” Mimesis can be both 'fake' and effective (and therefore in some sense 'real')" (Newell 2012: 32). Do you agree? Show what the implications are of this argument for studies of consumption with reference to examples.

Mimesis is a concept inherited from philosophy that refers to the imitation of reality in human behavior. Newell’s claim that “mimesis can be both fake and effective” (Newell, 2012, 32) highlights the fundamental paradox that a representation can be artificial, constructed, or idealized, yet still generate tangible outcomes. In consumption, this idea is for instance reflected in the way that advertisements, influencers, and brands create models or images that shape consumer choices, even when these representations do not faithfully reflect reality. This can be linked to René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire (Deceit, desire and the novel, 1961), where imitation is the structure of both desire and behavior. Girard argues that desire is triangular, involving a subject, a model, and an object, individuals come to desire objects only through observing and imitating the desires of others. Building on this, mimetic theories argue that imitation generates broader social effects, that shape affiliation, identity, and collective behavior (Dignath, 2020; Genschow, 2018). As Nidesh Lawtoo (2022) suggests, not only desires but also their consequences are mimetically produced. This raises the central question, if mimetic practices are rooted in imitation and perceived as «false», how do they nevertheless produce tangible, or «real» results in social and economic life? This essay explores this question and the implications of Newell’s argument for studies of consumption through two examples, pattern trends in fashion, and the GameStop short squeeze in financial markets (2021), both which show how mimetic desire (Girard, Deceit, desire and the novel, 1961), despite being artificial, generates consequences that are effectively material. First I will explore how fashion trends function as mimetic cascades, using the example of pattern trends on TikTok to show how constructed, anticipatory desire produces real consequences in consumer behavior and market dynamics. Then I will explore financial markets, where the GameStop short squeeze demonstrates how collective imitation can sustain a fake valuation long enough that there are real financial consequences. Finally, I will consider what these two cases together imply for consumption studies, arguing that the fake and the real are completely intertwined, and that mimetic dynamics must be placed at the center of how we understand desire, and consumer behavior.

Fashion represents one of the most visible domains in which mimesis operates, particularly with the rise of social media and the acceleration of trend cycles. Drawing on Georg Simmel’s theory of imitation and differentiation (Simmel, Fashion, 1904, 130-155), fashion trends can be understood as mimetic cascades, meaning that desires are collectively borrowed rather than individually originated, therefore “fake” in Newell’s sense. However, as presented underneath these constructed desires produce real consequences in consumer behavior. In 1904, Simmel argued that fashion operates through a dual logic of imitation and differentiation. Individuals imitate those they perceive as above them socially in order to signal belonging and cultural capital, while distancing themselves from those “below” (Simmel, Fashion, 1904, 135), and the result is a constant cycle of adoption and abandonment. According to him, fashion is therefore not about the specific value of a garment or pattern, but is about the social meaning generated through collective imitation. In other words, no one independently decides what garment is desirable, the desirability is produced through the observation that others desire it or are going to desire it. This is also mimetic desire in Girard’s triangular sense, the model mediates the object, and the subject imitates the model, and the object itself is almost insignificant, what is being consumed is the social position that mimetic participation confers.

What social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram have done is dramatically accelerate this dynamic and an example is the phenomenon of pattern trends in fashion. On social media (mostly TikTok), patterns such as polka dots, strips, and animal prints serve as markers of yearly or even monthly trends and users share their outfits to signal their awareness of what is currently fashionable. The influencer or early adopter functions as the model, the pattern is the object, and followers are subjects imitating the model. However, what makes this example particularly interesting and relevant to mimesis, is the predictive dimension. On TikTok, a significant amount of content is dedicated not to imitating the existing trends but to forecasting future ones, like which pattern will trend next season. This anticipatory mimesis reveals that desire is being generated before the object has even become desirable. The fake, which is the predicted trend, produces the real desire that then makes it an actual trend, and the forecast then becomes self-fulfilling. This maps directly onto Newell’s argument. The trend image circulating on TikTok is fake in the sense that it is entirely constructed, no pattern is inherently fashionable and the desirability attributed to it has no foundation outside of the mimetic dynamic itself. Yet the consequences are effective, brands produce collections around these signals, fast fashion brands such as Zara or H&M respond to these mimetic signals by producing pattern-specific collections within weeks, sometimes days and consumers purchase these items in large volumes. The pattern becomes a genuine market phenomenon that generates real revenue. As Lawtoo argues, the consequences of mimesis are themselves mimetically produced, the real effects “flow directly from the fake image” (Lawtoo, Homo Mimeticus, 2022. 350).

This has significant implications for how consumption is studied because if desire in fashion is structurally mimetic, then consumer behavior cannot be adequately explained by models that assume individual preference or rational choice, as the consumer buys only through the lens of what is considered desirable by others. This also reframes how we think about marketing. As Luke Burgis notes in his analysis of mimetic desire and branding (How mimetic desire impact consumer psychology and branding, 2025), “brands that understand the mimetic structure of desire do not sell products, they sell models”. The influencer is not endorsing a garment, she is functioning as a Girardian model that generates desire in her followers through the triangular structure. The product is almost secondary because what the consumer is truly purchasing is proximity to the model and participation in the mimetic community she represents. The phenomenon of fast fashion is a further consequence of this mimetic acceleration. Because trend cycles are now driven by social media rather than reasonable choices for clothing, the place of mimetic cascades has increased dramatically, and microtrends, which are hyper-specific aesthetic moments, often tied to a particular pattern, color, or garment, that emerge, spread and then abandoned all within weeks. This produces "real" environmental and economic burdens, including overproduction, waste, and the devaluation of clothing as soon as the mimetic moment passes. The "fake" quality of the trend, which is its purely social construction, is precisely what makes it so volatile and therefore so damaging in the real effects. Newell's paradox is here expressed in material terms, the more artificial the basis of desire, the more powerful and unstable its real consequences.

Financial markets are another domain in which Newell's dynamic plays out clearly. Classical economic models, particularly the Efficient Market Hypothesis (Fama E.F, Efficient Capital Markets, 1970, 383-417), assume that prices reflect the underlying value of assets and that the investors make decisions based on rational assessment of that value. However, mimetic theory challenges this, arguing that investors do not simply make independent decisions, but instead imitate each other, which creates collective movements that push market prices away from their real value. This means that fake perceptions, like a stock price driven purely by collective excitement rather than real value, can produce real financial gains and losses. One example of this dynamic is the GameStop short squeeze of January 2021. GameStop is a physical video game retailer that had been identified by institutional investors as a declining business, and large short positions had been taken against its stock, as well as bets that its price would fall. However, in early 2021, users of the Reddit community r/WallStreetBets started buying GameStop shares en masse, which sent the price up dramatically. As it kept rising, institutional short sellers had no choice but to buy shares to cover their losses, which pushed the price up even further. The stock rose from around four dollars at the start of 2020 to a peak of approximately 483 dollars in January 2021, before collapsing (EBSCO Research Starters, 2023). What made the GameStop event so sticking was not just the scale, but how visible and self-conscious the mimetic process was. Unlike most market movements where imitation operates quietly for the most part, r/WallStreetBets users were openly coordinating, sharing what they were buying, and collectively deciding to push to price up together. What they were doing was essentially mimetic as participants shared information about what others were buying, and then coordinated their actions, which generated a collective momentum that had no basis in GameStop's fundamental value as a business (Tomelleri, Mimesis and Social Interactions, 2021). The desire to purchase GameStop stock was not produced by an assessment of the company's prospect but by the observation that others were purchasing it, and by the anticipation that further imitation would drive the price higher. This is Girard's triangular desire playing out in a financial context, the community of buyers become the model, and the stock becomes the object everyone suddenly wants, and the subject imitates the model's desire, again not because of what the object is actually worth, but because of what everyone else seem to be doing.

This is clearly fake in Newell's sense, as the price of GameStop stock during the squeeze had no real connection with the company's actual value. The worth of the stock was entirely constructed through collective imitation and the expectation that others would keep buying, which is exactly what Newell means by fake. Yet the consequences were entirely real as the investors who bought early made substantial financial gains and institutional short sellers suffered losses estimated in the billions, until the entire system eventually collapsed. The event resulted in regulatory scrutiny, congressional hearings, and significant changes in how retail investment platforms operate (Dziak, Mark, 2024). What the GameStop event shows is that mimetic dynamics can sustain fake valuations long enough to produce real consequences that cannot be undone. This connects to the concept of herd mentality in behavioral economics (A. Banerjee, 1992, 803), which describes the tendency of investors to imitate the behavior of the majority rather than acting on independent analysis. But mimetic theory goes further than this, it is not simply that investors are irrational or poorly informed, it is that financial desire, just like fashion desire, is mimetic at its core. Value in financial markets is always partly a social construction, built on what everyone else seems to think is valuable (Shiller, Irrational Exuberance, 2000).

In both cases, mimetic desire operates through constructed images and signals that have no specific basis in anything real. The TikTok pattern trend has no inherent value, and the GameStop stock price had no real connection to the company's actual business. Yet, these fake constructions generated consequences that were real and impossible to undo once they had occurred, like people buying clothes they don't need, market moving billions of dollars, or wealth being redistributed between small investors and hedge funds. What this suggests is that the fake and the real do not simply follow one another, but are bound together, and that the real consequences grow directly out of the fake construction, not after it disappears. One of the most obvious implications for how we study consumption is that models based on individual rational choice are not accurate and do not capture what is actually happening. As we saw above, whether it is in fashion or in financial markets, consumers and investors make their decisions by imitating others, and by anticipating what others will do next. Therefore, studying individual consumers in isolation misses the point entirely, and what needs to be studied instead are the mimetic processes themselves, how imitation spreads and how anticipating what others will do ends up making it happen anyway. The second implication is about the relationship between representation and reality. Newell's argument pushes back against the idea that fake representations are just distortions of something real that exists independently. In both fashion and financial markets, the fake representation is what actually creates the reality. This changes how we should think about advertising, branding, and market valuation. All of these work mimetically, and their power comes not despite the fact that they are constructed and artificial, but because of it. The fake is not a problem to be corrected or avoided, it is the mechanism itself. This also means rethinking the role of platforms and media in consumption. TikTok and Reddit didn't create the mimetic desire, but they made it faster, more visible and more self-reinforcing than it was before. When a trend forecast gets ten million views, the prediction itself becomes part of the mimetic cascade, and when thousands of investors publicly share what they are buying in real time, imitation becomes the explicit logic of the whole system. Any study of contemporary consumption that ignores this system of imitation misses how desire and value are actually produced today. What this means for marketing, is that the most successful brands are not those that tell the best stories about their products, but those that create the most compelling models to imitate. Value is not built into the object, but comes from the imitative relationship between the consumer and the model, and sustained only as long as that relationship holds.

In conclusion, Newell's argument that mimesis can be both fake and effective is less of a paradox than it first appears. Once we understand that desire is never truly individual or spontaneous but always mediated through imitation, the idea that a fake construction can produce real consequences starts making sense. The two examples explored in this essay, pattern trends in fashion and the GameStop short squeeze, are different but they still share the same underlying logic: collective imitation generates a reality that none of the individual participants created by themselves, and that reality cannot be undone, simply because its origins were artificial. What this means for consumption studies is that value is not something objects simply have and consumer can just recognize. It is something that mimetic processes produce, and it is always unstable because it depends entirely on everyone continuing to believe in it together. This is why trends die out, and why stock prices built on mimetic momentum eventually crash back down. Perhaps the most uncomfortable implication of Newell's argument is that there is no clean alternative to any of this. Consumption is mimetic at its core, and Girard would argue that even those who refuse to follow trends are still defined by the models they reject. The idea of a consumer making genuinely independent choices based on real value is itself something of a fiction.

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