

Repackaging the past: Nostalgia as a Strategic Lever in Retro-Marketing in the Digital Era.

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Abstract

In an era of media saturation and consumer skepticism, retro-marketing has re-emerged as a strategic branding approach, leveraging nostalgia to foster emotional resonance and differentiation. Rooted in aesthetic and symbolic references to the past, this strategy draws on a complex emotional register that links memory, identity, and consumer attachment.

This article presents a critical literature review of nostalgia-driven retro-marketing, with a focus on its evolution within digital environments. Drawing from marketing, psychology, and cultural studies, the review explores the conceptual foundations of nostalgia and its role as an affective lever in consumer-brand relationships. Particular attention is given to key typologies of nostalgia such as; personal vs. collective, real vs. simulated, and restorative vs. reflective nostalgia, and their effects on consumer perception, trust, and purchase behavior.

The paper further examines how digital platforms such as social media amplify nostalgic appeals through algorithmic memory, emotional targeting, and participatory co-creation. These dynamics have transformed nostalgia from a passive sentiment into an active tool for digital brand engagement and identity construction.

By synthesizing interdisciplinary findings, the article identifies theoretical gaps and proposes future research directions to better understand nostalgia as a culturally situated and strategic communication asset in postmodern consumer culture.

Keywords: retro-marketing, Nostalgia, social media, brand engagement, identity construction.

Introduction

In today's media-saturated environment, consumers are constantly exposed to advertising content across multiple channels, particularly on social media. This excessive exposure has contributed to rising skepticism and a growing mistrust toward standardized promotional discourse (Yaylagul & Cakir, 2017).

In this postmodern era, the use of emotional and hedonic themes to connect with customers on a deeper level has never seemed more essential for a brand's survival and visibility in such saturated environments (Brown et al., 2003). One of the most widely used strategies by brands is retro branding, also referred to as marketing inspired by the past, or retro marketing. The deployment of these nostalgic tactics has also gained significant academic attention in recent years, as the field of retro marketing research continues to expand. This growing interest is largely due to the strategy's ability to tap into powerful emotional, memory-based, and identity-related dimensions (Goulding, 2000; Holbrook & Schindler, 1991; Kessous & Roux, 2010; Muehling & Sprott, 2004).

Retro marketing is no longer confined to a specific industry; it has emerged as a cross-cutting differentiation tool applicable across all sectors, including high-tech industries, which have been deeply impacted by these emotionally driven strategies (Hallegatte, 2015). Many scholars attribute the widespread adoption of nostalgic marketing practices not only to postmodern influences but also to the rise of social networks, which have greatly facilitated the exchange and celebration of collective memories (Youn & Jin, 2017).

By emphasizing the potentially disruptive and affective nature of the "retro," Brown's (1999) seminal works laid the foundation for critical reflection on this fascination with the past. Since then, numerous studies have explored the psychological mechanisms behind the activation of nostalgia, whether real or simulated, personal or communal (Holbrook & Schindler, 1991; Sedikides et al., 2004; Kessous & Roux, 2008). These studies consistently demonstrate that nostalgia is a powerful driver of engagement, capable of reinforcing brand attachment, eliciting positive emotional responses to advertising, and ultimately influencing consumer purchasing behavior (Larsen et al., 2013; Merchant & Rose, 2013).

The renewed interest in past-oriented marketing strategies holds a unique relevance in the digital age. Social media platforms act as emotional amplifiers and memory accelerators, not only through their interactive capabilities but also through their capacity to enable the rapid creation, reproduction, storage, and circulation of nostalgic content, often with the simple touch of a button. Moreover, they allow consumers to share, co-create, and relive memories within groups and online communities (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021). Through visual, auditory, or narrative

formats, brands craft “retro” campaigns that instantly resonate with generational imaginaries while aligning with the communicative dynamics of digital.

However, despite the growing body of research on nostalgia and retro marketing, few studies offer a critical synthesis that fully incorporates the specificities of the digital environments where these strategies are deployed. Moreover, the mechanisms of emotional engagement; particularly as they intersect memory, identity, and affect, remain largely fragmented in the literature. The impact of such strategies continues to vary depending on cultural, generational, or sectoral contexts.

In this light, the present article aims to offer a critical literature review of retro marketing within the digital environment, with particular emphasis on consumer engagement dynamics and emotional appeals. It seeks to address the question of the effectiveness of retro campaigns on social media platforms, focusing on their affective and cognitive levers, while also discussing the theoretical and methodological challenges posed by this form of memory-based marketing. Accordingly, this study aims to critically examine retro-marketing strategies based on nostalgia, particularly within digital environments. It seeks to understand how these strategies affect consumer engagement and to identify the emotional and cognitive mechanisms activated in this context.

The article is structured as follows: it begins with a theoretical review of key concepts related to retro-marketing and nostalgia, followed by an analysis of their articulation within digital and social media contexts. The discussion then turns to the dynamics of consumer identity and engagement, before concluding with critical reflections and avenues for future research.

1. Theoretical Grounding: Understanding Retro-Branding and Nostalgia

1.1. Retro-Marketing: Concepts and Forms

Retromarketing refers to the strategy of intentionally using the past, logos, symbols, aesthetics, and artifacts to evoke a sense of familiarity, emotion, or nostalgia in the consumer, in an effort to influence their attitudes, preferences, and purchasing behaviors (Brown, 1999). This approach is built on emotional and memorial capital, whether it is individual or collective, as a fuel to reach the consumer on a much deeper and emotional level than traditional marketing does.

Even though it might look like an aesthetic trend, retromarketing is here to stay. It has proven itself as a strong strategy for brand differentiation and for helping brands strengthen their relationships with consumers. It does so by building emotional ties and bonds that go beyond the function of a product, turning it into an element of identity and a symbol of cultural belonging (Brown, 1999; Fort-Rioche, 2013).

The theoretical origins of retromarketing are based on a critical view of the traditional marketing model, which relies on continuous innovation. In a key contribution, Brown (1999) explicitly challenges the obsession with innovation by proposing a shift towards valuing the past. He highlights the power of the retro to create alternative desires that are not based on novelty but rather on recognition, familiarity, and memory. This approach left a significant mark on marketing thinking, where the past is no longer seen as obsolete, but as symbolic capital that can be mobilized strategically.

Retromarketing practices were initially marginal in the market, gradually entering new sectors and product categories, from agri-food to decoration, games, fashion, and even high-tech sectors like the automotive industry (Hallegatte, 2015). These industries have seen remarkable success by applying these strategies, especially the well-known example of the Volkswagen Beetle relaunch, which was a major success.

Today, retro marketing is present across all industries and targets all ages and generations. Brown (1999), who is considered the first to conceptualize retromarketing, presented three main categories:

- "Repro" which refers to the faithful reissue of a past product or advertising campaign, exactly as it was originally produced.
- "Retro", which is a stylistic or symbolic update inspired by the past. Rather than replicating it exactly, this approach borrows aesthetic elements from previous decades and adapts them to today's context. It reflects a postmodern aesthetic where nostalgia is stylized, sometimes ironic or playfully reimagined. The past becomes a resource of meaning to evoke recognition without necessarily reproducing the original.
- "Neo-retro" which refers to a new creation that visually or narratively evokes a past era.

According to Brown et al. (1999), retro marketing is not just a reuse of past symbols or styles. It's a creative recontextualization of the past, mixing nostalgic references with contemporary relevance. Instead of repeating the past, effective strategies reinterpret it to align with modern consumers' values, expectations, and ways of life.

Retro might seem like a shortcut to emotional engagement, but in reality, it's more complex. Its success depends on a fine balance between perceived authenticity, emotional connection, credible storytelling, and coherence with the brand's overall strategy. When poorly executed, retro marketing can be seen as superficial or even manipulative. But when it's done properly, it helps brands reinforce their identity, build trust, and create strong symbolic connections with their audiences (Holotová, 2020).

The rising use of retro marketing is a postmodern response to several factors. First, the sociocultural dimension plays a key role. In a world marked by instability; economic, environmental, or identity-based, people tend to turn to symbols that offer a feeling of temporal continuity. The past becomes a form of emotional escape, a safe space compared to a future that feels uncertain and risky (Davis, 1979).

Then comes the demographic factor. Retro marketing first appeared when the Baby Boomer generation started looking back on their youth (Brown, 2001; Schindler and Holbrook, 2003; Stern, 1992). As people grow older, they often revisit the period when they were young. Brands are part of that memory. They remind people of moments, people, or experiences that are no longer there. Retro marketing gives consumers the desire to relive these times.

There is also a historical explanation. The fin-de-siècle effect shows that at the end of an era, people tend to look back at their achievements, or at events that shaped their lives. In today's market, where innovation moves fast, is easy to copy, and where markets are saturated, brands have turned to new emotional strategies like retromarketing. Postmodern consumers are tired of the rush and pressure of modern life. Retro consumption gives more meaning to the act of buying, by focusing on authenticity, trust, and the continuity of identity and history (Holak & Havlena, 1998; Stern, 1992).

In addition to that, product lifespans are shorter, and the fast pace of product launches has made the first-mover advantage less effective. This situation encourages brands to rely more on the trust that consumers already have in their past products. It is often more effective to invest in the brand's historical heritage than to race toward innovation, which is increasingly expensive and difficult to maintain in a market where technologies are advanced and product features can be easily copied (Brown et al., 2003).

Finally, the digital environment and rapid technological evolution have only accelerated retro marketing practices. New technologies offer several features and tools that make it easier to store, reproduce, and circulate nostalgic content at almost no cost. The ability to like, share, and comment also makes this content accessible to a wider audience, without geographical limits. On top of that, users actively participate by co-creating content, commenting, and sharing their own memories and experiences with the brand or product. This interactivity increases the chances that nostalgic content will be seen, shared, and even liked more, especially when it receives a lot of reactions (Youn & Jin, 2017).

Social media platforms enable the rapid reactivation of heritage content like old advertisements, slogans, or vintage designs, while also encouraging users to reinterpret and reappropriate them (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021). This leads to a form of memory performance, where the past is not

just remembered but reenacted, remixed, and reinterpreted through emotional and interactive experiences (Scola & Gordon, 2018).

It is important not to reduce retro marketing to a temporary trend, a phase, or a superficial approach. It is not just about appearances. When it is consistent with the brand's history and identity, and when it is applied with meaning, it can have a strong impact on brand attachment, credibility, and consumer attitudes, especially in cultural contexts where collective nostalgia plays a central role (Kessous, Roux, & Chandon, 2015).

1.2. Nostalgia as an emotional driver in brand strategies

When examining the retromarketing literature, it's almost impossible not to find nostalgia as an important component of retromarketing tactics. Moreover, a lot of authors use both terms as synonyms. We often find expressions like retro marketing or nostalgia marketing used interchangeably. So, for a better understanding of the use of nostalgia in retromarketing strategies and applications, it is essential to look back to its conceptual, psychological, and cultural roots.

This inseparability of the two concepts is understandable, as one does not go without the other. If retro marketing is the use and valorization of the past for commercial purposes, focusing on aesthetics, signs, and artifacts, then nostalgia is the emotional engine behind it. Nostalgia is what gives the consumer the ability to recognize, project, and feel connected to this valued, aesthetically charged past. It's the emotional resonance sought through retro practices. The power of modern retro marketing lies in this subtle dialogue between memory, emotion, and identity (Routledge et al., 2013).

The roots of nostalgia were first introduced in the field of medicine by Johannes Hofer in 1688 to describe a pathological state of homesickness observed in soldiers. After being considered a form of anxiety or sadness caused by being away from home, nostalgia gradually evolved into a more complex concept, both emotionally and socially.

Davis (1979) was one of the authors who conceptualized nostalgia as a bittersweet emotion, structured differently for each individual. His work, which focuses on the theory of discontinuity, suggests that individuals tend to feel nostalgic in times of crisis or during life transitions. It acts as a form of psychological escapism, where people turn toward a past that appears safer, risk-free, and often idealized when compared to the present or future. More recently, the works of Sedikides, Wildschut, and Routledge (2008) have highlighted nostalgia's adaptive role: rather than focusing on the past at the expense of the present, nostalgia strengthens self-esteem, identity continuity, and a sense of belonging.

The work of Holbrook and Schindler (1991) paved the way for the use of nostalgia as an emotional and hedonic tool in the field of retromarketing. They demonstrated that cultural goods like music, and emotional experiences linked to significant life events, frequently shape consumer preferences.

Nostalgia is indeed a very complex concept. Scholars have tried to categorize it in order to better define its contours and its effects depending on context and target audience. Pascal, Sprott, and Muehling (2002) proposed a distinction between collective nostalgia, which refers to shared memories within a generation or culture, and personal nostalgia, which is based on one's own autobiographical memories.

Another distinction has also been proposed: between real nostalgia, which is lived and experienced by the individual, and simulated nostalgia, which is not directly lived but rather transmitted through transgenerational means or media (Divard & Robert-Demontrond, 1997; Kessous & Roux, 2010). For example, certain distant eras become desirable thanks to the film industry or vintage video games, which have become popular among younger generations who never directly lived those times but oddly wish to experience them. This type of nostalgia is often triggered artificially through visual or symbolic cues, even in people who have never heard of the era in question. It is widely used in advertising, especially to appeal to younger generations attracted to the aesthetic codes of earlier decades like the 1980s or 1990s (Muehling & Pascal, 2011).

Boym (2001) proposed another insightful classification. He distinguishes between restorative nostalgia, which is a faithful recall of the past as it was, and reflective nostalgia, which is a more idealized reinterpretation of the past. This distinction helps explain why some campaigns try to reproduce old visuals or slogans identically, while others draw on them more symbolically or emotionally.

The richness and complexity of nostalgia lie not only in its different forms but also in its ability to evoke strong emotional responses. As a complex emotion, blending bittersweet feelings and idealized memories, nostalgia can deeply impact consumer psychology on multiple levels (Sedikides et al., 2008). These mixed emotions encourage introspection on time, memory, and identity. This expands the role of nostalgia beyond simply looking back; it becomes a powerful strategic tool for influencing consumer behavior, when used appropriately.

Nostalgia involves both cognitive and emotional dimensions. On a cognitive level, it activates a selective and often idealized reconstruction of the past. This mental reworking has been described as a symbolic psychological tool that helps consumers make sense of the present

through the comforting lens of memory. Nostalgia then becomes a form of adaptation in response to modern complexity or uncertainty (Davis, 1979; Wildschut et al., 2006).

On an emotional level, many empirical studies have shown that exposure to nostalgic content activates emotions that are often positive, such as warmth, gratitude, and psychological comfort (Holak & Havlena, 1992; Kessous & Roux, 2010). These feelings enhance the sense of familiarity with the brand and can lead to stronger consumer-brand relationships by reinforcing emotional attachment.

These underlying mechanisms of nostalgia, whether cognitive or emotional, can result in a significant positive effect on consumer behavior. The study by Merchant & Rose (2013) showed a strong correlation between nostalgic advertisements and increased purchase intentions, especially when the message is perceived as authentic and sincere. Authenticity is a key success factor in nostalgic or retro marketing strategies, in the sense that consumers must feel it is genuine, not just a commercial manipulation (Kessous & Roux, 2010).

In this context, the use of nostalgia in retro marketing strategies is not just about passive memories or aesthetic references to the past. It activates a real emotional process that deeply influences how consumers perceive, feel, and engage with brands, making it a powerful tool for helping brands withstand the test of time.

1.3. The role of social media as a vector of nostalgic retro-marketing strategies

As the strategies of retro marketing or nostalgic marketing rely on emotional and cognitive mechanisms, the appearance of social media platforms has changed the rules and conditions of these strategies more than ever (Youn & Jin, 2017). Social media and interpersonal platforms have transformed the way nostalgia is used and diffused. Social platforms have gone beyond their primary role as spaces to meet friends or colleagues, becoming environments where people produce, share, and seek information about many topics, including brands and services.

So, social media has proven itself to be much more than just a channel for communicational messages. It acts as an amplifier of collective memory, where the past is stored, shared, recreated, reinterpreted, and even evaluated through social media metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and views. These dynamics offer brands entirely new ways to reach a wider and more engaged audience, going far beyond traditional advertising methods. On social media, memories and nostalgic content are no longer private or individual, they are collectively experienced as a social phenomenon that can be judged, validated, stored, and reused with the click of a button (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021).

There are many differences between traditional retro marketing, which is a one-way communication controlled by the brand, and what happens now on social media platforms.

These platforms have introduced a participative logic where consumers can interpret, create, and contribute to the nostalgic narrative. They are no longer passive recipients, but active and proactive participants who co-create nostalgic content (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023). They can comment, share, like, or even produce brand-related content themselves. This affordance of social media has enabled the creation and multiplication of shared memory spaces within online communities.

Digital platforms do not only act as neutral distributors of nostalgic content. Through their algorithmic logics, they actively shape how this content is circulated, perceived, and emotionally experienced. In that sense, platforms contribute to the co-construction of nostalgic emotions, reinforcing shared memories and cultural sentiments that fuel user engagement.

Jacobsen & Beer (2021) introduced the concept of quantified nostalgia to describe how nostalgic content or memory is evaluated in digital environments. Their work focuses on user experience and how certain social media features shape that experience. They focused mainly on the capacity of memories to be stored and reshared on their anniversaries, and how this changes the conceptualization of nostalgia and retro marketing.

First, the period considered "nostalgic" has become much shorter, users now express nostalgia for very recent events. Second, nostalgic memories are no longer naturally stimulated; they are made accessible on demand and almost pre-programmed. Third, users have become attached—even addicted, to these features and to platforms that offer memory-related functions. There's also a certain excitement and curiosity to see what memory will resurface next. Lastly, these memories are now subjected to evaluation; likes, comments, views, which creates both excitement and pressure. There's even a kind of competitiveness around the validation of shared memories (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021).

Here, this phenomenon can be explained by social influence theory, where users adopt positive interpretations of the past not only because they personally connect to those memories, but because online group validation gives them more value. A meme, a retro ad, or a shared story becomes influential because it is repeated, endorsed, and emotionally charged by the community. In other words, it accumulates metrics like likes, comments, and shares ((Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012).

In the context of nostalgic brand content, this is especially interesting because it provides brands with a real-time view of how content is perceived and valued based on its social acceptance in online communities. It becomes clear that nostalgic marketing is no longer analyzed individually or in isolation, but as a collective, shared experience (Youn & Jin, 2017).

Social media platforms promote a kind of group nostalgia, where shared moments become tools for social bonding. This also relates to social identity theory, where individuals seek psychological comfort through belonging to a group or a tribe. These shared memories, of a childhood brand, a specific time, a place, a person, or an experience, help give individuals a sense of continuity and meaning (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

In this scenario, brands take advantage of this dynamic to create feelings of closeness and belonging. Using old slogans, retro packaging, or jingles from the 1980s or 1990s generates emotional reactions that are amplified by social media sharing. This phenomenon resembles emotional contagion, first described by Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1993), and now observable in digital contexts (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). Sedikides et al. (2008) also remind us that nostalgia is a social emotion that reinforces group identity and collective engagement. As a result, nostalgia becomes a participatory group experience that thrives in hyper-connected and instant digital environments like social media.

There's also an intergenerational dimension to this digital nostalgia. Ads, products, symbols, and artifacts from the past now circulate in spaces where different generations coexist. This creates symbolic bridges between memories, even when people did not live through the same era. In this way, nostalgia works as a kind of emotional language that connects parents and children around shared or reconstructed references (Kessous & Roux, 2010; Holak & Havlena, 1998). Nostalgia here doesn't only refer to past experiences, it acts as a tool for identity in a present marked by speed, uncertainty, and fragmentation.

So, digital platforms are not just spaces where nostalgic content is posted or shared. They transform the very nature of that content by amplifying its emotional power, increasing its viral potential, and building communities around it. For brands, this means approaching nostalgia not as a static or decorative element, but as a relational and participatory phenomenon, deeply linked to the logic of digital engagement (Suominen, 2008).

In short, social media has deeply redefined the role of nostalgia in brand strategies. What used to be a one-time emotional lever has become an ongoing, community-based experience. Retro marketing no longer speaks only to individuals, it speaks to collective emotions, constantly evolving in real time through the interplay between users, algorithms, and the stories brands tell (Youn & Jin, 2017).

1.4. Digital Brand Engagement and the Social Identity Dynamics of Nostalgia

In recent years, the notion of digital brand engagement has taken on a central role in marketing discourse, particularly in emotionally charged campaigns where nostalgia operates as a symbolic and affective trigger (Holak & Havlena, 1998). Unlike passive exposure to retro

content, engagement in digital spaces is inherently participatory and relational. Consumers do not merely receive nostalgic stimuli, they respond, reframe, and recontextualize them within personal and collective identity narratives. This evolution calls for a more granular understanding of how nostalgia interacts with identity, belonging, and emotional investment in digital environments, particularly through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social media affordances, such as algorithmic curation, sharing functionalities, and content visibility metrics, have created a fertile ground for nostalgia to become not only a marketing tactic, but also a social practice (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021). The act of engaging with nostalgic content online often reinforces group affiliation and identity. As Filieri (2023) explains, consumers actively co-create the meaning and revival of retro brands by interacting with nostalgic content, such as liking vintage ads, commenting, or even sharing this kind of content. These actions help consumers express and affirm their identity as part of a generational or cultural in-group.

This process resonates with the core tenets of Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and strive for positive differentiation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this context, nostalgic branding serves as a symbolic resource through which individuals can express group allegiance and reconstruct a sense of temporal and emotional continuity. Brands become vessels of collective memory, offering consumers a way to reconnect with a shared past and reaffirm their belonging to a symbolic community (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016; Sierra & McQuitty, 2007).

Importantly, the emotional and symbolic richness of nostalgia enhances consumer-brand identification, a key driver of digital engagement. When individuals perceive that a brand reflects their own history, values, or cultural references, they are more likely to exhibit behaviors associated with engagement, such as advocacy, co-creation, and positive word-of-mouth (Kessous & Roux, 2010; Muehling & Pascal, 2011). This emotional alignment fosters what Giakoumaki and Krepara (2020) define as brand engagement in self-concept (BESC), where the brand is integrated into one's personal identity.

Moreover, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok, which regularly surface memory-based content through features like "On This Day" or "Throwback Thursday," function as algorithmic agents of identity reinforcement. Jacobsen & Beer (2021) describe this as "quantified nostalgia" a phenomenon where the algorithm doesn't just recall the past, but curates and amplifies memory fragments that are most likely to resonate socially and emotionally. As

these nostalgic fragments gain traction through likes, shares, and comments, they become socially validated narratives, anchoring users within emotionally charged brand ecosystems.

The emotional contagion of nostalgic content (Hatfield et al., 1993; Kramer et al., 2014) is also particularly significant in digital brand engagement. When a nostalgic post triggers affective responses within a group, be it joy, longing, or collective pride, those emotions spread rapidly, shaping the atmosphere around a brand and reinforcing the user's emotional investment. Scholars such as Hartmann and Brunk (2019) and Holak and Havlena (1998) highlight that nostalgic appeals increase the depth of engagement by fostering a sense of temporal intimacy between the consumer and the brand, reducing psychological distance and enhancing affective bonding.

Additionally, these dynamics unfold across generational lines. Younger consumers may engage with simulated nostalgia; nostalgia for eras they never lived, while older consumers often respond to authentic, lived nostalgia (Cho et al., 2014; Pascal et al., 2002). Despite these differences, both groups find meaning through engagement: one through discovery and aesthetic fascination, the other through reminiscence and identity reinforcement. In both cases, nostalgia enables users to engage in what Jungselius & Weilenmann (2023) refer to as "memory performance"; a socially situated act of identity narration and affective expression.

In sum, the integration of nostalgia within digital brand engagement strategies reveals a complex interplay between memory, identity, and emotional belonging. Engagement is not simply behavioral; it is symbolic, affective, and collective, especially in digital environments where content is designed to evoke past experiences while reinforcing present identities. By mobilizing the emotional and symbolic power of nostalgia within algorithmically mediated platforms, brands do not merely communicate, they become embedded in the emotional fabric of everyday life.

1.5. Critical Issues and Future Perspectives of Retro-Marketing in the Digital Age

Retro marketing's success and gains of strategic legitimacy, and its proliferation in digital environments, raise several conceptual and operational criticisms. Even though it has proven that this success is well deserved, especially from a postmodern perspective where the need for emotional anchoring in a world perceived as uncertain and superficial is growing, it still calls for reflection on the potential pitfalls and limits of its effectiveness.

The first concern to address is the question of perceived authenticity. Even though retro marketing strategies, especially nostalgia, function as emotional levers, they must be seen and felt as sincere, real, and credible, in perfect alignment with the brand's history, personality, and values. Nostalgia alone does not automatically guarantee lasting engagement. Several studies

show that consumers are able to distinguish between a sincere approach and one that feels like an opportunistic use of the past (Kessous & Roux, 2010; Fort-Rioche, 2013). This sensitivity is even stronger in digital contexts, where memory is “algorithmized” (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021), and storytelling mechanisms are often overly standardized. When retro codes are used excessively or in a poorly calibrated way, they can lead to nostalgic fatigue, or worse, to a disconnect between the brand’s image and how it is actually perceived.

Another important issue is the saturation of shared cultural references, which creates a generational gap. Not all consumer groups have the same memories, nor the same ability to feel genuine nostalgia. While Generations X and Y may react emotionally to symbols from the 1980s and 1990s, younger audiences respond more to simulated forms of nostalgia that are often aesthetic rather than based on lived memories (Holotová, 2020). This raises questions about the limits of intergenerational marketing, which tries to unite different groups around increasingly fragmented memories.

Moreover, the cultural dimension plays a crucial role in the success of retro campaigns. What feels nostalgic in one culture might not evoke the same feelings elsewhere—or worse, might carry different meanings or associations that create the opposite effect. This is particularly true in cultural contexts where historical representations are absent, fragile, or even conflictual (Holak & Havlena, 1998; Brown, 2001). So, the assumed universality of nostalgia needs to be deconstructed in light of specific sociocultural contexts.

Nostalgia-based marketing is also not universally effective across all brands or situations. For retro marketing to truly work, brands must carefully calibrate the nostalgic elements they use, making sure they align with their identity and audience. Overusing retro codes can weaken their emotional impact and reduce the brand’s perceived authenticity, ultimately making the whole campaign less effective. Brands must find a balance in how they implement retro marketing strategies (Brown et al., 2003).

Finally, a deeper question needs to be asked about the purpose behind using retro marketing in the first place. By focusing too much on the past, do these strategies risk holding back innovation? The repetition of vintage product relaunches, retro packaging, and old slogans can contribute to a form of creative stagnation, where marketing imagination gets stuck in a safe but unchallenging loop (Goulding, 2002; McCole, 2004). If this is not balanced with a strong and relevant contemporary offer, the long-term vitality of the brand may be at risk.

In response to these criticisms, several reflections are emerging. One direction would be to see retro not as a simple recycling of aesthetics, but as a hybrid narrative tool that connects past and present in a meaningful way. This requires a more subtle approach, one that uses reflective or

critical nostalgia and is based on a deep understanding of the emotional expectations of the audience (Kessous, 2015; Stern, 1992).

Another valuable path would be to include audiences in the process of remembrance. By inviting them to co-create or share their own memories linked to the brand, companies can foster a more sincere and less manipulative form of nostalgia.

In short, the future of retro marketing will depend less on its ability to evoke the past, and more on its ability to create meaning in the present, by using memory as a source of identity, emotion, and cultural connection, without falling into the trap of empty nostalgia.

2. Methodology of the Review

For this article, we opted for a narrative and critical literature review. Unlike a systematic review, the objective here is not to provide an exhaustive synthesis of existing work, but rather to examine the key theoretical contributions related to the use of nostalgia in retro-marketing strategies, particularly in the context of digital platforms. This approach is justified by the exploratory and cross-disciplinary nature of our research question, which draws from multiple fields: including marketing, social psychology, consumer sociology, and cultural studies, in order to bring together different perspectives on a complex and constantly evolving subject.

The sources included in this review were identified through a combination of recognized academic databases (Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Cairn, JSTOR) and manual exploration of reference lists from foundational articles. The aim was to incorporate both early seminal works, such as those of Brown (1999), Holbrook & Schindler (1991), and Davis (1979), which laid the conceptual groundwork for retro and nostalgia, and more recent studies analyzing these phenomena in the age of social media (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021; Scola & Gordon, 2018). The review covers the period from the 1980s to 2024, in order to trace the evolution of the concept of nostalgia in its marketing applications.

The inclusion criteria were based on the relevance of publications to at least one of the following areas:

- studies explicitly addressing retro marketing or retro branding,
- research exploring nostalgia as an emotion or cognitive mechanism used in communication or consumption,
- analyses of memory-related practices in digital environments,
- investigations that mobilize theoretical frameworks relevant to understanding affective consumer dynamics (such as social identity, attachment, perception of authenticity, etc.).

Conversely, empirical studies without a clear theoretical contribution, as well as non-academic or non-marketing-related documents, were excluded from the review. All selected references were read carefully, and key concepts, typologies, and models were manually extracted in order to build a consistent and cross-cutting analytical framework.

The findings were then organized around **four main thematic axes**, which reflect the overall structure of the article:

1. The logic of retro-marketing and its temporal anchoring,
2. Nostalgia as an emotional and identity-based driver,
3. The role of digital platforms in the activation and circulation of nostalgic content,
4. The limits and controversies surrounding the instrumentalization of the past.

This process made it possible to highlight not only theoretical convergences across the literature, but also tensions and underexplored gaps, particularly in terms of how nostalgia is used differently depending on cultural, generational, or media-specific contexts.

3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like any theoretical review, the present work carries a number of methodological and epistemological limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, although we have drawn on a wide and interdisciplinary body of literature, this review does not claim to be systematic. Certain empirical studies, particularly those emerging from non-Western contexts or published in less widely circulated journals, may not have been included in our analysis. This limitation also reflects a structural bias in the existing literature, which remains predominantly centered on North American and European markets, thereby limiting the intercultural generalizability of the findings.

Moreover, this review places strong emphasis on conceptual and theoretical contributions, sometimes at the expense of more recent empirical work. This was a deliberate choice, intended to explore the foundational and sometimes conflicting conceptual underpinnings of retro-marketing and nostalgia. However, it calls for further research to be conducted in the form of fieldwork and empirical studies, exploring how consumers actually perceive, experience, and respond to nostalgic marketing in real-world contexts.

Another limitation concerns the variability of definitions and the dispersion of analytical frameworks across the literature. Nostalgia is treated in diverse ways—at times as an emotion, at other times as a marketing strategy, and still elsewhere as a cognitive or narrative construct. This theoretical polysemy, while intellectually enriching, makes it difficult to consolidate a unified model. It highlights the need for future work aiming to clarify and operationalize the concept of nostalgia within retro-branding practices.

Finally, the rise of digital platforms; a central theme of this article, warrants renewed investigation. While this review emphasizes the amplifying role of social media in spreading nostalgic content, it does not allow for a precise assessment of algorithmic logics or of the appropriation and resistance strategies deployed by users themselves. Further research would benefit from a closer dialogue between marketing studies, platform studies, and digital sociology.

Taken together, these limitations suggest promising research avenues to deepen our understanding of contemporary retro-marketing, particularly in its emotional, cultural, and technological dimensions.

Conclusion

In an age marked by both media acceleration and cultural uncertainty, the past has become a valuable marketing asset. Far from being a simple stylistic device, retro-marketing today engages deep psychological mechanisms and emotionally resonant narratives that respond to consumers' need for identity, continuity, and reassurance. At the heart of this trend lies nostalgia, no longer merely a melancholic sentiment, but a strategic tool for constructing brand meaning, shaping consumer experiences, and anchoring commercial messages in affectively charged memories.

This article has highlighted the evolution and multifaceted nature of retro-marketing, from its early conceptual foundations to its contemporary deployment across digital platforms. It has emphasized how nostalgia operates as an emotional driver, capable of activating both individual and collective memory, and how its influence extends beyond visual or aesthetic codes to affect attitudes, attachments, and behaviors.

The rise of social media has profoundly transformed the landscape of nostalgic marketing. Platforms now act as vectors of emotional amplification, enabling brands to tap into personal timelines, algorithmically resurface past experiences, and foster affective communities around shared memories. This dynamic calls for renewed theoretical attention to the interplay between nostalgia, digital memory, and consumer engagement.

At the same time, the growing ubiquity of retro campaigns raises critical questions: Is the widespread appeal of nostalgia merely symptomatic of cultural fatigue, or does it signal a deeper shift in how brands construct meaning in a fragmented and hyper-mediated world? What ethical considerations arise when memories are commodified and collective pasts are reframed to fit brand narratives?

While this article has sought to provide a critical synthesis of current academic work, it also calls for continued empirical and interdisciplinary research, particularly in underexplored cultural contexts. Understanding nostalgia today requires moving beyond the opposition between past and present, toward a more nuanced view of time as a cultural and emotional resource that brands mobilize, not to escape the present, but to re-enchant it.

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