

Brand *Displacement*: The Case for Mimetic Brand Placement in Media

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Abstract

Brand *displacement*: The case for mimetic brand placement in media

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As audiences continue to become more aware of marketing practices, brand placement in media is starting to disrupt the fragile transportive state normally brought on by compelling stories. Artists who want to distance their work from advertising yet still imbue their work with a sense of verisimilitude are increasingly leveraging the trade dress of recognizable brands. They modify existing brands to fill in their worlds with familiar images without using their real names or likenesses. Comprising two experimental studies, this doctoral research is the first to name and examine the effects of “mimetic brand placement” in media. By manipulating conditions of brand placement and narrative transportation, the results of the first study suggested that mimetic brands may be as effective or outperform real ones as unintrusive product placements. Not being immediately recognizable as advertisements, mimetic brands preserve audiences’ experiences without triggering the substantial defense mechanisms they have developed against persuasive marketing tactics. The second study reframed the research to center on preserving the interests of all key stakeholders: audiences, brands, and the studios that implement the placements. Employing qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the results revealed that transparently disclosing the placement of mimetic brands prior to a media experience led to more positive outcomes for all three parties relative to a deceptive framing. Through the lens of Service-Dominant Logic, mimetic brands are positioned as a collaborative tool through which long-term, mutually beneficial relationships may be cultivated and maintained between these groups. This dissertation also examined similar brands created by generative artificial intelligence models and the latent biases present therein. Ethical considerations at the intersection of mimetic branding and AI research are discussed. Mimetic brands pose important practical and ethical implications for brands and audiences, alike. With thoughtful and transparent implementation, they may represent a new middle ground between narrative content and advertising.

Keywords: *mimetic branding, narrative transportation, persuasion, advertising, service dominant logic, ethics, generative AI.*

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General introduction

This doctoral dissertation in marketing centers on a novel construct that I have named, examined, and the limits of which I have pushed. The placement of fictional brands in media with the goal of evoking and affecting attitudes and behaviour to the real-world brands from which they borrow, I have coined “mimetic branding”. From the root: mimesis, these brands imitate the world in which we live, lending realism to works of art. This imitation, an important division between reality and fiction, may allow them to be neither designed nor received as advertisements – interlopers from the world they know contaminating the world they are trying to explore. I posit that they allow audiences to deepen their immersion into a narrative without compromising its artistic integrity. The Aristotelian concept of mimesis posits that imitation in art is inexorably tied to added meaning and symbolism. The artist creates works that are removed from reality but maintain a certain familiarity that best captivates the hearts and minds of audiences. I argue that artists today are imitating real brands in their fictional works, often for purely artistic reasons, and this may have unintended persuasive effects on brands and audiences. Those who study human behaviour have long ago realized the power that artistic representation and imitation have to affect attitudes and behaviour and it is my honour to take part in the continued collaborative effort to fully understand them.

It is possible that despite efforts to distance them from real brands, placement of mimetic brands in media may be as effective as placing real ones in terms of positively affecting attitudes and behaviour. This, I argued, may be achieved by bypassing the considerable defense mechanisms built up by audience members to persuasive messages. I thus completed two studies: the first in which I have described the mechanisms behind and effects of mimetic brands on real ones, and the second in which I examined the ethicality of such a stratagem and explored its implementation. In this way, I hope to meaningfully contribute to the ever-growing field of consumer behaviour as well as preserve the ethical and financial interests of marketers, artists, and audiences, alike.

At its roots, consumer behaviour began as a means to study individuals, but within the first decade, many publishing researchers shifted their attention to advertising. This was, in my opinion, a crucial step in differentiating it from other streams of social science research, particularly psychology. As marketing scholars, it falls to us not only to apply the findings and theories of other disciplines onto the marketplace, but to study its unique structure, phenomena, and effects. Other social sciences continue to inform research in this field, and so too does consumer behaviour influence them in return.

The term “consumer” is used in this dissertation when discussing the field of consumer behaviour research or previous studies which have also used it. The topic of this present research places ethics and people at its center. I personally find the use of the term to be at odds with the goals of understanding human behaviour and have thus opted for alternatives whenever possible. As academics it is easy to see people as points of data, but we must make a concerted effort to remember that these behaviours we study are those of people and they stem from their thoughts,

feelings, and experiences. The term consumer robs our subjects of this framing and, in my opinion, limits the scope of research that we may do.

This dissertation seeks to contribute meaningfully to this continued effort and push the field forward, if even in a small way. This research considers the effects of a novel brand placement strategy, the mechanism of action of which is hypothesized to hinge on narrative transportation. Coined by Green and Brock in 2000, the field of narrative transportation has seen a steady increase in new studies, methodologies, and exciting research findings across multiple fields in the last several years. Beyond the technological and methodological advancements that have made this stream of research more readily conductible, I suppose it is the applicability of the construct to diverse disciplines and the universality of its effects on human culture that are driving continued interest in transportation theory. Human history is more than the records of past events, it is the stories we tell to describe them. From the paleolithic hand stencils in the Lascaux caves in France to the newest in the James Bond franchise, stories are as much a part of the human condition as air or water. They are not luxuries, they seem to be a necessary part of our lives and in that, they connect us to each other over distance and time.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of stories and storytelling and yet the impact they have on human behaviour has only recently begun to be examined. When we are faced with a compelling story, we allow a part of ourselves to leave us and experience the story events firsthand. We detach from the world around us and inhabit the action of the story for a short while. In that state, this theory posits that our beliefs are molded to reflect that story. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) described a willing suspension of disbelief to explain why people readily accepted fantastic or supernatural aspects of fiction as anecdotes and half-truths. Later, it would fall to academics to describe the psychological states evoked by stories. Some call it telepresence; others call it immersion or absorption. Each definition improved on previous conceptualizations, but the most recent and most specific is the extended transportation imagery model, henceforth referred to as narrative transportation in this paper. There are other related constructs being researched today, though the differences between them are quite important. Though these differences are sometimes subtle, and many constructs may arise in parallel with transportation during the same experience, they are important distinctions if we are to accurately study the effects of stories on human behaviour. For example, whereas flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975) describes an optimal state of involvement in a task, transportation is limited to stories and its effects more specific, as will be discussed below. Similarly, media engagement (Wang & Calder, 2009) is an experiential response similar to transportation though it stems primarily from visual elements, rather than stories themselves.

Narrative Transportation

Narrative transportation theory describes a state in which people lose themselves in a story in two ways: (1) they empathize with story characters and (2) their imagination is activated by the story leading to a suspension of reality (van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, and Wetzels, 2014). I have used the words “story” and “narrative” almost interchangeably, as many researchers have

in the past, but it is worth noting the important differences between them. Stories are recollections, told by a storyteller, of an event or sequence of events (Bennet & Royle, 2004). They include four necessary elements: a plot, characters, a climax resulting from the dramatic events of the plot, and an outcome that comes from the resolution of the climax by the characters (Banerjee & Greene, 2012). Characters put the plots of stories into a perspective that audiences can inhabit. The way that a plot is resolved, the outcome, provides a space for storytellers to insert a message or moral gist of the story (Huang & Guo, 2020). Storytelling allows an individual to recount and frame experiences, but they also provide a means for firms to communicate with audiences. What are brands and advertisements if not stories? A brand story employs all of the same elements of a traditional one, though its message is related to encouraging specific outcomes, such as increasing brand attitude, awareness, or purchase intention.

Experiencing a story is not a passive exercise. As we receive stories, we actively interpret them, changing their meaning and how their events are perceived. As is the case with the proverbial tree falling in a forest, a narrative – much like a sound – must be experienced to exist. Narrative describes the act of actively consuming a story. As a narrative, a story becomes available for audiences to enter and explore. People interpret stories in a manner consistent with their beliefs, culture, context, personality, and the like (Fishbein & Yzer, 2003). The distinction between story and narrative allows researchers to more precisely study the constructs and communicate them more effectively.

The transportive state is defined by three key features. The first is that people engage actively in interpreting the story events, accessing the narrative. The second is that their empathy and imagination are engaged. They begin feeling what the story characters feel, understanding the events of the plot not from their own perspectives but from those of the characters (Walter et al., 2017). They begin to sense, to see, smell, and touch - to a degree - the narrative world. Third, when transported into these illusory worlds, people lose some of their connection to the world around them in a physiological sense. I ask you now, reader, to imagine that you are reading a great book or watching a film you enjoy. Someone enters the room and calls your name. Do you hear them? Many of us can recall times in which we could not perceive the world around us while transported, though few can give a name to that feeling. It is narrative transportation. As such, transportation is measured as the extent to which audiences empathize with characters, imagine the plot, and suspend their connection to the real world (Van Laer et al., 2014). In this state, we become malleable and emerge changed by our narrative experiences.

Stories do not have to be factual to mold our thinking, but they must correspond at least a little bit with our beliefs to be accepted. Transportation is guided by life experiences. When audiences process narrative information, they engage in a cycle of narrative self-referencing. Typically an unconscious process, self-referencing sees audiences relate narrative information to memories evoked in transportation to extend story-implied beliefs into their reality (Hamby, Brinberg, & Daniloski, 2017). The more personally relevant a story message is, the more easily

new ideas may be accepted. Audiences may be better able to reflect on their previously held beliefs, reconciling them with the events of the story and of their own lives. This story-within-a-story approach to understanding the pathway of the effects of transportation is in its nascency but has already proven to be quite interesting. It is not, however, the only mechanism by which transportation may affect consumer behaviour and may be working in concert with other previously established ones. The process by which narrative transportation shapes our perceptions of and behaviour in the real world is called narrative persuasion and there are several mechanisms by which it may occur.

Narrative Persuasion

Research into narrative persuasion has been conducted in several disciplines including poetry, literature, psychology, healthcare, communications (where it originated), and, of course, in marketing. If transportation is a trip into a story, reflection – assimilating the events and outcomes of a story with our own beliefs, is the trip out of it (Hamby, Daniloski, and Brinberg, 2015). We return from narrative explorations and carry with us something new – be it a new perspective, greater understanding, emotions, new ideas, or the like. These affective and cognitive effects, the changes in beliefs, attitudes, and intentions that spring forth from transportive experiences are strong and long lasting (Green, Garst, and Brock, 2004).

One way in which narratives may enact changes in attitudes and behaviour is the suppression of persuasion knowledge. As audiences are exposed to more persuasion attempts, they develop an understanding of marketing tactics like advertising and brand placement and develop defense mechanisms against them; this is known as persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994). It makes audience members conscious that another party feels as though they are someone against whom persuasive tactics can or should be used. This may engage a pattern of thinking characterized by counterarguing, anger, and spite towards the message sender and towards the message itself.

Persuasion knowledge is a relatively common research topic in marketing. Since its inception in 1994, it has been studied within the contexts of brand placement in media (Wei Fischer, and Main, 2008), in consumer protection (Nelson et al., 2020), in advergame research (Vanwesenbeek, Walrave, and Ponnet, 2016) and more. There are many ways in which persuasion knowledge may be measured including qualitatively through interviews and ethnography or quantitatively with questionnaires. These are outlined in a study by Ham and Nelson (2015). Items included layperson persuasion knowledge, skepticism towards advertising, acceptability of persuasion tactics and self-confidence of persuasion knowledge.

When an individual perceives that a third party – in this case, the storyteller – is trying to constrain their behaviour or thinking, this may arouse psychological reactance (Torrance and Brehm, 1968), compromising the effectiveness of the message. Psychological reactance, a direct effect of persuasion knowledge, describes how when people are faced with threats to their freedom, they may act in direct defiance of the authority that they perceive is trying to

manipulate them. In consumer-behavioural terms, this may manifest as preference for competitor brands, changes in purchase behaviour, and the like. Typically, reactance is measured by collecting and adding several Likert items adapted to an individual study, to compute a composite reactance score. Examples of such questions include “I resist the attempts of the story to influence me”.

Audiences hold dynamic knowledge of the marketing world, of advertising, sponsored content, and of all the other ways marketers are trying to manipulate their thinking. As such, it is not unreasonable to say that marketers and audiences are in some ways in a sort of arms-race. Laypeople become aware of previously successful persuasion tactics, marketers adapt to the changes in knowledge and create new ones only for the cycle to begin anew. Narratives can seemingly obfuscate persuasive intent and, thus, circumvent persuasion knowledge and its outcomes (Boerman et al., 2018, Cowley & Barron, 2008; Moyer-Gose, 2008). Narrative structure, program liking, and identification with story characters – all hallmarks of the transportive state – have been shown to reduce perceptions of persuasive messages. Mimetic brands thus represent a potentially powerful tool by which marketers may sneak past audiences’ defenses. Whether that is ethical and how audience members might develop new defenses against them are discussed in a later section.

The mechanism behind this phenomenon, proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and later applied within transportation research (Slater & Rouner, 2002) is the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). According to this theory, the nature of a transportive experience in its activation of empathy and imagination limit resistance to persuasive attempts. As audiences become involved with the story and the characters, they are less likely to engage in counterarguing or other defense mechanisms against persuasion, increasing their acceptance of messages contained within a narrative (Moyer-Gose, 2008). By identifying with story characters, audiences see events through the eyes of those characters rather than their own and are likely to mirror the same logic afterwards in the real world (Walter & Tsfaty, 2018). This theory has been leveraged to sway audience perceptions both on purpose and unintentionally. For example, Green and Brock (2000) used a story titled *Murder at the Mall* which led participants in their studies to consider malls as unsafe. The film *The Da Vinci Code*, on the other hand, raised concern and conspiracy theories about Opus Dei, a sect of Catholicism. The unfounded myths that portrayed Opus Dei as violent or dangerous became so widespread and so damaging that the sect had to issue press releases to try to mitigate the harmful stereotypes suddenly associated with them (Igartua & Barrios, 2012).

Pushing this stream of research forward, Moyer-Guse (2008) proposed the Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model (EORM) which included the suppression of reactance and other forms of resistance by narrative transportation, opening the door to some exciting research avenues. Anger, reactance, message derogation, and counterarguing were all shown to decrease the efficacy of persuasive messages and have all been demonstrated to be significantly mitigated by transportation according to a comprehensive meta-analysis (N = 60 papers) of the field

(Ratcliff & Sun, 2020). Attitudinal shifts made possible by the EORM can be leveraged to influence many kinds of behaviour. It has been leveraged to reduce habitual drinking (Zhou & Shapiro, 2016), lower intentions to drive drunk (Burrows & Blanton, 2015), increase intentions to get vaccinated (Krakow et al., 2017), to donate organs (LaVail, Anker, Reinhart, and Freeley, 2010) or to get mammograms (McQueen & Kreuter, 2010; Kreuter et al., 2010), and more. Many of these behaviours are inherently positive and not at all controversial, but Slater, Rouner, and Long (2006) demonstrated that television show narratives were strong enough to suppress political leaning and personal values and still change attitudes. Transportation is a tool for transforming audiences, it is neither dangerous nor completely safe and must be used with caution when developing narratives.

Not only has narrative transportation been demonstrated to elicit profound attitudinal and behavioural changes, but those changes are long-lasting and themselves resistant to influence. Several studies compared information presented as a narrative versus rhetorically and all have yielded the same conclusion: narratives are the preferred strategy for organizing and retrieving information (Cayla & Arnould, 2013; Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski, 2017). Additionally, both cognitive and affective opinions formed from information gleaned from narratives are more stable over time (Green & Brock, 2000). It seems that we are hard-wired to process narratives more holistically than we do rhetoric. It is this propensity that I argue allows mimetic brands to have potent effects on audience attitudes and behaviour, both intentional and otherwise.

Chapter 1

Brand Displacement

Consider a scene from a 2008 episode of *The I.T. Crowd* television series. One character boasts about being immune to the effects of online advertising, only to immediately fall prey to an online ad for a cola named “Cuke.” In the very next shot, the camera reveals that he has since purchased that brand of cola, which he continues to do in greater excess as the episode progresses. The intention of the creators seems to have been to comment on the sneaky nature of online ads and their ability to manipulate purchase behavior unconsciously. The fictitious brand “Cuke” was clearly meant to imitate “Coke,” grounding their satire in reality while also distancing it from the advertising that they were parodying. This begs the ironic question: if it reminded audiences of Coke, and audiences responded positively to the scene, could the placement of “Cuke” have increased attitudes and purchase intention towards Coke? This is, after all, how brand placement advertising works except for which brand is being placed. If audiences did not identify the placement of this fictional brand as an advertisement, could its effects have been even greater for Coke than if the artists had included the real brand? Could the artists who lampooned brand placement have inadvertently stumbled across an even more powerful and insidious persuasive tactic?

This research centers on the use of brands like “Cuke”, a category of brands that has yet been unnamed, and their potential use as vehicles for persuasive messages. Our daily lives are marked by brands, whether we like them or not. In the real world, exposure to branding and advertisements is inescapable, so much so that it would look strange to see a populated setting with no such features. Storytellers and designers often fill their worlds with mimetic visual elements that forge a sense of recognition and familiarity with the virtual environment, set to be identical to—or reminiscent of—the real world (Steuer, 1992). This mimesis can include architectural styles, landmarks, music, language, and brands, which the audience will immediately recognize. This dissertation introduces the term “Mimetic Brand” and uses it to define fictional brands that share recognizable aesthetic properties of real ones. They borrow the trade dress - the visual cues associated with a brand (e.g., shape, size, color) (Harvey, Rothe, & Lucas, 1998) - of a well-established brand to enhance realism in an artistic work. Over the course of several studies, the effects of mimetic brands on marketing outcomes of their real-world counterparts will be examined, as will the mechanisms at play behind this effect. By remaining “part of the story” mimetic brands may increase attitudes and purchase behaviour towards their real-world counterparts much in the same way as traditional brand placement can, but with fewer risks.

Illusory worlds, real brands

We all love a good story. Stories allow us to experience and explore the complexities and nuances of our psyche and to see what life might look like under different circumstances. When we are faced with a compelling enough story, we allow a part of ourselves to leave us and

experience the story events firsthand. We detach from the world around us and inhabit the action of the story for a short while. Traveling into them, we allow those stories to shape us, we adopt story-consistent beliefs and take them with us from fictional worlds into our own. This captivating and immersive experience is known as narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000).

When audiences watch films, read books, or play video games, they want to be enthralled by the narratives therein, abandon the real world, and be whisked away into illusory worlds (Green, Brock, and Kaufman, 2004). Transportation is an enjoyable yet fragile state that is inexorably linked with persuasion and changing the way we see the world around us (van Laer et al., 2019). As much as artists strive to fulfil these goals, the reality is that for them creation is also bound by financial constraints. It costs a tremendous amount of money to create these experiences and one way that companies pay for them is advertising. Brand placement—paid brand messages deliberately inserted into programs to influence audiences (Balasubramanian, 1994)—was designed to provide a middle ground between a program and advertised content (Hudson & Hudson, 2010). By embedding brands in television shows, movies, or video games, marketers were supposed to be able to reach their audience without jarring them from their experiences (Kuhn, Hume, & Love, 2010).

As the production cost of the average film, television series, and video game continues to increase, media companies are increasingly employing brand placement as a means of reducing their spending (Sung & de Gregorio, 2009). Brand placement is not a new strategy, though, with examples such as Lever's Sunshine Soap placed in silent films dating back as far as the 1890s. Over time, this strategy became more organized, sophisticated, and successful. In 1982, placement of Reese's Pieces in the film *E.T.* garnered the attention of academics and advertisers when Reese's saw notable increases in sales and brand attitudes (Sung & de Gregorio, 2009). When brand placement is done well, firms can reap their benefits for decades, as is the case of *E.T.* The film not only positively exposed audiences to Reese's in the theater but also at home on VHS, DVD, Blu-ray, and streaming sites.

Brand placement may be initiated by either party, the brand who seeks to advertise or the studios who want to leverage the brand for artistic purposes. In either case, the initiating party often pays the other a licensing fee. Consider the following two examples. The finale of AMC's *Mad Men* (2014) contained a rather conspicuous placement of Coca Cola. The story of the show centered around the development of what would become one of the most recognizable brands in history. Thus, the placement of Coke was a necessary inclusion of a brand central to the plot. Replacing it with a fictitious brand could not have had the same impact on the audience. As such, AMC deemed it worthwhile to pay Coca Cola for the rights to place the brand in their episode. Conversely, *Jurassic World* (2015) contained a prominent placement of the same brand when the lead actor, Chris Pratt, halted the action and drank from a bottle of Coke carefully placed such that the logo on the frosty bottle faced audiences in what was can only be considered an advertisement. Though both scenes contain the same brand and the same prominence of its placement, the two are different and are received differently by audiences. In the case of *Mad*

Men, the brand's meaning and symbol was leveraged to further the plot of the show. In Jurassic World, the reverse happened, the plot and recognizable characters of the movie were leveraged to advertise for Coke.

For a brand placement to successfully sway audience attitudes and behaviour, several conditions must be met. When audiences are excited by a scene in media they enjoy, some of their excitement and enjoyment may be transferred to a brand placed within it (Zillmann, 1996). The link between the brand and the action in a scene should be strong, but not overtly so, such that is perceived as being in service of the plot, rather than an advertisement (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan, 2006). The type of product should be congruent with what is known about the characters (Marchand et al., 2015). Coca-Cola, for example, is much more likely to be accepted in Mad Men or Jurassic World than in Star Wars. There are many more subtle differences between successful and unsuccessful placements, though these few illustrate the complexity and importance of getting them exactly right.

When brand placement goes wrong

Brand placement is a difficult marketing strategy to employ effectively. If it is not prominent enough, it is unlikely to be noticed, even subconsciously, by audiences. It is even less likely to fulfil contractually mandated screentime quotas often established in brand placement deals. Too prominent, however, audience members begin to resent it as an interruption of their experience (van Reijmersdal, 2009). Moreover, people have developed the marketing knowledge to resist it (Cowley & Barron, 2008). When audiences notice attempts to persuade them, they may feel as though they are being deceived or manipulated (Nelson, 2002). This may engage a pattern of counter-argumentation and spite toward the perceived message sender and the message itself - known as psychological reactance (Torrance & Brehm, 1986) - which may compromise the efficacy of the strategy (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Russell, 2002). People who feel this way are more likely to have lower evaluations of the brands placed and the host media. They are also more likely to choose competitor brands over the placed ones, as a form of "punishment" for the interruption.

One way in which brand placement may activate reactance is by engaging audiences' persuasion knowledge. This construct, described by Friestad and Wright (1994) captures personal knowledge about the goals and tactics employed by marketers to influence their thoughts and behaviours. To date, persuasion knowledge has been linked to reduction in the efficacy of brand placement in media by Matthes et al., (2012). They demonstrated that the prominence of a brand's placement may activate defense mechanisms within audiences, undoing or even reversing the positive effects that good brand placement strategies may have on brand evaluations. Particularly interesting to this research is a subscale developed by Boerman et al., (2018) that is focused on the perceived appropriateness of a persuasive attempt. This scale captures audiences' beliefs about whether a persuasive attempt is fair, acceptable, or legitimate, for example. There are other components of persuasion knowledge that may be important in understanding the effects of mimetic branding, but we begin here with the simplest and most

likely to be related to reactance. These other components were gathered during study 1 and examined post-hoc to help guide future research directions.

Placing a brand in media is thus not without risks to both the brand itself and the media it inhabits. Setting aside, for a moment, the marketing knowledge that may lead to reactance on the part of audiences, consider the other effects one entity may have on the other. How characters interact with brands, the nature of those characters, or the general context of a placed brand may all influence the way a brand is perceived (Marchand, Hennig-Thurau, and Best, 2015). In very much the same way, brands may change the ways in which scenes or characters in a narrative are perceived. The strength of brands lies in their tremendous capacity for communicating meaning quickly. This meaning is not limited to the name by which a product is known or marketed, but all the various meanings that audience members may ascribe to it. Brands imbue their host scenes with some of that meaning (Chen & Haley, 2014). A suave spy drinking a martini, shaken, not stirred, is perceived differently than one drinking a Heineken. Herein lies a difficult decision for artists and marketers, alike. They must agree on where, when, and how brands may be placed in media such that they maximize their effective persuasive power without compromising on artistic vision.

Removing brands from media

This study examined the characteristics of brands that may contribute to the acceptability and success of a brand placement strategy. Understanding the audience's goals and preserving the integrity of their experiences is important not only for marketing managers and artists, but also from a theoretical standpoint. I thus proposed that a different type of brand placement – one that is already in use, despite a lack of academic study – may be doing just that, but perhaps unintentionally.

Before doing so, it is important to consider brand *displacement*, the purposeful removal of brands from an artistic work, the opposite of brand placement (MacLochlain, 2019). Frequently, artists and set designers deliberately choose to remove brands from scenes. This is done to satisfy contracts or agreements with brands or to distance the work from any marketing or advertising that is either inappropriate or simply unwanted. The most common practice in displacing brands is obscuring them. Often, we may find conspicuously placed stickers, blurs, tape, or props that block our view of brands. This is known as *Greeking*. Research suggests that blatant Greeking can be distracting to audiences and may lead to decrease program liking and brand attitudes, should they decipher which brand was covered up (Tillman, 2016).

The other strategy for displacing brands is to replace them with fictional ones. Genericizing or fictionalizing brands allows artists to retain a level of verisimilitude that brands may add to a scene without being associated with any brand in particular. Though perhaps more common in animated media, this strategy sees regular use by prop designers in live-action film as well. Prop designer, Independent Studio Services of California, for example, has created fictional and generic brands that are placed in many films and television shows. Brands like Let's Chips, a play on Lay's Chips, or Heisler, a beer brand that is meant to look generic, are used by studios in place of real brands. The latter became so recognizable and beloved that the studio has begun

selling production and merchandising rights to it. Fictionalized brands becoming real pose an interesting avenue of research.

This dissertation has introduced the notion of mimetic branding and contends that some but not all fictionalized brands are mimetic brands. Fictionalized brands that are not mimetic are “filler” brands that communicate the product category more than anything else. Heisler beer is a convenient choice when giving characters a beer to drink but adds little else to the understanding of a scene. It is understood by audiences to be a generic beer. In scenes in which a brand has paid to be placed, filler brands like this one complete the set design without competing with and violating brand placement agreements.

Fictionalized brands are mimetic when they are recognizable as counterparts to real ones, emulating enough of a real brand’s trade dress such that it may communicate some of a real brand’s meaning. Let’s Chips, Nuka Cola, and the like borrow meaning from target brands to imbue into a scene without paying for the right to do so. In many cases, this is mutually beneficial to both the brands who may not want to be associated with the characters on screen and the studio who may not want to water down their vision with marketing tactics. Examples of Greeked, fictionalized and mimetic brands may be found below in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Examples of Greeked, Fictionalized and Mimetic Brands



Note: From left: Laptop brand *Greeked* in “How I Met Your Mother”, Fictionalized brand “Heisler” in “Brooklyn 99”, and Mimetic brand “Let’s Chips” in “Community”.

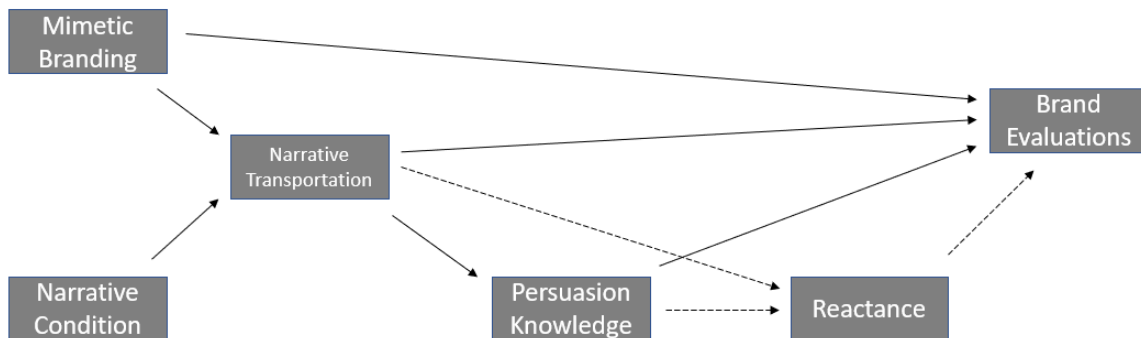
Some mimetic brands, like Cuke, may also be spoofs of real ones. Per Naderer, Matthes, and Bintinger (2021), spoof brands use humor and satire to poke fun at and make a deliberate statement about brands in media. In their study, they found that spoof brands successfully primed recall of their target counterparts and were not perceived as advertisements. This dissertation contends, much in the same way that not all fictional brands are mimetic, not all mimetic brands are spoofs. Mimetic brands are not limited to funny or satirical versions of brands and their success hinges on their ability to preserve narrative transportation. The effects of humor, specifically, may represent small but significant positive confounds in determining the persuasive power of mimetic brands (Walter et al., 2018). Thus, humor was purposefully omitted from

tested brands in this study. Though the two streams of research are certainly related, there is much left to be uncovered both in terms of spoofs and mimetic brands.

Hypothesis Development – Study 1

Mimetic brands add meaning and depth to a narrative without breaking the illusory properties of the universes they inhabit. Unlike the placement of real brands, though audiences may recognize them as mimicking real brands, mimetic placements are unlikely to be read as advertisements. They may see “Let’s” and make an instant connection to “Lay’s”, but without feeling as though Lay’s has paid to advertise to them. Thus, they are less likely to disrupt the delicate state of narrative transportation. This is supported by research on the effectiveness of brand placement in video games (Glass, 2007) which links its efficacy with narrative transportation afforded by interactive games. Transportation is deeply tied with persuasion whereby messages received under conditions of higher transportation are more likely to enact attitudinal and behavioral change (van Laer et al., 2019). By achieving these goals, mimetic brand placements are therefore less likely to elicit persuasion knowledge and reactance, leading to overall more positive evaluations of their mimicked brands relative to placements of the brands themselves. This hypothesized theoretical framework is summarized in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2
Theoretical Framework – Study 1



Note: Theoretical framework of the hypothesized relationships between experimental variables. Dashed lines indicate negative relationships.

For this study, both brand attitude and purchase intention were selected as dependent variables. While the parsimony of having only one outcome is typically worth striving for, early research such as this may uncover different effects or relationships in either context. Both variables have been used extensively in brand placement research. Though they appear to be correlated, they differ in that one measures a behavioural intent while the other captures the psychological position a brand may occupy. As such, in this early phase of research, we have

opted to include them both, though it is possible that future phases of research will look at one or the other in greater depth. We hypothesized that both would be affected in similar ways, but it is possible, of course, that the relationships are slightly different depending on the endpoint.

More specifically, it is hypothesized that, first and foremost, mimetic branding will have a direct effect on brand evaluations (H_1). Moreover, we predicted that the effects of mimetic branding on brand evaluations will follow a pathway mediated by narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge acceptability, and reactance (H_{2a}) which follows the directions described in the figure above (H_{2b}). Mimetic brands were hypothesized to increase narrative transportation, in turn increasing the acceptability of persuasive messages, thus lowering reactance which can lower brand evaluations.

H_3 concerned the relationships between the three key psychological variables in study 1: narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance. In this present study, narrative transportation was manipulated, and participants were randomized into high and low transportive conditions. As such, it serves as an anchoring variable from which the other two are predicted. H_3 posits that the predicted relationships between these key variables hold true across conditions of narrative transportation. That is to say that higher levels of narrative transportation will be associated with higher levels of acceptability and lower levels of reactance across both conditions. This research being the first to examine these relationships, post-hoc analyses were also conducted to delve further into the mechanisms at work and to uncover interesting directions for future study.

For mimetic branding to be a useful and persuasive vehicle of communication, and thus for it to be of use to marketers and researchers, alike, mimetic brands cannot compromise the efficacy of an advertisement. Just the same, the nature of the host media may affect their persuasive power. H_4 , the last hypothesis of study 1, predicted that the effects of narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance in determining brand outcomes are dependent upon conditions of narrative transportation. Namely that the pattern will only be significant in the high narrative condition. Narrative transportation is theorized to be central in facilitating the positive effects of mimetic brand placement and, as such, reducing it may compromise the strategy. Though many factors may decrease the transportability of a work, in this study, transportation was manipulated directly through a fluency/disfluency approach to best control for brand-related confounds. Though future research may explore thresholds and reversals of the positive effects of mimetic branding, there is no indication from previous research that these brands pose a direct threat to their host media nor their real-life counterparts. Notwithstanding, we must be diligent and account for this possibility. Moreover, the manipulations in study 1 have been minimal. As such, though we expected downstream positive effects on brand outcomes, the individual variables in the path were not hypothesized to differ significantly, at least not in the opposite direction of H_1 .

This chapter outlines the first study of its kind and the beginning of my doctoral research projects. Constant changes in the media landscape and in lay peoples' understandings of marketing efforts necessitate a shift in the way brands are portrayed in media. Audiences want their media enjoyment experiences to be preserved, studios need to advertise to provide high quality exciting works, and brands need to maintain their image. Mimetic brands may be able to bridge these gaps and compromise such that all three parties' interests are served.

Summary of hypotheses – Study 1

H₁: Mimetic branding will have a positive direct effect on target brand outcomes.

H_{2a}: The relationship between mimetic branding and brand outcomes will be predicted by a pathway linking mimetic brands with narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance, sequentially.

H_{2b}: The structural equation pathway described in H_{2a} will follow the directions outlined in Figure 2, above.

H₃: Higher levels of narrative transportation will be associated with higher levels of perceived appropriateness and lower levels of reactance across conditions of narrative transportation.

H₄: The effects of narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance in determining brand outcomes will only be significant in the high narrative transportation condition.

Methodology – Study 1

Procedure

The first study of this dissertation was completed in four phases: stimulus design and testing, a pretest, and two independent data collection events. The pretest was conducted to identify brands that are recognizable and positively rated at baseline, though whose evaluations are less stable in the face of alternatives. Commonly mimicked and placed brands such as Coca-Cola are not well suited to this research. People have largely made up their minds when it comes to brands like these and, as such, it is unlikely that a short narrative will sway their opinions enough to obtain a significant statistical signal. The pretest was conducted at the John Molson School of Business wherein one hundred and seventy-four ($n = 174$) participants were paid \$5 to rate their attitudes towards eleven household brands. Based on their positive yet seemingly malleable attitudes towards some recognizable brands, ultimately the brand selected for study 1 was Jell-O. The brand selection criteria have been designed to ensure that a mimetic brand is able to leverage the recognizable trade-dress of the target without explicit comparison and reduces the risk of the mimetic brand being perceived as a copycat or competitor brand. Manipulation checks for both assumptions were conducted in the main study to ensure the specificity of the experimental conditions. Therein, participants were asked to rate their levels of interest and attitudes towards eleven brands. This study informed the selection of the target brand, Jell-O, for this phase of research. The participants rated it rather highly, though indicated a lower

confidence of their rating as well as the importance of the brand to them compared to other recognizable brands such as Tide or Energizer.

The first data collection event was initially designed to be a complete study and thus two hundred and eighty-three students were sampled from the John Molson Marketing Research Practicum Participant Pool. Analyses demonstrated limitations in the manipulation and design of experimental variables and stimuli. The stimuli did not sufficiently differentiate between levels of narrative transportation as well as mimetic versus real branding conditions. These data were integral in redesigning and refining the experimental protocol for the third phase of research. Due to sweeping changes made to the materials used between phases, these data were not combined with more recently gathered batches and are instead only used in one instance as an historical control.

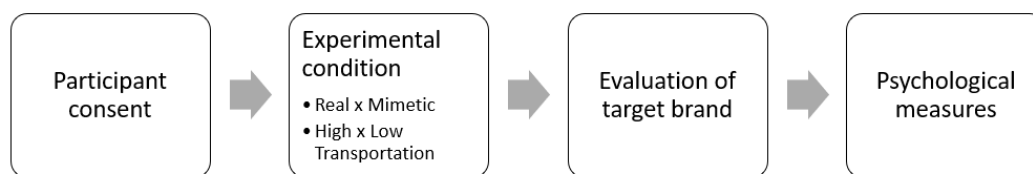
Study 1 was conducted as a proof-of-concept designed to establish the differences in brand outcome resulting from placements of mimetic brands as compared to real ones and the mechanisms that drive them. To this end, this study followed a simple 2 (branding) x 2 (transportation) experimental design. Three hundred and thirty-one student participants from the JMSB participant pool were sampled for this phase. Participants were told that they were participating in a market test for an upcoming game series, to obfuscate the goals of the study. Each participant was told that they were given a unique anonymous identification number, so researchers are able to match their responses to the questionnaire to other data, however this was not the case and their numbers denoted their experimental condition to the researchers. They were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, asked to engage with a short narrative and answer a subsequent questionnaire. There is no indication from previous literature that the chosen demographic contains inherent biases or individual differences that require specialized sampling methods.

After giving their informed consent, participants began the narrative experience. The two narrative conditions varied on their level of expected transportiveness. To substantiate the proposed mechanism of action through narrative transportation, an experimental manipulation of the variable was also added to further examine the effects of narrative transportation on the other constructs in the study and bolster the findings of the research. The distinction between high and low transportation was made in the presentation of the texts rather than in their content. Employing a fluency/disfluency approach, the high narrative transportation condition consisted of a white text against a dark background. The background and text colour varied slightly throughout the narrative to reinforce the drama. When the player character was in darkness, the text became very slightly blue-grey and when they were in warmth the background gained a slight orange hue. In the low transportation condition, in contrast, the lightly coloured text was instead placed against a light background, changing between yellow and blue at the same moments of the story as in the other condition. This manipulation was designed to make reading the story more effortful and less pleasant, following feedback in several pretests that suggested that the negative effects of other weaker manipulations were overshadowed by the novelty of the

stimulus. A manipulation check ensured that the two conditions differed as assumed. Participants reported mild discomfort and fatigue, resulting in lower levels of narrative transportation despite reading exactly the same text.

Following the completion of the narrative experience, participants were asked to rate their attitudes and purchase intentions towards the target brand, Jell-O. After this, they completed measures of transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance, as well as manipulation checks and control variables. The experimental protocol is summarized in Figure 3, below:

Figure 3
Experimental protocol for study 1



Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire that includes measures of brand attitude, purchase intention, narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge and reactance. The first part of the questionnaire assessed brand attitude on an average of six seven-point scales, as per Chan, 2020 and Ham and Nelson (2015). Participants indicated their attitudes toward the target brand and the extent to which they found the brand Appealing/Unappealing, or Favorable/Unfavorable, for example. This measure has been demonstrated as having strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.93 in a study by Chan (2020).

The second set of items in the questionnaire examined purchase intentions. As per Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave, and Ponnet (2017), this consisted of an average of three seven-point scales about participants' intention to buy the target brand and other distraction brands. For example, one item read: "I would like to buy a product from [brand]", to which they indicated a level of agreement or disagreement. This measure, per Vanwesenbeeck et al., (2017), yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87, indicating adequate reliability.

The third set of items completed assessed the level of participants' narrative transportation. This was measured using the Narrative Transportation Scale-Short Form (Appel, Richter, Gnambs, & Green, 2015) consisting of five Likert scale items adapted for use with a print ad for a film or game rather than as a reading experience. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as "I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the game." on a seven-point Likert scale, and the results summed to create a narrative transportation score.

In 2020, Huang and Guo employed this scale and found a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.88, demonstrating the high reliability of the measure.

Persuasion knowledge was assessed in the fourth section of the questionnaire using an adapted version of the Persuasion Knowledge Scales of Sponsored Content (PKS – SC) (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendal, and Dima, 2018). This scale captures the recognition of advertising in media, the understanding of persuasive intent from a commercial source, skepticism or appropriateness towards the content, and enjoyment. Most of the items in this scale are scored on a 7-point Likert scale, though some are binary (yes / no) items. Items include agreeing or disagreeing with statements such as “Seeing brands in a [medium] influences others without them realizing it” and “Brands try to influence me by making sure it does not look like advertising”. Boerman et al. (2018) established the test-retest reliability and the validity of the measure. Though rather long, this scale is particularly applicable to the study of mimetic branding, as it may be used to uncover complex feelings associated with persuasion knowledge towards very covert persuasion tactics.

Finally, brand placement reactance was assessed through a five-item scale adapted from Marchand et al. (2015). Participants indicated their level of agreement with statements such as “I nearly stopped watching the movie because of [brand's] permanent mention and presentation” on the seven-point Likert scale. Individual item values were summed to create a composite reactance score. This measure was also found to be reliable, yielding a Cronbach's alpha level of 0.89.

Materials

This study presented participants with a short interactive choose-your-own-adventure story built in Twine (twinery.org), a software used to create interactive textual narratives. Twine allows users to make decisions that alter the course of a story by selecting from predetermined options. Participants read a passage of a story and decided how the story continues from that point, moving through passages one at a time. To maintain experimental controls, these choices all led to identical texts worded such that they presented an illusion of choice without allowing the branching paths to differ. This allowed us to analyze the responses without controlling for specific in-story choices.

This interactive narrative called “The Hike” was entirely developed by me and is not subject to any copyright. The story follows the player as he or she explores the woods on a winter hike, gets lost, and ultimately finds safety. The story was written specifically for use in this study and pretested to ensure that it had the desired flow, narrative, and placement prominence that fit the goals of the present research. Four versions of the story were used in the experiment, differing only in their placement of real or mimetic brands as well as their colour scheme. A complete version of the memetic condition of the story, updated to include photos for the second study, can be found in Appendix A. The real brand conditions saw the placement of Jell-O whereas the mimetic condition replaced one letter, instead presenting Mell-O. This change was found in pretests to evoke Jell-O in almost all participants who were familiar with Jell-O

before the study. The story was written such that the brand was both frequently mentioned as well as central to the plot, to ensure a high prominence, per Cowley and Barron (2008). The narrative conditions differed in their colour schemes such that in the high condition the text was white against a black background, changing to light blue on black towards the end of the story. In contrast, the low condition presented white text against a yellow or light blue and slightly blurred to reduce the legibility of the text slightly. Figure 4, below, contains an example of the same passage across the two conditions.

Figure 4
Comparison of narrative conditions

Low narrative condition	In every direction, all you see are the same dead trees, a rock or snowbank here and there. Nothing remarkable. Certainly nothing you could call a landmark. You suppose that picking a direction at random is better than pointlessly freezing to death in some icy forest, so you just walk. You can either walk in a straight line in any direction, hoping to cover more ground or you could walk in a large circle, hoping to see something familiar, but at the risk of getting even more lost. Walk in a straight line Walk in a circle
High narrative condition	In every direction, all you see are the same dead trees, a rock or snowbank here and there. Nothing remarkable. Certainly nothing you could call a landmark. You suppose that picking a direction at random is better than pointlessly freezing to death in some icy forest, so you just walk. You can either walk in a straight line in any direction, hoping to cover more ground or you could walk in a large circle, hoping to see something familiar, but at the risk of getting even more lost. Walk in a straight line Walk in a circle

Statistical analyses were performed in IBM SPSS version 29, with the exception of structural equation modeling, which was conducted in AMOS version 29, both made available to the researchers through Concordia University.

Data Analysis – Study 1

To test the central hypothesis in the first study – that mimetic brands positively affect the brands on which they are modeled when placed in media - Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted. The ANOVAs demonstrated significant differences that in support of our hypotheses. Across both narrative transportation conditions, controlling for brand familiarity, mimetic brand placement was associated with higher brand attitudes ($F_{2, 338} = 16.065$, $\eta p^2 = .012$, $p < 0.001$, $B_{\text{mimetic}} = .247$, $95\%CI = [.002 - .495]$) and purchase intention attitudes ($F_{2, 328} = 19.681$, $\eta p^2 = .024$, $p < 0.001$, $B_{\text{mimetic}} = .466$, $95\%CI = [.145 - .788]$) towards Jell-O.

Further results are discussed within each narrative condition and then more parsimonious models are presented.

Manipulation checks

The first manipulation check employed previous pretest data as a historical control to ascertain whether the manipulations of brand placement affected attitudes towards Jell-O at baseline. Had this not been the case, then one might argue that differences found in study 1 were not due to the placement of any particular brand and that brand placement in any form did not affect the participants. This was therefore vital in contextualizing and understanding the results of the present study. Compared with pretest participants at Concordia University who saw only minimal brand placements in a narrative stimulus prior to rating their attitudes towards Jell-O, study 1 participants all rated their attitudes towards the brand as statistically significantly ($p < 0.000$ in all cases) higher following the narrative. This is an indication that the brand placement strategies all worked in increasing brand attitudes and differences across the conditions of branding were thus meaningful improvements over baseline.

The second manipulation check was conducted to determine whether the manipulation of narrative transformation by way of disfluency was successful. Indeed, the narrative manipulation resulted in significantly lower transportation within the target ($M = 24.432$, $SD = 7.709$), $t(166) = -2.65$, Cohen's $d = -.409$, $p = 0.004$) and mimetic ($M = 25.231$, $SD = 8.003$), $t(161) = -2.999$, Cohen's $d = -.47$, $p = 0.002$) conditions. This indicated that the manipulation was robust and led to meaningful differences in the participants' experience of the stimuli.

The third manipulation check included both study 1 and pretest data, once more. In both studies, the overwhelming majority of participants within the mimetic conditions (>99%) indicated that the mimetic brand, Mell-O reminded them of Jell-O as measured by an open text response. This finding lends credibility to the claim that mimetic brands may leverage the trade dress of existing brands such that audiences are reliably reminded of such targets.

Structural Equation Modeling – Brand attitude

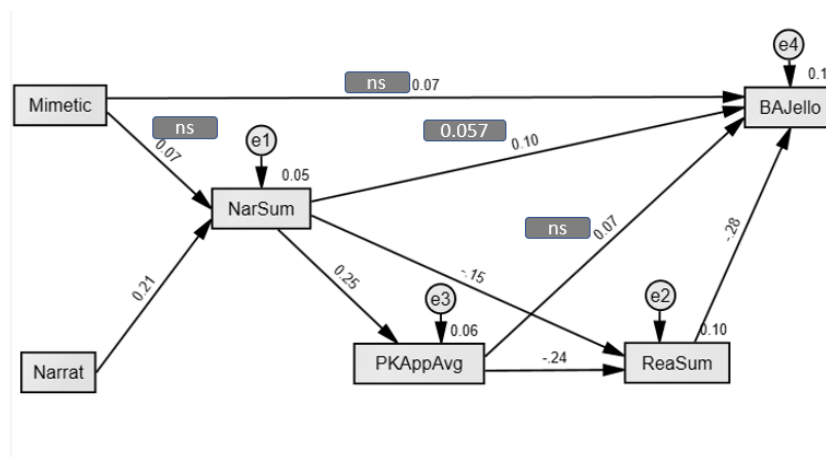
The model above yielded a non-significant Chi squared test ($\chi^2(6, N = 331) = 3.561$, $p = 0.74$), as well as GFI and AGFI levels of 0.996 and 0.988, respectively. Taken together, these indices provide evidence that the model fits the data well and further analyses were completed.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the measurement model. Though the chi-square test did not reach significance ($\chi^2(203) = 449.362$, $p < 0.001$), the TLI and CFI reached .937 and .944, respectively. The RMSEA was found to be .061. These results, excluding the chi-square test, fall within commonly accepted thresholds for statistical significance. The discrepancy may be attributed to the ratio of observed variables in the model (22) to the sample size ($N = 331$). Additionally, all factor loadings and covariances were statistically significant and there were no indications of skewness in the data. As the collected factors have all been previously validated measures, this model was deemed acceptable for this research. The CFA results can be found in Appendix E.

Within the model pictured below in Figure 5, the effects of mimetic branding and narrative condition on brand attitude seems to be at least partially mechanistically explained by a pathway beginning with narrative transportation predicting increases in the appreciation of persuasive messages and, in turn reducing reactance before ultimately predicting brand attitudes. The statistically significant standardized coefficients represent small though measurable effects in direct support of the proposed model. Notably, the effect of mimetic branding on narrative transportation was not found to be statistically significant. This is expanded upon below and is not an unexpected finding. There is also theoretical and statistical evidence of a cyclical feedback effect between narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance, thus suggesting further exploration of these intertwined variables.

Figure 5

Structural equation model predicting brand attitude



Note: Structural equation model predicting Brand Attitude towards Jell-O (BAJello) from Mimetic branding and narrative transportation conditions. Unless otherwise indicated, $p < 0.001$.

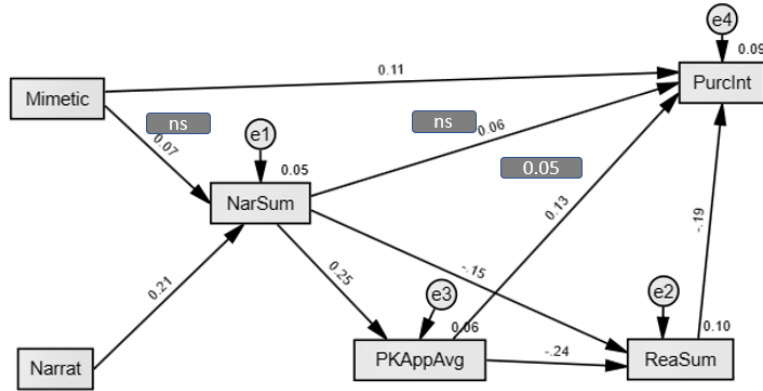
Legend: NarSum denoted narrative transportation, PKAppAvg denotes Persuasion knowledge acceptability, ReaSum denotes Reactance

Structural Equation Modeling – Purchase Intention

As with the previous model, the model below in Figure 6 predicting purchase intention toward Jell-O yielded a non-significant Chi squared test ($\chi^2(6, N = 331) = 5.753, p = 0.45$), as well as GFI and AGFI levels of 0.994 and 0.980, respectively. This once again suggests a good model fit. The data demonstrated an almost identical pattern of effects, though notably persuasion knowledge was found to significantly predict purchase intention as a direct effect in this model.

A confirmatory factor analysis was again conducted to assess the measurement model, which yielded almost identical results. The chi-square test did not reach significance ($\chi^2(203) = 448.771, p < 0.001$), the TLI and CFI reached .936 and .943, respectively. The RMSEA was found to be .061. All factor loadings and covariances were again found to be statistically significant and there were no indications of skewness in the data.

Figure 6
Structural equation model predicting purchase intention



Note: Structural equation model predicting Purchase Intent towards Jell-O (PurcInt) from Mimetic branding and narrative transportation conditions. Unless otherwise indicated, $p < 0.001$.

Legend: NarSum denoted narrative transportation, PKAppAvg denotes Persuasion knowledge acceptability, ReaSum denotes Reactance

Direct effects

Brand attitude and purchase intention

In this section, we discuss relevant statistical analyses within conditions of our manipulated variables: narrative condition and branding reality. Within the high narrative transportation condition, per analyses of variance, a direct effect of mimetic branding was detected on brand attitude, ($F_{1,170} = 6.280$, $\eta^2 = .036$, $p = 0.013$, $B_{\text{mimetic}} = .438$, $95\%CI = [.09 - .78]$) and purchase intention, ($F_{1,171} = 16.01$, $\eta^2 = .086$, $p > 0.001$, $B_{\text{mimetic}} = .927$, $95\%CI = [.47 - 1.384]$). The direct effects of mimetic branding on narrative transportation and reactance were not significant initially, thus only partially supporting H_1 . In the low narrative transportation condition, these effects no longer reached statistical significance.

The outcome variables, brand attitude and purchase intention were compared across each of the four experimental conditions. As noted in Tables 1 and 2, below, a matrix of results for brand attitude demonstrated the highest results in the Mimetic Brand x High Narrative Transportation condition. The same pattern was gleaned from a similar matrix of purchase intention outcomes, also included below as Table 1 and Table 2, thus lending support to H_1 and lending important credence to further analyses.

Table 1
Matrix of results for outcome variable: Brand Attitude

Experimental Condition	High Narrative Transport	Low Narrative Transport	Across Conditions of Narrative
Target Brand (Jell-O)	M = 4.524, SD = 1.171, N = 87	M = 4.684, SD = 1.183, N = 81	M = 4.601, SD = 1.176, N = 168
Mimetic Brand (Mell-O)	M = 4.962, SD = 1.121, N = 85	M = 4.697, SD = 1.300, N = 78	M = 4.836, SD = 1.213, N = 163

Table 2
Matrix of results for outcome variable: Purchase Intention

Experimental Condition	High Narrative Transport	Low Narrative Transport	Across Conditions of Narrative
Target Brand (Jell-O)	M = 2.897, SD = 1.647, N = 87	M = 3.486, SD = 1.545, N = 81	M = 3.181, SD = 1.529, N = 168
Mimetic Brand (Mell-O)	M = 3.824, SD = 1.570, N = 85	M = 3.421, SD = 1.157, N = 78	M = 3.631, SD = 1.577, N = 163

Persuasion knowledge – Appropriateness scale

For the sake of clarity, it is worth mentioning that in this section, we discuss a construct that captures the appropriateness of a persuasive attempt. As such, higher levels indicate lower persuasion knowledge and higher degrees of acceptability. Within the high narrative transportation condition, higher persuasion knowledge appropriateness was significantly predicted by higher narrative transportation ($F_{1,171} = 1.980$, $\eta p^2 = .262$, $p = 0.006$) and lower reactance ($F_{1,171} = 2.130$, $\eta p^2 = .276$, $p = 0.003$) but was not significantly predicted by mimetic brand placement or reactance, thus supporting the hypotheses and lending evidence to the flow of the structural model. In the low narrative transportation condition, higher persuasion knowledge appropriateness was predicted by higher narrative transportation ($F_{1,171} = 1.980$, $\eta p^2 = .262$, $p = 0.006$) but other effects did not reach statistical significance.

Narrative Transportation

Within the high narrative transportation condition, higher levels of transportation predicted higher brand attitude toward Jell-O ($F_{1,171} = 2.230$, $\eta p^2 = .286$, $p = 0.001$), higher purchase intention ($F_{1,171} = 1.959$, $\eta p^2 = .260$, $p = 0.007$), lower reactance ($F_{1,171} = 2.130$, $\eta p^2 = .276$, $p = 0.003$), and higher persuasion knowledge acceptability as discussed above. In the low

transportation condition, the effects of transportation on brand attitude and reactance were attenuated, no longer reaching significance, though trending in the same direction. The effects on purchase intention ($F_{1,158} = 1.633$, $\eta^2 = .293$, $p = 0.03$), and persuasion knowledge ($F_{1,158} = 2.298$, $\eta^2 = .369$, $p < 0.001$) did reach statistical significance.

Reactance

Finally, we examined the direct effect of reactance on brand outcomes. Reactance had a significant effect on purchase intentions in the high narrative condition ($F_{1,171} = 1.704$, $\eta^2 = .234$, $p = 0.026$) and in the low condition ($F_{1,158} = 2.383$, $\eta^2 = .319$, $p < 0.001$), as well. Its effects on brand attitude, despite remaining significant in the low narrative condition ($F_{1,158} = 2.686$, $\eta^2 = .346$, $p < 0.001$), did not reach significance in the high narrative condition ($F_{1,171} = 1.267$, $\eta^2 = .185$, $p = 0.191$). This result is not entirely surprising, however, as reactance captures peoples' resistance to behavioural manipulation and, as such, purchase intention was likely proportionally more affected than the more nebulous brand attitude. This finding also further reinforces the nuances and use of both endpoint variables as, though they may be correlated, they are differentially affected by mimetic brands and the model as a whole.

Summary of results – Study 1

Table 3

Summary of hypothesis testing results – Study 1

Hypothesis	Result
H ₁ : Mimetic branding will have a positive direct effect on target brand outcomes.	Partially supported: Higher means of purchase intention were directly associated with mimetic brand placement, but differences in brand attitude only trended towards significance.
H _{2a} : The relationship between mimetic branding and brand outcomes will be predicted by a pathway linking mimetic brands with narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance, sequentially.	Mostly Supported: Narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance were all significant mediators of effects on the outcome variables, but the direct links between mimetic brands and narrative transportation require further study.
H _{2b} : The structural equation pathway described in H _{2a} will follow the directions outlined in Figure 2.	Mostly Supported: The predicted model was largely accurate, except for the link between mimetic brands and narrative transportation.
H ₃ : Higher levels of narrative transportation will be associated with higher levels of perceived appropriateness and lower levels of reactance across conditions of narrative transportation.	Not Supported: The predicted pattern of results only reached significance in the high transportation condition.
H ₄ : The effects of narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance in determining brand outcomes will only be significant in the high narrative transportation condition.	Supported: The predicted pattern of results differed between the two experimental conditions such that in the low transportation group, the effects did not reach significance.

Study 1 discussion

This study represents the first research into the effects that mimetic brands have on their real-life counterparts. Though small, these measurable effects carry important implications for artists, brands, and audiences that call into question several truths and common practices that have been generally assumed or accepted by researchers and industry professionals. The manipulations employed in this study were very subtle: a change in one letter made the difference between the branding conditions. Nevertheless, these small details resulted in

significant positive effects on important brand outcomes. As such, they provide the first robust evidence that mimetic brands may indeed be appropriate persuasive vehicles. These manipulations were also designed to simulate a realistic and unintrusive brand placement strategy, thus accepting lower effect sizes but drawing more actionable and, in this author's opinion, exciting conclusions.

The central finding of this research was, in short, that the placement of a mimetic brand led to similar if not more potent persuasive effects relative to placing a real one. By preserving the integrity of a media experience, mimetic brands hide in plain sight, circumventing the defense mechanisms held by audiences to deliver their messages without the same threats of reactance or scrutiny.

The results of this study demonstrate a pathway of effects that suggest that the preservation of narrative transportation is integral in achieving the goals of brand placement, mimetic or otherwise. In this study, the manipulation of brand reality was not sufficient to significantly affect narrative transportation across the experimental groups. Nevertheless, the results indicated its importance in driving the success of persuasive brand placements. The transportive state seems to facilitate a pattern of thinking and processing that allows audience members to be more receptive to persuasive information without engaging the considerable defense mechanisms they may otherwise employ to shield themselves from similar persuasive attempts. It has long been clear to artists and scholars alike that successful brand placement hinges on the fit of a brand within a scene. This study is a novel exploration of the mechanisms and limits of that phenomenon.

Across all four experimental conditions, both brand attitude and purchase intentions towards the target brand, Jell-O, were highest after exposure to a mimetic brand, Mell-O. When narrative transportation was preserved, the mimetic brand in this study performed as well as the target in terms of facilitating narrative transportation – that is to say that neither brand condition bothered participants, generally – though mimetic brands yielded more positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions. When narrative transportation was artificially lowered, the differences between mimetic and target brand placement were no longer present. This may be an indication that the powerful manipulation of narrative transportation – though useful for testing other hypotheses – overshadowed the relatively small effects examined across these experimental groups.

Within this study, the direct link between mimetic branding and narrative transportation trended as predicted but did not reach statistical significance. Perhaps with a larger sample or a more disruptive placement strategy, these differences would have reached significance on their own. It is also possible that audiences react to mimetic brands differently based on preconceived notions about marketing, sensitivity towards advertising, or other psychological variables, which may form the basis of future research in this field. Notwithstanding this lack of significance, the differences in predicting positive outcomes from mimetic brand placement between conditions of

narrative transportation provide further important evidence that the two constructs are inexorably linked. There seems to be important connections between narrative transportation, persuasion knowledge, and reactance, in terms of downstream brand effects. If mimetic brands act in such a way that preserves this experience, it may offer an additional level of flexibility to artists and to marketers, alike.

Artists have been including mimetic brands in their works as a means of steering clear of advertising while still preserving the verisimilitude of their universes. The tragic irony that this paper posits is that these artists may have actually been doing a better job of advertising for brands than they would have, had they included real brands in their work. Similarly, a second ironic twist is that if mimetic brands do indeed perform the duties of real ones, advertisers ought to pay potentially higher fees for their placement, as opposed to tolerating or ignoring mimetic brands, as they seem to be doing now.

If mimetic brands are effective advertising tools, then artists may need to reconsider the manner in which they are used in their works. Perhaps evoking specific brands would longer fulfill their specific goals or satisfy their ethical or artistic standards. When specific brands' trade dresses are borrowed to create mimetic brands, it will fall to artists to justify their designs much in the same way as they currently do when placing real brands. Some, however, may no longer want to use mimetic brands at all. In anticipation of these cases, it may be useful to develop more genericized brands, such as Heisler, mentioned above.

Given the finding that mimetic brands may increase brand outcomes through a pathway predicated on the reduction of audience defense mechanisms, the ethicality of such a strategy cannot be overlooked. Though it fell outside of the scope of study 1, the next phase of research will be concerned with exploring minor modifications or framings that are designed to decrease the possibility of crossing ethical lines into the territory of subliminal messaging. These ethical concerns become even more complex when we consider the use of mimetic brands in media geared towards children. For now, the questions surrounding this implementation fall well beyond the scope of our research.

Implications for practitioners

As pressure on production studios to generate advertising revenue is growing steadily, scrutiny on how to reach audiences most effectively will continue to grow as well. Budgets for television shows, movies, and games are continuing to rise as we as audiences continue to demand increasingly more visceral and exciting entertainment. Individual television episodes today may require millions of Dollars to produce, sums of money that studios cannot reasonably hope to raise alone. Netflix reported spending over \$21 million (USD) on the production of their 2021 hit show, *Squid Game*'s nine episodes. Other popular shows in recent memory, such as *Stranger Things* or *The Queen* saw budgets nearing eight to ten million Dollars per episode (Netflix, 2021). As such, many studios across all media have turned their eyes towards brand placement as a means of generating revenue and funding their projects. Just the same, brands

have been increasingly interested in this method of advertising. Netflix, for example, ran a 2023 Superbowl ad in which they pledged to increase the placement frequency of electric vehicles in their shows moving forward.

Laypeople are becoming increasingly wary of advertising, and savvy in its avoidance. They recognize, resent, and avoid advertisements whenever possible. An estimated 51% of Gen Z reported to AList (2017) that they use some form of ad-blocking software while 82% of them reported skipping ads immediately when given the choice. Sixty-nine percent reported physically doing something else to distract themselves during an un-skippable ad. These young people are responding to persuasion attempts by advertisers by attempting to make certain that the ads cannot influence them. This is, in my opinion, persuasion knowledge and reactance, in action. The proliferation of internet ad-blocking software and on-demand entertainment has reduced the visibility of traditional advertisements (Jatani, 2020), but brand placement is almost unavoidable. Ad Blocking has been estimated to cost publishers over \$78 billion, globally in 2020, alone. Recent developments in the field of ad-blocking have made it possible to automatically skip even “baked-in” ads or sponsored content from video media such as on YouTube or Twitch. It now falls to advertisers and artists to respond in turn and to find new ways of communicating with audiences such that their rights and desires are upheld. One way that advertisers have sought to do this is through brand placement.

In partial response to audience attitudes, technological opportunities, and revenue requirements the industry has been increasing its investment in brand placement. For the last decade, the size of the brand placement market has seen consistent growth. In 2012, the total amount of money spent on brand placement topped \$4.75 billion (USD). By 2019, this figure grew to a substantial \$11.44 billion. Despite an overall negative downturn of the global economy due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this industry still grew, and by much more than expected. In 2020, brands and studios spent a combined \$20.57 billion – over \$11 billion in the USA, alone, on placing brands in media (PQ Media, 2020). People were largely quarantined at home for the duration of the pandemic, their appetites for media all but insatiable. Studios needed the capital to create compelling experiences for them and brands took the opportunity to fund them in exchange for advertising rights.

The global movie and television production and distribution industry stands at \$116 billion USD (IBISWorld, 2021). In this industry where almost one-fifth of the production budgets are spent on brand placement and in which the importance of immersive experiences is paramount to success, it is imperative that brand placement strategies are modernized to fit the changing marketplace.

As with global movie and television the rationale and interest in brand placement is similar for the video game market. A report compiled by Admix (2021) surveyed 400 media buyers in North America and Europe and found that a staggering 93% of them intended to begin implementing in-game advertising by 2025 though many noted a lack of clarity as to how and

when to best implement them. The global games market reached \$176 billion USD in 2021 and is expected to continue growing in the foreseeable future. It is therefore unsurprising that game studios, too, are looking to brands to help fund their increasingly costly work. This is the medium in which mimetic brands were first made apparent to me, and logically so. As games are usually entirely computer-generated, every detail placed in them must be deliberately created. Artists have used mimesis to create a sense of realism to their worlds. If mimetic brands do prove to be useful marketing tools, they may have another way of fulfilling their fundraising requirements without necessarily compromising on their artistic vision. Mimetic brands may serve a dual purpose: to remind audiences of a target but also to support the overall artistic direction, themes, and messages of the artists who create them.

While the use of brand placement accelerates, there appears to be considerable room for its optimization. Searches of the popular press yield insights into how people feel about brand placement in their media. When it comes to advertisements, it seems brand placement is more acceptable to audiences than ads that interrupt an experience outright, though often not by very much. A recent episode of the TV program “Loki” came under heavy scrutiny by audiences who felt that the final scene – one that takes place inside a department store – was gratuitously filled with brand placement (Fossen, 2021). Audiences felt as though they were watching an ad which they could not skip. They felt exploited, as though their experience was leveraged by an advertiser to manipulate them. Mimetic brands offer an important tool to artists to fill out their worlds without losing potential revenue streams that make their work possible.

Forbes (Sharbatian, 2020) reported on games containing brand placements and argues that for the strategy to work, the brands must serve some part of the experience. Forging early relationships between brands and studios allows both parties to work together to ensure that the key features of the game are not disrupted and that the placement feels as though it is done in their service. Mimetic branding may be seen as an extension of this philosophy in that it too may serve the world-building and action of an experience without breaking immersion.

As the adage goes: *with great power comes great responsibility*. The mimetic branding strategy may be a powerful one in swaying audience attitudes and behaviour, but its ethicality must be considered. In the same way as Kuhn, Hume, and Love (2010) outlined the potential ethical issues surrounding traditional brand placement, mimetic brands may carry similar ethical weight. I delved deeper into this in question 1, but if mimetic brands work by circumventing defense mechanisms and even consciousness, then they may be akin to subliminal advertising. If laypeople learn of their power and use, they may feel even more betrayed and manipulated by media studios and brands. As such, care must be taken in implementing mimetic brands and in remaining transparent to them. With this transparency, however, comes the risk of the strategy not working as well. I am confident that a middle ground may be reached, but the first step required is to fully understand if and how these brands may affect audiences. Furthermore, if mimetic brands are currently affecting people, we have an ethical obligation to study them and determine whether they are appropriate persuasive tools for widespread use.

Brand placement is an integral part of modern media production. Often, the media experiences we enjoy most are made possible thanks to brand placement deals. Mimetic brands, already being used in the media without formal study, represent a new communication tool that brands may use to reach their target audiences. As on-demand content and individualized marketing become more common, so too may the use of mimetic brands. It remains unknown, for now, how they may be shaping consumer behaviour. In preserving the state of narrative transportation, I hypothesize that mimetic brands may avoid the resentment and resistance audiences now feel towards traditional advertising and brand placement in their media. This study and stream of research will attempt to test and validate this strategy, thus contributing to the more effective deployment of brand placement advertising budgets and less intrusive media experience.

Chapter 2

The Case for Mimetic Brand Placement in Media

“Life imitates art far more than art imitates life” – Oscar Wilde

In 1981, Tsukasa Hojo began animating and publishing *Cat’s Eye* (キャッツ アイ), his first serialized manga, a type of Japanese comic book, about a trio of sisters living as baristas by day and vigilante art thieves by night. With the story unfolding in Tokyo, Hojo set out to animate the bustling metropolis, complete with its dense streets, crisscrossed webs of electrical wires, neon lights, and of course, its abundant stores and restaurants. In capturing the sights of the city – any city, really – artists like Hojo frequently put in details that anchor their fiction within understandable and familiar contexts. Often, a simple way to achieve this is by including brands. Logos are a sort of pithy shorthand that allows the artists to infuse their work with cultural meaning and realism (Steuer, 1992), teaching us about the characters, their lives, and the artist’s commentary about the real world. In the case of *Cat’s Eye*, that meant including references to the most recognizable fast-food company in history: McDonalds.

You cannot just animate a McDonald’s in your own commercial work, though, as it would infringe on their copyright. When artists want to include brands, they typically have to license the logo from the brand. This is both costly and comes with strings attached. Brands will often dictate under which circumstances their intellectual property may be used. Not wanting the cost or loss of creative control, Hojo found an ingenious workaround, one that would reverberate through Japanese culture for decades. He turned the Golden Arches upside-down and in doing so, created a fictitious but recognizable brand: “WcDonald’s”. This way, he was able to borrow the associations and attitudes audiences have about McDonald’s without being beholden to the company, nor promoting for them, or so he thought. If audiences immediately made the connection between WcDonald’s and the real thing, did its inclusion function as an advertisement despite Hojo’s intention? It is possible that disguising the brand just a little changed the way audiences processed its placement. In a sense, WcDonalds may have become an extension of the McDonald’s brand, an advertising stratagem, albeit an unaffiliated one.

WcDonald’s appeared in many more works than just *Cat’s Eye*. It appears the fictitious fast-food franchise struck a chord with audiences and artists, alike, as it has been included in many different manga, anime, video games, and films since its 1981 debut. The “brand” took on a life of its own, popping up in unexpected places; different cities, times, even planets. Like a meme, the use of WcDonald’s propagated through different media as a stand-in for the real thing, but also increasingly as a reference connecting one work to a larger body of art.

Over the last thirty years, WcDonald’s became an iconic sight, particularly within Japanese media. One has to wonder what effects it had on the millions of audience members and readers who stumbled across one or more of its many incarnations. Did they notice it? Did they connect the familiar arches with the ones in our world? Did it feel like an advertisement? Most

importantly: did the ubiquitous placement of WcDonald's affect audience attitudes or behaviour towards real-world McDonald's? WcDonald's and other similar fictitious brands will be the focus of this essay. Before continuing on with the theoretical foundations of the proposed mechanisms and effects of such brands, it is worthwhile understanding how the story of WcDonald's has evolved again over the timeframe during which this research was conducted.

Whether the unaffiliated and fictitious WcDonald's affected McDonald's, it certainly gained their attention, along with that of audiences. In early 2024, McDonald's partnered with Japanese animation house, Studio Pierrot, and announced that it would release four animated short films about the WcDonald's company and the world it inhabits. McDonald's had reclaimed the fictitious spoof and welcomed it into its considerable portfolio of brands and marketing tools. Perhaps in celebration or in recognition of the desire to include McDonald's restaurants in art, marketers officially connected the two brands and with them, the immense body of art with the now multinational fast-food goliath. The company even went as far as rebranding many of its locations across the world as WcDonald's, promoting the animated films with limited-time collectable artwork, products, and food. This strategy allowed the brand to coalesce all of the ideas surrounding WcDonald's in the myriads of universes in which it appeared, directly transferring them to their company. In this way, they retroactively transformed what were purposefully not advertisements or paid sponsorships into a thirty-year-long marketing venture.

This story speaks of the immense power held by fictitious brands. For decades, artists sought to distance themselves from advertising when in reality they may have been doing a better job than McDonald's could have even hoped. This essay will continue to discuss mimetic brands and the ways in which they affect audiences, artists, and real-world brands. It builds on the previous one by expanding the application to important stakeholders as well as further delves into the mechanics and ethics of mimetic brands.

The goals of this essay are thus twofold:

1. To build upon the foundations laid in study 1 towards a better understanding of mimetic brand placement
2. To determine the factors that may lead to more successful, ethical, and long-term implementation of mimetic brand placements in media.

Mimetic Brand Placement Today

Before you could walk into a WcDonald's to grab your WcNuggets and Coke, the brand occupied a very strange grey area from a marketing perspective. Was it a brand? It was recognizable, but was it real and what would that even matter? When audiences saw it, they were immediately reminded of McDonald's, but the important question is how they saw such a placement. Was it simply an advertisement, seen through increasingly discerning eyes, or was the thin veil of mimicry enough to trick them into keeping their guard down? If WcDonald's activated positive associations with McDonald's without being perceived as an ad, then audiences may not have processed it through their normal defenses against attempts to

manipulate them. As such, McDonald's and brands like it may prove to be very powerful marketing tools, though if they only work by exploiting readers who do not recognize them for what they are, then perhaps their ethicality is questionable. The second essay in this dissertation was written to explore the effects these brands have on various stakeholders and asks under which circumstances they can be deployed ethically.

As in study 1, this essay defines such brands as mimetic when they borrow the trade dress of existing recognizable brands to evoke specific associations or ideas within a work of media and are not widely available for sale. To clarify the term, I will provide several examples. By this definition, McDonald's was once a mimetic brand but transitioned into a real product line. It may represent the most successful transition from a mimetic brand to a real one. Bernie Botts Every Flavoured Beans was a completely fictional brand of jellybean from the Harry Potter franchise which were later produced and sold by Jelly Belly. It was not mimetic in the original work, nor is it now. Nuka Cola is a fictional cola brand from the Fallout franchise which does leverage the trade dress and marketing practices of Coca Cola to lend realism and economic commentary to its world without being available for sale outside of small collectors' items. It is thus defined as a mimetic brand. A red and white can of soda, a white pear on a laptop computer, and Let's brand potato chips are all examples of mimetic brands that may appear in shows, films, games, or text media. Despite little to no research concerning them, mimetic brands are entirely common additions to modern media. I invite you to remember this as you watch whatever modern show or movie you choose to in the near future. They are ubiquitous and inescapable. If they are affecting audience, brands, and the artists who place them, then their study is absolutely necessary.

Placing mimetic brands may not always follow with an intent to persuade or manipulate audiences. On the contrary, I posit that many such brands are placed by artists who intentionally want to lend a sense of verisimilitude to their fictional worlds without compromising their artistic vision or compromising the audience's experience with distracting and unwanted advertising messages. The first study in this line of research demonstrated that, ironically, placing mimetic brands may actually exceed the efficacy of placing real ones in shifting attitudes and behaviour.

By mimicking brands, artists are inadvertently and sufficiently veiling the persuasive power of a real brand behind their stories and fictional world building, tricking audiences into processing them as narrative information, rather than as an ad. Thus, audiences are less likely to be critical of the placement and of the real brand relative to seeing the real one. This begs the most important question in this new field of research, and one of the main focuses of this dissertation: do mimetic brands only lead to positive outcomes for real brands because audiences are not aware of this strategy, and if so, then are they ethical tools?

How Brand Placement Works

The practice of deliberately including brands within works of media to influence audiences' behaviour and attitudes is known as brand or product placement (Balasubramanian, 1994). It is typically designed to be unintrusive yet remind audiences of a brand within an

already enjoyable or exciting context in the hope that some of those feelings are transferred from the context to the placed brand, a notion called Excitation Transfer Theory (Zillmann, 2008). Notwithstanding the best intentions of brands and the studios who place logos or products in media, this strategy is not without risk. The considerable defense mechanisms built up by laypeople against marketing tactics often lead to feelings of manipulation or deception when confronted with brands in media (Nelson, 2002). These in turn often trigger patterns of counter arguing (Cowley & Barron, 2008) and even spite towards the message sender (Torrance and Brehm, 1986). Brand placement in media is often seen as little more than an interruption of the experience (van Reijmersdal, 2009). As such, while still being a common advertising method, if these pitfalls could be avoided then it stands to become more potent, less distracting, and possibly as exciting and novel as it seemed to us as it did in films like E.T. This dissertation asserts that careful use of mimetic branding is a next step in the evolution of in-media advertising that is designed to solve many of these problems. Babin et al., (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 relevant articles of brand placement and noted that among the most important factors contributing to its success as a persuasive tool were plot-connection and placement prominence. Mimetic brands may be uniquely tailored to fit into fictional narratives, allowing for more natural congruence with the plot and thus hopefully allow for more prominent and less disruptive placements.

At its core, the study of mimetic brands in media is an exploration of the power of narratives that shape us and the world we create for ourselves. In the pursuit of studying such a strategy, it is easy to lose sight of the responsibility one must understand how it could be ethically deployed. The second study in this dissertation builds upon the findings of the first phases while reframing the research on what is truly important: the audience. This study was designed to further test the bounds and inner workings of mimetic branding as a marketing strategy while paying close attention to its ethicality and its impact on host media.

Marketing is an applied discipline that synthesizes work from a number of related fields and presents new ideas and practices that can not only further the academic field but improve the relationships between audiences and brands. The first study demonstrated that mimetic brands can positively affect attitudes and behavioural intentions towards real-world targets. The results suggest that brands may benefit from collaborating with artists by affording them some creative freedom in redesigning their products so the new brands may fit better within the fictionalized works. In this way, studios may continue to rely on financial support from brands seeking to advertise in their films, shows, games, or other stories. With the costs of modern media production frequently exceeding hundreds of millions of Dollars for a film or even a single episode of a series, this support is often a strictly necessary part of the artistic process. In this way, studios and brands continue to collaborate in pursuit of their respective goals and provide audiences with a constant stream of high-quality entertainment.

This sounds like an excellent middle ground, one that can fill a growing void currently occupied by traditional product placement. Study 1 was an important step towards understanding

mimetic brands and the effects that they have on audience behaviour. For mimetic brands to ever see deliberate and widespread use in the market, the interests of all three parties – studios, brands, and audiences, must be preserved. Without ensuring that each party's objectives are met, the scope of the mimetic branding strategy may be severely limited. Brands must be sure that they will see a return on their marketing spending, studios need to be sure that the inclusion of mimetic brands is inoffensive and unintrusive, and audiences' rights absolutely must be respected. The first study was primarily focused on outcomes that are beneficial to brands: attitude and purchase intention. This second study sought to expand on earlier findings and address the other two important stakeholders' interests. More specifically, this study was designed to test the effects of mimetic brands on enjoyment of the host narrative as well as the ethicality of including them as persuasive tools.

Narrative Transportation Into Stories

Audiences certainly seek enjoyment from their narrative experiences, but that enjoyment is often predicated on the level to which they are allowed to become immersed in the story. This immersion – this journey of the self into illusory worlds – is called narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000, 2004). The present stream of research continues to build upon the growing body of work concerning how people connect with and are changed by narratives. Narrative transportation theory describes the two concurrent ways that audiences may be absorbed into a story: (1) they empathize with story characters and (2) their imagination is activated by the story leading to a suspension of reality (van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014). It describes the feeling of the real world and oneself seemingly melting away, replaced by the action and feelings of the story's world. Our senses are replaced with ones from within the story, to a degree, we experience the feelings of the characters in the narrative. In this way, the stories we consume may profoundly and persistently affect us.

The term “transportation” is *almost* literal. When audiences watch films, read books or otherwise experience a narrative, that activity is not a passive one. We are constantly and very actively interpreting them, examining their meaning, comparing it with our own experiences and resolving the two (Hamby, Daniloski, and Brinberg, 2015). In allowing a little piece of ourselves to be absorbed by and enter stories, so too do we allow it to return changed, molded by new experiences. Within a marketing context, studies have been done that demonstrated that even advertisements that tell stories wrap up audiences into a narrative with the goal that they are positively changed by the experience and bring with them positive attitudes to the brand (Escalas, 2004; Dessart, 2018).

The state of narrative transportation is an enjoyable yet fragile state (van Laer et al., 2019). It is both difficult for audiences to allow themselves to slip into the state and incredibly easy for them to be taken out. There are some factors which artists largely cannot control – a crying baby in a theater, an uncomfortable chair, or the idiosyncrasies of the individual audience members – that can all break the fragile transportive state. Just the same, there are factors well within the control of artists that may also work against their goals; first and foremost of which is

the quality of the narrative. This factor falls outside of the scope of this dissertation but it is worth considering when evaluating the efficacy and effects of mimetic brands. In short, transportation is achieved when audiences experience a narrative that successfully captivates their attention and imagination. This may be easier said than done, but for the purposes of this research we considered only narratives which can demonstrably engage audiences in this way.

Brand Placement – A Financial Reality

Artists and the studios for which they work strive to create immersive, exciting, entertaining media. Whether it be in pursuit of artistic goals or financial ones, they must deliver quality experiences, vying for audiences' limited time and attention in a market that is absolutely saturated with increasingly better options. Every facet of these works is meticulously planned; from scripting through casting, acting, and even marketing, the details are painstakingly crafted to ensure that audiences are entertained. The reality is that the cost of producing compelling films, games, and shows continues to increase and, with it, so does the reliance on advertising contracts with brands.

One increasingly scrutinized factor that may lead to diminished transportation is brand placement. (Balasubramanian, 1994). By embedding brands in television shows, movies, or video games, marketers were supposed to be able to reach their audience without breaking them out of their experiences (Kuhn, Hume, & Love, 2010) as opposed to an ad break. As the transportive state is so fragile, artists and studios are extremely careful when choosing which brands to place, and how. It is very easy for such a placement to backfire, reducing the impressions of the work as well as the brand placed. For instance, brands that are placed too prominently (Cowley & Barron, 2008) or ones whose placement conflicts with the logic of the action (Russell, 2002) of the story are often seen as intrusive. This intrusion triggers a set of defense mechanisms collectively referred to as "Persuasion Knowledge" (Friestad and Wright, 1994). The persuasion knowledge model encompasses the ways in which people apply their knowledge of marketing tactics to determine when messages are meant to persuade them and adjust their thinking to cope with those attempts. When we see advertisements, for example, we access our persuasion knowledge to process the messages with scrutiny and skepticism. We understand that the information presented is not entirely factual but is designed to manipulate our behaviour. When brand placement is perceived to be more than a prop in service of the story and becomes either too prominent or incongruent with the narrative, persuasion knowledge may kick in, changing the nature of the audience's experience (Cowley & Barron, 2008). The presence of a brand, an artificial and unwanted intrusion, becomes the focus and shatters the delicate transportive state.

We have access to vast and ever-growing libraries of stories with which to spend our time and money. Streaming services, cloud storage, and the like continue to make finding movies, shows, and games a matter of choosing from an at-times overwhelming number of options, rather than simply watching whatever is on TV. With so many options available to us, studios and artists must cut through that noise, providing a stream of high quality and innovative content. The choice whether to see one film or another is one made so frequently and may be sensitive to

such seemingly small annoyances. As such, artists and studios are acutely aware of the risks of including anything that could disrupt the experience. These works are expensive and risky to produce, and the survival of the studio often hangs in the balance when a new work is published.

With the risks so high, it is understandable that despite mimetic brands having been demonstrated to increase brand attitudes and purchase intention, further study is required before studios can be expected to accept and implement a mimetic brand placement strategy. As discussed in study 1, *good* brand placements are those that successfully avoid activating negative persuasion knowledge and mimetic brands may actively suppress it. The advantages suggested by study 1 principally benefit the brands, rather than the studios or the audiences. The question remains whether mimetic brands preserve or even add to the experience for audiences, thus benefiting them, the studios, and artists who include them in their work. The present study was designed in part to determine the effects of mimetic brands on audiences' experiences of a story.

Enjoyment and the Goals of Audiences and Studios

Studios may *need* audiences to enjoy their work to stay in business, but audiences certainly expect to or want to. When we spend our time or money on a story, we do so to be entertained, delighted, excited, or to otherwise enjoy the narrative experience. This is the first of two main audience goals that mimetic brands may preserve. If audiences' enjoyment is unaffected or even augmented by mimetic brands, then the strategy may be an attractive alternative to brand placement from both the audience and studio perspectives. In order to most parsimoniously capture the goals of studios and artists and the first concern of audiences, this study included enjoyment as the primary dependent variable. In this way, it was my hope that this would address the very first question that an artist or studio might have before including a mimetic brand in their work: "How will audiences respond to these brands?" Despite our innate understanding of what the feeling is, enjoyment is a difficult construct to operationalize, and much debate exists in the literature surrounding how to best do that (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004; Oliver & Nabi, 2004). In the present study, it was defined following Krakowiak and Tsay's (2010) conceptualization. As such, it is defined here as a dual-faceted construct comprised of both affective and cognitive enjoyment – two related but distinct aspects of the variable. This model was both theoretically and logically sound, while also allowing for post-hoc examinations and future research directions following asymmetrical findings between the two types of scales.

Though there are many kinds of narratives and thus many reasons with which to engage with them, this dissertation is predominantly concerned with stories which grant some sort of hedonic value. Thus, this research may only apply to works of fiction designed to entertain audiences, for now. It stands to reason that the commercial success of such works and by extension the people behind them hinges on the fulfilment of audiences' goal of being entertained. This is as opposed to works designed to inform audiences or challenge their beliefs, for example. The first goal of the present study was to ascertain whether mimetic brands were disruptive to or otherwise compromised the experience. When real brands are included in narratives, their effect on attitudes often depends on the reason, or at least the perceived reason,

that they were included. Brands possess a great deal of imbued meaning and associations which artists can borrow to inform audiences about a character's traits or add contextual information or verisimilitude to the setting of a story. Per Delorme and Reid (1999), and Lewis and Porter (2010) brands may enhance the narrative, provided they add realism and context to the story. Conversely, they may detract from the experience when they draw too much attention and activate their negative persuasion knowledge, irritating and distracting audiences (Cowley & Barron, 2008).

In both the present study and the first, the specific measure of persuasion knowledge that was measured was the appropriateness of an advertisement. This was based on a subscale developed by Boerman et al., (2018) that captures the perceived appropriateness of a persuasive attempt. This scale measures audiences' beliefs about whether a persuasive attempt is fair, acceptable, or legitimate, for example. Persuasion knowledge is a complex construct of which they may certainly be other fascinating facets to study. In this stream of research, this one was chosen for its simplicity and more obvious links to the manipulated and collected variables. The present study also included measures of attitudes towards advertising, directly, adapted from Sandage and Leckenby (1980).

The Importance of Transparency

Brand placement may or may not be acceptable to audiences based on a number of factors, some of which were mentioned above. In study 1, placement of mimetic brands was demonstrated to reduce negative persuasion knowledge and associated negative feelings without reducing narrative transportation and, as a result, led to positive brand outcomes as opposed to placement of real ones. They work as advertising tools because they seem to remind audiences of a target brand without being perceived as an ad. If, however, mimetic brands are to be used deliberately as a marketing strategy, then over time audiences will inevitably learn about them and eventually maybe begin to feel the same way about mimetic brand placement as they do about traditional brand placement.

Therein lies an interesting opportunity both from a theoretical and practical perspective. It is important to understand the mechanisms behind mimetic brand placement because they may yield insights into the ways in which the relationships between marketers and audiences continue to evolve. With the strategy in its nascency, it also affords marketers a unique chance to control the narrative surrounding mimetic brand placement. How people feel about mimetic brand placement may depend on the way in which it is introduced. Given that such a tactic may not stay secret indefinitely, I posit that brands, studios, and audiences would be best served by a transparent implementation, rather than a deceptive one.

Though this dissertation is the first study of mimetic brands, previous studies have demonstrated that transparency of product placement advertisements in media can increase their potency (Chan, 2020). These findings seem unintuitive, as it would be logical to assume that calling attention to advertising is a surefire way to prime audiences to scrutinize the

advertisement, thus reducing their immersion and enjoyment of the media in which it is placed and lowering the efficacy of the placement at shaping attitudes and behaviour (Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth, 2007). Notwithstanding, Chan (2020) found that fully and transparently disclosing product placement prior to a film drastically increased unaided brand recall and brand evaluations. When placement deals were disclosed to the audiences, the audiences were more likely to feel informed and less motivated to scrutinize the program or defend themselves against the advertisement. In contrast, when the placement deals were only partially disclosed, audiences spent more time looking for product placements and enjoyed the experience significantly less. Similarly, when product placements were disclosed transparently, audiences were more likely to enjoy the program and, through excitation transfer theory (Zillmann, 2008), the embedded brands.

Chan's (2020) findings were taken along with the findings of study 1 of this dissertation to inform the design of study 2. Chan, similarly to my first study, examined the relationship between program liking and brand evaluations and how it may be affected by psychological trait reactance and program involvement. Chan found that participants with higher baseline trait reactance were less likely to enjoy programs after a full disclosure, and program involvement was not found to be a significant moderator of disclosure and program liking. In designing the present study, I hoped to build on this foundation, exploring the ways that different disclosure types may affect the efficacy and acceptability of mimetic brand placements. Expanding on my previous findings, I also sought to expand on the nature of the relationships between disclosure and the interactions audiences have with narratives, choosing narrative transportation as a mediating variable over Chan's program involvement. Additionally, I chose to forgo repeating reactance measures used in study 1 which measured not trait but acute reactance. Instead I chose to focus more on underlying variables like attitudes towards advertising and controversy.

Disclosure and Service Dominant Logic

Whereas the goals of the first study were primarily centered on the potential benefits to brands, the philosophy guiding this second study recentered these goals for the benefit of all key stakeholders. Thus, I adopted a service dominant logical (SDL) approach (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and examined the potential for mimetic brands to serve not as secret weapons for brands but rather as tools of value co-creation. I see audiences as important co-creators of the value of mimetic brands. This is to say that the power of mimetic brands to persist as an effective and unintrusive marketing strategy lies equally in the hands of audiences as it does in those of studios and brands. Audiences cannot be expected to passively accept mimetic branding, nor should the strategy be implemented without their rights and wants being preserved. All three stakeholders must work together to design and implement mimetic brands in media as well as continually monitor and adapt them if the need arises. Mimetic brands stand to be an acceptable middle-ground between advertising and narrative content, but their success will depend on the extent to which their placement does not interfere with host narratives or unfairly manipulate audiences.

Whether audiences see mimetic brands as a new weapon in the ever-growing arsenal of dirty marketing tricks or a new and acceptable compromise between entertainment content and advertising may depend on the perceived transparency of the strategy. Disclosing or otherwise informing audiences of the persuasive intent of what seems like an effective covert advertising tool seems counter-intuitive. In this dissertation, I do so for two important reasons: the ethical use of mimetic brands and their longevity in the market.

Scholars in the product placement milieu have long called for additional research testing different types of disclosure, as well as disclosing the motives behind advertising strategies to audiences (Van Reijmersdal, Tutaj, and Boerman, 2013). This dissertation, in part, seeks to answer this call. The experimental design of the present study centers on the nature of disclosure as the primary manipulation driving the effects of mimetic brand placement on purchase intention. This decision was made in pursuit of results that not only contribute to our nascent understanding of mimetic brand placement as well as to serve as a starting point for future implementation of the strategy in a wider market. This dissertation thus contributes to academic and industrial interests, expanding a new niche within marketing and communications literature and providing actionable information to marketers and audiences.

The way audiences perceive mimetic brands – be they as a new middle ground between advertising and narrative experiences or as another in a long line of ethically questionable and manipulative advertising tactics – may change the nature of audience’s reception of the strategy. It is thus crucial to determine how the framing of mimetic brands may affect audience reactions and whether those conditions are favorable enough for brands such that implementing the strategy is still financially viable. To this end, two rather extreme disclosure strategies were tested.

The two types of disclosure in this study differ in their framing of mimetic brands as advertising placed in media. They lie on opposite ends of a spectrum of what I hypothesized would represent acceptable advertising practices. In the first condition, referred to as the transparent condition, the disclosure of the mimetic brand framed the strategy as cooperative and respectful of audiences, focusing on freedoms afforded to artists adapting existing brands and plans to further educate wider audiences. This was done to reduce the oppositional nature of advertisers and audiences and to foster goodwill. In stark contrast, the second condition, called the deceptive condition, positioned mimetic branding as a manipulative and covert strategy that advertisers use to prey on unsuspecting audiences. Akin to subliminal messaging, mimetic brands were thus framed as tools that work to persuade or trick audiences because the public is yet unaware of the tactic.

Though very different, these two disclosure strategies also represent best and worst-case scenarios for mimetic brand placement implementation. In both conditions the would-be targets of the persuasive messages were made completely aware of the purpose of the mimetic brands they would see. The only differences lie in how that information was presented. In my opinion,

any ethical implementation of mimetic brand placement ought to include educating audiences about how the tactic works. As such, in any long-term use of the strategy one must assume that audiences become familiar with mimetic brands as advertising messages. Audience members who are not deliberately educated about the use of mimetic brands may find out about them through other channels and conclude that the fictionalized brands they are seeing have been placed there to control their behaviour without their knowledge or consent. They may then share their discoveries and thoughts, reaching a wider population of audiences that may rightfully share in their frustration and opposition towards brands and studios.

We do not yet know how audiences may react to mimetic brands, but it is with these outcomes in mind that these disclosures were tested in the present study. They were designed to test two possible results of implementation of mimetic brand placements in media from which lessons may be learned to steer any ethical long-term implementation of the strategy. I hypothesized that following a transparent disclosure strategy, participants in this study would be more likely to enjoy the narrative that followed, as well as the placement of the brand. As with study 1, this effect was hypothesized to lead to increased purchase intentions and would be driven in part by maintaining high levels of narrative transportation and lowering ad-related persuasion knowledge. Thus, based on the above theoretical framework as well as the results of study 1, the present study centers on the following specific hypotheses:

H_{1a,b}: A transparent disclosure will be associated with increases in media enjoyment (a) and attitudes towards advertising (b) relative to a deceptive one.

H_{2a,b}: Increases in media enjoyment and attitudes will be associated with increases in narrative transportation (a) and ad appropriateness (b) relative to a deceptive one.

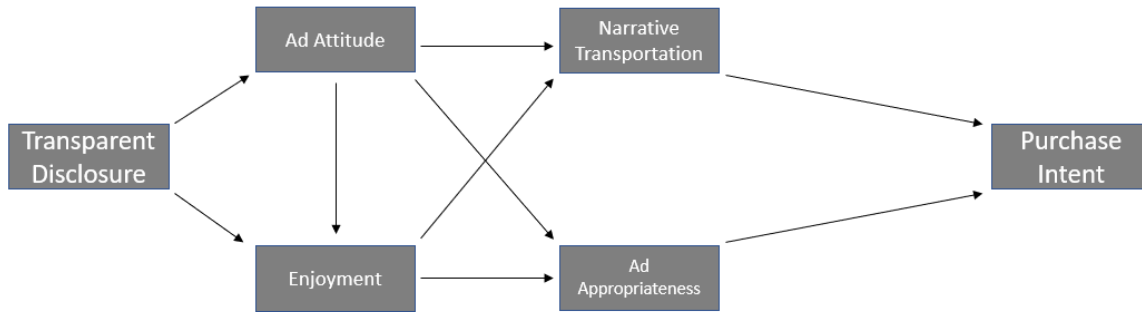
H₃: Increased narrative transportation and ad appropriateness will be associated with increased purchase intentions.

As in study 1, a more parsimonious and complete structural equation model was also tested. This model predicted a more specific mechanistic pathway by which the transparency of disclosure would ultimately lead to differences in purchase intention. These paths are suggested in hypotheses 1 through 3, but testing a complete model is a more rigorous and thorough examination of these theories. This new model is included below in Figure 7. As this new model included measures of ad attitude as well as enjoyment, the link between narrative transportation and ad appropriateness was deemed to be less theoretically sound relative to study 1, at least in this current study. In contrast with study 1, narrative transportation was not manipulated, this time, and thus its connection with ad appropriateness was more tenuous. Instead, a new link between ad attitude and this measure of persuasion knowledge was included in the new model, and another between it and enjoyment. The purpose and main manipulation of this present study was centered around capturing the effects of different disclosure strategies on Enjoyment and Ad Attitude. Thus, the examining direct effects of these new constructs on central variables from study 1 – persuasion knowledge and narrative transportation – follows a more logical and causal

model. It is clear from study 1 that there may be important links between all of these variables, but their specific positions in a structural model are also dependent upon the specifics of studies in which they are examined. The remaining paths in the proposed model follow from either hypotheses one through three or replicate the findings of study 1. Taken as a whole, this proposed path represents the fourth hypothesis: the sequential relationships between the central variables in this study.

H4: The relationship between disclosure type and purchase intention will be driven by a series of effects depicted in Figure 7.

Figure 7
Proposed SEM – Study 2



Note: Theoretical framework of the hypothesized relationships between experimental variables. All relationships were hypothesized to be positive.

Generative Artificial Intelligence and Latent Biases

The present study required the development of new stimuli. Though significant, the results of study 1 were small and I argued that perhaps they could have been amplified with a higher level of induced narrative transportation. To that end, study 2 presented new images alongside the narrative text to elicit that higher level of transportation (Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2019; van Laer, Feireisen, Visconti, 2019). A personal essay about my thoughts and experiences learning about generative artificial intelligence is appended to this dissertation in Appendix C.

In designing the new stimuli to be used in the present study, I elected to use generative artificial intelligence (AI) to create the visual components of the story. Without training in visual art and design, generative AI allowed me to personally develop and iterate upon images that fulfilled research goals without introducing other potentially confounding elements. Though not without its unique challenges, the tool that was used ultimately allowed me to personally control the experiment in a way that was both precise and personally satisfying.

Before I could use generative AI effectively, I required several months of training with the various available tools and platforms. With the help of online forums, personal friends, and publicly available tools, I developed the necessary skillset with which I was able to produce the images. It was on this journey and through these interactions, however, that I was exposed to both passionate early adopters of the technology and its harshest critics. It was the discourse between the two extremes and all of those in between that would give shape to a new dimension of this dissertation. There are two factors that I began considering at that time: the output of AI models and the public's acceptance thereof.

Beginning with the former, I would like to briefly summarize how these images are generated. At the time of writing this dissertation, generative AI programs such as StableDiffusion function by parsing input sentences and sequentially generating and removing noise from an image until it matches cues from that prompt with reference images on which it was trained, until it reaches an acceptable level of convergence. As such, the output of generative AI models is entirely dependent on the image libraries on which they are trained. In this way, AI models take in real images and output new ones which approximate facets of the real world, amalgamating millions of potential inputs to best capture the users' desired concepts.

Much in the same way that artists may be informed by their surroundings when creating fictionalized worlds, so too are generative AI models. Operating under the guidance of prompt keywords like "realistic" or "modern", AI models will draw from their immense libraries of images of the real, modern world. As stated in an earlier section of this dissertation: our world is a branded one. As such, the output images will almost always include depictions of branded elements commonly included in real photographs. These elements are usually not 1:1 recreations of real brands, but very much like mimetic brands, evoke commonly seen brands like Coca Cola, McDonalds, and the like. Though these elements are not added intentionally and thus do not fully meet the criteria to be defined as mimetic brands, they may still have unintentional effects on viewers. These pseudo-mimetic brands require further study but merit some preliminary discussion in this related work.

Art generated through AI models differs quite meaningfully from that created on other software platforms. This is because AI tools do more than just simplify tasks but actively take on some of the burdens of creation from artists. Looking at a simpler example, consider word processing in Microsoft Word, or statistical analysis in SPSS. These are industry standard tools that simplify and streamline work tasks. In both cases, the quality and content of the work is almost entirely dependent on the knowledge, skills, and creative thinking of the individual. Microsoft Word does not suggest new ideas or synthesize research findings for its users. IBM SPSS does not suggest new analytical models or troubleshoot experimental design problems. AI models differ from these other tools as they leave their marks on their output. These models shoulder some of the weight with artists in creating images. When they are asked to generate images, their output is a function of pre-existing data. As a result, the images that are created are

driven by the creativity of an artist but are then molded by the training of that particular AI model.

Returning to pseudo-mimetic brands, they pose an interesting ethical question: if AI models trained to depict realistic imagery place brand imagery in images and pull image data from large and largely non-curated image repositories, then their output may preferentially depict more commonly photographed brands. For instance, when prompted to create a canned soda, how often might it depict Coca Cola? I wondered whether the ways in which AI models are trained may bias their outputs towards already recognizable and successful brands, prime candidates for mimetic branding under other circumstances.

To examine the potential latent biases in training these models, I conducted a small anecdotal study. I generated 100 images using Stable Diffusion (FLUX), with the following prompt: “Hyper realistic close-up photo of a canned soda, The soda is on a windowsill looking out onto a meadow on a warm summer day, vibrant, intricate details, sharp focus, product focus, crisp image, volumetric light, cinematic light, atmospheric perspective”. The generation workflow as well as the entire image set are appended to this dissertation in Appendix B. I purposefully described the atmosphere, style, and lighting in detail to accentuate the differences in the soda depicted, which was not described other than being canned. The images were all numbered and saved directly to a destination folder. None were deleted nor replaced.

Three independent judges then coded the dataset, identifying which of the sodas borrowed any iconic Coca Cola branding elements. The three judges found an average of 75 sodas of the 100 that they felt borrowed iconic branding elements from Coca Cola, with an inter-rater reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha) of .935. These results suggest that the generated images that evoked Coke were as obvious as those that did not. It is interesting to note, however, that the raters did not consider Red and white cans with legible logos that did not read “Cola” or simple red cans without writing to be evocative of Coca Cola. Had they included those, then their average Coca Cola detection would have likely surpassed 90. The stark contrast between those borderline cases and the even more obvious ones that contained actual Coca Cola branding may have accounted for those borderline cases not to be identified as similar to Coke.

These preliminary findings strongly suggest that AI models are affected heavily by artefacts of their training and databases which they reference. In its current state, generative AI may indeed preferentially depict Coca Cola when tasked with generating a canned soda. When artists use these tools to create realistic scenes AI models may insert aspects that mimic or in fact copy recognizable brands. As such, these tools may exert some form of unintended persuasive power over audiences, similar to mimetic brands. These findings also suggest a potential for misuse or manipulation of AI models by brands or corporations that would seek to influence the databases from which models may be trained in favor of their brands or against the interests of their competition.

In this dissertation, I argue that artist-created mimetic brands pose ethical problems, as they may unfairly manipulate audiences. I propose solutions that foster a cooperative and respectful relationship between brands, studios, and audiences that, if successful, would empower all three parties to make informed decisions. These solutions depend on interactions between those parties in give-and-take relationships that build reciprocal trust and benefits, possibly overseen by legal or political entities. Generative AI is not yet governed by the same principles as other people, nor can we yet legislate its use, and perhaps we never will. Output images that contain evocations of real brands may act much like mimetic brands do and ought to thus be subject to the same ethical scrutiny. Both types of fictionalized brands may violate the rights of viewers. AI-generated art continues to grow into its own industry, appearing in everything from craft stores to Hollywood productions and is thus important to consider now.

Though solutions to this potential ethical problem fall very much outside of the scope of this dissertation and my technical and legal expertise, it is worthwhile considering the impact that consumption of AI-generated art may have on audiences. As the tools for its creation continue to evolve and become more powerful, so too will its use become more widespread, amplifying any effects it may have on us. I say this not to disparage its use or curb the creative and functional uses these tools have, but to draw comparisons with mimetic brands to inform future research and ethical discussion. As this is being written, I know that the lines between AI tools and more established standards are already beginning to blur, but it is important to reflect on the impacts that tools have on the work that can be done with them.

This is but one example of a concern that people may have with the ever-growing use of generative AI tools. As the technology advances, so too do the severity and visibility of issues that may arise with it. Be it the possibility that generative AI will replace human labor, infringe on copyright, or assist in spreading dangerous misinformation, at the core of these issues is the idea that the tool will reduce or remove human agency. The advents of new technologies, especially those as disruptive as AI, have often led to drastic changes the balance of power, societal structure, and peoples' day-to-day lives. As such, there is reasonable cause for concern and to analyze and scrutinize the ways AI may affect our lives.

As discussed above, images and videos created with help from generative AI are becoming more common, and those images seem to be borrowing design elements from real brands. It is worth understanding how audiences' feelings towards mimetic brands may intersect with their concerns about how those images are created. As with any persuasive attempt, ultimately the goal of the message sender, in this case the advertising brand, is to try to manipulate audience behaviour. Audiences are used to advertisers trying to control their attitudes and purchasing behaviour, but I wondered if perhaps the same images made by real people or generative AI would foster differing reactions. We are for the first time seeing how persuasive brand imagery and new AI-driven technology are interacting, and studying these phenomena are as exciting as they are important.

Perceptions of Controversy

This dissertation is not positioned to solve the potential problems with implementing AI and assuage all of peoples' concerns but it is important to consider them in the context of mimetic brands. As a newly described and therefore still malleable marketing strategy, it is still possible to implement it with respect to audience concerns. Chief among these concerns is, again, the reduction of agency. AI seems to be igniting fears surrounding the loss of agency, and so might mimetic brands. Without oversight, mimetic brands hold the potential to become very potent covert persuasive tools and palpable threats to audience agency. As one of the primary goals of the present research is to explore attitudes towards mimetic brands and their implementation, uncovering their potentially controversial nature is a logical and imperative step towards that goal.

Whereas the main goal of implementing mimetic brands smoothly is acceptability, the opposite – its perceived controversy – ought to be understood and measured. Following Huhmann and Mott-Sternerson (2008), controversial advertising practices are defined as ones that offend or outrage audiences for decency or ethical reasons. Per this definition, I posit that the covert nature of mimetic brands and the threats to agency posed by AI both constitute possibly unethical practices and may therefore be controversial. In turn, these controversies may hinder the abilities of these strategies to garner audiences' approval and support key to their long-term implementation.

Once again, I hypothesized that framing mimetic brands transparently and emphasizing the collaborative nature of the relationships formed by brands, studios, and audiences would lower the perceived controversy of mimetic brand placement in a story, relative to the deceptive framing. It was my theory that such a framing would lessen any perceived threats to agency and, in turn, ease concerns about unethicity and thus controversy. I thus present this fourth hypothesis:

H5: A transparent disclosure will be associated with decreases in perceived controversy of mimetic branding relative to a deceptive one.

Though there are not yet examples of AI being used to create mimetic brands as marketing strategies in media, the notion is far from far-fetched. That is, after all, exactly what was done in preparation for this research. I know very well that generative AI is more than capable of delivering high-quality mimetic brand images. We do not yet know what will become of mimetic branding as a strategy, nor can we guess how AI will continue to develop, but we stand now at a point at which the two are both poised to change the ways in which we interact with brands, media, and advertisements. From a consumer-ethical perspective, the preservation of agency is self-evident, but I argue that even from a completely utilitarian perspective, successfully implementing mimetic brand strategies is contingent on the acceptability of the tactic among audiences. Therefore, regardless of viewpoint, as the strategy is introduced, it is

vital to understand how audiences feel about both mimetic brands and the ways in which they may intersect with feelings towards AI.

This study included several questions aimed at capturing the perceived controversy of the mimetic brand placement strategy. Through a secondary randomization towards the end of the study, participants were told that the images they saw were either the product of generative AI or a human artist. Their perceived controversy of the practice was measured before and after this information was presented, to see whether what they learned changed the way they felt about the experience. An open-ended question was also included to allow for additional comments or concerns about mimetic brands. By learning how audiences feel about mimetic brands and the use of AI in their implementation as a marketing strategy, I hoped to find new directions for research in the differences in how they were described and discussed. As mimetic brands and generative AI are very much in their nascency, there was not yet enough theoretical framework on which to base a hypothesis. I could not predict whether or how audiences' concerns about AI and mimetic brands might intersect. As such, in lieu of hypotheses, I present two research questions, below. The first examines the potential effects of AI and its use in implementing mimetic brands while the second expands our focus and field of view and seeks to uncover yet more research avenues and undiscovered effects.

RQ1: How will perceived controversy differ before and after being informed of the source of the imagery?

RQ2: How do sentiments differ between participants in each of the four experimental conditions?

As always, consumer ethics sits firmly at the center of the design and philosophy that guides this research. These questions begin to address additional concerns potentially held by audiences in the hope that they may be mitigated in the implementation of mimetic brand strategies. Additionally, they may shed light on yet unexplored themes and research avenues, allowing for the continued development of academic and industrial practices related to mimetic brands and generative AI and their interactions. From both of these perspectives, the answers to these research questions may help account for confounds and ensure more responsible marketing and research practices. As both constructs continue to evolve, the answers to these same questions may change over time. I posit that regularly examining how and why people react to them is a key part of the mutually beneficial relationships facilitated by mimetic brands between brands, studios, and audiences.

Summary of hypotheses – Study 2

H_{1a,b}: A transparent disclosure will be associated with increases in media enjoyment (a) and attitudes towards advertising (b) relative to a deceptive one.

H_{2a,b}: Increases in media enjoyment and attitudes will be associated with increases in narrative transportation (a) and ad appropriateness (b) relative to a deceptive one.

H3: Increased narrative transportation and ad appropriateness will be associated with increased purchase intentions.

H4: The relationship between disclosure type and purchase intention will be driven by a series of effects depicted in Figure 7.

H5: A transparent disclosure will be associated with decreases in perceived controversy of mimetic branding relative to a deceptive one.

RQ1: How will perceived controversy differ before and after being informed of the source of the imagery?

RQ2: How do sentiments differ between participants in each of the four experimental conditions?

Methodology – Study 2

Stimulus Development

For the second study, the interactive text experience “The Hike” was once again built with Twine (Twinery.org), which allowed participants to make choices that seemed to affect the outcome of the story. As in study 1, in order to preserve the integrity of the experimental manipulations, these choices always led to the same result. This allowed the data to be analyzed without controlling for participants’ story-specific decisions. The story was focused on the journey of a hiker who gets lost in the snow at night and then finds a shelter in which to keep warm. In that shelter, they find a box of old Mell-O powder and while it provided little sustenance or warmth it did make them feel nostalgic and safe, if only a little bit silly. As in the first study, this story was written with Jell-O in mind. The drama of the narrative and the brand placed was intentionally incongruous. This little bit of dissonance was added to ensure that positive and negative attitudes towards the placement could not be confounded by the effects of a more consonant brand’s placement, itself, like batteries for a flashlight or an energy bar. Though this decision led to placement that did not represent a worst-case nor a best-case scenario for brand placement in media, the strange juxtaposition of product and drama was deemed a necessary control that was required to get as unbiased data as possible and to better differentiate the results from each experimental condition.

In contrast with study 1 in which the text and background colours were manipulated to elicit differences in narrative transportation, in the present study the colours were manipulated but this time in service of the drama and ludonarrative consonance. As the character in the story found themselves in the dark, the text became slightly grey in an attempt to capture the feeling of snow reflecting moonlight. When the character warmed up by a stove at the end of the story, the background colour took on a red hue to mirror the fire light.

The narrative stimulus for study 2 also included images that accompanied certain passages to provide a more holistic and transportive experience. These images were created

using the open-source generative artificial intelligence program “Stable Diffusion”, versions one through three, within the Automatic1111, and ComfyUI interfaces. At the time of image generation, these represented the cutting-edge of artistic generative AI, though even by the time of writing this dissertation, newer and much more powerful models have been released. This program, though available at no cost, was accessed through the commercial website Rundiffusion (rundiffusion.com), to account for incompatibility between this author’s graphical processing unit and Stable Diffusion.

The specific prompts used to generate the images varied depending on the desired image type and Stable Diffusion version or model used. An image of a bowl of Mell-O, for example, was generated in SD2.5 with the following prompt:

“small steel camping bowl (half filled:1.5) with smooth red Jell-O, sitting on a splintering wooden windowsill, in front of frosty window, (extremely dim warm lighting:1.7), inside an abandoned wooden shack, (late night:1.8), late winter night, heavy snow”.

A picture of a frozen lake, generated in an earlier version required this more specific prompt:

“realistic, heavy falling snow in the air, a view from on the snow covered ice of a frozen lake in the dead of winter, ominous, (night:1.9), (very dark skies:1.8), dark dense forest in the distance, extremely dim small moon behind dark clouds in the sky, 4k, high def, Photorealistic, Hyperrealistic, Hyper detailed, analog style, realistic, masterpiece, best quality, ultra realistic, 8k, Intricate, High Detail, film photography, heavy shadow”

All images were generated using standard negative prompts that were typically designed to prevent text, people, and artefacts from generating, as well as improving the overall quality and specificity of the positive prompts. All pictures were generated as 1080 x 1080-pixel images and resized to fit within the available screens in the behavioural lab, as needed, such that participants would not need to scroll down to see them. The images were all generated to be as photorealistic as possible and included a snowy forest, a hat dropped on the snow, a frozen lake at night, a tattered box of old Mell-O powder, and more. Ultimately, thirty-two images were selected from an estimated 8,000 that were generated to be used in the story. “The Hike”, in its entirety containing all selected images is included for reference in Appendix A.

Procedure

The second study of this dissertation was completed in the spring of 2024. Once again, 243 undergraduate students were recruited through the John Molson Marketing Research Practicum Participant Pool and completed study 2 for course credit towards their introductory marketing classes. At the beginning of study 2, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. They would later be further randomized into one of two secondary experimental conditions, to be discussed later. The primary manipulation dictated the nature of a scripted preamble that preceded the narrative. These preambles were based on the principles outlined by Abela and Murphy (2008) in their application of attributes of Service Dominant

Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The preambles focused the participants' attention on these attributes, either satisfying or infringing upon them. This theory is extremely important and discussed later in this essay to contextualize the results of the study. In both experimental conditions, the participants were informed about mimetic brands, why they work, how they may be used, and why they merit research. They were told that Mell-O would be placed in the story that would follow and that brands may pay to place such mimetic brands in media they will consume outside of the lab.

In the Transparent condition, this information was framed as a middle ground between narrative content and advertising, emphasizing that brands want to afford a greater level of creative freedom to artists who place their products in their work. This could allow them to better incorporate those brands into their work, increasing the quality of both. Further emphasis was placed on how brands who employ this strategy want to clearly inform audiences of the connections between their product and the fictionalized ones placed in media in an effort to be ethical and transparent rather than deceptive. This preamble highlighted the collaborative nature of mimetic brands and the importance of respecting and not deceiving the audience. It addressed several of the tensions outlined by Abela and Murphy (2008). It was designed to alleviate tensions surrounding consumer autonomy, consumer protection, satisfaction, consumer engagement, consumer welfare. The present study was positioned in the preambles as a means of understanding the efficacy of and consumer attitudes toward mimetic branding.

In the Deceptive condition, the same information was instead framed as a surreptitious attempt by brands to manipulate consumer attitudes and behaviour. Participants were told that mimetic brands work to shape their behaviour by bypassing their psychological defense mechanisms built up against advertising. Like the prior condition, the same tensions were considered, though in this case they were exacerbated. As in the first condition, to this group, the present study was positioned as a means of understanding efficacy and attitudes towards mimetic brands. In both conditions, participants were given the opportunity to ask clarification questions to better understand the preambles. Though, in practice this was a very rare occurrence, and the majority of participant groups did not ask any follow-up questions.

After the preambles, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form and begin the study. Participants were then tasked with completing a narrative experience, the text of which was almost identical to that of study 1, called "The Hike". The text was adapted from the Mimetic x High Transportation condition from study 1 but included new artwork and text that referenced it. This text, nor the accompanying art varied across experimental conditions. Upon completion of the narrative experience, participants were asked to rate their enjoyment of the story, their levels of narrative transportation, their attitudes towards mimetic brands as an advertising strategy, persuasion knowledge, purchase intention towards the target brand: Jell-O, reactance towards the brand placement, perceived controversy, and several manipulation checks. Repeated measures of controversy were completed twice per participant.

At this point in the experiment, each participant was again randomly assigned using a randomizer in Qualtrics to one of two secondary experimental groups. Participants were told that the images that appeared alongside the text were created either by a human artist or through generative artificial intelligence. This task was placed toward the end of the study so that participants could easily remember their responses to the first controversy task, as well as frame the question transparently. The participants were encouraged to think about the use of artificial intelligence within the context of either a manipulative or transparent advertising strategy. Finally, participants entered their demographic information before receiving their participation credit and being dismissed.

Scales Used

Participants in Study 2 completed six scales to capture their attitudes towards mimetic brands and their disclosure. The *first scale* answered by participants was of enjoyment. The scale was comprised of eight Likert scale items that measured affective enjoyment and seven more that measured cognitive enjoyment. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as “I felt happy reading this story” (affective), and “I would like more information about this story” (cognitive). This scale was replicated from a study by Krakowiak and Tsay (2011), in which it was developed and yielded Cronbach’s Alphas of .93 and .87 for affective and cognitive enjoyment, respectively. In the present research, these were found to be .753 and .865.

The *second scale* in the present study was of narrative transportation. This was an adaptation of the Narrative Transportation Scale-Short Form (Appel, Richter, Gnambs, & Green, 2015) consisting of five Likert scale items adapted for use with a print ad for a film or game rather than as a reading experience. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as “I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the game” on a seven-point Likert scale, and the results summed to create a narrative transportation score. In 2020, Huang and Guo employed this scale and found a Cronbach’s Alpha of .88, demonstrating the high reliability of the measure. In this study, Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated to be .825.

The *third scale* measured ad attitude and was adapted from Sandage and Leckenby (1980). Despite being rather old, this scale still sees use in contemporary work, such as a study by Raja, Anand, and Allan (2023). It consisted of six Likert scale items on which participants rated their agreement with statements such as “This advertisement strategy was honest” and “This advertisement strategy was safe”. It yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha of .886 in the study by Sandage and Leckenby (1980) and of .885 in the present research.

The *fourth scale* captured ad appropriateness, a subscale of persuasion knowledge developed by Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rosendaal, and Dima (2018). The items asked participants to rate the appropriateness of the advertising strategy on a scale comprised of seven seven-point Likert scale items anchored on endpoints such as Unacceptable/Acceptable, Unfair/Fair, and Wrong/Right. The scale yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha of .95 in the original work and .927 in the present study.

The *fifth measure* was purchase intention. As employed by Mitchell and Nelson (2018), this consisted of an average of five Likert scales about participants' intention to buy the target brand. The scale items were anchored by endpoints like never/definitely and very low/high purchase interest. This measure, Mitchell and Nelson (2018), yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of .87, and in this study .96, indicating a high level of reliability.

The *sixth scale* measured the perceived controversy of the advertising strategy and was repeated twice. It was a three-item scale adapted from a study by Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson (2008) in which participants rated their agreement with statements about the controversial nature of the advertisement. The scale yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of .816 in the original work and ranged from .68 to .76 in groups in the present study. In this experiment, it seems as though one of the three items was not as correlated with the others, without which the Cronbach's Alpha would have meaningfully improved. It was still included in all analyses, as its removal did not meaningfully change the results.

Manipulation Checks

In the present study, three manipulation checks were performed. The *first manipulation check* was done to ensure that participants correctly read and understood whether the story and art they had seen were created by a person or by generative artificial intelligence. When asked which was true, all the participants in both groups correctly identified their experimental condition.

The *second manipulation check* determined whether participants understood that Mell-O was not actually available for purchase in stores. Despite the preamble, of the 240 participants, 30 (12.5%) still believed that Mell-O was a real brand, and not a mimetic one, as measured by a single item asking just that. There was no difference in the experimental groups to which these 30 participants were assigned, suggesting that whatever confused them was unrelated to the manipulations. All analyses were conducted both with and without these 30 participants and were unaffected by their exclusion unless otherwise stated. It was important to preserve the quality and integrity of data to ensure that this study truly captured feelings towards the placement of fictional brands, and not real ones, in media. Thus, an argument could be made to exclude participants who believed that Mell-O was real. Notwithstanding, it is equally important to consider the possibility that even given clear disclosure of the strategy, a proportion of audience members will inevitably misunderstand or ignore any such information. As such, the small amount of statistical noise introduced by these participants may better represent the realities of implementing mimetic brand placement strategies in the real market. Marketers who wish to introduce mimetic brands would benefit from a clear and honest picture of how audiences may react, and not a sanitized dataset.

The *third manipulation check* assessed whether the preamble successfully shaped the participants' view of mimetic brands as a transparent or deceptive practice. To this end, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the statement: "The purpose of this

advertising strategy is to somehow trick or deceive you”. The two experimental groups were found to significantly differ such that the mean of this item was higher in the deceptive group ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.115$) as compared to the transparent condition ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(238) = 2.229$, Cohen’s $D = .288$, 95% C.I. = [.033 - .542], $p = .027$.

Hypothesis Testing – Study 2

Nature of Disclosure

Transparent disclosure of mimetic brands was hypothesized to be related with higher story enjoyment and attitudes towards advertising relative to a deceptive one. The results of an ANOVA suggest that despite higher average (cognitive and affective) enjoyment in the transparent condition ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.07$) relative to the deceptive condition ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.22$), the F test revealed only a trend towards significance ($F_{1,238} = 3.673$, $\eta^2 = .015$, $p = .056$, $B_{\text{Transparency}} = .283$, 95% C.I. = [-.008 – .573]). In the case of average attitudes towards the advertising strategy, however, the higher mean in the transparent group ($M = 30.22$, $SD = 6.74$) as compared with the deceptive group ($M = 28.18$, $SD = 7.11$) represents a small but statistically significant positive effect of transparent disclosure of mimetic brand placement on ad attitudes ($F_{1,238} = 5.193$, $\eta^2 = .021$, $p = .024$, $B_{\text{Transparency}} = 2.038$, 95% C.I. = [.276 – 3.801]). H_{1a} was thus not supported while H_{1b} was, as the data suggest that disclosing the presence and motivation of mimetic brands led to increased attitudes towards the strategy and possibly media enjoyment, as well.

Narrative Transportation and Persuasion Knowledge

The increases in ad attitude (H_{2a}) and enjoyment (H_{2b}) following a transparent disclosure of mimetic brands were hypothesized to be associated with increases in narrative transportation and ad appropriateness (persuasion knowledge). Beginning with the former, per a regression analysis, ad attitude was a statistically significant predictor of more positive narrative transportation ($F_{1,238} = 75.94$, $\beta = .372$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I. = [.288 - .456]), explaining 24.2% of the variance in the variable ($R^2 = .242$). Ad attitude also significantly predicted ad acceptability ($F_{1,238} = 132.74$, $\beta = .092$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I. = [.076 - .108]), explaining 35.8% of the variance in the variable ($R^2 = .358$).

Media enjoyment was also a significant and strong predictor of more positive narrative transportation ($\beta = 3.38$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I. = [2.979 – 3.778]), explaining 53.8% of the variance in the variable ($R^2 = .538$, $F_{1,238} = 277.192$, $p < .001$). Though still significant, it was found to be a rather weak predictor of ad appropriateness ($F_{1,238} = 28.20$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .305$, 95% C.I. = [.192 - .418]), explaining 10.6% of the variance in the variable ($R^2 = .106$). It is important to note that this relationship lost statistical significance in the more rigorous structural equation, tested later. Still, enjoyment was a significant predictor of both narrative transportation and this dimension of persuasion knowledge. As the same was true for ad attitude, H_{2a} and H_{2b} were both strongly supported.

Purchase Intention

The third hypothesis in the present study posited that increases in narrative transportation and ad appropriateness would be associated with higher purchase intentions towards a target brand – in this case, Jell-O. Understanding the relationships between these variables began with assessing their correlations with one another. A significant but small correlation ($r_{238} = .257$, $p < .001$) suggests that while related, narrative transportation and ad appropriateness are two separate constructs. Moving on, a regression analysis found significant associations between narrative transportation and purchase intention with an R^2 of .14, ($F_{1,238} = 38.543$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .107$, 95% C.I. = [.073 - .141]). Another, between ad appropriateness and purchase intention ($F_{1,238} = 64.816$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .651$, 95% C.I. = [.492 - .810]) yielded an R^2 of .214. These results support H₃ as increases in narrative transportation and ad appropriateness, respectively, predicted 14% or 21.4% of the variance in purchase intention towards Jell-O.

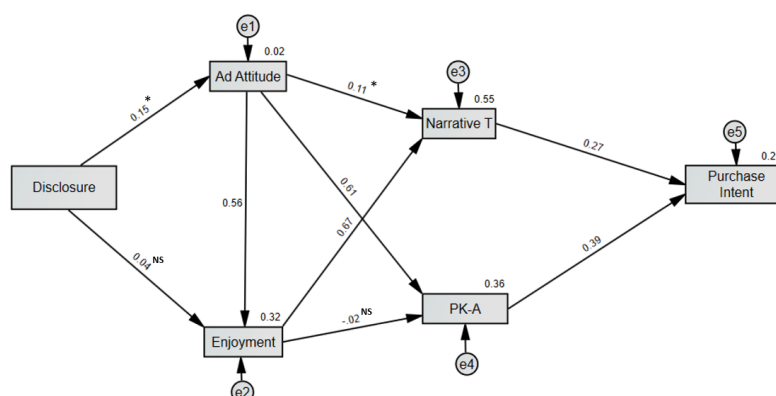
Structural Equation Model

The fourth hypothesis centered on a structural equation model that connects disclosure type with ad attitude and enjoyment, then narrative transportation and ad appropriateness, and ultimately to purchase intention. It could provide evidence for the mechanisms at play and much needed context to the complex and indirect relationships between the variables. Using AMOS 29, a model was created, tested, and depicted below. The model yielded a non-significant Chi squared test ($\chi^2(6, N = 240) = 9.570$, $p = .144$), as well as GFI and AGFI levels of .987 and .955, respectively. Taken together, these indices provide evidence that the model fits the data well and further analyses were completed.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the measurement model. Though the chi-square test did not reach significance ($\chi^2(619) = 1451.388$, $p < 0.001$), the TLI and CFI reached .863 and .873, respectively. The RMSEA was found to be .075. These results, though below the commonly accepted thresholds for statistical significance, may be attributed to the ratio of observed variables in the model (37) to the sample size ($N = 240$). Additionally, all factor loadings and covariances were statistically significant and there were no indications of skewness in the data. As the collected factors have all been previously validated measures, this model was deemed acceptable for this research. The CFA results can be found in Appendix E.

This model, depicted in Figure 8, below, confirmed almost all the proposed relationships between the variables, except those from disclosure type onto enjoyment, and subsequently from enjoyment onto ad appropriateness, mirroring the prior hypothesis tests. A post-hoc model was computed without these insignificant paths and fit the data well, suggesting a slightly different relationship between the variables, but requires confirmation by another study before it can be accepted. In both models, however, when the participants who believed that Mell-O was a real brand were removed, the effects of ad attitude on narrative transportation also failed to reach significance, though this is likely due to the lowered sample size.

Figure 8
Structural Equation Model – Study 2



Note: Structural equation model of variables and standardized estimates in study 2. All paths are significant at the 0.001 level unless marked with * denoting significance of .05, or NS (not significant).

The model largely supports H₄ and suggests a mechanistic explanation for how disclosure type of a mimetic brand ultimately increases purchase intentions towards a target brand. It is depicted below, along with standardized regression coefficients – which is to say the predicted change in one variable as a function of the one that preceded it in units of standard deviation. In this study, transparent disclosure led to increased ad attitude, which predicted increases in ratings of enjoyment, narrative transportation, and ad appropriateness. Higher enjoyment was also a very strong predictor of increases in ratings of narrative transportation. In turn, higher narrative transportation and ad appropriateness were significant predictors of higher purchase intentions towards Jell-O. The strong relationships between ad attitude and enjoyment and ad appropriateness as well as those between enjoyment and narrative transportation were of particular note and suggest that maximizing ad attitude and enjoyment of the story are vital to the success of any implementation of mimetic brands in media. The relationships that follow from narrative transportation and ad appropriateness to purchase intention serve to further underscore this finding as well as to replicate some of the findings of study 1.

Perceived Controversy

The fifth hypothesis concerned a different and independent endpoint: the perceived controversy of mimetic brand placement in a narrative. Despite a lower average perceived controversy score in the transparent group ($M = 11.31$, $SD = 3.86$) relative to the deceptive group ($M = 12.05$, $SD = 3.86$), this difference was not found to be statistically significant in an independent-samples t-test ($t(238) = 1.494$, $p = .137$). This result thus fails to support H₅, and no definitive conclusion about the relationships between transparency and perceived controversy can be argued. Table 4, below, contains a summary of the hypothesis testing results.

Table 4
Summary of hypothesis testing results – Study 2

Hypothesis	Result
H_{1a,b} : A transparent disclosure will be associated with increases in media enjoyment and attitudes towards advertising relative to a deceptive one.	Partially supported : Higher means on both measures in the transparent group. Enjoyment did not reach significance but attitudes towards advertising did.
H_{2a,b} : Increases in media enjoyment and attitudes will be associated with increases in narrative transportation and ad appropriateness relative to a deceptive one.	Supported : Enjoyment and attitudes towards advertising were strong predictors of both narrative transportation and appropriateness.
H₃ : Increased narrative transportation and ad appropriateness will be associated with increased purchase intentions.	Supported : Narrative transportation and ad appropriateness were both significant predictors of purchase intention towards Jell-O.
H₄ : The relationship between disclosure type and purchase intention will be driven by a series of effects depicted in Figure 6.	Supported : The model fit the data well. Transparent disclosure positively affected purchase intentions through mediating variables: ad attitude, enjoyment, narrative transportation, and ad acceptability.
H₅ : A transparent disclosure will be associated with decreases in perceived controversy of mimetic branding relative to a deceptive one.	Not supported : The difference in mean controversy across groups was not statistically significant.

After completing the measures discussed above, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups: one that was told that the story and art were generated by artificial intelligence (N = 123) and those what were told it was created by a human (N = 117). As this stream of research is still in its early stages, no hypotheses were posited, but research questions were posed.

The first research question asked how perceptions of controversy might differ across these groups. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to examine the difference between a baseline measure of controversy and another after being informed of the source of the media. Participants who were told that the story and art were created by a person demonstrated a small and non-significant decrease in the average controversy from before (M = 11.54, SD = 3.91) to after (M = 11.36, SD = 4.04). This result suggests that the new information did not affect perceptions of controversy and was very likely not different from the participants' expectations. In the other group, however, this difference between before (M = 11.80, SD = 3.85) and after (12.29, SD = 4.11) being told that the media was generated using AI was both slightly larger and trended towards two-tailed significance ($t(122) = 1.916, p = .058$). This result suggests that feelings towards generative artificial intelligence may negatively impact the success of mimetic brands as marketing tools, if audiences perceive them to have been designed by AI, but these claims require further research. Additional exploratory post-hoc regressions suggest that perceptions of AI may interact with baseline sensitivity towards advertising, opening the door to another future phase of confirmatory research and new directions for study.

Qualitative analysis - Disclosure

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked an optional open-ended question: whether they had any concerns or comments about mimetic brands and their use as advertising

tools. This item was completed after the secondary disclosure about the source of the narrative experience (human or AI-generated). In total, 107 answers were manually coded in NVivo 13 (Lumivero.com, 2020). Using an inductive strategy that followed Bandara et al. (2015), eight codes were identified based on the patterns present in the data and the goals of the present study. These were, in order of frequency references to: advertising (N = 71), acceptability (N = 49), enjoyment (N = 48), narrative transportation (N = 34), product-focus (N = 21), gaming (N = 14), text source - human or AI (N = 6), and disclosure (N = 2). Following this process, relevant responses were then coded again, this time for sentiment valence on a 5-point scale ranging from very negative to very positive, with the central point (neutral) omitted from sentiment analysis.

When the sentiments were organized by experimental group, several interesting patterns emerged. When analyzed across deceptive or transparent disclosure, responses from participants in the transparent condition were much more positive (N = 29 in the transparent and N = 16 in the deceptive condition) and slightly less negative (N = 16 in the transparent and N = 20 in the deceptive condition). The complete breakdown of sentiments organized by disclosure type can be found below in Table 5.

Table 5
Sentiment analysis matrix – disclosure

Sentiment	Deceptive	Transparent
Positive (total)	16	29
Very positive	4	7
Moderately positive	12	22
Negative (total)	20	16
Very negative	15	14
Moderately negative	5	2

Delving into the differences in sentiments between groups, it was clear that the difference in disclosure types primed the participants to think about their experience differently. Positive comments from participants in the transparent condition were frequently focused on the enjoyability of the story, the experience, and their degree of relation with the characters and drama of the narrative, with very few caveats about the brand disrupting it.

“I liked this advertising style, as it added a heartwarming story behind the brand. rather than selling a lie about the brand, like many tv advertisements usually do, it gave you honesty (too much sugar). but allowed there to be a heartwarming back story to the characters’ connection to the brand. Therefore, it was more of a story of her connection to Mell-o, rather than an ad that

was just trying to sell you everything with lies. There was a cute back story that is often related to many peoples' childhoods, in terms of Jello and the childhood memories with Jello, which was really cute to see, made me start craving Jello." (respondent 101).

Conversely, the positive responses in the deceptive condition contained many more mentions of the acceptability of the marketing strategy. One participant reported that even though the strategy was deceptive, this did not bother them, stating: "if ads trick me good job on them". While most other comments were indicative of participants enjoying the narrative participants in the deceptive condition seemed pleasantly surprised that they enjoyed mimetic brands more than they had expected.

"After hearing about the product before playing the game, I was waiting for it to show up. As soon as it did I paid close attention to how often and in what situations it would show up. While playing the game it felt like it was mentioned quite a lot. But after completing the game I feel like it was used respectfully. I did not have the feeling the brand was pushed onto me, however I might consider buying it." (respondent 35)

"I think this form of advertising would likely turn out successful if they also strived to amuse the consumer. While I personally just don't like JELL-O, this story was interesting, and the way the product is brought up made me chuckle. Had it been a product I'm more likely to consume, I'd take more of an interest in purchasing it." (respondent 20).

Interestingly, the negative comments in the transparent condition tended to center on the choice of Mell-O as the mimetic brand, citing it as incongruous with the story's drama and thus compromised their transportation into the narrative. This was often accompanied by references to advertising in media, in general.

"I think this type of advertisement has potential and might become inevitable seeing that ads are everywhere now. However, in the context of this story, I felt the product was mentioned too often and it became very apparent it was an ad. I also felt it was a bit misleading by the name. I really thought it would be some sort of marshmallow-type product. The product is supposed to inspire comfort and warmth, yet Jello seems cold and unsatisfying when one is dying of hunger." (respondent 60).

The negative comments in the deceptive condition, as with the positive ones, centered again on the acceptability of the advertising strategy. They felt that the tactic was deceiving, out of place, and detracted from their enjoyment tremendously.

"Personally, I would not like to see advertisements in a game. I think it would disrupt the game's storyline and gaming experience. I think I would not want to play the game again and would be more careful to not buying games with advertisements in the future." (respondent 4)

Qualitative analysis – Text source

When analyzed across conditions of the secondary manipulation – text source – the responses in the AI source condition as compared with the human condition were both vastly more negative (N = 23 in the AI and N = 13 in the human condition) and slightly more positive (N = 24 in the AI and N = 21 in the human condition). The complete breakdown of sentiments divided by text source can be found below in Table 6.

Table 6
Sentiment analysis matrix – text source

Sentiment	Human-Generated	AI-Generated
Positive (total)	21	24
Very positive	6	5
Moderately positive	15	19
Negative (total)	13	23
Very negative	1	6
Moderately negative	12	17

Looking deeper into each cell, the negative sentiments in the AI condition again most frequently included concerns about the amount or prominence of the advertisement and its acceptability, leading to lower enjoyment of and transportation into the story. There were also a small number of direct references to AI. The participants who mentioned it reported that it “takes away from [the story’s] authenticity” (respondent 27), that it impeded their transportation, and that they distrust AI generally.

“Knowing that the “The Hike” was AI generated and also advertised for MELL-O is a slight concern as I believe that readers and consumers will end up distrusting the extent to which MELL-O is made out to be a good product in the story. I think that had “The Hike” been written by a human, the product placement would be more trustworthy. This is not to say that MELL-O’s advertising in the story was not effective, it definitely was, still as a reader with an overall distrust of AI, I find that now I must question my interest in MELL-O” (respondent 37)

The positive comments from within the same group were primarily centered on the acceptability of mimetic branding and their enjoyment of the story, again with few but compelling references to the source of the text.

“I found the Mell-o inclusion not totally invasive, just a bit of worldbuilding that played on the fear and childlike sensibilities of the protagonist. The only real complaint was when the MELL-o was found in the cabin, this felt excessive and unwarranted. I enjoyed the “MELL-O is comfort”

line. I knew most of the images were artificially generated but was completely unaware of the text's identical attribute. This is what made me think the game would be controversial not the advertising since artists may state that the game aims to cut corners and put them out of work. If the advertisement were in a regular game; it would go unnoticed and maybe even appreciated (Nuka cola in Fallout) as good worldbuilding and become a fan favorite. However, I think that with the inclusion of AI, the advertisement would come off as a corporate shill: wishing only to increase their margins rather than cater to true enjoyment.” (respondent 36)

Within the human-source group, there were no mentions or concerns about the source of the text. The positive responses were predominantly centered on the enjoyment of the text and the acceptability of mimetic brands. The negative responses, though few in number, most frequently referenced the acceptability, as well, and the incongruity between Mell-O and the story’s drama. This mirrored the findings in the transparent group, suggesting that being informed that a human wrote the story and created the art did not violate the participants’ expectations and thus did not affect their feelings towards mimetic brands.

Discussion – Study 2

Mimetic brands already exist in media today and I predict that they will continue to find their places in the fictional worlds we, as audiences, love to explore. This study represents the second foray into their effects, their driving factors, and the first examination of their ethical positioning. The present research was designed to build on the previous study in this space to answer crucial questions about the ethical implementation of mimetic brands. Its design followed discussions about the covert nature of their mechanisms of acting on audience behaviour and attitudes. If mimetic brands only worked as marketing tools because they bypassed audience defense mechanisms, then perhaps they ought not be used at all. If, on the other hand, they could be implemented responsibly and with care for audiences, studios, and brands, alike, then perhaps mimetic brands could find their place in media without exploiting any party. This study was thus designed to ask the question: how can the disclosure of mimetic brands being placed in media affect their reception by audiences and success as advertising materials?

Service Dominant Logic

The philosophy that guided this research was that treating brands, studios, and brands as collaborators, and giving each party the requisite respect is the only means of implementing mimetic brand placement in media while minimizing the risks to all parties involved. It was fueled by my hope that some middle ground could be negotiated in which mimetic brands were not only non-intrusive, but a favorable and exciting new way to explore branding in both reality and fiction.

SDL allows us to frame the implementation of mimetic brands into media as a collaborative exercise that forces us to recognize and adapt to the complex social and economic systems that inform it (Akaka, Vargo, and Lusch, 2013). By acknowledging the four key axioms of SDL: (1) the application of resources in reciprocal service exchange, (2) the integration of

intangible and dynamic resources that create new resources, (3) the cocreation of value through collaboration and interaction, and (4) the importance of the context through which value is created, we may sculpt the use of mimetic brands into something mutually beneficial, long-living, and ethical.

For all three stakeholders to effectively cooperate, they must establish and respect the rules, norms, and heuristics that govern the use of mimetic brands. Though matters of policy and law fall outside of the bounds of this dissertation, it is my hope to start and guide the discussions thereof such that they remain centered upon consumer ethics. Extrapolating the implementation of mimetic branding as an advertising strategy through an SDL lens, I imagine the following guiding principles, summarized in Table 7 below: (1) Audiences, studios, and brands enter a mutually beneficial arrangement. Mimetic brand placement may represent a reciprocal exchange between brands and audiences in which the former sacrifices a measure of their brand equity and exclusivity and the latter in turn accepts the placement of advertising in their media experiences. The brands and studios therefore retain their ability to raise capital while audiences continue to enjoy high quality narrative works. (2) Use and acceptance of existing brand associations to further artistic and financial goals. Brands and studios ought to work together in pursuit of mimetic placements that not only benefit the brands but also respect the art as well as the audiences and add a new layer of meaning and value to narratives. (3) Transparency of the strategy and responses to audience concerns. Consistently monitoring the success and acceptability of mimetic brand placements is in the interest of all three major stakeholders. Guided by mutual respect and reciprocity, these placements must remain transparent and traceable. (4) Framing of the strategy and educating audiences about it. As mentioned above, the successful introduction of mimetic brands as advertising tools may dictate the longevity of the strategy. It will be up to brands and studios to work together to find ways of highlighting the key features of mimetic brands: reciprocity and artistic freedom, in their rollouts of the placements. In the short-term, perhaps works that contain paid mimetic brand placement should disclose that fact prior to the start of the work. Long-term strategies for retaining acceptability are still unclear, but it is my hope that they too will be guided by these same principles.

Table 7
Implementation of mimetic brands through SDL lens

Four key axioms of SDL	Implementation of mimetic brands
• (1) Application of resources in reciprocal service exchange • (2) Integration of intangible and dynamic resources that create new resources • (3) Cocreation of value through collaboration and interaction • (4) Importance of the context through which value is created	• (1) Audiences, studios, and brands enter a mutually beneficial arrangement • (2) Use and acceptance of existing brand associations to further artistic and financial goals • (3) Transparency of the strategy and responses to audience concerns • (4) Framing of the strategy and educating audiences about it

Disclosure

The biggest question suggested by previous research on mimetic brands was whether mimetic brands only affected attitudes and behaviour because their “disguises” allowed their presence to bypass audience defense mechanisms against marketing. This study demonstrated that not to be true. Not only can mimetic brands still yield positive outcomes for brands they mimic, but their success in the real market may counterintuitively hinge on their disclosure. If audiences are informed not only of their placement, but of their collaborative nature, they are more likely to accept their placement in media. In this way, mimetic brands may still find their niche as potent persuasive tools. On the other hand, if they were to be placed without such transparent disclosure, brands and studios may risk audiences feeling manipulated and taken advantage of, potentially leading to lower enjoyment of the media and negative brand outcomes. If mimetic brands are going to continue to be deployed by marketers, then audiences will eventually find out. Per Wei, Fischer, and Main (2008), this may lead to overall vastly more negative attitudes towards the target brand and perhaps also the host media. As such, we stand at an important junction. If they are to succeed in the market, mimetic brands must be positioned now as tools of value co-creation and a respectful, mutually-beneficial alternative to traditional brand placement and not manipulative hidden advertisements.

The ethical implementation of mimetic brand placement begins with educating audiences about how and why these lookalikes are being placed in media and the financial ties that connect them with real brands. The present study examined two extreme cases of the framing of such disclosure strategies: one transparent and one deceptive. To best understand the implications of disclosing mimetic brand placement to audiences, we will first examine the direct effects outlined in H_{1a} and H_{1b} . The results of the H_1 tests revealed a trend and a significant effect of transparent disclosure on enjoyment and attitudes towards the ad, respectively. The latter, in particular, seems to be the driving force behind the positive effects of transparent disclosures. This suggests that first and foremost, even ignoring for now the importance of the other variables in the study, informing audiences prior to their encounters with mimetic brands will help ease the otherwise jarring nature of the placement and lower negative reactions that could otherwise compromise the experience. As for enjoyment, though disclosure did not directly affect it, subsequent structural modeling suggested that ad attitude was a significant predictor of enjoyment, thus suggesting that ad attitude mediates that relationship.

Maximizing transportation and acceptability

The second hypothesis test examined the relationships between the first set of outcome variables – ad attitude and enjoyment – on narrative transportation and ad acceptability. Ad attitude and enjoyment were significant predictors of both narrative transportation and ad acceptability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strongest of these relationships was between enjoyment and narrative transportation. Given the findings of study 1 that narrative transportation was a key variable in predicting the success of mimetic brand placement as an advertising tool, this new finding demonstrated the importance of preserving enjoyment. As lower ad attitudes detracted

from reported media enjoyment, transparently disclosing mimetic brand placement is instrumental in ultimately preserving enjoyment and thus maximizing not only the efficacy of an ad, but also the outcomes that are more important to audiences and studios. As there were significant effects of ad attitude on enjoyment and of both ad attitude and enjoyment on narrative transportation, enjoyment may therefore partially mediate the relationship between the other two variables. Perhaps future research ought to delve deeper into these relationships, but what is clear for now is how important disclosure, ad attitude, and media enjoyment are in maximizing transportation.

The effects of ad attitude and enjoyment on ad acceptability were slightly less clear. While both significantly predicted higher levels of acceptability, the effects of enjoyment were rendered insignificant under the more conservative structural equation modeling method. This discrepancy merits further study but may be due to a low variability within the measure. The sampled students may not have been very sensitive to advertising in their media experiences. Future researchers may therefore opt to replicate these methods in different samples, to see how this particular variable may be affected. The present study's findings still suggest that maximizing ad acceptability begins with transparent disclosure and heightened ad attitudes and enjoyment. These are all variables that are central to the collaborative and mutually respectful relationships between audiences, studios, and brands. Each is best served when the others' goals do not supersede or otherwise interfere with their own.

Brand outcomes

Whereas the first two hypotheses examined variables that were explicitly involved in serving the interests of audiences and studios, the third was concerned entirely with the outcomes for the real brands being mimicked. Just as the other parties are important to consider in the study of mimetic brand placement, for the strategy to see long-term implementation it must also serve brands enough to justify their flexibility with their intellectual property. Bolstering the findings of study 1, this third hypothesis test examined the effects of preserving narrative transportation and ad acceptability on purchase intentions. The results of the present study suggest that purchase intentions toward Jell-O were heightened as narrative transportation and ad acceptability were increased. Once again, this emphasized the importance of mutual respect for the goals of all parties. Giving audiences and studios what they want in order to enjoy or profit from a narrative work ultimately benefits brands placed therein. Considered alongside the prior two hypothesis tests, these findings demonstrate a clear theoretical link that connects transparent disclosure of mimetic brands in media with positive brand outcomes.

The complete model

We may now examine the structural equation model to see a macroscopic view of the important variables at play. Each of the first three hypotheses served as the foundations for different sections of a completer and more parsimonious test of disclosure of mimetic brands in this study. As summarized in H4, the nature of disclosure was hypothesized not to act directly on

purchase intention, but rather through mediating variables: ad attitude, enjoyment, narrative transportation, and ad acceptability.

Taken together, the significant paths yielded by this experiment not only serve to replicate some of the initial findings in study 1 but also tell a compelling story that underlines the importance of all the variables and their interconnectivity, rather than only looking at the endpoints. The results suggest that a transparent disclosure is associated with more positive attitudes towards the marketing tactic. In turn, these positive attitudes led to higher ratings of enjoyment, narrative transportation, and acceptability, which ultimately contributed to higher purchase intentions. This pattern of results demonstrates the importance of treating audiences respectfully and transparently, preserving their interests as well as those of studios and brands, alike. Each of the studied variables is a foundational pillar on which collaborative relationships are built between the stakeholders and this model demonstrated that transparent disclosure is vital in preserving them. The findings demonstrated that mimetic brands are not simply another risky marketing tool with a short shelf-life, but rather one that ought to withstand the tests of time, provided it is used ethically. This begins with transparent disclosure, and not by hiding their presence from audiences. This transparency sets up the implementation and adoption of mimetic brand placement for success, respects the investments of all parties and ultimately makes for a more enjoyable experience while still functioning as a potent form of unobtrusive advertising.

The paths between disclosure and enjoyment and subsequently to ad acceptability, though significant in their respective hypothesis tests, failed to reach statistical significance in the complete model. This may be due to the more stringent requirements imposed by structural equation modeling but may instead be evidence of more complex relationships at play. This stream of research is still nascent, and we must remain open to the possibility that some of the hypothesized relationships do not function as tested. To that end, I call upon future researchers to explore alternative configurations and models.

Controversy

Controversy is a difficult variable to operationalize and perhaps requires some additional thought in future iterations. Measuring it asks participants to think critically and consider responses to an ethical problem through the eyes of hypothetical peers. Though no definitive conclusions may be drawn from the statistical tests of the differences between disclosure groups, a slightly lower perceived controversy score in the transparent group is intriguing and merits additional research. It is possible that this section of the present research ought to have had a more robust measurement and additional information on which participants could have based their answers. Future researchers should consider expanding it into a complete study on the perceptions of the ethicality of mimetic brands, from which we may glean important information and better steer their use in the future.

It is also worth considering that the pattern of results related to controversy yielded in this study may appear inconsistent but might well be explained as follows. Notwithstanding the lowered attitudes towards advertising elicited by a deceptive disclosure, the participants may not have felt that the practice was controversial, shocking or offensive. The participants may have been bothered by the placement of mimetic brands but did not feel that any ethical or moral boundaries were crossed. The rather young participants are constantly bombarded by marketing messages in their day-to-day lives and perhaps they feel that the marketing landscape is one without those rules. Deceptive mimetic brands may take advantage of audiences, but they are sadly but a drop in a much larger ocean of deceptive marketing practices already in use. If in marketing - as in love and war - all is fair, then even if a practice is wrong or upsetting, it does not stand out against the rest and is thus simply not controversial. If that is the case, then it is my hope that findings such as these call-to-action other researchers and practitioners to find better and more ethical alternatives. The present study stands as an example of how implementing marketing tools while respecting all stakeholders is not a burden, but an optimal, mutually beneficial, collaborative strategy positioned for long-term use.

Textual analysis

One of the goals of this study was to expand the thinking about mimetic brands. To that end, a qualitative textual analysis of participants' concerns about mimetic brands was conducted. They were asked the following question: "Do you have any concerns or comments about mimetic brands and their use as advertising tools?". The difference in disclosure type had not only a marked effect on the participants' sentiments but also the way in which they seemed to think about mimetic brand placement in media. The question posed was specifically worded to capture negative emotions and concerns surrounding mimetic brand placement. Notwithstanding, many of the comments received were from participants who wanted to share their positive and often optimistic views of the practice. This was surprising and led to a robust analysis of the content of those comments along this positive/negative axis.

Participants in the transparent condition wrote fewer negative and more positive responses to the question. Moreover, their responses were frequently focused on their enjoyment of and transportation into the story. Despite the question asking directly about the use of mimetic brand placement in media, the positive comments from this group suggested that participants were more excited to share their feelings about the story itself and not the brand's place within it. The negative comments from the same group did reference Mell-O frequently, but very seldom discussed the acceptability of the practice. They were instead often taken aback by the incongruity of the chosen product type with the drama of the narrative – a starving hiker trying to stay warm. This was not surprising, as the story was written with this dissonance in mind. Importantly, there were almost no references to the acceptability of the marketing practice, demonstrating that participants who received the transparent disclosure were not bothered by the placement of mimetic brands in media and even sought to improve its implementation in the future. The transparent disclosure resulted in a placement that while completely overt was not

salient enough to merit mention in neither positive nor negative discussions of the experience. This in turn provides additional support for the hypotheses in this study and suggests a bright and exciting future for mimetic brands, provided they are designed with respect for the audience in mind and properly disclosed.

This was in stark contrast to the responses in the deceptive condition. Participants in this group more frequently referenced the placement of mimetic brands in both positive and negative comments. Advertising was seemingly the most salient aspect of their experience. Positive comments frequently mentioned the acceptability of the practice, with some also indicating some measure of surprise that they enjoyed the placement strategy despite their negative reactions to the disclosure. Negative comments from participants in this group, too, centered on the acceptability of the placement of Mell-O in the story, with a strong focus on the deceptive and distracting nature of the tactic. They treated the story as nothing more than a delivery system for an advertisement. These findings strongly suggest that whereas transparent disclosure of mimetic brands allowed the narrative experience to come to the forefront of audiences' minds, the deceptive disclosure placed their focus squarely on the advertising. This demonstrated once again the importance of an ethical and transparent disclosure of mimetic brands, without which audiences may come to resent the marketing strategy and host media, alike.

Artificial intelligence and mimetic brands

The success of the present study hinged upon the use of generative artificial intelligence to create the stimuli used in the experiment. While doing so, it became clear that the study of mimetic brands and that of AI are inexorably linked by the ethical imperative of protecting the rights of audiences. Both may infringe upon these rights and unfairly manipulate attitudes and behaviour. Whereas mimetic brands are deliberately placed by artists to imbue a work with meaning or verisimilitude, this paper also names similar-looking stand-in brands created by generative AI as "pseudo mimetic brands"; separated only by the lack of that intent on the part of AI models. Placement or generation of lookalike brands such as these may work similarly to subtly shape perceptions of real-world brands and thus their effects should be understood and their use regulated.

In this study, the first to examine the similarities between mimetic and pseudo mimetic brands, two relevant analyses were conducted with mixed methodologies. The first was a quantitative exploration of perceptions of the controversial nature of mimetic brand placement by artists or generative AI following the secondary experimental manipulation. This was an attempt to understand how participants thought about the ethicality of the practice as well as understand the possible interaction between those attitudes and their preexisting concerns or beliefs about AI. Though no statistically significant results were obtained, an interesting trend emerged such that after being informed that the story they had just played through was written and designed by an AI model, the participants reported a slightly higher level of perceived controversy as compared to before they were informed. This finding may have been confounded by the primary manipulation in this study – disclosure type – and thus drawing specific conclusions to this

question is difficult. This represents grounds for future research, however, into the interactions between perceptions of manipulative or deceptive marketing practices and concerns about AI.

A similar question was explored using qualitative text analysis, this time across the secondary experimental conditions, which provided additional context to these first findings. Qualitative methodology allowed for a more in-depth look at specific cases and shed light on underlying mechanisms at play (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006). The first of such was that the sentiments and coded references found within comments from the human-source group mirrored the positive and negative comments from the previously discussed transparent disclosure condition. This pattern suggests that the knowledge that the narrative and art were created by a human did not affect their concerns or lack thereof following the experience. This was almost certainly their baseline assumption, an inference supported by the complete lack of reference to the source of the text in these comments. The result allows this group to function as a baseline against which AI-source effects may be compared.

Participants who were informed that the story was written and animated by AI expressed much more negative sentiments and slightly more positive sentiments as compared with those in the human-source condition. Several participants remarked that the placement of Mell-O by AI models felt manipulative and untrustworthy. It does seem as though the participants who were generally skeptical of the use of AI to create media were also concerned about its use in such a persuasive context, though they represented a very small proportion of the responses to this question. Generally, responses did not include many references to the source of the story, but there were important differences in the themes associated with each sentiment and group.

Often, the negative comments from participants in the AI-source group referenced the prominence and acceptability of the placement of Mell-O in the story and their lower opinions of the narrative. Many felt that Mell-O's inclusion felt forced and out of place. It is possible that informing these participants that the story had been written by an AI model primed them to consider other works of and discourse surrounding AI-generated art in which there are often elements that too feel out of place or unnatural. The participants felt that the story and art were simple and clumsy, descriptors absent from the other experimental condition. One might think that these participants were looking for evidence congruent with their pre-existing beliefs about AI. It certainly seems plausible that growing sensitivity toward the use of AI and the loss of human agency can be gleaned from these responses, though a more thorough examination of this intersection ought to be performed before definitive conclusions may be drawn.

Artificial intelligence, as we know it today, is still not as sophisticated as it will surely be in the coming years. As it continues to develop, we must remain both appropriately optimistic and skeptical of its use and place in our society. This research represents one very early look at the intersection between AI and novel marketing strategies. The findings surrounding the controversy and attitudes towards the use of AI to create mimetic brands suggest that people are not comfortable with AI being used to manipulate them and strongly resist any such attempts. It

will be interesting to look back at these findings as AI and its place in our world grow and change over time.

There is no doubt that AI-generated art will continue to find its way into the media and our surroundings. As such, it falls to academics and policymakers to scrutinize the models being used and the companies that may design them to ensure that its use will be ethical and responsible. This present research has demonstrated that current AI models are already producing pseudo mimetic brands which may be affecting consumer behaviour and attitudes without any oversight or regulation. Though far from the biggest concern, this is yet another in a long list of ethical and moral problems with unregulated use of AI. AI will change the landscapes of media production and marketing, probably for the better, but that requires monitoring its unintended effects on both and adjusting accordingly. It is my hope that future researchers will continue this examination into AI-generated brands and their effects on audiences and the media in which those brands are placed, as we have done with brand placement in the past or with mimetic brands in this stream of research.

General Conclusion

The case for mimetic brand placement in media

This dissertation is the culmination of over ten years of research into mimetic brands, the majority of which fell outside of the scope of these essays, as is often the case in PhD theses. The stream of research on mimetic brands was sparked from the placement of these and similar brands in existing media, probably with no ill-intent, possibly without understanding, and certainly without oversight. The two studies reported in this essay sought to answer questions about their use, the mechanisms that drive their efficacy, their effects on audiences, studios, and brands, and their ethicality. The first study established that mimetic brand placement outperformed the placement of real brands in a story and the mechanism by which this may occur. By their nature of not being recognized as advertisements so easily, they preserve audiences' media experiences without triggering the substantial defense mechanisms we have all developed against persuasive marketing tactics. After study 1, the biggest question that remained was whether mimetic brands *only* worked because they circumvented audience defense mechanisms. If so, then perhaps they are unethical tools that merit study but not widespread use. The present research was designed to answer that question and lay the foundations for an ethical and effective implementation of mimetic brand placement in media.

The results of the present study suggest that mimetic brands represent so much more than simply hidden or subliminal advertisements. Thoughtfully and transparently disclosed, they may become powerful marketing tools that find their way into the media we love. Whereas traditional brand placement in media was positioned as a sort of middle ground between advertising and content – a necessary evil if creating that content continues to be as expensive as it is – it is my opinion that mimetic brands are another step towards that goal, a *new middle ground*. Mimetic brands placed in media are also not quite advertisements and nor are they organic parts of the

narrative in which they are hosted. They exist somewhere in between the two, only compared to real brands they are less disruptive to audiences and have the potential to be even more effective persuasive tools. As the relationships between audiences and advertising shift and evolve, so too will the tactics and expectations on both sides.

Mimetic brands lie at another midpoint – that between audiences, studios, and brands. Properly implemented, they are positioned to preserve the interests of all three parties. Brands may continue to advertise their products in media, studios may receive the financial support required to create high quality and engaging art, and audiences may enjoy those experiences without disruptive advertisements. In treating the others respectfully, each party achieves its own goals while also helping the others. Each is responsible for maintaining relationships with the others based on mutual trust despite having different goals.

Mimetic brand placement may be a novel form of advertisement but its similarity with traditional product placement as well as existing artistic techniques affords it a considerable advantage: it is simple to implement. Brands like these are already being designed and woven into the media we consume. The present stream of research demonstrates that these brands may already be having effects on behaviours and attitudes. As such, while it falls to marketers and perhaps policymakers to continue the work to understand the effects of mimetic brands, there is an opportunity for brands and studios to experiment with them at minimal cost and expertise required. The results of these studies show promise that brands that implement a mimetic brand placement strategy, provided it is properly disclosed, stand to benefit from it as well as help studios create memorable and exciting experiences for audiences. Academic research into mimetic brands is important but is also limited by scope and scale. This dissertation thus calls on brands and studios to forge new relationships with one another and test mimetic brands as an ethical, persuasive, immersive, and collaborative strategy.

For mimetic brand placement to be implemented properly, brands must relinquish a small amount of control over their intellectual property. They should afford studios some creative license to edit their branding to better fit into their art while still supporting them financially for their placement. Given the results of this stream of research, mimetic brands may outperform traditional placements. Thus, the risk posed to brands is seemingly outweighed by the potential benefits. Studios must in turn use mimetic brands responsibly to ensure that the placements are both effective advertisements as well as organic parts of the stories they wish to tell. The placements should strive to be evocative of the target without being a disruptive or unnatural presence that could compromise the experience. Together, brands and studios absolutely must disclose the presence of mimetic brand advertisements to audiences transparently. Finally, it falls to audiences to acknowledge the realities facing brands and studios and accept that access to high quality entertainment at low cost may entail a certain degree of paid advertising and the placement of mimetic brands instead hinges on their acceptability in the market. If audiences indeed prefer mimetic brands, then they should provide positive feedback and support the brands and studios working to improve their experiences. It is my hope that each of these parties

upholds their responsibilities to the others but also demands more from one another, allowing for the continued evolution of their relationships.

Without preserving the interests of one, the integrity of that relationship will be compromised, and mimetic brand placement will lose exactly what makes it so effective and special among other marketing tactics. The present study demonstrated that transparent disclosure of mimetic brands improved their acceptability without compromising their persuasive power. It is very seldom the case that doing the ethical thing is the same as doing the most profitable one. Mimetic brand placement represents a mutually beneficial compromise between marketing and entertainment around which new and long-lasting relationships may be built. It is my hope that its implementation lives up to its promise as an ethical and exciting new frontier in marketing.

Future research

This dissertation has begun what I hope continues as a promising and important stream of research. There are still so many questions about the use of mimetic brands to achieve goals of various stakeholders, the mechanisms that drive them, as well as about their ethical use in the market. I implore future researchers to explore the intersections of mimetic branding research and their own fields of expertise. One particularly noteworthy and exciting extension of this dissertation lies in finding alternative uses for mimetic brands. Whereas these studies have examined their potential to deliver positive outcomes for stakeholders, I posit that they may also be used to shield brands from negative associations. Such a strategy may already be in use, as seen in several instances in the Netflix series “Black Mirror”. Therein, Netflix has allowed the inclusion of a streaming company – “Streamberry” – that borrows their own trade dress, down to their iconic startup sound, in work that is deeply critical of the company and its ilk. I wonder whether much in the same way that mimetic brands have been demonstrated to remind audiences of a target brand, attaching positive sentiments from the narrative without triggering defense mechanisms against advertising, perhaps they may also do the opposite. Mimetic brands may evoke a target brand without allowing negative connotations present in the narrative to connect as readily with it. In the case of Black Mirror, perhaps audiences are reminded of Netflix without the biting criticism of Streamberry to affect perceptions towards it. If so, this could carry interesting implications for product placement strategies that typically avoid associations with villains in media, as well as expand on practical and ethical uses for mimetic brands.

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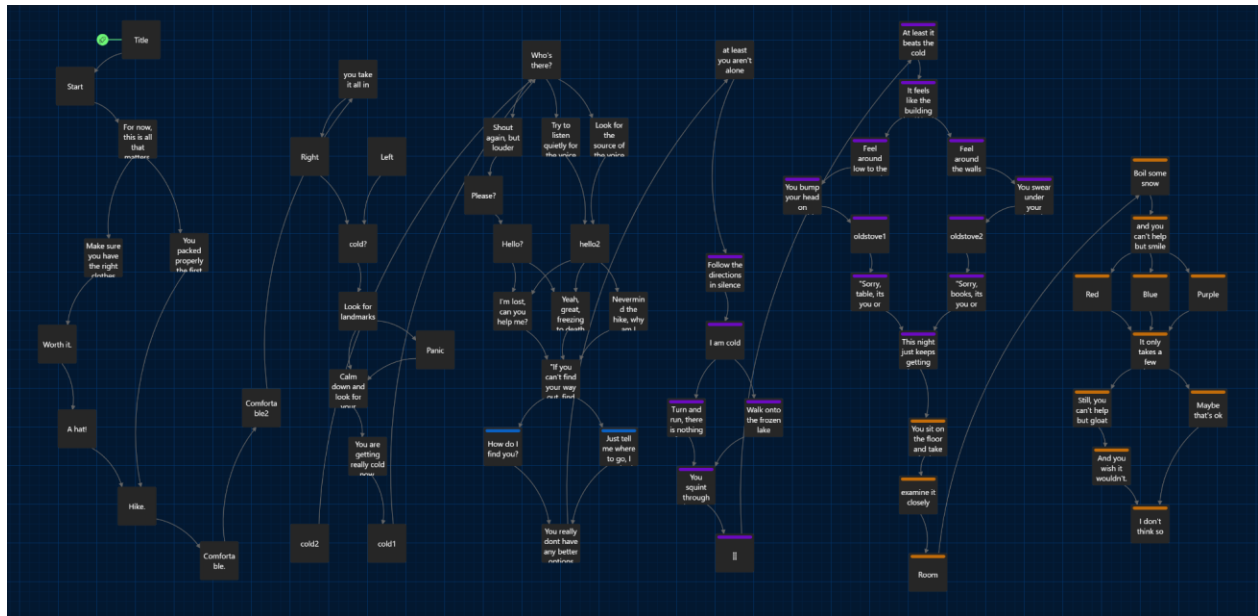
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Appendix A – The Hike

A narrative game built to examine mimetic brand placement

by Nathaniel Mayer-Heft

Flowchart depicting the progress through the story and all options.



All passages are included, below.

Note: Passages labeled “XA and XB” denote choice consequences and are thus mutually exclusive to the audience. Passages labeled “XA 1, XA 2” denote further consequences only accessible to participants who made prior choices.

1.

Thank you very much for taking the time to play this game, we sincerely hope you enjoy it!

This is an interactive story where your decisions determine how the story continues.

To progress through the game, simply click on the blue words indicating your choice at the end of each passage.

There is no way to undo a choice, so please continue without refreshing the page or using the back button on your internet browser.

When you are ready, you may begin.



Let's go for a hike

2.

There is nothing like a hike in the fresh December air.

You needed this.

The air is different here.

You can't get air like this back home.

You can't get *time* like this back home.

For now, this is all that matters.

3.

Parking your car at the trailhead you can already feel the stress and responsibilities you left behind fade into the light snowfall.

Winter is the perfect time for a hike, as long as you are dressed properly and have packed everything you need.

Your dad taught you that. You can't think of how many times you heard him say it to you in the past.

Still, a little double check might be a good idea before you head off.



**Make sure you have the right clothes
You packed properly the first time, let's go!**

4A 1.

You look at your gloved hands.

Ok, that's a good start, you smile to yourself.

Snow pants and thermal leggings hug your legs, nothing to worry about there.

You look at your boots. They must be happy to finally be out of their box. Warm, if a bit clunky, You are ready to hike together. You'd better be, those boots were expensive.

Worth it.

4A 2.

You are wearing your favorite jacket, the one you wear around town.

You suppose avid hikers probbaly have two jackets, one for the city and one for the forest. Maybe it has to do with the smells.

Maybe they don't want to bring the smells of wood fire and smoke back into town. Maybe they want to keep familiar smells of crowded trains, fast food, and car exhaust separate. Everything in its place.

You don't though, do you?

You kind of like the idea of coming back smelling of adventure.

You run your fingers through your hair, already proud of yourself.

Wait, isn't something missing?

A hat!

4A 3.

Bullet dodged, you think, grabbing your favorite hat off of the snow near your door and slipping it onto your head.

It must have fallen out when you got out of the car.

Lucky you took the second to think about it.

Your bare head would have gotten cold.

How could you have forgotten a hat?

You would have forgotten your head, too, if it weren't attached.



Glad we got that out of the way, time to hike

4B.

You already drove all the way out here.

What are you going to do, drive back home because you forgot something small?

Don't be ridiculous.

You know what you are doing

5.

You planned all this out. You know where you're going - generally speaking.

The path is unmarked and the snow is heavy underfoot. This trail probably hasn't been used much this season.

It is hard work, but the cold winter air is keeping you moving.



Comfortable.

6.

Before long, you can no longer see the trail head. It is just pillowy snow and mostly bare trees. You could almost be fooled there was no colour anymore, like old black and white TV shows, were it not for the smattering of green pines breaking up the monochrome.

You can just barely hear the wind whistling as it finds its way through the forest, but you definitely feel it.

You make more noise than it does as you walk. The snow crunches and squeaks beneath your feet. Branches bend and snap to make room for you on your trek, all while you huff and puff.

In a weird way, all the sounds come together like a sort of freeform music.



you take it all in

7.

You come to a fork in the path.

You recognize this from the maps you saw online.

Yup, there is the rock that kind of sort of looks like a face, just like the website said.

On your right, you see what looks to you like old trail markings - tattered bits of yellowish nylon cling to tree branches, worn down by who knows how many seasons.

On your left, the trees seem to have grown more spread out, probably making for an easier hike.

Not much thinking involved, here.

You prepared well for this hike, so you know that you have to go



Right
Left

8A.

Right. Clearly. A right at that weird rock face.

You walk the old trail as best you can.

At first relying on the trail markings you saw, you now move instinctually through the forest.

You walk for what feels like an effortless hour or so but you get the impression that it has been much longer.

What sky you can see through the tree canopy is taking on the evening shades of reds and purples.

How long have you been walking for, and why does it seem so

cold?

8B.

Left, clearly. A left at that weird rock face.

You walk through the clearings between the trees, glad to see the sun again.

At first relying on landmarks you saw online, you now move instinctually through the forest.

You walk for what feels like an effortless hour or so but you get the impression that it has been much longer.

What sky you can see through the tree canopy is taking on the evening shades of reds and purples.

How long have you been walking for, and why does it seem so

cold?

9.

When did it get so cold?

Of course it's cold, it *is* winter.

Still, you dressed properly, so why are you *this* cold?

How long have you been out here?

It feels like you turned at that fork only seconds ago, but it has to have been longer than that.

You suppose you got lost in your thoughts as you hiked.

That's fine, that's what you came here to do!

As long as you don't get lost in the cold, you will be fine.



Look for landmarks

10.

You take in your surroundings again.

This time, there is no parking lot, no trail markers, and certainly no rock that looks like a face.

You stay confident. You prepared for this. You read a lot of posts about hiking and navigation. You know all the drills.

You feel your legs start to shake. You couldn't have predicted this kind of cold. You can't get it get to you, no matter how wobbly they might feel.

They kind of remind you of Mell-O. You remember, that jelly snack from childhood. You could really use some comfort like that now.



Calm down and look for your footsteps

Panic

11A.

Breathe.

You are going to be fine.

You look back at the path you left.

You probably should have looked more quickly after you realized you might be lost.

Except for the hard-packed circle your pacing just carved, the falling snow has all but filled in your footprints erasing both your journey and any hope you had for a quick fix.

How are you going to get back?

You are getting really cold now.

11B 1.

You panic.

YOU REALLY PANIC.

YOU ARE GOING TO FREEZE IN THESE STUPID WOODS.

You yell out into the forest.

Got it all out of your system?

Good, it is time to figure out what to do.

Can't have you panicking all night

11B 2.

Breathe.

You are going to be fine.

You look back at the path you left.

You probably should have looked more quickly after you realized you might be lost.

Except for the hard-packed circle your pacing just carved, the falling snow has all but filled in your footprints erasing both your journey and any hope you had for a quick fix.

How are you going to get back?

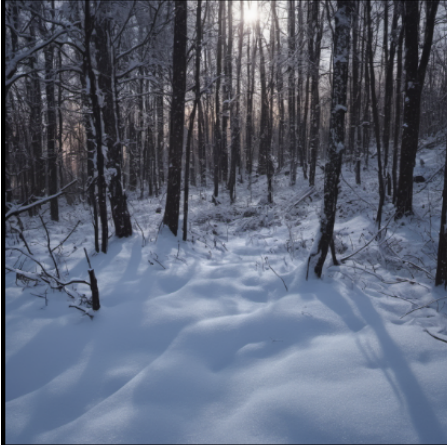
You are getting really cold now.

12.

In every direction, all you see are the same dead trees, a rock or snowbank here and there. Nothing remarkable. Certainly nothing you could call a landmark.

You suppose that picking a direction at random is better than pointlessly freezing to death in some icy forest, so you just walk.

You can either walk in a straight line in any direction, hoping to cover more ground or you could walk in a large circle, hoping to see something familiar, but at the risk of getting even more lost.



Walk in a straight line

Walk in a circle

13 A.

"Why don't you take the scenic route?" says a quiet voice.

"I'm sure you will find your old trail. Remember that weird rock?" It whispers, reassuringly.

Who's there?

13 B.

"Good, take the scenic route." says a quiet raspy voice.

"I'm sure you will find your old trail. Remember that weird rock?" It whispers, reassuringly.

Who's there?

14.

"Who's there?" you shout, two parts fear and one part hope in your voice.

"Can anyone hear me?" you follow-up.

Nothing.



Shout again, but louder

Try to listen quietly for the voice

Look for the source of the voice

15A1.

"WHO IS THERE?!" You shout, your echo the one answer.

Is someone really here? Are they messing with you?

"OK THIS ISN'T FUNNY" you plead, "I THINK I'M LOST, CAN YOU PLEASE HELP ME?"

"COME ON!" you shout again, to no avail.

All you have left to muster is a defeated

Please?

15A 2.

"Don't worry" the voice responds reassuringly.

The voice is as calm, cold, and weathered as the forest around you. It is deep, wise, and sure.

It sounds completely alien yet familiar all at once.

You try to find the voices origin, but no one's there

-**"Hello?"** you ask in disbelief.

15B.

You close your eyes, trusting the frozen air around you to provide some answer.

Wind whistles through the barren trees

Birds chirp from nests you can't see

Snow crunches softly under your restless feet

You try to find the voices origin, but no one's there

Somehow, as though the winter itself might hear you, you muster a rather embarrassed "Hello?"

15C.

You turn around in place, taking in your surroundings.

You think surely someone has to be hiding behind a tree or something.

You get really quiet.

All around you, everything is the same, still, dead, white forest.

There is nobody around you but the wind, snow, and trees.

You find no comfort in that thought.

Somehow, as though the winter itself might hear you, you muster a rather embarrassed "Hello?"

16A.

"Hello," the voice echoes.

"How's the hike?", it asks in a tone equal parts reassuring and taunting.

You answer what comes naturally



I'm lost, can you help me?

Yeah, great, freezing to death

Nevermind the hike, why am I hearing voices?

16B/C.

"Hello," the voice echoes.

The voice is as calm, cold, and weathered as the forest around you. It is deep, wise, and sure.

It sounds completely alien yet familiar all at once.

"How's the hike?", the voice asks in a tone equal parts reassuring and taunting.

You answer what comes naturally



I'm lost, can you help me?

Yeah, great, freezing to death

Nevermind the hike, why am I hearing voices?

17A.

The voice does not acknowledge the concern in your voice.

"Come closer, I can't see you" you beg shakily.

Like it wouldn't ignore that, too.

You stand in silent disbelief, waiting in the cold for an answer from a ghost or something instead of finding your way out yourself.

Just as you resume trudging through the snow, the voice beckons, again:

"If you can't find your way out, find your way to me"

17B.

Good old sarcasm, all the comfort and warmth of an old ratty blanket with the appropriate social distance of a lineup at the bank during a global pandemic.

You shrug off the voice's feigned concern for what it is.

The voice, apparently unphased by your retort, continues:

"If you can't find your way out, find your way to me"

17C.

Nope.

No thanks.

Disembodied voices taunting you was not on any of the websites you read to prep for today.

You continue on your path, hoping that your loud marching drowns out the sounds of anyone trying to talk to you.

Shit, you think, what if someone is really out here to help you and you are just ignoring them.

Maybe you should take whatever help you are offered, existent or otherwise.

You quiet yourself and slow down.

The voice continues, completely ignoring your attempt to banish it.

"If you can't find your way out, find your way to me"

18.

"You are tired, starving, and freezing to death", the voice continues, in a tone you could mistake as comforting.

"But you must relax. Please. All will be well."

What does this guy mean? *IF* I can't find my way out? Isn't it painfully obvious?" - You think to yourself.

Not that you needed the reminder, but you really are starving. You can hear your stomach churn and grumble almost as clearly as you can hear your crunchy footsteps in the snow.

Mmm. Crunchy. You really could use a snack.

You suppose it isn't crunchy, but you can't stop thinking about Mell-O. It seems to be everywhere you look.

What is wrong with you?

You try to ignore your stomach and respond to the voice, perhaps begrudgingly:



How do I find you?

Just tell me where to go, I am tired

19.

"Stand still, calm yourself, listen to the wind whistle through the trees and follow it to find me", the voice continues in a frigid tone.

You turn around, feeling icy wind lap up against your face, crystalline and callous. The small and sharp flakes of snow stinging your face as you reluctantly contemplate the potential march head-on into the wind.

Even before walking, you already feel colder than before, probably colder than you thought possible. Heading into the wind will mean you'll be colder still, and definitely hungrier.



You really dont have any better options

20.

"Follow me", the voice says calmly.

You oblige, if only to give your mind a break.

Who or what could this voice be? Why was it talking to you?

It feels like its been with you a long time, but you aren't entirely convinced it is a friend.

You notice a tattered nylon trail marker on a nearby tree. You turn around but cant see any others.

At least it is something



at least you aren't alone

21.

At least you have a... friend? An adversary?

You settle on companion, for now.

Stumbling through guts of the forest, you have to remind yourself to see the shapes and forms of the forest for the trees and rocks they are.

Your feet are numb in your boots (guess they weren't as good as you thought. Then again, maybe you are being harsh on them).

The wind feels like it is cutting your winter gear to ribbons.

You can't go much further like this.



How much longer will it be, you **beg the voice**

22.

Snow still crunches and squeaks beneath your boots.

You can still hear the wind deftly run through the barren trunks that surround you.

No animals. No life. It is as if time itself might be frozen, catching you somewhere between the world of the living and that of the dead.

With you still, your hunger.

Mell-O.

Mell-O.

Mell-O.

It wouldn;t even be filling, you can't help but chuckle to yourself.

It is basically candy, but you wouldn't mind.

It is **comfort**

23.

You are finding it harder and harder to see.

The voice is guiding you, but the moon is the only thing lighting your way.

The snow in the air continues to fall, now reflecting the blue grey moonlight, hiding the forest around you in a ghostly fog.

"Look at me" the voice says confidently.

You squint to see through the falling snow.

As you reach a clearing, you can make out the barren emptiness of a frozen lake. A snowy desert in the cold night.

No trees, no mountains, no landmarks. The banks of the lake are littered with boulders, their details covered by the darkness of night, so they all meld into one continuous dark mass surrounding you.

It is beautiful. The falling snow looks like the stars themselves have come down to shine on you.



I am cold

24.

You are cold, but you knew that already.

Was the voice cold, too?

Is it hungry?

Are its legs also wobbling like Mell-O?

The voice continues: "Look into me, come closer"

But there is no one around, there is nothing to see, there is nothing to feel but the bone shattering cold.

The same cold that drove you here, the cold that forced your feet to keep moving, that forced your brain to stay alert, beckons you further.

The sheer cold howls through the valley made by the frozen lake.

Turn and run, there is nothing for you here

Walk onto the frozen lake

25A.

The voice never meant to help you.

It pulled you deeper into the cold. It can't be trusted.

Why, though?

You don't have time to dwell on it. You have to get out while you still can.

Running is keeping you warm, but how long can this last? You are too cold, hungry, and tired to think you have any hope of making it out of the forest like this.

Your legs are growing sluggish, you can barely feel your face but you know that if you could, it would probably hurt.

Almost blind in the snow, walk around like a zombie, without purpose.

You don't even know what you would even hope for.

You sort of wish the voice would say something, but it never does.



You squint through the snow

25B.

Moving is moving, you hope to yourself as you venture yet further into the snow.

The beauty of the lake is too hard to resist.

As you take your first steps onto the ice, you hear the creaks and groans of the lake water pushing up against its ceiling. It calls to you like a winter's siren song, ready to shatter the ice and pull you ever deeper into the cold.

You wander the lakeshore more slowly than before.

Your legs are growing sluggish, you can barely feel your face but you know that if you could, it would probably hurt.

In the full glare of your hopelessness you walk around like a zombie, without purpose.

You don't even know what you would even hope for.

You sort of wish the voice would say something, but it never does.

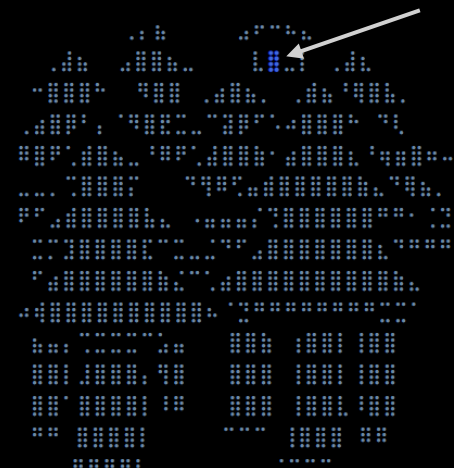


You squint through the snow

26.

Note: The link to progress is hidden, players must click on the door of the shack, indicated in this appendix with an arrow for clarity.

You can barely make out the outlines of trees against the nighttime snowfall, but something catches your eye



27.

What is that?!

A shack?

HERE?

Not that you know where "here" even is, at this point.

Without thinking, your feet are already working without you, bringing you to the shack.



At least it beats the cold

28.

You slowly approach the shack.

It is old, weathered by years of neglect.

You can feel the rotting beams bend and crackle underfoot as you step onto the porch.

Every part of the dark shack seems as though it was built by an amateur craftsman. The door hangs loosely from its remaining hinge, the two windows on either side sit crooked within the walls.

To you, it might as well be a palace.



It feels like the building itself had been waiting for you.

29.

Grabbing the cold doorknob, you make your way into the abandoned shack; your intrusion hopefully unnoticed.

You slam the door behind you, securing it with a small rock, locking out the piercing wind, for now.

Moonlight can't light your way in here.

You feel around, fumbling around in the dark for anything you might use to warm up. A blanket, maybe.

You can't stop yourself from hoping.



Feel around low to the ground
Feel around the walls

30A 1.

You get on your hands and knees.

You feel around, blind, for anything familiar.

You feel the crinkle of old leaves turning to dust under your body, the dust and earth that made its way in through tiny holes in the wood.

You bump your head on something hard.

30A 2.

Thin wooden beams, flat surface, yeah, that's a table, not terribly exciting.

Moving along the floor your hand reaches something that almost rings when you tap it. You can't quite tell what it is, so you remove your glove.

You lay your hand against the object. It is coarse and absolutely freezing to the touch. You keep your hand on it as you stand up and follow its contours as it narrows and becomes a tube or duct or *chimney*!

You can't believe your luck, you found an **old stove!**

30A 3.

The stove's icy cast iron frame might freeze your hand if you kept it there any longer, but you can't help yourself.

You scrounge around on the floor around the stove, looking for anything you might use for fuel.

Matches, a lighter, some papers, anything!

More dead leaves, not a bad start, but not enough.

You work your way back to the table and stand beside it.

You feel the wood it is made from under your hands. If you are going to survive, you know this table can't.

You pause to think of the craftsman who built it as you ball your hands into fists above your head.

"Sorry, table, its you or me"

30A 4.

The wood buckles and snaps under your frozen fists. You can't help but feel a little proud.

The wood hits the ground, along with whatever was on top of the table.

You hear a bowl wobble and roll on the floor, the sound of papers fluttering, and one more very familiar sound.

A little rattle, the sound of small sticks scattering on the floor. Not splinters, though.

Matches!

This night just keeps getting better.

30B 1.

You are afraid that if you bend over, you might not be able to get back up.

You hug the walls of the shack hoping to bump into anything familiar.

You feel the crinkle of old leaves turning to dust under your boots, the dust and earth that made its way in through tiny holes in the wood coat your gloves.

You bump your head on something hard.

You swear under your breath and feel the object.

30B 2.

A small shelf, nailed to the wall still holds a few books and trinkets.

What are you going to do with a book in the dark. You feel like the shack itself is taunting you now.

You continue your search when your hand reaches something that almost rings when you tap it. You can't quite tell what it is, so you remove your glove.

You lay your hand against the object. It is coarse and absolutely freezing to the touch. You keep your hand on it as you stand up and follow its contours as it narrows and becomes a tube or duct or *chimney*!

You can't believe your luck, you found an **old stove!**

30B 3.

The stove's icy cast iron frame might freeze your hand if you kept it there any longer, but you can't help yourself.

You scrounge around on the floor around the stove, looking for anything you might use for fuel.

Matches, a lighter, some papers, anything!

More dead leaves, not a bad start, but not enough.

You work your way back to the bookshelf and stand beside it.

You feel the old paper and leather bindings in your hands. You take in that old book smell. If you are going to survive, you know this can't.

You have never been much of a reader, but still, the thought of burning a book doesn't sit well with you.

You don't have a choice, maybe you will visit a library when you get home out of some sort of penance.

"Sorry, books, its you or me"

30B 4.

You collect the books in your arms to drop them off near the stove.

As you hastily grab the books from their perch, you knock over some other things that must have been on the shelf with them.

You hear a bowl wobble and roll on the floor, the sound of papers fluttering, and one more very familiar sound.

A little rattle, the sound of small sticks scattering on the floor. Not splinters, though.

Matches!

This night just keeps getting better.

31.

You strike a match against the dusty floor and it ignites. Not on the first try, admittedly.

The smell of the crackling wooden match is like a fine incense. Calming, warm, moving, even. You can barely contain yourself.

Are you really going to be ok?

The objects around you suddenly come out from the shadows at once.

You see a stove, a small kitchen, boarded windows, and old furniture.

"You see that?!" you taunt the voice, but it stays silent. Is it gone?

The match singes your fingers as it defiantly burns out and leaves you in the cold darkness again.

You gather your fuel and light a fire in the oven.

You sit on the floor and take in the warmth

32.

The fire crackles in the stove, casting lines of light through the iron grate.

The air in the shack is so still you almost feel like you are intruding.

Though you can sense nobody was in here for a very long time.

The room comes to life around you. A stuffed deer head watches you from the wall as you take in your surroundings.

You are sitting in a small living room, your company an old ratty bed, boarded windows, crudely upholstered furniture, a series of guidebooks for identifying birds and mushrooms, and some truly boring though lovingly framed art.

Above the stove, between the "art" you spot a framed topographical map of the area.



Without a second thought you tear it out of its frame and **examine it closely**

33.

You recognize the general area from what you saw online before your ill-fated hike.

You struggle with the map, turning it around and around, desperate to find some indication of where you might be on it.

You open the door of the shack to look for anything that might give you some sort of clue, but it is no use.

The night spills over the map like ink, staining the landmarks and keeping the secrets of the forest until dawn.

You fold the map and slip it into your pocket with a new sense of comfort. You must be on it somewhere, folded into its creases, ready to find your way home at first light.



Looks like you are staying the night

34.

In front of you sits the fire, smiling at you through the teeth of its grate and lighting up the room. There might be something here you could use.

You find comfort in the repetitive ritual of feeding the fire. You keep it alive, it keeps you alive.

You've been sitting by its side for some time now. You are warm enough to shed your jacket and gloves and finally relax.

You even boiled some snow for drinking water.

It might not be the fresh brewed cup of coffee you are craving, but in a pinch



it will do

35.

You feel the water hit your stomach and begin to warm you from the inside like a furnace.

You curl up on the nearby chair. Warm, safe, relieved.

Looking around the room for something to read that isn't some sort of guide, you spot something you have definitely seen before.

You can't believe your eyes, let alone your luck.

Tucked away between old dusty books, only its side visible, you recognize something from the past somehow spared by the elements and mice

and you can't help but smile

36.

You rub your fists against your eyes in disbelief but you would recognize that logo anywhere.

The bright red blocky letters with a slight blue shadow remind you of school snacks from childhood. There is no mistaking it. That's a packet of MELL-O.

"Are you kidding me?" you ask out-loud, to nobody.

What are the odds?

It might not be too filling, but it ought to make up for it in sweet jiggly fun.

The box might be old and dusty but this stuff is basically sugar, it can't really go bad.

MELL-O was there for you when you were a kid and it is here for you now.

Despite how faded the ink has become, you can still tell that the once vibrant perfect cubes of MELL-O used to be



Red
Blue
Purple

37A.

Red. Was it strawberry? Cherry?

No, no, you know which flavor it was: Red MELL-O.

Even if you weren't starving, you always have room for MELL-O.

"Made with real fruit juice"? Maybe, but who cares? Besides, it is only 84 calories!

You have some boiled water left-over. Why not?

You tear the box open to reveal a blank package of MELL-O powder.

You rip into it, careful not to spill any of its precious contents onto the floor, though ultimately unsuccessful.

Following the instructions on the box you had to piece back together, you add the MELL-O powder to the bowl of water on the stove and temper it with some snow in place of cold water.



It only takes a few minutes to set outside

37B.

Blue. Was it blueberry? Blue raspberry? What even is a blue raspberry?

No, no, you know which flavor it was: Blue MELL-O.

Even if you weren't starving, you always have room for MELL-O.

"Made with real fruit juice"? Maybe, but who cares? Besides, it is only 84 calories!

You have some boiled water left-over. Why not?

You tear the box open to reveal a blank package of MELL-O powder.

You rip into it, careful not to spill any of its precious contents onto the floor, though ultimately unsuccessful.

Following the instructions on the box you had to piece back together, you add the MELL-O powder to the bowl of water on the stove and temper it with some snow in place of cold water.



It only takes a few minutes to set outside

37C.

Purple. Was it grape?

No, no, you know which flavor it was: Purple MELL-O.

Even if you weren't starving, you always have room for MELL-O.

"Made with real fruit juice"? Maybe, but who cares? Besides, it is only 84 calories!

You have some boiled water left-over. Why not?

You tear the box open to reveal a blank package of MELL-O powder.

You rip into it, careful not to spill any of its precious contents onto the floor, though ultimately unsuccessful.

Following the instructions on the box you had to piece back together, you add the MELL-O powder to the bowl of water on the stove and temper it with some snow in place of cold water.



It only takes a few minutes to set outside

38.

You cant help but feel silly.

Here you are, sitting cross-legged in an old armchair with a blanket in the silence of the winter, alone, barely alive, eating MELL-O with the enthusiasm and enjoyment of a child as it dances and jiggles in its bowl.

Comforted by the map in your pocket and by the warmth of the fire in the stove beside you, shielded from the piercing wind by what remains of an old hunting shack.

You are going to be fine. In the morning you will use the map to find your car and get home. The hardest part of the hike is over, finally.

Laughing to yourself about the journey that brought you here. You thought you were prepared but you didn't even bring a bag of supplies. You almost didn't bring a hat!

You might want to hate the forest, the cold, the darkness, but you really can't.

Maybe that's ok

Still, you can't help but gloat

39A.

You can get used to anything. Even the howling winds threatening to blow the shack away from over you or the cold whispering into your ear, luring you deeper into the frozen night can feel familiar.

Almost friendly.

You are lucky the voice said anything at all. You might not understand exactly what it was or why it pushed you, but without an adversary, without a direction, you would surely not have made it here.

You feed the fire and settle in for a well deserved sleep.

You bid the dark forest and the cold a good night.

Is there a sound more relaxing than falling snow hitting the thin glass of the windows?



I don't think so

39B 1.

You shout out at the voice.

You call it names.

You want it to know you are safe and warm. You want it to know that you won.

But the voice stays silent.

And you wish it wouldn't.

39B 2.

You want to rub it in. You want to feel the win.

Just who did you beat, though?

What did you want the voice to say? What did the voice want from you?

You can get used to anything. Even the howling winds threatening to blow the shack away from over you or the cold whispering into your ear, luring you deeper into the frozen night can feel familiar.

Almost friendly.

You are lucky the voice said anything at all. You might not understand exactly what it was or why it pushed you, but without an adversary, without a direction, you would surely not have made it here.

You feed the fire and settle in for a well deserved sleep.

You bid the dark forest and the cold a good night.

Is there a sound more relaxing than falling snow hitting the thin glass of the windows?



I don't think so

40.

Note: The code displayed was required to begin the questionnaire and prevented participants from skipping the story.

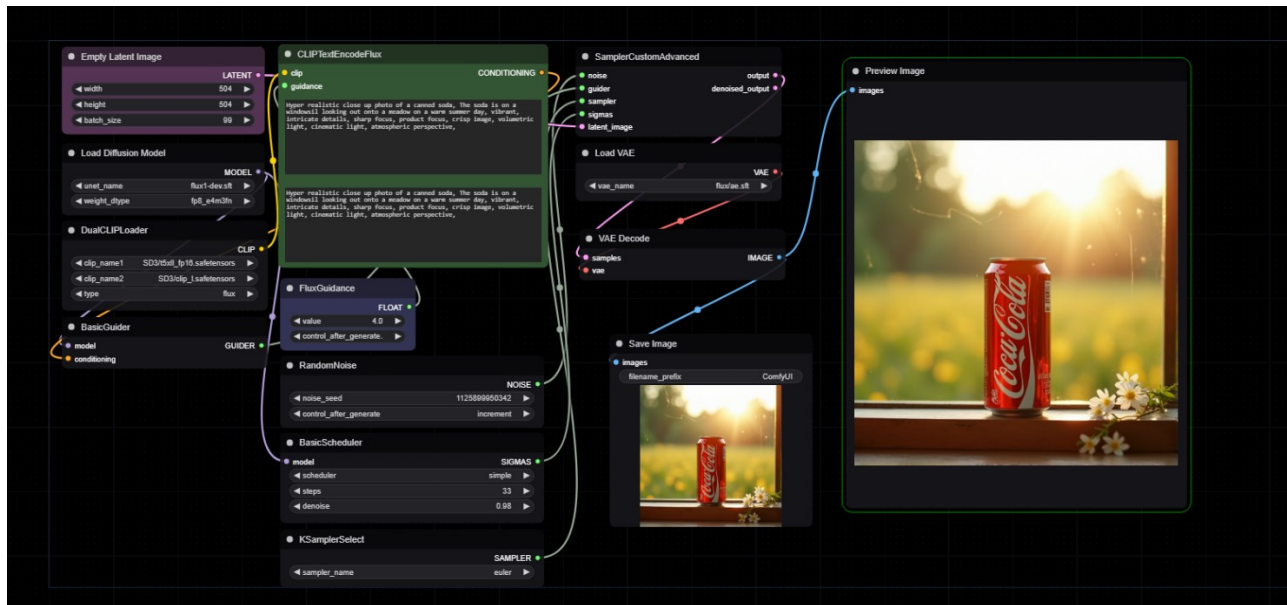
Thank you for completing this interactive story.

Please copy your unique code into your other browser window and continue to the questionnaire:

0121

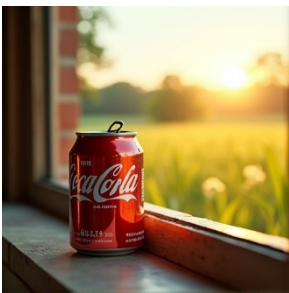
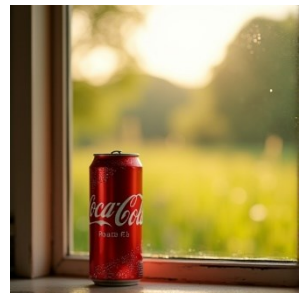
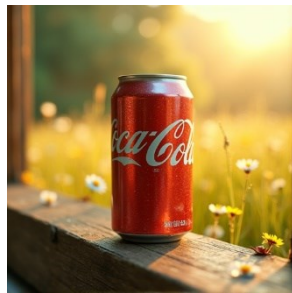
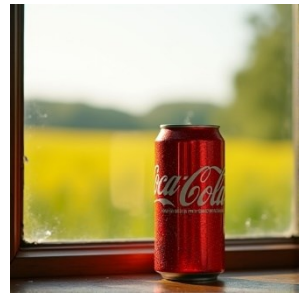
Appendix B – Generative AI workflow and images

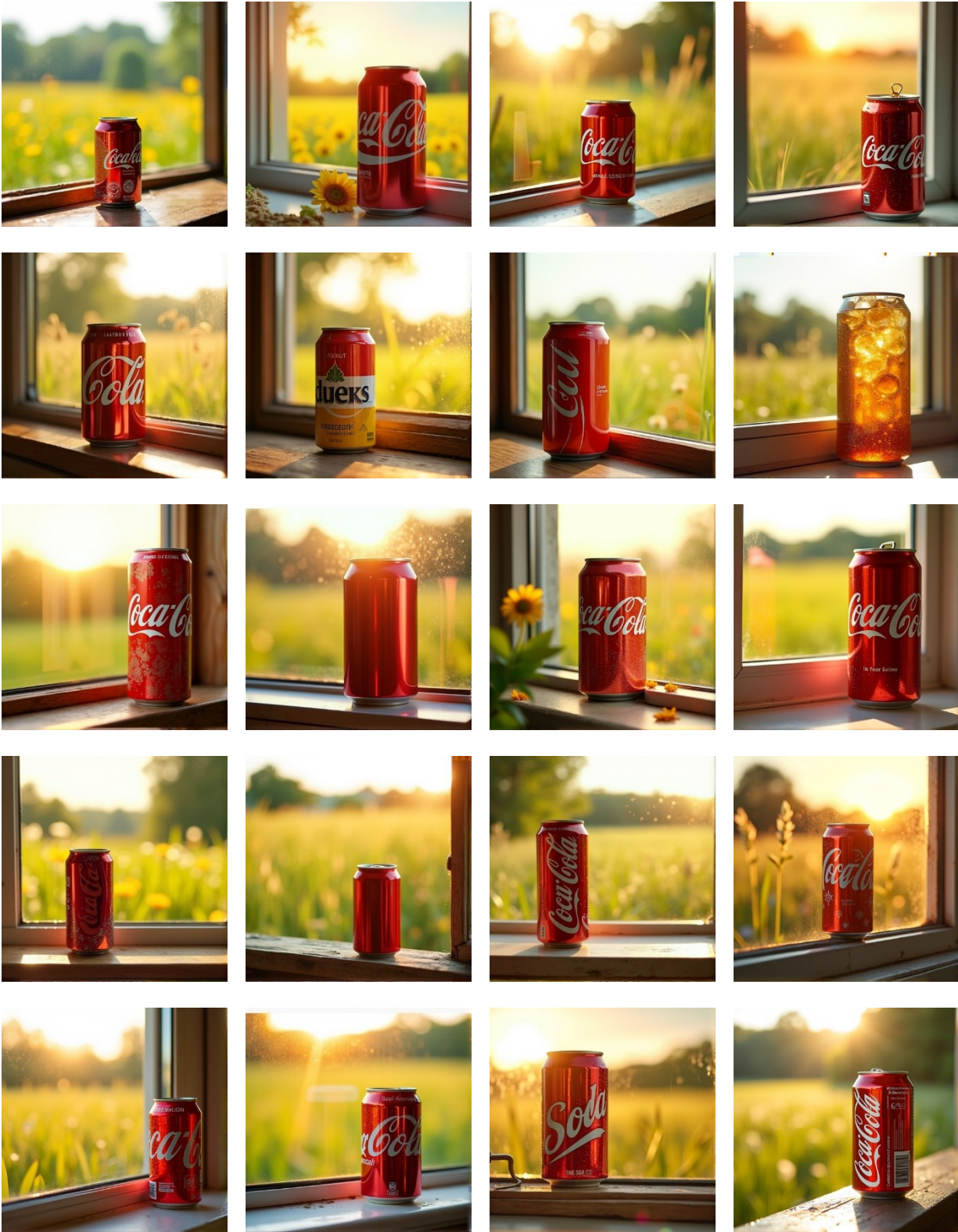
1. Workflow in ComfyUI

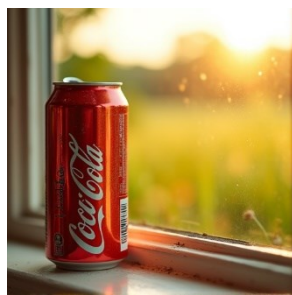
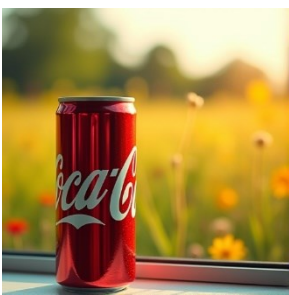
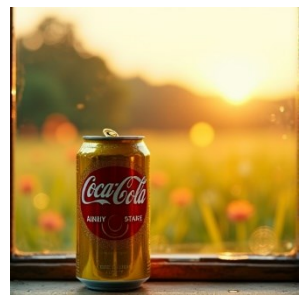
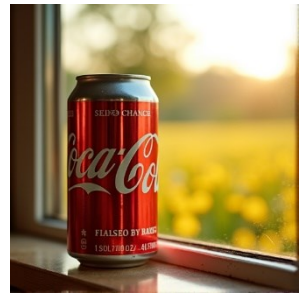


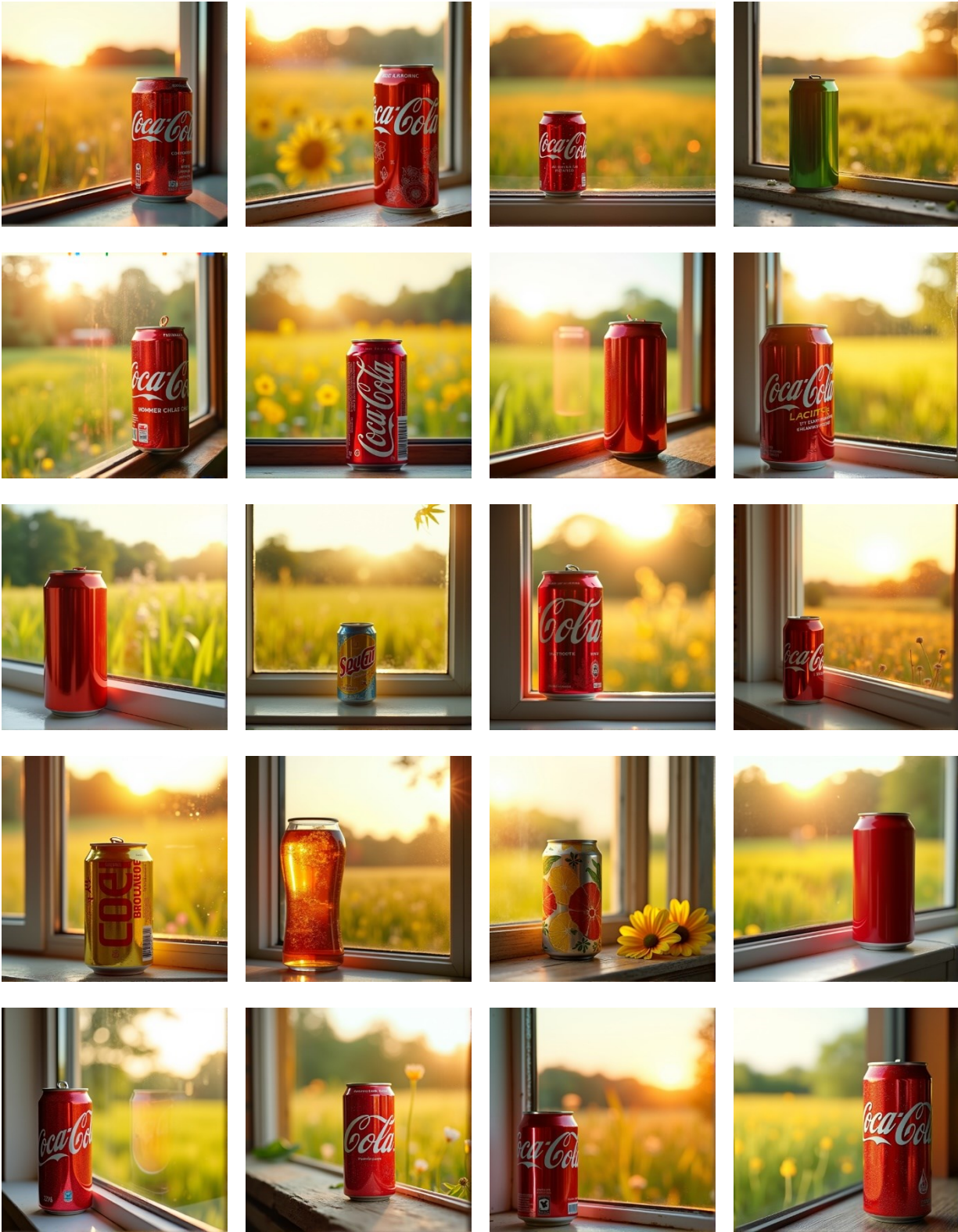
2. Output images (100)

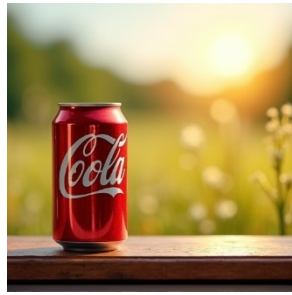
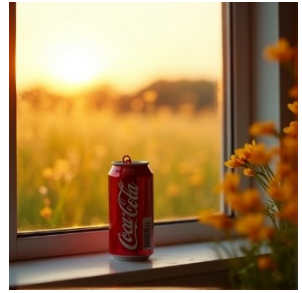












Appendix C – Personal Essay about AI

A word on generative artificial intelligence and its use in this dissertation

In the course of writing my PhD dissertation on Mimetic brands, it became necessary to create and maintain my own experimental materials and stimuli. Mimetic brands are those that artists may include in their fictional work to evoke real brands without overtly advertising for them. I posit that this is typically done to lend a sense of realism to fictional worlds and to avoid advertising. The mechanisms that I studied behind the efficacy of the strategy center on audiences' abilities to immerse themselves into the stories in which these brands are placed and avoiding the distractions that come with traditional placement of real brands. To best facilitate the participants' experiences, in designing the second study for this dissertation I decided to add images to the text-only game used in the previous study. In previous research projects in which I have taken part, this work was often outsourced to qualified artists, but elements required by the research design were usually lost in translation. For this dissertation, I wanted to minimize the points at which experimental control could be compromised and opted to create materials specifically designed to achieve my research goals.

As such, in addition to the skills required to develop the research methodology, I had to familiarize myself with the tools required to write and depict compelling stories. The creative writing and game design were things I was fortunate enough to study in my coursework, but I am not a visual artist and was not prepared to create the images I needed for the experiment. Per the suggestions of my committee, I began exploring the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) as a research tool. I did not know it at the time, but this would go on to influence the following study profoundly as well as introduce a new and important stream of research. In this personal essay, I will briefly outline the process I followed to learn these tools and my advice to future

researchers who may want to do the same. I will also advocate for the use of such tools to both control and expedite academic research, paying close attention to ethical boundaries.

Before this summary, I must clarify an important qualification: the use of generative AI in this work was entirely limited to the creation of research stimuli. The rest of the research, from its conceptualization in 2014 to its writing and editing this year in 2025, was unassisted by AI tools. I do not make any claims about the ethics or morality of its use in academia, nor do I argue that future researchers ought to impose the same limitations on its use in their work. Artificial Intelligence tools are new and their place in social science research is not yet understood. It falls to each researcher to decide where its boundaries should lie and how to best and most ethically employ it in their work.

Finally, this essay represents a limited snapshot of the use of generative AI in social science research. The majority of the work described was conducted was done between 2023 and 2024. Though for my own edification and enjoyment I have tried to find the time to keep up with the latest developments, the tools I used and therefore some of the advice I will strive to give may be out of date by the submission of this essay, let alone by the time it is read by a fellow academic heading down the same path. I ask you, reader, to consider the philosophical underpinnings that informed my decisions in cases in which the technology has changed such that the specifics no longer apply.

Closed and open-source AI Models

It is important to understand the basics of how AI generates images from text. All the generative AI models being used today have been trained on billions of existing images and their descriptions scraped from the internet. This is what enables users to use text prompts to generate

images that draw from these vast libraries. Inputting details about content and style allows the model to compare its output with previous images to ensure accuracy. Users can create images of almost whatever they want, in whichever style they prefer, with any lighting, framing, or details they can imagine. AI models all generate images in a similar way through a process called diffusion. They begin by generating a random pattern of noise, and then slowly iterate on and refine that noise until it resembles the desired image.

Image-generating AI models can be grouped into closed-source and open-source categories. What differentiates the two fundamentally is the inability or ability of users to access and change the underlying code beneath the models. The former provides accessibility while the latter offers flexibility. Closed-source models like OpenAI's Dall-E 3 are extremely powerful and quite simple to use. They require almost no prior experience to generate realistic images. Writing simple prompts in conversational English is all that is required, though specifying particular aspects or details can be challenging as iteration is typically imprecise. This is because these tools are built for ease-of-use, getting people excited to play, rather than work with them. As such, the options afforded to users are streamlined and extremely limited, focused on the experience of effortlessly creating images and not working with the engine under the hood.

Closed-source models, though powerful and easily accessible, are also subject to regulations imposed by their controlling companies. Often these rules are meant to protect the operating companies from infringing copyrights such as artistic styles, brands, or well-known people and characters and from the use of those in illegal or otherwise unsavory images. While important in a commercial space for ethical reasons, some of these limitations pose problems for research. For example, in preparation for the second study of this dissertation (see chapter 3), I had to generate an image of Mell-O, a mimetic brand that copied Jell-O. The prompt I used

contained the name “Jell-O” which set off the automatic copyright filters and for which I was promptly though temporarily banned. Thus, I chose not to use any closed-source tools to complete my tasks, as it was important to me that all of the images were generated in the same way, for the purpose of replicability.

With replicability in mind, there is another important limitation that ought to be considered when using closed-source models. When new versions are released, older models are no longer accessible. This is often because the companies that manage the tools do not want to spread their attention across multiple products when they can instead focus only on supporting the most powerful and accurate one. While the newer models almost always bring with them significant improvements, the same prompts one used before may yield vastly different results. The newer models may differ in their prompt parsing and the images they create can have slightly different styles, resolutions, and artifacts. For artists and regular users, this means adapting to the new model before quickly returning to making the images they want to, but for researchers this may pose a problem of replicability. If researchers do not have access to the same models, then anyone trying to replicate previous methodologies must develop the equivalent skill set before doing so, as they cannot simply use pre-existing prompts from previous studies. Even researchers continuing their own stream of work may not want to expand their image library with images that have a slightly different style. For this dissertation, I paid very close attention to subtle factors that could have detracted from participants’ narrative transportation. To that end, I did not feel that I could risk using tools I could not reuse if it became necessary to add new images in this or a future iteration of the study.

Open-source tools accomplish many of the same tasks as their closed-source counterparts but differ dramatically in their features. While a few large open-source models exist, my

expertise and by extension this essay are limited to one: Stable Diffusion. I say “one” but in reality, Stable Diffusion is more a family of closely related open-source models. Every user can modify and share versions of models like this one. As such, there are thousands of highly specialized versions of Stable Diffusion, each with their own specializations, unique options, and version histories. These models are often geared towards a specific goal such as realism or animation styles, or to the content of images like people, products, landscapes, and more. Moreover, these versions can be further refined by pairing them with even more specialized fine tuning sub-models called Low-Rank Adaptations, or LORA. These too are user-generated and are created by training a new AI model on a large dataset of images that share a very particular style. Say, for example, that a user wants to generate an image of a shack in the woods in the winter, at night. This user must first choose a base version of Stable Diffusion that generates photorealistic images and then fine tune it with a LORA that has been trained on night photography to bring out more realistic details one might expect in a real photo taken in low light.

Even the interfaces through which users can access and employ the models can be changed to accommodate more or less granular control over the processes and output. These tend to differ on their levels of useability and granularity of control over the models. Learning to use open-source tools like Stable Diffusion is thus a rather daunting task, especially while also busy working towards a PhD. It requires a great deal of tinkering and iteration – and lessons, if you can find someone from which to learn. There are countless variables that can be manipulated and a myriad of models and user interfaces, all of which interact with those variables differently.

Despite the difficult and tedious learning phase, I firmly believe that the benefits of using open-source tools vastly outweigh their at-times frustrating quirks. Returning to replicability,

using open-source tools like Stable Diffusion allows one to locally store settings and models so regardless of changes to existing models or the release of new ones, users can maintain a consistent version and workflow. This allows researchers, for example, to iterate upon experimental materials without adjusting their approach or having to recreate previous ones from scratch. If there are ever concerns about data sensitivity or management, then all programs can be installed and run locally, as well. The use of LORAs also allows for greater control over and consistency between generated images, both of which are essential for preserving experimental control. Researchers may even quickly train their own LORAs to create consistent characters, settings, or styles; something not possible with closed-source models. All of these files can also be shared between researchers, allowing them to collaborate more effectively.

Compared with closed-source models, Stable Diffusion is also much more powerful. Beyond the control it offers users, it also allows them to create truly massive batches of images, the best of which can be further refined or edited all within the same interface. Some stable Diffusion models are also well-suited to generating images with much higher detail and resolution compared with closed-source models like Dall-E. RULES RULES RULES

Philosophically speaking, I personally believe that researchers ought to employ as many open-source tools whenever possible. Both in the name of replicability but also to democratize the tools used to make theoretical and practical claims. This allows readers to better understand, engage with, and criticize research findings. Using closed-source AI seems to me like working behind a curtain. How those models were deployed as well as the specific rules that governed them at the time remain unknowable to readers or future researchers. So, for both philosophical and technical reasons, all generative AI used in this research was conducted with open-source tools.

How AI was used in this work

Following my proposal defense, I was fortunate enough to have been given a great deal of flexibility and time in which to develop a skill set in generative AI use. I began by first playing with free closed-source tools simply to learn the basics of prompt-writing. Quickly, I found the limitations imposed by these platforms prevented me from creating the images I had hoped to add to the next phase of my experimental research and shifted my focus to Stable Diffusion. Using some freely available older models in my internet browser, I familiarized myself with the new settings and more complicated workflow, though I was not able to make anything passable as a realistic image. Moving onto more powerful models, I was hindered by my personal computer's specifications. In order to use these models it became necessary to run them remotely on more powerful machines, which I did through a service called RunDiffusion.

With access to some seriously powerful computers and thousands of Stable Diffusion models from which to choose, I began trying to create the images that I needed for the study. As I tinkered with the options, my output was not quite realistic enough and often generated horrific artefacts within the images which I would later learn were due to selecting the wrong models. I then turned to online forums on which other users posted their generated images along with the workflow through which they were generated. Doing so was the single most impactful action I had taken in pursuit of learning about generative AI. Reading their prompts, their comments, and recommendations, I was very quickly able to adapt my own and refine my output.

While I wholeheartedly recommend that other researchers do the same and explore these online forums, I recommend doing so with caution. Generative AI is in its “Wild-West” phase, and users who plumb its depths ought to do so with an iron stomach and the expectation that they will encounter the abject horrors brought out by the intersection of anonymous internet users and

the tremendous power of AI. I recommend applying the content filters made available by these sites before browsing other users' work. Thus, to distance my work from theirs, I have chosen not to cite the specific forum from which I have learned my skills. I urge future researchers to find their own resources and, better yet, collaborate and share their expertise.

Ultimately, the images created for the interactive story "The Hike" for study 2 were generated using Stable Diffusion versions 1 through 3 within the Automatic1111 and ComfyUI interfaces. Approximately 8000 images were generated from which eventually 32 were used in the story. The bulk of these images were rough drafts, the best of which were selected and iterated upon. The image generation began with prompts such as this one used to generate a mug of warm water in Stable Diffusion version 3:

"Metal camping mug of boiling hot water sitting on a tattered red blanket on an old splintering coffee table, (very dim warm lighting:1.7), inside an abandoned wooden shack, late night, iron stove in the background".

It is important to use very specific descriptors to avoid generating vastly different images as it iterates. Using numbered weighting also allows users to emphasize important features of the prompt, which I found especially useful when it came to lighting. Very few models available at the time were geared towards low light photography and so using these weights allowed me to create the correct ambiance for the image. Older models required more quality-related terms such as "high definition", "realistic", or "hyper-detailed" though these are not as frequently used now. Each image was also generated using a negative prompt – instructions that tell the model what *not* to generate. These are fairly standardized and include keywords relating to undesired elements. In this case, words included: "people", "eyes", "faces", "sun", "low quality", "JPEG", and the like. Additionally, without any training in photography, I was not sure what a realistic

photo taken at night in the winter might look like. I thus went out much like the protagonist in the story on my own adventure to take some pictures in the Laurentian forests. The photos I took were then compared with the AI generated ones and used to ensure that the images used in *The Hike* were as realistic as possible.

Generative AI proved to be a potent and versatile research tool. It allowed me to precisely create research stimuli tailored to my own research goals while being careful not to include potentially confounding elements. While doing so, an interesting question arose as to whether the use of AI in research may bias results. Though not very relevant to the images I was creating for “*The Hike*”, I wondered how the libraries of images to which generated images were compared might affect the generation process. I theorized that prompting AI models with generic words like “soda” – a category in which Coca Cola is a dominant figure – might result in output images more similar to Coke due to the sheer number of images of the drink on the internet. Perhaps elements more commonly seen and photographed are more likely to be generated than others. This is discussed at length in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, as I conducted a small-scale study of biases in AI image generation, but this is a research direction I would not have pursued had I not interacted with this nascent technology.

I thus recommend that future researchers in this and other fields familiarize themselves with generative AI not as a means of cutting corners or rushing out work, but one through which we may create more specialized research materials and interact with them in novel ways. Though I cannot even opine on how AI may evolve nor how it will change social science research in the long term, I am confident that it will occupy an ever-larger part in our academic and other pursuits. Social science researchers are faced with the unique opportunity to watch and study

how the introduction of powerful new tools affects every facet of our world and to be among the first to harness it for research.

Appendix D – Information and consent form

Study Title: Attitudes towards narrative styles

Researcher: Dr. Michel Laroche

Research Assistant: Nathaniel Mayer-Heft

Research Assistant's Contact Information: nathanielmh@gmail.com

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: Michel.Laroche@concordia.ca

Source of funding for the study: SSHRC Insight Grant (S02139)

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to examine how people evaluate new narrative research paradigms. We want to understand how consumers like you feel about advertising within stories. We want to study whether things like product placement, the mentioning of brands in media, contribute to your enjoyment of the experience or detract from it.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked to read a short story and answer a survey on the computers in the marketing lab.

In total, participating in this study will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. This research is not intended to benefit you personally.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research: Your answers to the survey questions.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

The information gathered will be anonymous. That means that it will not be possible to make a link between you and the information you provide.

We will protect the information by keeping it on a secure computer, protected with a password.

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

We will destroy the information five years after the end of the study.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher before your completion of the questionnaires.

As a compensatory indemnity for participating in this research, you will receive course credit.

To make sure that research money is being spent properly, auditors from Concordia or outside will have access to a coded list of participants. It will not be possible to identify you from this list.

There are no negative consequences for not participating or stopping in the middle. Please note that once you have finished the study, due to the anonymity of the data it will not be possible to remove your information from the study should you want to withdraw.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

If you consent to participating in this study, please click the button at the bottom of your screen.

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Dr. Michel Laroche
Department: John Molson School of Business\Marketing
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Attitudes towards narratives in (text, film, video games).
Certification Number: 30012542

Valid From: March 29, 2023 To: March 28, 2024

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "David Waddington", followed by a horizontal line.

Dr. David Waddington, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Dr. Michel Laroche
Department: John Molson School of Business\Marketing
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Attitudes towards narratives in (text, film, video games).
Certification Number: 30012542

Valid From: September 10, 2024 To: September 09, 2025

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

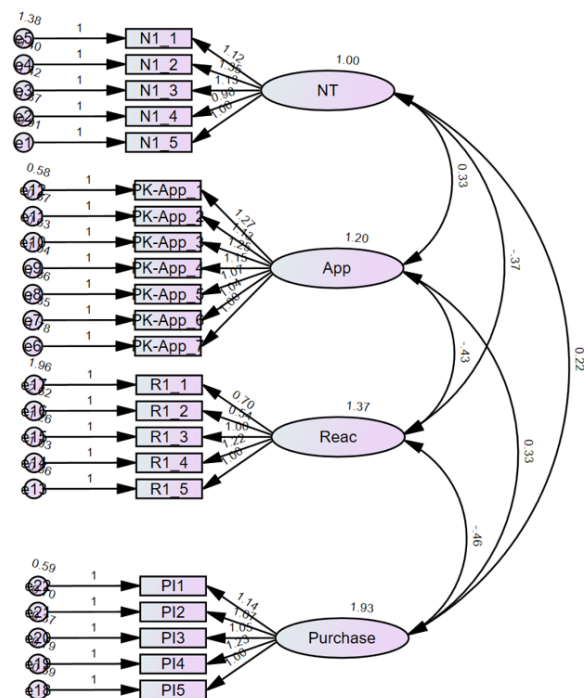
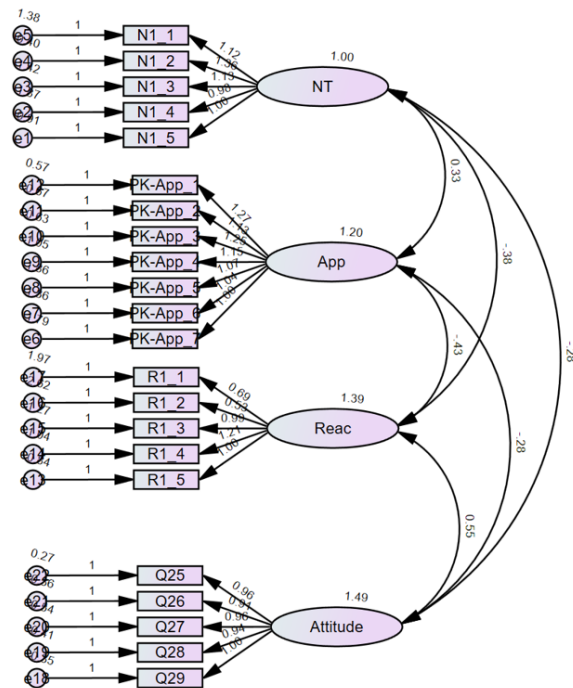
A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard DeMont".

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix E – Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results

Appendix E

Confirmatory Factor analyses – Study 1



Note: Measurement model containing Brand Attitude (top), and Purchase Intent (bottom).

Appendix E Confirmatory Factor analysis – Study 2

