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"Even better than the real thing"?: Electronic organs and the dilemma of product mimicry

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Abstract

Research Summary: Mimetic products like fake wood and fake meat pose a dilemma for producers. On the one hand, their core value lies in faithfully replicating a "real" referent. On the other hand, they must differentiate themselves. I explore this tension through a qualitative historical investigation of the first electronic musical organs: The Orgatron was a low-cost close imitation of the pipe organ, whereas the Hammond was a lesser imitation that attempted to augment the pipe organ. Ironically, the Orgatron's superior imitation limited its success, whereas Hammond's lesser imitation enabled it to identify and develop new markets. My study suggests that the best product-imitation strategy may not be faithful mimicry, but rather rapid augmentation. More generally, it contributes to the literatures on imitative products, positioning, and authenticity.

Managerial Summary: Mimetic products like fake wood and fake meat pose a dilemma for producers. On the one hand, their core value lies in faithfully replicating "the real thing." On the other hand, they must differentiate themselves. I explore this tension through a historical investigation of the first electronic musical organs. One pioneer, the Orgatron was a pure imitation of the pipe organ, whereas the other, Hammond, was a lesser imitation that attempted to augment it. Ironically, the Orgatron's superior imitation limited its ultimate success, whereas Hammond's lesser imitation enabled it to

identify and develop new markets. My study suggests that the best product-imitation strategy may not be faithful mimicry, but rather rapid augmentation. More generally, it contributes to our understanding of imitation, positioning, and market exploration.

KEYWORDS

archival and historical research, authenticity, cognitive strategy, framing, imitation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Mimetic products—that is, products made to offer a key attribute or attributes of an established "real" referent but that do not claim to be real versions themselves—are rampant, including imitation meat, artificial flavors, and fake fur. Mimetic products also present a dilemma: On the one hand, firms may strive to make their product as close as possible to the "real" referent; on the other hand, they must differentiate from this referent and from other mimetic products. These mimicking and differentiating strategies may not be compatible. Surprisingly, despite the growing ubiquity of mimetic products—often fueled by technological advances—we know very little about how firms introduce and frame such products, and to what effect. In this article, I tackle this challenge through a historical qualitative analysis.

I explore the introduction of the electronic musical organ. In 1935, two firms, Everett and Hammond, introduced the first electronic organs, intending them as substitutes for the large and expensive pipe organs that were dominant at the time. Everett and Hammond advertised their instruments in the same periodicals; highlighted the similarities between their products and the pipe-organ referent; and emphasized cost and size advantages over this referent. Yet while Everett closely mimicked the referent, taking a "pure" imitative approach, Hammond both imperfectly mimicked and attempted to extend the referent, employing an "augmenting" approach. These two approaches, in turn, were associated with different performance outcomes.

My study makes three primary contributions. First, I extend our understanding of mimetic products. Specifically, I detail different dimensions of mimicry and different strategies that firms may employ, along with their apparent effects. I also surface how a particularly successful imitation can be associated with worse performance, precisely because it adheres to expectations of the "real." Second, I address the literature on new market entry, challenging recommendations of a niche approach for new entrants and unearthing how tensions between novelty and familiarity may play out across existing known users versus potential new markets. Finally, I contribute to the literature on authenticity, contrasting different bases of authenticity, and linking imitation strategies to authenticity implications.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Mimetic products

Fundamentally, mimetic products are substitutes, defined as products or services that meet the same basic need in a different way (Porter, 1980). As competitors, all product-substitute

producers strategically position their products, choosing a combination of product attributes and price that mark a superior competitive position for their offering (Greve, 1998; Porter, 1980; Porter, 1996). In turn, an enormous and still-growing literature explores the antecedents and consequences of product positioning (e.g., recent examples include Anthony et al., 2016; Barlow et al., 2019; and Cattani, Dunbar, & Shapira, 2017).

Like other substitutes, mimetic products attempt to offer a key attribute (or attributes) of products in a category. Often, they also attempt to be a low-cost option. However, unlike substitutes generally and even other products that may engage in imitation, *mimetic products*, as conceptualized here, make explicit reference to a "real" version of the product and consumers rely on this reference to make sense of the mimetic product and its value. Thus, mimetic products foreground consumer cognition, and firms' may attempt to shape cognition through their framing efforts.[1] "Fake" meat, for example, only has meaning insofar as a consumer has a certain conceptualization of "real" meat, and it attempts to provide some of the same key attributes as this real referent (e.g., taste, texture, and appearance). By contrast, pork and chicken may be substitutes. However, consumers do not perceive one to be real and the other to be imitative, nor (typically) do chicken producers frame their product as an imitation of pork. Similarly, Coke and Pepsi may be substitutes, but consumers do not perceive one to be real cola and the other to be fake, nor does Pepsi position itself as an imitation of Coke.

Mimetic products, as conceptualized here, also differ from copies and forgeries. Several studies explore copies or "knockoffs" (Kim & Nelson, 2000), which consist of "duplicating an original as nearly as possible" (Posen et al., 2023, p. 76). For example, generic versions of ibuprofen are the molecular equivalent of the name-brand products that they copy. Because there are obvious benefits to selling a copy, typically at a lower price, copying firms strive to closely mimic the original. In turn, the literature focuses on the effect that copies have on original products and producers (e.g., Lee et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2023; Yilmaz et al., 2023). Mimetic products such as fake wood and synthetic rubber, however, are not copies since they do not *attempt to be* nor *are they* the same as real wood and rubber; though they reference the "real," they also acknowledge that they are not the same thing.

Another subset of the literature on substitutes examines forgeries. Unlike copies, forgeries "necessarily involv[e] *deceptive intentions* on the part of the forger or the seller of the work: this [intention] distinguishes forgeries from innocent copies" (Dutton, 2003 p. 259, emphasis in original). Common examples of forgeries include signatures and cultural products such as works of art (e.g., Qian, 2014; Qian et al., 2015; Wang, 2023), when producers claim that the product is something that it is not. Yet again, mimetic products such as fake wood and synthetic rubber are not forgeries since they do not *deceptively suggest that* they are the same. Moreover, in the case of both copies and forgeries, producers typically attempt to offer something that is as close as possible to the real thing, and intellectual property (which may or may not be violated) serves as the primary barrier to their efforts. By contrast, mimetic products face a more pronounced tension between such close mimicry and the need for differentiation—driven, in part, by the fact that, by definition, they are not real and they acknowledge as much.

Across different products, the imitated attribute(s) may differ. For example, some mimetic products, such as artificial flowers and artificial leather (Meikle, 1995), may attempt to replicate the appearance of the real thing. Others, such as biodiesel (Hiatt & Carlos, 2019), may attempt

[1]I use the phrase "mimetic product" rather than "imitation product" to signal the tighter boundary conditions around the phenomenon I explore. While many products engage in imitation of one another, mimetic products make explicit reference to "real" versions of the product and acknowledge that they are not real.

to imitate functionality. Others, such as margarine, may attempt to imitate taste. Still others, such as fake fur, may attempt to imitate texture. And, of course, many mimetic products attempt to imitate multiple attributes since products have bundles of attributes (Levinthal, 1997). For example, fake wood may imitate both the functionality and appearance of real wood.

As with substitutes generally, which attributes matter depends on the use-case scenario. For example, if one is creating a decorative table centerpiece with an imitation strawberry, then appearance is key; but if one is creating a beverage, then taste is key. Yet in each case, these mimetic offerings are defined by reference to the "real" strawberry and by an explicit recognition (on the part of producers and, typically, consumers) that they are *not* "real."

2.2 | Authenticity, categories, and mimetic products

As this discussion highlights, reference to "real" referents is core to mimetic products. These products thus implicate both authenticity and categories. Fundamentally, authenticity "is a question of audience perceptions of being real or fake" (Hahl, 2016, p. 930. See also Lehman et al., 2019). Of course, there are multiple dimensions against which any product might be judged as "authentic." For example, O'Connor et al. (2017) note that a beer might be judged as authentic, or not, on the basis of its ingredients, origin, production technique or other characteristics. Moreover, a consumer may judge a given beer as authentic on some dimensions and not others—though, of course, the most authentic beer would be authentic on all dimensions.

Building on these insights, O'Connor et al. (2017) develop a framework that reveals four meanings of authenticity: *Moral authenticity* concerns the sincerity of choices and the alignment between professed values and actions, as with a socially driven firm; *Idiosyncratic authenticity* concerns the "recognized historical quirkiness [of an] organization, product, or service," as with a well-regarded and unique restaurant; *Craft authenticity* concerns the process by which something is created, as with certain distilleries and breweries; and *Type authenticity* concerns whether something is "true to its associated type or genre" (O'Connor et al., 2017, p. 4. See also Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Lehman et al., 2019).[2] With mimetic products, type authenticity can be particularly germane since these products, by definition, attempt to replicate key attributes that define members of a type, even as they acknowledge that they are not "real" members.

These insights also highlight the close connection between research on authenticity and on categories. Porac and Thomas (1990, p. 227) define a cognitive category as, "a collection of organizations [or entities] that are perceived as similar to each other and different from those outside the category." Categories thus feature rules that can be used to determine the inclusion or exclusion of entities (such as products), as well as labels that establish semantic boundaries (Cattani, Dunbar, & Shapira, 2017; Cattani, Porac, & Thomas, 2017, p. 70. See also Bowker & Star, 2000; Hannan et al., 2007; Murphy, 2004; Porac & Rosa, 1996; Rosch, 1978). Thus, in the language of type authenticity, category members are entities that conform to audience expectations around the type.

Critically, both perceived authenticity and category alignment convey benefits to producers (e.g., Hsu, 2006; Voronov et al., 2023; Zuckerman, 1999). Given these benefits, much of the

[2]Lehman et al. (2019) offer a somewhat different, but complementary, discussion of three broad conceptualizations of authenticity: as *connection to a claimed person, place or time*; as *consistency between the "internal values" and the "external expressions" of an entity*; and as *conformity to a category*.

literature's focus is on how producers can convince consumers that their offerings are authentic category members (e.g., Beverland, 2005; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Hiatt & Park, 2022; Jones et al., 2005). For example, Voronov et al. (2023) explore how incumbent and micro-distilleries in the Canadian whiskey industry use both materiality and narratives in attempts to establish their authenticity. Likewise, Peterson (2013) describes how country music artists adopt wardrobes and personas to make their music seem authentic. In each of these cases, producers thus engage in what Lehman et al. (2019, p. 31) term "authenticity work" aimed at convincing consumers that their offerings are "real" category members.[3]

By contrast, this literature offers less insight into cases in which a firm's products are, by definition, *not* "real" nor do they claim to be. In fact, to the extent that the literature discusses such cases, the focus is on the costs of inauthenticity. For example, Fine (2003, p. 166) writes, "If authenticity sells art, claims of inauthenticity can be damaging" (see also Frake, 2017). Thus, the emphasis is on producers' attempts to establish the authenticity of their products, rather than on how producers frame products that they acknowledge to be inauthentic (see also Hahl, 2016).

These insights also suggest an inherent tension: On the one hand, the core value of a mimetic product lies in mimicking the "real" referent, and producers may thus claim that their products are as close as possible to this referent (cf. Barlow et al., 2019; Majzoubi et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2018). For instance, *The New York Times* reported in 2019 that imitation-meat companies like Impossible and Beyond were striving to make burgers that "look, taste and even appear to bleed like real meat" (O'Connor, 2019). On the other hand, mimetic products, by definition, are not real and they acknowledge as much. Thus, differentiation from a referent is "baked into" them—though the basis of this differentiation is not at all obvious.

Mimetic products thus foreground a tension between mimicry and differentiation. Unfortunately, neither the literature on authenticity nor the literature on categories explores or explains this dilemma. In turn, despite the growing prevalence of mimetic products, we have little understanding of how producers do and should go about introducing them. In this article, I thus ask how producers frame new mimetic products, and with what apparent consequences.

3 | DATA AND METHODS

3.1 | Setting

An ideal setting to explore this question would have three characteristics: First, the "real" would be long-established such that consumers understand the referent category and its attributes. Second, one could observe both the introduction of mimetic products and their reception and potential modification over many years. Finally, there would be multiple mimetic products introduced simultaneously, enabling a comparison of different approaches. The introduction of the electronic musical organ, which imitates a pipe organ, meets all these criteria.

The pipe organ is one of the oldest musical instruments. Pipe organs have piano-style keyboards and foot pedals connected to numerous pipes. Airflow through different kinds and sizes of pipes generates different pitches and sounds. (Large organs feature thousands of pipes.)

[3]At the same time, other work explores how attempts to claim authenticity can backfire and end up undermining an organization (e.g., Demetry, 2019; Dobrev & Verhaal, 2024; Verhaal et al., 2023).

Historically, pipe organs were used by professional musicians in church environments—and for centuries, the pipe organ was the world's most complex technological artifact (Whitney, 2004).

Beginning in the late 1890s, multiple inventors attempted to harness electricity to create musical instruments (Nye, 1992). In 1935, two firms introduced the first electronic organs: The Everett Piano Company, founded in 1883, introduced the "Orgatron." Laurens Hammond, who founded the Hammond Clock Company in 1928 to commercialize his invention of an electric rotary motor, introduced the Hammond Organ.

Both Everett and Hammond advertised their instruments in leading music trade magazines and described their instruments as imitations of—and substitutes for—traditional pipe organs, at least initially. For example, a 1935 Hammond ad claimed, "The low price of The Hammond Organ makes fine organ music available to congregations that could not afford expensive installations." As this ad highlights, the new electronic organs often referenced their lower price as an advantage. While a comparable pipe organ cost $10,000 or more, the Orgatron and the Hammond each retailed for less than $2000.[4] In addition, both manufacturers highlighted their instruments' comparatively compact size as an advantage. Yet despite these similarities, Everett and Hammond framed their instruments differently.

3.2 | Data

I began by collecting advertisements for the Orgatron and the Hammond Organ. Analysis of advertisements is an established approach to research on product positioning and framing (e.g., Anthony et al., 2016; Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010; Raffaelli, 2019; Rosa et al., 1999). Ads enable researchers to assess which features producers choose to highlight, what language they use to describe their products, whom they target, and other reflections of producer framing of product offerings. I thus collected every advertisement for the Orgatron and the Hammond Organ from every monthly issue of *The Diapason* and *The American Organist* (two leading magazines oriented toward professional organists) from 1935 through 1953. (In 1953, an electronic organ first appeared on the cover of *The American Organist*, thus signaling that imitations were well-established.) As I describe below, I found that manufacturers later marketed electronic organs to musical amateurs for home use—a new practice since pipe organs had never been marketed this way. Thus, I also captured advertisements in *Etude*, a more general hobbyist music magazine, from 1943 (the year of the first *Etude* electronic-organ ad) through 1953. My full ad dataset includes 235 ads: 148 from *The Diapason* and *The American Organist*, and 87 from *Etude*.

To complement the ad data, I also collected data from the Hammond corporate archives at the Chicago History Museum and from the Wurlitzer corporate archives at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.[5] I copied approximately 1300 pages from these archives, including internal memos, annual reports, board meeting notes, and sales information.

Finally, I collected additional documents to capture the perspectives of musicians, critics and the general public. Thus, I gathered articles, editorials, letters-to-the-editor and columns

[4]The Orgatron initially retailed for $1800; the Hammond retailed for $1250 but, unlike the self-contained Orgatron, required the additional purchase of an external tone cabinet. Contemporary observers noted that the two instruments, compared as complete systems, were thus very comparable in price (e.g., D-1935-12b).

[5]Wurlitzer acquired the Orgatron technology and brand in 1945.

from all three focal magazines, as well as from *The New York Times*, that mentioned Everett, Wurlitzer, Hammond, and/or electronic organs for this same time period (1935–1953).

3.3 | Analysis

Because of the lack of theory addressing the introductory framing of mimetic products, I used inductive, historical methods for my analytical strategy (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, I took an interpretivist approach to longitudinal data analysis (Kirsch et al., 2014; Wadhwani, 2016; Wadhwani et al., 2020). I began by reading third-party sources that described the broad development of the electronic organ and the histories of Hammond and Everett/Wurlitzer, including Eby (1953), Faragher (2011), and Vail (2002). I then used archival sources to assemble case histories for the Orgatron and the Hammond organ. These case histories listed key events for each instrument and company, such as modifications introduced and, in the case of the Orgatron, the acquisition by Wurlitzer in 1945.

Because my research question is fundamentally concerned with framing, advertisements form the core of my analysis. I initially coded the advertisements chronologically, thus considering the Orgatron and the Hammond together. I coded each ad for features mentioned, adjectives used, specific comparisons to pipe organs, endorsements, stated target markets and use-case scenarios, and similar indicators of product framing. In addition, I coded for visual features, including where the instrument was pictured (e.g., in a church) and the appearance of the instrument itself, such as decorative features on the cabinet (cf. Krabbe & Grodal, 2023).

Once I had coded all ads and generated my full code list, I clustered codes into four groups, which reflect different dimensions of imitation. I further describe these four groups in my findings, but briefly they consist of: *sounds*, which captures the sounds created (e.g., "diapason," which is a stop on a pipe organ), descriptions of these sounds (e.g., "realistic"), and descriptions of sound-generation techniques (e.g., "the Hammond tonewheel system"); *use*, which captures who might use the machine (e.g., an amateur or professional), for what purpose (e.g., to accompany choirs or for practice), in what environment (e.g., a church, hotel or home), and via what kinds of interactions (e.g., via an "easy-to-use" interface); *appearance*, including the case design and the mimicry of visual features of then-contemporary pipe organs; and *social proof*, which captures endorsements, lists of adopters, highlights of company history, and mentions of conformity to institutional standards, such as those designated by the largest professional association for organists, the American Guild of Organists (AGO).

Of course, there was some degree of overlap between codes and groups, as might be expected with rich historical data. For example, conformity to the AGO standard dimensions might influence both the appearance and use of an instrument. I thus present the evidence according to these groups, which reflect a higher-level interpretation, rather than rigidly adhering to the assignment of lower-level codes to singular groups.

Finally, I passed through the advertisements chronologically again, but this time considering each instrument separately. At the same time, I again reviewed the corpus of features and columns, as well as corporate archival data. From these sources, I pulled commentary on each instrument, as offered by musicians and journalists, as well as key statistics, such as sales trends. I also reviewed my coding against some of these materials, such as market research reports. And I identified key events tied to shifts in each company and the industry as a whole. This combination of ad coding and archival analysis enabled me to assess shifts in each manufacturer's framing strategy over time (cf. Langley, 1999), and highlighted three periods within

the 1935–1953 timeframe that I consider: 1935–1940—initial introduction; 1941–1948—disruption and reintroduction; and 1949–1953—convergence and broad acceptance.

4 | FINDINGS

The Orgatron and Hammond were similar in many respects, including their low cost and compact size compared to a pipe organ. Despite these similarities, however, Everett/Wurlitzer and Hammond framed their imitative organs quite differently: Everett/Wurlitzer took what I term a "pure" imitative approach, striving to show how their instrument was just like the pipe organ, only cheaper and smaller. By contrast, Hammond took what I term an "augmenting" approach, mimicking the pipe organ to a degree, especially initially, while also highlighting new sounds and applications. Ironically, even as Everett/Wurlitzer's superior imitation enabled them to find considerable success in capturing the traditional organ market, it also bound them to existing conceptualizations of this market. Conversely, Hammond's lesser imitation enabled them to open new markets and, ultimately, to find much greater success.

The sections that follow are divided into the three time periods that emerged from my analysis. In each section, I first review the Orgatron's positioning along the dimensions of sound, appearance, use and social proof. I then examine the Hammond along these same dimensions.

4.1 | Initial introduction (1935–1940)

4.1.1 | The Everett Orgatron

Advertisements for the Orgatron emphasized the instrument's similarity to a pipe organ across the dimensions of sound, appearance, use and social proof. For example, a 1936 ad quoted an organist as saying that the Orgatron, "Looks, sounds and plays just like my own church organ!" (AO-1936-09b). Similarity in sound often was at the center of mimicry claims—as might be expected since making sound is any organ's core function. For example, a 1936 ad claimed that the Orgatron "possesses the conventional character and artistic quality of tone to which organists are accustomed" (AO-1936-08e). A 1938 ad claimed, "Each tone is characteristic of the stop [pipe] it represents" (AO-1938-06a). In addition, most Orgatron ads during this period also included a "stop list," which named sounds using the same language as a pipe organ.

Even as Orgatron ads highlighted the instrument's sound similarity to an organ, however, they were silent about the electronic technology that made this possible. For example, one 1936 ad read, "Normal, not artificial, tone production methods" (D-1936-09c). By downplaying the difference in sound-generating approach, these ads thus minimized the contrast between the Orgatron and a real organ.

Orgatron ads also underscored the instrument's similarity in appearance to a pipe organ. For example, a 1936 ad noted, "The console looks like the regulation unit on a large pipe organ" (D-1936-10b). Indeed, every ad for the Orgatron included a picture, and knowledgeable readers would have noticed the extreme similarities between the Orgatron and a pipe organ, including the cabinet design, the 32-note foot-pedal board, the multiple "expression" pedals, and the on–off "stop tabs" used to select sounds. Online Appendix A offers a direct visual comparison.

Advertisements for the Orgatron also emphasized that an organist would play it in the same way as a pipe organ. For example, a 1936 ad claimed that organists could easily move from a pipe organ

to the Orgatron: "Organ literature may be played as written and without the necessity of acquiring a new technique! ... Organists and organ students may pass from [the Orgatron] to the conventional organ without the slightest difficulty" (AO-1936-08e). In addition, Orgatron ads emphasized that the instrument would be used for the same purposes as the pipe organ—namely, for church services. For example, one 1936 ad noted, "It is an ideal instrument for the church—large and small—because it performs beautifully for solo, choir, or congregational singing" (AO-1936-10b).

Finally, the social proof in Orgatron ads reinforced the instrument's close alignment with the pipe organ. For example, a 1938 ad featured a well-known pipe organist to make a claim about pure imitation: "In the words of the eminent composer and organist, Dr. Alexander Russell, 'the nearest thing to real organ tone.'" Still other ads listed the names of churches that had installed the Orgatron. In addition, the Orgatron closely adhered to AGO standards around use and design—and called attention to this alignment. For instance, a 1936 ad boasted that the instrument's "Measurements and specifications conform to those adopted by the American Guild of Organists" (D-1936-08b). Because Everett had a long history as a piano maker, their ads also referenced this history to suggest the Orgatron's alignment with tradition. For example, a 1936 ad noted, "It is built by a company and in a plant that has made fine musical instruments for more than half a century" (D-1936-09c).

In short, across a variety of dimensions, Orgatron ads attempted to hue closely to the sound, appearance, and use of the pipe organ, and they showcased how the firm's early adopters, professional endorsements and musical history reinforced this replication of tradition. Online Appendix B offers additional examples.

Articles, reviews and editorials provide evidence that this approach resonated with organists, professionals in the organ world, and general listeners. For example, a 1936 article in *The American Organist* reported, "It [the Orgatron] sounds more like an organ than anything else" (AO-1936-09a), while a 1937 article in the same publication reported that it "looks, sounds, plays—in fact does everything like an organ" (AO-1937-12c). An article in *The New York Times* that same year reported, "The tone, whether of string, flute, reed or diapason variety, strikingly approximates that produced by organ pipes" (New York Times, 1937).

At the same time, however, organists and professionals in the organ world still considered the Orgatron (and any electronic organ or "electrotone") inferior to a "real" organ, given how it generated sound. For example, a 1936 article in *The American Organist* argued:

> Oleomargarin tastes like butter, looks like butter, acts like butter; but it does not come from a cow's milk and is therefore not butter. ... Rayon looks like silk, feels like silk, acts like silk; but it does not come from the product of the silk-worm and is therefore not silk. ... An electrotone may sound to uneducated ears like certain types of organs, but its tones do not come from organ pipes, and T.A.O. in fairness to its readers ... [cannot] make an electrotone appear to be an organ, or a substitute for or the equal of an organ—particularly for church use (AO-1936-01a).

Thus, even as the Orgatron seemed to strike a chord, it remained inferior to "the real thing."

4.1.2 | The Hammond organ

While the Orgatron hewed closely to the pipe organ referent, the Hammond attempted not only to mimic key attributes but also, crucially, to augment this referent by offering additions and

improvements. Thus, Hammond claimed that its instrument could both imitate the pipe organ and create *new* sounds. For example, a 1935 ad featured the slogan "The organ of a million tones" and boasted, "[The Hammond] produces the entire range of tone coloring necessary for the rendition, without sacrifice, of the great works of classical organ literature. In addition, it permits many tone colors never before heard on any musical instrument" (AO-1935-05).

Unlike Orgatron ads, Hammond ads also emphasized the novelty of the instrument's sound-generating technology. For example, a 1936 ad highlighted the Hammond's electrical innards and linked this characteristic to a claimed advantage over the pipe organ: "It [the Hammond] creates sound electrically, contains no blowers or pipes, never gets out of tune, and is inexpensive to maintain" (D-1936-03a). Thus, while Orgatron ads downplayed the use of novel technology, Hammond ads highlighted it as an improvement on the pipe organ.

The Hammond also differed in appearance from pipe organs, in some respects. Like mid-sized pipe organs (and like the Orgatron), it had two keyboards and foot-pedals; but the case of the Hammond had open sides and skinny piano-like legs. Moreover, the Hammond featured just 25 foot-pedals instead of the standard 32—owing to Laurens Hammond's observation that many organists seemed to not use the upper pedals anyway (Vail, 2002). Finally, the Hammond did not have familiar on–off stop tabs; instead, the console featured numerous 10-step "drawbars" that the organist had to adjust to create a sound (again, see Online Appendix A).

The Hammond's drawbar interface for selecting sounds, unlike the pipe organ and Orgatron's "stop tab" interface, also meant that organists had to interact with it differently. Thus, although Hammond sometimes claimed, "The musician plays it as he would any other organ" (D-1936-04a), other ads pointed to the need to learn a different technique. For example, a 1937 ad noted, "A very interesting instruction book has been prepared ... its purpose is to show the [organist] how to adapt his technique to the Hammond Organ" (D-1937-02a). This book was soon followed by another: "An Introduction to Playing the Hammond Electric Organ and a Translation of Pipe-Organ Stops into Hammond-Organ Number Arrangements" (Irwin, 1939). These ads and books thus acknowledged that organists interacted differently with the Hammond.

The sound-generating mechanism for the Hammond organ also had an instantaneous "attack," meaning there was no delay before the onset of a sound. This was unlike both the Orgatron and a pipe organ, in which there is a slight delay. Hammond played up this characteristic as a feature, not a flaw. For example, a 1937 ad claimed, "The easy and instantaneous action of the Hammond enables the player to produce brilliant staccato passages and repeated notes as effectively as upon the piano—a great advantage over the ordinary pipe organ." (D-1937-06b) Thus, with this characteristic, as with others, Hammond was a lesser imitation. In turn, it drew attention to such differences and claimed that they were improvements.

Descriptions of use-case scenarios for the Hammond organ likewise differed from the Orgatron in that Hammond ads not only appealed to the use-case scenario for pipe organs—namely, churches and concert halls—but also suggested additional applications. For example, a 1935 ad for the Hammond listed not only the names of several churches, but also hotels, restaurants, schools, and mortuaries (D-1935-09b). In fact, half of the Hammond ads with pictures show it in a building other than a church, such as a 1936 Hammond ad that pictured the instrument in a living room with the headline, "A 'Concert' Organ at Home" (D-1936-09b).

Finally, like the Orgatron, Hammond ads relied heavily on indicators of social proof. However, unlike the Orgatron, Hammond ads featured adopters and endorsers beyond church organists. For example, a 1935 ad boldly listed the industrialist Henry Ford as a Hammond owner (D-1935-09b). Lists of organizations showcased similar diversity. For example, another

1935 ad noted "61 churches in 17 states bought the Hammond Organ," signaling this key market. However, it went on to list numerous non-church purchasers, too, under the categories of "mortuaries and cemeteries," "schools and colleges," "hotels, ballrooms and restaurants," and "miscellaneous" (D-1935-12a).

At the same time, only one Hammond ad from this period mentions AGO standards—probably because Hammond's imperfect imitation did not adhere to these standards. And again in contrast to the Orgatron, Hammond could not cite a legacy as a musical instruments company. Thus, no Hammond ads make any mention of the company's history.

Articles, reviews and editorials show mixed reactions to the Hammond. For example, a 1935 article in *The Diapason* initially praised the instrument. However, it then noted that the AGO had supplied Hammond with "drawings and details" of organ specifications and lamented, "But Mr. Hammond found it more advantageous ... to modify, and in some cases entirely to disregard, these recommendations. So neither the manuals nor the pedals, combination pistons or other items are Guild standard recommendations" (D-1935-12b). An article that same year in *The American Organist* characterized the Hammond as a "delightful invention" that "has enough merit to stand on its own," and expressed hope that the Hammond will enable more people to make music. However, it also critiqued the Hammond as a "one-color instrument" with a "short-range pedal clavier [i.e., 25 instead of 32 foot-pedals]" (AO-1935-09-1).

Sales data, meanwhile, indicate that both Everett and Hammond were successful—and Hammond especially so: Within a year (by 1936), Hammond had sold 1400 electronic organs, and within 4 years, it had sold over 5000 units—more than all makes of pipe organs combined (Hammond Instrument Company, 1939; Hammond Organ Company, 1954). Orgatron sales data are more difficult to obtain, but available figures indicate that Everett sold around 500 units in the 1930s. Everett was thus another top organ manufacturer, but fell well behind Hammond.

4.2 | World War 2 disruption and reintroduction (1941–1948)

US entry into World War 2 (WW2) in 1941 forced both Hammond and Everett to pause production since the government required organ manufacturers—pipe and electronic alike—to retool manufacturing for the war effort. Then, with the end of WW2 in 1945, the companies reintroduced their electronic organs to the market.

4.2.1 | The Orgatron's reintroduction

Wurlitzer, an established manufacturer of large pipe organs, acquired Orgatron and all related assets from the Everett Piano Company in 1945 (Wurlitzer, 1945). After WW2, Wurlitzer (re) introduced the Orgatron, later calling it the "Wurlitzer Electronic Organ."[6] Advertisements from the post-WW2 era indicate that Wurlitzer continued Everett's strategy of framing the instrument as a pure imitation of the pipe organ in terms of sound, appearance, and use. For example, a 1945 ad for the Wurlitzer Orgatron read, "The only electronic organ with true

[6]It is notable that Everett labeled the instrument the "Everett Orgatron" rather than the Everett Organ, and that Wurlitzer initially kept the "Orgatron" name—though both Everett and Wurlitzer consistently called it an organ in the text of every ad.

church organ tone" (AO-1945-12). The same ad showcased the similarity between the Orgatron's appearance and that of a pipe organ, describing "an instrument possessing all of the traditional characteristics of design ... so long associated with the Orgatron" (AO-1945-12). Similarly, ads for the Orgatron continued to emphasize its focus on professional musicians serving churches, as with a 1946 ad that read, "Fully satisfies the musical requirements of churches large and small" (AO-1946-01a). These ads also offered social proof tied to Wurlitzer's music history, as with a 1948 ad that highlighted, "Wurlitzer's broad experience in electronics and the building of fine musical instruments" (AO-1948-07-19).

Wurlitzer did begin advertising its electronic organ in the more general music magazine *Etude* in the post-war period. However, these early *Etude* ads primarily focused on Wurlitzer's other instrument offerings (e.g., pianos) and still placed the organ in a traditional context. For example, a 1946 Wurlitzer ad in *Etude* focuses on the piano, but also includes small pictures and brief mentions of Wurlitzer's accordions, phonographs, and "a great new electronic organ"—the latter pictured in a church (E-1946-11). Online Appendix C provides additional examples of ads from this period reinforcing the pure imitative positioning of the Orgatron.

Articles, reviews, and editorials suggest that Wurlitzer's approach continued to resonate with church organists and other professionals in the organ world. For example, a 1947 letter to editor in *The American Organist* praised the "familiarity [of] the names on the stop-controls" on the Wurlitzer (AO-1947-11-01), while a 1948 concert review noted "Wurlitzer's vast experience in building organs" and commented that the "Wurlitzer instrument seems to excel in its variety of beautiful soft effects" (AO-1948-07-04). At the same time, however, many commentators continued to emphasize the shortcomings of electronic instruments generally. For example, a 1946 editorial in *The American Organist* claimed, "[pipe organ builders] can knock any of these electrotones into the discard. ... All they [small churches] need is an organ that will sound churchly, support the choir, lead the congregation, and provide modest preludes & postludes."

Still other materials provide an indication of a changing market that was opened by Hammond's augmenting approach. For example, a 1945 article in *The American Organist* commented: "For jazz music and in jazz hands, the Hammond electrotone does splendidly" (AO-1945-08). As Hammond's early experimentation had revealed, their instrument need not attempt to imitate the pipe organ to find success.

4.2.2 | The Hammond's reintroduction

As noted, Hammond targeted homes from the outset, among many possible applications. However, according to an internal history (Hammond Organ Company, 1966), they were surprised at just how many Hammond organs were going into homes and how many amateurs were purchasing them. In fact, most of Hammond's sales were to amateurs in homes and not professionals in churches. Hammond thus increased its emphasis on the home market and for a few years (until 1949) dropped its ads in the traditional and professionally oriented *The American Organist* and *The Diapason*, focusing instead on the broader *Etude* audience.

With this shift, Hammond moved even further away from mimicry, as reflected in the ad descriptions of sounds, appearance and use. A 1943 ad, for example, emphasized the variety of sounds possible on the Hammond, but made no mention of organ-like tones: "there are so many different combinations of tones" (E-1943-05-50). Similarly, these Hammond ads made no reference to the appearance of pipe organs. Instead, they commonly compared the instrument to a spinet (compact) piano, an instrument often found in homes. For example, a 1947

Hammond ad read, "It is hardly larger than a spinet piano and is easily moved" (E-1947-12), and a 1946 ad challenged readers to, "See how conveniently it will fit into your living room" (E-1946-02-25).

This shifted positioning was reflected in descriptions of the use of the Hammond, too. Specifically, ads emphasized ease-of-use as a key characteristic, clearly appealing to amateurs rather than experienced professionals. For example, a 1944 ad claimed, "Perhaps you wonder how you can play beautiful music if, like many others, you have had no training, or have 'let your music go.' Here's the answer!" (E1944-06-23). Another 1944 ad featured a picture of a middle-aged couple, "Mary and Dan," seated at a Hammond organ. The ad asked, "How is it that average folks, like Mary and Dan, who never studied music very seriously, suddenly find in it so much satisfaction? It's just this: the Hammond Organ makes lovely, satisfying music *easy to play*" (italics in original) (E1944-08-23). Notably, Hammond ads in this period also evinced a shift in the gender of the organist pictured: Only three Hammond ads showed women organists in the first period; but in this second period, nearly twice as many Hammond ads showed women organists as showed men. (Orgatron ads, by contrast, pictured only men in both periods.)

Hammond ads in this period also mentioned a wide array of musical styles. For example, a 1947 ad claimed, "Whether you play by ear or by note ... whether you prefer popular or classical music ... even if you're just a beginner—this remarkable instrument will add rich new beauty to anything you play" (E-1947-12). Similarly, a 1946 ad read, "Classics, ballads, swing—no matter what kind of music each member of the family prefers, it's easier to play—and sounds better—on the Hammond Organ." (E-1946-02-25-2).

Finally, social proof in these advertisements also emphasized homes. For example, a 1943 Hammond ad noted that already "thousands of families have chosen it as the ideal home musical instrument" (E-1943-05). In fact, every Hammond ad during this period pictured the instrument in a home environment, almost always with a man and a woman next to it, and often with young children, too. The message that it was an instrument for use by families to play popular music in the home was clear. Again, Online Appendix C provides additional evidence.

4.3 | Convergence and maturity (1949–1953)

The organ market as a whole grew alongside American affluence in the post-WW2 period. Wurlitzer organ sales increased 11-percent from 1947 (the first year of full production) to 1949. In their 1949 Annual Report, Wurlitzer (1949) noted, "The Wurlitzer line of electronic organs... is gaining steadily in prestige and favor, particularly among churches and institutions here and abroad." However, it was the amateur home market, which Wurlitzer had largely ignored, that would prove to be most lucrative. As noted, Hammond organ sales already greatly exceeded those of the Orgatron, and Hammond's 1949 annual report shows a 60-percent increase in sales from 1947 to 1949. Sales to homes drove the majority of Hammond's revenue.

Finally, in 1949, Wurlitzer introduced a home model alongside their purer imitation. Ads for this model mirror earlier Hammond ads. Thus, they highlight a wide array of sounds, they showcase piano-like styling, and they emphasize use by amateur musicians in the home. For example, a 1949 ad that introduced the Wurlitzer home model claimed, "*Easy* to play, too—even for beginners. If you know just a little about playing the piano, you can sit right down and play this Wurlitzer." Continuing, it noted, that the instrument could be used to play "a gay party tune or the music of the masters!" (E1949-05-25). Other ads for the Wurlitzer home model

emphasized its variety of sounds rather than the organ-like realism of these sounds. For example, one 1951 ad celebrated "a multitude of tonal colors that puts new fun in playing and new joy in music" (E1951-04-02). The Wurlitzer home model looked different, too: Like the Hammond organ, it had 25 pedals (rather than 32), and it featured piano-like legs in front. Thus, like Hammond in the earlier period, the new Wurlitzer home model clearly moved away from a purely imitative approach. Online Appendix D provides additional examples.

At the same time, Wurlitzer's ads for its non-home electronic organ continued to claim pure imitation. For example, a 1952 ad noted, "Wurlitzer's interest in tradition is a pretty natural thing. For years, Wurlitzer has been upholding organ tradition in a world of electronics. To this day Wurlitzer Organ has the essentials of true organ tone" (D-1952-11c). Another ad claimed, "The Wurlitzer electronic organ is an authentic church instrument...reverent...the basis of essential beauty in sacred music" (D-1952-2c). Online Appendix D again shows additional data.

Like Wurlitzer, Hammond also bifurcated its offerings during this period. Thus, they introduced a new model explicitly for home use, and another for church use. Ads for the home model amplified earlier Hammond approaches regarding sounds, appearance and use, and dropped any last remaining references to the sounds, appearance and use historically associated with pipe organs. For example, the organ's sound was advertised in 1949 as offering "music's most glorious voice" but makes no reference to a traditional organ (E-1949-12-27). Another 1951 ad touted, "you needn't know music now. ... in less than a month you can learn to play simple music on the Hammond Organ" and featured a subheading reading, "A richer family life" (E1951-04-27); it contained no reference to professionals, churches, classical music or other vestiges of the pipe organ. According to an internal company history (Hammond Organ Company, 1966), even the name and design of the organ—called the "Spinet"—were intended to evoke the home environment, drawing on the prevalence of spinet (compact) pianos in the home.

At the same time, Hammond introduced a new "Concert Model" organ with a traditional cabinet and a full pedalboard. To market it, they restarted their advertisements in *The American Organist* and *The Diapason* in 1949. These ads showcased pure imitation unlike any of Hammond's previous ads. For example, a 1952 ad described in detail the organ's imitation of "16 ft., 8 ft., 4 ft., 2 ft., and 1 ft." pipes and claimed that the instrument could "produce the sonority of a reverberative [sic] church building" (D-1952-10c). Other ads contained "stop lists" for the first time, matching those provided for pipe organs (D-1950-08d).

The console of this Hammond Concert Model also closely resembled a pipe organ, while the interface added familiar "stop tablets" and a standard 32-note pedalboard. A 1950 Hammond Concert Model ad noted that the organ was "designed and built to conform exactly to the specifications laid down by the American Guild of Organists" (D-1950-10b). Ads for the Hammond Concert Model also emphasized its use in churches and for classical concerts. For example, a 1952 ad notes, "[it] is especially built for the church and concert organist who performs in recital" (D1952-09a). And the social proof in these ads reinforced these uses and users. For instance, a 1951 ad noted, "[Hammonds] have been installed in well over 20,000 churches all over the world during the past fifteen years" (D-1951-07b).

Thus, both Wurlitzer and Hammond arrived at similar positions, each offering a purely imitative model and a model that innovated along most every dimension—and often abandoned the referent entirely. However, the two manufacturers' paths varied: Everett/Wurlitzer moved from a pure imitation to, eventually, a bifurcated approach focused on church and home offerings; Hammond moved from an augmenting imitation to the lucrative home market that this strategy revealed, and finally to a bifurcated approach focused on home and church offerings.

By 1953, an electronic organ was on the cover of *The American Organist* magazine, signaling the instrument's widespread acceptance as an imitation of the pipe organ. However, clearly the home market—which was far less imitative of the pipe organ—was the major opportunity for electronic organs. Indeed, that same year (1953), an internal corporate Wurlitzer corporate history claimed, "Today, Wurlitzer Electric Organs are enjoying the greatest era of popularity ever experienced in over two thousand years of the instrument's evolution"—a statement backed by Wurlitzer's sales to homes (Wurlitzer, 1953). For its part, Hammond noted that by 1955, just 6 years after it introduced its Spinet model, the company had sold more of these home organs than all the other organs it had previously produced over the past 20 years (Hammond Organ Company, 1966). By 1956, there were more than 500,000 electronic organs in American homes (Wurlitzer, 1956). And by 1958, nationwide organ sales exceeded piano sales, with home instruments driving the vast majority of sales (Hammond Organ Company, 1966).

At the same time, Hammond and Everett/Wurlitzer met very different fortunes. A mid-1950s report from Hammond noted, "Although six other companies now manufacture electronic organs...the Hammond Company continues to do more organ business than all others combined" (Hammond Organ Company, 1954, p. 46). Indeed, while Hammond sold approximately 500,000 organs between 1935 and 1960, the Orgatron sold less than 25,000 units and was discontinued in 1964 (Faragher, 2011). Although it is impossible to account for every possible influence on firm performance, we can certainly observe that Hammond's approach of experimentation through augmentation was consistent with its triumph, while the Orgatron's superior imitation did not translate into long-term success. In fact, in 1954, Hammond introduced another variant based on their observation that professional jazz musicians were experimenting with their drawbar instrument—yet another new market and application. This new electronic organ, the model B-3, would go on to become an iconic instrument—the most successful organ ever, one of the most recorded instruments in history, and the foundation of new genres of jazz, blues, progressive rock and other musical styles far removed from imitation of the church pipe organ (Vail, 2002).

5 | DISCUSSION

Mimetic products make explicit reference to "real" counterparts in order to help consumers understand what they do and what value they provide. For their producers, they also present a dilemma between mimicry and differentiation. Through a qualitative historical analysis of the electronic musical organ, this study unveils two potential paths that firms can take, along with their apparent consequences. The Orgatron strove to be like the pipe organ that it imitated in most every way, offering reduced price and differentiating based on size, but otherwise hewing very closely to the pipe organ referent. The Hammond Organ, too, offered reduced price and size, but strove to augment the pipe organ while placing less emphasis on accurate imitation. Ironically, my findings suggest that precisely because the Orgatron was a better imitation, it was less successful; Hammond's augmenting approach, by contrast, enabled it both to substitute for pipe organs and, more critically, to identify new markets by redefining the organ and its use.

My study thus suggests that firms introducing mimetic products should strive not to copy too closely, *even if* their imitations can undercut the referent on price and offer modest differentiation. Although close copying can meet with some immediate success, as was the case with the Orgatron, it also can lock a mimetic product into competition with established players

around existing attributes (cf. Kim & Mauborgne, 2014), and preclude the use of mimicry to discover more fruitful markets. My study enhances our understanding of mimetic products, of market-entry strategies, and of authenticity perceptions. I elaborate on these contributions below.

5.1 | Mimetic products

Imitation is a longstanding topic in strategy, and several studies have explored imitation by and of firms (e.g., Csaszar & Siggelkow, 2010; Lieberman & Asaba, 2006; Posen et al., 2013; Posen et al., 2020; Posen et al., 2023; Semadeni & Anderson, 2010; Sharapov & Ross, 2023). However, most studies on product imitation, specifically, tend to assume that firms maximize imitation, and then examine how this affects original products (e.g., Ethiraj & Zhu, 2008; Lee et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2023, Yilmaz et al., 2023). My study, by contrast, shifts attention to the strategic dilemma that mimetic-product producers face.

Fundamentally, firms producing mimetic products must decide *what* to imitate—that is, which attributes—and *how much* to imitate—that is, the fidelity of imitation. Figure 1 illustrates these different considerations in a two-dimensional matrix. In the upper-right of the matrix is a perfect copy—a product that mimics a referent across every attribute and with perfect fidelity. Copies typically attempt to offer "the same thing" at a lower price, as with generic drugs. In this upper-right corner, intellectual property considerations also are particularly salient.

Near the copy, also on the upper-right, lies the example of the Orgatron. Like many mimetic products, the Orgatron was lower-priced than a "real" organ. It also offered the key differentiator of compact size. However, it otherwise strove to be as close as possible to the referent. Farther down and to the left lies the example of the Hammond. The Hammond, too, was lower-priced than a "real" organ and, like the Orgatron, attempted to imitate multiple attributes. However, the Hammond imitated fewer attributes and it offered a lower-fidelity imitation on those it *did* imitate. Of course, such lower-fidelity imitation can be inferior or, as Hammond attempted to claim, can be a lesser imitation because it *improves* on the attribute. As another example, Meikle (1995) documents how DuPont scientists and engineers attempted to make a fake leather that, they claimed, was better than real leather—at least on some dimensions.

As Figure 1 illustrates, one also can envision other mimetic strategies. For instance, in the lower-right quadrant, artificial strawberry flavor may imitate the flavor of a strawberry with great fidelity; but it misses most other attributes, such as appearance and texture. In the lower-left corner, plastic-based toy jewelry may poorly imitate the appearance of a real necklace or ring, and not at all imitate attributes like weight or durability. (Indeed, such products often lead consumers to dismiss them as "cheap imitations," with "cheap" referring not (only) to the cost but also to the perceived quality of mimicry.)

These considerations highlight how mimetic products are not straightforward substitutes—indeed, the means and degree of substitution also vary along Figure 1—and how strategic considerations must account for both multiple dimensions and varying fidelity. Indeed, even more "pure" imitations cannot and do not fully replicate every characteristic of the "real"; if they did, they would be copies, not imitations. Moreover, consumers often purchase mimetic products because they do not *want* some aspect of the real thing. For example, consumers may desire a piano sound, but without the size and weight of an actual piano, or they may desire the look of a potted tree but without the need to care for a real tree. In turn, as my findings highlight, the

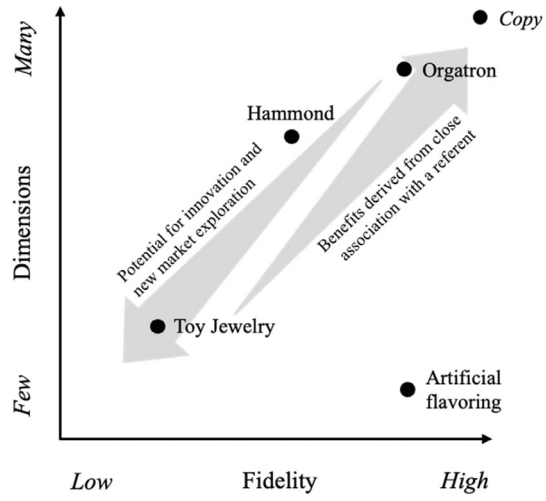

FIGURE 1 Imitation dimensions and fidelity. The potential benefits from associations with a referent are highest near the upper-right; but the potential for innovation and new market exploration increase as one moves to the lower-left.

specific mix of attributes and the fidelity of imitation are key strategic decisions faced by firms producing mimetic products.

Specifically, firms' choices about imitated attributes both shape and reflect the comparisons that consumers make between mimetic products and real ones. This comparative process is similar to the analogical process by which consumers make comparisons between, and sense of, new and existing products (cf. Gavetti et al., 2005)—and thus highlight how the strategic considerations for mimetic products mirror those for innovations, generally. For example, Bingham and Kahl (2013) describe how early computer users could interpret this new technology as a "machine" or as a "brain" and how these analogies shaped their expectations and use of the computer. Similarly, Hargadon and Douglas (2001, p. 489 quoting Basalla) describe how Edison, when introducing his electric light, worked "to effect exact imitation of all done by gas so as to replace lighting by gas with lighting by electricity." While this prior work shows the importance of analogy, generally, when introducing new products, my study highlights how firms introducing mimetic products may emphasize different attributes as the basis of imitation, and consumers may interpret their offerings accordingly.

An interesting possibility surfaced by the electronic organs case lies in the possibility that a particularly good ("pure") imitation can bind a mimetic product to the expectations that surround "real" products in the same category. In turn, these expectations can challenge efforts to move into new markets that are not aligned with these products. In the case of the electronic organ, centuries of experience stated that organs were for use by professional musicians to play classical music in church settings. In turn, to the extent that the Orgatron was a purer imitation of the organ, it also was challenged to move away from these expectations. In fact, the very differentiators that Orgatron built up against its rival Hammond—such as its realistic organ tone and traditional cabinet—proved unhelpful in a new amateur home market that placed little value on these characteristics. One lesson to be gleaned, therefore, is that a rational strategy with mimetic products may be to *not* be overly imitative. Indeed, it is notable that leading "fake meat" producers Impossible and Beyond have suffered significant setbacks as some fast-food

chains introduce veggie burgers that, according to one analyst, "taste like actual vegetables" (and not like meat) (Heil, 2023); Impossible and Beyond's excellent imitations of real meat, according to some analysts, have ended up being a liability and not a benefit. In fact, one challenge of attempting to hew too close to a referent—in other words, of being too pure an imitation—is that doing so encourages consumers to closely compare the mimetic product and the real thing. In turn, the imitation, by definition, will always be inferior to the real (cf. Majzoubi et al., 2025).

As these considerations signal, strategy around mimetic products thus implicates both the actual characteristics of these products (i.e., the attributes and fidelity of imitation) as well as their framing. A great deal of work, of course, has explored different framing strategies. For example, both Aversa et al. (2021) and Vinokurova (2019) explore how firms may frame very similar products in different ways in order to guide evaluators' perceptions of what a product "is"—and thus, against which other products it should be compared (see also Anthony et al., 2016). The present case builds on these insights by illustrating how framing decisions may both reflect and reinforce unique product characteristics, too. Thus, even as the Hammond and Orgatron offerings were very similar products in some respects, they differed in others. The framing approach of each firm reflects both these similarities and differences, bringing together the material characteristics of the technology with the purposeful language and rhetoric underlying framing (cf. Hoppmann et al., 2020).

Finally, the Orgatron/Hammond history shows that optimal strategies may change over time, as mimetic products themselves become more established. For instance, earlier Hammond ads, as discussed, implicated the pipe organ referent far more than later Hammond ads (until Hammond bifurcated its strategy and introduced a purer imitation). This pattern suggests that mimicry may be more important early on, as imitators seek to understand the combinations of attributes and fidelity that may reveal the most promising market. Later, as mimetic offerings become more salient, the optimal framing, too, may change (cf. Taeuscher & Rothe, 2024).

5.2 | Market entry and new market development

The contrasting experiences of the Orgatron and the Hammond organ also hold implications for the literature on market entry and new market development. Conventional wisdom often suggests that new entrants should pursue a single niche (Autio, 2017; Bhide, 1994; Echols & Tsai, 2005; Gruber & Tal, 2017; Noy, 2010; Porter, 1980). This is because doing so enables an entrant to focus their limited resources, thus maximizing impact (Bhide, 1994; Noy, 2010). Moreover, established incumbents may overlook niche markets, thus reducing the competition that a new entrant faces (Carroll, 1985; Gruber & Tal, 2017; Noy, 2010). In some ways, Everett/Wurlitzer took just this approach: As a pure(r) imitation with a competitive advantage in price and size, the Orgatron attacked the dominant market for pipe organs and did rather well, at least initially. However, their strategy did not yield long-term innovation benefits.

In contrast to both the Orgatron and conventional wisdom, Hammond pursued multiple niches from the onset, one of which (churches) was the established market (and thus directly competitive with producers of "real" organs) and others of which (e.g., restaurants, hotels, and homes) were decidedly experimental. As Hammond determined which of these markets was most attractive, it then developed specialty products to address these individual niches (such as the Spinet and Concert models). In this way, Hammond used a single initial product to engage in broad market experimentation, and pursued multiple niches simultaneously.

Hammond's experience, and success, thus emphasizes entrepreneurial experimentation over resource conservation (cf. Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Eisenhardt et al., 2010; McDonald & Eisenhardt, 2020). Indeed, to the extent that success with a mimetic product is a matter of finding a new market and not simply expanding an existing one—as was the case with the electronic organ—experimentation is key. Put slightly differently, because mimetic products must offer *something* different from the real (otherwise, they are copies and not merely mimetic), discovering which characteristics should differ and how is essential.

Hammond's approach might thus be characterized as one of "probing and learning" (Lynn et al., 1996), in which imperfect imitation enables experiments with different combinations of product attributes and markets. Returning to Figure 1, positioning in the upper-right allows little space for experimentation or innovation since the offering is closely tethered to the referent. Positioning in the lower-left, by contrast, allows for a great deal of experimentation and innovation, but without the benefit of associations to a referent. This figure thus foregrounds an inherent tension between imitation and innovation, and suggests that imitation can, in fact, be a gateway to innovation (cf. Berg, 2002)—but only if it is not too pure.

At the same time, Hammond's success with experimentation may again reflect the particulars of this case. A common reason that the literature encourages firms introducing a new product to pursue a singular niche is that they are resource constrained. Thus, a niche strategy enables them to devote all of their limited resources to greater, though narrower, effect. Yet Hammond's pursuit of multiple niches required few resources—primarily, a new cabinet and pedalboard, and, perhaps most important, the use of different framing in advertisements; fundamentally, each Hammond organ had the same technology "innards" and experimentation therefore was relatively low cost.

Thus, returning to the role of framing, these results highlight how experimentation with framing can be an important aspect of new market entry. Other work on strategic framing emphasizes the heterogeneity of audiences and the importance of framing innovations differently for different audience members (e.g., Falchetti et al., 2022; Howard-Grenville et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2020). The present case highlights how this strategy can aid not only with audience receptiveness, but also with unearthing which audiences are most fruitful to pursue—and ultimately, how to guide subsequent product development.

Of course, experimentation by producers of mimetic products can be a two-way street with producers of "real" products, too. For example, following the electronic organ's success, pipe organ manufacturers created compact and lower-cost instruments oriented toward home use. Thus, even as mimetic products can be an opportunity to test new markets, applications, and designs, they do not insulate their producers from "real" competition—though they may unearth markets that are less advantageous for this competition. In fact, it is possible that producers of real products may react favorably to mimetic ones since, by definition, imitation suggests a reverence for the original (Yilmaz et al., 2023).

5.3 | Perceptions of authenticity

Finally, my study contributes to the literature on authenticity. This literature highlights the advantages of being perceived as authentic and as a clear member of a category (e.g., Hahl & Ha, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2017; Radoynovska & King, 2019; Verhaal et al., 2017; Voronov et al., 2023; Zuckerman, 1999). Mimetic products, however, bring into conversation two different aspects of authenticity. Lehman et al. (2019) note that something can be authentic if it is

perceived to be a legitimate category member—a judgment of "type authenticity" (see also Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2017). However, it also can be judged to be authentic if it seems true to itself—that is, if there is consistency between its claims and reality. Thus, mimetic products may shift the basis of consumers' authenticity judgments from "real" to "consistent." For example, both the Hammond and the Orgatron were *inauthentic* in that they were not real (though the Orgatron was closer to an authentic offering). However, they were *authentic* to the extent that they *acknowledged* that they were not real, and Hammond's augmenting strategy may have better made this acknowledgement.

Returning one last time to Figure 1, an imitation that is closer to a copy (i.e., in the upper-right) may be at greater risk of charges of inauthenticity precisely because of its proximity to a type-authentic offering. In turn, this can put pressure on a pure(r)-imitation producer to explicitly acknowledge their offering is not real so that their claims might be judged as consistent. In fact, Wurlitzer did just this, as with a 1948 ad that began with the text, "THE Wurlitzer electronic Organ has already won a pre-eminent position in the music world. Not as a substitute for a fine costly pipe organ, which it isn't, but for what it is: the outstanding organ of its type" (D-1948-07b). This dilemma thus builds on Verhaal et al.'s (2023) authenticity paradox, which highlights how claims to authenticity can undermine an organization's authenticity. Here, close imitation can force an organization to acknowledge its product's *lack* of authenticity.

Many studies on authenticity also implicate consistency with the past and, specifically, with both the identity and expectations tied to the past. For example, Hatch and Schultz (2017) investigate how the Carlsberg Group simultaneously interpreted, leveraged, and felt constrained by history as they used a historical artifact. Similarly, Ravasi et al. (2019) explore how organizations' histories, evident in part in their corporate museums, shape their contemporary identities and serve to legitimate (or not) particular actions.

Here, Hammond and Orgatron again provide an instructive case: The Orgatron could—and did—claim a tie to a musical past; under Everett, ads emphasized Everett's long history as a piano manufacturer, and under Wurlitzer, ads emphasized Wurlitzer's experience as a pipe organ builder. By contrast, Hammond had a very brief history as a company, and that history was tied to clocks, not musical instruments. However, history can be a double-edged sword, constraining options (precisely because of expectations of historical alignment) even as it provides an authenticity boost (Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Raffaelli et al., 2019). Moreover, historical experience in an industry may sensitize firms to different stakeholder frames—that is, those more aligned with the current market (Hiatt & Carlos, 2019). When mimetic products open new markets, as was the case with the electronic organ, these constraints may become more salient. The religious setting of the traditional pipe organ may have been especially important in this way: Because the organ was so closely associated with the church and because the church has its own long history, a mimetic product closely tied to the pipe organ (i.e., the Orgatron) may have found it particularly challenging to break away from this association. Thus, on occasions when the best path for a mimetic product is one that breaks from the "real" product, history may be a liability more so than an authenticity boost—and, of course, vice versa.

Finally, the potential for mimetic products to expand beyond a "real" referent also tests the relationship between authenticity and augmentation. The most authentic imitation, of course, will not augment. Yet my findings reveal that mimetic products that *do* augment—and, importantly, that are well-received—can be indicative of changes to perceptions of authenticity itself, and also may be a mechanism for category expansion (cf. Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005).

At the same time, this observation raises additional questions. For example, despite the Orgatron's more limited success, was this imitative action by an established musical instrument

manufacturer essential? Could Hammond, as an industry outsider, have achieved the same success were it the lone mimetic entrant? Moreover, how do the new uses for the organ (e.g., by amateurs in the home) interact with interpretations of the category by existing users (e.g., professionals in the church)? Finally, to what extent did the (then-) high-tech nature of the organ shape the dynamics of authenticity, in contrast to prior work focused on the production of (low-tech) craft products such as beer (O'Connor et al., 2017), whiskey (Voronov et al., 2023), and food (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009)? As these examples highlight, mimicry of processes and not just artifacts may provide further insight into the relationship between mimetic products and authenticity. These and other questions signal important future research opportunities.

5.4 | Conclusion

Mimetic products have found wide distribution and success across an array of industries and markets. Yet their introduction also poses a fundamental challenge to producers around how to frame such offerings. This study highlights different approaches that producers may take and the reality that the path to greatest success may, in fact, lie in being a lesser imitation.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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