Magic or Manipulation: AI and Deepfakes in the New Age of Disney

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Executive Summary

Planning in media and technology, the Walt Disney Company is going through a rapidly evolving period. Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and deepfakes are becoming more accessible and easy to use, showing up in film, television, and advertising. AI tools may assist studios to produce new images, alter the age of an actor, or even bring back characters that people adored in new forms. Meanwhile, they pose tough questions on ethics, honesty, and trust. In the case of Disney, an emotional, nostalgic, and family story-oriented brand, the usage of deepfakes is of particular importance. Information about the perception of the audiences concerning these tools can inform the choices made by Disney, as well as protect its reputation in the long term.

This study aims to comprehend the responses of audiences regarding the application of AI and deepfakes in the stories and advertisements made by Disney. The respondent of an online survey was questioned concerning their awareness of deepfakes, level of comfort with AI-induced content, and the impact of this content on their trust in Disney. There were also open-ended questions used in the survey, and this enabled individuals to add their own opinions and concerns in greater detail. To supplement the survey's results, additional secondary resources, such as previously developed studies on synthetic media and Disney as a brand, were analyzed.

The findings demonstrated significant trends. Most respondents were young adults, and reactions toward deepfakes were, in most cases, flat or disconnected. Despite Disney having a reputation for intense emotional plotlines, when questioned about AI or deepfake usage, most respondents said that they felt either neutral or that their concern about the subject was minimal. This can indicate an increased credibility to AI, a lack of competency, or survey misreadings in the way that the questions were formulated. It turned out, however, that when given room to elaborate on themselves, some respondents raised more complex and deeper issues.

There were two themes that were distinguished: authenticity and transparency. A few of the respondents referred to deepfakes as shortcuts that are dishonest to Disney or make it seem less genuine. They were concerned that the overuse of AI would erode the "magic" that individuals anticipate about Disney films and characters. It was said that in the case of Disney, it ought to use AI or deepfakes, particularly the old characters or dead actors, and it should be transparent and public. The use of deepfakes without disclosure was viewed as deceptive, and some of the respondents thought that it would hurt their trust in the company.

Another common finding amongst respondents was the raising of ethical concerns. Respondents passionately believe that the face or voice of an actor must not be reproduced without explicit permission. They too feared that deepfakes, when applied haphazardly, would overstep the boundaries into the field of manipulation or misrepresentation, regardless of how eye-catching the end product appears on screen. The conflict between technical and moral responsibility was a common theme in the feedback.

Employment in the creative sector was another big issue. Some of the most common answers were that people were afraid of AI taking the jobs of human workers, including actors,

animators, writers, and other artists. They associated this concern with more general discussions of automation, labor, and the future of the creative professions. To them, Disney needs to take responsibility for safeguarding human innovation, not for pursuing efficiency or even reducing costs.

Despite these concerns, the research was unable to suggest a complete dismissal of AI. Whenever deepfakes were used to fulfill limited and technical purposes, participants were more receptive to their application. There were cases of de-aging an actor, correcting some flaws in the image, or enhancing the quality of sound and background. Other respondents also observed that AI may assist in the process of localization, streamlining the process of integrating Disney's content into various languages and cultures. In such situations, they perceived AI as a helpful aid to help stories reach their full potential.

Overall, the results are indicative of a conditional acceptance. In this sample, respondents do not completely fear AI, although they outline strict delimitations for its use. They feel happier when deepfakes are subtler in application, actor consent is respected, and when Disney is transparent about its application. If these conditions are not met, they worry about losing touch with reality and the emotional attachment they tie to the Disney name.

These findings generate a valuable lesson for Disney and related businesses. In disclosing the existence of an AI or deepfake tool, which may significantly contribute to its content and streamline workflows, Disney should invest in making its brand trustworthy. It must also create and adhere to explicit guidelines regarding ethics, consent, how to handle legacy characters, and the boundaries of digital re-creation. The concept of AI as an assistant tool used to polish and enhance may prove more successful than replicating human performances altogether.

Lastly, the research indicates existing gaps that future research should address. The sample was primarily young adults, and thus it might not represent the opinion of parents, children, and other older fans who have decades of sentimental attachment to Disney. Future studies on wider age groups and cultures may indicate additional insights regarding audience concerns when it comes to the use of deepfakes, AI in entertainment, and Disney's own AI usage. Through further listening and adjusting, Disney can apply AI in a manner that provides value to its fundamental claim of meaningful, human-first storytelling.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gauge the response of Disney's target audience to the application of artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies by the Walt Disney Company in the process of narrative, advertisement, and other media activities. Depending on the context of applying deepfakes in entertainment, it should be known what impact these devices will have on the viewers ' trust, emotional involvement, and perception of what is real. Disney has developed its brand based on emotional narratives, nostalgia, and a family-friendly experience. Through this, alterations in content creation might influence the perception of values and integrity of the company.

Some of the associated objectives were targeted in this project. First, it sought to understand the reaction of people toward AI-modified characters, or AI-created characters, in relation to Disney. Secondly, it aimed at determining the perceived primary advantages and disadvantages of using deepfakes to audiences. Third, it considered the familiarity levels of people with deepfake technology and how familiarity affects the comfort level of people with the technology. Lastly, it inquired of the audience what they expect of Disney in terms of transparency, consent, and ethical boundaries when it comes to AI usage.

Research Questions

This study explored several research questions and hypotheses related to audience perceptions of deepfakes and AI in Disney storytelling and advertising. The following research questions guided the investigation:

RQ1: How familiar are audiences with deepfake technology, and how accurately can they identify a deepfake when shown an example?

RQ2: What are audience reactions—positive, negative, or neutral—to the use of AI and deepfakes in Disney-related media?

RQ3: To what extent do audiences feel that Disney should disclose the use of AI or deepfake technology, especially when it involves legacy characters, iconic roles, or deceased actors?

RQ4: How do audiences perceive the ethical boundaries of deepfake use, particularly regarding consent, authenticity, and potential manipulation?

RQ5: How does the use of AI and deepfakes influence audience trust in Disney's brand and its reputation for authentic, emotionally resonant storytelling?

RQ6: Are audience attitudes toward deepfake use influenced by age, personal familiarity with Disney content, or prior exposure to AI-generated media?

Hypotheses

Based on secondary research and industry context, the study examined the following hypotheses:

H1: Increased use of AI and deepfakes in media production provides creative and operational benefits, making the technology more prevalent in entertainment companies such as Disney.

H2: When used without transparency, deepfakes trigger negative audience responses, including concerns about authenticity, manipulation, and ethical misconduct.

H3: Consumers are more accepting of deepfake use when employed for minor visual enhancements (e.g., de-aging or background refinement) rather than full character replacement.

H4: Audiences expect Disney to disclose any use of AI or synthetic media, and lack of transparency will reduce trust in the brand.

H5: Younger audiences may show lower emotional engagement or concern regarding AI and deepfakes compared to older or family-oriented viewers, reflecting generational differences in media literacy and technological desensitization.

Method

The primary method of research was an online survey that was developed and sent out to participants via text, email, and social media. The survey remained open for one week and took about eight minutes to complete. The questionnaire provided an efficient means of collecting quantitative and qualitative data while featuring an array of Likert scale, semantic differential, ratio, and open-ended question formats.

The purpose of this survey was to determine how AI usage impacts the perception of Disney as a very human-centric, storytelling-first brand among its target audiences. Disney's brand perception was analyzed through the lens of AI usage because of AI's general societal perception as being devoid of creativity. As this perception directly contradicts Disney's heavily established brand identity as an inter-generational, creative storyteller, this study aimed to seek consumer opinions on whether this implementation truly tainted Disney's brand identity. At the beginning of the survey, participants were provided with a definition of deepfakes to establish a baseline level of competency for all respondents. The survey then continued by gauging respondents' familiarity with the Disney brand through asking how often they consume its content. Once those foundational questions were asked, the survey provided an example of a deepfake used by Disney and asked respondents to identify the deepfake in a side-by-side comparison with the unaltered actor. The questions that followed addressed ethical considerations on AI, the impact of AI usage on brand trust in Disney, perceptions of AI use in Disney advertisements, and general thoughts on AI usage in content. These questions all helped provide a holistic view of what consumer understanding of AI currently looks like, what their comfort level is with deepfake technology, and how it would influence their feelings regarding the Disney brand, knowing it is actively being used in Disney content. The target population consisted of U.S. adults aged 18-34 who regularly consume Disney content, and a convenience sampling approach was used to recruit 46 participants for this exploratory study. Out of 46 total respondents, the age range was 18-34, with half being 18-24 and the other half being 25-34. There were slightly more female-identifying respondents than male, making up 57% (26) of the total respondent pool. As far as education, 73% (34) of respondents held a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Overall, the variables selected for this study aligned with four key dimensions. The cognitive dimension measured participants' knowledge and awareness of AI and deepfakes. The affective dimension captured their attitudes towards AI, including perceptions of trust and authenticity. The evaluative dimension assessed respondents' ethical judgments related to AI usage, particularly concerning likeness replication. Finally, the behavioral dimension measured participants' future intentions, levels of support, and likelihood of engaging with AI-generated Disney content.

In sum, the survey design, sampling strategy, and data collection procedures were intentionally structured to capture a comprehensive understanding of how audiences perceive Disney's use of AI and deepfake technologies. By combining quantitative measures with

open-ended qualitative insights, the study was able to evaluate not only participants' awareness and attitudes, but also their ethical judgements and potential behavioral responses. This mixed-methods approach ensured that each construct was examined in relation to the study's broader objective: assessing whether AI integration enhances or undermines Disney's longstanding identity as a trusted, human-centered storyteller. The methodological framework established here provides a strong foundation for interpreting the findings and identifying meaningful patterns in consumer perceptions.

Findings

This section will address the primary research prompt given to survey participants. Next, it will cover survey responses, identifying trends and consumer insights based on the cross-tabulation analysis of variables such as age and responses to key questions. Finally, recommendations will be made as to how Disney can address sustainable AI use that does not effectively tarnish its brand legacy.

The research prompt of this study was to understand consumer sentiment surrounding the use of AI and deepfakes and how the Walt Disney Company's use of it influences their perception of the brand.

The first key finding identified in the results was a correlation between apathy and a lack of AI competence. In a semantic-differential scale question asking participants to select how the use of AI in advertising makes them feel (Q34), the mean brand attitude score was 2 (neutral), revealing a trend of apathy in regard to AI usage. In this question, 82% (37) of respondents reported a low familiarity with deepfakes and their ability to detect AI-generated content. To address the correlation between apathy and competency, another question asking respondents to select their familiarity with deepfakes, AI, and their ability to detect AI usage received a mean score of 2.1 (mostly unfamiliar) among respondents who scored 1-3 on Q34. Based on these findings, low audience familiarity creates an apathetic brand attitude. A key insight to consider in relation to this result is that this is reflective of a high level of education and spans Gen Z and millennial generations. This insight could be indicative of the fact that these generations are slightly removed from the nostalgia of Disney's classic image and are more familiar with Disney's more updated style and feel, mitigating the strong emotional ties that an older generation with more nostalgia for the brand might have.

Despite the quantitative data pointing to a lack of apathy, the qualitative data presented a more emotional response when asking respondents what they think of Disney using AI or deepfake technology. Some of the responses included: *putting talented people out of jobs*; *lazy, anti-art, lack of environmental awareness, cheap, and underhanded*; *disappointment*; *the product feels very detached at this point with the implementation of these technologies, making it harder to connect with whatever they are trying to sell you on*. The disparity between the emotional responses of the semantic-differential question (Q34) and the survey's concluding open-ended questions could be attributed to survey fatigue and the ease of being able to select a neutral answer. Further, to elicit more emotionally charged responses, more image-based questions could have been provided to visually establish the consumer's emotional connection with the brand.

The second key finding was between feeling deceived and the accompanying loss of trust that follows. In Q35 of the survey, respondents were asked for their agreeability on a Likert scale to the following statement: "If Disney used AI without disclosing it, I would feel deceived." The results of this statement were that 78% (35) of respondents selected that they either somewhat agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed that they would feel deceived by nondisclosure. To gauge feelings of consumer trust, Q5 of the survey asked respondents in another Likert scale

agreeability format to state their agreement with the following statement: “If I discovered AI was used without disclosure, my trust in Disney would decrease.” This statement received high agreeability, with 83% (38) either somewhat agreeing, agreeing, or strongly agreeing.

On the qualitative side, this survey asked respondents in an open-ended question about what conditions would make them fully comfortable with AI-generated advertising. The responses given here also mirrored the sentiments provided from the quantitative data, with 30% (6 of 20) of respondents voicing their advocacy for clear AI use disclosure. Participants voiced their thoughts, such as: *nothing really would make me fully comfortable, as I think companies should utilize artists. I feel more comfortable with disclosure and minimal use, I guess; disclosure of AI Use on people tbh; if it was disclosed that is was AI; clearly disclosed and no employees suffer from wage loss or downsizing because of it.* Therefore, AI disclosure is imperative when protecting Disney’s brand trust among young adult consumers. The 18-34 age demographic is a generation that places a lot of emphasis on holding brands accountable. Bearing this in mind, along with the supporting survey data, it is clear that this bracket of Disney’s target audience values transparency in their favorite brands. Being upfront about AI usage and disclosure can ensure the longevity of Disney’s trust among consumers and minimize feelings of deception commonly associated with AI.

The third, and final, key finding was a correlation between age and ethical concern regarding AI. Among the 23 respondents in the 18-24 age group, 55% (12) of respondents strongly agreed that AI disclosure is necessary, with 40% (9) strongly agreeing that the use of AI to revive deceased actors is problematic. These numbers went up considerably in the 25-34 age group, with 68% (15) strongly agreeing with AI disclosure being necessary and 55% (12) strongly agreeing that the use of AI to revive deceased actors is problematic. Based on this trend, it is forecasted that as age increases, so too will the audience’s ethical concerns for AI usage. This claim is fully supported by the qualitative data, as only seven individuals in the 18-24 age group provided a response to the open-ended question regarding their comfort level with AI usage in advertising. Of those seven respondents, 43% (3) strongly advocated for AI disclosure. The low response rate to this question either reflects a lack of apathy within the age group or survey fatigue. Within the 25-34 age group, however, 13 individuals responded to this question, with 47% (6) of respondents citing ethical concerns when asked what would make them more comfortable with AI usage in advertising: *ethical use, not too much use, just enough to make the end product more engaging but no less human; my major concerns are around deception, using likenesses they legally cannot, excessive energy usage for subpar products, and the removal of the human element.* This finding revealed the importance of ensuring clear AI disclosure on Disney advertisements, specifically those targeting older audiences, to combat the potential for brand distrust to manifest.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings have demonstrated an overall need for disclosure and dissatisfaction with a dependence on deepfakes, especially when they replace human performances. Authenticity and human storytelling take precedence over technology, especially when Disney has established its reputation upon these exact values. While the respondent sentiment around the incorporation of these tools was generally negative, especially as it pertained to Disney's current practices, the use of AI and deepfakes in Disney's media is not impossible.

Within the responses was a consistent and repeated demand for disclosure and transparency when using AI or deepfake technology. Disney has historically been a company that promotes values like creativity, honesty, and the human experience. When AI and deepfakes are used in ways that replace humans, audiences may feel betrayed. When AI or deepfake tools are used without clear disclosure, that sense of betrayal becomes even more pronounced. Audiences may feel that the authenticity they associate with Disney's stories and performers has been compromised. Lack of transparency is seen as technology quietly replacing authentic performance and storytelling, which conflicts with the values of honesty and creativity promoted by the company. Thus, Disney should highlight the benefits of AI and deepfake tools used during the creative process to help audiences understand how these technologies enhance storytelling, rather than replace it. By being transparent in how these technologies are used, Disney can increase its audience's AI competency and remove skepticism about the use of AI and deepfakes during production.

Participants were also uncomfortable with the use of AI and deepfakes in critical ways during production. A reliance on this technology, such as the complete replacement of an actor or the use of deepfakes as a main character, was seen as "creatively bankrupt" and "lazy." Overusage of these tools and prioritization of using these technologies suggest to audiences that the end product and profit hold the most influence within Disney, undermining the creative process and passion that is contributed by creators and artists. Rather than developing a dependence on these tools, Disney should use them in minor, practical ways, such as touch-ups and de-aging. This preserves the human touch of the company's work while reassuring audiences that these technologies work as a supplement to human creators.

Another matter of AI and deepfake technology revolves around respecting the legacy and work of actors who are affected or altered by these tools. When actors, particularly deceased individuals, are brought "back to life" through deepfakes, it is critical to deliver an end product that both respects the original actor's performance without replacing it entirely. In addition, the final product shown to audiences must be of high quality to avoid any negative reactions. A low-quality end product will appear disrespectful to the original actor and could trigger phenomena, such as the uncanny valley effect, for viewers. Therefore, disclosure of consent from appropriate parties should be acquired and shared with audiences, especially in the case of deceased actors who are unable to provide their own context, rationale, or opinions.

Limitations

A limitation of this survey was that the respondents were not randomly selected. Rather, a group of respondents was chosen based on their proximity and accessibility to our team members. This means the survey participants were mainly USC students and extended family or friends of the survey's developers.

Within the responses were signs of low emotional activation with the media examples used. These examples were not very effective in triggering an emotional response from the participants. In future studies, media should be selected that is moving enough to invest audiences to a greater extent. This would give better insight into the influence that AI and deepfakes have on a consumer. Additionally, the reasons behind why participants reacted indifferently to the survey examples were not recorded. This would have provided insight into what could have been done differently.

Appendix

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Consent

We are interested in understanding consumer perception and sentiment around the use of AI and deepfake technology in media, specifically using examples from the Walt Disney Company. In this study, you will be shown advertisements and deepfake examples used by Disney. After reviewing the advertisement, you will be asked to tell us your response to it. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years old and live in the U.S. Participation is voluntary and will take 8 minutes or less. There are no known risks to participating in this research study.

Please read all questions carefully and thoroughly. There are no right or wrong answers – please respond as honestly as possible. Also, it is most important that you take this ENTIRE survey completely and without taking a break. If you have questions about your rights as a study

participant, or any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, University of Southern California Institutional Review Board, Los Angeles, CA, 90039, (323) 442-0114.

Your identity and participation will remain confidential and your individual privacy will be maintained in any or all published and written work resulting from this study.

By clicking "Yes" below, you indicate that you have read this consent form and your questions about your participation in this study have been answered. Also, by clicking “yes,” you also indicate that you are 18 years of age or older.

- ○ Yes, I consent to participate in this study.
- ○ No, I do not consent to participate in this study.

Deepfake Background

What is a deepfake?

Deepfakes are synthetic media created using artificial

intelligence to manipulate or generate realistic human appearances, voices, or movements. Essentially, deepfakes use AI to superimpose existing images and audio onto source material, making it appear as though someone said or did something they never actually did.

Media Exposure

How often do you watch or engage with Disney content (films, shows, or ads)?

- ○ Daily
- ○ A few times a week
- ○ A few times a month
- ○ Never

Approximately how many Disney advertisements have you seen in the past month?

Awareness & Competence

The following questions will gauge your awareness and familiarity of AI-generated content.

	Not familiar at all	2	3	Neutral	5	6	Strongly agree
How familiar are you with the concept of deepfakes?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
How familiar are you with AI-generated advertising technologies?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
How confident are you that you can detect when media content has been altered or AI-generated?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

A recent usage of deepfake was featured in *The Mandalorian*, with the Luke Skywalker cameo. One of these is a deepfake, and the other is the original footage. Please select the panel you think is the deepfake.

- Left
- Right

Perceptions of AI in Disney Advertising

The following statements will guage your perception of AI in Disney Advertising

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I think Disney's use of AI helps it stay competitive.	○	○	○	○	○
Companies that use AI appear more future-oriented.	○	○	○	○	○
Avoiding AI would make Disney seem outdated.	○	○	○	○	○
AI makes advertisements more creative and visually appealing.	○	○	○	○	○

AI enhances storytelling potential in Disney ads.	○	○	○	○	○
AI use increases my engagement with ads.	○	○	○	○	○
I am comfortable with AI being used for minor visual effects or background elements.	○	○	○	○	○
I am comfortable with AI being used for minor visual effects or background elements.	○	○	○	○	○
I am comfortable with AI recreating fictional characters.	○	○	○	○	○
I am comfortable with AI recreating real actors (living or deceased).	○	○	○	○	○
AI-generated content should always be clearly labeled.	○	○	○	○	○
If Disney used AI without disclosing it, I would feel deceived.	○	○	○	○	○

I am more likely to support a brand that uses AI ethically and transparently.	○	○	○	○	○

Brand Trust and Authenticity

The following statements relate to your brand trust regarding Disney. Rate your opinions on the following statements based on how much you agree:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	N
I trust Disney to use AI responsibly in its advertisements.	○	○	○	
Knowing that AI was involved makes Disney ads feel less authentic.	○	○	○	
If I discovered AI was used without disclosure, my trust in Disney would decrease.	○	○	○	

The following statements relate to ethical considerations regarding Disney. Rate your opinions on the following statements based on how much you agree:

	N
	a

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	dis
Replicating an actor's likeness without their consent is unethical.	○	○	○	
Using AI to recreate deceased actors is more problematic than using it for fictional characters.	○	○	○	
Ethical AI usage increases my willingness to support a brand.	○	○	○	

Brand Attitude

Mark one point between each pair that best matches your perception of Disney's AI advertising.

Harmful	○	○	○	Helpful
Inauthentic	○	○	○	Authentic
Untrustworthy	○	○	○	Trustworthy
Outdated	○	○	○	Innovative
Disengaging	○	○	○	Engaging

Section G

What comes to mind when you think of Disney using AI or

deepfake technology in its advertisements?

How much AI use in advertisements do you consider acceptable before it feels “too much”?

(Optional) What conditions would make you fully comfortable with AI-generated advertising?

Demographics

What is your age?

- ○ 18-24
- ○ 25-34

- 35-44
- 45+

What is your highest level of education?

- Some high school or less
- High school diploma
- Some college/Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral/Professional degree

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-identify