

# **Time to Imagine an Escape: Investigating the Consumer Timework at Play in Augmented Reality**

**Purpose:** While the spatial dimensions of augmented reality have received significant attention in the marketing literature, to date, there has been less consideration of its temporal dimensions. This paper theorises digital timework through augmented reality to understand a new form of consumption experience which offers short-lived, immersive forms of mundane, marketer-led escape from everyday life.

**Design/methodology/approach:** We draw upon Casey's phenomenological work to explore the emergence of new dynamics of temporalisation through digitised play. An illustrative case study using augmented reality shows how consumers use this temporalisation to find stability and comfort through projecting backwards (remembering) and forwards (imagining) in their lives.

**Findings:** The proliferation of novel digital technologies and platforms has radically transformed consumption experiences as the boundaries between the physical and the virtual, fantasy and reality, play and work have become increasingly blurred. Our findings show how temporary escape is carved out within digital space and time where controlled imaginings provide consumers with an illusion of control over their lives as they re-establish cohesion to a ruptured sense of time.

**Originality:** Prior work has conceptualised augmented reality as offloading the need for imagination by making the absent present. We critically unpack the implications of this for a more fluid understanding of the temporal logics and limits of consumer escapism.

## **Keywords:**

Augmented reality, immersive digital consumption, imagination, memory, temporalisation, comfort

## 1. Introduction

Prior research notes that individuals search for and immerse themselves into various types of consumption experiences which acquire meaning due to a particular temporal flow (Woermann & Rokka, 2015), whether this is slowed down as in the case of pilgrimage visits (e.g. Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019) or sped up as in the context of high-risk leisure activities such as skydiving (e.g. Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993). The extraordinary experience literature is characterised by varying degrees of experienced temporality (Arnould & Price, 1993) which offer a temporary escape from the confines of everyday life through imaginative play (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Orazi & van Laer, 2022). Increasingly, these experiences cut across physical and digital realms (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Mele & Russo-Spena, 2022; Skandalis, 2023) and no longer require physical escape such as travel, but can be integrated into consumers' mundane, everyday routines. Such temporal forms of escape have yet to be fully theorised as these do not follow the Turnerian (1969) framework of liminal, or liminoid liberation from the constraints of work and everyday responsibilities which characterise much of the extraordinary experience literature (Cova, Caru & Cayla, 2018). Our aim is to address this shortcoming by investigating the more short-lived and temporary forms of everyday escape which are situated within the intersection of physical and digital modes of consumption (Belk & Llamas, 2013; Hilken et al., 2022; Scholz & Duffy, 2018). Although technology has been shown to affect our temporal flows (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019), how new technological tools can offer different temporalities and opportunities for consumer timework (Robinson, Veresiu & Rosario, 2022) remains surprisingly absent from the literature.

Drawing upon the phenomenological work of Edward Casey (1977) on remembering and imagination, we build on what Cova, et al. (2018: 445) describe as a “new type of escape route” which comprises of “small everyday escapes facilitated by technology and especially digitalisation” (450). To do so, we must consider not only temporal flows but also ‘consumer

timework,' that is "marketplace stakeholders, negotiation of competing interpretations of how the past and the future relate using a wide range of consumption objects and activities" (Robinson et al., 2022: 96). Consumers seek to re-establish cohesion to a ruptured sense of time, negotiating between past memories (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003; Brunk, Giesler, & Hartmann, 2018; Robinson, et al., 2022) and future anticipations (Heath & Nixon, 2021; Jenkins & Molesworth, 2018; Philips, 2017). In this study, we bring together and synthesise temporal flows, and in particular speed of time, along with dynamics of temporalisation, that is time-consciousness through orientation in past, present or future. We illustrate how consumers immerse themselves into digitised, more run-of-the-mill short-lived branded escapes which cut across various experienced temporalities. Casey's (1977) work allows us to create a holistic framework which integrates both temporal flows and time-consciousness by encompassing both imagination and remembering, that is cognitive processes required to escape to other temporal dimensions.

We focus on augmented reality, AR hereafter, as an example of an immersive technology wherein the digital and the physical are increasingly superimposed (Farshid, Paschen, Eriksson & Kietzmann, 2018; Sung, Han & Choi, 2021), as opposed to other emergent technologies such as virtual reality where users are completely immersed in an application and must 'leave' reality for a complete alternate reality. While there are many examples of 'temporary everyday escapes' through technology – social media scrolling being the most obvious contender – we are interested in the fluid transition from physical to digital that AR affords and which is increasingly heralded as the next iteration of the Internet. It seems that if the metaverse is to live up to its hype (Preece, Whittaker & Janes, 2022), AR will be a significant entry point (Yao, 2022). Indeed, AR is now at a point of mass adoption in the UK (Bennett, et al., 2021). It provides users a finite and fixed set of possible interactions and layers

of data, sound, video, and graphics, integrating imagined and real stories, brands and products in a coherent experience embedded in the immediate environment.

The branded aspect of this form of digital escapism is of particular interest to us, given that branded entertainment and content is widely considered to supersede traditional advertising and communications (Dens & Poels, 2023). Bennett, et al.'s (2021) report finds that 63% of UK users regularly consume AR filters on social media. In fact, branded filters on social media constitute a common entry point to experiment with AR world-building such as Tommy Hilfiger's recent Snapchat filter which combines virtual try-on with a surreal World Lens. However, the wave of such new AR apps has been primarily examined from a practical use case perspective (Farshid et al., 2018; Hilken, et al., 2017; Hilken, et al., 2018; Hilken, Heller, et al., 2022) and somewhat fails to consider more hedonic and imaginative uses for consumer escapism. Even more utilitarian uses of AR, such as previewing how a piece of Ikea furniture might look in your home, does allow for imagining and fantasising and as such, provides forms of temporary and mundane entertainment (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Illouz, 2009). This paper thus broadens a somewhat narrow focus on AR in order to open up for a research-based, more holistic discussion.

AR is therefore marketer-driven but offers consumers hedonic interaction and can be defined as the real-time direct or indirect view of a physical environment which has been augmented through virtual computer-generated information overlaying it (Carmigniani & Furht, 2011). AR has received significant recent attention in the marketing literature (Javornik, 2016a; 2016b; Scholz and Duffy, 2018) and prior studies (Heller, et al., 2019; Hilken, et al., 2017; Petit, Javornik & Velasco, 2021) illustrate how, through AR, consumers' cognitive process can be offloaded, improving decision comfort and purchase intention. We consider some of the more critical implications of this offloading capacity (Heller, et al., 2019), which we show does not prevent cognitive processes such as imagination and remembering, but rather

puts limits on them. We show that these more short-lived, everyday types of digitised escape do not allow for an escape from the structures of everyday life as much of previous literature suggests. While much of the AR literature has considered the spatial immersion it affords users (e.g. Sung et al., 2021), the temporal dimensions of this immersion have been ignored to date.

We contribute to the marketing literature in theorising digital timework, focusing on a specific AR app to understand new forms of short-lived, immersive, mundane and marketer-led escapes from everyday life. We suggest that escape is more complex than previously highlighted in the literature and accounting for time-consciousness is essential. Our theorisation illustrates how consumers escape temporally by grappling with various temporal flows and temporalisations. We show that this process is fluid, dynamic and cumulative and allows for consumer sense-making, providing individuals with comfort through a sense of control over their everyday lives. Imagination and remembering are found to be central to this form of escape, yet we highlight that when this imagination and remembering is too controlled by marketers, it can constrain consumer escapism. We also provide practical recommendations and design guidelines for marketers to overcome this danger and support rather than hinder self-directed imaginative play (whether past-, present- or future-focused).

Next, we provide a review of the consumer culture theory literature which focuses on various forms of escape through extraordinary experiences and their temporal flows before we move on to highlight the rise of more mundane forms of temporary escape which sit in-between physical and digital modes of consumption and cut across memory and imagination, providing different temporalisations. We illustrate how many of the AR experiences we consume in our mundane, daily lives, offer us leisure activity for enjoyment or relaxation, allowing for immersive temporal forms of escape through controlled remembering and imagining directed by the market. We situate such forms of temporal escape within Casey's (1977) phenomenological work. A case study focusing on a particular AR application illustrates how

consumers can re-orient themselves to find a market-mediated stability and comfort through various forms of time-consciousness.

## **2. Extraordinary Experiences, Temporal Flows and Consumer Escapism**

The consumer culture theory literature has heavily drawn on notions of enjoyment and play as forms of escape within the realm of extraordinary experiences (Goulding, Shankar & Elliott, 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Seregina & Weijo, 2016). Such experiences are framed as an escape from the tedium of everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993) with temporary escapes sitting outside of the ordinary pressures of life from which consumers can return (temporarily) restored and transformed (Goulding, et al., 2002; Kozinets, 2001). Extraordinary experiences therefore occur within specific temporal and geographical boundaries, forming separate alternative worlds (Cova, et al., 2018) and the temporary escapes they afford are grounded in the liminal (Turner, 1969), providing respite from nine to five constraints and market logics (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Prior work highlights that the temporal flows of extraordinary experiences contribute to their perceived extraordinariness and the escape that they provide, mediating the quality of such an experience (Arnould & Price, 1993). For instance, Woermann and Rokka (2015) illustrate how consumers can become enveloped in a phenomenal field with a certain timeflow whilst Husemann and Eckhardt (2019) highlight that consumers can experience an escape from their busy, accelerated everyday lives via slower forms of consumption and subjective experience of time.

However, there seems to be limited understanding of more ordinary experiences and temporary escapes which become meaningful for consumers whilst staying grounded within the structures of everyday life (Skandalis, 2023). In fact, prior work argues that there is a need to move beyond the dialectics of 'reality-unreality' which dominates the consumer culture literature on escape (Jones et al., 2020: 462). In line with recent work (Cova et al., 2018;

Skandalis et al., 2016), we argue that much of the extraordinary experience literature has fallen into a romantic fallacy in relying on Turner's (1969) binary distinction between structure and antistructure which understands the latter as a potentially regenerative force that liberates individuals from their social roles and statuses, allowing for escape from everyday life. We further contend that such dualistic categories somewhat fail to capture the complex nature of contemporary experiences which sit in-between the physical and the digital and the various dimensions of associated temporal forms of consumer escapism (see also Jones, Cronin & Piacentini, 2020). We position our study on this fluid terrain to further consider the temporal escapes that emerge through immersive technologies such as AR. More specifically, we seek to understand these digitised, more run-of-the-mill, short-lived escapes which bear the potential to provide different temporalities.

### **3. Everyday, Imaginative Experiences and Consumer Timework**

Recent studies have provided a more nuanced and multifaceted perspective on escape, highlighting that the pleasure involved in escape can emerge from escaping 'into' inner worlds as well as 'from' the outside world (Kerrigan et al., 2014) and that these escapes can be mundane as well as extraordinary (Cova et al., 2018; Jones, et al., 2020; Skandalis et al., 2016). Rather than the realm of the transcendent privileged by the extraordinary experience literature, this work has identified different forms of imaginative experiences which lead to inner escape with varying degrees of emotional intensity ranging from mundane daydreams to abstract fantasies (see Heath & Nixon, 2021; Jenkins & Molesworth, 2018). In short, the role of imagination, fantasy and daydreaming in consumption and its potential for providing temporary forms of escape has been addressed by a number of studies (McCracken, 1986; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Illouz, 2009). Consumers are considered often playful (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Seregina & Weijo, 2016), willing to temporally suspend their

disbelief and become enchanted through the “actualisation of the imagination” as the imaginary is actualised into desired forms (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010: 125).

Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007) show the potential of the digital virtual in the actualisation of consumer fantasies. These fantasies or imaginings, however, are not free but rather subject to market mechanics resulting in novelty but within controlled limits, or as Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2008: 373) put it “controlled decontrolling.” Similarly, Philips (2017: 2140) notes that marketers seek to understand how imagination augments reality to “engage consumers’ imaginations around products and brands to facilitate persuasion” and distinguishes between uninstructed and marketer-instructed imagination. The latter, controlled imagination as directed by the marketer is the focus of this paper. In a temporal sense, imagining is characterised as providing a sense of short-lived control, particularly when reality denies such control, by allowing for consideration of potential alternative futures (or past) outcomes (Jenkins & Molesworth, 2018).

In this paper, we argue that consumers increasingly escape through the virtual to reconcile past, present and future and find respite from their daily, hectic schedules. For instance, when individuals try out a variety of face filters on Snapchat through the use of AR, a series of past, present, and future imaginings and actual possibilities come into play (e.g. younger vs older selves, different aesthetic styles). Prior work highlights that individuals are increasingly forced to mediate their sense of time due to accelerating rates of social change and, hence, engage in consumer timework, that is multiple and competing interpretations of the past, present and future (see Robinson et al., 2022). While the use of AR may not be obviously related to times past or future, it has been noted for its ability to activate nostalgia and actualise consumer fantasies (Hinsch et al., 2020), both of which require consumer timework. Consumers’ preoccupation with and use of the past as part of their consumer identity projects is well documented (Brown, et al., 2003; Brunk, et al., 2018; Robinson, et al., 2022). Similarly,



the dreams and promises or even fears for the future have also been examined (Heath & Nixon, 2021; Jenkins & Molesworth, 2018; Martin, 2004) as offering particular market-mediated identity positions. Although time has been previously documented as a significant cultural resource, we still know relatively little about its role in the creation of digital forms of short-lived escape, as we spend more and more time at the intersection of the physical and digital.

#### **4. Comforting Temporal Escapes through AR**

We have now entered a digital milieu wherein both offline and online, real and virtual, analogue and digital forms of consumption co-exist (Kozinets, 2019). Immersive technologies are at the heart of this “very mundane and everyday nature of the online-to-offline-to-online consumption of the digital consumer” in that “the distinction between the real and the virtual is no longer entirely clear” (Belk & Llamas, 2013: 5). Immersive technologies typically merge the physical world with a digital or simulated reality and often lead to the creation of novel and distinct brand experiences (Cowan & Ketron, 2019). The forms of temporalisation and temporal flows offered by new immersive technologies have been previously undertheorised. While new technology is generally thought of as one of the key drivers of our accelerated lifestyles (Husemann & Eckardt, 2019), it is clear that digitalised forms of escape have become one of the key ways in which consumers find an easily accessible respite from their routines and duties (Cova et al., 2018).

The aim of this paper is to explore how immersive technology can temporally dislocate consumers, allowing them to engage into short-lived escapes and negotiate their temporalisation. We focus on AR as one of the more accessible immersive technologies which is at the point of mass adoption due to the widespread use of smartphones and has moved from “spectacle to a commonplace, routine part of people’s lives” (Bennett, et al., 2021: 11). AR comes in a variety of forms and the potential applications of AR for marketing have generated

significant interest both in practice and theory with recent studies also highlighting its significance for generating escapist experiences (see Sung et al., 2022). AR can simulate a sense of direct, vivid and personal experience with products through a sense of presence and suspension of disbelief afforded by the immersive technology (Heller et al., 2019; Hilken et al., 2017). We follow Shin (2018: 70) in conceptualising the immersion and presence afforded by these technologies “not as an external factor bestowed upon users,” embedded within technological properties but rather, as dependent on subjective, contextual consumer sense-making. Consumer timework is, we argue, a key part of this contextual sense-making but has been largely overlooked.

Scholz and Duffy (2018) show that, through AR, branded content can be fused with consumers’ own environments and bodies and is integrated into their life rhythms, extending beyond a task-oriented relationship with the brand and forging a radical intimacy. AR provides an avenue into private time and space which is otherwise somewhat difficult to access by marketers. The examination of how AR offers hedonic opportunities for consumers to focus on themselves in their own time as an escape from their daily obligations and commitments requires further investigation. Our study sheds light into the immersive, gamified distractions that consumers engage in amidst their daily activities, which provide them with a temporary imaginative escape directed by the underlying market logics and engineered into the platforms which provide the virtual content (Dymek, 2018). Current studies of escapism in AR have been limited to the advertising context (Sung et al. 2021) and have neglected any temporal dimensions.

New technologies such as AR present easy springboards for both remembering and imagining. As Illouz (2009) argues, much of the emotional power of consumer culture relies on the fact that the emotions aroused, while real, are experienced on the basis of memory and imagination. It is therefore worth further examining the ways in which technology can trigger

memories and imagination and indeed, outsource them. Prior work highlights that, with the use of AR, consumers' cognitive process can be offloaded, improving decision comfort and purchase intention (Heller et al., 2019; Hilken et al., 2017; Petit, Javornik & Velasco, 2021). Consumers are relieved from the mental burden of visualising the product or what it will look like within their homes due to capacity of AR to embed virtual branded content on the physical environment. Hilken, Heller et al. (2022) demonstrate that AR can help to bridge 'imagination gaps' when users do not have the cognitive ability to generate and process mental images, particularly when there are multiple elements and relations to imagine such as with product bundles. They also show the capacity for AR to allow consumers to project themselves at the point-of-sale when out-of-store or at home. This offloading capacity (Heller et al., 2019) requires further consideration. While the literature seems to suggest that offloading removes the need for imagination, the gamified or playful aspects of these applications have been shown to have significant emotional benefits on consumers as a source of enjoyment and nostalgia (Rauschnabel, Rossmann & tom Dieck, 2017) somewhat countering this argument. Given the rise of therapeutic servicescapes (Higgins & Hamilton, 2019) in a context where consumers are seeking detachment and decelerated experiences to switch off (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019), the effects of these brief digitised escapes deserve further attention.

## **5. Towards a Temporal Continuum of AR**

To further consider how consumers negotiate their temporalisation and attune themselves to new temporal flows, we turn to Casey's (1977) phenomenological work on imagination and remembering. The close connection between these two acts is hardly new and first appears in Aristotle's early writings about human mental activity (Casey, 1987). For Casey, imagination constitutes one of the most frequent and important acts of our minds and we frequently attempt to imagine all those things that we cannot easily recall. Indeed, we can

imagine “whatever and however we wish to do so” and imagining is “remarkably easy to enter into. It is always nearly available to us as an alternative to whatever else we may be doing at a given time” (Casey, 2000: 6). Imagination can thus be perceived as the process of conscious projection and contemplation of various objects and/or events as pure possibilities. According to Casey (2000), we can further identify two basic traits of imagination, that is spontaneity and controlledness depending on whether imagination unfolds in an unsolicited manner or not. The latter trait is the main focus of this study, as mentioned above.

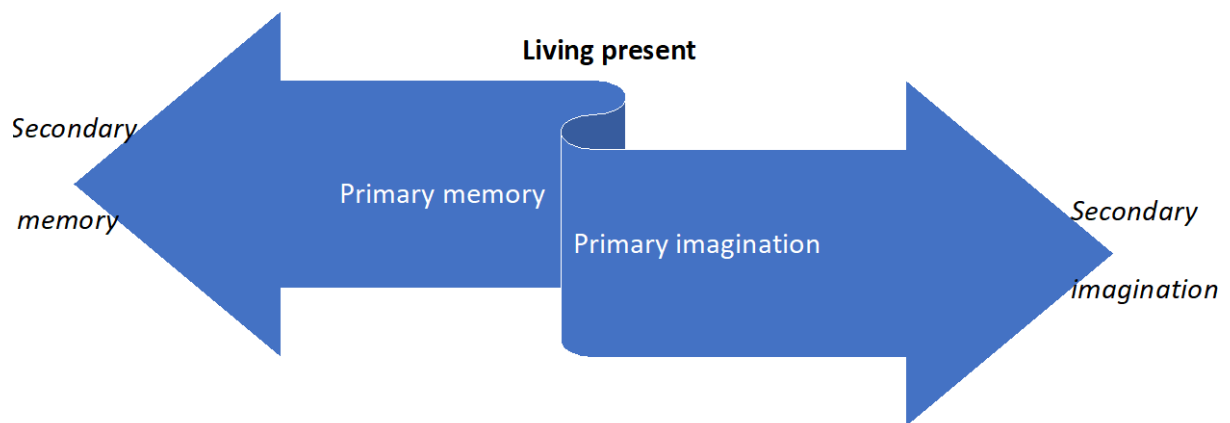
In marketing and consumer research, imagination has been previously perceived as encompassing two core features, that is, the understanding and the augmentation of reality (Philips, 2017). While the former refers to imagination as a “gap-filling process which produces an understanding of perceptual stimuli,” the latter deals with the development of “new content that is not found in a completed form in reality” (Philips, 2017: 2139-40). Furthermore, imagination differs from fantasy in the sense that it is not oriented towards the superimposition of narrative forms on what we imagine but rather on imagining exactly as and when we wish to do so. Imagination is, in fact, more similar to remembering as they both take place within typical acts of sensory perception (Casey, 1976). As Casey (1977: 195) argues, “what we cannot remember we can try to imagine, and what we cannot imagine we can try to summon up in memory as an analogue from the past.” This highlights the collaborative and co-constitutive relationship between imagination and remembering in the realm of what Casey (1977: 199) calls time-consciousness, that is the fact that “our consciousness of time manifests itself in a series of closely related and often overlapping phases which we conventionally label ‘past,’ ‘present,’ and ‘future.’”

To these ends, we can distinguish between primary imagination, wherein we project various possibilities through “what is just-coming-to-be in the very process of its coming to be,” and secondary imagination, wherein we project possibilities “beyond those already

predelineated in the present or already realised in the past” (Casey, 1977: 203). Similarly, we can distinguish between primary memory or remembering, which refers to the variety of ways “in which we remain aware of what has just appeared or happened in our experience” and secondary memory or remembering, which concerns our ability to recall or recollect things and “its operation is conceived as that of rescuing former experiences from oblivion” (Casey, 1987: 49-50). Time-consciousness, as Casey (1977: 199) argues, “is the product of a collaboration between imaging and remembering that is not only non-contingent but continuously operative.” Our sense of being in time and of time’s passing is therefore not episodic but pervasive and this is what gives our lives a cohesive structure.

Overall, Casey’s framework accounts for the time-specific role of imagination and remembering and highlights the temporal dimensions of consumption experiences, which, we argue, are relatively underexplored in prior studies dealing with the escapist nature of experiential consumption, particularly online. In fact, prior work largely fails to dig deeper into how various temporalities are experienced, negotiated and used as anchoring mechanisms by consumers (Jenkins & Molesworth, 2018). In drawing on Husserl, Casey (1977) likens every new experience to the tail of a comet which represents a continuous streaming backwards, what he calls retention, whereby the present-as-just-past or is-becoming-past. In this way the present lingers in primary memory. Similarly, the present is extended forwards through imagination, what Casey calls protention and the realisation of the present-as-future-in-the-making. This proximal future is the realm of primary imagining and, through this continuum, the ‘living present’ becomes an ongoing, never-fully-concluded enterprise. Secondary memory and imagination reach further backwards and forwards and can be properly disassociated from the living present but are still dependent on primary memory and imagination as they must possess a certain minimal obduracy, even if this perseverance is solely in the mind. Secondary imagination, however, is necessarily less fixed and more open than secondary memory as it

deals with pure possibilities projected rather than recollections remembered (Casey, 1971). Figure 1 below depicts this timeline. Both memory and imagination thus summon up the absent which eludes as it is beyond the range of perception through a complementary bi-directional action, that is imagination often fills in the gaps in imperfectly recalled memories and remembering offers a basis for the projection of the future. We can remember, imagine and perceive concurrently although generally when remembering or imagining we forgo active involvement in what immediately surrounds us (Casey, 1977).



*Figure 1: Temporal continuum, adapted from Casey (1977)*

## **6. Case Study: A ‘in-the-wild’ transmedia storytelling experience**

To illustrate the way immersive experiences can provide consumers with short-lived imaginary escapes, we draw on an exemplar AR case study. We do not intend this section of the paper to operate as a complete analysis that would function as a free-standing piece of research but only as a means of providing illustrations of the types of readings that might emerge from the analytic stance informed by our readings of Casey (1977). We focus on theory adaptation aiming “to amend an existing theory by using other theories” (Jaakkola, 2020: 23)

in order to “reconcile and then extend past research in a particular domain in a meaningful, conceptual way” (Hulland, 2020: 28). In doing so, we use case study evidence as a facilitating tool to enable our conceptual contribution (see MacInnis, 2010). In fact, in this very journal, Cova and Cova (2002) have previously employed a similar illustrative case study-based approach to situate their conceptual study on tribal marketing (see also Canniford, 2011).

The selected AR case study concerns the development of an R&D prototype for a large multinational mass media television company to explore the potential of AR to develop more interactive relationships with viewers. The AR experience was created using procedural audio, machine learning and photogrammetry to unlock a virtual museum of AR objects, testing the power of virtual touch and sound to inspire deeper audience engagement - not dissimilar to the Lego Studio AR app examined by Hinsch, Felix & Rauschnabel (2020). This AR app is part of a wider integrated transmedia storytelling experience, designed around a twenty-minute pilot television show focusing on avid collectors of modern collectibles from the 1980s. These collectibles include *StarWars* memorabilia, trainers and arcade games. The accompanying AR app lets viewers interact with audiovisual representations of the collectibles presented in the show in their own homes. For example, a walking *Star Wars* figure of the AT-AT was shown in the app, and viewers could open and close its doors, and select other zones of interaction to learn more about the object. The additional story content highlighted how the object fits into wider social history and could be explored by viewers from the comfort of their sofa with any smart phone device.

A mixed-methodology approach was adopted, combining surveys and interviews. Two survey studies were conducted with 253 participants, including 93 individuals in the core demographic for the show, that is, male and aged 30-54. The first survey (148 participants) explored views on the show and whether the show and app worked together while the second survey (103 participants) focused on aspects of the app. The average age was 35 and the gender

distribution was 63% male, 37% female. Testers were recruited across the UK and needed to have access to a smartphone in order to test the experience. Qualitative interviews were also undertaken with ten of the survey respondents who engaged extensively with the survey (as indicated by time taken to complete the survey and qualitative feedback supplied). These participants were interviewed about their experience in watching the show and using the app. The interviewees were aged from 35-50 and there was an even split in terms of gender.

The research took place over a six-month period during the Covid-19 pandemic. All data collection was remote using an online participant recruitment platform which allowed participants to watch the programme, download the app on their phones and respond to the survey. Interviewees were contacted through the platform and provided with Zoom links for the interviews. A team of eight researchers was involved and the first author of this paper collected the qualitative data used in our case study which enabled us to dig deeper into how consumers shift between temporalities for momentary imaginative escape. We thus respond to Javornik's (2016b) call for a more holistic understanding of the experiential value of AR.

Much of the research on AR takes an experimental approach (Beck & Crié, 2018; Hilken et al., 2017; Poushneh & Vasquez-Parraga, 2017a, 2017b) and is restricted to artificial lab settings rather than accounting for how consumers actually use this technology in-the-wild (Javornik, 2016b). Scholz and Duffy (2018) are a rare exception, taking an ethnographic approach for a more holistic perspective on how consumer-brand relationships can be facilitated through AR. They show how by looking at the use of AR in the home, rather than a transactional encounter, a more close and intimate relationship emerges which can impact on the consumer's sense of self. We followed this 'in-the-wild' approach and adopted an inductive process of data coding using thematic and grounded analysis (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). More specifically, both authors read the research transcripts (a dataset of around 10,000 words) as part of an open-coding process resulting in a list of themes which helped us discover



patterns in our data. We followed Gioia, Corley and Hamilton's (2013) guidelines which resulted in first and second-order themes. The first-order codes were informant-centric, providing us with an understanding of what value the AR app provided users. This resulted in our focus on the elicitation of memories and imaginings. We then examined these codes to conceptualise more abstract second-order themes from extant literature on remembering and imagining which would adequately capture the phenomenon observed in the first-order categories. This allowed us to structure our findings into a two-by-two matrix (Table 1) which, in turn, enabled us to map the dynamics of consumer timework through AR by *affirming* the interrelationships between memory and imagination, *extending* existing knowledge on AR's offloading capacity and *generating* a new understanding of how users can negotiate between various time flows and temporalisations through AR, with explanatory power for marketers (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

## **7. Consumer Timework within an AR Experience**

While the focus of the study was on the potential of the app to further engage viewers through transmedia storytelling, time-consciousness emerged as central to users' engagement with the app and its perceived value (or lack of). Significantly, the app as a leisure activity was perceived as a momentary – our participants played for an average of 5 to 20 minutes at a time – playful activity which offered a source of psychological comfort (Melumand & Pham, 2020) via its offloading capacity (Heller et al., 2019) so that users could remember or imagine what owning the collector's object felt like and how it could integrate in their lives. Using Casey's (1977) framework of remembering and imagination and accounting for different temporal flows, we outline four types of experienced temporality resulting from consumers' usage of the AR app. These are outlined in Table 1 and discussed in detail, below. We find a more complex and dynamic sense of shifting time-consciousness as memory and imagination intertwine at

different temporal logics. Through this timework, consumers impose a sense of stability and cohesion to a ruptured sense of time. We note, however, that this comfort could quickly turn to boredom and the app was not considered a repeatable experience by all, in some cases it was unfulfilling and limiting. We suggest that the offloading characteristic of AR (Heller et al., 2019) is therefore both enabling and constraining to consumer well-being.

<i>Primary remembering (fast)</i> ‘Flow’ of past memories experienced as energising/stimulating	<i>Secondary remembering (slow)</i> Remembering of past temporalities experienced as relaxing/boring
<i>Primary imagining (fast)</i> Fusion of past and future experienced as new projected possibilities	<i>Secondary imagining (slow)</i> Projecting alternative futures experienced as lost futures

*Table 1: The AR experienced temporalities matrix*

#### *Quadrant I: Primary remembering*

Given that the focus of the TV show was on collectibles from the 1980s, nostalgia was particularly significant in shaping the experience. Our data highlight the role of AR in enabling users to offload their nostalgic leanings (Brown et al., 2003) by evoking past memories through digital objects. Hinsch et al. (2020: 8) note the ability of AR to activate nostalgia, even positing that it is an “ideal technology” for doing so. The collectible digital object featured in this app becomes a resource that allows the user to bridge past, present and future. Although the memories elicited are often from secondary memory, as Casey (1977) shows, this is dependent upon the initial activation of primary memory. Our analysis highlights that the digital objects unleash a “flood of memories” (Edwin) and more recent primary memories such as “playing lego” with their children (Mario), can prompt more distant secondary memories about their

own childhoods and forms of play. While this is partly a result of the content of the experience itself and the nature of the objects themselves which “took you back to being young,” “I remember it so vividly, the way that the legs moved and it clicks” (Georgia), it is also due to the affordances of the AR technology itself. The memories provoked by the app were often sensual in nature and extremely vivid, providing a child-liked playful aesthetic experience: “I liked the imaginative play the app provided” (Edwin). This is in line with Casey’s (1976: 41) concept of imaging, that is, the formation of “an imaginative presentation whose content possess a specifically sensuous – an intuitive or imagistic – form.”

However, this type of imaging depends upon offloading “a significant amount of the creative information processing” (Jessen et al., 2020: 88) of consumers to the app and is bounded within the confines of their digital engagement with specific digital objects. Edwin described how using the app allowed viewers to have “the idea that you’ve got the actual thing in front of you, you can look at and move around and then interact with it in that sense, actually have something that represents not just what’s being spoken about on screen but actually seeing it in front of you, ‘oh, look, there’s this thing appearing in my house’.” The added value of the digital interaction is made clear here, any gaps of memory are offloaded through the virtual projection of the object and the resulting sense of temporal flow is fast paced as the virtual object can be instantly loaded and does not require extensive cognitive effort in searching and retrieving memories.

The facility of engaging with the AR was also noted: “these things are so easily downloadable on your phone, you’ve got your phone with you. So, I’ve been sort of playing around with that.” AR is both instantaneously available and provides a short-lived ontological security, safely ensconced in the past and allowing for a ‘rehearsal’ of childhood play. Pushing buttons, spinning wheels and finding hidden features within the app all provided for tactile, playful interactions. In fact, the simplistic nature of the interaction – in that it can only be

played with in limited ways due to the confines of AR apps in terms of smart phone/tablet memory, power, etc. – enhanced these perceptions. This resulted in getting “wrapped up in it,” “it wasn’t just you open the side door, the side door opens, then closes but there was a whole story being told around it” (Edwin). The interactivity ensured users were fully immersed and engaged, facilitating a sense of being “energised and stimulated” you are fully “in it” and you want to “keep going” (Edwin). This lack of friction which keeps users ‘hooked’ is typical of most digital experiences, including social media. However, the interactivity and layers of the AR experience in encompassing the physical and the digital and in our case, additional transmedia elements, provides further stimuli for emotional engagement.

The past is thus perceived as just-past, remembered as part of the living present: “I remember playing in the arcades with my brother as though it was yesterday” (Ida). The past is also fused into the present, providing users with a more cohesive structure to a previously ruptured sense of time: “ I remember when the original Pong came out, that’s how old I am, so I remember that, I remember on New Year’s Eve where somebody actually had one, and then of course getting Ataris and things like that and then, of course, now you’ve got the Xbox and all that kind of stuff as well, so I sort of dip in and out of this.” Here, Ida pieces several memories together quite rapidly, all related to gaming and her relationship with her brother, constructing a comforting nostalgic narrative around the digital object which is not only remembered but also supplemented with imaging.

#### *Quadrant II: Secondary remembering*

Many of the memories at play are from the distant past and therefore disassociated from the living present. The living present is used to springboard back to these past times. A sense of a “slower” more distant past was therefore also experienced by our participants, “I had the slow experience, which I enjoyed, it was stress relieving and reminded me of watching the rain

as a child, wasting the time away” (Silvia). This is in line with Scholz and Duffy (2018: 15) who note that their participants find the use of the Sephora makeup AR app to be “relaxing” and “de-stressing,” providing hedonic opportunities for consumers to focus on themselves in their own time as an escape from their daily commitments. Again, this is partly due to the simplicity of the virtual object’s mechanics and the affordances of the AR in that “time appeared to stand still as I focused on these objects.” The app provides a possible “oasis of deceleration” since it operates as a “protected space where the speed and rhythm of life is temporarily slowed down” (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019: 1143). As our lives speed up and the rate of change increases, nostalgia becomes a reorienting or steadying force (Hinsch et al., 2020). These types of secondary remembering are difficult to pinpoint to any specific time, they are “vague and you’re not sure, can’t quite put them into context” (Edwin) and the AR serves to bring them back into context.

Yet, what at first appears playful and engaging can quickly become “boring,” (Sonya) and, indeed, much of the literature on AR highlights the lack of long-term engagement with technology (Hilken et al., 2018). A few of the users found the app “had no purpose” and it was not worth returning to: “I wasn’t massively entertained by it for more than, you know, the initial ‘oh!’” (Avina). Similarly, Ivo discussed how while he would watch the television show again, “I’m probably not going to get the same level of enjoyment out of another half hour using the app. I’ve had a go on it, I don’t know if I’d get the app up again.” Beyond the novelty of the experience, further reinforcement is needed to make users pick up the app on a regular basis. Marketers therefore need to strike the right balance between relaxation and boredom by ensuring that users can find the temporal flow that suits them, providing enough content to ensure continued engagement: “we need to see something we haven’t seen in terms of the information provided, the novelty of the AR experience is not sufficient” (Ivo). This reflects

the notion that consumption is activated by excitement and comfort (Illouz, 2009), as neither can be sustained continuously, both are needed.

Since AR has been previously shown to offload certain internalised cognitive processes (Heller et al., 2019), the significance of storytelling as part of the immersive experience (Shin, 2018) becomes clear here, particularly for less familiar objects which do not elicit specific memories. For example, for the trainers featured, the political story around their creation in the Soviet Union provided not only a connection to that period in time but also to contemporary political tensions between Russia and the UK. Although different temporalities are at play, through the AR the memories become offloaded and: “less vague, you can put them into context, it helps you to enhance your memories.” This contextualisation allows for a “deeper understanding” of the ways in which the past interacts with the living present “an opportunity to re-examine or re-evaluate the period as we were too young to really understand it at the time” (Edwin). The very idea of enhancing memories demonstrates the need for imagination in reconstructing and making sense of the past in the present (Casey, 1977).

AR objects provide a portal which allow the users to explore a particular social history and situate themselves within it (Jones et al. 2020). While the flow of memories which springboard from primary memory tend to be more playful instances of nostalgia (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019), the more distant, secondary memories represent more reluctant modes of nostalgia, harking back to better times which provide a “sort of safety, it’s a time when things were, you know, less rubbish than they are now” (Mario). Unlike Hartmann and Brunk (2019), we find that both modes bring past, present and future into dialogue in a more fluid manner, anchoring users into the living present as per more progressive forms of nostalgia. Indeed, nostalgia has been shown to increase self-continuity and the connection between one’s past and present (Lasaleta and Loveland, 2019) and is associated with seeing something new in a familiar context (Hinsch et al., 2020). Hence, the sense of visual presence provided by the

placement of the virtual object in the physical space provided a sense of “familiarity and comfort” (Edwin) so the object could be “re-examined in a new light” (Georgia).

The storytelling and the depth of layering of this storytelling which the AR experience allows, is extremely significant in enabling or constraining temporal escape, particularly in light of the aforementioned lack of long-term engagement with the technology. As Ava notes, “online gaming is a bit empty, it’s the stories that give you the substance and the information” and further suggests enabling users to emotionally engage more with the app by sharing their own stories around these objects, providing another more social and shareable layer of digital information to enhance the experience of the AR object. Our data show that users want to be taken on a journey. Yet, it is the very offloading of the cognitive process of remembering which allows for primary remembering and also inhibits the imaginative action needed to fill the gaps in secondary remembering, making the experience boring when the storytelling is too narrow.

### *Quadrant III: Primary imagining*

Our data also show a fusing of the past and future as the AR extends, embodies and embeds the past into the present (Hilken et al., 2018), resulting in the projection of new possibilities. What was found to be most interesting about the immersive experience were the “opportunities for the objects to fuse with the modern” (Mario) creating a momentary spatio-temporal simulation in which memories are externalised and fused into the contemporary home environment. This sense of “in-betweenness” as the past was projected through “cutting-edge technology” (Ida) resulted in a more vivid relation to both past and future: “what is interesting is you’re looking at what we can do with it now” (Mario) exploring the past with an eye towards the future, “not just looking at retro or stuff from a certain year in a historic perspective but thinking about what the next iteration of the product could be.” Our participants shared numerous ideas for other collectibles which could be featured on the app as well as other

features which would enhance the experience as noted in the example of more shareable social engagement above. Here, the ability of AR to provide further contextual information facilitates the projection of hypothetical possibilities as the virtual objects can be visualised and at least somewhat used as per the offloading identified by Jessen et al. (2020). While imagination is not completely offloaded, it is directed towards market-mediated consumption ends.

As the absent objects are made virtually present, Scholz and Duffy (2018: 16) note how AR dissolves “boundaries between consumers, social others, objects, and the brand.” The layering ability of AR, particularly in the context of this transmedia experience, whereby collectibles are discussed by experts on TV and then digitally beamed into the household, means that the experience can also dissolve boundaries between the past, present, and future. It is worth noting, however, that these hypotheticals are relatively limited in terms of creativity, this is not uninstructed imagination but rather marketer or, in this case, producer-led. Users’ visions are restricted to the consumption context in which the experience takes place (Philips, 2017). In discussing the ATAT, Silvia noted that she had once owned one of the Star Wars “little figurines (...). I just wish, I’d love to know where it went, you know, it’s probably lost. I took it out with me somewhere and I dropped it. I wish I could find her again... Maybe I’ll see how much they are.” In shifting from past to present, we see how the experience moves away from linear entertainment to a more circular firing, fuelling and fanning the flames’ of viewers’ passions. Rather than the transformation promised by Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007), users are further locked into the cycle of consumer desire (McCracken, 1986) through anticipation of the probable rather than the impossible with little emotional effort due to AR’s offloading capacity (Heller et al., 2019). This allows for rehearsal of real life which has been noted to be useful to marketers in the AR literature in that due to our accelerated lifestyles, the consumer journey is compressed and more inspiration is needed (Böttger et al., 2017).



In the projection of these hypothetical possibilities, the speed at which these imagined scenarios arise is noteworthy: “Do you think that could be brought into the app in any way in terms of, for example, if collectors could kind of contribute their own pictures of their own collections? Yeah, I’m sure that would work, because I think particularly these days now, with social media, that’s largely what people are doing, isn’t it? ‘Look at me, look what I’ve got’ kind of thing, so yeah I think an aspect of being able to share their own stories, their own collections, the things or your own, your own links into that, would I think that would be more engaging and certainly even with my collection [of crystals], if I wanted to see how other people were storing their crystal collections, and this app would walk me round someone’s room with various different ways that they were doing that” (Avina). Through primary imagining, users remain grounded in their current reality yet also engage in momentary imaginative escape providing “the emotion of being in a different futuristic world, like a dream” (Robbie) as the digital and physical are seamlessly integrated.

#### *Quadrant IV: Secondary imagining*

As noted above, the play facilitated by the app is not fully creative, it is constrained by the nature of the interactivity afforded by the app. The secondary imagination is less fixed and more open than is the case for secondary memory, it is also more fragmented as it represents pure possibility which is untethered to a specific point in time (Casey, 1971). The marketing literature has long-since recorded how the consumer imagination uses goods as potential bridges to hopes for the futures (McCracken, 1986). Our data highlight that the app allows individuals to playfully engage in the fantasy of being a collector, momentarily, in their own homes, ignoring the realities of financial or physical constraints. Despite enthusiasm and interest in these collectibles “there’s no way I could spend thousands on one of them, I just can’t justify it, not with a mortgage” (Silvia). The offloading capacity of the app allows users

to actualise their fantasies of owning these objects through imaginative play (Jenkins & Molesworth, 2018) offering a momentary escape from their lives. More interesting, however, is how the AR allows for the imagination of alternative futures as significant, wealthy collectors but this is done through the narration of alternative pasts. For example, Georgia projected to an alternative (lost) past/future as she felt “the regret, the absolute regret!” of her own perceived failure as a collector: “cursing our moms and dads for getting rid of our stuff, giving it to some younger family down the road or a charity shop, or cursing ourselves for burying it, knowing that could be a collector’s item now.”

Although these are disassociated futures, they are viewed very much from the lens of the living present. Past and future intersect to consider alternative realities. These alternative realities are anything but radical since they are centred on economic value and the market as per the strategic experiential design promise of AR (Jessen et al., 2020). Much of the imagining recounted to us focused on the value and the market for these objects as directed by the content producers and providing opportunities for branded entertainment. In this sense, we see how AR does indeed relieve the burden of imagination in offloading it to specific ends (Heller et al., 2019). While much of the AR literature (Hinsch et al., 2020; Javornik et al., 2021) positions AR as transformational and enchanting, allowing consumers to transcend their everyday selves, we find that, rather than uninstructed imagining, the form of imagination afforded by AR is very much marketer-instructed and controlled (Casey, 1977; Philips, 2017), directed towards consumption. Avina, for example, evidenced this slower, more structured form of imagining: “I did at one point have a bit of a collection of high-top trainers, which, I have still got some but space was becoming a bit of an issue with that particular habit. I think as I’ve got older and had children, the things that are not as expensive and not as big have taken over. At the moment I’ve got into holistic-y spiritual type stuff but in the future, I may eventually go back to it.” In accounting for her economic and spatial realities, Avina redirects her consumption to more

intangible and experiential products and services, yet crucially, she is still consuming and planning future consumption.

The modalities of the AR ensure a frictionless experience, providing the user with a sense of personal efficacy and control as they manipulate the virtual object while simultaneously providing data points on what objects and aspects of those objects they enjoy engaging with, as well as locational and temporal data. The way in which the body comes into relation with the screen enhances the illusion of control and users feel free within certain limits which encourages them to remove any critical distance between themselves and the media they are engaging with. In manipulating and playing with the digital objects, the app provides a “real-time instant gratification which, I suppose, is quite superficial,” Mario notes. The “music and aesthetics and packaging and culture all comes together” (Mario) to briefly envelop the user in specific lost pasts and futures (as directed by the AR).

### *Designing AR experiences*

Our case study points to how both imagination and remembering enable consumers to make sense of their lives through active engagement with complex shifts in temporal flows and time-consciousness, allowing for momentary escape into individual pasts and futures. In Figure 2 below, adapted from the immersive audience toolkit of Bennett et al. (2021), we highlight the central themes of our case study and as a result, identify some of the key questions that should be asked when designing an AR experience. As befits our focus on the consumer experience, the user/consumer should be at the heart of the process, in line with Scholz and Duffy (2018), and we note that their experience is shaped by four key elements.

The *place* and *time* of the experience are significant for contextualising the use of AR in consumers’ everyday lives. To allow for remembering and imagining, both of these elements are significant in terms of temporal flow and consumer timework. In our case study, the fact

that most users were at home when using the app meant that the experience was more intimate and allowed them to imagine themselves owning the objects by projecting them directly into their living space. If the app were to be designed for use outside the home, however, other considerations such as safety would have to be taken into account but a town centre, for instance, could also unlock specific local memories. The focus on 1980s collectibles clearly allowed for nostalgia but only for a specific target market that lived through the 1980s. Yet, the fulfilment of a consumer fantasy in being a collector is also invoked so that consumer timework in both directions is made possible. For brands using AR, having different time periods evoked relate to key moments of the brand heritage or vision could therefore create further links to and understanding of the brand. Furthermore, the affordances of the type of play experienced through the app also helped to elicit remembering (e.g. through sounds, highlighting the multi-sensory nature of AR). In terms of time flows, our analysis points to ways in which the app can both slow down (e.g. through simplicity) and speed up (e.g. through interactivity) time depending on the interaction.

The *type of experience* and *genre* clarify the platforms/devices/hardware/software needed (with implications for who the user will be and where they are located) as well as the stylistic and aesthetic qualities and affordances for co-creation, interactivity and shareability therein. In our case, the aim was to develop more interactive relationships with viewers and the type of experience selected was an app allowing users to engage with the objects on screen through their AR virtual representations. There were opportunities for more gamification, for example to further enhance interactivity. As users were generally using their mobile phones for the experience, it tended towards individual rather than communal consumption, making the experience more social could also perhaps allow for a longer ‘life’ for the experience. While the stylistic and aesthetic decisions for the app were relatively simple and could have been further personalised, our analysis also highlights the need for further storytelling around the

virtual objects presented. While most of the storytelling was within the TV programme, consumers wanted additional storytelling within the app itself. While we separate these four dimensions here for analytic purposes, we recognise there is significant overlap between them. For example, a key finding was that overall, the time flow of the app was judged to be too slow resulting in relatively short plays and users not returning to it. Further consideration of the user experience in terms of ability for users to share their own stories enhancing co-creation and interactivity, could help resolve this issue.

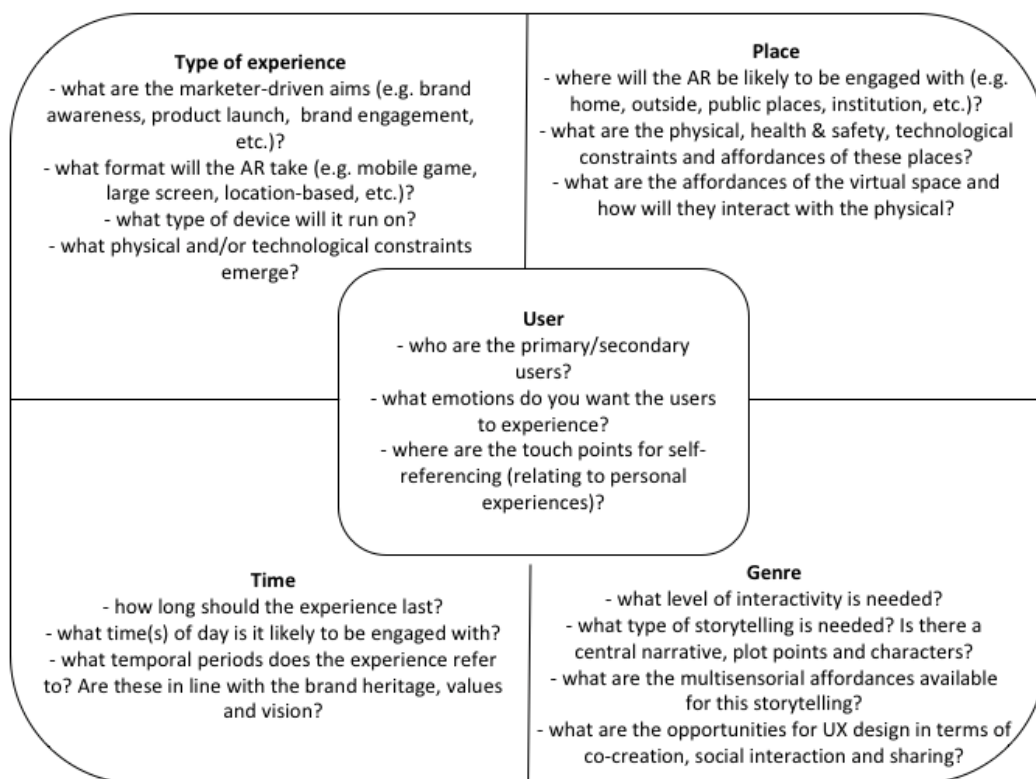


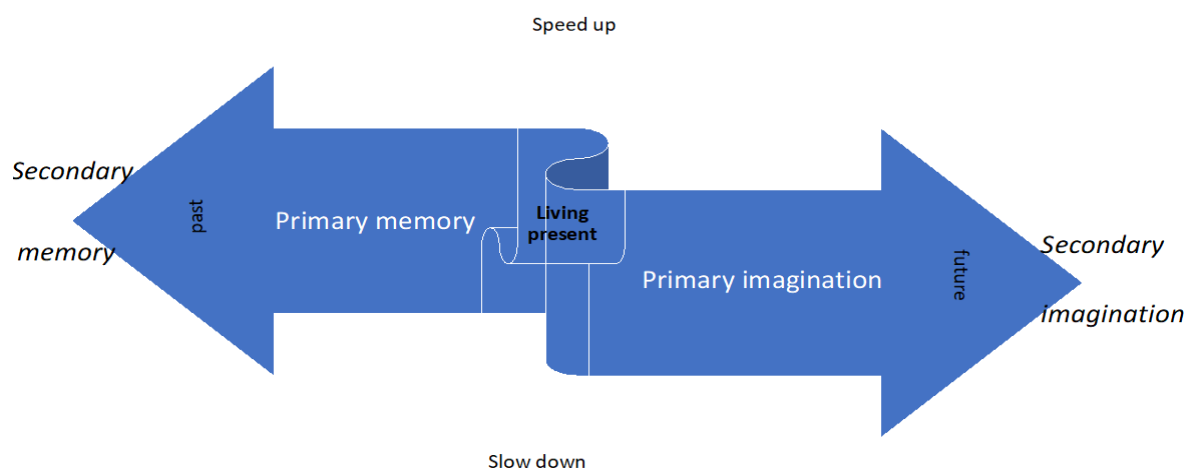
Figure 2: AR toolkit adapted from Bennett et al. (2021)

## 8. Discussion: Beyond the Liminal, Into the Marketplace

### *Theoretical implications*

In accounting for more routine and less detectable forms of escapes (Cova et al., 2018), this study highlights the fluidity and complexity of ways in which consumers escape temporally

and how this allows them to re-negotiate pre-existing schemas and make sense of their lives. Our theorisation of digitised temporal escapes through AR illustrates how consumers shift seamlessly across various dynamics of temporalisation which cut across Casey's (1977) primary and secondary memory and imagination constructs (Figure 3). While there has been significant attention on remembering (Brown et al., 2003; Brunk et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2022) and imagining (Heath & Nixon, 2021; Jenkins & Molesworth, 2018; Philips, 2017), the relation between the two and the temporalities they present has been overlooked. To these ends, our study provides three main theoretical implications which are discussed in detail below.



*Figure 3: Temporal framework*

First, our study suggests that consumers are not offered emancipation (albeit temporary) or transcendental release (Goulding et al., 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Tumbat & Belk, 2011) in their escape, as in the context of standard theorisations, but rather, comfort. Prior research illustrates how individuals often achieve comfort through their participation in lifestyle-oriented activities and encounters which often lead to the creation of extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993). Recent studies further suggest that consumers can find psychological

comfort using digital devices such as smartphones providing them with a private space that offers escape from the external world (Melumand & Pham, 2020). However, our study highlights that comfort is achieved through time-bound interactions with AR technology leading to controlled imaginings and rememberings (Casey 1977; Philips, 2017) which serve to provide an illusion of control over consumers' everyday lives. We demonstrate how AR provides users with a sense of comfort and familiarity wherein the past lingers into the present and provides a direction for the future by anchoring individuals into their own personal, temporalisation through consumer timework. While much of prior work (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Jones et al., 2020) finds that escapism can be collaborative and community-based, the form of escapism we focus on is generally individuated due to the current affordances of the technology through a personal smartphone or tablet. Although previous literature has noted that objects and/or memories can evoke different nostalgia responses from different consumers (see Higson, 2014), our analysis illustrates how these individual temporal locations can be past- or future-focused and occur at varying speeds, providing a more cohesive temporal framework for their lives, a sense of structure as to where they are. We further suggest that escapism can be a 'sense-making activity' (Jones et al., 2020: 468) and illustrate how complex temporalities and temporalisations underpin this activity. By remembering past memories – how things were - and projecting future possibilities – how things ought to be – users re-orient themselves in a more coherent living present. In particular, the sense of lost pasts and futures is something which has been largely missing from studies of consumption.

Second, our temporal framework provides a detailed explanation of the variety of ways in which different forms of escape can occur (Figure 3). Prior work highlights that when consumers experience unprecedented political or economic change, rather than seeking self-loss through playful escape, they seek instead to find what they have lost (Jones et al., 2020).

Here, escape is more complex than previously accounted for and by further acknowledging how it can occur at different temporalities, we can understand how consumers become oriented towards new temporalisations in order to stabilise their lives. The various temporalities we highlight, although examined separately here, can be (and usually are) experienced in conjunction. Consumers look both to the past and future while seeking escape through both excitement and relaxation. There is, therefore, a need to account for such complexity by moving beyond the duality of a liminal framework (Cova et al., 2018; Skandalis et al., 2016; Turner, 1969). While much of the literature frames escape as evading the tedium or routine of everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993; Canniford & Shankar, 2013), we show that escape can, at times, embrace the boring to regain slowness and relaxation (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). Escapism is therefore more complex than simply forgetting or finding oneself (Cova et al., 2018). While Husemann and Eckhardt (2019: 1145) suggest that deceleration is possible by abstaining from the use of technology, we show that it can also be achieved through it. Escapism, thus, accommodates various temporalities and temporal flows by encompassing past and future selves. This also sheds light on why the affective experience of escape has multivalenced complexity and is experienced as more than simply pleasurable (Jones et al., 2020: 476; Preece, Rodner & Rojas-Gaviria, 2022). Depending on the specific temporal flows and temporalisations consumers locate themselves in, they may feel anxiety about the future or regret about the past as well as experience more positive emotions; these affective responses are dynamic and fluid.

Third, our study shows how AR allows users to simultaneously project themselves into the near future by visualising the product while also remembering the past through the tactile mechanics of the app which provide a sense of embodiment and control over the digital objects being viewed. While immersive technologies have been previously labelled as extraordinary, as they are becoming mainstream (Bennett et al., 2021) the types of escape they offer are less



spectacular and have become increasingly grounded in the mundane and everyday confines of intimate spaces within the home (Jones et al., 2020; Scholz & Duffy, 2018). Our findings therefore echo Jenkins and Molesworth (2018) in suggesting that remembering and imagining provide consumers with a sense of control and further show how the mechanics of the technology provide further illusions of control by operating in an encapsulated safe space as the body comes into relation with the phone or tablet. It feels private while of course, it is not. In line with various forms of technocultural and digital virtual consumption (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010; Kozinets, 2019) which blur the boundaries between marketplace offerings, consumers, and brands, these technologies enable entanglements of complex relationalities between the digital and material worlds that draw together people, things, affects and temporalities.

### *Practical implications*

Our study goes beyond the focus on observable and measurable aspects of AR (Beck & Crié, 2018; Hilken et al., 2017; Poushneh & Vasquez-Parraga, 2017a, 2017b), focusing on the personal and experiential ways in which AR becomes implicated in our everyday lives. AR has been noted for its ability to offload consumers' cognitive processes (Heller, et al., 2019; Hilken, et al., 2017; Petit, Javornik & Velasco, 2021). Our research presents some of the more critical implications of this offloading capacity by highlighting that while it is certainly functionally useful in immersing consumers directly into the experience, offloading can also constrain consumer imagination. In fact, we note that consumer imagination is particularly significant to ensure consumers return to the app once they have gotten over the initial excitement.. While this may not be relevant for AR apps which serve solely functional benefits, for those which are also seeking to provide hedonic benefits, we caution that there is a need to

carefully consider the balance between uninstructed imagining and structured imagining (Philips, 2017).

For illustrative purposes, Table 2 provides examples of branded AR experiences and the affordances they offer. Given that AR is rapidly evolving, the list of examples is non-exhaustive and many AR experiences combine different types of AR content (e.g. AR advertisements and apps using AR filters). While these experiences are more (i.e. filters, branded apps) or less (gaming, arts experiences) goal-oriented, the table demonstrates that they all allow for some form of temporary escapism.

<b>Types of AR Consumer Experience Content</b>	<b>Example(s)</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Practical Recommendations</b>
AR filters	Branded filters on Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok e.g. <i>Tommy Hilfiger, GAP, ‘Pride and Joy Looks’ filter by MAC Cosmetics</i>	Product promotion and brand awareness - conducive for structured hedonic and imaginative escape both future- and past-focused	Allowing for co-creation with consumers by giving them choices to personalise, focusing on interactivity and sensory options beyond the visual, need to consider the background visuals as well as the foreground
AR advertising	<i>Nike Air Max Clouds</i> - AR experience in Brazil created to promote Nike’s sneakers. Looking towards the sky, users could find a sneaker shape like a cloud to get access to stories from different music and dance artists. <i>Marz Brewing Company</i> - AR Packaging to promote their new IPAbears.	Product promotion and brand awareness - conducive for structured hedonic and imaginative escape both future- and past-focused	Focusing on allowing consumers to relate the product/service to their own personal lives and experiences through e.g. nostalgia for emotional engagement

AR branded apps	<i>Shopify AR, IKEA Place</i>	Help customers get a better sense of product details, size, and scale, provides a more seamless shopping experience - conducive for structured imaginative escape through actualising of consumer fantasies	While many of these apps are more practical and utilitarian, options for more imaginative play are possible e.g. change in the virtual space allowing consumers to project themselves to other (fictional or aspirational) places
AR branded experiences	<i>Burberry</i> pop-up AR experience in Harrods to coincide with the launch of its new Olympia bag. Using a QR code found in-store, customers were able to watch the Elphis statue walk around in their surroundings, as well as take a photo or video to share with friends.	Product promotion and brand awareness, branded engagement - conducive to build excitement and engagement through an extraordinary experience for structured hedonic and imaginative escape both future- and past-focused	Thinking beyond the product/service at the entire experience as multisensorial and phygital, consider working with artists for more creative approaches
AR gaming (individual and social multi-player experiences)	<i>Pokemon Go, Angry birds AR, Candy crush AR, Pull &amp; Bear 'Pacific Game'</i>	Gamified branded content to increase brand awareness and engagement - conducive for structured imaginative escape through competitive play	World-building in line with the brand's values, ensuring the game is sufficiently complex to allow consumers to return while not making it so difficult it is off-putting
AR storytelling for behaviour change	<i>Cupsy</i> at Heathrow Airport: Costa Coffee's large screen in-store AR experience to encourage recycling cups.	Social marketing, education - conducive for structured imaginative escape through active play and interactivity	Focus on storytelling for a more compelling narrative and engaging consumers with strong characters (fictional or historic)
Site-specific cultural / heritage	<i>Story Trails</i> : Mobile AR trails across the UK set out to use moving image archive in new and innovative ways; particularly the way audiences were to engage with archive within a site-specific experience. The intent was to reanimate BFI and BBC archive using immersive technologies to imprint local history on place, to reinvigorate audience connection to public places and create a sense of pride in a shared past.	Build brand awareness, loyalty and community - conducive for structured hedonic and imaginative escape and remembering	Making the most of the place featured by providing new perspectives on hidden histories, allowing for more social forms of consumption through interactivity

<p>Arts experiences e.g. concerts</p>	<p><i>Urban Jungle</i>: a AR experience which debuted at Coventry’s CVX Festival. It hosted a series of virtual performances by established and up-and-coming talent – from spoken word and grime artists to dance and circus performers. Audiences used smartphones at locations around FarGo Village to trigger these virtual forms of busking, which was billed as a virtual companion to CVX and “a festival of art and performance in your pocket”.</p>	<p>Build brand awareness, loyalty and community - conducive for structured hedonic and imaginative escape</p>	<p>Allowing for consumer imagination by providing more abstract animated visuals, for example rather than having very vivid imagery which is completely guided by the marketer</p>
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*Table 2: Examples of AR consumer experiences and practical recommendations to enhance the temporal escape*

We thus highlight the capacity of AR experiences for escapism yet provide specific practical recommendations (see Table 2) to marketers to ensure the AR experience can be returned to over time and to overcome the inherent danger of constraining consumer escapism through overly structured imagining. We note the potential in particular of storytelling (Van Laer, Feiereisen & Visconti, 2019) due to AR’s affordances in allowing consumers to easily transition from real to digital and the layering of data, visuals, and sounds. Although there has been much focus on the technical aspects of AR (Hilken, Heller, et al., 2022; Heller, et al., 2019), less attention has been paid to the storytelling and creative aspects of the experience. This is puzzling given that the most successful AR experience to date is Pokémon Go which has been dubbed the most successful mobile game in US history (Rauschnabel et al., 2017). Indeed, AR can generate significant affective and emotional responses yet this is not always achieved solely through better technical capabilities. For example, Bennett, et al. (2021) find that immersive experiences with abstract animated visuals can be more conducive to relaxation and escapism compared to more realistic settings.

We advise marketers who are designing AR experiences to allow for daydreaming and other forms of imaginative escape in allowing for more playful and creative aesthetics. We invite marketers to consider more ‘risky’ uses of AR in further engaging consumers by allowing, for example, more social interaction to share the emotions these experiences may engender. Figure 2 provides a framework from which these calculated risks can be taken. It is only by focusing on the hedonic rather than utilitarian dimensions of AR that marketers will fully uncover the ability of this technology to allow for contextual consumer sense-making around their brand. This is particularly significant, we argue, given the rise of branded entertainment and transmedia storytelling whereby brands need to create intellectual property driven content that audiences want to consume (Dens & Poels, 2023). Further choice, interactivity, personalisation and complexity can significantly enhance the opportunities for a more fulfilling escape in allowing users to fill in the ‘gaps’ between the physical and the digital in their imaginations.

It is also worth mentioning here the significance of nostalgia in terms of emotional engagement. The app discussed in this paper has a specific nostalgic dimension by focusing on collectibles, as did Pokémon Go. It has been noted that AR is particularly able to activate nostalgia (Hinsch et al., 2020). We suggest that AR storytelling is particularly worth exploring for brands with a strong heritage, as they can derive strong equity by allowing consumers to engage with the stories built into this brand heritage in less structured ways thus eliciting nostalgia. We show that nostalgia can be conducive to a comforting escape to other temporal dimensions in allowing for both remembering and imagination (Casey, 1977). While not all the experiences in Table 2 explicitly bring together past, present and future, they all involve some type of projection into the past or future, for example, a future self (with a new look), a memory of a place, a childish game. Through engagement with the AR, consumers can construct a revised, more coherent temporal framework which brings together past, present and

future. This has implications for consumer well-being. While our research did not specifically seek to investigate consumer well-being, recent literature has pointed to the need for consumers to escape from their busy, accelerated everyday lives via slower forms of consumption and subjective experience of time (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019) and our analysis highlights that AR can result in a more relaxed frame of mind.

### *Conclusion and future research*

From a more critical angle, the embedding of technology, and AR in particular, has been noted for its embodied properties as it merges the online and offline seamlessly (Hilken et al., 2018), making its ideological or political properties invisible as they are seamlessly integrated in the practices of everyday life. We respond to calls from Javornik et al. (2021) in further examining some of the more negative practical implications of AR technology, particularly in considering its offloading capabilities. Rather than escape from the market, these digitalised ‘mini-escapes’ operate according to market logics. AR provides a sense of comfort, in making the illusionary more real and our current situation more bearable, perhaps even pleasurable and is reminiscent of Benjamin’s arcades (1999) as enchanting spaces of immersion in which consumers are semi-aware, where every product is worthy of desire.

This is not to say that consumers are merely dupes, but rather than these physical and digital spaces are not apolitical. Indeed, escapism itself is not apolitical. The politics of escapism requires further attention to gain in-depth insights into the longer-term impact of people’s engagement with immersive technologies upon customer well-being which, in the context of our case study, seems to pseudo-alleviate technology-related anxiety (Hilken et al., 2022) in the short-term but may quickly become boring in the longer-term and limit our imaginations. Further ethnographic work is needed to understand the affective and imaginative states which emerge from these new technologies and how they are used, often unreflexively,

as part of our daily escapes. It is not as simple as immersive technology being good or bad, providing imaginative escapes or being dangerously addictive, more nuanced conceptualisations are required to unpack the antecedents of limiting people's imagination and the fully-fledged escape that consumers might desire.

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