

EXPERIENTIAL COMMUNICATION:
A NEW ERA OF STORYTELLING AND BRAND CONNECTION

by
Chelsea Lomartire

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Abstract

In the world of digital nativism and rise in brand desertion post-pandemic, it is critical that brands look for new ways to connect with their audiences. As a result, this thesis explored experiential communication and this new era of storytelling and brand connection. The research established the need for experiential communication and the power it has to create a deep brand connection between an organization and its audiences. Using a case study and in-depth interviews, this research examined the role of storytelling in experiential communication, its universal nature, and the development of brand connections through experiential communication. As a result of this research, a revised experiential communication definition that focuses on immersive storytelling was developed as well as an experiential communication model that offers communication professionals guidance on how to effectively utilize experiential communication.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Throughout the human experience, communication has been at the heart of connection and innovation. From cave drawings to the modern age of digital nativism, new technology has played a critical role in the advancement of communication, but even with these advances, experience has remained at the core. With the rise of digital dependence and shift in in-person interaction post-pandemic, brands must reevaluate the best ways to reach and connect with their audiences. A solution can be seen in the world of experiential communication.

Initially coined experiential marketing, the term has been defined as the ability to create desired emotions, outcomes, and development throughout the customer journey. It is the process of strategically creating and strengthening a customer's entire interaction with a product or organization (Solis, 2015). While called experiential marketing, it is argued throughout this research that this process goes deeper than marketing. According to HubSpot (Forsey, 2022), marketing is defined as any action a company takes to attract an audience to the product or service of the company through messaging. For for-profit organizations, marketing's ultimate goal is to increase sales. In contrast, this research study considered if and how experiential communication creates deep connection through immersive experiences with storytelling at the heart of these interactions. To do so, this research examined how brands connect with their audiences through experiential communication that is rooted in storytelling.

Storytelling

The National Storytelling Network (2022) notes that storytelling is an ancient artform that is a valuable form of human expression. It defines storytelling as the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal a story while sparking the listener's imagination (National Storytelling Network, 2022). The definitions of story and storytelling showcase both the

importance of this form of expression as well as its place in human history. In a definition by Literary Terms (2022), it is noted that stories are of great value to human culture and are some of the most important aspects of life. The value of storytelling in human culture and its universal nature is emphasized through the fairytale *Cinderella*. *Cinderella* alone has over 500 versions in Europe and its origins date back to a Chinese story from the ninth century (Northrup, 2000). The longevity of *Cinderella* showcases the transcendent nature of stories and their universal nature. To examine this further, this study asked how storytelling is foundational to experiential communication.

The Universal Nature of Experiential Communication Activations

Experiential communication activations are the point in which experiential communication comes to life. It is when the brand launches an immersive experience (Torres, 2022). For example, *Van Gogh: Immersive Experience* invites guests into the artwork of Van Gogh through 360-degree projections, +1,000m² screens, and virtual reality. The traveling exhibit has made stops in cities across the world, and as a result, has created a media buzz nationally and internationally. This activation has sold over 3.2 million tickets, making it the most successful attraction worldwide on Ticketmaster (Capps 2021). It was awarded the best experience in 2021 by *USA Today* and was ranked among the 12 best immersive experiences in the world by *CNN* (Fever Labs Inc., 2023). This worldwide success of the *Van Gogh: Immersive Experience* is noteworthy but emphasized the need for further investigation into the universal resonance of experiential communication activations.

Brand Connection

Brand connection is critical between an organization and its audiences. It is deeper than just an interest in a product. According to McKinsey & Company (2023), the pandemic caused

extreme brand loyalty disruption. Thirty-nine percent of audiences, mainly millennials and Generation Z, deserted trusted brands. This desertion was also attributed to the fact that many younger audiences are searching for brands that reflect their values (McKinsey & Company, 2023). According to Sprout Social (2018), the desire for this value reflection is due to the divisive nature of society and the political environment. This article argued that connection is the new critical and that relationship is more powerful than transaction when it comes to brand engagement (Sprout Social, 2018). Further, Sprout Social's (2018) research found that 64% of consumers want brands to connect with them. These findings suggest that audiences will not be loyal to a brand simply because they like the product or service. Audiences need to feel connected to the brand. The brand needs to feel personal to them.

In a study among 70,000 consumers in 15 countries, researchers found that audience connections with brands could be as deep and emotional as their personal relationships with others (APCO Worldwide, 2013). Using an emotional linking model, the researchers found that emotional connection with a brand consists of curiosity, pride, admiration, empowerment, relevance, approachability, identification, and understanding (APCO Worldwide, 2013). The results of this study emphasized the personal nature of brand connection and the importance of this connection to business outcomes and creative strategy. With its global focus, the study also showcased that these brand connections can be universal in nature. As a result, this research considered if experiential communication can be used to create personal brand connections.

To facilitate this examination, this research used two primary methods, a case study and qualitative in-depth interviews. The case study examined storytelling foundations and the universal nature of the experiential communication activation with the Moomins. A case study on

the Moomins was chosen in order to analyze the universal themes and timeline of a story that has resonated in many cultures.

The Moomins are the central characters in a series of books and comic strips. The story was originally published in Swedish in Finland and was written by Swedish-Finn illustrator and writer Tove Jansson. Jansson's first Moomin-like character was seen in the magazine *Garm* in 1943, and the first Moomin story was published in 1945. There are nine full-length books, three picture books, and hundreds of comic strips (Ardagh, 2017).

Over the years, the world of the Moomintrolls has been adapted into new communication mediums and has gained popularity globally. This evolution highlights the universal nature of the Moomins. The first Moomin television series aired in Germany in 1959 with subsequent series in 1969 in Japan and Sweden, in 1979 in Poland, in 1990 in over 60 countries, and in 2019 broadcast worldwide. In 1974 *The Moomin Opera* premiered in Helsinki. In 2016 the first interactive exhibition on the Moomins opened at the Southbank Centre in London. The first Moomin theme park, Moominworld, opened in Naantali, Finland in 1993, and in 2019 a second theme park opened in Japan (Moomin, 2023).

The over 75 years of Moomin history showcases the resonance of this story and global brand. To discover why it resonates on a universal level and the importance of experiential communication in this new era of storytelling, one must analyze it through the lens of universal human experiences, essential elements of storytelling, and the value of experiential communication activations. Using a case study approach, these aspects were examined.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were chosen to gain insight into how audiences connect to the Star Wars universe through experiential communication. Through this method, the researcher immersed members of Generation Z into a virtual reality experience and then explored their level

of brand connection with Star Wars. Since 1977, Star Wars has expanded from the movie screen to a comprehensive universe. The franchise consists of 11 films, 15 television series, over 100 video games, books and comics, merchandise, and more (Statista, 2023). The story has also come to life in a physical format through the themed lands, Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Walt Disney World and Disneyland (Britannica, 2023). In addition to themed lands and attractions, Star Wars is known for its fan engagement initiatives. This engagement can be seen through Star Wars Celebration, a four-day fan event featuring exclusive announcements, screenings, merchandise, celebrity guest appearances, and immersive exhibits (Star Wars Celebration, 2023). Star Wars celebration began in 1999 and occurs every one to two years. These celebrations have occurred across the United States and around the globe in the United Kingdom and Germany as well as Japan (Wookieepedia, 2023). The Star Wars celebrations showcase the desire for Star Wars to connect with audiences to continue this fan loyalty that started in 1977.

In summary, society's increased digital reliance has led brands to consider other ways to connect with audiences. The use of new technologies and immersive experiences showcase that experiential communication may be the answer. Through the Moomins case study and qualitative in-depth interviews, experiential communication was examined. Specifically, the study was guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How is storytelling foundational to experiential communication?

RQ2: How is the universality of stories demonstrated within an experiential communication activation?

RQ3: How does experiential communication deepen the brand connection between organizations and their audiences?

Some of the limitations of this research included that the nonprobability sample and qualitative nature of the in-depth interviews do not allow for generalizability. Since the research is qualitative, the breadth of brand loyalty among audiences could not be measured, but the depth of the connection to this particular study was established. Also, due to the timeline of the study, the study only included members of Generation Z. Case study limitations included the Moomins as the single focus of research and the inability to obtain primary research on the thoughts and feelings of those who have experienced the Moomin brand.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

In a crowded digital marketplace, brands are looking for new ways to tell their story and engage audiences. Experiential communication may offer a solution. This literature review first describes the emerging field of experiential communication. It then considers the role of storytelling and universal nature of experiential communication. Finally, this chapter will review the importance of brand connection to experiential communication.

Experiential Communication

Experiential communication innovates the way stories are told. It propels the field of communication forward by combining cutting-edge technology with immersive storytelling. Further, experiential communication offers a new way for audiences to experience a brand.

The idea of experience in communication was brought into the modern era in 1998 with B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore's (1998) controversial essay in the *Harvard Business Review*. This essay put forth the idea that businesses should create memorable events for their customers and that those experiences, and the memories they developed, would become part of the product and brand (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Pine and Gilmore (1998) said an experience occurs when a company uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). This breakthrough essay became the framework for the modern-day concept of experiential communication (McCoobery, 2021).

Experiential communication is a strategy that engages audiences through branded or themed experiences. The core of this type of communication is to immerse audiences in live experiences. Instead of telling an organization's story, the story is brought to life, and audiences are invited into the story. The goal is for audiences to be impacted in a way that creates a deep

brand loyalty. Guests should leave the experience inspired and excited to share the organization's story on all their channels of communication. This type of experience is more than just a typical event, (Eventem, 2022). It includes various touchpoints throughout the experience that allow audiences to engage with and fully become a part of the story (Solis, 2015).

Experiential communication utilizes interactive technology, all five senses, visual storytelling, an audience-focused approach, and touchpoints or active participation. In *Experiential Marketing*, Shirra Smilansky (2018) identified an experiential communication framework based on the 10 key STRATEGIES or components of experiential communication. These components include service, theatre, research, adverts, televised or broadcast, entertainment and culture, game or competition, interactive technologies, education, and set.

The first component, service, refers to providing an added-value element for the target audience. This element can look like transportation, delivery, a makeover, etc. It is whatever reflects the organization, allowing brand personality to shine through and connect with audiences in a new way.

Theatre is an extremely important component of experiential strategy. This element is used to creatively tell stories and immerse audiences in the story. Through bringing audiences into the world of the brand, audiences become engaged participants in the live experience. Theatre is almost always used in experiential activations (Smilansky, 2018).

The third element, research, is key to experiential communication because, by nature, experiential communication is audience-focused. By creating a space for audience participation and input, brands can gain strong qualitative and quantitative insights. Brands and marketing agencies have found that experiential communication campaigns have given them insights into the thoughts, feelings, lifestyles, and brand engagement behaviors of their audiences. By being

audience-centric, these campaigns have also created brand ambassadors who recommend the brand and create social media content surrounding the brand.

The next element, the adverts element, showcases how live brand experiences can elevate the entirety of a communications campaign. This element can be utilized to communicate the content of advertising initiatives. The relationship developed in a live experience fosters a strong connection between the audience and the organization. As a result, when audiences see an advertisement related to that brand, they already have a deeper connection and desire to support that brand.

The televised or broadcast component of experiential communication allows for a broader reach of a live brand experience. Examples of this component include developing a media partnership, broadcasting the experience on television, or using radio, digital, or social media channels. The televised or broadcast element also fosters a continued relationship with audiences before and after the experience.

The entertainment and culture element adds to the experience through creating an opportunity to align the brand with an interest that resonates deeply with audiences. This element could include music, fashion, sports, arts, food, or culture-based activities. By positioning the live experience to the strong desires of the target audience, the entertainment and culture element can create word-of-mouth buzz, encourage social content, and deepen brand relationships.

The seventh element, game or competition, is an important element because gamification continues to gain popularity in the marketplace (Smilansky, 2018). This element taps into human nature's competitive spirit by bringing a brand personality to life. Gamification could look like creating an interactive brand-based game using familiar games like Jenga, chess, or quiz shows,

or by utilizing popular apps or video games. This competitive mindset fosters increased brand connection as audiences share content in order to “win” the game (Smilansky, 2018).

Interactive technology is another essential element in experiential communication. Living in a digital age, audiences are consistently demanding that technology be customized to serve their needs. The connection between people and their mobile devices is too prominent to ignore when developing an experiential communication activation. An example of interactive technology is the metaverse. While definitions vary, the metaverse is many digital spaces that incorporate augmented and virtual reality (Stackpole, 2022). The metaverse continues to gain popularity and will soon be worth more than \$1 trillion. Due to its popularity, it is no surprise that brands such as Nike and Gucci are designing clothes and accessories for the metaverse (Stackpole, 2022). Facebook even changed its name to Meta to showcase their belief in the future of the metaverse (Stackpole, 2022).

In *Navigating the Metaverse* Cathy Hackl, Dirk Lueth, and Tommaso Di Bartolo (2022) noted that three patterns have emerged as a result of the metaverse. These include experience, identity, and ownership. Experience refers to people not just wanting to consume a product but experience the product through gamified or contextual experiences. Identity is the second aspect of the metaverse and refers to the idea that people value their digital persona and want to carry it with them across the metaverse and even into the real world. Finally, ownership refers to the idea that wherever people choose to spend their time, they want to be invested. These areas of experience, identity, and ownership showcase the strong desire for audiences to become part of the story (Hackl, 2022). Just hearing a story is no longer creating the audience engagement that is necessary for brand connection. Rather, these authors found that audiences want to be immersed

in a brand, identify with it, and take ownership of it as part of their own story (Hackl, Lueth & Di Bartolo, 2022).

Education is the sixth component of the STRATEGIES of experiential communication. It is an important method to inform audiences about a brand and can be utilized to create an association between a brand and a cause. The education element is very popular in the government sector as a way to inform audiences about topics such as voting, health, and crime. The value of education can be seen in David Kolb's experiential learning theory (WGU, 2020). Experiential learning is important because it showcases the value that experience has when it comes to receiving and analyzing new information. There are four cycles to this Kolb's theory: concrete learning, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The first two stages are focused on grasping the experience, and the last two are focused on transforming the experience. Concrete learning refers to when a learner has a new experience or interprets a past experience in a new way. Reflective observation is when the learner reflects on the experience personally. Abstract conceptualization occurs as the learner forms new ideas or adjusts one's thinking based on the experience and then reflects on the experience. Finally, active experimentation happens when the learner applies the new ideas to the world to see if there are modifications that need to be made (WGU, 2022).

The benefits of experiential learning theory include immediate knowledge application that help learners better retain information, improve collaboration and motivation, and reflect on real-world practice (WGU, 2022). This application showcases the power that experience has in the learning process. Going through each stage allows the learner to better connect with the information. The benefits of this theory also translate to experiential communication. Learning

throughout a themed environment allows audiences to develop a connection that results in personal ownership and engagement.

Experiential learning also emphasizes that experience is transformational. Experience has the ability to both change the way in which audiences learn and foster deeper understanding and meaning. The power of experience harnessed in communication practice introduces a tool that creates a deep and incredible connection between an audience and a brand. The connection is captured through taking ownership of the knowledge and relating it to personal experiences.

Finally, set is one of the most unique elements in an experiential communication activation. These sets are much like a theatre production and create immersive sensory environments that an audience can experience either virtually or live. Interactive elements and technology are also crucial in these sets as they often drive social media content sharing (Smilansky 2018).

Together these 10 strategies create the framework for experiential communication. Experiential communication brings audiences into a brand through immersive experiences. It gives brands the framework to connect with their audiences in new ways that foster continuous engagement. In order to choose the right strategies from the framework, brands must look to the foundation of these strategies, storytelling.

Storytelling

While it is impossible to determine the exact origin of story, people told stories thousands of years before learning to read, write, or keep records (National Storytelling Network, 2022). Story is defined as a connected series of events told through words, imagery, body language, performance, music, or any other form of communication (Literary Terms, 2022). A story can be told about anything and can occur at any time. As long as a series of events are being

communicated, then a story is being told. Stories are of great value to human culture and are some of the most important aspects of life (Literary Terms, 2022). Thus, story conveys the universal nature of the human experience, connecting people through all mediums of communication throughout history.

Although stories can span time and place, five essential elements are necessary to tell a good story. These include plot, or what happens, inciting incident, or the event or decision that begins the story, conflict, or the struggle of the protagonist against an opposing force, climax, or the point where the conflict or crisis reaches its highest peak, denouement, or the resolution of the story, character, or the people in the story, dialogue, or the communication of the characters, point of view, or the character telling the story, and theme, or the underlying concept of universality insight (Wittenberg, 2019). The goal of the story's resolution is for the audience to reach catharsis or emotional identification with the character(s) (Wittenberg, 2019).

Researchers Al-Jafar and Buzzelli (2004) believe visual imagery is key to storytelling. Looking specifically at children, they noted that when the narrator tells a story in the language of imagery, children connect the events in the story with their everyday lives (Al-Jafar & Buzzelli, 2004). This connection allows children to convey past experiences and see them in a possible future (Al-Jafar & Buzzelli, 2004). Their finding suggests that visual storytelling offers a powerful connection between an audience and a story. An example can be seen in the way people relate to characters in a story and then mimic that behavior in their own life. Thus, stories create connection.

As a result, storytelling is a foundational aspect of experiential communication. What is less clear is how stories are foundational. This research, then, posed the research question:

RQ1: How is storytelling foundational to experiential communication?

The Universal Nature of Experiential Communication Activations

Universal human experience is defined as life encounters of an individual or a wider group that shape the human psyche in one or more ways (Dux College, 2022). These areas include life stages such as birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age; key milestones such as the first day of school, divorce, death of a parent, moving homes, marriage, discovering/rediscovering religion, accepting a job promotion; emotions and the complex ways people process and accept them such as love, anger, grief, depression, happiness, fear; dealing with questions of existence such as nihilism, religion, understanding the connection between people and art, anxiety about the future morality; cultural/historical events such as earthquakes, poverty, discovery of gravity, war, political movements; and mundane, everyday activities such as eating, sleeping, work, daily commute, or city vs. country life (Dux College, 2022). These universal human experiences are key components to stories but are especially prevalent in fairytales.

While story can span time and space, a good story has universality or resonance with people across geographic locations and culture (Missouri Southern State University, 2022). Fairytales are a key example of the universality of storytelling. Their timeless and universal nature can be seen throughout history and across global cultures (Konner, 2022). For example, versions of the fairytale *Rapunzel* appear in several countries, including Italy, France, and the Philippines (Ashliman, 2022). Other fairytales such as *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Puss and Boots* have also been found throughout history and in various cultures (Konner, 2022). Their appearance across time and culture showcases the transcendent nature of these stories and their universal themes that are routinely retold and adapted to new cultural patterns (Konner, 2022). An example of this adaption can be seen through the changes in classic Disney fairytales

through live action movies. These adaptations have tweaked classic elements of these fairytales in ways that reflect modern audiences, such as a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion as seen in the upcoming live action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. This example emphasizes the importance of seeing the connection between ancient stories and how and why people continue to repeat them in innovative ways (Konner, 2022).

In a study done by Ali Al-Jafar and Cary A Buzzelli (2004) the importance of storytelling is emphasized. In this study, children in a rural school in America were given two versions of *Cinderella*, a familiar version and a Kuwait version, and challenged to write their own stories after reading them. Researchers found that the stories the children wrote reflected the universal elements found in both versions of this fairytale. Thus, the researchers concluded that humans are rooted in story, regardless of background or culture, and that timeless stories, such as fairytales, can transcend culture through connection (Al-Jafar & Buzzelli, 2004). What is less clear is how experiential communication utilizes these universal storytelling aspects in experiential communication activations. Thus, this research posed the following research question:

RQ2: How is the universality of stories demonstrated within an experiential communication activation?

Brand Connection

Experience has always been at the heart of storytelling (Jornet, 2014). In its earliest forms, experience can be seen in cave drawings (Mendoza, 2015). These drawings were not just stagnant forms of communication. Tribes of nomadic people would gather at the end of the day and listen to the chief tell stories. This shared experience would result in these stories coming to life in a way that created a connection amongst the tribe (University of Central Florida, 2023).

This experience-based storytelling can be seen throughout history. From the beautiful Japanese tapestries to the Sistine chapel, our ancestors created shared experiences and connection through tangible forms of communication. This same strategy can be utilized for organizations. Using this new era of technology, experience offers a new way to foster brand connection (Solis, 2015).

To create a successful brand connection, one must first consider the audience. In Jerry Smith and Dan Hanover's (2016) book *Experiential Marketing*, the importance of brand connection is emphasized. Smith and Hanover (2016) outlined four main drivers to the audience-brand connection: driver one, the audience identified with the brand; driver two, the brand helped the audience or solved a problem; driver three, the brand had specific meaning to the audience; and driver four, the audience felt better about themselves when they used the brand. Driver one emphasizes the need for audiences to see themselves in a brand. Driver two showcases the need for a brand to not only connect, but to help the audience in some way. Driver three highlights that the brand needs to be personal in nature, and driver four showcases the power that a brand has to change the thoughts and feelings of audiences. Together these four drivers create continuous brand loyalty (Smith & Hanover, 2016).

Finally, the rise and success of experiential communication activations emphasize the need to further examine brand connection through experiential communication. An example activation is the *Wimpy Kid Live: The Meltdown Show* (2018). The company Switch reinvented the standard of book signing through the Diary of a Wimpy Kid Book Tour. This tour traveled across the country and consisted of a giant pop-up book production. The book came to life through quizzes, dance competitions, anecdotes of the author's travels, and randomized activities that were determined at each stop by a giant digital spinning wheel. As a result of this immersive experience, families connected with the themes of the book. Each tour stop sold out within hours

of going live, and #themeltdown saw a huge increase in social media usage during the tour. The book was ranked #1 on the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestseller lists during the tour, and, since the tour, over 2 million copies of the book were sold worldwide (Switch, 2018).

Google Pixelville (2020) also showcases the success of experiential communication activations. The goal of this activation was to create buzz around the Pixel 4 smartphone. To launch the product, Google wanted to create a truly immersive experience to showcase all that the smartphone could do and also allow the audiences to see themselves with it in their everyday lives. This retail experience was designed as an interactive town square with various touchpoints along the way to simulate an urban apartment lifestyle. From this experiential communication activation, the immersive retail space had a 46% conversion from intercept to demo. It created an over 35-point lift in purchase consideration for the Pixel 4 and fostered an over 15-point lift in purchase consideration for the Nest Mini (Mosaic, 2023). These results showcase the success that this experience had in terms of purchase growth.

A final example to note is *The Bell* (2019), a Taco Bell Hotel and Resort. The goal of this experiential communication activation was to increase brand loyalty and trendiness amongst Taco Bell audiences. To do so, Taco Bell designed a completely brand-themed hotel in Palm Springs, California. *The Bell* consisted of Taco Bell-themed rooms, activities, and exclusive Taco Bell dishes. As a result, this branded hotel experience sold out in two minutes. The campaign generated 4.4 billion impressions and more than 5,000 articles from news outlets. It also resulted in a sales-growth of 7% in Q2 that year (Taco Bell, 2019).

While these examples showcase the success of experiential communication thus far, it is less clear how organizations create and/or sustain this brand connection. As a result, this research sought to answer the research question:

RQ3: How does experiential communication deepen the brand connection between organizations and their audiences?

To review, this literature review defined experiential communication and examined storytelling and its universal nature. The value of brand connection was explored, and the ability that experiential communication has to foster connection between brands and audiences was established. While these areas were examined, it was clear that further research was necessary to fully examine the storytelling foundation of experiential communication, the universal nature of experiential communication activations, and the ability experiential communication has to deepen brand connections between organizations and audiences.

Chapter 3 Methods

This study used two primary research methods to examine experiential communication, its storytelling foundation, and the universal nature of activations along with its ability to create brand connections. A case study on the Moomins offered an in-depth look at storytelling and the universal nature of activations. A Star Wars virtual reality experience and in-depth interviews focused on brand connection in experiential communication. Together these two methods offered a close examination of the usage of experiential communication.

Case Study: The Moomins

A case study on the Moomins was utilized to research the role of storytelling and the universal nature of experiential communication. A case study was chosen in order to fully examine all aspects of a brand's evolution and connection with audiences. The story of the Moomins was selected as the focus of the case study because of the legacy of the story and its ability to connect with people across cultures. Specifically, the case study examined the portrayal of the key characters throughout the Moomin stories as well as the plot structure of the story "The Mystery of the Hattifatteners." To guide this analysis, the researcher reviewed the written stories, the characters, history, and the experiential communication activation *Adventures in Moominland*.

In-Depth Interviews: Star Wars Universe

Qualitative in-depth interviews were utilized to examine the role of brand connection in experiential communication. Specifically, this research invited participants to engage in a virtual reality experience using the game *Star Wars: Tales from the Galaxy's Edge* followed by in-depth interviews about the experience. This qualitative research design allowed for nuanced conversation about the thoughts and feelings of the participants towards the Star Wars brand and

provided the rich, contextual understanding necessary to determine engagement with a brand through experiential communication. In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to probe participant experiences and offer rich and deep insights. One of the advantages of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other quantitative methods (Boyce, 2006). Thus, this research utilized in-depth interviews to better understand and probe participants' experience immediately following the virtual reality experience to gain better insight into brand connection. The inclusion of the virtual reality experience was also important to the study. According to Smilansky's (2018) STRATEGIES, gamification and competition, and interactive technologies are key components in the experiential communication framework. With its focus on gaming through interactive technologies, *Star Wars: Tales from the Galaxy's Edge* fits this framework. This game is an action-adventure virtual reality experience from ILMxLAB that lets users travel across the galaxy to the planet of Batuu and live out their own story. Users fight alongside classic characters and face intimidating villains as they explore all-new regions and eras of the Star Wars galaxy. The selected portion of the game for this study allowed participants to explore a Star Wars cargo ship, experience hyperspace, meet droids, and interact with objects. The visual as well as sound components emphasized the immersive nature of virtual reality by homing in on the participants' senses. *Star Wars: Tales from the Galaxy's Edge* was also chosen for its immersion and exploratory nature versus battle objectives. Galaxy's Edge, specifically the planet of Batuu, is a thriving hub in the Outer Rim for traders and travelers. Familiar characters in the Star Wars universe can be seen exploring, flying on spaceships, or roaming the streets of the planet (Lucasfilm, 2023). Through interacting with this virtual reality experience, study

participants were completely immersed in the storytelling experience without outside distraction, making it a suitable experience for this study's focus on experiential communication.

Explanation of Research Process

The population for this study was Generation Z (Gen Z) ages 18-25, specifically students and staff from Belmont University. This population was chosen because there is a strong push from Gen Z for more personalized experiences (Law, 2020). According to Sprout Social, 64% of Gen Z consumers expect a more personalized experience based on previous interactions (Sprout Social, 2023). This data showed that Gen Zers are looking to connect with brands in a way that is more relational and experience-focused, making this generation a clear target population for experiential communication research.

Participants from this population were chosen using a nonprobability convenience sampling strategy. They were recruited via email based upon the researcher's contacts. Fifteen individuals participated in the in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted over a six-day period, and each interview ranged between 24 minutes to 37 minutes. The total interview time across all participants was 14 hours and 29 minutes.

Research Process. After agreeing to participate, each participant was asked to complete an informed consent and a pre-interview survey before engaging in the interview process. First, each participant was asked to review and sign an informed consent form prior to signing up for an individual experience/interview time (See Appendix A). The consent form explained the study's process and asked for permission to audio record the interviews. These audio recordings were transcribed and then deleted after analysis, and the transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer. In order to conduct this study ethically, key safeguards were put in place to protect the participants. To maintain participant confidentiality, participants were assigned a

number that was used for reference purposes in the transcript and in the analysis. Further, the researcher recognized that the virtual reality experience may create slight disorientation for participants when engaged in the immersive experience and that participants may feel uncomfortable sharing about their experiences in a one-on-one setting. These potential risks were explained to participants, and they were provided the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time in the process without penalty. See Appendix A for the participant consent form and the audio recording consent form.

Second, participants were asked to complete a pre-interview survey prior to the interview process. This survey was distributed via Qualtrics and collected participants' demographic information as well as their brand awareness of the Star Wars universe. The questions consisted of general demographic information such as age, Belmont student or staff classification, and gender identity. The question on age ensured that participants fit within the target population of the study. It also asked participants to rate their familiarity with the Star Wars universe along with questions about the number of movies watched and the number of characters they could name. These questions were used to determine participants' initial familiarity with the Star Wars brand. See Appendix B for the pre-interview survey.

Finally, participants engaged in the in-depth interview process. The interview began by introducing each participant to *Star Wars: Tales from the Galaxy's Edge* using an Oculus Quest 2 virtual reality headset. The researcher explained that the headset went over the participant's eyes, and the participant was instructed to adjust the two side straps and top strap so that the headset fit snugly around the head and provided a clear image of the game. The participant was then instructed to pick up the joysticks and step into the designated virtual space to be transported into the Star Wars universe. Prior to the interviews, the researcher setup a virtual barrier so that

participants did not run into any physical objects in the room. If the participant walked close to the barrier, red Xs would appear on the Oculus headset, warning participants to step back into the designated virtual space. The researcher instructed each participant through these initial settings and movement orientation, then each participant was given 10 minutes to explore the universe and engage in the immersive experience. Following the 10 minutes of exploration, the participant removed the Oculus headset, and the researcher used a semi-structured interview format to understand the participant's experience in the virtual reality game and its potential connection to the Star Wars brand. The semi-structured interview format was important as it allowed the researcher to follow what resonated most with the participant and adapt with follow-up questions as needed in order to collect deep and rich data (Ruslin, 2022).

Interview Guide. The in-depth interviews were guided by seven open-ended questions that focused on a participant's immersive experience and potential brand connections with the Star Wars universe. The interview guide included questions relating to the participant's experience with Star Wars and how the virtual reality experience gave greater insight into the story, the participant's feelings toward the Star Wars brand, and the participant's desire to share this experience with others. Questions such as how did this experience make you feel toward the Star Wars brand, what are some of the ways this experience fostered a new connection with the Star Wars universe, and how did it solidify existing connections were asked in order to determine if the virtual reality experience developed new connections or solidified existing ones with the Star Wars universe. See Appendix C for the interview guide.

Coding Process. After conducting the in-depth interviews, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using the audio transcription service Otter.ai. The transcripts were

then reviewed and corrected to ensure the transcripts were identical to the audio recordings. This process resulted in 21,400 words suitable for qualitative analysis.

The qualitative analysis used an inductive coding process to identify themes in the data. The inductive coding process was appropriate for this research as it allowed themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing pre-determined themes onto the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1988). Themes were identified using the constant comparative method with an idea as the unit of analysis. The researcher would isolate an idea in the transcript and give it a categorial name with a corresponding memo to describe the category and its characteristics. Then the researcher identified another idea in the data and compared it to the established category or theme. If the idea did not fit this category, the researcher created a new category with a corresponding memo of its characteristics. For example, the wonder category was created, and its description noted as the awe participants felt during the virtual reality experience. Any idea that did not align with this description of wonder was placed in a different category. The researcher continued this comparative process until all ideas within the data had been identified and categorized into themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). Themes were then carefully reviewed to ensure that each theme was distinct from one another and that ideas within a theme were similar (Stacks, 2016). For example, to establish the difference between the perspective and immersion themes, key characteristics were identified. The perspective category noted the participants' ability to assume the role of a character in the story, versus the immersion category emphasized story engagement. Finally, participant quotes that described a theme, or emic language, were identified. This coding process was completed twice in order to establish reliability. The first round of coding established the themes, while the second round of coding examined each theme

to ensure the quotes appropriately fit the initial categorization. Coding differences were resolved by examining the sentiment of the quote to determine which category fit best.

Through a case study and in-depth interviews, this research sought to better understand experiential communication. The use of these two research tools allowed the researcher to explore participants' experience in an immersive environment and understand how this experience impacted brand connection. By doing so, this research was able to deeply examine experiential communication.

Chapter 4 Results

This research study used a case study and in-depth interviews to examine experiential communication and its foundation of storytelling, its universal nature, and its ability to build brand connection amongst organizations and audiences. The results of the case study illustrated the importance of storytelling through the Moomins tales and characters and the universal nature of this story through an experiential communication activation. The in-depth interview results revealed four key themes of wonder, perspective, immersion, and further engagement and sharing. The emergence of these themes described participants' immersive experience and their associated connection to the Star Wars brand.

Case Study Results

To examine the storytelling process, three prominent characters in the Moomin stories were examined: Moomintroll, Snorkmaiden, Snufkin, and Little My. Moomintroll is characterized as kind, caring and curious, a great lover of nature, a true friend, brave, and optimistic (Moomin, 2023). Snorkmaiden is a creative and excitable dreamer whose imagination comes in handy on adventures. She is very resourceful and quick-thinking, which often leads to her saving the day in style with a unique and ingenious solution (Moomin, 2023). Snufkin is a philosopher and a wanderer who enjoys the simple things in life. A free spirit with no interest in owning things, Snufkin enjoys challenging authority figures. He values his independence and is admired for his quiet confidence and self-belief (Moomin, 2023). Little My is fiery and independent. Known for her sharp tongue, quick temper, and mischievous nature, she thrives in dangerous situations and takes pleasure in the small misfortunes that befall others. She is loyal, honest, protective, and brave (Moomin, 2023). These characteristics of Moomintroll, Snorkmaiden, Snufkin, and Little My were seen throughout the world of the Moomins and

informed how these characters approach different experiences. The translation of these characteristics were seen in the written stories as well as on screen and in experiential communication activations.

The universal nature of the Moomins through the use of universal human experiences was seen throughout stories such as “The Mystery of the Hattifatteners.” The first of these experiences was human emotions and the complex ways people process them. The human emotion that was identified in this story was fear. This emotion was seen through the way Snorkmaiden dealt with the fear of the Hattifatteners and the idea of losing her clock mirror, her prized possession. Her reaction to the idea of losing the mirror showcased her fear of the future. The case study revealed a second universal human, questions of existence, which can include nihilism, religion, understanding the connection between people and art, and anxiety about the future morality. Questions of existence was seen through Moomintroll and Little My’s questioning of the purpose of the Hattifatteners. Throughout the story, Moomintroll and Little My asked each other questions about what these creatures were. The experience of encountering the Hattifatteners ultimately led the Moomin characters to a new perspective. “Maybe the Hattifatteners gathered together to greet the storm, or maybe they created it. Perhaps we’ll never know and perhaps that’s the way it should be” (Moomin Official, 2023). This quote showcased the characters’ realization that they do not have all the answers and that it is okay to accept that the questions surrounding the Hattifatteners may never be answered. Finally, the case study revealed that the written Moomin stories and the Moomin immersive experience share storytelling conventions and portray universal human experiences.

The experiential communication activation *Adventures in Moominland* also showcased these conventions. This activation created a space for audiences to experience the Moomin world

in a way that encouraged them to develop an experience of their own. Audiences traveled through Moominvalley as they experienced locations throughout the Moomin adventures. The use of a physical environment in the activation also allowed two different cultures to be immersed in the story. This new way of storytelling captured the attention of Moomin lovers, resulting in the expansion of the stories and the addition of another theme park and museum (Moomin Museum, 2023).

Survey Results

The pre-interview survey established study participants' familiarity with the Star Wars universe. Seventy-four percent of study participants were familiar with the Star Wars universe while only 20% of participants were unfamiliar with the brand. Participants also indicated a familiarity with the Star Wars movies and characters. Seventy-three percent of participants had seen four or more Star Wars movies, and 13 participants were able to name four or more characters.

In-Depth Interviews Results

The results of the in-depth interviews revealed four key themes: wonder, perspective, immersion, and further engagement and sharing. The theme wonder referred to participants' admiration of the technology, brand, and the overall experience. One participant described this wonder saying, "It's fascinating. It was just really cool to like, be able to pick up those objects and like touch everything and see everything. That's awesome" (Participant 3). The mention of the excitement of being in the universe was noted by all participants. In fact, the word "cool" had high resonance among participants, appearing 63 times in the data. Another aspect of the theme wonder was the sense of awe participants felt toward the Star Wars brand. One participant said, "It made me very impressed. Just the fact that intellectual property can transcend into so many

different experiences versus just the original films and now into everything in terms of merchandise and immersive things, both in terms of technology, and also location and that type of thing. So yeah, just very impressive to think about the legacy of the last, like 40 years of how it came to this point” (Participant 7). As a result, the theme wonder illustrated how the virtual reality experience grabbed participants’ attention and connected them to Star Wars.

The theme perspective described the ability of the participants to assume the role of a character in the story. One participant described perspective by saying, “I feel like people gain so much of an attachment and like comfort to characters. So, I can't imagine the excitement that people would feel when they see a certain character that they really value like that. And, like, I can't imagine if I was like standing with, like, Spider Man. But in here, you're like helping them with something, or you're like on a mission with them. So, it's a much greater, like emotional connection with the character, but also feeling like you're included in something that like you really care about” (Participant 1). In addition to connection, this theme noted the longevity this type of connection has:

And so, I've never done something like this before. So, it really hadn't been like a big part of my life or anything that I had done before. I feel like when you're just watching an ad on the TV, it's just so easy to ignore it. You know, you just mute it, or you just forget about it seconds after you watch it. I feel like with this like I'm not going to forget this because it's something that I was in. It's something that I felt like I was like tangibly in. I felt like I was actually touching the thing so I'm not gonna forget that I did a Star Wars VR experience. You know, in terms of like advertising, it's something that definitely like stuck with me more than just, you know, watching it on a screen (Participant 13).

A final aspect to note in this theme was that every participant stated that the experience either solidified or created a new connection for them with the Star Wars universe due to being placed in the perspective of the character.

The third theme, the immersion theme, illustrated the ability of participants to become completely engaged with the Star Wars universe and story. One participant described immersion by saying:

It made me excited to possibly get back into Star Wars more because like I said, I kind of pour myself more into Star Trek as a fan, but I have never wanted to like abandon Star Wars fandom either. And if Star Wars has this going for it, like this amount of immersion, and I can like feel like I'm part of the story more so than like holding a game console in my hand. Like it's one thing to see it on the TV or the computer screen but like to be able to take part in it gives me that same feeling of immersion that I felt when like riding Star Tours (Participant 2).

Similarly, Participant 14 articulated how immersive experiences not only connect audiences to brand stories but allow these stories to become a part of a person's own story. "Immersion and interaction are very important. I think without it that it's just another story we're being told. But it becomes inner with immersion and interaction. It's entwined with your own story" (Participant 14).

Finally, the theme further engagement and sharing referred to the desire of the participants to revisit the Star Wars universe and tell others about their experience. One participant described further engagement and sharing by saying:

It makes me want to go to Galaxy's Edge and experience this in person. Like this is the kind of thing that I could see like being the little kick in the butt to get me reinvested in a

fandom that you know has not been at the top of my radar in the last few years. Like I've been more into Star Trek or Marvel or whatever the thing, but this is the kind of thing that could make me kind of reactivate that itch for Star Wars in my life that I had for a few years" (Participant 2).

Also, all 15 participants in this study expressed that they would do the experience again, that it piqued their interest in some way, or that they would tell others about it. In addition to this, nine of the participants specifically noted that they wanted to go watch the Star Wars movies, series, or go back to Galaxy's Edge, a Star Wars themed land at Disney's Hollywood Studios and Disneyland, after this virtual reality experience.

Finally, when describing the overall experience, participants used relationally-focused language more often than consumer-based language. For example, the word "marketing" was mentioned three times whereas the word "connection" was mentioned 21 times.

The results of this case study analyzed the storytelling process through key Moomins characters and the universal human experiences illustrated in "The Mystery of the Hattifatteners." The way this story was translated into an experiential communication activation was also analyzed. The case study showcased the power of storytelling and its universal nature in the Moomins and the translation of these elements into an experiential communication activation. The results of the in-depth interviews included the emergence of four key themes: wonder, perspective, immersion, and further engagement and sharing. It also illustrated the connection participants felt during the activation towards the Star Wars brand.

Chapter 5 Conclusions

Through the Moomins case study and in-depths interviews, foundational aspects and universal nature of experiential communication were examined. In doing so, the results of this study emphasized both the success of and need for experiential communication. The use of the term experiential communication was also revealed as important. While initially coined experiential marketing, this research found that immersive brand experiences are better termed experiential communication. Unlike experiential marketing, this study identified relational connection rather than product sales as key to these immersive experiences. As is seen through the Star Wars virtual reality experience, the word “marketing” was mentioned three times whereas the word “connection” was mentioned 21 times. As a result, this research suggests that experiential communication is defined as the use of immersive storytelling to advance organizational or brand connection with audiences through wonder, perspective, and continued engagement.

The Definition

At its core, experiential communication is about creating deep brand loyalty. Whether it be through the Moomins or Star Wars, bringing an audience into a story allows them to create a personal connection that in turn develops further brand engagement. Wonder, perspective, and continued engagement are essential aspects of this definition because, as seen in the research, wonder brings people in, perspective through immersion allows audiences to personally engage with the brand, and continued engagement keeps audiences coming back, creating and sustaining deep brand connections. The four themes that emerged in the study’s in-depth interviews are seen through immersive storytelling.

Immersive Storytelling

This research sought to understand how storytelling is foundational to experiential communication. In doing so, the results revealed that immersive storytelling, not simply storytelling is foundational to experiential communication. Immersive storytelling is a story that invites the audience into the experience. For example, the four Moomin characters displayed the common human personality traits of creativity, loyalty, bravery, confidence, and optimism. These traits allowed audiences to connect to the story because the audience could identify with the characters. Yet, this identification was intensified through immersive storytelling. Audiences were invited to be part of the Moomin world and walk with the characters through the story rather than observe the story unfold. The identification with the characters and the audiences' ability to immerse themselves in the story showcases that storytelling is foundational to experiential communication.

Further, this study found that universal human experiences are incorporated into the immersive storytelling experience in experiential communication. For example, the Moomin stories relied on emotions and questions of existence to facilitate audience connections across time and culture. The study found that these universal human experiences were incorporated successfully in experiential activations such as "Adventures in Moominland" to engage with audiences around the world. As a result, immersive storytelling is not bound by time, place, or culture. Rather it incorporates universal human experiences into a story so that the story has wide-reaching audience connection. The transcendent nature of universal human experiences seen in "Adventures in Moominland" illustrates the universality of stories in experiential communication activations.

Thus, this research found that immersive storytelling is critical to experiential communication. Yes, experiential communication is founded on story, but not simply a story to be told. Rather experiential communication is founded on a universal story to be experienced.

The study's immersion theme also illustrated the importance of experiencing a story through experiential communication's ability to place audience members into the story and thus make the brand's story their own. The personal connection noted by Participants 2 and 14 in the study is an integral part of brand engagement through experiential communication and results in the desire to tell others about the experience. For example, participant 2 said, "It made me excited to possibly get back into Star Wars more because like I said, I kind of pour myself more into Star Trek as a fan, but I have never wanted to like abandoned Star Wars fandom either. And if Star Wars has this going for it, like this amount of immersion and I can like feel like I'm part of the story..." Such examples emphasize the power that experiential communication has to immerse audiences in a story that leads to a strong brand connection.

Brand Connection

Finally, the research found that experiential communication creates and sustains brand connections between an organization and its audiences. The four key themes that emerged from the Star Wars virtual reality experience were wonder, perspective, immersion, and further engagement and sharing.

The sense of wonder that emerged from the coding is significant. With United States adults spending 13 hours and 11 minutes per day with media, it is critical that an organization immediately brings the audience in amongst the noise of constant media bombardment (Cramer, 2022). Experiential communication does so by conveying a sense of wonder to audiences. This wonder activates audience engagement, moving audiences from passive storytelling consumers

to active participants in a brand's story. By doing so, the brand experience becomes a personal experience for the audience.

Another aspect that immediately became clear across all 15 interviews was the use of the word "cool," appearing 63 times. "Cool" showcased that the virtual reality experience immediately captured the attention of the participants or audiences. Synonyms for cool include captivating, wonderous, and inspiring (Brockway, 2015). These are immediate elements that should be fostered for an organization or brand to capture the attention or wonder of their audiences.

Perspective is another important component of experiential communication. For someone to connect deeply to a brand, one must feel a part of it. According to Smith and Hanover (2016), one of the main drivers of brand loyalty is that the brand has a specific meaning to the audience. This personal meaning was seen throughout the in-depth interviews when participants relating their Star Wars experience back to childhood memories with their families. Another key component to brand loyalty is that the brand creates a specific meaning for the audience (Smith & Hanover, 2016). This study's theme perspective illustrated this point by noting that through experiential communication participants felt connected to the brand. In fact, every participant stated that the experience either solidified or created a new connection for them with the Star Wars universe.

Thus, while wonder was the initial hook, perspective deepens the audience's connection with the brand. What is striking is that being put into the universe and assuming the perspective of a character created a connection regardless of the prior level of Star Wars fan. In many cases, it sparked a new interest or changed a negative perception. For example, one participant noted, "I'd say that like even though I've had a number of like negative emotions towards Star Wars as a

general brand recently, I thoroughly enjoyed that experience... It definitely made me have a better opinion of the brand” (Participant 9). It also showcased how this experience attached to a personal memory, which in turn created a deeper connection to the Star Wars universe. “I think it just solidified my existing connection because I'd always been interested in that world. And feeling like I was in that kind of just reminded me of all the past memories that I've had with Star Wars and with my dad and like watching the movies. So that was really cool. Definitely brought back a lot of memories of watching it” (Participant 13). As a result, the theme of perspective illustrates and emphasizes the importance of being put into the story for brand connection.

The immersion theme from the study was valuable because it illustrated universal storytelling. Participant 14 articulated that immersive experiences not only connect audiences to brand stories but allow those stories to become a part of a person’s own story. “Immersion and interaction are very important, I think without that it's just another story we're being told, but it becomes inner with immersion and interaction. It's entwined with your own story.” This quote is striking because it emphasizes how a brand can become a part of the audiences’ own personal story. This showcases that experiential communication can create a deep brand loyalty that transcends typical promotion.

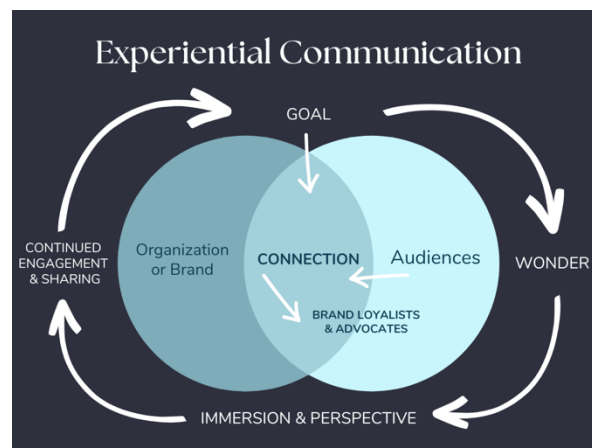
Finally, the further engagement and sharing theme was important because it illustrated a key result of experiential communication, that audiences should leave the experience inspired and excited to share the organization’s story on all their channels of communication. This desire to share was evident as all 15 participants said that they would engage in the Star Wars universe again as a result of their experience. In addition, nine of the participants specifically noted that they wanted to go watch the Star Wars movies, series, or go back to Galaxy’s Edge in Disney World or Disneyland after this virtual reality experience.

As shown through the themes of wonder, perspective, immersion, and further engagement and sharing, this study confirmed that experiential communication can create a strong brand connection between organizations and audiences. Experiential communication fosters active participation with a brand, establishes meaning between a brand and its audiences, creates new connections or transforms old ones, and inspires future brand connection.

Practical Application: The Experiential Communication Model

By nature, experiential communication is a visual and active process. Throughout this research, it became clear that a framework on the experiential communication process was both missing and necessary. As a result, a model of practice was developed to help communication professionals understand the key elements of experiential communication and guide them in the experiential communication process.

Figure 1: Experiential Communication Model



This experiential communication model showcases the essential elements for experiential communication. The model illustrates the organization or brand on the left side and the audience on the right side. Bridging the two in the middle is brand connection. Brand connection is the ultimate goal of experiential communication as it fosters a deep connection between the audience and the brand or organization. Surrounding the audience and organization are the essential

elements to creating or sustaining brand connection. These elements illustrate the experiential communication process.

The process begins with wonder. In order to create a brand connection, it is imperative that audiences' attentions are captured through the establishment of wonder. The participants in this research indicated the importance of wonder by using the word "cool" 63 times in the interviews. Further, this research showed that virtual reality can create this sense of wonder through its interactive technology and game-based format. The next step in the experiential communication process is immersion and perspective. To create brand connection, immersion into the story using all five senses is necessary. This immersion allows for perspective, or the ability of the audience to become the main character of the experience. The creation of immersion and perspective are key in establishing or solidifying a new connection with the brand. The importance of using the five senses in immersion is important as participants in this study noted how the use of multiple senses such as sight and sound heightened the immersive experience.

Once immersion and perspective have been achieved, continued engagement and sharing can occur. After the immersive experience of this study, all 15 participants expressed a desire to connect or revisit the brand in some way. As a result, at this stage of the experiential communication process, audiences move from a single point of brand connection to a desire to revisit, share, and learn more about the brand organization. When experiential communication is done well, it keeps audiences coming back, transforming audiences into brand loyalists or advocates. Brand loyalists and advocates are the ultimate goal of brand connection because these audiences have longevity with the brand. They engage with all aspects of the brand. They celebrate it, defend it, and encourage others to engage with it.

Looking to the future, the possibilities for the implementation of and research into experiential communication are numerous. This study's population consisted of a single generation. Future research could broaden this focus by using a more globally representative population to examine how diverse audiences connect with a brand. Further this research used a qualitative method in order to understand experiential communication and its process. Future research could investigate quantitatively to measure the widespread occurrence of brand connection through experiential communication. Finally, this study used interactive technology to create the immersive experience, limiting participants' usage of their senses to sight and sound. Future research could replicate the design of this study using a physical immersive environment to examine the impact of using multiple senses, such as sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, on the effectiveness of experiential communication.

In conclusion, experiential communication is the new era of storytelling and brand connection. Whether it be through the Moomins world or the Star Wars universe, the power of this type of communication is evident. Stories connect people across cultures and generations through universal human experiences. It is the root of connection, and without it, experiential communication would not flourish. This connection is showcased through the universal emotions and characteristics of the Moomins as well as the way that story, through experiential communication, connects people across cultures and in countries around the world. It is also seen in Star Wars through the Star Wars Celebrations that have been held globally and across generations. Through this study's Star Wars virtual reality examination, participants' personal relation to the story by assuming the role of a character also emphasized the power of immersive storytelling in experiential communication.

The study also proposed a revised definition of experiential communication and a model that explained the experiential communication process and its power to create deep brand connections amongst organizations and their audiences. Finally, this study revealed that experiential communication goes deeper than a single moment. Experiential communication connects with people on a personal level that allows brands to become personal to their audience and be part of their audience's ongoing story. This connection creates a brand loyalty that transforms audiences into brand ambassadors and lasting advocates.

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORMS:

**BELMONT UNIVERSITY
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

EXPERIENTIAL COMMUNICATION: THE WORLD OF BRAND CONNECTION AND IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

Principal Investigator: Chelsea Lomartire

Co-investigator: Christie Kleinmann, Professor of Public Relations

You are invited to participate in a research study about perspectives on experiential communication through connection with the Star Wars universe.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you agree to be part of this project, you will be asked to read the consent form provided to you, sign and date that you have read and understand the consent form, sign an audio recording release form, answer basic demographic questions, and truthfully participate in an in-depth interview. The interview will take place on Belmont's campus and will last 45 minutes. You'll be asked to **participate in a virtual reality Star Wars experience along with an in-depth interview asking about your experience and how you connect to the brand.** The primary benefit of this research is to help brands better understand their target audiences and how to best connect with them through immersive experiences.

Risks and discomforts are minimal for this research. Some participants might experience slight disorientation when first trying on the virtual reality headset and may be uncomfortable sharing in a one-on-one setting. This research will follow current Belmont Covid-19 protocol as necessary.

It is your choice whether or not to participate in this study. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time.

We will work hard to protect the confidentiality of your research records. While information collected may be shared among the researchers involved in this project, we will not share any information that could identify you with others outside of the research team. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

We will audio-record the interview. You will be assigned a participant number so your name will not appear on the written transcript of the meeting. Once a transcript of the interview has been generated, the researchers will verify the accuracy of the transcript and destroy the audio recording.

Transcripts and demographic data will be stored on a password-protected computer and destroyed after three years. No hard copies will be produced.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Principal Investigator, Chelsea Lomartire, chelsea.lomartire@belmont.edu | (615) 460-8115.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact David Gregory, PharmD, Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Excellence, (615) 460-6400 or david.gregory@belmont.edu.

Name of Participant (Please print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ **Date:** _____

**Belmont University Institutional Review Board
Release of Recordings**

Project Title: Experiential Communication: The World of Brand Connection and Immersive Experiences

Principal Investigator: Chelsea Lomartire
Associate Investigator(s): Christie Kleinmann

Use of audio and/or video recordings within the research protocol:

This focus group will be audio-recorded on password protected device. The audio recording will be associated with the given participant number.

Once the interview has ended, the audio recording will be transcribed through a password protected transcription software. The researchers will verify the accuracy of the written transcript and destroy the audio recording.

The researchers might use of direct quotes from the interview in their published study, but they will not identify you or include information that would allow your identity to be known.

The written transcripts will be stored for three years on a password-protected computer. After that time, they will be deleted. Your consent forms will not be keyed to your participant number, and they will be stored separately from your transcript. The two researchers will have access to the audio and transcript for the purpose of coding and analysis.

Statement from Participant:

I _____ freely consent to the use of the audio and/or video recording of my words and/or actions as described above in this study. I understand that the recordings may be used as described in presentations, research reports, and other formats, and I waive the right to inspect or approve use of this material as incorporated in the work. I acknowledge that investigators shall be under no obligation to use the recordings in the work.

I release investigators, sponsors and successors from any claims that may arise regarding the use of the recordings, including any claims of defamation, invasion of privacy, or infringement of moral rights, rights of publicity or copyright. I acknowledge that I have no ownership rights in the recordings or the research.

I have had an opportunity to ask any desired questions about the recordings and am in agreement with the answers provided. *I have been given a copy of this form for my records.*

Name: _____ Date: _____

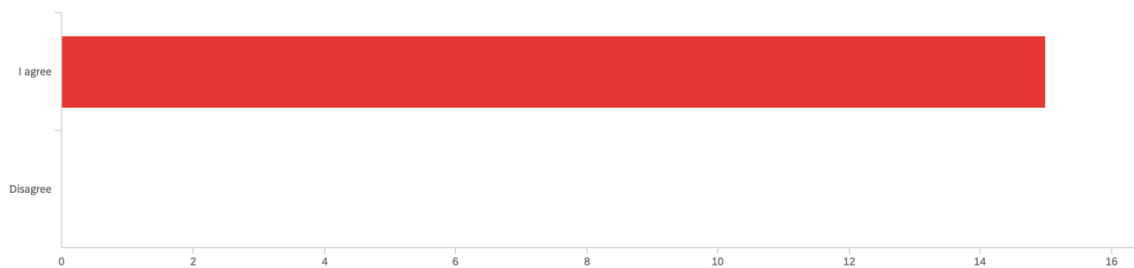
Signature: _____

Address: Creative Grounds, Belmont University

Appendix B

PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY:

Consent - Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you agree to take part in this study, please select "I agree". You may opt out at any point.



Ages:

20- 4 participants

19- 3 participants

22- 2 participants

21- 2 participants

24- 2 participants

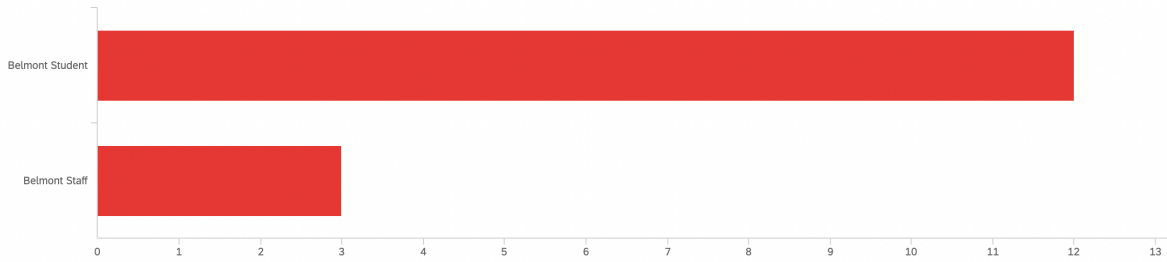
25- 1 participant

18- 1 participant

Belmont Student or Staff:

Q2 - Are you a Belmont student or staff member?

Page Options ▾



Gender Identity:

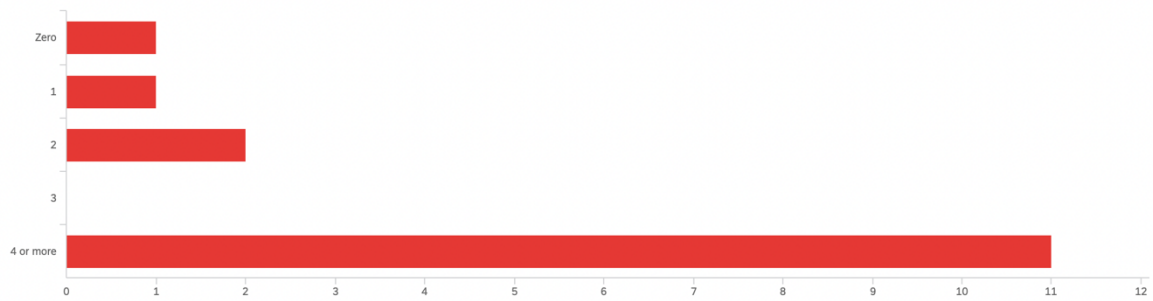
Female- 10 participants

Male- 5 participants

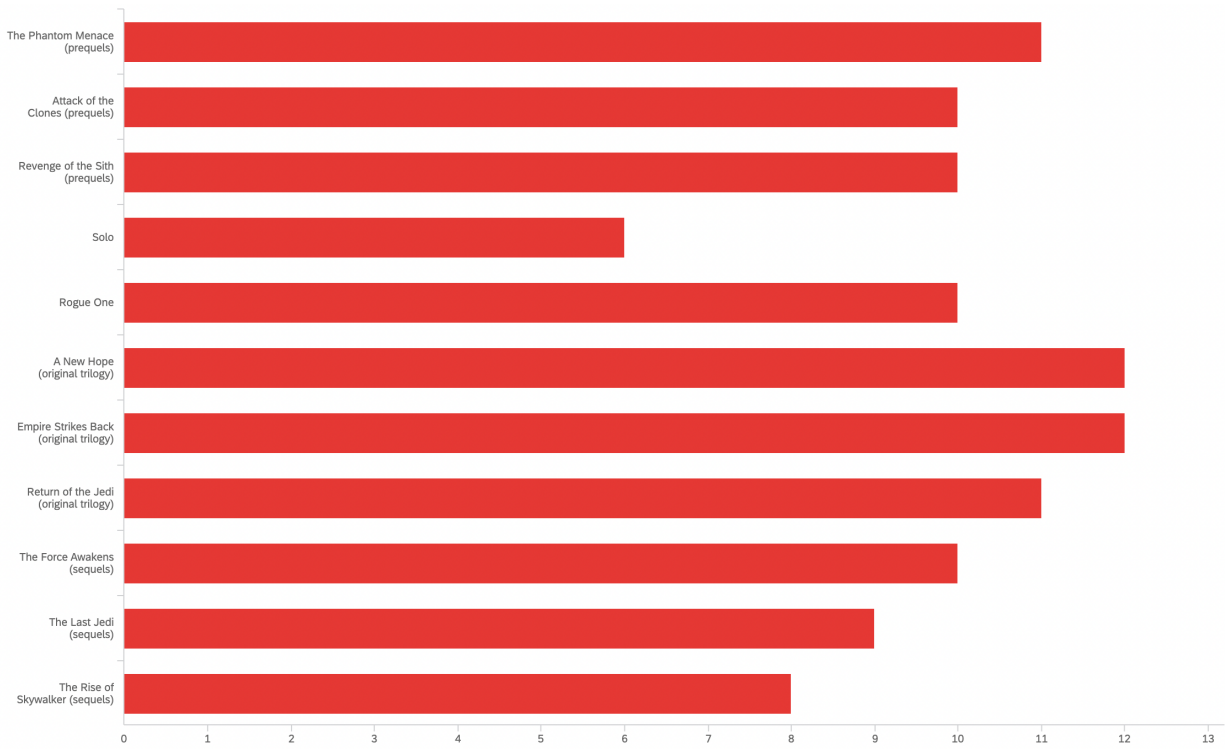
Star Wars Movies Watched:

Q4 - How many Star Wars movies have you watched?

Page Options ▾



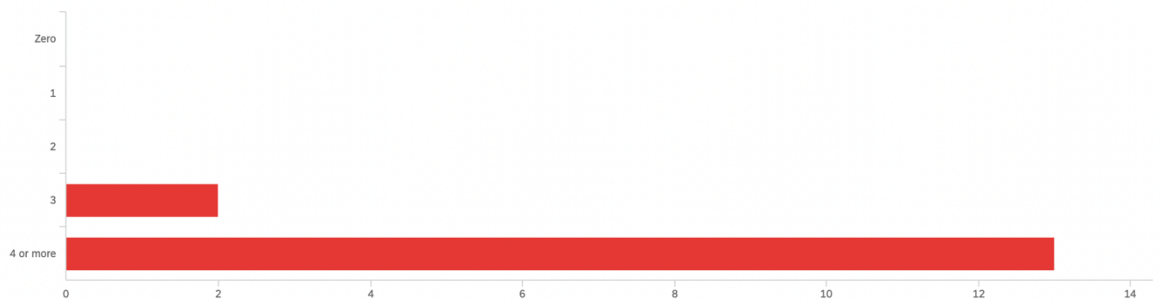
Star Wars Movies Watched:



Ability to Name Star Wars Characters:

Q6 - Without research how many Star Wars characters could you name?

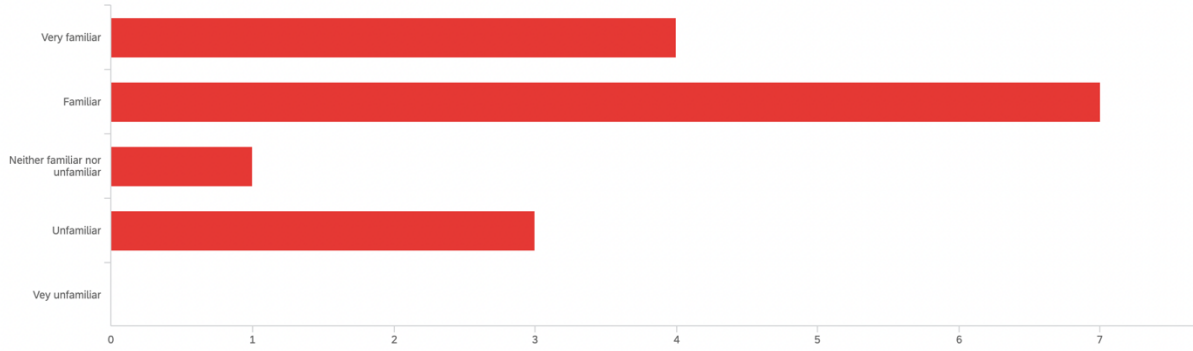
Page Options ▾



Familiarity with Star Wars:

Q7 - How would you rate your familiarity with the Star Wars universe?

Page Options ▾



Appendix C

INTERVIEW GUIDE:

*Assign Participant Number

-Tell me about your experience with Star Wars?

Identification with overall story (characters, themes, relationships)

What does your engagement look like (movies, series, themed lands, Star Wars celebration, books)

- Tell me about your virtual reality experience. Did the experience give you greater insight into the Star Wars story? How so?

-How did this experience make you feel toward the Star Wars brand?

-What are some of the ways this experience fostered a new connection with the Star Wars universe? How did it solidify existing connections?

- How important was immersion and interaction with the story to you? Do you feel closer to the Star Wars brand because of it? Why or why not?

-Did this experience make want to learn more or tell others about Star Wars? If so, how?

-Is there anything else you would like to add?