

**What Players See, What Brands Gain**  
A Visual Semiotic Study of Engagement in *Infinity Nikki*

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## ABSTRACT

As the video gaming market continues to expand its commercial reach, freemium and gacha-based sectors have started to emerge as key players in this industry. This opens up a new way for marketers to engage their consumers and build brand loyalty in order to sustain players in an industry where revenue streams come only from dedicated players who are repeat purchasers of the in-game content. *Infinity Nikki*, a dress-up role playing game that was released in December 2024, offers a compelling case study for how visual design alone can support ongoing user engagement and brand loyalty. This thesis investigates how the visual elements in *Infinity Nikki* function as engagement strategies that contribute to brand loyalty, focusing on both hedonic and utilitarian gratifications within the frameworks of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE).

The central research question asks: *In what ways do the engagement strategies in Infinity Nikki build brand loyalty?* To address this, the study examines three sub-questions: how visual elements reinforce brand identity and encourage ongoing engagement, how utilitarian and hedonic gratifications are activated through interface design, and how these strategies align with the cognitive processing, affection, and activation dimensions of CBE.

To conduct its research the study utilizes a qualitative visual semiotic method, with a dataset composed of curated in-game screenshots grouped into five categories: in-game advertising, environmental design, character design, achievement systems, and avatar customization. Screenshots are analyzed using denotative and connotative categories, and structured with semiotic concepts such as salience, attributes and setting.

Ultimately, through the findings of this research it was uncovered how *Infinity Nikki* integrates hedonic and utilitarian engagement in its semiotic design to motivate enagement and consequently create a satisfying gaming experience for the players so that they become repeat consumers. The exploration of CBE also revealed that the game carefully crafts its visual presentation in a way that build and improves the relationship the players have with the brand. Through this it was illustrated just how these improved relationships are elicited in a way that promotes engagement and fosters brand loyalty due to how the players feel positive emotions, absorb themselves and dedicate their time to the brand of *Infinity Nikki*.

The study concludes that *Infinity Nikki* builds brand loyalty by encouraging engagement through carefully designed visual semiotics that consistently align with player motivations and needs. These cues reinforce an experience that feels both rewarding and satisfying. In doing so, the game turns interaction into investment and offers insights into how visual engagement strategies can be used as brand loyalty fostering tools.

**KEYWORDS:** *UGT, CBE, Gacha, Engagement Strategies, Brand Loyalty*

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## 1. Introduction

In the modern digital age, technological advancements have transformed how consumers interact with brands, making it essential for them to stay informed on marketing strategies (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 497). Engagement within marketing in particular, is crucial as research has shown that unengaged consumers can drop revenue by up to 13% (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 497). This is particularly significant in the video game industry, where the free-to-play market has experienced substantial growth in recent years (Gong et al., 2025, p. 48). However, with the rapid expansion of this market, new organizations entering the space face growing challenges, particularly when it comes to effectively marketing their games in a competitive industry (Xu, 2023, p. 80). Consequently, it is valuable and beneficial to understand these marketing strategies for businesses looking to establish themselves and succeed in this fast-evolving market (Xu, 2023, p. 80). Furthermore, video games foster high levels of engagement and provide rich material for analysis (Sharek & Wiebe, 2014, p. 570). One example of a game navigating this competitive landscape is *Infinity Nikki*, which leverages unique gameplay mechanics and innovative marketing strategies to engage players and drive success in the free-to-play sector. Therefore, this thesis will explore the engagement strategies employed in the video game industry, focusing on *Infinity Nikki*, a game known for its creativity and ability to captivate players.

### Societal Relevance

*Infinity Nikki* is a free-to-play gacha video game released on 5 December, 2024. As previously discussed video games are a growing industry and the same can be said for the free-to-sector which has experienced significant growth in recent years (Gong et al, 2025, p. 48). This is especially seen in the Chinese free-to-play mobile game industry, which has had a substantial increase in revenue, reaching 296 billion yuan in 2021, a 6.4% rise from the previous year (Cao, Zhang, & Sun, 2024, p. 3716). Due to the wide reach and increasing dominance of free-to-play video games in the gaming market, it becomes evidently clear that the topic holds strong societal relevance for marketers and developers who wish to enter this industry. By analysing *Infinity Nikki*, this research will contribute to a clear understanding of the engagement strategies behind the success of free-to-play games and provide insights into how these strategies impact player engagement and retention in a rapidly growing industry.

### Academic Relevance

The academic relevance of studying *Infinity Nikki* lies not only in its position in the rapidly growing free-to-play market, but also in its implementation of the popular and developing “gacha” system, which raises important questions about consumer behavior, engagement, and monetization strategies (Lakić, Bernik, & Čep, 2023, p. 1). Moreover, it is crucial for businesses to research effective marketing strategies to achieve long-term success (Xu, 2023, p. 82). Thus, the motivation

for choosing to study *Infinity Nikki* in terms of this context, besides the relevance of free-to-play video games, was due to its use of a “gacha” system which has recently gained popularity and lacks marketing related research (Lakić, Bernik, & Čep, 2023, p. 1). “Gacha” works as a lottery-like system where players use in-game currency, crystals in the case of *Infinity Nikki*, to randomly obtain items. If players use up all of their in-game currency without obtaining the items they wanted, the game then gives them the option to pay with real money to try again. Research on gacha free-to-play video games has predominantly been approached from sociological and psychological perspectives, leaving a potential gap in studies focused on business (Chen & Fang, 2023, p. 4). Which is the research gap the that this thesis aims to fill.

Previous research on engagement in video games has primarily used quantitative analysis, focusing on gen-z (Xi, 2024) and on how it encourages consistent play (Kesuma & Princes, 2024). Xi (2024) found that engagement is multifaceted and is dependent on consumer needs (p. 38). While Kesuma & Princes (2024) put emphasis on understanding these needs to encourage more time spent on the game (p. 13). Since Xi’s (2024) research focused only on a specific demographic in a concrete area, this research will expand on it by not targeting one specific group in its analysis. Furthermore, neither of these studies utilized a visual semiotic methodology; hence, by implementing an underdeveloped method, this research will attempt to discover insights into engagement strategies that have not been explored. Therefore, this thesis will build on this research by highlighting the aftereffects of engagement and doing so with a different approach.

Consequently, this research seeks to answer the central research question “In what ways do the engagement strategies in *Infinity Nikki* build brand loyalty?”. In order to answer this research question the thesis results is split into five clear sections, which will be separated via screenshot categories that will address and answer the following sub-questions:

“How does *Infinity Nikki* use utilitarian and hedonic gratifications to build brand loyalty?”

“How does *Infinity Nikki* use the cognitive processing, affection and activation dimensions to build brand loyalty?”

“How are the visual elements in *Infinity Nikki* designed to reinforce the brand image and encourage ongoing engagement?”

Due to the broad scope of the research question and the multifaceted nature of engagement, the thesis benefits from sub-questions based on multiple theories (Xi, 2024, p. 38). Thus, analyzing how the selected theories shape engagement and build brand loyalty will provide an in-depth answer for the main research question by breaking down different types of engagement and the varied ways it can be shaped.

To answer the questions proposed, this thesis will conduct semiotic visual analysis on

screenshots collected during the sampling phase of the research. It will do so by analysing semiotic concepts such as setting, salience, attributes, and iconography, and applying them to the frameworks of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE). The research will therefore offer insights into how visual semiotic choices shape consumer engagement for brand loyalty. Therefore, hedonic and utilitarian gratifications, along with the three core dimensions of CBE, cognitive processing, affection, and activation, will form the results section of this thesis.

UGT was chosen as it is central to understanding how media motivates consumers to engage with it through gratification which leads to loyalty to the brand (Dessart & Veloutsou, 2021, p. 376). In the case of *Infinity Nikki*, the visual design will be analyzed to see how it is structured in ways that gratify players either hedonically, through enjoyment and pleasure, or utilitarianly, through goal-oriented or functional satisfaction to create a pleasant experience. This is valuable as it explains the motivations behind player engagement and connects them directly to the strategies used by the developers to foster loyalty through the creation of a satisfying and gratifying experience (Chen & Zhunag, 2023, p. 3).

CBE on the other hand was selected as it will allow for an understanding of how semiotics can be utilized to create stronger relationships between the player and the brand. This theory highlights three specific dimensions that engage the consumer in different ways to build better relationships and consequently foster brand loyalty. Cognitive processing involves how much attention is dedicated to the brand, affection relates to positive emotional attachment, while activation refers to the time, energy, and effort the consumer is willing to invest (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick, 2014, p. 154). In the context of *Infinity Nikki*, it will be analyzed how these dimensions are activated through both visual elements in order to improve the relationships that the players have with the brand. By illustrating how these elements encourage engagement it will consequently reveal in what ways it fosters brand loyalty by improving the consumer brand relationship through the time spent on the game, the positive associations that are built and the attention that is dedicated to it (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick, 2014, p. 162).

The visual semiotic method will give this research the ability to expose the feelings that *Infinity Nikki* is trying to communicate and elicit from the players with visual concepts. This will consequently allow it to clearly examine how engagement is motivated through gratifications and improved consumer brand relationships. Thus, by dissecting the semiotic choices within each screenshot category, the research aims to uncover the ways in which engagement is constructed and sustained over time.

In order to answer the sub-questions, the thesis will break down the visual elements of the game into five distinct categories: in-game advertising, game environment, character design, achievement screens, and avatar customization. These categories were selected based on recurring,

visually rich components found in the game, each of which communicates with the player visually in their own unique way. Through separating the screenshots into these distinct categories, the thesis will be able to represent the vast scope of the video game and its many visual aspects in an organised way. Thus, by separating the analysis into these categories, the thesis is able to carefully examine and illustrate how specific visual strategies gratify player needs and build relationships to encourage engagement to foster brand loyalty.

The first sub-question will be examined through the previously mentioned categories to find the ways in which *Infinity Nikki* uses semiotic concepts to create an overall satisfying experience for the player. Consequently, by analyzing how these two concepts come together in order to make the playing experience satisfying and enjoyable, the thesis will demonstrate the ways in which they are used to motivate engagement for fostering brand loyalty. The second sub-question will be addressed throughout the whole results section by focusing on how the game activates the three dimensions of CBE to build better relationships with the player. This question will be answered alongside UGT due to their overlap in hedonic gratifications and the affection dimensions which both focus on eliciting enjoyment and positive emotions from the consumer. This will be done by tracing how the semiotic concepts examined throughout all screenshot categories shape the way players focus their attention, get absorbed in the world of *Infinity Nikki* form emotional connections, and invest time in it to drive engagement. For example, the analysis will show how the cuteness of animals and magical creatures gratifies players emotionally, while the fantastical styling activates immersion and escapism. Collectively, the semiotic choices that will be explored across all categories will demonstrate how the game uses its design to form better consumer-brand relationships. Ultimately, the third sub-question will be answered as an aftereffect of the previous sub-questions, as by analyzing how the game uses the previously mentioned theories, it will also be revealed how a cohesive brand image is achieved through the consistent semiotic design of *Infinity Nikki*.

Thus, through this analysis, the research will approach the central research question from multiple angles, each informed by the interplay of how *Infinity Nikki* uses UGT and CBE to motivate player engagement. The thesis therefore, aims to reveal how players are engaged through gratifications and brand relationships in a way that ultimately creates a satisfying experience and positive relationship, which fosters brand loyalty.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding how the engagement strategies in *Infinity Nikki* shape brand loyalty requires a theoretical framework that takes into account theories and concepts that align with the proposed research question. Hence, as previously discussed, two interlinked theories, UGT and CBE, will be explored. A discussion of the free-to-play business model and gacha mechanics will also be conducted to give a clear overview of the game that is being explored. Together, these components will offer an in-depth analysis of and understanding of how the theories chosen will allow the research to analyze how *Infinity Nikki* engages its players and ultimately shapes that engagement into brand loyalty.

To provide the necessary context of the type of video game that is being analyzed, the theoretical framework will first examine the free-to-play business model. By examining this model it will give insight into *Infinity Nikki's* complex design and monetisation model, which offers the game for free while relying on in-game advertising and microtransactions to generate profit. Central to this monetisation strategy is the use of gacha mechanics, which allow players to spend in-game or real-world currency for a chance to obtain virtual items. Thus, this is the next model that will be discussed in this theoretical framework. Therefore, these two sections are necessary to establish a foundation for understanding how *Infinity Nikki* operates as a whole.

Afterwards, to build on this foundation, the theoretical framework will explore the first theory, UGT. UGT explores the personal motivations behind player engagement through the gratifications that the game elicits. However, since this only covers one angle of player engagement, CBE will also be introduced to further assess how engagement is sustained through relationship building. While UGT focuses on individual motivations and satisfaction, CBE will provide the tools for analysing long-term behavioral outcomes which are activated through the relationship that is built by the cognitive, behavioral and emotional responses. Therefore, their combination will help in conducting a nuanced analysis of how *Infinity Nikki* applies these theories to shape engagement and build brand loyalty.

### 2.1. Free-to-play business model

Free-to-play video games are based on the freemium business model, which means that a product is offered for free with basic features, and additional features are then sold for a price (Flunger, Mladenow & Strauss, 2017, p. 373). This model first originated in the 2000's in China, but has recently experienced rapid growth, which makes it increasingly interesting to analyze (Shein, Ching & Hook, 2024, p. 1082). In video games, this model offers free access to the game and monetisation comes from the players having the choice to buy virtual goods within it to improve their experience (Flunger, Mladenow & Strauss, 2017, p. 374; Hussain, Ting & Marder, 2024, p. 1). Thus, through selling additional services the game gives the consumer an option to improve their

experience (Hussain, Ting & Marder, 2024, p. 1). One of the main ways the freemium model achieves this is by incorporating in-game advertising for additional services, which are used to persuade consumers to pay for premium features (Hussain, Ting, & Marder, 2024, p. 3). Through this, the game develops unlimited revenue generation, which is crucial as these are the only ways freemium games can actually make a profit (Hussain, Ting & Marder, 2024, p. 3).

Furthermore, research on the freemium model has emphasised that it is distinct from the typical video game revenue one. This is due to the fact that it requires the developers of the game to carefully configure the interplay between the free core service and the premium components to add meaningful value (Shein, Ching & Hook, 2024, p. 1081). Shein, Ching & Hook (2024) found that players buy a variety of virtual products such as coins, weaponry, artefacts, skins and many more, depending on the game, which is a form of engagement (p. 1083). Moreover, the model's success depends on balancing free access with compelling premium content as many consumers might choose not to pay for any of the additional content that is monetised (Shein, Ching & Hook, 2024, p. 1083). The model has been proven to be successful, as for example, the free-to-play mobile game *Honour of Kings* brought in a total of 2.45 billion US dollars in revenue in the year 2020 (Statista, 2022).

Thus, exploring in-game visual content to explore how it drives engagement within a game that utilizes a freemium model is especially significant as this type of model relies vastly on engagement and loyalty to sustain continuous revenue. Furthermore, in order to achieve this, gacha systems are strategically implemented in *Infinity Nikki*.

## **2.2. Gacha Video Games**

Gacha games are a subcategory and extension of free-to-play games that use a unique monetization model centered on chance-based transactions within the game itself. These games encourage the players to spend real money in exchange for a chance to receive a random virtual item, meaning that it functions in a similar way to a lottery (Woods, 2024, p. 824). By examining both the broader free-to-play business model and the specific features of gacha mechanics, this thesis can more comprehensively explore how these interconnected strategies in *Infinity Nikki* drive player engagement and lead to brand loyalty. In the case of *Infinity Nikki*, the game uses the gacha mechanic by “pulling cards” which contain clothing items, hair styles or makeup. The player can choose to either pull for one card at a time for less in-game currency or to pull for 10 cards at once which requires more in-game currency but guarantees the player at least one high-ranking item. This model contrasts with the traditional pay-to-win or subscription-based systems, as it offers players basic game access for free while encouraging microtransactions to unlock additional content or cosmetic items.

Players use in-game currency, which can be earned through gameplay, by completing tasks

or missions, or purchased with real money to pull for cards. In free-to-play games, the gacha mechanic functions not only as a monetization strategy but as a form of engagement that extends beyond simple transactions. Woods (2024) notes that “loot boxes offer the promise of virtual rewards – new characters, cosmetic upgrades, and other in-game accessories” (p. 824). This becomes especially relevant when considering how the affective dimension of engagement is activated. As Woods (2024) argues, the appeal of gacha games lies in their “affective embeddings” that allow players to experience the game as more than just entertainment (p. 825).

Gacha mechanics drive players to invest resources into the game not solely for functional benefits but also for the emotional satisfaction that is derived from curating aesthetic assemblages. For instance, players’ spending behaviors are motivated by a desire to collect aesthetic virtual items that allow them to express themselves within the game (Woods, 2021, p. 826). Thus, this action is not only about acquiring virtual items; it is also about receiving an emotional payoff through the customization of characters and through the items that they collect, which in turn deepens the player’s investment in the game.

Woods (2024) explains that “gacha games embed players within a cultural matrix that not only shapes the aesthetics of gameplay but also activates a range of affective responses, from escapism to the mediated expression of the self” (p. 827). These responses explain the rationale behind player behavior and illustrate that monetary value becomes justified by the affective value that is elicited from acquiring the items.

By incorporating these insights, this thesis will examine how the design and implementation of gacha mechanics in *Infinity Nikki* contribute to a satisfying experience that drives long-term engagement and brand loyalty. In doing so, it illustrates that gacha games foster emotional and cognitive responses that shape players’ interactions with the game (Woods, 2022, p. 828). Therefore, because gacha mechanics often function as a form of engagement, encouraging repeated interaction and emotional investment, the system will be examined not only as an economic tool but also as an engagement strategy.

### **2.3. Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)**

Uses and gratification theory (UGT) was first introduced in communication studies to explain the motivations behind users choosing to interact with a certain type of media (Che et al, 2023, p. 2). UGT is especially suited to this case study because it connects directly to the reason why players engage with a game like *Infinity Nikki*, where visual semiotics are designed to gratify different types of player motivations. Over time, it has been widely applied across various research fields, including social media, internet studies, and video game research (Che et al, 2023, p. 2). Its prior widespread application highlights UGT’s relevance for analysing the engagement strategies within *Infinity Nikki*, as the theory provides valuable insight into the motivations behind media

engagement (El & Quiddad, 2021, p. 372). Furthermore, according to El & Quiddad (2021), UGT goes beyond explaining how engagement affects the straight forward after-effect of revenue as it focuses more on building long-term loyalty, which illustrates its relevance to the proposed research question (p. 370).

This thesis in particular will be looking into two motivations behind consumer engagement that have previously been identified within UGT, utilitarian and hedonic (Abrar & Khurshid, 2020). The utilitarian dimension concerns itself with task-oriented gratifications that drive engagement by improving the user experience. It does this through achievements, which reflect the desire for higher levels and authority, self-presentation, where players shape their in-game image to influence the way they are perceived by others, and flexibility, which allows games to be played conveniently and increases accessibility (Abrar & Khurshid, 2020, p. 653). The hedonic dimension refers to the emotional gratifications. Key aspects of this dimension include enjoyment, where players experience excitement; escapism, which allows them to disconnect from real-life challenges; and fantasy, where players immerse themselves in imagined worlds to experience what is unattainable in reality (Abrar & Khurshid, 2020, p. 652). These dimensions and their influences all impact and shape how a player engages with the game that they are playing (Hussain, Ting & Marder, 2024, p. 4). These motivations are particularly relevant to *Infinity Nikki*, where the game's design caters to both goal-oriented and emotional player experiences.

Furthermore, in Xu et al's (2025) research, they found that video games tend to have highly interactive environments which means that the medium presents its users with more opportunities to satisfy their needs (p. 145). This is due to the fact that players become engaged by the gratifications that are elicited from playing the game (Xu et al., 2025, p. 158).

In terms of video game research multiple concepts can be identified when looking at how the medium utilizes hedonic and utilitarian gratifications. To develop on the previously mentioned hedonic gratifications, the thesis will apply the research by Hussain et al (2024) in order to expand on it and present how it can be achieved. For instance, Hussain et al (2024) explained that escapism as a concept has been found to satisfy hedonic gratification as it fulfils the desire to escape unwanted realities or as a way to avoid the problems that the players might be facing in real life (p. 4). Hence, escapism will be analyzed within *Infinity Nikki* by looking at how the game's vast and immersive environments allow the players to escape their own dull or unwanted world to gratify them hedonically. Furthermore, fantasy in a similar way allows the players to construct an imaginary world in order to satisfy their need to perform actions or live realities that are not possible in reality (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 3). This can be achieved in many ways in *Infinity Nikki*, from purchasing virtual items, completing tasks that are impossible in the real world and by interacting with the magical aspects of the game. Another concept which can hedonically gratify players in video games is role projection, which occurs when a player uses their in-game character or avatar to project

themselves onto it in order to fulfil their desire to have a certain identity (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 4). In *Infinity Nikki* the game allows the players to customise their character by changing their outfits, makeup, accessories, hairstyles, and more. Despite the ways in which virtual items in video games can satisfy hedonic gratifications and therefore engage players, little research has been done on this (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 2). Thus, this thesis will delve into the way this visual aspect shapes player engagement and leads to brand loyalty in *Infinity Nikki* in order to fill this research gap.

The function of selling virtual items in video games is one of the ways the medium can engage players (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 2). This function can be used in order to satisfy both hedonic and utilitarian gratifications. For instance, when purchasing new or powerful items at a discounted price, this can lead the player to have a more pleasurable purchasing experience, which satisfies the emotional aspects of hedonic gratifications (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 2). Moreover, the appeal of a discounted item can also gratify players in a utilitarian way. This is discussed by Cicchirillo (2024), who explained that the ability to save money satisfies utilitarian needs by making the player feel like they have experienced economic gain (p. 111). Consequently, analysing how *Infinity Nikki* presents their discounted items will allow the thesis to illustrate how this engages the players through both hedonic and utilitarian gratifications.

Utilitarian gratifications in video games on the other hand, concern themselves with more unemotional gratifications (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 2). In his research, Cicchirillo (2024), explained that convenience serves as a functional benefit that fulfils utilitarian motivations (p. 107). This therefore, illustrates that when a video game includes material or images that aid the player in completing a task it achieves utilitarian gratifications by making the experience more convenient for players.

Furthermore, Hussain, Ting and Marder (2024) found that the freemium business model in video games fits well with UGT. This is due to the fact that since players seek fun and excitement, they are more likely to convert into premium to gratify themselves (p. 14). This can especially be seen at the start of free-to-play games since they often offer premium content for free to new players (Hussain, Ting, & Marder, 2024, p. 14). Through this, the game gives the players a feeling of how these premium features make them feel. Ultimately, it was found that hedonically oriented players happen to be less price sensitive since they focus more on fulfilling their gratifications with specific virtual items that make their experience more enjoyable and pleasurable which illustrates how gratifications can lead to committed consumers (Hussain, Ting, & Marder, 2024, p. 14).

Similarly, McLean, Al-Nabhani and Marriott (2022) emphasized the importance of enjoyment and satisfaction on brand loyalty. In their text on engagement, they connected how mobile apps create enjoyment through UGT and how it leads to loyalty. However, unlike Hussain, Ting & Marder (2024), McLean, Al-Nabhani and Marriott (2022) explored both types of gratifications,

hedonic and utilitarian, meaning that they expand on the previous points. Through their study, McLean, Al-Nabhani and Marriott (2022) found that the use of utilitarian gratifications positively influences brand loyalty and the likelihood of a consumer returning to the application (p. 162). This is because an app that creates a comfortable and efficient experience for the user makes them want to return to the app and fit it more comfortably into their day to day lives (McLean, Al-Nabhani & Marriott, 2022, p. 162). Furthermore, just like Hussain, Ting & Marder (2024), McLean, Al-Nabhani and Marriott (2022) found the same to be true about hedonic gratifications. Through their research, they discovered that since hedonic gratifications lead to enjoyment and continuous use of the app, it ultimately leads to brand loyalty (McLean, Al-Nabhani & Marriott, 2022, p. 163). Their findings suggest that by combining both utilitarian and hedonic gratifications within the medium, the developers can create an enjoyable experience for their consumers (McLean, Al-Nabhani & Marriott, 2022, p. 163). If there is a lack of these gratifications, however, the application is posed with a threat of losing brand loyalty as the users are more likely to abandon the brand and switch to a different one (McLean, Al-Nabhani & Marriott, 2022, p. 163). Therefore, even though this research focused on mobile applications the findings are still relevant for this thesis as they exemplify how UGT can build brand loyalty.

Despite this, existing literature has focused more on identifying gratification types or motivations for media use, while less attention has been paid to the link between these gratifications and outcomes like brand loyalty. While UGT has been widely applied across different media contexts, existing research reveals varied approaches to how gratifications are understood in relation to brand loyalty. Dessart & Veloutsou (2021) applied UGT to analyze brand community identification and explained that gratifications such as social interaction and emotional value help build community attachment, which in turn impacts loyalty (p. 374). Their findings support the idea that satisfying individual motivations can influence a player's connection to the brand. Furthermore, the authors also explain that even in cases where the engagement itself is less active, consumers can still form attachments to the brand as long as their needs are gratified, which leads to better loyalty (Dessart & Veloutsou, 2021, p. 376). Despite *Infinity Nikki's* interactive nature, it is still beneficial to acknowledge this and recognise that highly interactive environments are not always required to achieve engagement and brand loyalty.

Moreover, Kujur & Singh (2020) also examined UGT with a focus on how visual content engages users through cognitive and emotional dimensions. In their text, Kujur & Singh (2020) explained that visuals act as effective tools for understanding the information provided by a medium. They argue that visuals can provide a clearer representation of the information given and make it more digestible for the consumers' memory (Kujur & Singh, 2020, p. 37). Thus, due to its ability to communicate information, their study identifies visual content as a key driver of engagement (Kujur & Singh, 2020, p. 34). These findings are especially relevant to this thesis, since it applied visual

semiotic analysis in order to examine what *Infinity Nikki* communicates to its audience in order to engage them and answer the proposed research question.

Thus, applying this research and analyzing these concepts throughout the thesis will allow it to demonstrate why players engage with and invest their time, money, and attention into the game. It also provides insights into how these investments foster long-term brand loyalty by building commitment through creating an enjoyable and satisfying player experience (El & Ouiddad, 2021, p. 370).

#### **2.4. Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)**

Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick (2014) defined consumer engagement as the concept of keeping consumers active rather than passive when making decisions, thus keeping themselves engaged (p. 149). The theories' importance in marketing comes from its ability to shape consumers and improve the brand positions of organizations (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick, 2014, p. 150). This thesis will look at consumer engagement theory through the Hollebeek et al (2014) model as it takes into consideration varying empirical research.

This model splits engagement into three dimensions, cognitive processing, affection, and activation. The cognitive processing dimension involves a consumer's knowledge of brand-related thought processing in a particular brand and consumer interaction (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick, 2014, p. 154). Affection revolves around positive thoughts and associations that a consumer might have with a brand or product (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick, 2014, p. 154). Activation concerns itself with a consumer's energy, effort, or time spent on a brand (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick, 2014, p. 154). Furthermore, in their research, Park and Ha (2021) found that within these dimensions there are various concepts that make exploring them clearer. They expand that cognitive processing includes attention, absorption, and immersion, the affective or affection dimension involves eliciting happiness, passion or excitement and the behavioral or activation dimension includes participating in multiplayer activities, content sharing within the community or paying attention to the brand (Park & Ha, 2021, p. 89). These dimensions represent different aspects of engagement and provide a thorough framework into understanding how it can shape consumer behaviors (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Roderick, 2014, p. 150).

To further elaborate on these dimensions, this thesis incorporated additional research that explored social media, e-sports, and gamification, to explain the application of consumer engagement theory to the context of video games (Abbasi et al., 2021; Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2020; Xi & Hamari, 2020). In their text, Abbasi et al (2021) explained that engagement in terms of video games occurs when consumers invest their resources such as their time, attention, money and thoughts into it (p. 1194). Therefore, revealing that when *Infinity Nikki* activates any of the dimensions it engages their players. Abbasi et al (2021) then went on to develop that cognitive processing involves

investing attention, concentration and absorbing the stimulus, the affective dimension concerns itself with emotional investments such as enjoyment, and that behavioral investments include time, activity and energy that is spent on the game (Abbasi et al., 2021, p. 1197-1198). While this research focused on the consumption of e-sport content through streaming sites, since it involved the relevant medium of video games and took into account its elements, this thesis took these observations into consideration when conducting the analysis.

Moreover, Xi and Hamari (2020) also expanded on the cognitive processing dimension in relation to CBE and gamification by showing that achievements like completing missions, goals, and challenges, as well as progression metrics and badges, all activate this dimension (p. 451). By integrating this research and applying the concepts to *Infinity Nikki* this thesis illustrates that even though there is limited direct research linking CBE theory to video games, its dimensions are relevant and can be applied to the case study in order to analyze how it shapes brand loyalty. This is due to the fact that the most valuable outcome to analyze when applying this theory to engagement is brand loyalty. As Hollebeek, Glynn, and Roderick (2014) state that it is the consumer behavior that is most impacted by its use (p. 162). Furthermore, this claim is further supported in the research by Leckie, Nyadzayo and Johnson (2016), where they explained that brand loyalty is achieved through building strong relationships between the brand and the consumer through all of the three dimensions of CBE (p. 559). All of these perspectives work to illustrate why this theory is relevant to the thesis and why it was selected to demonstrate how engagement is shaped in order to build brand loyalty.

Additionally, Adhikari & Panda (2019) further develop how CBE leads to brand loyalty in their research by delving into its role in relationship quality to explain the long-term effects of the engagement created. Rather than viewing engagement as a stand-alone construct, they argue that its effects on loyalty are strengthened when combined with feelings of trust, satisfaction, and affection (p. 998). This position highlights that brand loyalty is not just an outcome of interaction but is also strengthened by emotional attachment and satisfaction that is built over time. This directly connects consumer brand engagement to UGT and gives further insight into why exactly engagement leads to brand loyalty. The research proves to be pointingly relevant to this thesis as it demonstrates how CBE and UGT are interlinked and how UGT falls into consumer brand engagement in order to build loyalty. Their findings support that features such as brand interactivity and consumer involvement significantly drive engagement outcomes such as brand loyalty through the creation of emotions such as satisfaction (p. 998). What distinguishes this study from others is its focus on the mediating role of relationship quality, which suggests that engagement strategies in games such as *Infinity Nikki* must work beyond initial interaction and instead focus on building emotional connections and feelings of satisfaction to foster loyalty. This therefore illustrates how by analysing both UGT and CBE is necessary for this thesis to demonstrate exactly how engagement is shaped in order to foster brand loyalty. Gratifications are needed in order to engage players and drive long term commitment and

consumer brand relationships are crucial for strengthening this and further solidifying loyalty.

Building on these findings, Helme-Guizon and Magnoni (2019) further develop CBE by putting emphasis on examining how its three dimensions translate into brand loyalty outcomes through the exploration of brand-hosted social media (p. 720). Their study highlights the relational approach to brand loyalty and engagement, positioning the consumer-brand relationship as one based on emotional, behavioral, and cognitive bonds (p. 719). Thus, this approach supports the relational focus found across other CBE literature, such as the previously discussed Adhikari & Panda (2019), by treating the engagement and subsequent improved relationships that are achieved through the activation of the three dimensions as the drivers of loyalty.

Therefore, Helme-Guizon & Magnoni (2019) findings are particularly useful to this thesis, as they further justify the choice of CBE as a framework for analysing how engagement strategies in *Infinity Nikki* shape brand loyalty. When connected with UGT, it becomes clear that both theoretical approaches are necessary. UGT offers a foundation for identifying the individual motivations that drive engagement and commitment, while CBE provides a framework for analysing how it solidifies this loyalty through the creation of long-lasting relationships. Therefore, by combining the two theories, the thesis is able to explore not only what draws players to commit to the game but also how that commitment is used to foster sustained brand loyalty through the relationships that are built.

**Table 1**

Theoretical framework matrix for UGT and CBE.

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Application to Infinity Nikki</i>
Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)	Hedonic Gratifications	Emotional and pleasure-based motivations such as enjoyment, escapism, excitement, fantasy, and role projection (Abrar & Khurshid, 2020; Hussain, Ting, & Marder, 2024).	Players are emotionally gratified through vast and beautiful environments which enable escapism (Hussain et al., 2024). Role projection, using the avatar as a second self through customization (Hussain et al., 2024). Fantasy allows players to construct a new world to satisfy unachievable desires in reality (Hussain et al., 2024). Discounted items create an enjoyable purchasing experience (Hussain, Ting, & Marder, 2024).
	Utilitarian Gratifications	Task-oriented motivations focused on functionality and knowledge acquisition (Abrar & Khurshid,	In-game achievements for progress and information gathering (Abrar & Khurshid,

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Application to Infinity Nikki</i>
Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)		2020; McLean, Al-Nabhani & Marriott, 2022). Concerns achievement, self-presentation, flexibility, and economic value (Abrar & Khurshid, 2020; Cicchirillo, 2024).	2020). Convenient in-game design features for efficiency (McLean, Al-Nabhani & Marriott, 2022). Economic gain through item sales. (Cicchirillo, 2024).  Self-representation through using prestige symbols through semiotics to appear knowledgeable and of higher status to other players (Abrar & Khurshid, 2020).
	Cognitive Processing	Mental effort devoted to brand-related thought, including attention, absorption, and immersion (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Park & Ha, 2021; Xi & Hamari, 2020; Abbasi et al., 2021).	Players engage cognitively when focusing on gameplay tasks, goals, and achievements (Xi & Hamari, 2020). Immersion is created through beautiful and idealised game environments and leads to absorption (Park & Ha, 2021).
	Affection	Positive responses such as enjoyment and happiness that are then associated with the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Park & Ha, 2021).	Pleasure and enjoyment can be achieved through the fantasy world, aesthetic designs, avatar customization and satisfaction with in-game progression (Abbasi et al., 2021).
	Activation	Behavioral investment such as time, effort and energy spent on a brand or product as well as community interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Park & Ha, 2021).	Players invest time by playing for completion, looking for achievements and to gain status. Joining out of the game communities through social media pages seeps the game into players real life (Abbasi et al., 2021).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Method description and justification

Research has shown that a staggering 91% of consumers value visual based media over ones that are text based (Dhanesh, Duthler & Li, 2022, p. 2). Furthermore, content that uses visual communication rather than textual engages consumers much more (Dhanesh, Duthler & Li, 2022, p. 2). This already highlights why working with a visually focused methodology is so suited for this research. Dhanesh, Duthler and Li (2022) explained in their paper that the increased engagement comes from the way visuals let consumers interact with the content and through its ability to imply attitudes that the players project towards the objects that are being presented (p. 4). In order to answer the research question, this thesis applies the qualitative semiotic visual analysis method. It mainly applies Machin and Mayr's (2012) as well as Bouzida's (2014) research and explanation of the methodology. This is because, as Milliken (2001) explains, the qualitative research approach can be overlooked in marketing and business studies (p. 73). However, despite our society being a data-driven one, qualitative analysis allows research to explore the reasons behind consumer behaviors which provide valuable insights into their reactions to stimuli (Milliken, 2001, p. 73). Thus, applying it can help businesses understand consumer behavior and their motivations which will ultimately aid in optimizing marketing efforts (Milliken, 2001, p. 73). Due to this, visual semiotic analysis proved to be highly suitable for this thesis.

The visual elements of a video game are integral to forming its overall meaning, as they form how the game constructs and communicates ideas to its audience (Friedman, 2015, p. 294). In the context of business, the visual aspects of a game are particularly valuable, as they can be used to gain deeper insights into consumer behaviors by analyzing how players react to the different visual stimuli (Du, 2024, p. 1). Consequently, since the visual design of *Infinity Nikki* is key both to the experience of the player and to the marketing of the brand, semiotic analysis is a highly relevant and fitting method. As it allows the thesis to explore how visual strategies shape engagement and, ultimately, brand loyalty. Furthermore, in his research on young audiences in mobile gaming, Martínez (2019) also highlighted that visual advertising significantly shapes consumers by guiding their emotional reactions without their explicit awareness (p. 850).

Hence, semiotic analysis allows research to explore how the visual elements create meaning and communicate with the audience (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 49). According to Barthes, in their definition of semiotic analysis, the method goes beyond analysing what is presented on the image (Bouzida, 2014, p. 1001). Instead the method allows for the researcher to delve deeper into the signs that exist within the visual language and allows them to decipher and explore the hidden meanings within it in order to investigate how these shape the consumer (Bouzida, 2014, p. 1001). This, therefore, illustrates why the method was used to analyze how the visual language in *Infinity Nikki*

communicates with their audience in a way that encourages them to engage.

In the context of *Infinity Nikki*, this method enabled for a deeper analysis of how the game's visual design encourages engagement to foster brand loyalty since visual language is a powerful tool in marketing due to its ability to impact consumers (Hamizar et al., 2023, p. 77). Moreover, visual elements within video games have been shown to effectively research the ways in which they shape player experiences (Marczak, 2012, p. 1). This is due to the fact that based on the choices that the creators make, such as using specific colors, images or symbols, they can shape how consumers interact with the brand which can shape their loyalty (Hamizar et al., 2023, p. 77). This is reiterated in Aiello's (2020) research where they explained that semiotic analysis is concerned with how meaning is created through the different symbols and iconography used in visual media (p. 367). Overall, the method allows research to bring the hidden meanings and intentions of the medium to the forefront (Aiello, 2020, p. 368). Thus, imagery in *Infinity Nikki* is not neutral but is carefully constructed by the developers to create meaning and shape the players' behaviors. Generally, the methodology has been applied to a wide range of media, to paintings, novels, websites and even fashion items, which further demonstrates its versatility (Aiello, 2020, p. 368). Therefore, due to all of these factors and because visual elements in video games can be utilized and researched to understand how they engage a player it proves to be a valuable method for analyzing the chosen engagement theories and the ways in which they shape brand loyalty.

Thus, by applying a qualitative semiotic visual analysis approach, this thesis ensures a focus on the deeper meaning-making processes embedded within the visual aspects of the game. As established, semiotic analysis is particularly appropriate for this thesis given that engagement strategies are communicated primarily through visual elements in video games. Furthermore, the explored research demonstrates that visual elements in video games are integral to forming meaning, influencing consumer behavior, and engaging players in ways that traditional textual marketing cannot. Therefore, the relevance of semiotic analysis in researching engagement strategies and the gaming industry is evident through its proven ability to reveal the intentions behind visual choices and their impact on consumer behaviors like brand loyalty.

### **3.2. Sampling strategy**

In the evolving media and business landscape, industries are constantly developing new marketing strategies to stay competitive amid rapid technological advancement (Hussain, Talat & Rehman, 2022). This has encouraged marketers to create new ways of targeting and engaging consumers more effectively across different platforms through strategies such as in-game advertising, which is when the game reaches its consumers and engages them within the game itself (Hussain, Talat & Rehman, 2022). In free-to-play video games, their main revenue comes from two streams, the in-game advertising and in-game purchases (Ravoniarison & Benito, 2019, p. 63).

Through these, free-to-play games like *Infinity Nikki* can shape consumer behaviors through the effectiveness of their marketing strategies within the game itself. This is because studies have shown that in-game engagement strategies are more effective than traditional ones as the consumers are more actively engaged (Hussain, Talat & Rehman, 2022). In the case of *Infinity Nikki* an example of it employing in-game purchases is in its use of gacha, which, as previously discussed, means that within the game players can choose to spend real money to randomly pull for items. Hence, its implementation of in-game purchases illustrates the motivation behind choosing to sample the in-game material of *Infinity Nikki* for this thesis.

Moreover, in order to analyze engagement strategies and how *Infinity Nikki* communicates them to its players to shape brand loyalty, the thesis will look at screenshots that have been collected directly from the game. Even though scholars have argued that screenshots are an uninteresting method of collecting evidence and material for analysis, others argue that it is actually the opposite (Švelch, 2021, p. 554). Screenshots are an efficient and effective way to store and represent a moment that the researcher wants to explore in their study (Švelch, 2021, p. 554). By collecting screenshots of *Infinity Nikki* the thesis accurately documented the visual strategies employed by the developers and ensured that the analysis reflects the actual experience of the players. It is important to recognise that in-game photography, a function in some video games that allows players to capture an image inside the game with the game's camera function, is not representative of the game itself (Švelch, 2021, p. 557). This is because this function often comes with filters and other ways that the player can adjust and change the image on the screen, consequently, altering the way it is usually presented (Švelch, 2021, p. 557). Due to this, this research instead relied exclusively on the default screenshot function on the console to capture unaltered in-game visuals. This ensured that the images analyzed accurately reflected what is shown on screen, providing a clear insight into what the player sees when the game engages them.

Therefore, this thesis will conduct a qualitative visual analysis of the collected screenshots from the game. A total of 150-180 screenshots that were collected with the console's screenshot function will be. 30-35 screenshots were captured from each of the following categories: the game environment, character designs, avatar customization, achievement screens, and in-game advertising. This amount of screenshots ensured for a thorough representation of each category while avoiding redundancy. After compiling this data it was then sectioned and explored to identify the engagement strategies within them through semiotic analysis. This was done by identifying the use of the selected theories within them. Since the amount of screenshots collected was too vast to include in the thesis, the most encapsulating examples were chosen to be included in the analysis. The criteria for inclusion of these screenshots were based on how often the semiotic concepts aligned with the theoretical dimensions established by UGT and CBE.

### 3.3. Operationalisation

The concepts within semiotic analysis as described by Machin and Mayr (2012) are iconography, settings, salience and attributes. These will allow the research to look at how the visual aspects of the game, such as its environment, the composition of the objects, presentation, and the connotations and denotations of the image, communicate ideas to the consumers. Iconography refers to analysing the connotations and denotations in visual texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 49). By analysing denotations, the research will determine what is directly presented in the game's visuals, while connotations will reveal deeper associations that engage the players and influence their behavior (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 50). This is the concept that will be applied and analyzed the most as it provides a clear way to explore what the game is trying to communicate to its players through the visuals. Therefore, by looking at the connotations this research will be able to gain insight into how exactly *Infinity Nikki* engages its players through the feelings and the responses they evoke. Since the analysis of connotations allows for a thorough understanding of how the game motivates its players to engage through the previously mentioned semiotic concepts the research will also apply Barthes' understanding of the sign and signifier (Bouzida, 2014). Barthes defined semiotics as visual signs that communicate with the consumer through the meanings that they (Bouzida, 2014, p. 1004). Thus, Barthes explains that the analysis of these signs and their connotations will illustrate how meaning is created in media to shape consumer reactions (Bouzida, 2014, p. 1001).

By analysing the technique of settings, the thesis will examine the environments of the image (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 52). This will allow for an analysis of how the game uses its environments to build an immersive world in order to activate feelings of escapism and fantasy, both of which play a key role in motivating player engagement. Through salience, the thesis will see how consumers are engaged through the composition of the image by looking at symbols, size, color, tone, focus, overlapping and foregrounding elements (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 54). Salience will help analyze how *Infinity Nikki* captures attention and drives engagement by highlighting or hiding certain visual elements. By isolating the visual techniques through salience it will be easier to understand how the game uses colors, size and composition to direct the player's gaze and attention which will reveal how engagement is maintained and encouraged through visual hierarchy. Attributes will allow the research to look at how the visual representation of objects within the game communicates ideas to the consumers and shapes them (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 51). This is essential for answering the research question and identifying how the colors, shapes and features of the objects in *Infinity Nikki* communicate certain emotions, their desirability or rarity, consequently triggering hedonic or utilitarian gratifications as well as CBE and contribute to engagement. Together, these semiotic concepts will help answer the research question by revealing how *Infinity Nikki* uses its visual composition to motivate its players to engage with the game.

### 3.4. Processing and analysis of data

In order to analyze the collected data, the screenshots were organised according to the five categories: game environment, character designs, avatar customization, achievement screens, and in-game advertising. All of the collected screenshots were first compiled into an Excel spreadsheet and sorted into the five predetermined categories. Afterwards, the screenshots were then analyzed semiotically by breaking down each concept and exploring what was denoted as well as connoted. This way, each screenshot was thoroughly analyzed to identify which gratifications or dimensions of CBE were being activated. After this, the screenshots that were the most encapsulating of the findings and which activated UGT or the CBE dimensions the most were chosen to be used in the results section of this research paper.

To illustrate how this analysis will be carried out, the following examples demonstrate how specific semiotic concepts will be applied to interpret the collected visuals through the lens of UGT and CBE. These examples reflect the analytical approach used to identify how visual strategies in *Infinity Nikki* encourage engagement and foster brand loyalty. For instance, since it has been shown that the use of bright and saturated colors elicits joy, the thesis will identify how salience is used in *Infinity Nikki* by analyzing how the game uses this to activate both the affection dimension within CBE and hedonic gratifications of UGT (Geslin, Jégou & Beaudoin, 2016, p. 7). The influence of colors on player behavior will also be able to be analyzed with connotations and denotations. For instance, denotation illustrates literal meaning while connotations reveal symbolic meaning. In the case of *Infinity Nikki* colors can be examined in a literal sense for aesthetics as well as in a symbolic way, by demonstrating how they are able to elicit feelings of joy or sadness (Aiello, 2020, p. 370). Attributes will be analyzed by looking at specific character design for example. This will illustrate how the game ensures the aesthetic and brand image remains consistent throughout while also absorbing the players into its fantastical world. Furthermore, escapism has been shown to be interlinked with engagement as it makes the player lose track of time (Calleja, 2010, p. 344). Hence, the visual setting of the video game will be analyzed by looking at the screenshots of the environment in order to see how it uses hedonic gratifications to allow the player to escape their unattractive reality by being immersed in the beautiful landscapes of *Infinity Nikki* (Calleja, 2010, p. 346). Therefore, by identifying UGT and CBE through visual semiotic analysis the thesis will explore how *Infinity Nikki* applies them to engage its players and foster their brand loyalty.

### 3.5. Validity and reliability

To ensure the credibility of this research, it is essential to establish the validity and reliability of the selected methodology. Semiotic visual analysis has been consistently recognised as an effective method for analysing video game content. As Falaky & Shazly (2025) explain in their text, semiotics in video games are analyzed as texts that are presented on the screen inside the games'

virtual space (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 100). These semiotics are then examined in order to understand the games' entertaining, functional and informational aspects (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 100). In their text Falaky & Shazly (2025) also acknowledged how semiotic analysis has been defined within video game analysis. They highlighted that the conceptualisation of video game environments through non-verbal communication allows landscapes and interfaces to speak to the player through visuals alone (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 101). Other research has further emphasised the importance of semiotic analysis by explaining that it is able to communicate with the audience through signs alone in order to create meaning (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 101). Thus, through the analysis of these semiotics, the researcher is able to derive meaning and understand what the game that is being examined is communicating and how it is shaping the players. For example, the size or placements of objects, notifications that encourage players to make actions, and heights of certain icons can all engage the player, which directly illustrates why this methodology is valid for this research (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 106). Furthermore, Mazlan and Roslan's (2025) semiotic analysis of the video game *Detention* showed that visual elements significantly contribute to player immersion and emotional engagement, which further illustrates the validity of this method (p. 39).

Building on this, Lopes, Pereira, and Maciel (2017) also give insights into why the visual components of video games are able to shape player behavior and responses. In their paper Lopes, Pereira and Maciel (2017) explain that the virtual space of video games are made up of actions and decisions that the player is able to make (p. 52). However, these actions are tightly controlled by the developers, as the decisions available to the player are limited to what has been designed and made possible through specific functions and electronic means (Lopes, Pereira, & Maciel, 2017, p. 52). Consequently, the importance of analyzing the different ways developers create the interface of their games is emphasised, as these choices clearly present the most important aspects of the design, and the intentions that guided the developers when deciding which functions and elements to include (Lopes, Pereira, & Maciel, 2017, p. 53). Their decisions are not random, instead they allow the researcher to get an understanding of what the game is trying to communicate to its audience. Nonetheless, despite all of these factors is important to note that they are not all encompassing. There are other meaning-making stimuli, such as player external influences that determine how they react to the content as well (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 100).

Research has emphasized the need for marketers to adjust their strategies according to the different needs and wants of their consumers (Haris, 2023, p. 79). Therefore, analysing how the personal wants and brand relationships of consumers shape them is important. This analysis will enable the thesis to offer insights into how to more effectively target consumers and improve brand loyalty (Haris, 2023, p. 79). Hence, it becomes evident that semiotic visual analysis is an appropriate method for this thesis, as it provides an effective way to critically examine how *Infinity Nikki's* visual elements are constructed to encourage engagement among players and foster brand loyalty.

Furthermore, drawing from the previously discussed research on the semiotic methodology, its implementation in video game analysis, and its ability to capture the way developers shape player behaviors (Aiello, 2020; Falaky & Shazly, 2025; Lopes, Pereira, & Maciel, 2017; Martínez, 2019), it becomes evident that this methodology is fitting for examining how visual elements within video games construct meaning, guide emotional responses, and shape consumer-brand relationships. Through this approach, the thesis offers a reliable exploration of how engagement is visually encouraged to foster brand loyalty.

## 4. Results

By exploring UGT and CBE, this section will investigate how the game's visual design uses engagement strategies to foster brand loyalty. By examining the chosen visual this study illustrates how utilitarian and hedonic gratifications, along with the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of CBE, are activated to encourage player engagement.

### 4.1. In-game Advertising

#### 4.1.1. Events

In the game's menu section, players can access the in-game store. In this shop there are multiple sections that divide what the player can buy or claim. Each month, *Infinity Nikki* introduces new themed events that are prominently featured in this store. These events typically include new items, outfits, and limited-time offers. Within this subsection of the in-game advertising, several semiotic elements stood out after conducting the analysis. For instance, all of the advertisement images include a timer along with a symbol of a clock that is not only included in the image itself but also on the side of the shop menu. The denotation here is simply the symbol of the clock, however as according to Barthes' theory, the connotation associated with this symbol highlights the sense of time pressure experienced by the player when navigating these events. It places the player within a temporal framework by communicating that the item is limited and will not be available forever through the connotation of the clock. This puts pressure on the player and means that they must decide within the given timeframe whether or not to purchase the item. This engages the player through hedonic gratification and activates the affection dimension. The reason for this is that if the player decides to purchase the item, they experience the pleasure and excitement associated with obtaining something limited and exclusive (Hussain, Ting & Marder, 2024, p. 7). Thus, by using the semiotic symbol of a clock *Infinity Nikki* is able to emphasise the rarity of the item that is being promoted and encourages the players to purchase it in order for them to feel the affection and hedonic gratification that comes with obtaining a limited time items (Hussain et al, 2024, p. 5).

Furthermore, another clear way that the advertisements engage the players through their semiotic elements is through setting and how they implement colors within the images. The in-game advertisements often revolve around one main color scheme that is related to the items or the outfits being promoted. Two exemplary advertisements have been selected to illustrate this. For example, when advertising a bike that allows the player to navigate through the world, the advertisement features "Nikki" at what seems to be a field of flowers by a lake while holding the bike and smiling at the camera with a dominant green, yellow, and blue color palette (Figure. 1). When looking at the denotations of these colors they correspond perfectly to both the setting and the function of the item being sold, thus, working in a similar way as a sign as defined by Barthes. The color green for instance, denotes feelings of freshness and natural environments (Hasiana, Agustina & Trisnawati,

2024, p. 31), the color yellow has been associated with happiness, sunlight and optimism (Hasiana, Agustina & Trisnawati, 2024, p. 27), and blue symbolises freedom and the sky (Kartashkova & Belyaeva, 2022, p. 206). This therefore shows how the game strategically uses colors as signs to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the promoted item but also to highlight its function. The image, in this context, communicates the emotional connotations of the color scheme, freedom, joy, and the ability to explore the game's expansive environment.

Another example of how the game utilizes color is in their advertisement for a fluffy, pink, bunny bean bag that the player can purchase as decoration for their room (Figure. 2). In this image, "Nikki" lies on the bean bag with her eyes closed, either relaxing or sleeping. This image in particular, primarily features the color pink of varying shades. Pink is most often associated with femininity and softness which highlights the comfort of the bean bag through salience (Koller, 2008, p. 395). Moreover, in marketing contexts, pink has been primarily used to promote products that are targeted at women and are usually combined with rounded shapes (Koller, 2008, p. 401). Consequently, color is used to highlight the emotions that the player should experience and associate with the product that is being promoted.

The use of harmonious color palettes that align with the items being promoted in *Infinity Nikki* is consistently present across all of their in-game event advertisements (Appendix. 1). These carefully coordinated semiotic visual elements enhance the appeal of each product that is being promoted by ensuring that the colors and their aesthetic presentation reflect the nature and theme of the product. This, in turn, activates both affection and hedonic gratifications, as aesthetically pleasing and harmonious layouts have been found to contribute to improved consumer satisfaction and experience (Moshayeri & Seifi, 2024, p. 33).

Moreover, when looking at the limited time events that feature gacha-exclusive items that players can only obtain by participating in the game's randomized reward system, the game adds another layer of time-limited urgency. Not just in purchasing items directly, but in engaging with the gacha mechanic while it is active. This reinforces the emotional appeal by offering exclusive and desirable rewards within a narrow window of time. The semiotics used in these events (Figure. 3) highlight the exclusivity and satisfaction through the use of a cohesive aesthetic and the strategic use of color to draw attention to the deals. Thus, these gacha-linked events activate hedonic gratification and the affection dimension of CBE by visually emphasizing that, through participating in the events, the player has a higher chance of obtaining something exclusive. This is illustrated by the text, which highlights that if the player uses more in-game currency, they increase their chance of acquiring a higher-level item, "Every 10 Resonances guarantees a 4-star or higher piece" (Figure. 3). This text is highlighted through the use of stimulating colors, thus utilizing salience to draw attention to the fact that greater engagement increases the player's chance of gaining exclusive items, once again creating a satisfying purchasing experience for them by guaranteeing something rare. (Volkova & Cho, 2025,

p. 695).



Figure 1. “Nikki” with a bike in a field.



Figure 2. “Nikki” resting on a bean bag.



Figure 3. Two “Nikki’s” in a circus setting.

#### 4.1.2. Gifts (daily rewards/time limit)

Within the store, the player is also able to claim daily or weekly bonuses of free items by clicking on the “Featured” or the “Heartfelt Gifts” area of the store. Despite the fact that this content

of the game is free it is advertised and presented in similar ways to the paid content. Just as the previously explored events' content of the game, the free gifts and outfits are advertised with very clear color schemes that revolve around one color and create a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing aesthetic. Furthermore, this area of the store also includes a clock symbol alongside a timer.

Despite the visual similarities in the in-game advertisement, there are clear semiotic differences in how *Infinity Nikki* presents its free rewards system. For instance, since this content revolves around outfits, the stars, which are used as symbols that demonstrate the rarity of said items, are always included. Drawing on Barthes' semiotic theory, within *Infinity Nikki*, stars act as symbols which highlight and denote to the player the exclusivity of what they are obtaining, it emphasizes the value of the items through this. Thus, by including the stars when advertising what the player will obtain by logging in daily to claim these rewards it gratifies both utilitarian and hedonic gratifications. This is due to the fact that obtaining new items at discounted prices brings pleasure to the player and improves their experience which brings hedonic gratification (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 2). Moreover, the ability to save money gratifies the player in a utilitarian way as they feel that they are economically benefiting from it (Cicchirillo, 2024, p. 111). Furthermore, the players are motivated to gratify both hedonic and utilitarian gratifications since the outfits get more rare as the days go on. For example, compared to day 1 and 2, which both reward the player with three star outfits, on day 3, the player receives a four star outfit (Figure. 4). Since both of these gratifications ensure that the player has a pleasurable and enjoyable experience with the game it also activates the affection dimension of CBE. Thus, this builds their relationship with the brand through the positive emotions that are built to be associated with it, which consequently improves their brand loyalty. Furthermore, the visual inclusion of numbered days in the reward images activates the activation dimension of CBE. The semiotic symbol of the progressing days serves to encourage continued play and greater time investment by clearly stating how many days in a row the player must log in to obtain the items. Therefore, this further deepens the relationship between the player and *Infinity Nikki*.



Figure 4. Day 1-3 free login rewards.

### 4.1.3. Loading Screen Advertising

When a player opens or starts the game, they are greeted by a loading screen. This loading screen entertains the player until the game loads or until an update is complete and acts as a subtle marketing space. It usually features a visually striking background with promotional visuals related to the current in-game event. Typically, this background depicts the main character, “Nikki”, in elaborate outfits without any intrusive elements, like stars or text, allowing the image to stand out (Figure. 5). In the foreground, a small rectangular panel is placed to the left side of the screen (Figure. 5). This small panel displays the game’s news, event notices, or system announcements (Figure. 5). Directly above it is a rotating banner which features promotional slides advertising current events, items, or community features, such as their various social media communities and forums (Appendix. 1.3). Hence, even while the player is in a passive state, waiting for downloads to complete or the game to start, *Infinity Nikki* continues to visually engage their players.

The small, rotating banner, unlike the main image in the background, does include text and symbols at times. While the banner is small, which communicates to the player that it is not as significant, the fact that it is in the foreground does mean that it draws subtle attention (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 54). In one of the featured images which is promoting a limited-time outfit from the current event, the banner visually highlights only the most essential information, the outfit’s title and its star rating (Figure. 5). It only features the title of the outfit and its star rarity, completely leaving out any other attributes. The outfits that are featured in these promotional slides are always at least 4 or 5 stars and never promote lower ranking items. This way, the game once again uses the icon of the stars as a symbol to signify and communicate the exclusivity and rarity of the items that the player can get. This engages the player through both hedonic gratification and utilitarian gratification. Doing so by teasing the emotional satisfaction of acquiring a rare and by offering a sense of practical gain through the acquisition of a valuable item.

Another theme in these rotating slides is their use of fantastical attributes of *Infinity Nikki*. They often feature her flying and outfits that include fantasy attributes like wings (Appendix. 1.3). These denote to the player that they can fly and obtain features that are impossible in the real world; thus, *Infinity Nikki* gratifies them hedonically by fulfilling that fantasy (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 3). It also activates the cognitive processing dimension of CBE by immersing the player and absorbing them in a fantasy world by detaching them from reality (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 3). Moreover, the game activates the activation dimension of CBE by encouraging players to join and participate in their online communities through the use of salience. This is done through the use of bright colors and bold text in their promotional slides when highlighting their social media pages such as X (Figure. 6). Participating in communities means that the player pays more attention to the game and spends more time on it, as it begins to seep into their life outside of the game world. This activates the activation dimension of CBE and strengthens their relationship with the brand.

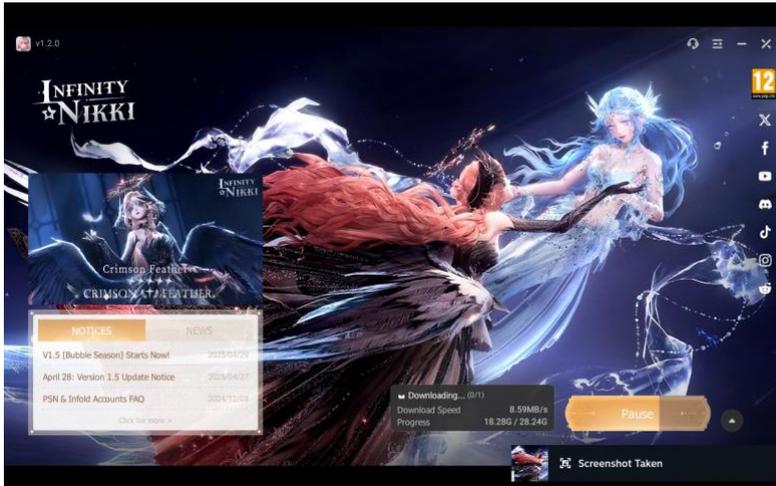


Figure 5. *Infinity Nikki* loading screen with outfit banner.

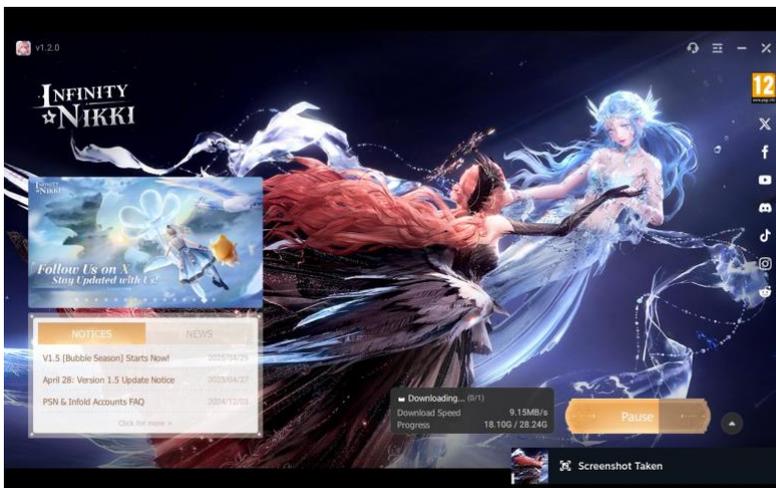


Figure 6. *Infinity Nikki* loading screen with X community banner.

#### 4.1.4. Shop

Within the store section of the game it also includes a “Featured” section which allows the player to buy in-game currency directly with their real money and not through gameplay or tasks. This area engages the player through salience with color and through iconography. For instance, all of the items include red discount icons paired with struck-through original prices, which serve as visual cues to communicate urgency and emphasise to the player that they are saving money and making a economically smart decision by purchasing them while discounted (Figure. 7). Through the semiotic use of the color red, the game therefore highlights the discount while simultaneously communicating to the player the urgency of getting the item while it is discounted (Volkova & Cho, 2025, p. 695). This is further reinforced by the game including the non-discounted price in small and crossed out text next to the current price which is larger (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 106). Through this use of size the game engages the player with salience and brings their attention to how much money they are saving. Thus, the game motivates utilitarian gratification by spotlighting the economic benefits while also activating hedonic pleasure in securing a high-value item at a cheaper

price. This semiotic engagement strategy consequently improves consumer brand relationships through the affection dimension by creating a satisfying purchasing experience.

The store section also allows the players to claim some items for free once a week. For example, the ‘Floral Tribute’ gift is presented with a soft, ornate aesthetic and label (Figure. 7). The color of the tag for the item is purple, which semiotically has been shown to evoke a feeling of luxury (Hasiana, Agustina & Trisnawati, 2024, p. 33). By highlighting the luxury of the item through the use of salience and color connotations, the game hedonically engages the player by making them perceive the item that they are getting for free as something luxurious, despite the fact that it does not have monetary value. Furthermore, the item also includes a weekly limit overlay, which enhances its value by introducing a sense of scarcity (Figure. 8). This activates both hedonic gratification and the affection dimension of CBE by making the player feel enjoyment from obtaining the item for free within a limited time frame.

Furthermore, these free rewards also serve as an entry point into the gacha system. While the items are given at no cost, since they are visually presented in the same way as the in-game currency, *Infinity Nikki* introduces players to the gacha system without monetary pressure. Through Barthes’ concept of the signifier, the crystals function as visual signs that symbolize the gacha mechanic itself. This association gradually familiarizes the player with the system and builds engagement through recognition and repetition. Consequently, by introducing the gacha system without requiring players to spend money, the game encourages even money-conscious players to engage with premium gacha pulls. Since obtaining an exclusive item provides hedonic satisfaction, players are more likely to engage again in the future to experience that gratification again.



Figure 7. Featured section of the store within *Infinity Nikki*.



Figure 8. Free items that are given to players weekly.

## 4.2. Game Environment

The environments in *Infinity Nikki* allow the player to openly explore the world within it. The game utilizes an open world mechanic which means that the player can travel to any point of the world without a loading screen, which allows for completely free exploration. This type of game provides the player with a much larger opportunity to get immersed in its world (Fraile-Jurado, 2023, p. 893). Immersion in a video game is exceptionally important which is why it is emphasised and reinforced by the semiotic visual design of the landscapes of *Infinity Nikki* (Fraile-Jurado, 2023, p. 892).

One of the most recurring visual themes that were discovered when analysing the screenshots of the environment was *Infinity Nikki's* consistent use of fantastical elements. Video games, as explained by Fraser (2016), are able to create a perfect amalgamation of the real and fantastical (p. 185). They feel real while being completely fake, this is especially true in open world games where the environment is so vast that it can fully immerse the player (Fraser, 2016, p. 185). In the open world environment of *Infinity Nikki* the game utilizes visual semiotic attributes to communicate this to the player and to reinforce its immersive and fantastical nature through the attributes of the image. For instance, following Barthes' semiotic framework, *Infinity Nikki's* environmental features, such as ancient ruins, scattered monuments, and floating debris, are seen to indicate the remains of structures (Figure. 9). The image of ruins brings along with it a different interpretation of the real world in a way that offers the players a unique chance to immerse themselves in something fantastical (Fraser, 2016, p. 186). This is due to the fact that the attribute of ruins brings with it an illusion of a fantastical world history where rubble represents a catastrophic past that the players can imagine (Fraser, 2016, p. 188). Their connotative meanings communicate lost civilizations and mythical pasts.

Another consistent visual cue that was present throughout the screenshots of *Infinity Nikki's* environment was that the setting often features forests, greenery and natural landscapes (Figure. 10).

While traversing the environment, the player can travel through forests, climb mountains and pick up flowers. As seen in the screenshots, the attributes of trees and forests are prominent (Appendix. 2). Research has shown that the visuals of forests in 3D environments have led to reduced stress levels (Yahaya et al., 2023, p. 2). This therefore, illustrates how the visual setting of *Infinity Nikki* is designed to improve the mood of the player and communicate calmness. Moreover, the inclusion of forest visuals in video games contributes to a more immersive experience for the player as it allows them to be distracted from their reality and stressors which ultimately makes them more engaged (Yahaya et al., 2023, p. 12).

Furthermore, even the colors and tones of the environment in *Infinity Nikki* work to further immerse the player and make them escape into its fantastical world. This is due to the fact that the game uses unnatural hues and bright colors throughout its environment, often making it seem like the world itself has a hue on top of it, such as pink or blue (Appendix. 2). On top of that the use of bright colors communicates happiness through positive emotions which show how the unnatural hues and saturation in *Infinity Nikki* provide the players with an ability to escape into a world that is beautiful and magical in comparison to their daily lives (Setiawati et al., 2024, p. 6). This combination of fantasy and escapism allows the players to feel happiness when immersing themselves in a world that is different and better than their real one (Hussain et al., 2024, pp. 3-4). Thus, the game's visuals hedonically gratify and engage the player by fulfilling fantasies that could never be achieved in the real world. Eventually, through this repeated immersion *Infinity Nikki* also activates the cognitive dimension of CBE by catching their full attention and absorbing them by allowing them to escape into its world (Park & Ha, 2021, p. 89). This is only emphasised by the magical attributes that the player can find. For example, the flowers and other plants that the player is able to gather and collect throughout the game sparkle, to not only show the player that the item can be collected but to also increase the game's magical and otherwise unattainable reality even more (Figure. 10) (Calleja, 2010, p. 346). Thus, through all of these visual aspects the game ensures that the player is engaged which improves their relationship with the brand and ultimately leads to sustained brand loyalty.



Figure 9. “Nikki” traversing the game environment on a paper plane while reaching abandoned ruins that are surrounded by flying debris.



Figure 10. “Nikki” in a forest environment with collectible plants that are marked by sparkles.

### 4.3. Character Design

Characters in any type of media come with their own image, that is to say that their characteristics and design communicate to the audience what they represent (Chen & Zhunag, 2023, p. 3). Their characteristics can evoke emotions from the audience in that way, thus, using visual semiotics to communicate with them and illustrate what the creators were trying to convey (Chen & Zhunag, 2023, p. 3). Consequently, it becomes clear why character design would be used by developers in a way that not only enriches the overall aesthetic and brand image but also reinforces the games ongoing message and atmosphere. A good example of this being done is with the cartoon character *Mickey Mouse*, whose design and associations elicit happiness and joy from the consumers (Chen & Zhunag, 2023, p. 3).

When consumers resonate with the characters and allow themselves to feel the emotions they evoke, they get pleasant feelings (Chen & Zhunag, 2023, p. 3). The importance of this for marketers is highlighted by Chen & Zhunag (2023) in their text as they explain that eliciting happiness, satisfaction or achievement in consumers with character design leads to brand loyalty (p. 3).

All of this emphasises the importance of the cute brand image aesthetic in *Infinity Nikki*. The cute aesthetic is often used in video games to elicit happy emotions and to bring an overall pleasant experience to the player as they are able to escape into an idealised world (Rose, 2023, p. 302). The cuter a character is the more positive emotions the player feels which leads to more satisfaction, which leads to brand loyalty (Chen & Zhunag, 2023, p. 3). Thus, this encapsulates why character design is so important for developers to consider when trying to engage their consumers.

#### 4.3.1. Animals/Creatures

The world of *Infinity Nikki* is inhabited with a vast array of animals and creatures. Each one of these creatures roam the open world and have a unique character design. Across all of them

however, one feature stays consistently the same, and that is their contribution to the overall cute aesthetic of *Infinity Nikki*.

Visual attributes that have been found to contribute to the cuteness of character design are large heads, large eyes, a lack of a clear neck, short limbs and small palms. This is because these features resemble those of babies (Chen & Zhunag, 2023, p. 4). Other attributes that can work towards a cute design are clean lines and the inclusion of simple shapes (Rose, 2023, p. 301). Despite the unique features of each creature in *Infinity Nikki*, including whether they are magical or not, or what color they are, one thing stays consistent and that is that they all have at least one of the previously mentioned cute attributes.

The creatures do not only embody the cute aesthetic but also contribute to the overall fantastical aspect of *Infinity Nikki* by giving players a chance to escape into its magical world through their engagement with the creatures. For example, many of the animals that do exist in the real world were designed in such a way that exaggerates their features, makes them cuter or even magical. Cats, dogs and sheep, all real animals, were made to be more round and fluffy, exaggerating their softness and contributing to the overall cute aesthetic of the game (Appendix. 3.1). This cuteness ultimately leads to a more pleasurable and enjoyable experience for the players (Rose, 2023, p. 302). Thus, gratifying them hedonically and activating the affection dimension of CBE.

Furthermore, certain animals are transformed in a way that promotes escapism and immersion. For example, the character design of “cushion” squirrels makes it so the animal, while existing in real life, still appears magical and more beautiful than the one that runs around in our world (Figure. 11). Not only is the design more cute, with rounded features and a small body compared to its tail, the squirrel also has fantastical elements. Its color, pink, as previously discussed, elicits feelings of softness which not only exemplifies that the creature is magical, but also amplifies its cuteness. Furthermore, its tail is unnaturally large and rounded, curved in a way that makes it appear like a heart. All of these attributes work to make the creatures of *Infinity Nikki* cute and magical, through the previously mentioned design choices which have been shown to directly contribute to a cute aesthetic. Thus, by creating an idealistic version of reality, the game immerses the player in its world and activates the cognitive CBE dimension by allowing them to escape into it (Rose, 2023, p. 300).

To emphasise the fantastical elements of *Infinity Nikki*, which gratify players hedonically and activate the affection dimension of CBE to engage them, the game also uses magical attributes in the character designs of its fantastical creatures. The design of “Kilo the Cadenceborn”, a magical animal that exists only in the game, is reminiscent of a dragon, with shiny horns and blue scales (Figure. 12). Much like the other creatures it is representative of the prominent characteristics all of them have. The “Cadenceborn” has short limbs, a large head, large eyes, round face and a small

neck, all attributes that ultimately work to ensure it fits the overall cute image of the game.

Through all of these visual elements, *Infinity Nikki* constructs a magical world and communicates to their players that they can escape into it by engaging with it and the animals within. Due to the fact that cute character design shines into the players' otherwise possibly dull lives, the game gives them a place where they can escape and enjoy themselves in ways they can not in the real world (Rose, 2023, p. 302). Ultimately, through cute character design, fantastical attributes, and the exaggeration of real-world animals, *Infinity Nikki* drives players to engage with the game. They create a satisfying experience and strengthen their relationship with the players through this by creating positive associations and gratifications which in turn solidify brand loyalty.



Figure 11. “Nikki” holding and grooming a cushion squirrel.



Figure 12. “Kilo the Cadenceborn” sitting in a flower field.

#### 4.3.2. Enemies

It is important to note that *Infinity Nikki* ensures a cohesive brand image consistently throughout the game. The visual design focuses on ensuring the players feel immersed and happy when they are playing, since even the enemies or the creatures that the players have to fight also share the same cute attributes. Despite the fact that the figure of an enemy or monster represents something unusual, the game still focuses on making them fit into the fantastical world of *Infinity Nikki* (Pérez Valero & Cuéllar Santiago, 2024, p. 9).

The enemies that the player can encounter have the same visual attributes of a cute aesthetic. They also have short limbs, rounded features and large eyes (Figure. 13). This therefore demonstrates that *Infinity Nikki* prioritises the creation of a cute aesthetic in order to engage their players and make the game a pleasurable experience for them across all character designs.



Figure 13. “Nikki” surrounded by in-game enemies.

#### 4.4 Achievement Screens

Achievements are collected by the players as they navigate *Infinity Nikki* and fulfil the many tasks the game assigns them. This can range from how many fish the player has caught, how many fashion items they have obtained or what level they have reached in the game. All of these factors are then recorded in the player’s achievement progress areas where they can see how far along in the game they are and can also receive rewards for their completion.

Achievements motivate players to engage mainly through utilitarian gratifications and the activation dimension of CBE. This is due to the fact that the game gratifies the player by allowing them to improve their skills while also gaining rewards, thus being both an economically beneficial and knowledge expanding experience (Xu et al., 2025, p. 145). Furthermore, the fact that players have vast amounts of achievements to complete as well as rewards to gain by logging in daily, means that they are also encouraged to invest many hours into the game, which activates the activation dimension of CBE.

##### 4.4.1. Personal Achievements

As previously mentioned *Infinity Nikki* allows their players to track their own personal achievements and in-game progress through the menu screen. Here the players can track various types of achievements. One thing that stood out across all of these screens was their vast amount of attributes. The screen attributes are busy, with many sub-sections and progress types (Appendix 4.1). These visual signs exaggerate and signify to the player just how many tasks they have to complete in

order to obtain all of the achievements. Furthermore, the screens often feature percentages next to each achievement type, this way the game visually communicates to the player how much progress they have left. This is the type of visual design that most effectively engages completionist players. Completionists are players who play a game to complete it fully, obtaining all achievements, finishing all of the tasks and obtaining all of the items (Duarte et al., 2024, p. 10). Thus, by visually communicating to the player that they still have a vast amount of content to complete, *Infinity Nikki* encourages them to engage and fully finish the game. This is especially relevant in *Infinity Nikki* due to its implementation of a gacha system. Since what the players can obtain varies monthly, the only way to fully complete the game is by engaging with each and every single one of the events. This, therefore, activates the activation dimension of CBE and motivates the player to spend long amounts of time on the game, as once they are done, the game will communicate this to them and make them feel a sense of achievement when they see the “100%” sign on the screen.

Moreover, many achievement milestones are visually and semantically tied to the gacha system. Players are frequently rewarded with in-game currency used to access premium gacha pulls. These gacha-linked achievement rewards are highlighted with icons such as the crystals that can be used to “Resonate” or pull for the outfit items. As according to Barthes’ theory, these crystal icons start to signify and denote to the player the gacha system since they can only be used to purchase the randomised pulls. Due to this denotation, these rewards in turn remind the player to engage and that if they spend more time on the game they will subsequently be able to access a usually paid for activity for free. Therefore, this not only drives players to engage through activation but also gratifies them hedonically and activates the affection dimension by giving away exclusive items for free.

Furthermore, the game tracks the players progress with stars by rewarding them whenever they reach a certain amount of achievements by giving them another star. Drawing from Barthes’ theory stars in this context can signify success and knowledge, consequently motivating the player to engage with the game in order to receive more of them. Thus, this symbol gratifies the player in a utilitarian way as it visually represents their accumulated knowledge and communicates to them that they have received rewards and gained higher levels through their completion of the game (Cicchirillo, 2024, p. 110).



Figure 14. The “Skilled Stylist” progression screen of the *Infinity Nikki* Courses menu that tracks outfit collections.



Figure 15. The main “Compendium” menu where the player can navigate all of their progression.

#### 4.4.2. Creature Achievements

As the player explores the world of *Infinity Nikki* and catches as well as interacts with the creatures within it, they unlock and learn more about the animals and plants that inhabit it. This unlocks information that can then be seen in the “Creature Compendium” section of the menu screen (Image. 16). Here the player can view the creatures they have caught and also get a preview of the ones they did not. When a player catches a new creature and logs it into the compendium, they will see a pink “New” icon next to the cards (Figure. 16). This use of a bright color draws the attention of the newly unlocked or recently discovered content through salience and makes the player focus on their progress. This gratifies them in a utilitarian way by highlighting the new creature they just added to their collection.

If the player did not collect the creature or discover it yet, however, the game shows black silhouettes and question marks on the undiscovered animals (Figure. 16). Even though these elements do not use bright colors, the shadows still serve to draw attention to the creatures that

remain undiscovered. The question mark works as signs and the shadows subtly grab the attention of the player through salience. Through this, the semiotics communicate that more exploration is needed which motivates engagement. Doing so through the activation dimension of CBE, the game encourages continued exploration and engagement by teasing the player with what remains undiscovered and visually communicating that their collection is still incomplete. This strategy will especially engage the completionist gamer who focuses on obtaining every item and wants to complete the game fully (Duarte et al., 2024, p. 10).

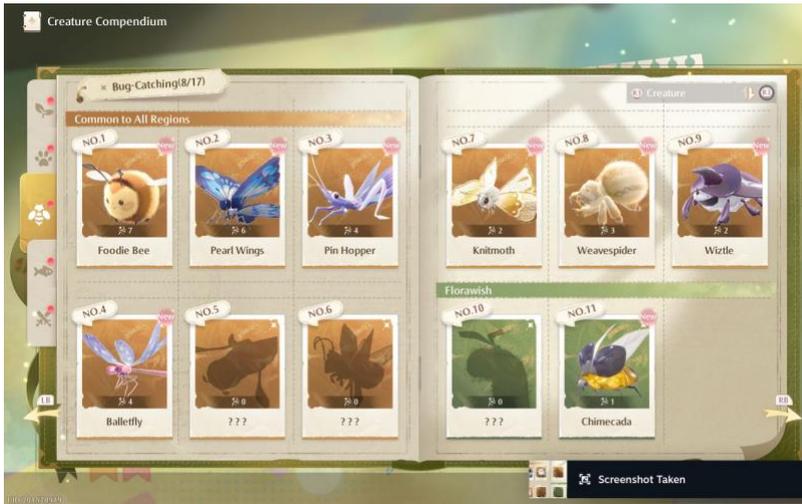


Figure 16. “Creature Compodium” with both newly discovered and undiscovered creatures.

#### 4.4.3. Public Achievements

Each player in *Infinity Nikki* has a personal profile and card that every other player can see (Appendix. 4.3). This serves as a visual representation of the player's level and status within the game. The cards use visual elements to semiotically communicate and illustrate the progress of the player. For example, the card shows the level of the player, their acquired title, the percentage of their progress and the amount of clothing items they have acquired (Figure. 17). Moreover, as the player levels up they also unlock new ways they can edit their photo frame, avatar and background (Figure. 17). Thus, when players see certain backgrounds or avatar frames, these visual cues communicate the status of the player since they start to work as signs of status as according to Barthes’s theory.

Through these status semiotic signs the game encourages players to engage in order to improve their in-game status. Higher percentages, levels and the number of items collected all visually signify and communicate player success (Liao, Cheng, & Teng, 2019, p. 352). This gratifies the player hedonically through role projection as it allows players to become somebody they respect (Xu et al., 2025, p. 145). Since the player sees themselves in the role of their avatar, gaining higher levels and obtaining visual icons that signify status motivates them to engage further in order to earn more respect from other players (Park & Chun, 2023, p. 261). The display of the player’s level, title,

and equipped visuals functions not only as a system of progression but also as a semiotic tool for self-representation and social comparison within the game.

For instance, more advanced profiles have more visually elaborate and detailed cards when compared to lower level ones (Figure. 18). The backgrounds are more detailed, with brighter colors and more intricate designs. The design of the frames is also more detailed with the addition of animations (Appendix. 4.3). These denote high achievement but connote prestige, commitment, and status within the game's world. In contrast, lower level cards feature a much simpler design. The visuals lack animations or an ornate frame which visually communicates to other players that the user is less prestigious (Figure. 17).

The semiotic contrast between these two cards highlights how *Infinity Nikki* uses visual tools to reward and display progression to satisfy the player through hedonic gratification and role projection. The higher level profiles allow the player to build an identity within the game that makes them feel powerful and accomplished through the visuals, which leads to positive feelings of satisfaction (Xu et al., 2025, p. 145). This, therefore, activates the affection and activation dimension of CBE, as the player forms a stronger bond with the brand through repeated and enjoyable engagement. Therefore, the game gratifies the player by allowing them to build an idealistic version of themselves through semiotic connotations and consequently fosters brand loyalty.

Moreover, since these cards are public they also work to gratify players in a utilitarian way through self-representation, since they are motivated by the desire to display their progress to appear more respectable to other players (Abrar & Khurshid, 2020, p. 653). This way *Infinity Nikki* engages players through the need to gain status by using the semiotic attributes in player cards as icons that communicate prestige. Thus, *Infinity Nikki* once again creates a satisfying player experience by providing rewards for committed engagement hence promoting dedicated brand loyalty.



Figure 17. A low level personal player card.



Figure 18. A high level personal player card.

#### 4.5 Avatar Customization

Allowing the player to customise and edit their in-game avatar is crucial for ensuring that the player has an enjoyable experience with the game. Avatars allow the player to express themselves in ways they can not in real life, and their avatar even becomes their second self, a self that can achieve and do things that are otherwise impossible (Park & Chun, 2023, p. 261). By equipping rare or high-status items, the player is able to build a different persona for themselves through role projection, which gratifies them hedonically and activates the affection dimension of CBE (Xu et al., 2025, p. 145). Thus, allowing the player to customise their avatar in many different ways is crucial for engagement as it motivates them to interact through self-expression and the positive emotions they get from it (Brock & Johnson, 2022, p. 603). This, therefore explains why, when equipping and dressing their character the player can always see what star level each item is (Figure. 19). This signifies to players that what they are equipping is rare and of high status, consequently gratifying them hedonically.

In the customization area of *Infinity Nikki* the player can choose from all of their obtained fashion items to dress and change their avatar. The player can pick clothes, accessories and hair colors as well as styles. Each item is categorized and marked with its star level and a hue that accompanies and represents said level (Figure. 19). What is most notable is that only the five star items, the ones that are most rare which can only be obtained through gacha, are highlighted through salience with a red hue (Figure. 19). Drawing from Barthes's theory this red hue becomes a signifier that connotes importance and illustrates to the player that they have obtained something that has monetary value and exclusivity which is further highlighted through the use of a stimulating color. This, therefore, gratifies players hedonically through the constant reminder that they possess a rare item, and consequently strengthens their relationship with the game through the affection dimension by creating positive emotions that they associate with the gaming experience.



Figure 19. *Infinity Nikki* customization screen.

Moreover, in *Infinity Nikki*, certain outfits function as ability unlockers. For example, when a player unlocks all the items of the “Animal Grooming” ability, they gain the ability to pet and groom fluffy animals in order to collect crafting items, which are essential for designing new clothes (Figure. 20). In the wardrobe section of the customization menu, each ability outfit is clearly marked by a unique icon and sign. The “Bug Catching” outfit has a net sign, while “Fishing” is indicated by a fishhook, the “Electrician” is marked by a wrench and “Animal Grooming” by a brush (Figure. 20). These icons permeate the game whenever the player equips an ability outfit and act as semiotic signifiers that visually communicate the outfits’ function. This gratifies the player in a utilitarian way, as the icons highlight that the outfit they have obtained is not only aesthetically pleasing but also serves a specific, practical purpose (Cicchirillo, 2024, p. 110). This therefore, engages the players to purchase or obtain any outfit that is marked by this icon as it reminds them of its functional use. Consequently, this engagement fosters brand loyalty by making them want to return to the satisfying playing experience.



Figure 20. *Infinity Nikki* ability outfits customization screen.

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, through this exploration of *Infinity Nikki's* visual design, it becomes evident just how the game utilizes UGT and CBE in order to shape engagement and ultimately achieve brand loyalty. By targeting the players' needs through both hedonic and utilitarian gratifications, the game offers a satisfying experience that encourages repeated engagement. By using the players' needs the game gratifies them and provides them with a satisfying experience which encourages the players to engage through the motivation to gratify themselves. For example, by creating a satisfying playing experience through aesthetic appeal, self-representation and fantasy as well as escapism the game ensures that the player receives enjoyment from interacting with it. Since satisfaction leads to improved brand loyalty due to the way consumers return to the brand or product to once again experience this pleasant feeling, the importance of visual design in sustaining continuous player engagement becomes clear (Dessart & Veloutsou, 2021, p. 376).

Thus, by analyzing the visual semiotics in *Infinity Nikki*, it was revealed how the game communicates satisfaction to its players through UGT. By examining all of the screenshots and how semiotic elements such as symbols, attributes, settings and salience are used, it became clear that the visuals are carefully constructed to communicate specific messages to the players and to make their experience enjoyable and comfortable. These messages consistently create a cohesive and aesthetically pleasing brand experience, where every component of the image is designed to evoke a certain feeling. It was demonstrated how the game uses visual signs to communicate exclusivity, time sensitivity, fantasy or usefulness, which in turn shapes how the player interacts with it through hedonic and utilitarian gratifications.

Firstly, it was illustrated and examined how *Infinity Nikki* gratifies players hedonically to engage their players. The research showed how semiotics worked as signifiers and communicated the value and exclusivity of in-game items. These included both purchasable items and daily login rewards. By consistently representing rare items with specific signs, such as stars, hues and timers, it was demonstrated how the game conveys exclusivity and urgency in order to engage players by communicating to them that they are gaining something valuable. Fantasy was also found to be central to how the game engages players. Through visual attributes and settings like magical creatures, floating debris and beautiful hues, it became evident how *Infinity Nikki* constructs an escape from the real world. These attributes invite the player into a space that is more pleasurable and emotionally comforting which gratifies the player through a reality that is otherwise unattainable. Furthermore, it was found that the game's use of visual semiotics to communicate status expression further deepened player engagement through hedonic gratification. Thus, by finding that the higher level public player cards featured more visually complex, intricate, and brightly colored frames and avatars, it became evident how the game shapes engagement through gratifying role projection. Hence, the game encourages players to engage to obtain visual status

symbols of prestige to reinforce the satisfaction that they receive by tying themselves to the more successful version of themselves.

Furthermore, utilitarian gratifications were found through the analysis of the screenshots of *Infinity Nikki*. Icons used on ability outfits were found to clearly communicate their function to highlight to the player the usefulness of the item. Moreover, discounted items in the shop were found to consistently use red labels, crossed-out original prices, and larger current prices to visually signal and communicate smart purchasing decisions. While analyzing the free rewards section of the game, especially the daily login items, it was further found how the game uses visuals and utilitarian gratifications to engage players. Through examining the effect of salience and attributes when including numbered days and star ratings on each reward it was illustrated how the game highlights rarity. These elements show progression and give a clear overview of what can be earned. The analysis of these visual engagement strategies demonstrates how *Infinity Nikki* motivates continued play through consistent and daily utilitarian gratification. This was further reinforced in the achievement screens, where progress bars and silhouettes communicated what was completed and what was missing. By visually communicating what has already been completed and what remains the analysis revealed how players are encouraged to engage in a utilitarian way in order to obtain all of the knowledge the game has to offer.

Consequently, through all of these findings, it becomes clear how the game shapes engagement through hedonic and utilitarian gratifications. The exploration of all the screenshot categories demonstrated how players were gratified through the way the game made their visual communication enjoyable, knowledgeable and comfortable. Since both types of gratifications were consistently found throughout the whole research, it becomes clear that *Infinity Nikki* encourages and puts importance on engagement. This way they ensure that the way they shape their engagement fosters brand loyalty, since enjoyment and comfort all lead to continuous and committed brand use (McLean, Al-Nabhani & Marriott, 2022, p. 162). Thus, through this exploration, the research answered its first sub-question.

Furthermore, through the exploration of all the screenshots, their categories and semiotic concepts this thesis also illustrates how the game engages its players through the three dimensions of CBE. The affection dimension, which focuses on the emotional and positive associations with the brand, was proven to overlap with hedonic gratification. This was evident throughout the findings, as it was demonstrated that when players experienced hedonic gratification through enjoyment, they also developed positive emotional ties to the game. If the player was gratified hedonically due to the satisfying experience created, they were also engaged through the affection dimensions because of the positive emotions which were elicited. Despite this similarity, the affection dimension developed on these findings rather than repeating them. It was illustrated that since *Infinity Nikki* uses its visual semiotics to engage their players through the positive emotions evoked, they do not only do so

through gratification but also through the improved relationship that comes as a consequence of the activation of the affection dimension. This way the game not only encourages engaged and continuous play through gratification but also goes on to solidify it through the creation of a strong relationship in order to foster brand loyalty in a sustainable way. Since the affection dimension was found in each screenshot category, it becomes clear that the game ensures that the relationships and associations that are built are positive, using their visual design in a way that consistently communicates satisfaction and positivity to its players. Thus, by engaging the players through the affection dimension, *Infinity Nikki* improves its relationship with them and fosters loyalty through the positive associations that are created.

When exploring the screenshots, the activation dimension of CBE, which works to improve consumer brand relationships through the time and effort spent on a brand or product, was most prominently found in the achievement category of the research. It was found that the game highlights the daily rewards with salience and by using attributes to emphasise the vastness of the game's achievements. This finding made it clear that the way *Infinity Nikki* uses the activation dimension to shape engagement is by motivating players to return every day for status, progress or rewards. Furthermore, when looking at the in-game advertisements, it was found that the game promotes their social media pages in order to build a committed and engaged fan base. This became most evident when exploring their banners that promote its social media pages, like X, in a way that visually encourages players to engage with the brand beyond the game itself. As a result, the thesis demonstrated how the game uses its visual components to activate this dimension. Thus, the game shapes engagement by encouraging players to dedicate their time and effort to it which in turn builds a stronger relationship and ultimately fosters brand loyalty through this.

Lastly, through the analysis, it was found that the activation of cognitive processing was also prominent throughout the visual design of *Infinity Nikki*. This dimension builds brand loyalty by improving the consumer brand relationship through the players' focused attention and absorption into the game. Since fantasy elements do not only gratify players by allowing them to fulfill their desires but also encourage them to be absorbed in the world and immerse themselves in it, finding its use throughout the screenshots also illustrated the activation of cognitive processing. By creating an idealised and fantastical world that the players can escape into *Infinity Nikki* uses its setting and attributes in order to immerse their players and to absorb them into its world, therefore, activating the cognitive processing dimension. Thus, *Infinity Nikki* improves its relationship with its players and shapes their engagement by allowing them to escape into a world that absorbs them. Since the players consequently spend more of their cognitive time absorbed in *Infinity Nikki* their loyalty is improved even further.

Therefore, through the analysis it was found that the game shapes engagement by activating all of the CBE dimensions with positive emotions, time investment and absorption to build a better

relationship as well as loyalty. Consequently, answering the second sub-question.

An interesting discovery that was made when conducting the analysis and while answering the first two sub-questions it became evident that a consistent way that *Infinity Nikki* engages its players is through the creation of a satisfying and cohesive brand image. Throughout all of the screenshot categories, one thing always stood out, and that was the game's implementation of cute and consistent branding. This was evident in the character design, in-game environment, and even in the design of outfits and items. It was found that the game consistently engages the players by utilizing an aesthetic combination of colors with a specific theme, round shapes, and idealized as well as fantastical visuals to create a comforting and satisfying playing experience.

Through this exploration and by breaking down gratifications as well as each CBE dimension, the thesis was able to thoroughly and clearly illustrate exactly how *Infinity Nikki* shapes player engagement. This subsequently illustrated the way loyalty is maintained and built, ultimately answering the main research question.

## **5.1. Implications**

The findings of this research offer several important implications for both academia and society. From an academic view, the study contributes to the limited works on visual semiotics in video game environments which provides new insights into how engagement is constructed through the strategic use of semiotic elements such as salience, iconography, settings, and attributes. By connecting these semiotic concepts to the established UGT and CBE theories, the study demonstrated how visual strategies shape engagement.

This research offered useful insights for developers and marketers working within the gaming industry, especially for those in the gacha game industry, where they rely on obtaining revenue from in-game material. Thus, by illustrating how semiotic choices can be effectively used to shape player engagement, this research provided information for firms on how to effectively optimise their visual presentation in a way that satisfies players and builds a better brand relationship with them. This, therefore aided in closing the research gap by not focusing on the psychological and sociological implications of gacha systems and instead on how these games engage players through their in-game material and environments in a way that fosters brand loyalty and engages them. Thus, these findings expanded the research and provided the video game marketing landscape with new insights and discoveries.

By showing how a game like *Infinity Nikki* uses visuals to build better relationships and satisfy consumers, the research highlighted a path for firms that are seeking to build sustained connections with their consumers. Overall, this thesis demonstrated that visual semiotic strategies are engagement tools that can be intentionally used to shape consumer behavior and loyalty in a highly

competitive marketing space.

## 5.2. Limitations & Credibility

To evaluate the credibility of this research accurately, it is important to note its transparency, use of thick description and triangulation. First, a thick description is the thorough analysis that is conducted to delve into and understand a specific concept or phenomenon (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). This was done in this research when thoroughly analysing the ways in which engagement strategies of UGT and CBE were utilized to foster brand loyalty in *Infinity Nikki*. Moreover, triangulation, which “assumes that if two or more sources of data, theoretical frameworks, types of data collected, or researchers converge on the same conclusion, then the conclusion is more credible” was also achieved (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). This was ensured by using the visual semiotic analysis method to reveal the engagement strategies and by supporting the observations with findings from previous academic research.

The research paper also demonstrated clear transparency, which further emphasizes its credibility, as it thoroughly outlined the theories, data collection method, and methodology. This improved the paper’s reliability by ensuring that it is replicable, since all the steps that are needed to conduct the analysis were clearly discussed.

Furthermore, to ensure the thesis is reliable and credible it is necessary to reflect and acknowledge the biases of the researcher and the limitations that can come along with it. Firstly, a limitation of this thesis was that it only looked at one gacha video game, *Infinity Nikki*. Therefore, future research should analyze more data sets and draw further conclusions to support the statements made. Moreover, it is also important to acknowledge the author's background in media studies, as this may have influenced how the analyzed data was perceived (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). This is especially significant as the visual semiotic method is subjective and open to multiple interpretations (Bouzida, 2014, p. 1006). Thus, if this research were to be replicated, involving researchers from diverse academic backgrounds could improve reliability by taking into account a range of perspectives.

Furthermore, the visual semiotic methodology also has its limitations. For example, the thesis did not take into account the auditory design of *Infinity Nikki*. This is a limitation as video games rely heavily on auditory design as well when creating a player experience and when communicating with them (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 100). Moreover, there are also many other stimuli that might influence player perceptions such as their background (Falaky & Shazly, 2025, p. 100). Therefore, it would be suggested that future research include the analysis of the ways in which audio effects and other player factors influence the implications as well. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of using screenshots as a method of data collection. While this approach allowed the research to present game elements in a way that clearly reflects what players see, it must

be noted that screenshots represent only one perspective at a single moment. For visuals that are not static, such as the in-game creatures, what is captured in a screenshot is just one representation and does not fully reflect how they may appear across the game environment.

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## Appendix

### Ethics Checklist

Your proposed research project is expected to meet the guidelines of the Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, as set forth by the Netherlands Association of Universities (VSNU), which can be found [here](#).

Please complete the following checklist, regarding the proposed research project

- No potential harm of any kind (physical, psychological or reputational) is envisaged for the researcher, participants or the population from which participants have been drawn.
- Participants are healthy adults who are not in a vulnerable position, notably in their relation with the researcher.
- Participants will give active informed consent for participation in the research.
- Participants receive complete and accurate information about the goals of the research before they participate.
- No important details about the purpose of the research are either withheld or misrepresented.
- Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any point in (or following) the data collection process.
- Personal and sensitive data are kept confidential and are stored in a secure environment.

If your research deviates from any of these standards, please consult your supervisor. You may need to apply for approval from the ESHCC Ethics Review Board, before commencing data collection.

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

### Student Information

Name: Alina Mikheeva

Student ID: 740010

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Selma Toktas

Date: 25/06/2025

Declaration:

### **Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools**

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

### Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

### Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance

with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Alina Mikheeva

Date of Signature: 28/06/2025

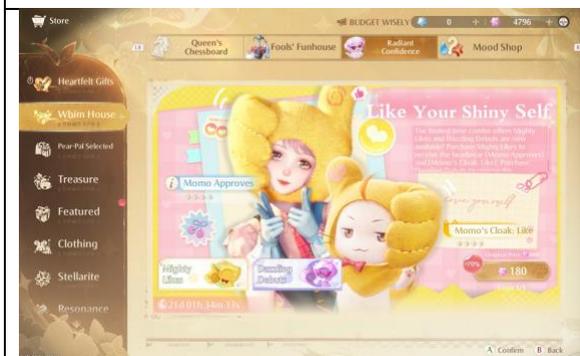
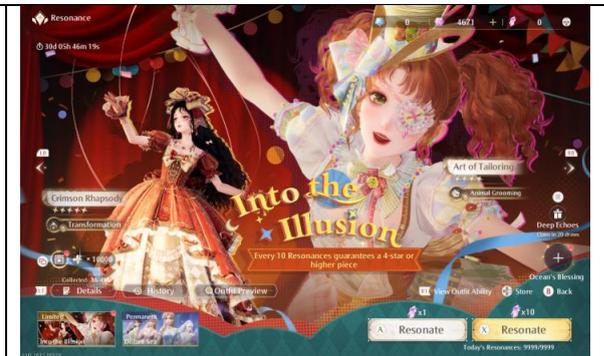
**Prompts Used:**

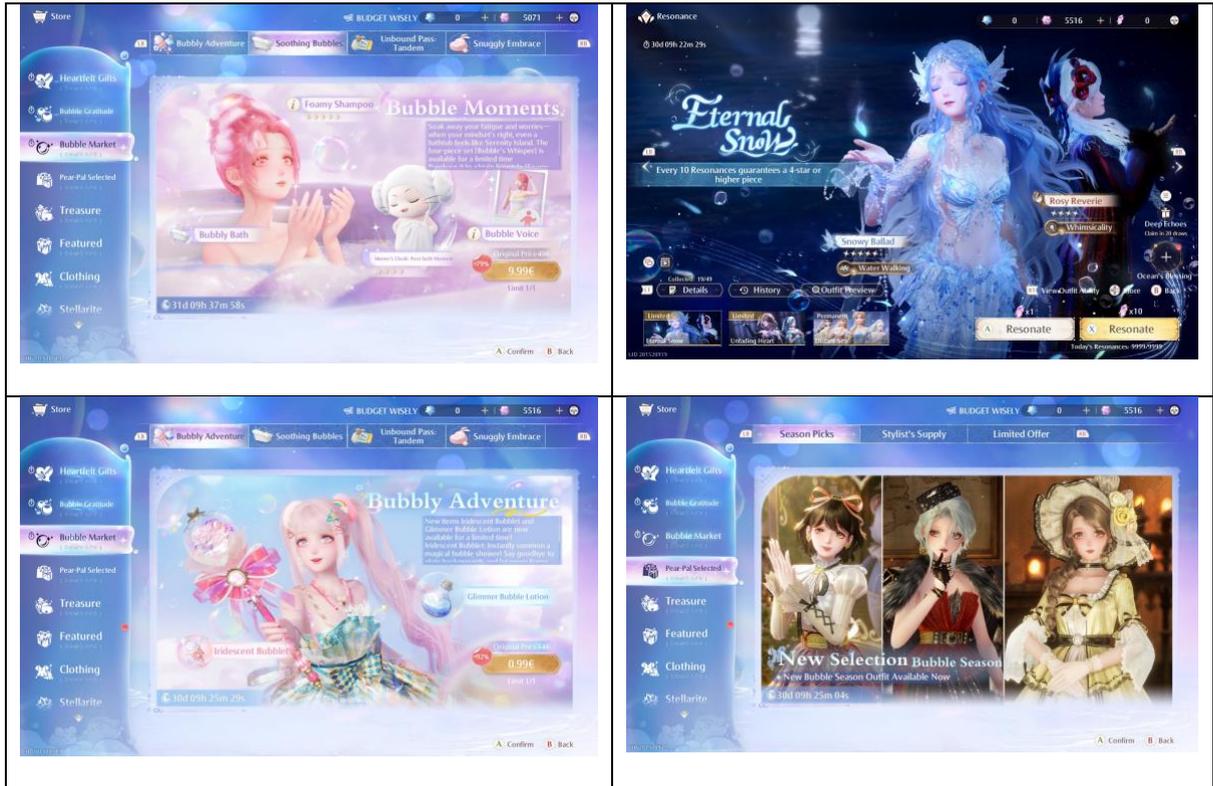
1. Read through these texts fully and write a summary of the introduction, main body and conclusion. Include quotes with page numbers for each of your summaries so that I can cross check any of your information.
2. Look for academic journals that can be found on google scholar which discuss UGT or CBE theory and write a clear summary of what was discussed. Write down clear titles and author names so that I can search them on google scholar myself.
3. Read through this entire document and give me title ideas.

# Semiotic Analysis

## 1. In-game Advertising

### 1.1. Events





Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dresses in various colors and themes (green, pink, blue, white) with star ratings, titles, and icons</li> <li>- Character expressions (happy, relaxed, confident)</li> <li>- Mood icons (question mark, sweat drop, angry lines)</li> <li>- Feathers, wings, floating characters, sparkles, icons like hearts and doll imagery</li> <li>- Items like bunny beanbags, accessories, and a bike</li> <li>- Resonance buttons with price indicators</li> <li>- Discounted prices with crossed-out original values</li> <li>- Sale markers (-77%, -61%, etc.)</li> <li>- Text labels like “Crimson Feather,” “Celestial Whispers,” “Bunny Beanbag”</li> <li>- Stars and limited-time labels</li> <li>- Timers and countdown clocks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicates rarity, prestige and value and is used in an aesthetically pleasing way (stars, icons, purple color)</li> <li>- Builds on the existing theme and fits with whatever is being promoted, royalty, travel or night time</li> <li>- Reinforces fantasy, luxury, or cuteness. Exaggerates the existing theme through fantasy elements and makes the image feel otherworldly as well as whimsical</li> <li>- All items promoted fit the advertisement to build a cohesive image</li> <li>- Encourages urgency and decision making through time limits and discounts to put pressure on players</li> <li>- Signifies fairness through guaranteed high-value rewards</li> <li>- Uses colours and themes to appeal emotionally and build a cohesive brand</li> </ul>

<p>Saliience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Colors that all fit the theme or are overall dominating like reds, yellows, pastels, pinks</li> <li>- “Nikki” or items like dresses, a bean bag, a bike are placed in the foreground</li> <li>- Blurred or less detailed backgrounds</li> <li>- Sale icons and discount tags</li> <li>- Title banners such as “The Queen’s Move,” “Like Your Shiny Self”</li> <li>- Floating icons feathers, hearts, stars</li> <li>- Bright coloured text and buttons for Resonance</li> <li>- Crossed-out prices and large bold letters for current price</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Points attention to the cohesive and aesthetic branding</li> <li>- Bright colours such as red, yellow and organge</li> <li>communicate urgency, attention and stimulation</li> <li>- Bright colors bring attention to whatever is being promoted</li> <li>- Plain and blurred backgrounds communicate attention to what is in the foreground and signnify that those hold more value</li> <li>- Larger size or position in terms of items and outfits are then shown to be of higher significance</li> <li>- Focus is always on items and fashion outfits, the importance of obtaining those and claiming something rare is always prioritized</li> <li>- Repetition of star ratings communicates rarity and prestige is the most important aspect of <i>Infinity Nikki</i></li> <li>- Directs attention to sales or rare items by showing that they are cheaper than usual, meaning economic benefit</li> </ul>
<p>Setting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Blurry, softly lit backgrounds with cloudy skies, palace interiors, celestial skies, field of flowers, chessboards all which correspond to the items promoted</li> <li>- Decorative environments: circus lights, red curtains, windows with gothic frames and marble columns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reinforces themes that are being communicates through saliience and attributes like rest, nobility, fantasy, comfort and exploration</li> <li>- Maintains focus on products and items promoted</li> <li>- Backgrounds reinforce the fantastical elements through whimsical or gothic imagery</li> <li>- Emphasizes brand aesthetics</li> </ul>

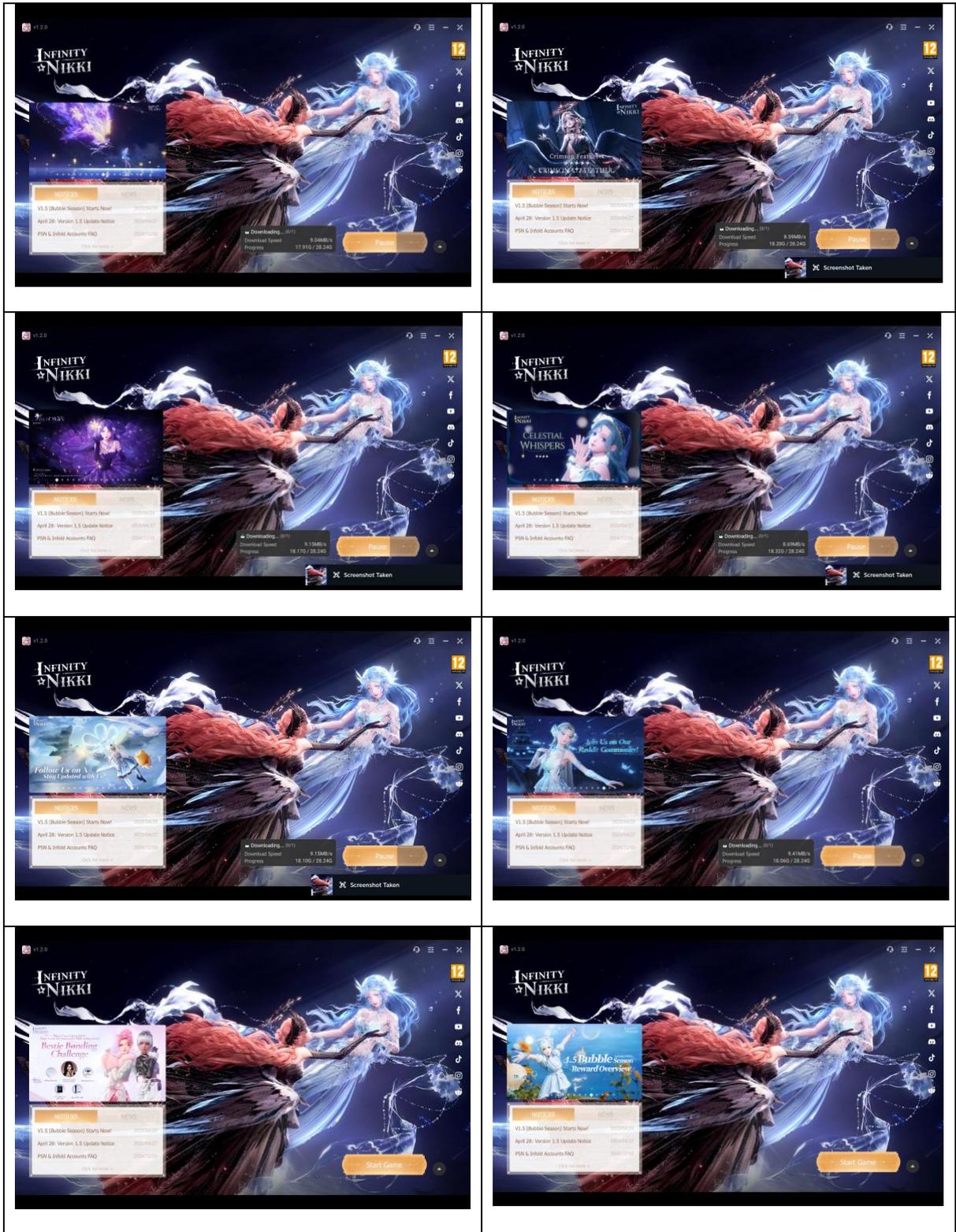
## 1.2. Gifts

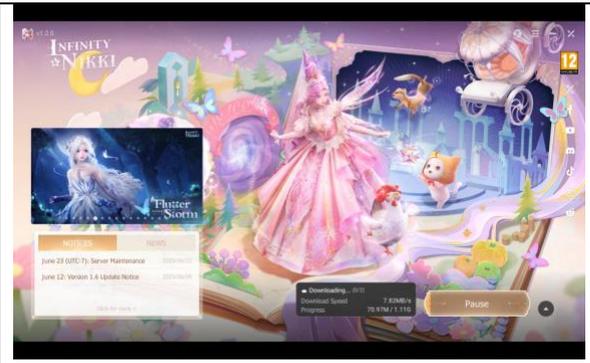
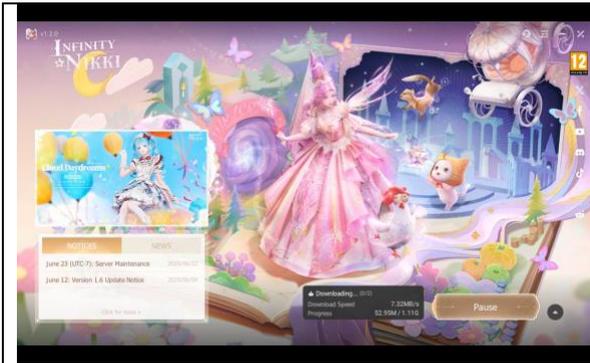


Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Outfits feature a wide range of aesthetics</li> <li>- Accessories are always visible</li> <li>- Models have poses that ensures accessories are seen</li> <li>- Presented the same way as paid content</li> <li>- Stars are always present</li> <li>- Clock symbol and timer always visible</li> <li>- Numbered days shown on weekly login awards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each outfit communicates a unique theme, targeting diverse avatar customization</li> <li>- Accessories are highlighted and are key to the outfit, communicate that the free items provide a lot of items which heightens their value</li> <li>- Presentation matches paid content which communicates that the free gifts are also valuable and exclusive</li> <li>- Stars signal rarity and value and are consistent signifiers of prestige. They are used to</li> </ul>

		<p>communicate and reinforce the exclusivity of the free items</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clock and timer again connote urgency and time-limitation to create pressure to log in daily and claim rewards while they are still there</li> <li>- Numbered days visually signify the necessity to consistently engage in order to gain free high value content and rewards</li> </ul>
Saliience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Outfits are marked day by day</li> <li>- Some outfits are grayed out or locked with padlock icons</li> <li>- “Accept” buttons allow instant claim</li> <li>- Purchase button</li> <li>- Each outfit card is brightly colored, with backgrounds matching the outfit's aesthetic</li> <li>- Outfit names are bold and centralized</li> <li>- 4–5 star icons are visible on all cards</li> <li>- “Limit 1/1” or “Limit 2/2” tags are shown in green</li> <li>- “100%” tags in red circles on price tags in purchase view</li> <li>- Higher rarity items use more vibrant and detailed backgrounds that are no longer blurred</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sequential day markers create anticipation</li> <li>- Locked icons communicate exclusivity and reward progression, encouraging daily logins</li> <li>- Purchase button communicates the exclusivity of the items even if they are free</li> <li>- Color coordination reinforces aesthetic harmony and creates a feeling of satisfaction</li> <li>- Star symbols denote rarity</li> <li>- Red discount bubbles and “100%” highlight that the item is discounted, creating urgency and positive economic benefits</li> <li>- “Limit” tags trigger scarcity mindset, encouraging immediate action</li> <li>- Rising rarity based on daily login rewards visually motivates players to log in more days for better rewards and to engage</li> <li>- Consistent color theme creates brand cohesion and satisfaction</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soft, pastel backgrounds that align with the color theme of each item, often blurred</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create a cohesive aesthetic</li> <li>- Ensure that the focus is on outfit</li> <li>- Keep player attention on the gift</li> <li>- Matching the item’s background to its main color improves satisfaction</li> </ul>

### 1.3. Loading Screen Advertising

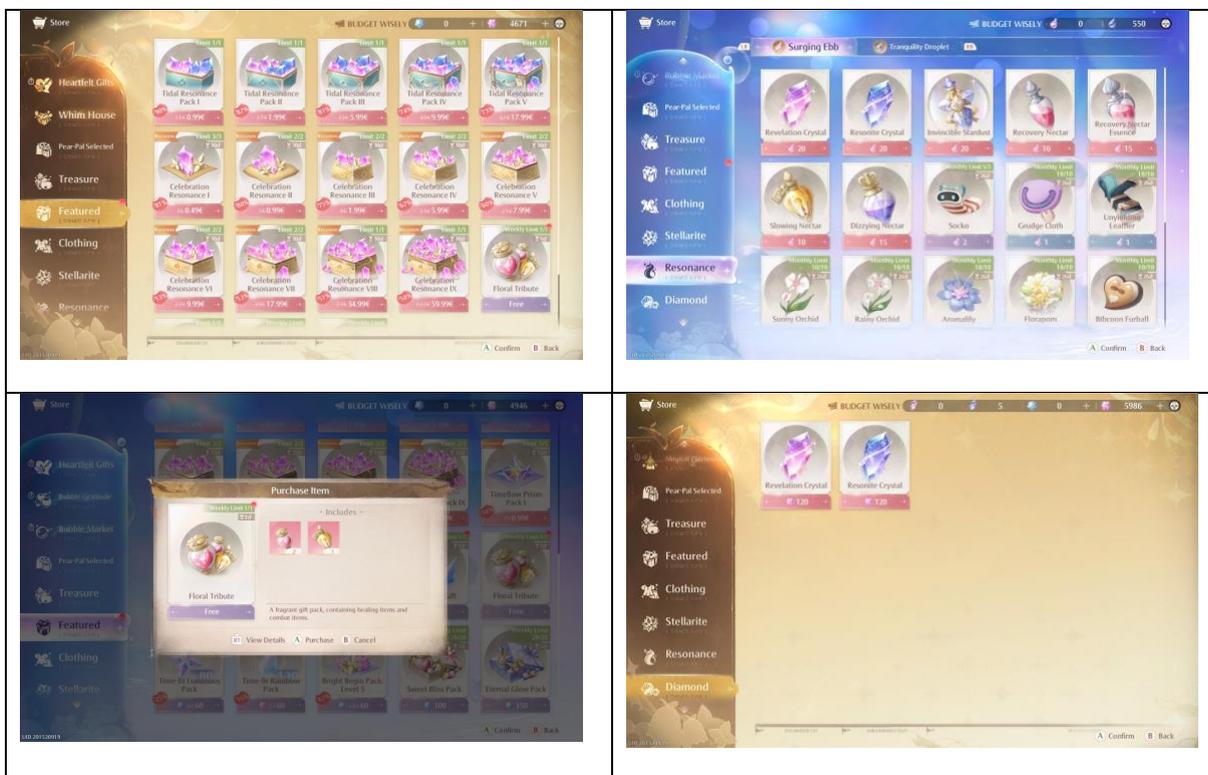




Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dominant backdrop, promoting events and outfits. In this case two mythic figures</li> <li>- Small rectangular rotating banner in the lower-left cycling through outfit promos, events, social media promotion and community boards</li> <li>- Stars are always visible</li> <li>- Flying, purple colors, feather and wings, ice, water</li> <li>- Main character "Nikki" always featured in the events' outfits, without intrusive elements like stars or text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fantasy motifs</li> <li>- Carousel panel frames each outfit as a rare "spotlight" moment, priming status desire</li> <li>- Only 4 or 5 star outfits means that only the most valuable outfit are featured, highlights their status</li> <li>- All of the visual attributes communicate fantasy and a different world where magic is possible</li> <li>- No extra elements emphasizes the fantasy elements by ensuring the player is ready to get immersed into the world of <i>Infinity Nikki</i> while they wait</li> <li>- Rotating banners encourage engagement with events and the community by highlighting its presence</li> </ul>
Salience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Backdrop occupies takes up most of the screen but the small banner is in the foreground</li> <li>- Slides feature titles and star ratings</li> <li>- Bright colors and bold text on banners that are promoting social media pages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Size contrast shows that whole backdrop is important the banner is not forgotten as its in the foreground</li> <li>- Star icons highlight the exclusivity and rarity of the items and spotlight that this is the most important factor, puts priority on status</li> <li>- Bold text and colors draw</li> </ul>

		attention to community features which encourage engagement beyond gameplay and communicates that the game has a wide community even outside of the main platform
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Backgrounds are consistently simple, blurry or completely in line with the event happening at the moment</li> <li>- Shows otherworldly settings such as flying</li> <li>- Color coordinated with the outfit promoted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create a cohesive aesthetic</li> <li>- Ensure that the focus is on outfit</li> <li>- Reinforces fantastical elements and that the player is getting transported into another world</li> </ul>

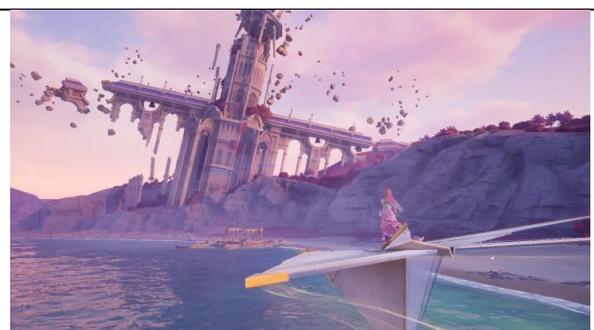
### 1.4. Shop

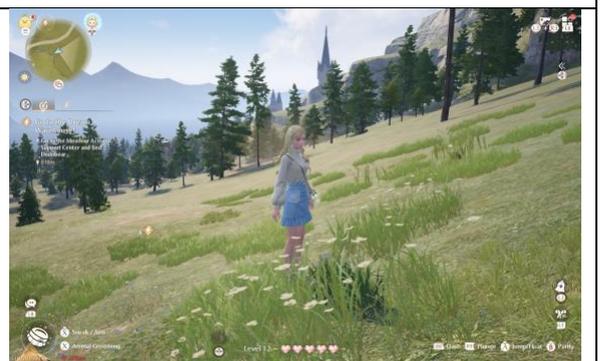


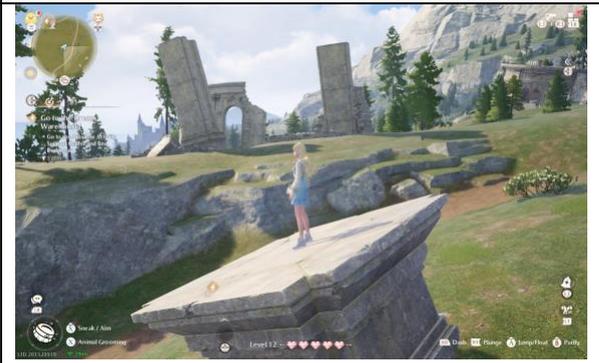
Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Items displayed as with images, names, and price</li> <li>- Crystals, potions, gift boxes, and flower motifs</li> <li>- Red discount percentage icons are paired with struck-through original prices</li> <li>- Non-discounted price is smaller and crossed out, the current price is larger</li> <li>- Some items labeled as “free” and are presented with ornate label and purple tag</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gift boxes connote value, luxury, and exclusivity</li> <li>- Potions/flowers reinforce fantasy</li> <li>- Red icons and crossed-out prices again communicate urgency and economic benefit</li> <li>- Larger discounted price draws attention to the deal that the player would get and communicates saving money</li> <li>- Ornate label and purple color on free items communicate</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weekly limit overlays on free items</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>luxury and make free rewards feel valuable</li> <li>- Weekly limit overlay communicates rarity and scarcity, making free items feel exclusive</li> <li>- Crystals visually signify the gacha system which makes players familiar with it</li> </ul>
Saliience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bright backgrounds and pastel borders</li> <li>- Discounted or “free” items have extra-bright labels or banners, red, green, or gold</li> <li>- Purchase pop-up highlights the selected item, fading out the background.</li> <li>- Use of size contrast, discounted price is larger than original price</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bright color tags highlight deals and luxury of the items and communicate economic benefit</li> <li>- Whether the item is free or not it is presented in the same way so it communicates luxury regardless</li> <li>- Size contrast brings attention to the savings and draws attention away from how expensive it was</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soft and simple background that is color coded to the event at the time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensures focus on item</li> <li>- Communicates cohesion</li> <li>- Reinforce luxury, fantasy and exclusivity</li> </ul>

## 2. Game Environment











Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ruined stone corridors, rolling flower meadows, cliffs, cosmic seascapes</li> <li>- Sparkling flowers</li> <li>- Trees</li> <li>- Ruined cities</li> <li>- Recurrent fantasy animals and creatures</li> <li>- Forests and mountains</li> <li>- Unnatural hues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Historic ruins communicate a lost history and fantasy</li> <li>- Floating debris communicates fantasy and a magical world</li> <li>- Flowers and trees communicate calmness and serenity</li> <li>- Forest visuals communicate calmness</li> <li>- Unnatural bright colors create a sense of magic that is more beautiful than the real one</li> <li>- Sparkling plants heighten the fantasy and encourage interaction by communicating that the player will gain something if they interact with it</li> </ul>
Salience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sparkling flowers</li> <li>- Saturated biomes</li> <li>- Brightly colored plants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Magical environment that is more beautiful and better than the real world.</li> <li>- Including real world aspects that are overly saturated or highlighted spotlights the magical aspects of the world and how it's an improved version of the real one.</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Forests and mountains</li> <li>- Broken villages and civilizations</li> <li>- Crumbling architecture, arches, domes, pillars, floating debris.</li> <li>- Cosmic environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fusion of realism and fantasy immerses players in a world that feels historically impossible yet real</li> <li>- Ruins connote back-story and invite imaginative world-building</li> <li>- Cosmic environment connotes an out of the world reality that is far away from the real world. Communicates to the player that they are escaping somewhere that is not</li> </ul>

		associated with their dull reality.
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**3. Character Design**  
**3.1. Animals/Creatures**

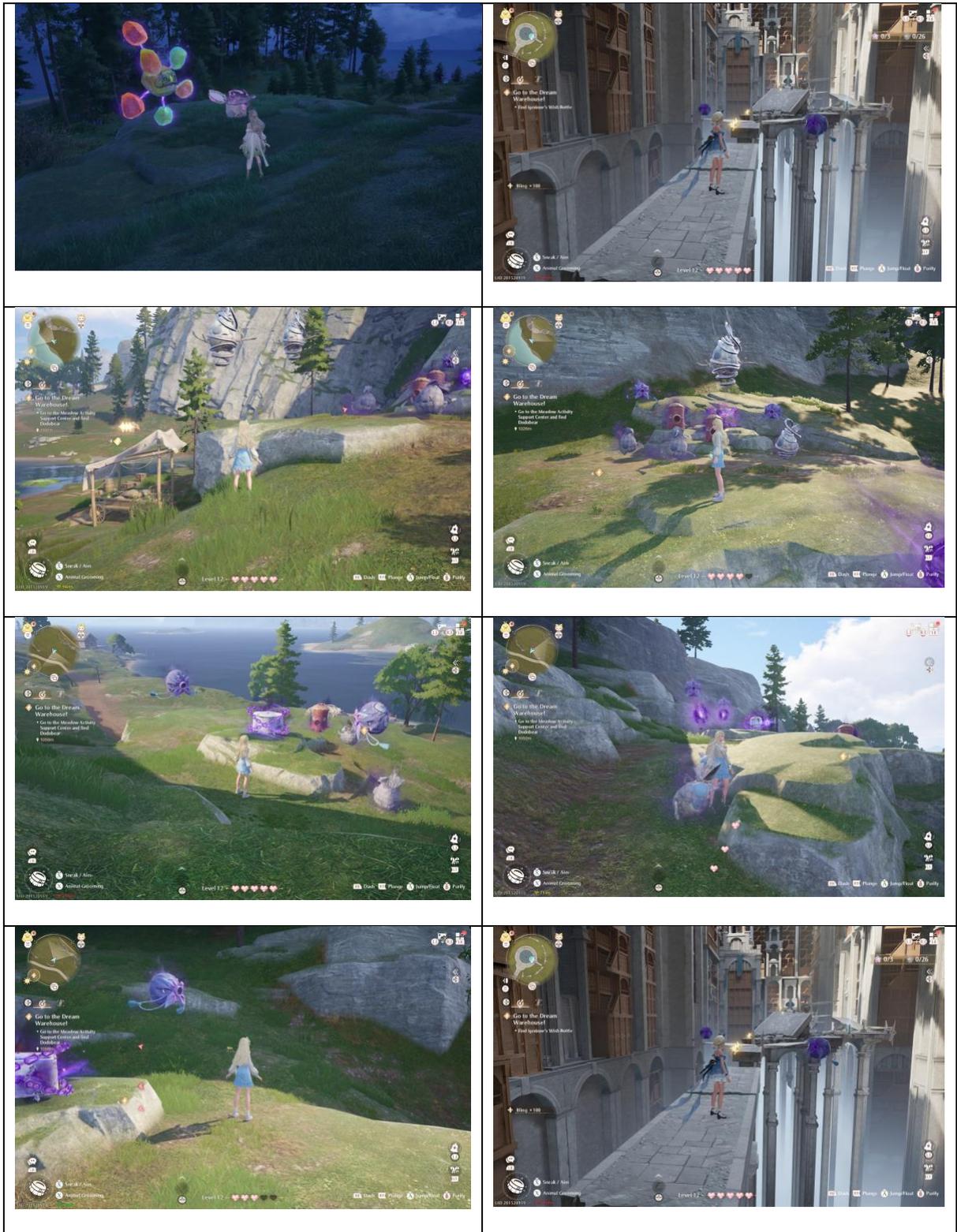






Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Big eyes</li> <li>- Round faces</li> <li>- Fluffy wool</li> <li>- Golden horns and unnatural colors for some of the real animals</li> <li>- Heart shaped tail</li> <li>- Short limbs</li> <li>- Big heads</li> <li>- Simple lines and shapes</li> <li>- Rounded and soft body forms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All of the attributes work together to form a cute aesthetic and communicate to the player that the animals inhabiting this world, while some of them being real. Are fantastical and otherworldly.</li> <li>- They promote escapism and happy feelings</li> <li>- Connote a better reality where they can relax</li> <li>- Exaggeration of baby-like features to communicate cuteness and an idealized reality</li> <li>- Magical attributes, such as shiny horns or odd colors connote fantasy and the improved version of the animals that inhabit the players' real world as well</li> </ul>
Salience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Purple dolphin</li> <li>- Golden horn</li> <li>- Pink squirrel tail</li> <li>- Glowing seal</li> <li>- Exaggerated size of heads, eyes, and tails</li> <li>- Consistent use of bright and pastel colors for animal designs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The salience highlights the fantastical features of the animals and communicates to the player that they are magical and the cuter version of their real-life counter parts</li> <li>- Bright, unnatural colors and glowing animations reinforce the feeling of a magical world</li> <li>- Emphasizes that the player is in an idealized and comforting space</li> </ul>

### 3.2. Enemies

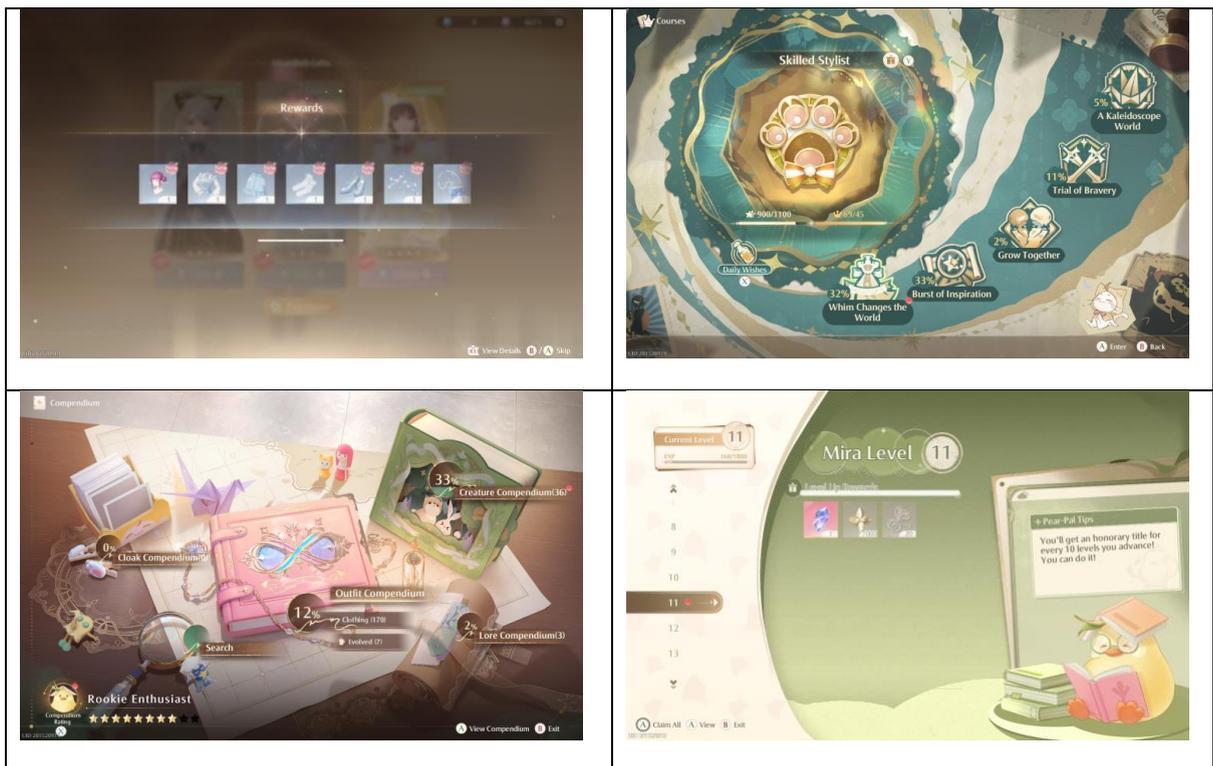


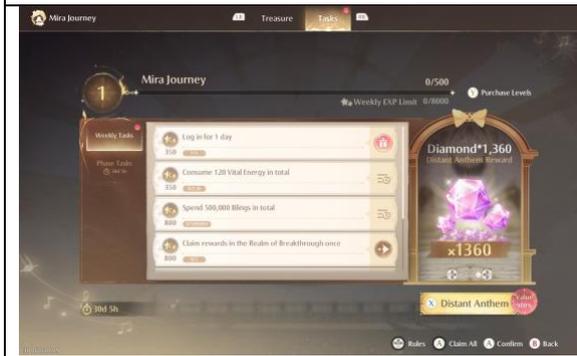
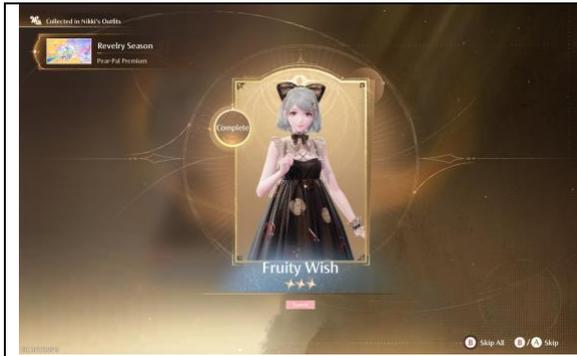
Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Round features</li> <li>- Patch work design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All of the attributes work together to form a cute aesthetic and communicate to the player that even the enemies in this</li> </ul>

		world align with the cute aesthetic and gentle as well as serene atmosphere.
Saliience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unnatural bright colors</li> <li>- Large bodies and small limbs</li> <li>- Glowing colors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The colors highlight that these creatures are not from the real world, communicating to the players that they are in a fantasy land.</li> <li>- The large bodies and limbs communicate to the players that they are still safe and that even the enemies do not pose a big threat. The saliience highlights that these creatures are still native to this cute fantastical land</li> </ul>

#### 4. Achievement Screens

##### 4.1. Personal Achievements



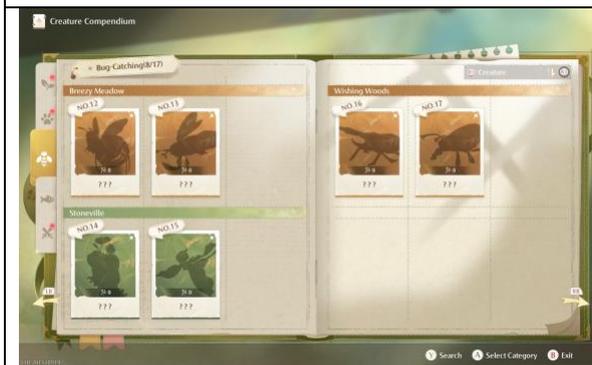
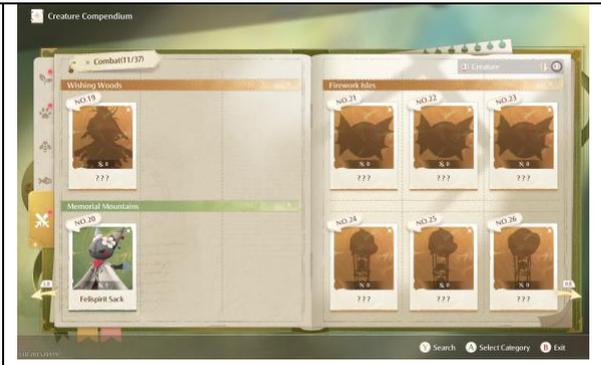
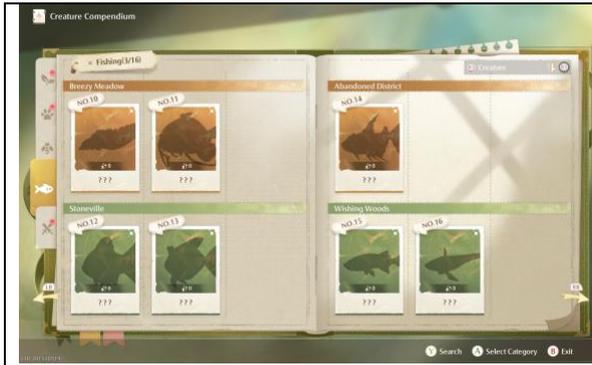


Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Books</li> <li>- Crystals</li> <li>- Paper cranes</li> <li>- Magnifying glass</li> <li>- Outfits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicating to the player that they are conducting in depth research and achieving a lot of different tasks</li> <li>- The crystals communicate value that they are getting from progressing in the game and communicate to the player that they are successful</li> </ul>
Saliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bright colors</li> <li>- Prominence of yellow</li> <li>- Percentages</li> <li>- Stars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bright colors call attention to the achievements of the player and make them focus on how they are accomplished to satisfy them</li> <li>- Yellow connotes excitement and happiness and communicates to the player that they are being gratified</li> <li>- Percentages highlight exactly how much progress is being made and connote to the player that there is still a certain amount to go while simultaneously connoting to them how much they have achieved already</li> <li>- Stars connote progress and since they are prominent throughout the game they</li> </ul>

		communicate the status of the player. They connote to the player that the more stars they have the more status they hold, once again reiterating the importance of status in the game
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Map-like layout</li> <li>- Consistent cozy art style, like a personal diary or notebook</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicates a journey</li> <li>- Cohesion reinforces brand identity</li> <li>- Connotes fantasy and comfort</li> <li>- Communicates that the lay out is more personal</li> </ul>

#### 4.2. Creature Achievements



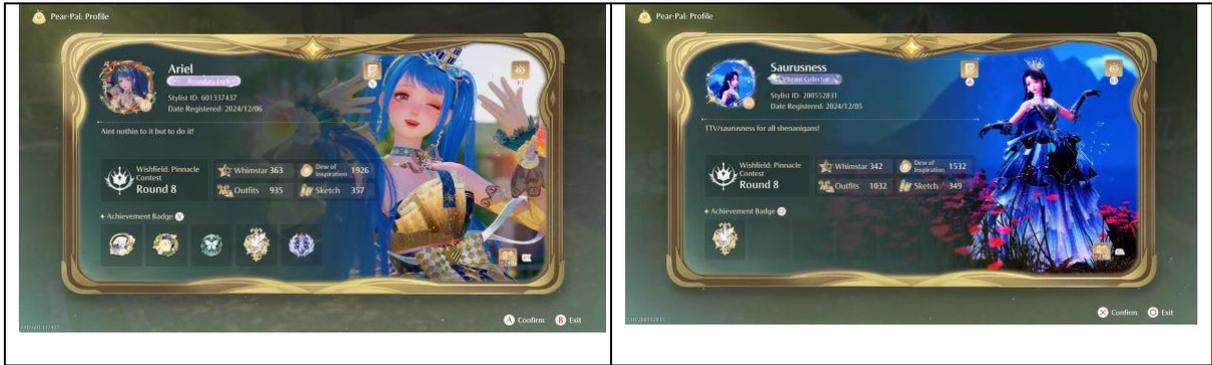


Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collect 14/21, Bug-Catching 8/17, Groom 5/25, clearly shows progress</li> <li>- Animal and creature images</li> <li>- Tags that communicate if something is new, undiscovered or already interacted with</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicates to the player how much progress they have made, their success and that they have achieved exploring the world</li> </ul>
Salience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'New' tags next to newly discovered animals or plants.</li> <li>- Silhouettes with '???'</li> <li>- Numbered animals and creatures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Draws focus to newly discovered animals to communicate to the player that they are discovering new things and learning more about the worlds.</li> <li>- Communicates knowledge acquisition.</li> <li>- Silhouettes and '???' communicate that there is still much left to explore, the shadows tease and preview what the player still needs to discover</li> <li>- Numbers reiterate this and communicate the vastness of the world by giving each creature an assigned number, clearly communicates to the player how much more they have to explore.</li> </ul>

<p>Setting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mimic a physical field journal.</li> <li>- Includes tabs and sections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evoke a relaxed mood and environmental aesthetic that aligns with the overall layout of the creature compendium</li> <li>- Communicates journey tracking.</li> </ul>
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### 4.3. Public Achievements



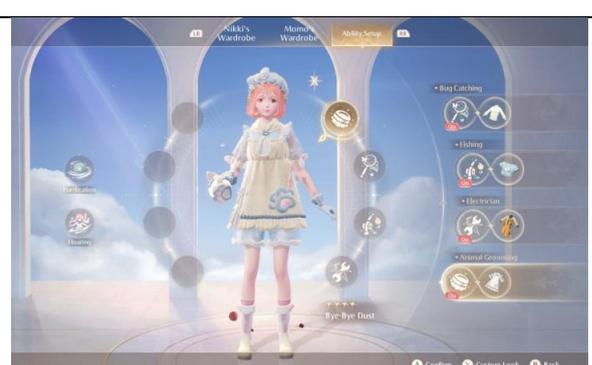


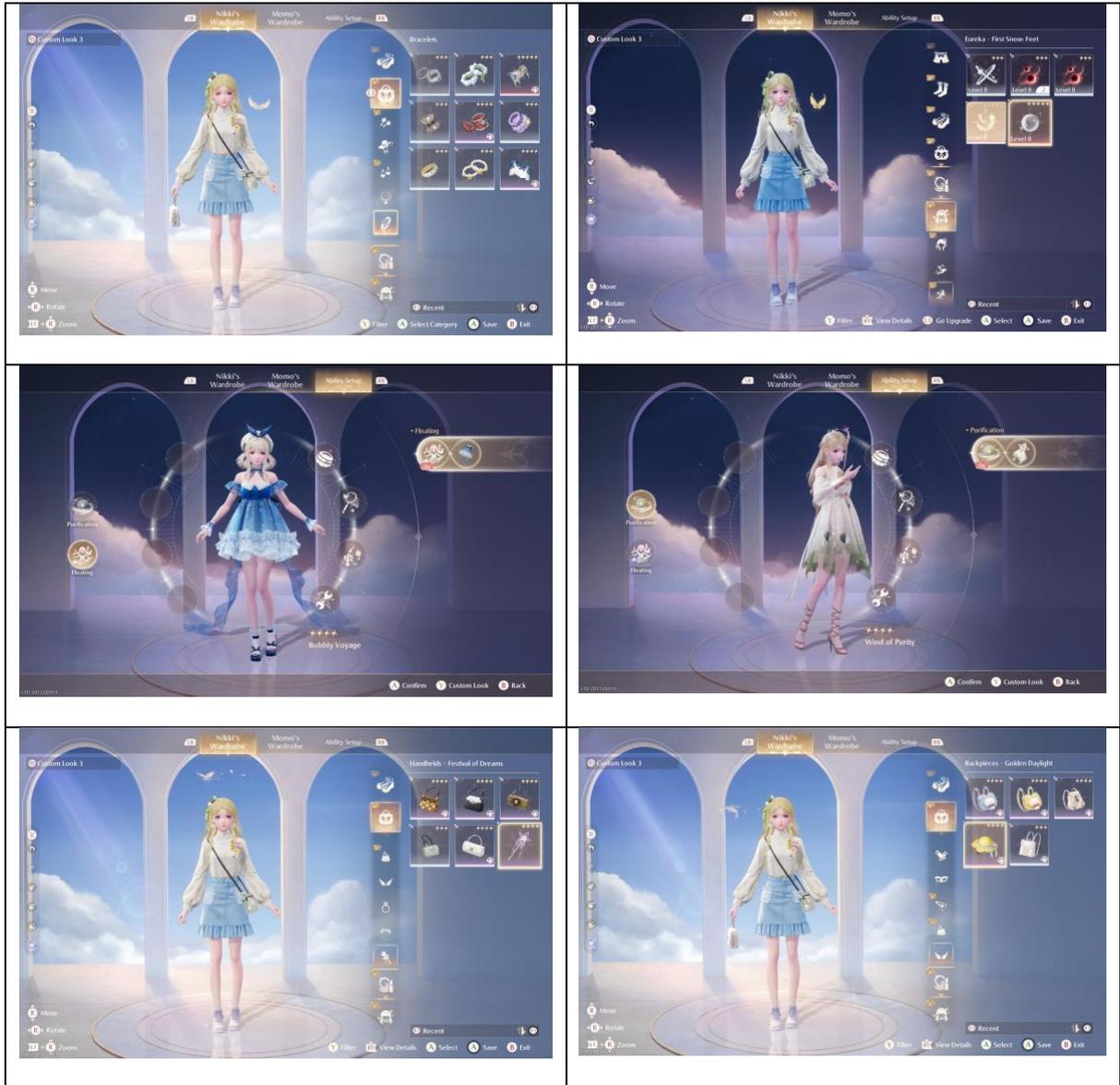
Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Progress percentages</li> <li>- Stars</li> <li>- Achievement Title Banners</li> <li>- Badges</li> <li>- Player's level and collected item percentage count</li> <li>- Editable photo frames, avatars, and backgrounds that are unlocked with progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Achievement mastery and progression. Higher percentages symbolize dedication, time investment, and player expertise</li> <li>- Status and rank</li> <li>- Identifiable titles that communicate the status of a person and that they are powerful or skilled and hold authority in game</li> <li>- Collected items and levels function as public communicators of success and prestige</li> <li>- Unlocked customization options communicate exclusivity and engagement commitment</li> </ul>
Salience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Plain primary colors for low-ranking cards</li> <li>- Bright colors for high-ranking cards</li> <li>- Frames that the player can choose based on their level</li> <li>- More elaborate and animated designs as the player level advances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All of these function to signify power and status within the game. They work as reminders to the other players that the player they are seeing is either high or low level. Bright colors bring more attention or higher-level player and connote their importance to anyone who might see their profile.</li> <li>- Animated or ornate frames communicate prestige and respect to the player community</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simple backgrounds featuring a single animal</li> <li>- Detailed and ornate background with details, sound icons and flowers</li> <li>- Animated or static background depending on player level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicates the big difference between low ranking and higher-ranking players</li> <li>- Backgrounds act as visual representations of rank and status</li> </ul>

## 5. Avatar Customization









Semiotic Concept	Denotation	Connotation
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full body avatar</li> <li>- Clothing, accessories, makeup and hair can be selected</li> <li>- Each item is categorized and marked with star rating and colored hue</li> <li>- Icons on ability outfits like a bug net, fishhook, wrench and brush</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The full body view communicates the importance placed on creating a visually pleasing avatar that others can view.</li> <li>- Star ratings and hues communicate rarity</li> <li>- Icons communicate utility and outfit function</li> </ul>
Salience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each item has a star rating in the corner, and newly acquired items are labelled with a pink 'New' ribbon</li> <li>- A vertical grid of clothing/accessory icons is positioned to the right of the avatar, each grouped by type</li> <li>- Five styles marked by colors: Elegant, Fresh, Sweet, Cool,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indicate and communicate rarity as well as newly acquired items. This communicates to the player that they are successful and that they are making progress.</li> <li>- 5-star items are highlighted in red hue to spotlight and draw attention to the</li> </ul>

	<p>and Sexy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Locked palette colors appear greyed out with padlock icons</li> <li>- Different star items have corresponding hues</li> <li>- Ability icons for outfits that serve a utility purpose</li> </ul>	<p>exclusive items, communicating to the player that those are the most desirable and showing that rarity is significant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Five styles communicate to the player that they are free to customize their character in any way they like, it communicates the freedom of self-expression</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simple with clouds</li> <li>- Frame Nikki by using arches and window like visuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connotes fantasy and a magical doll like aesthetic. It communicates to the player that the most important factor is the foreground, which is Nikki herself</li> <li>- The focus is only on Nikki and the items. The plain colored background also ensures that the hues of the items are always seen and don't fade into the background</li> </ul>