



## CONSUMERISM AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DESIRE (ICCHĀ & TRṢṆĀ): AN INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE COGNITION OF WANT

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### Abstract.

This paper investigates the epistemic foundations of consumerist desire through classical Indian theories of cognition, especially Nyāya and Buddhist pramāṇa-theory. It argues that *icchā* and *trṣṇā* (desire, craving) are not only psychological or economic phenomena but also epistemic — produced, sustained, and amplified by particular kinds of cognition that Indian thought classifies as false or defective. Using Nyāya's distinction between *pramā* (valid cognition) and *apramā* (invalid cognition), and Buddhist accounts of *viparyaya-jñāna* (erroneous/false cognition) and *vikalpa* (conceptual construction), the article maps how modern advertising systematically manipulates perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*), and testimony (*śabda*) to generate consumerist illusions. The result is an epistemic ecology in which symbolic exchange, image-saturated perception, and inferential shortcuts produce persistent unsatisfied want. The concluding sections propose epistemic-corrective strategies — drawn from Nyāya's insistence on testing and verification and Buddhism's practices of mindfulness and insight — aimed at cultivating an “epistemic ethics of consumption” and practical media literacy.

**Keywords:** Consumerism, desire, *icchā*, *trṣṇā*, *pramāṇa*, *viparyaya*, Nyāya, advertising, epistemic ethics.

### 1. Introduction

Modern consumer culture frequently frames desire as a problem of appetite, economics, or identity. Marketing scholarship and social critics alike point to how advertising manufactures wants and attaches identity to commodities. Yet the phenomenon can be interrogated at a deeper layer: as an epistemic problem. Why do human beings continually misrecognize objects (brands, commodities) as sources of lasting satisfaction? Classical Indian epistemological systems—Nyāya with its instrumental theory of valid cognition, and Buddhist pramāṇa-scholars such as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti with their refined analyses of perception and conceptual cognition—offer conceptual tools to analyze how desire arises from and is sustained by specific cognitive errors.

Two canonical passages help to frame this inquiry. In the Bhagavad-gītā (2.62–63) Śrī Kṛṣṇa diagnoses a cognitive sequence leading from contemplation of sense-objects to desire and thence to the loss of discriminative intelligence — a sequence strikingly apt for consumerist dynamics:

(Bhagavad Gītā 2.62–63)

ध्यायतो विषयान् पुंसः सङ्गः तेषूपजायते ।  
सङ्गात् सञ्जायते कामः, कामात् क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥ २-६२ ॥  
क्रोधात् भवति सम्मोहः, सम्मोहस्मृतिविभ्रमः ।  
स्मृतिभ्रंशाद् बुद्धिनाशो, बुद्धिनाशात् प्रणश्यति ॥ २-६३ ॥

*dhyāyato viṣayān puṁsaḥ saṅgaś teṣu upajāyate; saṅgāt sañjāyate kāmah, kāmāt krodho 'bhijāyate.*

*krodhāt bhavati sammohah; sammohāt smṛti-vibhramah; smṛti-bhramśād buddhi-nāśo; buddhi-nāśāt praṇaśyati.*

Translation: “When a man contemplates sense-objects, attachment to them arises; from attachment arises desire; from desire comes anger. From anger comes bewilderment; from bewilderment comes loss of memory; from loss of memory the destruction of discrimination; and from the destruction of discrimination, he perishes.”



From the Buddhist side, the Dhammapada famously states that mind is the forerunner of all phenomena — the ethical and cognitive quality of mind determines whether suffering follows. The opening verse underscores the primacy of cognition in producing wholesome or unwholesome states:

### Dhammapada (verse 1).

*Pāli: Mano pubbangamā dhammā  
manosethā manomayā  
Manasā ce padutthena  
bhāsati vā karoti vā  
Tato nam dukkhamanveti  
cakkam'va vahato padam*

*Translation:* “Mind precedes all mental states; mind is chief, mind-made. If with an impure mind one speaks or acts, suffering follows as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox.”

Taken together these passages invite an epistemic reading: if unhealthy cognitive patterns issue in desire and therefore suffering, then consumerist desire may be fruitfully analyzed as a domain-specific form of error — an *apramā* or *viparyaya* that the interpretive apparatus of Nyāya and Buddhist *pramāṇa*-theory can help diagnose and remedy.

### Research Questions:

1. How can *icchā* (desire) and *trṣṇā* (craving) be interpreted within Indian epistemology as forms of cognition influenced by *viparyaya* (false knowledge)?
2. Can consumerist desire be analyzed as a form of *apramā* (invalid cognition) within Nyāya epistemology?
3. How do modern advertisements employ perceptual (*pratyakṣa*) and inferential (*anumāna*) mechanisms to create the illusion of happiness or identity through commodities?
4. In what ways does the Buddhist notion of *viparyaya-jñāna* (erroneous knowledge) explain the continuous regeneration of consumer craving (*trṣṇā*)?
5. Can Indian epistemology provide a framework for deconstructing consumerist illusions and promoting epistemic freedom (*mokṣa*) from desire-driven cognition?

### Objectives:

- To analyze *icchā* and *trṣṇā* as epistemic rather than merely psychological phenomena.
- To interpret consumerism as an epistemic structure rooted in false cognition.
- To apply *Nyāya* and *Buddhist* *pramāṇa* theories to modern media and advertising.
- To identify philosophical means for transforming desire through epistemic correction (*pramā-pratipatti*).
- To suggest ethical and pedagogical interventions for mindful consumer awareness.

### Methodology:

This article is primarily conceptual and hermeneutical, it reads Indian epistemological texts (Nyāya and Buddhist *pramāṇa* literature) against contemporary theoretical and empirical literature on advertising, branding, and consumer psychology. Primary classical passages (Bhagavad Gītā; Dhammapada) were used to frame the existential and ethical stakes; technical treatments of *pramāṇa* were drawn from Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and standard expositions of Gautama's *Nyāya-sūtra* and their commentarial traditions. Contemporary work on consumer society (Baudrillard) and empirical studies on



advertising was used to connect philosophical diagnosis with media mechanisms. The analysis is therefore interdisciplinary, philosophical exegesis, conceptual mapping, and applied hermeneutics toward present-day media practices.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Nyāya and Buddhist Pramāṇa-Theory

### 2.1 Nyāya: pramā, apramā, and the taxonomy of pramāṇas

The Nyāya tradition develops a systematic account of knowledge: *pramā* (valid cognition) and *apramā* (invalid cognition). Knowledge-acquisition is regulated by *pramāṇas* — the means of correct knowledge. Classical Nyāya treats four primary *pramāṇas*: **pratyakṣa** (perception), **anumāna** (inference), **upamāna** (comparison/analogy), and **śabda** (verbal testimony). The Nyāya-sūtra, while itself aphoristic, establishes a practical program, correct epistemic practice leads to *tattvajñāna* and ultimately to *niḥśreya-sādhana* (the attainment of supreme good) — an explicitly soteriological objective of true knowledge. The canonical opening sutra (1.1.1) famously enumerates the sixteen categories of inquiry which frame Nyāya's epistemic enterprise (*pramāṇa* being first among them).

Nyāya's central methodological claim is that not every cognition is trustworthy; cognition must be tested against *pramāṇas* and critiqued for *doṣa* (defects such as hallucination, memory-fault, or defect in inference). When defects are present, cognition becomes *apramā* — and the resulting behaviour (action, attachment) will be misguided. This normative epistemology is well-suited to analyze how misperceptions engineered by cultural technologies (advertising, branding) produce epistemically defective desires.

### 2.2 Buddhist pramāṇa-theory: perception, inference, and viparyaya

Medieval Buddhist epistemologists (notably Dignāga and Dharmakīrti) reworked Indian epistemology with refined technical precision. Dignāga defines perception (*pratyakṣa*) as non-conceptual, bare acquaintance free of linguistic or classificatory overlay; inference (*anumāna*) is conceptual and discursive. Importantly, Buddhist theory develops a fine-grained account of **viparyaya** — false cognition or distorted appearance (the classic rope-snake illusion is paradigmatic): an experience that is not simply mistaken but formed by conceptual superimposition (*vikalpa*) or by ignorance (*avidyā*). The Buddhist philosophical project maps how conceptual constructions — claims about value, selfhood, permanence — latch onto perception and produce craving (*tṛṣṇā*). Dignāga's *Pramāṇa-samuccaya*, and Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*, articulate how perception must be purified of conceptual contamination if knowledge is to be veridical.

Buddhist accounts are especially apt for consumerism because advertising does not merely misrepresent facts; it projects conceptual frames — identity, status, completeness — upon neutral objects. Where perception in its pure form would merely register features, advertising works by prompting conceptual superimpositions that produce *viparyaya-jñāna* and thereby *tṛṣṇā*.

### 2.3 A working hypothesis

Consumerist desire is not reducible to scarcity or utility. Rather, it is often an epistemic error; a formed, persistent *apramā* or *viparyaya* in which objects are cognitively misrepresented as sources of lasting selfhood, status, or felicity. The ensuing sections operationalize this hypothesis: (a) by mapping how *pramāṇas* are used by advertising to generate defective cognition, and (b) by suggesting corrective moves derived from Nyāya and Buddhist practice.

## 3. Epistemic Mechanics of Advertising: How Ads Produce False Cognition

Modern advertising is an epistemic technology designed to provoke certain cognitive movements. Drawing on empirical and critical work in advertising and consumer theory (including classic social theory on symbolic consumption), one can identify the principal mechanisms through which ads create and sustain desire: staging perceptual experience, crafting compelling inferences, deploying analogies and testimony, and saturating symbolic fields so that commodity-signs replace



immediate facts about use or need. Empirical studies in consumer behaviour document how visual and rhetorical framing influences memory, source-monitoring, and inferential shortcuts, producing durable attitudinal changes toward products.

Below I analyze these mechanisms with reference to the Nyāya pramāṇas and Buddhist accounts of viparyaya.

### 3.1 Pratyakṣa (Perception): the staged encounter

Nyāya treats perception as a primary pramāṇa. Advertising engineers perception, high-resolution images, motion design, colour palettes, close-ups of bodies and objects, targeted sequencing — all shape what the consumer literally perceives. But Dignāga's insight is crucial here, pure perception is non-conceptual; the error arises when perception is immediately interpreted through conceptual frames. Advertisements intentionally combine sensory stimuli with suggestive contexts so that viewers' perceptual inputs are quickly bound to concepts (beauty, success, desirability). In contemporary terms, the ad creates an **enactive perception** — not neutral registration, but perception with an implicit value-halo.

This is equivalent to a classical viparyaya; the viewer sees a product and the advertising mise-en-scène superimposes non-perceptual properties (status, attractiveness). The result is a quasi-perceptual conviction — “this product confers desirability” — which functions like perception for the agent, but is epistemically defective because the inference (product → durable social success) is not warranted by the perceptual evidence alone.

### 3.2 Anumāna (Inference): engineered causal beliefs

Nyāya's analysis of inference focuses on the structure of reasoning: hypothesis, reason (*hetu*), and relation to the probandum. Advertising frequently short-circuits careful inferential testing by presenting emotionally salient reasons (celebrity usage, idealized scenarios) as if they were robust evidence. A smartphone ad suggests: “using X brand will make you creative and connected” — an inferential move from observed sign (stylish imagery, creative users) to causal claim (the device produces the trait). Such inferences often depend on illicit generalizations, false causal projections, or confounded correlations.

Because Nyāya emphasizes the need for proper *hetu* (reason) and the elimination of fallacies (*hetv-abhāsa*), the ad-produced inferences qualify as *hetv-abhāsa* — apparent reasons that masquerade as valid ones. From the Buddhist angle, these are conceptual reinforcements (*vikalpa*) that transform ordinary perception into *viparyaya* (e.g., seeing a glowing model using a watch and concluding “this watch makes life meaningful”).

### 3.3 Upamāna (Analogy/Comparison): modeling desire

Comparison is central to consumption (keep up with peers, buy what the aspirational others buy). Nyāya's *upamāna* is an epistemic form that gives knowledge by analogy. Advertisers exploit this, products are portrayed as analogous to socially valued items or lifestyles (e.g., “like a star, wear X”), producing an inferential shortcut whereby consumers learn by analogy. The consumer's mind binds commodity to admired virtue through analogical cognition. When *upamāna* functions without verification — i.e., when analogy replaces causal, empirical support — the result is again an epistemic distortion.

### 3.4 Śabda (Testimony): authority and celebrity endorsement

In Nyāya, *śabda* (verbal testimony) is a legitimate pramāṇa when the source is reliable. Advertising produces testimony-like effects through celebrity endorsements, reviews, influencer posts, and expert claims. But the crucial defect is source manipulation and conflation of entertainment with epistemic trustworthiness. When the testimonial source is motivated, paid, or not independent, the testimonial becomes a vehicle for *apramā* — a pseudo-pramāṇa. Studies on advertising show that celebrity endorsements can significantly change perceived product efficacy and desirability, especially when viewers fail to evaluate source reliability.

## 4. Consumerism as Viparyaya/Apramā: Philosophical Elaboration



#### 4.1 The shape of the error

Combining Nyāya and Buddhist vistas, consumerist desire often emerges from a layered error:

1. **Perceptual staging** (ad-induced *pratyakṣa*-like experience) that is conceptually framed;
2. **Quick inferential jumps** (illicit *anumāna*) where aesthetic or affective salience stands in for epistemic warrant;
3. **Analogical learning** (*upamāna*) that substitutes likeness for proof;
4. **Authority displacement** (*śabda*) where testimonial force is manufactured.

This layered process converges into **viparyaya**: a false, yet phenomenally convincing, cognition that treats symbolic properties as ontological properties. For example, the “luxury-commodity” becomes not merely expensive but a quasi-substantive guarantor of dignity. The commodity’s sign-value becomes mistaken for its being. As Jean Baudrillard and other critics argued, consumption today is saturated with symbolic exchange — commodities stand in for identity rather than only serving use-value — and this semiotic saturation makes epistemic error structurally likely.

#### 4.2 The rope–snake analogy revisited

Buddhist *pramāṇa* literature’s rope–snake example (mistaking a rope for a snake in poor light) is instructive; a perceptual datum (curved rope) combined with conceptual fear produces a compelling false cognition (snake). Consumerism’s “snake” is the promise: a photograph, story, and testimonial conspire to create the image of fulfillment. Once the false cognition is established, *trṣṇā* arises; the desire to possess the apparent snake (the object that seems to guarantee a desired state). When the object fails to deliver durable satisfaction, the cycle repeats, often with new commodities or upgrades — a dynamic perfectly captured by the Bhagavad-Gītā’s sequence from contemplation to loss of discrimination.

#### 5. Case-Style Analytic Examples (Illustrative)

Below are condensed, illustrative readings of how specific advertising strategies instantiate *pramāṇa*-manipulation:

##### 5.1 Beauty advertising and *pratyakṣa* → *viparyaya*

A cosmetic advertisement stages “before/after” images, soft-focus lighting, and satisfied social settings. The viewer’s perceptual intake is rich in affective cues; the ad’s voiceover offers an implicit inference; “the product transforms your attractiveness → social success.” The perceiver’s mind forms a near-perceptual conviction (I see the beauty; I imagine myself as that beauty). Nyāya would flag the inferential gap; a Buddhist analysis would flag the conceptual overlay (the ad imparts a story about identity as if it were immediate).

##### 5.2 Luxury cars and *Anumāna* / *upamāna*

A car ad uses sweeping cinematography and shots of handsome, successful people. The causal inference is, “owning this car is correlated with social success; buying it will thus elevate me.” The ad replaces causal evidence with the appearance of causal linkage — a classic *hetv-abhāsa* (fallacious reason).

##### 5.3 Tech branding and *śabda*-mediated transfer

An influencer’s endorsement functions as verbal testimony. The consumer treats the source as credible (or fails to register the commercial nature of the testimonial). What should be a defeasible testimony becomes a quasi-*pramāṇa*, and belief follows.





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Empirical research supports these mechanisms; advertising affects perception, source-monitoring, and inferences about product efficacy; repeated exposure can distort memory and produce durable attitudinal shifts.

## 6. Toward Epistemic Correction: Nyāya and Buddhist Remedies

If consumerism is partly an epistemic pathology, then the remedies must be epistemic as well as ethical. Nyāya offers methods of critical testing, cross-examination, and verification; Buddhism offers practices to disentangle perceptual immediacy from conceptual overlays (mindfulness, insight into impermanence and non-self). Together they suggest a two-pronged pedagogy.

### 6.1 Nyāya-style corrective: testing pramāṇas in everyday life

- **Source evaluation:** Train consumers to ask whether a testimonial is independent and whether the evidence is the right kind (i.e., is the *hetu* reliable?). Nyāya's norms for avoiding *hetv-abhāsa* can be adapted into consumer checklists (source independence, replication, causal plausibility).
- **Cross-pramāṇa corroboration:** Nyāya emphasizes deploying pramāṇas in concert. If a claim is made via testimony or attractive perception, verify via independent perception (trial, product testing), reasoned inference (is the claim causally plausible?), and reliable external reporting.
- **Dialectical practice:** Nyāya's tradition of debate trains one to spot fallacies. Media literacy can import dialectical techniques, spotting equivocation, false analogy, and hidden premises.

### 6.2 Buddhist corrective: deconditioning cognition

- **Mindfulness practice (satipaṭṭhāna):** Increase awareness of the arising of desire at the moment of exposure. When advertisements provoke craving, mindfulness enables one to see desire as a transient mental event rather than as a fact about the world.
- **Insight (vipassanā):** Practice observing eventual disappointment after consumption and trace the chain from perception → craving → action → dissatisfaction. This insight weakens the credence of viparyaya by making the conditionality and impermanence of satisfaction experientially evident.
- **Ethical reflection:** Reflective practice reduces the automatic binding of identity to commodities by cultivating non-attachment and values-driven consumption.

Both approaches complement, Nyāya supplies analytic tools for interrogating evidence and reasoning; Buddhism supplies practices for changing the cognitive-affective habits that accept pseudo-pramāṇas uncritically.

## 7. Pedagogical and Policy Implications

If advertising can engender epistemic distortions, there are institutional responses to consider:

1. **Epistemic media literacy curricula:** Teach students to identify pramāṇa types in media messages, train them in cross-verification and fallacy detection.
2. **Regulatory transparency requirements:** Mandate clearer declarations of paid endorsements and manipulative tactics (reducing the power of *śabda-as-pramāṇa*).
3. **Public mindfulness initiatives:** Incorporate contemplative practices into school and workplace wellness programs to strengthen citizens' resistance to compulsive consumption.



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4. **Design ethics for advertisers:** Encourage (or regulate towards) truthfulness in framing and avoid manipulative inference-leaps in advertising content.

These practical actions connect philosophical diagnosis with civic solutions — an “epistemic ethics of consumption” that addresses both the cognitive mechanics and socio-political structures that amplify them.

## 8. Conclusion

Reading consumerism through Indian epistemology reframes desire not as a mere symptom of capitalism or a psychological lack but as an epistemic event — a pattern of cognition that misrepresents, over-attributes, and infers without warrant. Nyāya’s insistence on valid means of knowledge and Buddhist analyses of *viparyaya* provide complementary diagnostic and remedial resources. Advertising is an epistemic technology; it stages perception, engineers inferential shortcuts, leverages analogy, and manufactures testimony — and thereby produces powerful false cognitions that feed *icchā* and *tr̥ṣṇā*. Addressing consumerism therefore requires epistemic interventions, cultivation of critical reason, verification practices, and contemplative training. Only by combining analytic scrutiny with introspective practice can the grip of false cognition be loosened and consumption reoriented toward more authentic ends.

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