiences.
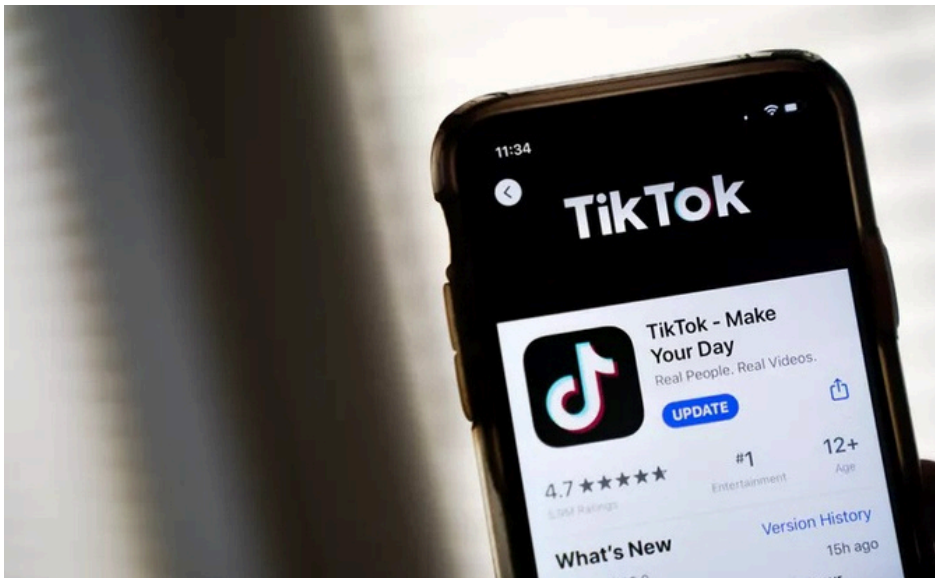
TikTok was designed to keep users scrolling because they're entertained.

Educational Experiences

In educational settings, emotional design helps to enhance motivation, curiosity, and memory retention. Gamified apps like Duolingo use character design, color psychology, audio feedback, and reward loops to emotionally anchor learning (Liu, 2018). When learning environments evoke positive emotions, they will increase persistence and deepen the person's understanding.

Duolingo's immersive, educational design keeps users learning through fun games.

Esthetic Experiences

Esthetic experiences are when emotional design becomes the most visible in everyday life. Retail stores, coffee shops, boutique hotels, and branded environments carefully construct atmospheres that bring out specific emotions. These spaces rely heavily on visual storytelling; material choices, lighting, layout, color palettes, and curated objects work together to create a specific narrative. The rise of "Instagrammable spaces" is the direct outcome of esthetic emotional design (Messenger & Perry, 2023).

Coffee shops are now designed with aesthetics in mind, making them "Instagrammable" spaces.

Escapist Experiences

Escapist experiences fully immerse participants by blending visceral, behavioral, and reflective design. Virtual reality, theme parks, and immersive theater rely on emotional triggers to transport people into different realities. Escapist emotional design draws heavily on Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow, which describes deep engagement and loss of self

consciousness. These experiences often rely on sensory immersion and carefully curated challenges to sustain attention.

Disney World was designed to be a fully immersive experience so visitors can escape the real world.

Across all four realms, emotional design plays a foundational role in shaping consumer's expectations and behavior. Yet, as the sophistication of emotional influence rises, so do the ethical concerns.

Case Study: The $7 Coffee as Emotional Experience

The high end coffee shop offers a clear, relatable example of how emotional design reshapes perception and behavior.

A nicely designed cafe interior stimulates the senses before the brain has really thought about what it's seeing.

Visceral Layer: Crafting First Impressions

When you walk into a boutique cafe, you're immediately greeted with warm lighting, natural textures, and a curated color palette; often earth tones, minimalistic decor, and handcrafted ceramics. These elements create a visceral emotional response, signaling comfort, sophistication, or creativity. The senses generated are intentional and designed to evoke a feeling of belonging or retreat from outside stress.

Easy ordering systems and smooth lines create an easy experience for customers.

Behavioral Layer: Designing Ease and Flow

Beyond its sensory appeal, the cafe is designed for frictionless interaction. The layout directs customers toward the counter in a natural flow. Menus are legible and digital ordering kiosks reduce decision fatigue. The furniture is arranged to create different zones; a communal table for socializing, cozy corners for solitude, and window seats meant for people watching. These behavioral design choices reduce cognitive load and reinforce positive emotion (Hassenzahl, 2010).
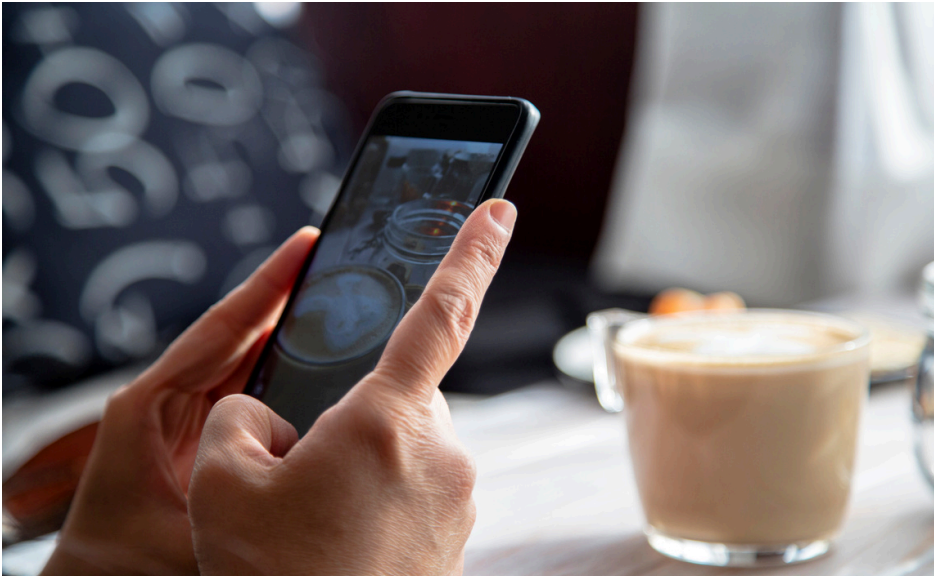
Creating spaces that makes customers want to come back gives identity to them.

Reflective Layer: Identity and Meaning

Reflective design is where emotional influence becomes the most powerful. The cafe becomes a symbol of self care, productivity, or social identity. Consumers photograph the latte art and post it on social media which transforms a routine beverage into a performative moment. As Manzo (2015) explains, coffeehouses function as a "stage for everyday life", where individuals perform their identity and participate in social rituals.

Economic Impact: Emotional Value as Monetary Value

The cafe's emotional design directly impacts consumer behavior; people willingly pay a premium for an experience that makes them feel good. The latte's value lies not only in its ingredients, but in the carefully designed emotional journey surrounding it. This illustrates the core argument behind this paper: emotional design profoundly influences consumer's behaviors and its intensity raises different ethical questions.

Ethical Concerns: Emotional Manipulation in the Experience Economy

While emotional design enhances experiences, it also carries the potential to manipulate the consumer. As emotional triggers begin to develop more, the line between persuasion and exploitation becomes increasingly blurred.

Dark Patterns and Manipulative Interfaces

In digital design, dark patterns intentionally exploit cognitive biases to steer users towards actions that benefit the company rather than the individual (Gray et al., 2018). Scarcity cues like "Only 2 left!" or FOMO (fear of missing out) driven notifications often target emotional vulnerability.

Nudging and Behavioral Economics

Emotional nudges can influence consumers to spend more money, stay longer in specific environments, or quickly make decisions they will later regret. While nudging isn't inherently unethical, its strong use in emotionally charged settings raises concerns about autonomy.

Emotional Labor and Retail Environments

Retail spaces often manipulate their ambiance to create emotional states that increase a person's spending. Scent marketing, ambient music, and lighting are designed with psychological precision. Without transparency, these environments may undermine informed decision making (Susser et al., 2019).

Identity Exploitation

When brands tap into reflective level identity cues, such as self care, minimalism, or aesthetic lifestyle, they risk exploiting consumers' emotional needs for meaning and belonging. Emotional design becomes problematic when it amplifies social inequality or encourages over consumption.

These issues reinforce the need for an ethical framework that can guide emotional design towards enhancing someone's well being over exploiting their psychological vulnerabilities.

Implications for Visual Storytelling

Emotional design is deeply intertwined with visual storytelling and shapes the narratives that consumers encounter across both digital and physical environments. As Ellen Lupton (2017) argues, design itself is a narrative form. It guides, persuades, and communicates through images, typography, and structure.

Narrative Framing

Experiences become a story when consumers internalize, share, and even perform. The cafe visit becomes a story of productivity, self-care, or aesthetic lifestyle.

Multi-sensory Storytelling

In the Experience Economy, storytelling goes beyond visuals to encompass different multi-sensory cues, like sound, texture, and even scent. These cues work together to construct emotional narratives.

Designer Responsibility

Since emotional storytelling is persuasive, designers must consider how their choices shape beliefs, behaviors, and identities. Transparency and respect for the consumer's autonomy must guide the outcome.

Conclusion

Emotional design has become a central force in shaping consumer behavior, especially within the Experience Economy where feelings, not objects, create perceived value. From the visceral impact of lighting in a cafe to the reflective narratives that consumers attach to a brand, emotional design deeply influences how people perceive and decide. However, the power of emotional triggers introduce specific ethical challenges. As emotional design becomes more precise and persuasive, designers have to adopt ethical frameworks that address autonomy, transparency, and psychological well being. Emotional design has the potential to enrich human experiences, but only if wielded responsibly.

References

Apple. (2019, September 20). Apple Fifth Avenue The Cube is back. Apple Newsroom. https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2019/09/apple-fifth-avenue-the-cube-is-back/

Canva. (n.d.). Canva: Design, photo & video. https://www.canva.com/

Carù, A., & Cova, B. (2003). Revisiting consumption experience: A more humble but complete view of the concept. Marketing Theory, 3(2), 267–286. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931030032004

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. Harper & Row. https://harpercollins.com/products/flow-mihaly-csikszentmihalyi

Desmet, P. (2003). A multilayered model of product emotions. The Design Journal, 6(2), 4–13. https://doi.org/10.2752/146069203789355480

Disney World. (n.d.). Magic Kingdom Entertainment & Shows. https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/entertainment/magic-kingdom/magic-kingdom-welcome/

Gray, C. M., Kou, Y., Battles, B., Hoggatt, J., & Toombs, A. L. (2018). The dark (patterns) side of UX design. Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3174108

Hassenzahl, M. (2010). Experience design: Technology for all the right reasons. Morgan & Claypool. https://www.morganclaypool.com/doi/abs/10.2200/S00261ED1V01Y201003HCI009

Investopedia. (2021, December 24). What is TikTok? https://www.investopedia.com/what-is-tiktok-4588933

Liu, M. (2018). Gamification and emotional engagement in digital learning environments. Journal of Educational Technology & Society, 21(4), 204–216. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26511535

Lupton, E. (2017). Design is storytelling. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. https://shop.cooperhewitt.org/products/design-is-storytelling

Manzo, J. (2015). Coffeehouses: Places, practices, and the performance of everyday life. International Review of Sociology, 25(3), 415–430. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2015.1029048

Messenger, S., & Perry, A. (2023). Aesthetics and the Instagrammable experience: Visual culture in contemporary retail. Journal of Visual Culture, 22(1), 45–62. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14704129231156823

Norman, D. A. (2004). Emotional design: Why we love (or hate) everyday things. Basic Books. https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/don-norman/emotional-design/9780465051366/

Norman, D. A. (2013). The design of everyday things (Revised and expanded ed.). MIT Press. https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262525671/the-design-of-everyday-things/

Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). The experience economy: Work is theatre & every business a stage. Harvard Business School Press. https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=28636

Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (2019). The experience economy (Updated ed.). Harvard Business Review Press. https://store.hbr.org/product/the-experience-economy-updated-edition/10257

ResearchGate. (2015). Figure 1: The four realms of an experience [Graphic]. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-four-realms-of-an-experience_fig1_284903618 Schmitt, B. (1999). Experiential marketing. Journal of Marketing Management, 15(1–3), 53–67. https://doi.org/10.1362/026725799784870496

Susser, D., Roessler, B., & Nissenbaum, H. (2019). Online manipulation: Hidden influences on autonomy and decision-making. Ethics and Information Technology, 21(4), 275–288. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-019-09520-1