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Nostalgic consumer trends and nostalgia marketing

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Abstract

Over the last few years, we have observed an intensification of nostalgic consumer trends manifested through choices and behaviors that reflect sentimental attachments to the past. In parallel, we increasingly note a growing presence of marketing activities that tap into the emotions and experiences tied to consumers' memories. These efforts link brands and their campaigns to positive concepts or ideas from the past. Nostalgia marketing relies on evoking positive feelings about the past and applies to products, marketing communications, and brand experiences.

The article seeks to identify trends based on nostalgia, both in terms of consumer behavior and marketing practice. The author presents the essence of nostalgia marketing and the research domains on nostalgic consumer behavior. The article describes nostalgic consumer trends in the context of their determinants. It identifies nostalgic strategies and trends in contemporary marketing practice. The objectives are realized based on a literature review supported by bibliographic analysis, desk research based on available quantitative and qualitative research results, and content analysis of campaigns promoting nostalgic products and using themes and content related to nostalgia marketing. Insights on nostalgic trends and marketing approaches provide the basis for identifying practical and research recommendations.

1. Introduction

In recent years, we have observed an intensification of nostalgic consumer trends manifested through choices and behaviors that reflect sentimental attachments to the past. In parallel, we increasingly note a growing presence of marketing activ-

ities that tap into the emotions and experiences tied to consumers' memories. These efforts link brands and their campaigns to positive concepts or ideas from the past. Nostalgia marketing relies on evoking positive feelings about the past and applies to products, marketing communications, and brand experiences.

In busy, hectic, and challenging times, nostalgia through revisiting memories can provide a way to slow down, a means of escape and relaxation (Wigmore and Tuxill, 1995). This creates conditions for the development of nostalgia marketing based on recalling memories, familiar events, symbols, and products. It also ties in with the growing value of narratives based on past associations. Returning to memories and references from the past in marketing efforts is becoming a way to attract consumers seeking comfort and stability in times of uncertainty and change. For researchers and practitioners, it is important to answer the question of what drives nostalgia and how brands can utilize its power in their marketing strategy and turn it into concrete actions.

The author aims to identify trends based on nostalgia, both in terms of consumer behavior and marketing practice. The article describes nostalgia as a concept and an area of scientific research. The author identifies the essence of nostalgia marketing and determines the domains of research on nostalgic consumer behavior. The article describes nostalgic consumer trends in the context of their determinants. It identifies nostalgic strategies and trends in contemporary marketing practice. The study offers insights regarding nostalgic marketing approaches and trends, which provide a basis for identifying practical and research recommendations.

The objectives are realized based on a literature review supported by bibliographic analysis, desk research based on available quantitative and qualitative research results, and content analysis of campaigns promoting nostalgic product, and using themes and content related to nostalgia marketing. The research procedure involved three stages. The first was based on a literature review and allowed us to present the concept of nostalgia and its relevance in scientific research. The second stage incorporated the analysis of available research results published over the past three years and focused on nostalgic trends and consumer behavior. The third stage incorporated the analysis of verbal and visual content of nostalgic campaigns and online materials on nostalgia marketing practices. The selection of reports on nostalgic consumer trends and behaviors and the identification of contemporary nostalgic marketing practices was based on Google search results using keywords such as nostalgic consumer trends, nostalgic trends, nostalgic consumers, nostalgic marketing trends, nostalgia marketing, and nostalgic campaigns.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The concept of nostalgia

As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, nostalgia is “a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Mills and Coleman (1994) defined nostalgia as the bitter-sweet recall of emotional past events. While nostalgic memories can be associated with pleasant or good times in the past, the fact that a person is far from that ideal situation can also cause a feeling of sadness and loss (Davis, 1979). Nostalgia combines bitterness and sweetness, but positive feelings about the past and linking them to the present can make present experiences more pleasant, lovely, and even magic (Harper, 1966; Wigmore and Tuxill, 1995).

Nostalgia, understood as a sentimental longing for the past, is as Sedikides and Wildschut (2018) maintain, an emotion with more positive than negative meaning. According to psychological research (Sedikides et al., 2015; Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018), nostalgia helps strengthen one’s identity and self-continuity (a sense of connection between the past and the present) and by increasing social ties (a sense of belonging and acceptance).

Nostalgia is the consumer’s emotional response to an external or internal stimulus referring to an idealized past. With that said, it does not always have to refer to personal memories and past experiences (Grębosz, 2016). The phenomenon of nostalgia also applies to those who, even if they did not experience a particular decade, return with their thoughts to those times (Wigmore and Tuxill, 1995). The past is attached to powerful symbols that consumers often use to express and even construct their identities.

The nostalgia concept refers to personal and public domains, thus the distinction between private and collective nostalgia is derived. Private nostalgia refers to those symbolic images and references to the past that, because of their source in the biography of a particular person, tend to be more specific and individualized in their references. Collective nostalgia relates to a condition in which symbolic objects and images from the past are highly public, widely shared and familiar. Under certain conditions, these symbolic resources from the past can evoke nostalgic feelings in many people simultaneously (Davis, 1979; Wigmore and Tuxill, 1995).

Considering the source of nostalgia, Baker and Kennedy (1994) distinguished real, simulated, and collective nostalgia. Nostalgia can be triggered by direct and indirect, personal and group experiences therefore Holak et al. (2006) classify nostalgia into personal, interpersonal, cultural, and virtual. The types of nostalgia referring to its reference point are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classifications of nostalgia related to the source of consumer experience

| Author | Nostalgia types | Source (reference point) |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Baker and Kennedy, 1994 | real simulated collective | — consumer’s own direct and personal memories — individual experiences or memories of others, such as parents, grandparents, ancestors — collective experiences or memories (e.g., national, historical) |
| Holak et al., 2006 | personal interpersonal cultural virtual | — direct personal experience and memory — non-direct experience and memory, which can come from parents, common experience and memory et al. — memory of groups — books, movies, video materials and other non-direct experiences |

Source: own elaboration based on Baker and Kennedy (1994) and Holak et al. (2006).

The phenomenon of nostalgia is the subject of numerous research and scientific publications in various fields, such as psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, ethics, anthropology, tourism and hospitality management, literature and art, etc. It is also an area of interest in business research, including marketing and consumer behavior studies.

There is a noticeable increase in the presence of the topic of nostalgia in scientific research. According to bibliometric analysis using SciVal, 405 publications classified in the “nostalgia; reverie; emotion” topic cluster were published in the Scopus database in recent years (2018–2022), and from the beginning of 2023 to mid-2023 there were already 85 publications (data status as of June 30, 2023). In comparison, 244 publications were published in the period 2013–2017. This indicates that there has been an increase in interest in nostalgia issues in recent years.

2.2. Nostalgia marketing: The concept and research areas

Nostalgia has sparked curiosity and generated interest among marketing researchers and practitioners for years. The study by Rana et al. (2022) tracking the evolution of the nostalgia concept in marketing, reveals that despite the growing attention paid to nostalgia in marketing practices and research, the domain has so far lacked a solid theoretical structure. Scholars on nostalgia in marketing tend to adopt a mixed approach and relate nostalgia to various psychological, social and managerial aspects in order to construct marketing practices (Rana et al., 2022).

Many publications describe the concept and its applications, but do not explicitly define nostalgia marketing or limit its meaning to tactics. Often quoted in online sources is the definition proposed by Tran (2022), which states that “nostalgia marketing is a strategy of using positive, familiar concepts from previous decades to build confidence in new ideas and revitalize modern campaigns.”

Considering the complexity of the concept of nostalgia marketing, its essence can be described as follows:

- uses associations with the past to evoke feelings of nostalgia in consumers, triggering good memories or evocations associated with a particular period;
- applies to both products, communication strategies and tactics, and the creation of brand experiences;
- relies on the strategic use of nostalgia related to branding and/or uses nostalgia in a tactical manner in selected marketing activities;
- involves using elements and aesthetics of the past to evoke positive consumers' emotions and feelings related to a particular brand, product, service or experience.

As a practice, nostalgia has been around in marketing for quite a long time, but as a separate field of research in the marketing discipline, it gained more attention in the 1990s. Rana et al. (2022) identified four research streams that have influenced the focus of inquiry in the field:

1. Various emotions evoked by nostalgic promotion, including advertising (Muehling et al., 2014).
2. Nostalgic triggers that can influence consumer attitudes, brand loyalty and purchase intentions (Muehling, 2013; Muehling et al., 2014).
3. Psychological functions of nostalgia, as the influence on the way consumers remember their past or the level of self-reflection (Muehling and Pascal, 2012).
4. Influence of consumer characteristics or affective states on responses to nostalgic advertisement (Zhao et al., 2014).

Essential to nostalgia marketing are references to consumer behavior and research conducted in this field. Scholars are trying to understand the emergence of nostalgia among consumers, conducting studies and offering implications for marketing practice. Nostalgic consumer behavior is related to needs, attitudes, preferences, purchase intentions, choices and consumption of products and services that evoke memories or references to the past.

The issue of the impact of nostalgia on consumer behavior is addressed in many scientific publications. Research studies related to nostalgia in consumer behavior address the following key areas:

- impact of nostalgia on purchasing decisions and behavior (Diamantopoulos et al., 2013; Rutherford and Shaw, 2011);
- influence of consumer characteristics on nostalgic attitudes (Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2019; Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent, 2010);
- assessment of the nostalgic attitudes of consumers towards brands (Ford et al., 2018; Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2019; Grębosz, 2016);
- impact of nostalgia on consumer loyalty (Chen et al., 2020; Toledo and Lopes, 2016);
- impact of nostalgia on consumer behavior for different product categories (Fan et al., 2020; Xia et al., 2021).

The nostalgic behavior of consumers depends on their personal, sociocultural and economic characteristics and situational context (Rana et al., 2020). The results of several studies support that the proneness to nostalgic consumer behavior

varies by age (Madoglou et al., 2017; Yüce et al., 2019), gender (Akagün Ergin and Şahin, 2019; Madoglou et al., 2017), social class and identity (Hepper et al., 2014), and economic and cultural aspects (Hepper et al., 2014; Sedikides and Wildschut, 2022), among other factors. However, the relationship between different characteristics and nostalgia proneness is a topic of debate among nostalgia researchers (Rana et al., 2022).

The nostalgia marketing strategy is based on precise targeting. The literature to date indicates a strong interest in targeting primarily two groups: seniors citizens and Baby Boomers. The third group with great potential noted by the researchers in the context of nostalgia marketing is Generation Y, popularly known as Millennials. To reach these customers, the current wave of nostalgia marketing refers to time periods considered consistent with the early adulthood of members of these generations, namely the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s (Rana et al., 2022). According to Rynnänen and Heinonen (2018), memories of consumer experiences can be classified into four temporal frames: light nostalgia from one's youth, strong nostalgia from childhood, recent past events, and consumption practices to be promoted in the future. Of course, consumer drivers can refer to the various sources of nostalgia identified earlier.

For strategic reasons it is crucial to pinpoint the periods that evoke nostalgia among consumers but also to comprehend the motivations and consumer preferences linked to the longing for the past. Consumers' nostalgia can serve a reflexive function linked to idealizing of desirable past and a restorative function to strengthen or improve their social ties (Keskin and Memis, 2011; Rana et al., 2020). Consumers may also engage in nostalgic behavior to bring a sense of security, identity, self-worth, and belongingness (Sedikides et al., 2015).

Nostalgia marketing efforts should bring beneficial outcomes to consumers expressed in a sense of identity and congruence with themselves. From the brands' point of view, produce positive effects related to cognitive, affective and conative responses (Rana et al., 2022). Linking marketing to positive references from past times humanizes brands, creating meaningful connections between the past and present. The use of symbolism, images and sounds from the past often evokes the positive feelings that often accompany these memories. It is also a way to build social ties through nostalgia (Friedman, 2016).

3. Nostalgic consumer trends

Nostalgia is becoming a key trend as consumers increasingly lean toward fashion, objects and culture from the past. It is a way to tap into familiar memories or appreciate the aesthetics of "things" they could not appreciate or experience before. The desire to feel nostalgia is increasingly driven by the need to feel comfortable and stable in times of uncertainty and change. Times have been and continue to

be uncertain due to various factors, such as the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the economic crisis, climate change, etc.

All generations feel nostalgia to some degree, but the newest research taken by GWI Zeitgeist indicates that it is the younger generations that are driving today's nostalgic trends (Harlow, 2023). Generation Z and Millennials are the most nostalgic. Respectively 15% and 14% of the surveyed members of these groups feel that they'd prefer to think about the past rather than the future. The results of the GWI survey indicate the periods towards which each generation feels nostalgic (Table 2). While the different generations tend to miss the years associated with their youth, it seems interesting that 37% of Generation Z say they feel nostalgic for the 1990s. That is, for the period when some of the representatives were very young, and others weren't even born yet. Nostalgia for the 1990s is also felt by 61% of surveyed Millennials and 55% of surveyed Generation X representatives. Given the stressful reality we've been experiencing over the past few years, it's not surprising that many respondents feel nostalgic for periods representing more carefree and simpler times (Harlow, 2023). The research results indicate periods to which consumers representing each generation want to return sentimentally. At the same time, they allow the identification of periods towards which different ages feel nostalgia.

Table 2. Time periods for which representatives of different generations feel nostalgic

| Time period | Generation Z | Millennials | Generation X | Baby Boomers |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| 2010s | 42% | 18% | n.d. | n.d. |
| 2000s | 56% | 42% | 21% | n.d. |
| 1990s | 37% | 61% | 55% | 28% |
| 1980s | 21% | 36% | 65% | 66% |
| 1970s | 12% | 11% | 28% | 67% |
| 1960s | n.d. | n.d. | 10% | 31% |
| 1950s | n.d. | n.d. | n.d. | 9% |

Note: online survey conducted by GWI Zeitgeist on a sample of 6,390 in 12 markets (January 2023). Generation Z: born 1997–2006, Millennials: born 1983–1996, Generation X: born 1964–1982, Baby Boomers: born 1958–1963.

n.d. — no data available

Source: own elaboration based on Harlow (2023).

Over the past few years, many trends from the 1990s and early 2000s have experienced a revival. Nostalgic trends appeal to a wide range of consumers, either Generation Z who view the 1990s and early 2000s trends as aesthetic inspiration, or Millennials and Generation X who remember these trends from their youth (Harlow, 2023; Trend Hunter, 2023). Therefore the current 1990s revival in pop culture extends to more and more products which evoke nostalgia while still appealing to consumers.

Nostalgia has been reflected especially in fashion trends and a return to vintage clothing styles. The trend forecast for 2023 by fashion magazine *Vogue* says that nostalgia for the 1990s and 2000s will remain (Cary, 2023). It should be noted that consumers, in particular representing Generation Z, are bringing back fashion with a more body-positive attitude and are increasingly rejecting the beauty standards of the past (Harlow, 2023). Nostalgic trends with vibrant and bold colors and makeup applications are also becoming more expressive (Trend Hunter, 2023).

Nostalgic consumer trends stem not only from past experiences. A key driver of nostalgia for all generations is the media, regardless of generation, region or gender. The influence of media on nostalgic feelings is indicated by 46% of consumers surveyed. To the greatest extent, consumers' feelings of nostalgia are triggered by movies, TV shows, music and photographs. Nostalgic media messages influence consumers' feelings and moods. According to the GWI survey, 53% of respondents say they feel happy, and 40% say they feel comforted when they engage with media from the past (Harlow, 2023). This is important about the influence of the media in shaping consumer trends and the marketing use of film, music and image motifs.

Trends related to preferred music are pretty interesting. Regarding favorite music styles, each generation prefers music from the decade they grew up. Except for Generation Z, whose most favorite genre is hip-hop/rap and music from the 1990s, for many of them which were released before they were born (Harlow, 2023). Consumers are also increasingly reverting to old media carriers, using CDs or vinyl records.

It should be noted that nostalgic trends are associated with other trends. One of them is escapism. The results from recent studies showed that people consume nostalgic media (including music, movies, television, books, and video games) to escape the turbulence of COVID-19 (Wulf et al., 2022). Consumers may be particularly motivated to use nostalgia-inducing media in times of crisis because nostalgia allows them to take their minds off the present (EU Business News, 2022). Therefore, not only do nostalgic themes evoke good memories, but they are also a form of escape from reality for many consumers. Nostalgia carrying the value of sentimentality thus increasingly provides tired, restless consumers with emotional escapism (Trend Hunter, 2023).

Consumer nostalgia affects more than just fashion and media. In recent years, many foods and drinks familiar from the past have returned. Consumers are therefore looking for flavors and food products from the past. Many consumers remember the joy of drinking sodas in their youth. Customers desire to recapture the flavorful, youthful experience, but not to the detriment of their own health, so they are putting pressure on brands to create better products to satisfy the nostalgia. In addition, nostalgic escapism is influencing the popularity of retro retailers, as consumers are increasingly interested in recalling the past in the places and ways they shop (EU Business News, 2022).

There is also a nostalgic return to traditional food and home cooking. It brings people together, and consumers are enjoying cooking with family, friends and even strangers. Users on various social media sites share simple and home-made recipes. These recipes are so accessible that any user can join this trend. In addition, the emotional aspect of cooking and eating has become more important in recent years. Nostalgia and the corresponding simultaneous desire for escapism and comfort are satisfied by participating in online cooking and culinary communities (Trend Hunter, 2023).

4. Nostalgia in contemporary marketing practice

Over the past few years, we can observe a noticeable increase in nostalgic marketing practices. They respond to consumer trends and concurrently stimulate, influence, and develop nostalgic consumer behaviors. Marketers use mainly product-focused and marketing communications-focused approaches in their activities.

A strategy based on nostalgic products is implemented by:

— offering consumers products from the past, their modifications or versions resembling those from the past;

— using the design, graphic motifs or period-specific styling.

A growing number of brands base their product portfolio on nostalgic connotations. A good example is the Polish brand Śląskie Oblaty, which has among its flagship products the traditional Silesian wafers — *oblaty*, as well as *kopanioki* candies, known since the late 19th century (Śląskie Oblaty, n.d.). Marketers are also introducing limited-edition replicas or products styled to resemble products of the past, as exemplified by the limited edition vintage Coca-Cola.

Brands like Nintendo are revisiting old products, including games based on new technological capabilities. Nintendo's efforts are based on giving new life to games from the 1990s. With many gamers who encountered them in their youth being parents, Nintendo is introducing the games to a new generation of future consumers, ensuring the longevity of their product and a whole new cycle of nostalgia. Nintendo is a good example of using the multi-generational strategy in marketing nostalgia (Fahey, 2022). Toys and board games from the past are also experiencing a renaissance.

Nostalgic references are also increasingly visible in the design and style of products and packaging. These apply strongly to the food and beverage market. Manufacturers of innovative products also offer models with designs evoking the past, such as smartwatches styled after classic watches.

The product-focused strategies aim at recalling positive past experiences and evoking feelings of pleasure and satisfaction associated with the purchase and use of a nostalgic product. It can also allow to strengthen the relationship with the

brand by referring to shared past experiences or sentiments. It can evoke in consumers a sense of stability, associated with the brand's long history and continuity.

Brands use nostalgic approaches based on marketing communications, linking their positioning strategies and marketing campaigns to positive references from past times. Nostalgia in marketing communications is based on the following:

- storytelling, using flashbacks or references to past events, characters and lifestyles;

- appealing to popular culture and using icons, images, movies and music from the past;

- use of motifs, slogans, jingles, and graphic elements from the past;

- reuse of advertisements (remasters, remakes, re-releases).

Many brands use nostalgia in their campaigns, referring most often to the 1990s and 1980s. Campaigns styled on those of the 1990s and late 1980s are used by Nintendo, which often reuses themes, motifs, and stylistics of ads from the past. It also appeals to personal nostalgia by showing stories that may remind viewers of their own experiences in their youth, as in the well-known *Two Brothers* campaign. In the communication (Helm, 2019), Nintendo skillfully connects the past with the present through its flagship products, showing how playing together can connect people and generations.

Another example is the Ceneo's campaign referencing the vibe of the 1990s with the key message "All stores in the computer, thousands of bazaars" (Ceneo.pl, 2023). This campaign refers to the collective nostalgia associated with lifestyles of the past by relating them to the present. Similarly, past and present are merged in Ikea's campaigns inspired by the features of the late 1980s TV series, set in a scenography entirely using contemporary products (Marketing przy kawie, 2022).

Nostalgia marketing is also often a way to create content around the campaign itself. An example of this is the illustrated Mary Katrantzou's campaign launched on social media which takes inspiration from vintage holiday stamps (Williams, 2020). The Internet existence of the campaign means that it can exist in the virtual space for many years, being shared and commented on by the audience.

Media and technological development have accelerated the use of sensory-based triggers in nostalgia marketing, which can draw a stronger commitment from consumers (Chae et al., 2021). The combination of marketing and real-world experience is an important trend that is being reinforced by the development of virtual and augmented reality technology allowing brands to make greater use of nostalgia for marketing applications (Hinsch et al., 2020; Tsao and Shu, 2020).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

According to previous research, in turbulent times people feel more nostalgic than ever before. They are looking for peace, comfort, and an escape to the past, where

life seemed simpler and more stable. Considering the challenging reality we have encountered in recent years, it comes as no surprise that consumers express nostalgia for eras symbolizing carefree and simpler times. Nostalgia has become a key trend in recent years, as consumers increasingly turn to culture, fashion, and objects associated with the past. People representing different generations tend to sentimentally return to the years associated with their youth. Recent studies indicate that young consumers are increasingly driven by today's nostalgic trends (Harlow, 2023).

In response to nostalgic trends, it has become increasingly common for companies to use nostalgia in their marketing practices. They seek to build emotional attachment and influence consumer preferences by linking their brands and offerings to consumers' past experiences, memories or references. Marketers evoke memories of past times and inspire nostalgic reflection through nostalgic products and marketing communication, in which storytelling and references to the stylistics and symbolism of the past play an important role.

Conducting nostalgia marketing requires a strategic approach and adequate knowledge of nostalgic consumer behavior. The development of nostalgia marketing creates challenges for research concerning the following avenues:

- impact of various factors on the effectiveness of nostalgia marketing (demographic, psychological, social, cultural);
- research in the context of different target groups and their susceptibility to nostalgia marketing activities, including various marketing strategies, tactics and elements;
- evaluation of the effectiveness of nostalgia marketing in the context of brand building, purchase decisions, consumer satisfaction, commitment and loyalty;
- application and feasibility of nostalgia marketing strategies and tactics in different contexts, such as industries, products or services.

The research findings can serve as a valuable guide for brands aiming to leverage nostalgia in their marketing endeavors. Thus, for instance, they indicate periods to which consumers representing each generation want to sentimentally return. At the same time, they allow the identification of periods towards which nostalgia is felt simultaneously by different generations. It is worth remembering that nostalgic consumer trends are not only driven by past experiences. A key driver of nostalgia for all generations is the messages reaching them through various media. Nostalgic marketing strategies, therefore, result from both consumer research and media monitoring.

Nostalgia marketing efforts should bring beneficial outcomes to consumers expressed in a sense of identity and congruence with themselves. Marketers should also comprehend the underlying motivations linked to the longing for the past. From the brand's point of view, nostalgia produces positive effects related to cognitive, affective and conative responses (Rana et al., 2022). Nostalgia marketing

requires integrative thinking, which refers to combining different aspects of the past and present. A strategic approach is key, which should address brand positioning and the long-term significance of activities and their effects.

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