

# From Labubu to LOVOT: Emotional Intellectual Property (IP) Design in the Post-Consumer Society

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**Abstract**—In the materially abundant post-consumer society, individuals’ emotional expression and self-gratification needs have become increasingly prominent, driving a shift in consumption logic from utilitarianism toward self-actualization and emotional fulfillment. As a form of “emotional currency,” emotional IPs extend personal feelings into collective identification through effective emotional design, thereby serving as cultural carriers of the “usefulness of the useless.” This paper takes POP MART’s blind-box IP Labubu and GROOVE X’s emotional companion robot LOVOT as case studies, and—through the lens of the Emotional Identification Model—explores how emotional IPs construct design pathways from individual affect to collective identity via character design, interactive mechanisms, and narrative strategies. The study ultimately argues that the future development of emotional IPs should transcend superficial symbols of “emotional illusion” and instead evolve into genuine forms of “emotional support,” thereby contributing more profoundly to the shaping of future society.

**Keywords**—post-consumer society; emotional IP; emotional design; Emotional Identification Model; Labubu; LOVOT

## I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of consumption lies an illusion of pleasure; trends, meanwhile, are fleeting dreams of eternal delight encountered along the way. Within this illusory joy and transient fashion stand individuals in the post-consumer society. When material scarcity no longer exists, “utility” is no longer the sole criterion of consumption. Under the discourse of neoliberalism, an increasing number of people are willing to pay not for functions but for “emotions” and “feelings.” As a result, consumption has shifted from the exchange of goods to a process in which individuals pursue an ideal self and seek spiritual consolation.

This paper defines this shift as “emotional consumption”: individuals no longer pay merely for functionality but are more willing to invest in the emotional value evoked, as well as the self-representational and social value symbolized by products. Within this context, emotional IPs—represented by designer toys and emotional companion products—have rapidly emerged as iconic commodities of emotional consumption.

Take POP MART’s blind-box IP Labubu as an example. Its grotesque-yet-cute visual language, combined with the “surprise” brought by the blind-box mechanism and the “child-showcasing” style of sharing on social media platforms, generates a triple synergy of artistic aesthetics, emotional consolation, and social value. The global popularity of Labubu not only fulfills the multilayered

psychological needs of modern consumers but also profoundly reflects contemporary society’s broad recognition of the “non-functional” value of products. By contrast, Japan’s GROOVE X companion robot LOVOT deliberately minimizes utilitarian functions in its design. Through anthropomorphic behaviors such as “affection-seeking,” it anchors “emotional companionship” in every interaction, awakening humanity’s primal instincts of love and the need to be needed. In doing so, it establishes with users an emotional bond that transcends instrumental attributes.

## II. FROM SYMBOLIC POSSESSION TO EMOTIONAL IDENTIFICATION: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EMOTIONAL IPs

The essence of modern consumption has long transcended the satisfaction of material needs. As Baudrillard argued in *The Consumer Society*, consumption has entered a stage of social construction grounded in symbols: individuals no longer purchase goods for their utility value, but for the meanings, identities, and emotions they embody. Fromm, in *To Have or To Be?*, further advanced this critique, noting that material prosperity has produced the illusion of creating a “second world.” Consumption thus functions as a psychological mechanism to compensate for the lack of existential meaning and selfhood, while the logic of “to satisfy desire is to enjoy” increasingly dominates mainstream consumer behavior. This view resonates with Tim Kasser’s argument in *The High Price of Materialism*, which demonstrates that emotional identification has shifted from being a byproduct of consumption to becoming its central objective.

An early observation in *The Talmud: The Commercial Wisdom and Life Scripture of the Jewish People* once noted that “what is popular among the wealthy generally becomes popular among the lower classes after about two years,” revealing the class-based diffusion cycle inherent in fashion. However, in the contemporary context of highly participatory social media, this traditional cycle has been dramatically compressed. Emotional IPs such as Labubu and LOVOT, as typical carriers of popular culture, quickly entered the public sphere through celebrity endorsements, social media interactions, and appearances in film and television. Limited releases further intensified consumers’ desire for “celebrity-owned” items. This desire reflects the immediacy effect of fashion diffusion: while it continuously generates novelty, it simultaneously produces a kind of “instantaneous anxiety”—where excessive pursuit of trends exacerbates individuals’ identity insecurity.

Against this backdrop, driven by psychological mechanisms such as conformity, suggestion, and curiosity, and further accelerated by the dual forces of rapid dissemination and identity anxiety, emotional IPs have become ideal vessels for emotional projection. They propel consumption beyond the functional level, transforming it from mere material “possession” into a sustained pursuit of identity “recognition” and self “expression.” To systematically understand this psychological mechanism, the Emotional Identification Model provides a critical theoretical foundation.

### III. FROM EMOTIONAL IDENTIFICATION TO CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MECHANISMS OF THE EMOTIONAL IDENTIFICATION MODEL

The Emotional Identification Model (EIM) posits that when consumers encounter specific symbols, products, or characters, they may engage in a form of emotional self-projection — that is, projecting personal emotions, life experiences, or idealized identities onto them, thereby achieving psychological compensation, identity construction, and social expression. As an analytical framework, the model emphasizes that emotional identification is not only the initial motive triggering consumption behavior but also the core mechanism sustaining long-term user participation and emotional investment. For this reason, it has become an important theoretical tool for understanding the effectiveness of emotional IP design.

The model comprises five interconnected stages of identification:

Emotional Trigger → Emotional Resonance →  
Emotional Projection → Emotional Identification →  
Consumption Behavior

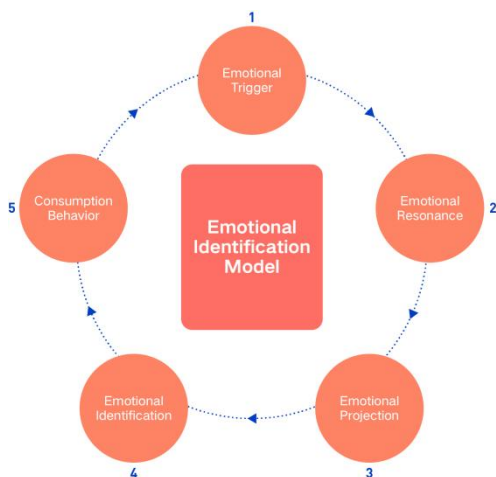


Fig. 1. Emotional Identification Model (EIM) – Basic Structure

#### A. Emotional Trigger: Constructing a Non-Functional Initial Attraction

Emotional triggering marks the starting point of the linkage between users and IPs. Its design core lies in transcending utilitarian functions to directly evoke users’ intuitive affective responses. Labubu, with its “ugly-cute,” grotesque, and marginal counter-aesthetic, immediately stimulates users’ curiosity and emotional fluctuation, offering a unique and healing affective touch in social

contexts dominated by anxiety and loneliness. In comparison, LOVOT employs highly anthropomorphic “affection-seeking” behaviors, body-temperature simulation, and active gaze-tracking technologies to precisely activate humans’ deep caregiving instincts and emotional response mechanisms. Both establish the “first contact point” of emotional connection through their distinctive non-functional qualities.

#### B. Emotional Resonance: From Affective Stimulation to Inner Identification

When the initial emotional stimulus aligns with users’ intrinsic emotional needs or life experiences, it elevates into emotional resonance, forming a deeper layer of psychological identification between the user and the IP. Labubu’s narrative kernel— “even if imperfect, one is still worthy of love” —directly responds to young people’s longing for self-acceptance and social recognition, providing a channel for being understood and acknowledged. Meanwhile, LOVOT’s “being needed” design allows users, through one-way or two-way interaction, to obtain a sense of emotional comfort and dependency, compensating for the lack of feedback often found in real-world social relations.

#### C. Emotional Projection: IPs as Emotional Mirrors of the Ideal Self

Building upon resonance, users begin to project their personal emotions, ideal personas, or unrealized self-expectations onto the IP, thereby transforming it into a customizable emotional mirror. Labubu’s diversified series and character variations offer multiple possibilities for identity mapping. In the acts of selecting, collecting, and displaying different Labubu figures, users are effectively expressing and reconstructing aspects of their own identities. By contrast, LOVOT directly encourages users to project deeper emotions of “love, care, and attachment” onto the robot. In performing the role of “caregiver,” users fulfill their psychological need to be needed and to establish intimate bonds.

#### D. Emotional Identification: From One-Way Consumption to Two-Way Emotional Attachment

This mechanism is the key to ensuring user retention in emotional IPs. It transforms the relationship between users and IPs from transient, one-directional consumption into a sustainable, anthropomorphic two-way attachment. Labubu, through the randomness of the blind-box mechanism and community practices of “raising” and “modifying” figurines, extends the user – IP relationship beyond mere purchase, fostering long-term “nurturing” and interaction. LOVOT, through daily interactive feedback, customizable outfits, and the user’s attention to its “emotional states,” naturally integrates into the rhythm of daily life, gradually becoming a family “companion member” rather than a cold device.

#### E. Consumption Behavior: The Economic Externalization of Emotional Value

Ultimately, all of the above emotional mechanisms are externalized into concrete, sustainable consumption behaviors. At this stage, consumption is entirely detached from the traditional “function – price” trade-off and

instead reflects the fulfillment of emotional identification. The global collecting craze and speculative trading surrounding Labubu clearly demonstrate how emotional triggers and resonance can be transformed into powerful market momentum. Despite its high price, far exceeding that of functional service robots, LOVOT still attracts users willing to pay for its emotional companionship value. This strongly validates that in the post-consumer society, emotional value itself is sufficient to drive substantial economic behavior.

TABLE I. APPLICATION OF THE EMOTIONAL IDENTIFICATION MODEL TO LABUBU AND LOVOT

Model Stage	Labubu	LOVOT
<b>Emotional Trigger</b>	“ugly-cute” appearance + viral meme such as “If only life could be like Labubu—ugly but still loved by so many”	Cute appearance + official slogan “Inspires your instinct to love”
<b>Emotional Resonance</b>	Imperfection, failed life experiences, and marginality → evoke traumatic resonance	Sense of being needed, loneliness → provide deep emotional consolation for singles or those living alone
<b>Emotional Projection</b>	“I am also imperfect, and I also hope to be loved.”	“The way I care for it reflects my ideal relationship model.”
<b>Emotional Identification</b>	Labubu as “my kind” or “my shadow”	LOVOT as “needs me,” fulfilling “my need to be needed”
<b>Consumption Behavior</b>	Accessories, selfies, fashion styling, and photo sharing → become identity markers and emotional trophies	Companionship, interactive videos, and social topics → ritualization of digital companionship in daily life

#### IV. DESIGN PATHWAYS OF EMOTIONAL IPS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LABUBU AND LOVOT

##### A. Labubu: Achieving Reverse Emotional Identification through the Aesthetics of “Ugly-Cute”

As the core IP of POP MART’s The Monsters series, Labubu has rapidly become a symbolic phenomenon in the designer toy market since its launch in 2018. Breaking away from traditional aesthetic paradigms, it resonates strongly with younger generations through its imperfect, grotesque, yet endearing “ugly-cute” design. Unlike earlier designer toys characterized by rebellious “subcultural coolness,” Labubu communicates a gentler, looser, and imperfect-yet-lovable visual language. It is not a flawless idol but resembles a “lonely being worthy of love despite its flaws,” thus constructing a pathway of reverse emotional identification.

This design logic fundamentally serves as a counter-response to mainstream systems of social evaluation. A viral Xiaohongshu topic in 2025 — “If only life could be like Labubu—ugly but still loved by so many” — garnered over 30,000 comments, with keywords such as “being loved,” “relief,” “healing,” and “imperfection is fine” frequently appearing. Labubu has thus become a collective psychological metaphor, symbolizing “accepted fragility” and “permitted failure,” reflecting a deep yearning for unconditional love.

At the market level, Labubu’s emotional value has consistently translated into economic momentum. According to POP MART’s financial reports, revenue from The Monsters series grew from RMB 780 million in 2020 to RMB 2.24 billion in 2024. A major turning point occurred in early 2024 when Korean artist Lisa’s public endorsement propelled the global spread of the “ugly-cute is justice” aesthetic, underscoring the strong communicative power of projection-based emotional IPs.

Notably, Labubu’s core user base — the so-called “Kidults” (adults who retain childlike playfulness)—has continued to expand. Through toy consumption, they revisit a form of “controlled childhood” to counter real-world anxiety and loneliness, seeking emotional comfort. The quality of being “ugly yet loved” perfectly aligns with this group’s dual need for self-acceptance and emotional companionship, making Labubu an iconic symbol within Kidult culture.

##### B. LOVOT: Achieving Positive Emotional Attachment through Anthropomorphic Interaction

In contrast to Labubu’s path of reverse identification, GROOVE X’s companion robot LOVOT represents another design logic of emotional IP — fulfilling users’ psychological needs for warmth, security, and emotional feedback through positive emotional projection and highly anthropomorphic interaction.

Explicitly defined as “a new type of robot that inspires your instinct to love,” LOVOT’s value lies not in functional tasks but in emotional companionship. It does not perform the utilitarian duties of service robots but instead engages in infant-like interactive behaviors — such as recognizing voices and touch, and responding with cuddling or soft vocalizations — to trigger caregiving instincts and foster emotional attachment. Particularly in Japan, where aging and solitary living are widespread, LOVOT directly responds to a growing demand for emotional companionship.

Through its gentle appearance, customizable attributes, and over one million possible eye expressions, LOVOT constructs a consistent emotional sign system. Users perceive it not merely as a device but as a “family member,” actively engaging in cultural practices such as “LOVOT outfit styling” and “companionship check-ins” on social media. In this way, LOVOT achieves a transformation from a technological tool to an emotional partner, establishing a new paradigm for human – robot relationships.

C. Comparative Summary of Labubu and LOVOT's Design Pathways

Although Labubu and LOVOT follow different design approaches, both are fundamentally structured around the core of emotional identification. Their differences and commonalities in character design, emotional mechanisms, user co-creation, dissemination, lifecycle, and design models systematically reveal distinct modes of realizing emotional IPs. These can be summarized as follows:

TABLE II. COMPARATIVE DESIGN PATHWAYS OF LABUBU AND LOVOT AS EMOTIONAL IPs

Dimension	Labubu	LOVOT
<b>Character Setting</b>	Blank character without gender or occupation; grotesque, ugly-cute, imperfect; emphasizes a decentralized space for subjective projection	Anthropomorphic character; cute appearance, affection-seeking behaviors; simulates infant-like attachment; emphasizes emotional interaction
<b>Emotional Mechanism</b>	Symbolic empathy: evokes resonance through imperfection, pain metaphors, and rebellious narratives	Behavioral attachment: builds emotional bonds through touch, eye contact, and real-time feedback
<b>Co-Creation Mechanism</b>	Blind-box mechanism stimulates collecting pleasure; abundant user-generated content; emphasizes community sharing and identity re-coding	Naming, outfit customization, and behavioral nurturing; emphasizes continuous user investment in anthropomorphic relationships
<b>Dissemination Pathway</b>	Affordable pricing enables "low-threshold display"; frequent appearances in fashion, workplace, and social contexts	Dissemination centered on "companionship" and "healing," often ritualized through photos and videos
<b>Lifecycle</b>	Artist collaborations and stylistic expansions enhance novelty; emphasizes frequency and variety of updates	Builds deep, long-term emotional attachment; reinforces uniqueness and trajectories of emotional growth
<b>Design Model</b>	Identity projection: strengthens self-expression and community belonging	Emotional dependence: constructs long-term emotional bonds and companionship rituals

In conclusion, although Labubu and LOVOT belong to different domains — designer toys and technological products—they both respond to individuals' core emotional needs for existence, understanding, and companionship in the post-consumer society. By transforming abstract experiences of loneliness, anxiety, and the longing for love

into tangible, participatory, and communicable design practices, they not only fulfill psychological demands but also collectively shape a new cultural landscape in which "emotional support" becomes central.

V. CORE DRIVING FORCES OF EMOTIONAL IPs: INSIGHTS INTO THE EMOTIONS OF THE ERA

The core driving force of emotional IPs lies in their precise insight into collective social emotions and the emotional structures of target consumer groups. As social emotions evolve rapidly, the ability to capture these shifts with sensitivity has become the essential foundation of emotional IP design and the underlying logic driving the cultural and creative industries.

Cross-analysis indicates that in the past five years, significant changes have emerged across demographic groups differentiated by gender and nationality, with a notable rise in emotions such as "anxiety," "loneliness," and "emotional deprivation." Research reveals that Chinese women show a marked increase in these three dimensions—likely related to pressures from marriage and childbirth, workplace competition, and appearance anxiety. At the same time, the sentiment of "I deserve to be loved" has gradually emerged as a social-emotional label. Japanese women, meanwhile, continue to experience high levels of loneliness, while their feelings of "emotional deprivation" and "nihilism" in 2025 approach those of Chinese women, reflecting widespread uncertainty about social value and self-identity.

By contrast, Chinese men demonstrate significant improvement in the dimension of self-identification, with rising anxiety levels that remain relatively moderate. Japanese men overall show emotional stability, though gradual increases in both anxiety and loneliness are also evident.

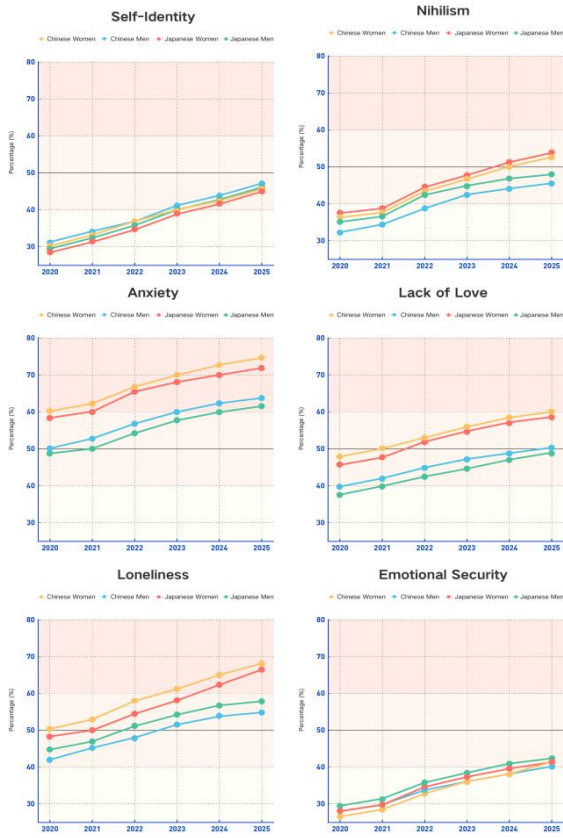


Fig. 2. Comparative Emotional Trends (2020–2025) among Populations Aged 18–45 in Major Cities of China and Japan (by Gender)

As Japanese cultural scholar Atsushi Mitsufo has noted, “The cure for loneliness lies in culture.” Within the neoliberal social structure, emotional IPs serve precisely as a “social antidote” to collective loneliness.

#### VI. “THE USEFULNESS OF THE USELESS”: THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EMOTIONAL IP DESIGN

Zhuangzi, in Ren Jian Shi, asserted: “All men know the use of the useful, but none know the use of the useless.” Later summarized as the proposition “The usefulness of the useless is the greatest use,” this philosophy suggests that things seemingly devoid of practical utility often contain deeper wisdom and value. Applied to the realm of emotional IP design, this idea manifests as an affective connection mechanism that transcends instrumental rationality and functionalism. Users’ motivation to purchase emotional products is no longer based on material utility or functional satisfaction, but rather on the pursuit of psychological comfort, emotional projection, and resonant feedback. These seemingly “useless” experiences, in fact, address profound human spiritual needs.

Comparable notions exist within Western aesthetics. Kant, in Critique of Judgment, advanced the idea of “purposiveness without purpose”, suggesting that true beauty does not arise from external goals but from the free pleasure elicited by form itself—existing beyond utility, yet uplifting the spirit. Similarly, Hegel emphasized in Aesthetics that art is rooted in the sensuous world and appeals to human senses, but its greatness lies in its ability to embody spiritual meaning through sensuous form, allowing

emotions and existential experiences to be expressed and understood.

Japanese aesthetic traditions also construct a distinctive logic of non-functional appreciation. In his Trilogy of Japanese Aesthetics, Okakura Kakuzō articulated concepts such as *yūgen* (幽玄, subtle profundity), *もののあわれ* (物哀, sensitivity to impermanence), and *wabi-sabi* (侘寂, beauty in imperfection and simplicity). These notions, deeply aligned with Zhuangzi’s philosophy of the “usefulness of the useless,” emphasize the potential for emotional resonance between humans and objects and the tranquility derived from “heart-to-heart” communion.

In emotional IPs such as Labubu and LOVOT, this philosophy is concretely realized. Rather than relying on practical functionality, they generate tender and stable feelings of companionship, effectively responding to users’ loneliness and awakening humanity’s innate instinct to love—thereby forging profound emotional bonds.

#### VII. FROM EMOTIONAL RESONANCE TO EMOTIONAL COMPANIONSHIP: THE TECHNO-ETHICS OF LOVE

The design trend of emotional IPs is shifting from singular “emotional symbols” toward more systemic “emotional resonance.” Future emotional IPs will require not only healing-oriented aesthetic forms but also complete “pathways of emotional response” embedded in narrative logics and interactive experiences.

At the same time, with the advancement of technology, the emotional capabilities of AI are steadily progressing, raising urgent issues of emotional ethics, dependency risks, and the restructuring of human – machine relationships. Designers must construct a comprehensive AI emotional ethics framework, integrating mechanisms such as overload warnings, dependency management, and the safeguarding of human autonomy. Only in this way can AI emotional-companion robots become sustainable “emotional support tools,” rather than substitutes that generate illusions of dependence.

Emotional IPs and emotional-companion robots are two sides of the same coin: the former conveys emotions through content, while the latter stimulates empathy through interaction. Together, they respond to individuals’ desire for understanding, tenderness, and self-expression, reshaping the relationship between humans and technology in future society. In an age where loneliness increasingly becomes the norm, the highest mission of design is not merely to create pleasure but to embody a techno-ethics of love. As Victor Papanek observed in Design for the Real World, “Design must serve real needs.” When technology genuinely engages with the emotional domain, its value lies not in replacing humanity but in reawakening reflection on connection, companionship, and self-recognition—perhaps the most profound echo of “the usefulness of the useless” in the digital age.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study has examined the driving forces, design pathways, and philosophical foundations of emotional IPs in the post-consumer society. Using the Emotional Identification Model as a theoretical framework, it

systematically analyzed the design language, consumption logic, and sociocultural significance of two representative cases: Labubu and LOVOT. Through an interdisciplinary lens combining semiotics, consumer psychology, and cultural studies, the research demonstrates that the rise of emotional IPs is not merely the result of consumption upgrading and media evolution, but also a profound reflection of shifts in the emotional structure of the era.

The findings further reveal that the essential characteristic of emotional IPs lies in their “non-functionality” and “highly affective” design orientation. This paper constructed a triadic pathway model—collective social emotions → consumer resonance → IP design—to validate the emotional consumption foundation underpinning Labubu and LOVOT from 2020 to 2025. It identified core emotional variables such as anxiety, loneliness, and emotional deprivation, along with their demographic differentiations. At the same time, the study highlighted the emotional dependencies and ethical challenges inherent in the development of emotional IPs. It emphasizes that designers must establish more human-centered creative pathways between ideals and realities, thereby providing tender yet powerful imaginaries for future emotional connections in human society.

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