



The Role of Nostalgia in Marketing: Leveraging Retro Branding to Connect with Modern Consumers

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Abstract

Nostalgia marketing has emerged as a powerful tool for brands to connect with consumers by evoking emotional memories of the past. This paper explores how brands leverage nostalgia to create emotional bonds, enhance brand loyalty and drive purchasing behavior. It examines relevant theoretical frameworks, including the construct of Emotional Resonance and “Consumer-Brand Relationships Theory”, to explain the psychological underpinnings of nostalgia in marketing. Key insights are illustrated through detailed case studies involving Spotify’s “Wrapped” campaign, Burger King’s retro rebranding, LEGO’s franchise collaborations and Silent Hill 2 video game remake. These cases highlight how nostalgia enhances emotional engagement, fosters community through shared memories, and even influences impulsive buying behavior. The comparative analysis suggests that nostalgia marketing is particularly resonant among Millennials and Gen Z generations, demographics that highly value authenticity, emotional connection and digital personalization. The discussion also evaluates the ethical implications of nostalgia-based marketing practices, including emotional manipulation, cultural sensitivity and environmental responsibility. Recommendations are offered for marketers to ethically and effectively apply nostalgic strategies without reinforcing idealized or exclusionary narratives. Ultimately, this conceptual paper proposes an analytical framework for understanding nostalgia marketing, illustrated through four key cases. It advances testable propositions to guide future empirical research on psychological mechanisms, boundary conditions, and ethical implementation.

Keywords: Brand strategy, Consumer Behavior, Emotional Resonance, Generational Marketing, Marketing Ethics

1. Introduction

Nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, has become a cornerstone of modern marketing strategies. In an era of information overload, consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that offer emotional connections and a sense of familiarity. Nostalgia marketing taps into this desire by evoking positive memories of the past, creating a bridge between the brand and the consumer’s personal experiences. According to Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel (2010), nostalgia is a powerful tool for brands to connect with consumers, as it fulfills the human need for belonging and emotional comfort. This paper investigates how brands use nostalgia

to connect with consumers and analyzes the effectiveness of retro branding in modern campaigns.

The relevance of nostalgia marketing has grown significantly in recent years, particularly as millennials and Gen Z-two generations that value authenticity and emotional resonance have become dominant consumer groups. Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides and Juhl (2012) discuss how nostalgia serves as a psychological resource that enhances well-being and fosters emotional connections, making it particularly appealing to younger generations who seek meaningful and authentic brand interactions. Brands use nostalgia to cut through digital advertising clutter and create memorable, shareable experiences. From reintroducing vintage packaging to reviving iconic slogans, retro branding has proven to be a powerful tool for driving engagement and loyalty (Holbrook & Schindler, 1993).

While early nostalgia research emerged primarily from Western context, its application has globalized. Recent studies have begun examining nostalgic appeals in non-Western markets, noting how cultural values like collectivism or specific historical narratives shape their effectiveness (Zhou et al., 2012).

Beyond these foundational mechanisms, recent scholarship has expanded the understanding of nostalgia's contingent effects. Cross-cultural research demonstrates that nostalgia's impact is moderated by cultural orientation. For instance, collectivist cultures may exhibit stronger responses to collective versus personal nostalgia cues (Zhou et al., 2012). Methodologically, while the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Sedikides et al., 2015) and PANAS remain dominant, newer measurement approaches are emerging to capture state-based nostalgia in real-time digital contexts. Furthermore, the rise of digital personalization introduces a novel dynamic: algorithmic curation of nostalgic content (e.g., Spotify's Wrapped) can enhance resonance but also raises concerns about consumer privacy and the commercialization of autobiographical memory, creating a tension between personalization and exploitation.

The objective of this paper is to explore the role of nostalgia in marketing, focusing on how brands use retro branding to connect with modern consumers. Specifically, the paper investigates the psychological foundations of nostalgia, the mechanisms that drive nostalgic brand connections, and the impact of such strategies on consumer behavior. The analysis is organized into the following sections: Methodology, Results, Discussion, Ethical Considerations, Limitations and Conclusion.

By synthesizing theoretical models and campaign analyses, this study offers practical recommendations for marketers to ethically and effectively incorporate nostalgia into their brand strategies.

This paper adopts a conceptual research design, synthesizing theoretical frameworks with illustrative brand cases to address the following research questions:

RQ₁: How do contemporary brands use nostalgia and retro branding to create emotional connections with modern consumers?

RQ₂: What psychological mechanisms explain how nostalgia influences consumer attitudes and behaviors?

RQ₃: Under what boundary conditions do nostalgia-based marketing become more or less effective across different consumer segments and contexts?

The next section outlines the conceptual methodology used to analyze these cases.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual research design (MacInnis, 2011), aiming to integrate existing theory, identify patterns in practice, and advance a structured framework for future empirical

testing. It does not seek to make causal claims or present findings from a systematic literature review. Instead, it proposes an analytical lens through which to understand contemporary nostalgia marketing.

2.1 Framework Development and Illustrative Case Selection

The analytical framework (detailed in Section 2.2) was developed deductively from two core theories in consumer psychology: Emotional Resonance Theory and Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory. To ground and illustrate this framework in current practice, four prominent and diverse marketing campaigns were selected as illustrative cases: Spotify Wrapped, Burger King's retro rebrand, LEGO's franchise collaborations, and the Silent Hill 2 remake. Case selection followed a purposive, Theory-informed logic. They were chosen not through a quantitative screening process, but for showcasing distinct types of nostalgia (personal, heritage, cultural, and "Newstalgia") across different sectors (digital, CPG, toys, gaming), which is the primary selection criterion. Secondary criteria included diversity of industry sector and availability of sufficient public documentation (e.g., press releases, annual reports, credible industry analyses) to illustrate the framework's dimensions. The cases were also selected to represent distinct forms of nostalgia (autobiographical, heritage, cross-generational, and "Newstalgia"), allowing the framework to be demonstrated across multiple strategic contexts. This approach aligns with established methodology for theory-building conceptual research, where cases are selected for their theoretical revelatory power rather than statistical representativeness (Eisenhardt, 1989; MacInnis, 2011).

Acknowledging the conceptual scope of this paper, the analysis focuses on these paradigmatic successes to construct a positive framework. It does not include cases of outright nostalgia marketing failure (e.g., misaligned retro launches that elicited consumer backlash). Therefore, the exclusion of failed nostalgia campaigns is a direct limitation of this conceptual approach, which future research should address by testing the proposed propositions against such negative cases. While analyzing failures is valuable for identifying negative boundary conditions, it falls outside this paper's primary aim.

2.2 Proposed Analytical Framework

To structure the case illustrations and enable comparative discussion, we propose a four-dimensional conceptual matrix, which serves as the primary heuristic device for this analysis:

1. **Nostalgia Cue:** The specific sensory or narrative trigger employed (e.g., retro logo, personalized data, franchise IP, legacy gameplay).
2. **Theoretical Mechanism:** The primary psychological process engaged, anchored in the core theories of Emotional Resonance and Consumer-Brand Relationships, and extended by complementary lenses such as self-concept attachment and authenticity signaling.
3. **Observed Outcome:** The publicly reported metric of engagement or impact (e.g., engagement counts, sentiment shift, sales lift). We explicitly treat these as proxies for campaign resonance, not as definitive measures of causal financial impact.
4. **Key Boundary Factors:** A contextual element suggested by the case that may limit or enable effectiveness (e.g., generational memory, brand heritage, authenticity, platform type).

This framework serves as the primary analytical lens for the subsequent case illustrations. The results section applies each dimension to the case to demonstrate its utility. The Discussion section then synthesizes findings across these dimensions to derive boundary conditions and testable propositions, advancing the conceptual contribution.

2.3 Theoretical Foundation

1. Affective Mechanisms and Emotional Resonance:

The psychological impact of nostalgia is often explained through its potent affective mechanisms. While “Emotional Resonance Theory” is not a singular, formalized theory in the psychological canon, the construct of emotional resonance is central to understanding nostalgia in marketing (Muehling & Sprott, 2004). It describes the process by which nostalgic cues trigger congruent positive emotions (e.g., warmth, fondness, belonging) that “resonate” with the consumer, thereby transferring affective value to the associated brand. This aligns with the broader nostalgia literature, which identifies emotion-laden memory recall as a core function of nostalgia (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018; Wildschut et al., 2006). For instance, Pascal, Sprott, and Muehling (2002) found that consumers with a higher need for belonging are more likely to prefer nostalgic products, as these products provide a sense of comfort and connection to their past. Therefore, this paper uses “emotional resonance” to refer to this affective mechanism: the triggering and alignment of positive emotions through nostalgic stimuli which undergirds the consumer’s subsequent attitudinal and behavioral responses.

2. Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory:

The second model is Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory, which highlights how nostalgia strengthens the emotional connection between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1998). By evoking shared memories, brands can create a sense of belonging and community among their customers. For example, Merchant and Rose (2013) demonstrated that nostalgia-driven campaigns foster stronger emotional bonds between consumers and brands, leading to higher levels of brand attachment and advocacy. This is particularly evident in campaigns that leverage cultural nostalgia, such as Netflix’s *Stranger Things*, which capitalizes on 80s pop culture to create a shared sense of nostalgia among viewers (Relidzyńska, 2021).

Together, these theories demonstrate that nostalgic marketing is not merely aesthetic but rooted in deep psychological processes. Brands that apply these concepts, particularly Emotional Resonance Theory and Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory are able to foster emotional authenticity and connection.

The study integrates supporting ideas from related constructs such as nostalgia proneness (Loveland et al., 2010) and embodied cognition, highlighting how sensory cues (e.g., sounds, visuals, textures) enhance nostalgic recall and consumer engagement. This theoretical methodology provides the foundation for the next section, which explores real-world applications of nostalgia marketing through detailed brand case studies.

3. Results

This section analyzes how nostalgia marketing is implemented in real-world brand campaigns, focusing on four representative case studies across music streaming, food, toys and gaming. These examples demonstrate how nostalgia enhances emotional engagement, brand loyalty and cross-generational appeal.

3.1 Spotify’s “Wrapped” Campaign

Spotify’s annual Wrapped campaign represents a highly effective application of nostalgia marketing, blending personalized data with emotional storytelling to create a deeply engaging user experience. Each year, Spotify compiles users’ listening habits into visually appealing, shareable summaries that highlight their most-played songs, artists, and genres. The

campaign taps into personal nostalgia by reminding users of the music that defined the year, evoking memories of specific moments, emotions and experiences tied to those songs.

In 2022, Spotify reported that 156 million active users engaged with Wrapped during Q4, representing a 30% year-over-year increase in engagement across 111 markets (Spotify, 2023). This engagement was corroborated by industry analysts such as Time Magazine, which confirmed the figure and noted that Wrapped has become “one of its most successful and most sharable marketing ploys on social media” (TIME, 2023), solidifying its position as a dominant cultural event. The campaign’s design blends retro-inspired visual elements with data-driven personalization, encouraging users to nostalgically reflect on their musical routines while celebrating their digital identities.

Wrapped’s viral success is further amplified by its shareability. Although Spotify does not disclose exact sharing volumes, the company has consistently noted that Wrapped generates “record levels of organic social activity” and industry analyses frequently identify it as one of the most circulated annual user-generated digital events. In doing so, it transforms individual nostalgia into a socially diffused, collective cultural phenomenon, as millions of users post their summaries across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and X. As recent analyses argue (e.g., Pichierri, 2023), campaigns like Wrapped succeed because they tap into shared nostalgia, while simultaneously preserving personalization, allowing participants to connect over common experiences while celebrating their uniqueness.

Compared to the other cases examined, Spotify Wrapped represents a form of autobiographical nostalgia, where emotional resonance is generated through autobiographical memory rather than brand heritage, making it particularly effective in digitally native contexts.

3.2 Burger King’s Retro Rebranding

In 2021, Burger King introduced its first comprehensive visual identity redesign in more than two decades, deliberately reintroducing retro design elements drawn from earlier brand iterations, including its simplified logo, color palette, and packaging. The redesign explicitly referenced the brand’s historical visual language while updating itself for digital platform consumption, signaling familiarity and continuity rather than radical change.

A detailed case study of this rebranding on Instagram reveals that Burger King employed a gradual transition strategy spanning 150 days, from the first unofficial appearance of the vintage logo in August 2020 to the official announcement in January 2021 (Martiez-Sanchez et al., 2026). During this period, the brand generated 63 posts, using humor and participatory engagement to prepare audiences for the visual shift. The first unofficial appearance featured the new vintage logo subtly on a consumer’s T-shirt in a giveaway post, embedding the change within authentic, user-generated content rather than a formal corporate announcement.

This approach aligns with signaling theory: by gradually introducing retro elements through casual, community-focused content, Burger King reinforced perceptions of authenticity and continuity (Martiez-Sanchez et al., 2026). The strategy proved highly effective with the official launch post achieving 2.69% interaction rate, six times higher than the brand’s average engagement, demonstrating how heritage-based nostalgia can generate significant audience resonance (Martiez-Sanchez et al., 2026). Consistent with Bushnell’s (2022) argument that familiar visual cues reduce psychological resistance to updated branding, retro elements function as an effective tool for easing brand transitions. Burger King’s approach demonstrates how strategically reviving heritage elements can strengthen emotional attachment, attract lapsed consumers and generate renewed cultural relevance.

In contrast to Spotify's personalized nostalgia, Burger King's strategy exemplifies heritage-based nostalgia, where long-standing visual assets function as authenticity signals that reconnect lapsed consumers by reactivating shared brand memory rather than individual experience.

3.3 LEGO's Nostalgic Collaborations

LEGO has mastered the art of nostalgic collaborations, partnering with iconic franchises like Star Wars, Harry Potter and Super Mario to create sets that appeal to both children and adults. These collaborations tap into shared cultural nostalgia, allowing adults to relive their favorite childhood stories while introducing younger generations to timeless narratives. According to Lubiński (2021), such partnerships are a strategic way for brands to leverage nostalgia as a generational bridge, fostering emotional connections across age groups. This is supported by cross-industry analyses suggesting nostalgia acts as a generational bridge (Pichierri, 2023). Lubiński's empirical study of Polish LEGO consumers found that "the intensity of consumer nostalgia towards a brand positively affected the strength of LEGO brand equity" (Lubiński, 2021, p. 30).

For example, LEGO's Star Wars sets have become a cornerstone of the company's product line. The sets not only replicate iconic scenes from the movies but also incorporate modern building techniques and interactive features, such as motorized components. This blend of nostalgia and innovation ensures that the sets remain relevant and engaging for today's audiences. Further research focusing specifically on Millennials found that nostalgia-oriented strategies significantly shape this generation's perception of the LEGO brand, with unfulfilled childhood desires emerging as a key driver of purchase intent for revived products (Lubiński, 2020).

In conclusion, LEGO's nostalgia collaborations illustrate how brands can harmonize tradition and innovation to create products that resonate across generations, ensuring both financial success and enduring brand loyalty.

Relative to Burger King's heritage revival and Spotify's individualized cues, LEGO's collaborations rely on cross-generational cultural nostalgia, using globally recognized intellectual property to synchronize emotional resonance across age cohorts while sustaining relevance through incremental innovation.

3.4 Silent Hill 2 Remake: Newstalgia in Gaming

The announcement of the Silent Hill 2 Remake exemplifies the "newstalgia" strategy—a portmanteau describing the modernization of legacy content for contemporary appeal (Balakhonskaya et al., 2022) - the gaming industry, where legacy titles are revitalized through modern technology while preserving their emotional and cultural significance. Originally released in 2001, the game is considered a benchmark in psychological horror, and its remake by Bloober Team seeks to reintroduce this legacy to contemporary audiences. The remake features updated photorealistic graphics, enhanced spatial audio, redesigned combat and modernized controls, enabling it to meet the expectations of Gen Z players who prioritize immersive, high-fidelity gameplay.

At the same time, the remake stays true to the core elements of visual tones and thematic atmosphere that made it a cult classic, ensuring it also caters to its original Millennial fans. As Makai (2018) notes, video games frequently serve as both "objects and vehicles of nostalgia", allowing players to revisit memories while experiencing updated content. This dual appeal is reflected in the significant anticipation surrounding the remake.

Early promotional material for the Silent Hill 2 remake generated extensive discussion within gaming media and fan communities, particularly regarding whether the trailers accurately conveyed the psychological horror tone of the original 2001 release. Coverage of early footage highlighted mixed reactions, with both fans and developers acknowledging concerns that certain promotional elements did not fully reflect the spirit and atmosphere of the original game (Chalk, 2024).

The remake also bridges generational gaps and creates a shared experience for fans of all ages. Wulf et al. (2020) highlights that video game nostalgia serves as a powerful emotional tool, enhancing well-being by allowing players to reconnect with cherished memories while engaging with updated content. The development team focused on reimagining the original game’s details with respect for its legacy, to ensure that it appeals to both long-time fans and newcomers. As Makai (2018) argues, video games of this nature often function as both objects and vehicles of nostalgia, preserving cultural memories while adapting them for contemporary audiences.

These engagement indicators should be interpreted as evidence of high anticipatory interest rather than confirmed commercial performance, consistent with the conceptual scope of this analysis.

Limitations of Data Interpretation: Consistent with the framework’s use of “Observed Outcome Proxies”, the metrics cited in this analysis, including user engagement, media sentiment, market leadership reports, and anticipatory attention, are interpreted as publicly available indicators of campaign resonance and cultural traction. They are drawn from brand announcements, third-party industry analyses, and academic case studies. While useful for illustrating comparisons, they are not causal performance data and should not be interpreted as definitive proof of financial success. This approach prioritizes mechanistic insight over financial quantification.

Unlike the other cases, which draw on stable brand or cultural references, the Silent Hill 2 remake illustrates “newstalgia”, where technological modernization operates as a boundary condition that allows legacy media content to retain emotional authenticity while meeting contemporary experiential standards.

To synthesize the analyses above and facilitate cross-case comparison as outlined in the analytical framework (Section 2.2), Table 1 presents the core dimensions of each campaign.

Table 1: Application of the Analytical Framework to Illustrative Cases

Case	Nostalgia Cue (Trigger)	Target Segment	Primary Channel	Observed Outcome Proxy
Spotify Wrapped	Personalized data (“Your” past year)	Millennials/Gen Z	Digital/App	156M (2022) user engagement (30% YoY increase).
Burger King Rebrand	Retro logo & packaging (1990s aesthetic)	Millennials (Lapsed)	Physical/Digital	2.69% interactive rate (2021 launch).
LEGO Collaborations	Franchise IP (Star Wars, Harry Potter)	Cross-generational	Retail	Sustained market leadership in premium toys (2020 – present).
Silent Hill 2 Remake	Gameplay & aesthetic legacy	Gaming Nostalgists (Millennials) & New Gen Z	Digital/Gaming Platforms	High anticipatory media attention (2024 pre-release).

Note. Outcome proxies are based on publicly reported metrics from brand announcements and industry analyses (see Section 2.2).

As Table 1 illustrates, the comparative application of the framework reveals that the effectiveness of nostalgia marketing hinges on aligning specific cues with the target segment's memories and preferred channels. The table's "Cue" and "Outcome" columns map directly to the first and third dimensions of the framework. Furthermore, the "Target Segment" and "Channel" data provide the empirical basis for inferring the key boundary conditions (the framework's fourth dimension), such as Audience-Cue Alignment and Platform-Cue Fit, discussed in the following section. The synthesized findings show distinct patterns: personal data drives digital engagement, retro aesthetics reconnect lapsed consumers, and iconic IP bridges generations. These patterns set the stage for the deeper theoretical discussion that follows.

4. Discussion

This discussion synthesizes the case analyses, as structured by the proposed framework and summarized in Table 1, to directly address the research questions. RQ₁ (How do brands use nostalgia?) is answered by examining the Nostalgia Cue and its deployment across different channels (Table 1, columns 1 & 4). RQ₂ (What are the psychological mechanisms?) is addressed by linking these cues to the theoretical mechanisms outlined in Section 2.3 (the framework's second dimension). RQ₃ (What are the boundary conditions?) is informed by variance in target segment and the contextual factors emerging from the framework's fourth dimension, highlighting the critical roles of generational memory and cultural relevance.

4.1 Emotional Comfort and Escapism

Nostalgia marketing works because it provides comfort and escapism, especially during uncertain times. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, led to a surge in nostalgia-driven consumption as consumers sought solace in familiar products and experiences. According to Faul and De Brigard (2022), nostalgia played a moderating role during the pandemic, improving mood and fostering optimism by allowing individuals to reconnect with positive memories from the past. This emotional uplift made nostalgic content particularly appealing during a period of global uncertainty.

Furthermore, recent empirical synthesis on nostalgia (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018) and validated measurement tools like Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015) provide a validated foundation for pre-testing nostalgic cues, segmenting audiences by nostalgia proneness, and establishing boundary conditions for campaign effectiveness.

4.2 Community and Shared Experiences

Another crucial outcome of nostalgia is its ability to create a sense of community by connecting individuals through shared experiences. Brands that successfully evoke collective nostalgia—such as relaunching a beloved product or reviving iconic campaigns—create communal bonds, encouraging consumers to engage not just with the brand but with one another. Hartmann and Brunk (2019) discuss how nostalgia marketing can (re-)enchant consumers, reinforcing a sense of belonging and sparking word-of-mouth promotion as people organically share their nostalgic experiences online.

4.3 Impulse Buying and Emotional Decision-Making

Nostalgia also plays a role in impulse buying, as consumers are often quick to purchase products that reignite cherished memories. This emotional response is not only about longing for the past but also about recapturing the feelings associated with those moments—a sense of warmth and familiarity. Brands strategically leverage this behavior through limited-edition releases, retro packaging, or "throwback" collections, creating a sense of urgency and

excitement that fuels spontaneous purchasing decisions. As highlighted by recent studies, the emotional high triggered by nostalgia can cloud rational thinking, leading to impulse buying. According to Alkhafagi (2023), nostalgia marketing significantly impacts consumers' purchase intentions, as the emotional connection formed with nostalgic products increases the likelihood of a purchase, blending sentimentality with consumer behavior.

These consumer behaviors confirm that nostalgic campaigns can shape both emotional and cognitive responses. However, the strategic application of nostalgia must also consider ethical implications, as overuse or misuse may distort reality or alienate segments of the market.

Across the cases examined, ethical risk intensifies as nostalgic cues shift from personal or self-generated memory toward collectively shared cultural and historical representations, increasing the potential for emotional manipulation and appropriation.

4.4 Synthesizing the Framework: Boundary Conditions and Research Propositions

The comparative analysis, structured by the proposed framework, allows us to move from descriptive case observation to conceptual advancement. We synthesize two core outputs: a refined set of boundary conditions that determine the effectiveness of nostalgia marketing, and a series of testable propositions to guide future empirical research.

The framework highlighted that success is not automatic but contingent on specific contextual factors:

1. **Audience-Cue Alignment:** the nostalgic trigger must correspond to the lived experience or culturally absorbed memory of the target segment (e.g., *Silent Hill 2*'s efficacy hinges on Millennial gaming memory).
2. **Brand Authenticity Congruence:** Heritage-based cues require a verifiable brand history to be perceived as authentic rather than manipulative (a key factor in Burger King's rebrand acceptance).
3. **Platform-Cue Fit:** The digital or physical channel must support the nostalgic experience (e.g., Spotify's app enables personal data visualization, social media favors shareable retro aesthetic).
4. **Temporal & Cultural Context:** Periods of societal uncertainty may heighten nostalgia's appeal, while cross-cultural campaigns risk cue irrelevance.

Derived Research Propositions: From these conditions and the interplay of theoretical mechanisms, we advance the following propositions for empirical testing:

- P1: Nostalgia marketing campaigns will yield stronger brand attachment and behavioral intent when the nostalgic cue is aligned with the target segment's direct generational or cultural memory.
- P2: The positive impact of heritage-based nostalgia cues (e.g., retro logos, packaging) is positively moderated by brand's perceived historical authenticity. Brands with weak or inconsistent heritage will see diminished or negative effects.
- P3: Interactive and self-referential nostalgia cues (e.g., personalized data summaries) will generate higher levels of digital engagement and social sharing than static, broadcast retro cues.

These propositions provide a direct roadmap for moving from the conceptual insights presented here to causal hypothesis testing.

5. Ethical Considerations

While nostalgia marketing can foster emotional resonance and brand loyalty, it also raises important ethical concerns. The emotional power of nostalgia can be exploited in ways that mislead, exclude or promote unsustainable behaviors. This section explores four major ethical dimensions marketers must consider when using nostalgic strategies.

5.1 Emotional Exploitation: Manipulating Memories

One of the biggest ethical concerns with nostalgia marketing is its potential to exploit consumer emotions. Nostalgia taps into deep psychological needs, offering comfort in uncertain times (Veresiu, Robinson, & Rosario, 2021). While there's nothing inherently wrong with using nostalgia to make consumers feel good, an issue emerges when brands attempt to distort reality, to make past times seem simpler, better or more glamorous than they actually were.

For example, campaigns that idealize the 1950s as an era of prosperity and great family values. For some, this imagery sparks warm memories, but for marginalized communities, it may evoke memories of exclusion and inequality. Pichierri (2023) points out that nostalgia marketing can sometimes create an idealized or inaccurate past. Brands have a significant responsibility to acknowledge these historical nuances with sensitivity, instead of painting a picture of a "one-size-fits-all" version of history.

Another ethical challenge that brands face is how nostalgia marketing influences consumer spending. In cases where brands use nostalgia to spark impulsive purchases, whether it's limited-edition throwback packaging or a rebooted product, this approach pushes consumers to buy emotionally rather than out of genuine need. Chrostowska (2010) argues that nostalgia, when overly used in marketing, can lead to a cycle of excessive consumption, where consumers continuously keep chasing after past emotions evoked through material goods rather than meaningful experiences.

Specifically, for data-driven campaigns, transparency about how user data is transformed into nostalgic narratives is critical to maintaining trust and avoiding perceptions of manipulative surveillance. Consumers must clearly understand what data is collected, how it is curated into a personalized story, and whether their private listening history is being commodified for marketing purposes without explicit consent.

Campaigns such as Spotify Wrapped illustrate the importance of transparency, as algorithmically curated personal histories blur the boundary between user reflection and corporate storytelling.

5.2 Cultural Sensitivity: Respecting Heritage

Nostalgia marketing has a history of misusing cultural symbols and traditions. When brands attempt to pull from different cultures to create aesthetic nostalgia, whether it's vintage travel posters that used glamorized "retro" images or branding that simplifies cultural identities, they risk erasing historical complexities.

Rousseau (2015) warns that if brands do not handle cultural nostalgia carefully, the results may turn to cultural appropriation. This happens when brands choose to use traditions, symbols or historical narratives without proper research, acknowledgment or respect. For instance, companies may borrow ethnic, indigenous or national aesthetics without any sort of engagement with the communities they represent. Thus, instead of truly honoring cultural history, these campaigns only end up reducing such communities into marketable aesthetics.

Brands must diligently work to avoid these missteps by focusing on inclusivity and authenticity. Brands should therefore conduct inclusivity audits, engaging with cultural representatives to ensure that nostalgic cues are historically accurate and respectful, rather

than reductive stereotypes. That means working with cultural experts, engaging with community leaders, and carefully ensuring that nostalgic campaigns celebrate history in a way that resonates with all consumers.

5.3 Environmental Responsibility: Greener Nostalgia

Nostalgia marketing often revives old designs, packaging and product formulations, which can be a double-edged sword when it comes to sustainability. On the one hand, retro branding can promote the idea of long-lasting, high-quality products that counteract today's disposable consumer culture. On the other hand, it can also encourage wasteful behavior, especially in cases where nostalgia is used to push short-lived, limited-edition products with overt packaging (Howell, Kitson, & Clowney, 2019).

This creates a challenge that necessitates merging nostalgia with sustainability. "Retrovation", a concept that is defined as "an entrepreneurial innovation process that leverages the past as a functional resource to meet contemporary consumer needs, primarily capitalizing on market opportunities related to nostalgia or sustainability" (De Noni, Blasi, & Sabbadin, 2026, p.3), which offers a strategic solution. The concept involves retrieving and reusing past knowledge through either minimal adaptation (exploitation) or significant reconfiguration (exploration) to develop products that address both nostalgic and sustainable market demands (De Noni, Blasi, & Sabbadin, 2026). For example, some companies have brought back classic products with eco-friendly materials, using biodegradable packaging or recycled fabric. This approach allows brands to tap into nostalgia without contributing to environmental harm.

To be truly ethical, nostalgia marketing should align with sustainability goals rather than work against them. That means putting durability as a priority, rather than focusing on trend-driven consumption, using sustainable materials in retro products and promoting mindful purchasing instead of impulse buying.

5.4 Guidelines for Ethical Nostalgia Marketing

To apply nostalgia ethically, brands should follow these key principles:

1. **Authenticity over Manipulation:** Focus on creating campaigns that reflect historical realities rather than an idealized past (Veresiu et al., 2021).
2. **Respect Cultural Heritage & Handle it With Care:** Engage with cultural communities and strictly avoid reducing traditions and cultures to mere aesthetics (Rousseau, 2015).
3. **Promote Sustainable Nostalgia:** Use nostalgia to encourage responsible consumption and focus on discouraging practices that contribute to excessive waste (De Noni, Blasi & Sabbadin, 2026).
4. **Encourage Emotional Well-Being:** Avoid marketing strategies that manipulate consumers' emotions to impulse buy through nostalgia (Pichierri, 2023).
5. **Include Diverse Perspectives:** Ensure that nostalgic narratives reflect and represent different social and cultural experiences, not just a privileged few (Chrostowska, 2010).

6. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

While the proposed framework and illustrative cases provide a structured understanding of nostalgia marketing, this conceptual approach has inherent limitations that define the scope for future empirical work.

6.1 Limitations

First, the reliance on publicly available secondary data (brand reports, media articles) limits the depth of psychological and behavioral analysis possible. Second, the four cases, while selected for paradigmatic variety, are not statistically representative and are drawn primarily from Western, digitally advanced contexts, which constrain generalizability. Third, as a conceptual study, it identifies associations and proposes testable relationships but does not provide causal evidence.

6.2 Future Research Directions

These limitations directly inform specific empirical research programs. The propositions advanced in Section 4.2 can be operationalized as follows:

1. **Cross-Cultural Experiments:** Testing P1 (Audience-Cue Alignment) requires experiments that manipulate nostalgic cues (e.g., 1990 Western pop vs. 1990 K-pop) with culturally diverse samples. Dependent measures should include validated scales for brand attachment (e.g., Thach and Olsen's 2006 scale) and behavioral intent (e.g., purchase likelihood). Moderation analysis would test national identity or cultural orientation.
2. **Longitudinal Field Studies:** Partnering with brands to track the long-term impact of nostalgia campaigns on brand equity metrics (e.g., brand love, price premium, loyalty) versus control campaigns. This is ideal for testing P2 (Brand Authenticity Congruence), using pre-campaign brand heritage perception surveys as a moderating variable.
3. **Experimental Causal Designs:** Testing P3 (Interactive Cues) requires a lab or online experiment where participants are exposed to either an interactive (e.g., a personalized nostalgia quiz) or a static (e.g., retro poster) nostalgic ad. Dependent variables would be digital engagement intentions (sharing, clicking) and actual social sharing behavior, with potential mediation analysis through perceived self-relevance.
4. **Segmentation via Nostalgia Proneness:** Employing validated scales (e.g., the Southampton Nostalgia Scale) to segment audiences and measure trait-level susceptibility as a key moderating variable for all propositions. Furthermore, studies should test whether emotional resonance (measured via the Positive Affect Negative Affect schedule, PANAS) mediates the relationship nostalgic cues and brand outcomes.

Undertaking this research will transform the conceptual relationships outlined here into a validated, contingent theory of nostalgia marketing.

7. Conclusion

Nostalgia marketing is a powerful tool that allows brands to forge deep emotional connections with consumers, tapping into their memories and personal histories. However, its influence comes with a significant ethical responsibility. Brands must ensure that their use of nostalgia does more than drive sales and should foster meaningful engagement, promote cultural respect and sustainable business practices.

When applied ethically, nostalgia marketing can strengthen brand authenticity, reinforce heritage, and create emotionally meaningful connections. Nostalgia can create shared experiences that bridge generational gaps, foster communities and reinforce a brand's heritage in a genuine and inclusive way. Moreover, nostalgia can be an innovative driver, as seen in the concept of "Retrovation", where brands successfully merge the past with modern sustainability efforts (De Noni, Blasi & Sabbadin, 2026).

However, nostalgia marketing is not without its risks. If misused, it can reinforce misleading narratives, alienate specific audiences, or encourage unsustainable habits. A primary

challenge is to balance emotional appeal with ethical integrity in a way that ensures that its campaigns reflect a nuanced, inclusive and responsible approach to history. This is a process that requires ongoing reflection, collaboration with cultural stakeholders and a long-term commitment to transparency.

Ultimately, ethical nostalgia marketing is about striking a balance between honoring the past and shaping a better future. Brands that recognize that will not only build a strong consumer trust but also contribute greatly to a marketing landscape that is emotionally compelling, environmentally aware and socially conscious.

To translate these insights into actionable guidance for practitioners, the following checklist summarizes key principles for applying nostalgia marketing ethically and effectively.

Practical Implications: A Checklist for Ethical Nostalgia Marketing

1. Identify authentic heritage assets: logos, stories, symbols or designs that genuinely belong to the brand's history.
2. Match nostalgia cues to target segments: ensure generational relevance and cultural appropriateness.
3. Balance retro and brand elements: maintain functional value while evoking emotional familiarity.
4. Avoid idealizing problematic historical periods or excluding marginalized groups.
5. Integrate sustainability into retro product designs, packaging and limited-edition releases.
6. Test emotional reactions with diverse consumers groups before launching campaigns.
7. Communicate the purpose of the retro revival clearly to strengthen brand authenticity.
8. Define clear KPIs: Link campaigns to specific metrics such as engagement rate lift versus a non-nostalgic control, conversion rate among the target segment, and brand tracker movement on "authenticity" and "trust" scores.
9. Implement risk-mitigation protocols: conduct an authenticity audit of all heritage cues and develop a pre-emptive response plan for potential backlash concerning cultural appropriation or emotional manipulation.

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