

# “Consumer storytelling as an element of word-of-mouth communication of nostalgic brands: evidence from Poland”

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Magdalena Grębosz-Krawczyk (Poland)

# CONSUMER STORYTELLING AS AN ELEMENT OF WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION OF NOSTALGIC BRANDS: EVIDENCE FROM POLAND

## Abstract

Nowadays, brand storytelling is an important element of successful brand management on the business-to-consumer market. Based on brand storytelling, consumers create their own brand stories. Therefore, consumer storytelling becomes an essential component of word-of-mouth communication. The objective of the paper is to evaluate the possibility of using consumer storytelling as an element of word-of-mouth communication of nostalgic brands. The results of the empirical studies concerning 24 international and Polish, generational and transgenerational nostalgic brands, conducted among 1,000 Polish consumers, are presented. The research is based on a personal interview technique, an online survey technique and a focus group interview. Research results confirm that nostalgic brands – that reflect personal history – generate stories more often than their non-nostalgic counterparts. Consumer storytelling is more common among older respondents. Consumers create stories about nostalgic brands and are happy to share them. Given the strength of consumer storytelling, it is worth encouraging consumers to share stories about the brand that can be an important element of word-of-mouth communication.

## Keywords

branding, marketing communication, nostalgia, story, Poland

## JEL Classification

M31, M32

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, stories and storytelling have become fundamental for successful brand management on the B2C market. Stories are important for identifying brands identity and connecting them to their target groups. In brand positioning, stories that precisely reflect the brand's personality are of particular importance. Companies have to identify the essential elements and emotional core of an individual story that can form a basis of brand communication. Storytelling also allows consumers to relive significant moments in their relationship with the brand and encourages them to create their own stories. According to Woodside et al. (2008, p. 100), storytellers "enjoy the nostalgia of reliving earlier experiences". Consequently, brands are perceived as nostalgic ones that "echo a personal story, should generate more storytelling" (Kessous, Roux, & Chandon, 2015, p. 190).

The objective of the paper is to evaluate the possibility of using consumer storytelling as an element of word-of-mouth communication of nostalgic brands.

The paper can contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between consumer storytelling and communication of nostalgic brands. The issue of nostalgic brand communication based on

creating stories characteristic for a brand and based on symbolic and emotional values is rarely discussed in the literature. The subject is, therefore, important given the increasing use of storytelling in brand management.

The paper consists of the theoretical and empirical parts. The importance of storytelling in marketing communication is considered first, then the research methodology is presented and the results are discussed.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Story and storytelling

According to Schank (1999, p. 2, cited in Woodside, 2010, p. 532), “human memory is story-based”. People create stories for pleasure, to share knowledge and experience with other generations, to preserve cultural heritage, or to alert others to dangers (Lugmayr, Suhonen, Sutinen, Sedano, Hlavacs, & Montero, 2016). Various information is transferred in the form of stories. A large amount of information from a human memory is episodic (Woodside, 2010). As a consequence, the stories include inciting events, experiences and reflexions on the relationship between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1998; Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008; Woodside, 2010).

While creating the brand image, companies increasingly use brand stories. This process is called a brand storytelling in the literature. Stories allow you to express the brand identity and refer to the experiences of specific target groups. During the process of brand positioning, identification of key emotional elements of the story can help in creating the basis for all brand communication. Storytelling became a part of brand communication and can be used in various types of media. Some authors (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boye, 1991) suggest that the most significant brand discourse is communicated verbally through storytelling systems. However, Barry, and Elmes (1997) also argue that successful brand stories can obtain credibility through the use of materiality (in physical modes, e.g., videos). With the development of new media, there are various options for serious and entertaining storytelling. Many authors have emphasized the power of storytelling in their research (Woodside et al., 2008; Fog, Budtz, Munch, & Blanchette, 2010; Baker & Boyle, 2009).

Stories and storytelling are crucial to understanding consumer behavior and attitudes toward brands (Escalas & Stern, 2003; Holt & Thompson, 2004). By generating positive and negative emotions, stories create importance in people’s lives and help them store information (Woodside, 2010).

The process of storytelling refers to showing, enacting or representing reality. Storytelling can be described as imitation or virtualization of real-world people or happenings (Lugmayr et al., 2016). Brand stories have the potential to impact consumers’ brand experience. This consists of all the “sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of brand’s design and identity, packing, communications, and environment” (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 52).

Storytelling is also a skilful reference to other stories, themes or characters and placing them in creating stories. Content often changes, mainly due to audience-inspired stories. Consequently, consumers create new stories, which are referred to as consumer or personal storytelling. Consumer storytelling is used by well-known brands, including Nutella or Ralph Lauren, which, on their websites, encourage consumers to share stories about the brand (Cova & Pace, 2006; Kessous et al., 2015). In this sense, personal storytelling represents the voice of consumers and becomes an important element of word-of-mouth communication.

Because consumers are becoming skeptical and wary of traditional advertising, word-of-mouth communication seeks to expose consumers to their brands in a unique and innocuous fashion. Word-of-mouth works when the message appears to originate with an independent source. One approach is to enlist genuine consumers able to give authentic endorsement of the brand by their own stories (Keller, Apéria, & Georgson, 2008, p. 263).

According to Pereira (2019), the storytelling framework posits that story exists in a three-dimensional space comprised of a character, plot and the world in which the story takes place. The core of brand storytelling is a brand story communicating to the customers. Customers have their internal stories that shape how they perceive the brand. Finally, the market has its own larger story that surrounds and impacts the consumers' stories. The brand story and the customer story coexist within the context of a larger market story.

The brand and consumer stories often do not overlap completely, and in order to communicate more effectively with customers, marketers must focus on the intersection between these two stories (Pereira, 2019).

Hirschman (2010) proposes three types of branding narratives concerning the interpersonal relations:

- the first one relies on a human tendency to be a part of a community having an exceptional and attractive history;
- the second concerns the desire of people to reach out to other people who are perceived to have the same qualities and values; and
- the third is based on identity negotiations within the brand community.

## 1.2. Storytelling of nostalgic brands

The marketing literature today describes nostalgia as “a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)” (Holbrook & Schindler, 1991, p. 330). Authenticity is essential to nostalgia, because consumers find a sense of authenticity via nostalgic objects and experiences, and then use it to construct and confirm identity (Leigh et al., 2006; Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2019).

Therefore, nostalgic brands can be described as the brands that were popular when one was younger and are still common and chosen by the consumers who maintain good memories of the past

(Holbrook & Schindler, 1991; Loveland, Smeesters, & Mandel, 2010; Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent, 2010). Loveland et al. (2010, p. 393) define nostalgic brands as “brands that were popular in the past and are still popular now,” and the non-nostalgic brands are defined as “brands that are popular now (but were less so in the past or did not exist in the past).” Based on the various classifications of the phenomenon, two basic types of nostalgic brands can be indicated (Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2018, 2019):

- generational brands based on real nostalgia (connected with one's own, direct and personal memories), having an individual or collective character;
- transgenerational brands based on real nostalgia (connected with own, direct and personal memories) or simulated nostalgia (connected indirectly with individual experiences or memories of other individuals or groups).

Past research on brand and consumer storytelling discussed among others:

- the effect of stories on consumers' attitudes towards brands or products (Cheung & Lau 2012);
- the relations between emotional consumption and word-of-mouth communications (e.g., Ladhari, 2007; Moore & Bowman, 2006; Moore, Wilkie, & Lutz, 2002; Escalas, 2004; Delgadoillo & Escalas, 2004);
- the measurement of story quality (Kohtamäki, Vesalainen, Henneberg, Naudé, & Ventresca, 2012);
- the importance of emotion in storytelling (Jaafar, Lalp, & Naba, 2012);
- the impact of brand stories on consumer experiences (Chang, 2009, p. 22);
- the impact of nostalgia on the storytelling (Kessous & Roux, 2008, 2010; Kessous et al., 2015);
- story content in nostalgic advertising (Stern, 1992).

Emphasizing nostalgic brand values is a key element of brand communication campaigns. This allows us to reach potential customers, underline the brands' value and appreciate the consumer. The characteristic features of nostalgic brand communication include creating ideas about the brand based on symbolic and emotional values. Communication is based on symbols and emotions referring to memories. The nostalgic brand image must reach consumers' awareness and be recognized by them.

The appropriate construction of the brand story gives the possibility to reinforce the message of nostalgic brand with an emotional element, which underlines its specific sentimental character. Hence, storytelling fits perfectly in creating and reinforcing the nostalgic brand image and is used in practice as the part of nostalgic brands communication.

## 2. DATA, HYPOTHESIS AND METHODS

The aim of this study is to evaluate the possibility of using the consumer storytelling as an element of word-of-mouth communication of nostalgic brands. Based on the literature studies, the following hypothesis was formulated:

*H: Consumer storytelling is more common in case of nostalgic brands than in case of brands perceived as non-nostalgic.*

To test the hypothesis, in addition to desk research, author's research was conducted based on the concept of triangulation. The use of triangulation of research methods was aimed at ensuring a higher quality of research and reducing a measurement error. As a consequence, data were collected using several quantitative and qualitative methods, followed by comparison and matching of results. As a result, three main stages of research were carried out:

- The first stage was based on the qualitative research. The research was conducted among 100 Polish respondents. The direct method of collecting information was used, based on the personal interview technique to identify

nostalgic brands and their counterparts seen non-nostalgic.

- The second stage was based on the quantitative research. The research was conducted among 1,000 Polish respondents. The indirect method of collecting information was used, and the online survey technique was applied to evaluate the importance of consumer storytelling in communication of nostalgic brands. A random-quota sampling was applied based on the Polish Central Statistical Office's data (Table 1). The study included 24 Polish and international nostalgic brands of generational and transgenerational nature identified in the first stage.
- The third stage was based on the qualitative research and was a research experiment, complementary to the second stage of research. 100 respondents took part in the focus group study. Qualitative methods were used, such as a focus group interview and observation, to evaluate the importance of consumer storytelling in communication of nostalgic brands. The study included eight Polish and international nostalgic brands of generational and transgenerational character identified in the first stage.

The following product categories are represented among the identified nostalgic brands:

- food products (eight brands);
- clothing products (four brands);
- cosmetic products (three brands);
- household appliances (two brands);
- automotive products (three brands);
- sportswear products (two brands);
- sports products (one brand);
- household chemicals (one brand).

Among the brands most frequently mentioned by respondents, there are 11 transgenerational and 13 generational brands. Nine brands are global and present on international markets, and 15 brands are local.

In a quantitative study, 1,000 participants were asked to provide their views on willingness to talk about the brand or share brand experiences

**Table 1.** Sample characteristic – quantitative study

Source: Own study.

Sex/Age	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Σ
F	3.70%	8.90%	9.10%	7.70%	10.20%	13.60%	53.20%
M	3.80%	9.40%	9.30%	7.40%	8.80%	8.10%	46.80%

**Table 2.** Operationalization of consumer storytelling

Source: Own study.

Construct	Operational measurement of the construct	References
Consumer storytelling	I love talking about this brand with other people [S1]	Cristau (2006)
	I tell stories about this brand to other people [S2]	Kessoux and Roux (2010)
	I explain to others why it is in their interest to buy this brand [S3]	Albert (2014), Kessoux et al. (2015)

**Table 3.** Sample characteristic – qualitative study

Source: Own study.

Age	Number of participants	Sex		Average age	Median age	
		F	M			
Age group	18-24	8	4	4	21.5	21.5
	25-34	8	4	4	29.5	28.5
	35-44	8	4	4	38.87	39
	45-54	8	4	4	48.37	48
	55-64	8	5	3	59.25	59
	65+	8	5	3	72.25	72.5

(Table 2). The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means “definitely disagree”, and 5 – “definitely agree”.

In a qualitative study, focus group interviews were conducted. Using this technique, long discussions were held in eight groups of 8 respondents (Table 3). Gender balance was upheld in all groups.

The discussion was organized by a moderator, who animated, directed, managed and controlled all meetings and helped participants to express on proposed topics, based on the rules of group’s dynamics (Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2019). During conducting focus group interviews, the observation was also applied.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Analysis of research results confirms that transgenerational nostalgic brands that reflect personal history generate more stories than their non-nostalgic counterparts. The research results confirm that in eight out of 11 cases of transgenerational nostalgic brands, over 50% of respondents like to

talk about a nostalgic brand. Table 4 shows that in all cases respondents prove a relatively high level of tendency to create stories about transgenerational nostalgic brands (over 50% of indications for one brand, over 40% for four brands, and over 30% of indications for five brands). It was also found that for all brand pairs, the desire to talk about a brand and tell stories about the brand is higher for transgenerational nostalgic brands than for non-nostalgic brands (Table 4).

Telling the story about a brand and talking about it allow consumers to relive selected events from their lives and indorse memories. The research results show the rapport between transgenerational nostalgic brands and word-of-mouth communication. In case of nine transgenerational nostalgic brands, it was also confirmed that telling stories about a brand allows reinforcing brand relationships and, as a result, respondents explain to others why they should choose the products of nostalgic brand (more often than products of non-nostalgic brand) (Table 4).

In the case of generational brands, respondents, regardless of age, are also more likely to talk and

**Table 4.** Consumer storytelling in case of transgenerational brands

Source: Own study.

Number of brand pairs	Consumer storytelling					
	Nostalgic brands			Non-nostalgic brands		
	S1 [%]	S2 [%]	S3 [%]	S1 [%]	S2 [%]	S3 [%]
1	65.93%	46.12%	25.16%	31.64%	23.65%	29.05%
2	74.11%	53.81%	78.58%	22.59%	18.10%	24.90%
3	60.54%	33.00%	38.68%	26.34%	24.10%	17.89%
4	59.09%	30.74%	23.80%	24.75%	17.02%	17.31%
5	68.75%	45.80%	66.80%	24.53%	17.30%	25.71%
6	60.41%	45.48%	63.25%	27.97%	19.26%	24.54%
7	47.20%	22.86%	27.33%	25.36%	19.74%	29.19%
8	48.2%	42.0%	33.7%	27.16%	17.15%	14.02%
9	47.86%	32.86%	31.00%	37.75%	22.50%	19.63%
10	56.55%	36.12%	28.44%	40.07%	24.91%	26.84%
11	56.55%	35.89%	35.21%	39.24%	23.95%	22.68%

narrate about brands considered nostalgic than non-nostalgic (Table 5). In nine out of 13 cases, the products of nostalgic brands are also recommended to others more often than products of non-nostalgic brands.

Respondents are more likely to talk about nostalgic generational brands rather than nostalgic transgenerational brands. Perhaps this is due to the more frequent recall of memories.

Willingness to talk about the brand is declared by more than half of the respondents from particular age groups, in the case of the global brands (Levi's, Wrangler) and local brands (Polar, Zelmer, Syrenka, Wólczanka, Krakus, and Biały Jeleń). Whereas creating stories about a particu-

lar brand is declared by more than half of the respondents from particular age groups, in the case of one global brand (Levi's) and one local brand (Syrenka).

In summary, one can say that in the case of nostalgic brands, a slightly higher average level of consumer storytelling is observed. A similar relationship was found for the median (Table 6).

A non-parametric statistical hypothesis test – Wilcoxon signed-rank test – was used to compare two samples (Table 7).

The analysis shows that the differences in telling stories about nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands are statistically significant.

**Table 5.** Consumer storytelling in case of generational brands

Source: Own study.

Number of brand pairs and age range	Consumer storytelling					
	Nostalgic brands			Non-nostalgic brands		
	S1 [%]	S2 [%]	S3 [%]	S1 [%]	S2 [%]	S3 [%]
12 (35-44)	36.80%	24.80%	39.20%	17.60%	14.40%	16.00%
13 (18-24)	33.85%	32.31%	29.23%	24.62%	21.54%	16.92%
14 (25-34)	28.89%	16.30%	17.78%	25.55%	18.98%	22.63%
15 (45-54)	53.42%	39.04%	31.51%	21.17%	16.79%	21.17%
16 (55-64)	47.66%	32.81%	22.66%	36.13%	27.74%	24.52%
17 (55-64)	78.41%	50.00%	48.86%	30.38%	25.95%	29.75%
18 (45-54)	60.42%	42.36%	36.81%	33.58%	20.15%	26.12%
19 (65+)	60.95%	44.29%	63.33%	40.72%	31.96%	47.94%
20 (35-44)	31.51%	31.51%	23.97%	28.67%	18.88%	27.97%
21 (65+)	59.36%	62.03%	3.21%	27.68%	18.64%	19.77%
22 (65+)	60.95%	42.38%	41.43%	18.90%	10.37%	16.46%
23 (55-64)	59.43%	36.57%	48.00%	19.23%	11.54%	23.08%
24 (65+)	55.61%	46.52%	45.99%	32.80%	23.66%	34.95%

**Table 6.** Consumer storytelling evaluation for nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands

Source: Own study.

Group	N*	Avg	SD	Min	Q25	Median	Q75	Max
All nostalgic brands	998	3.26	0.53	1.31	2.93	3.31	3.62	4.83
All non-nostalgic brands	1000	2.80	0.58	1.18	2.42	2.83	3.18	4.83
Generational nostalgic brands	968	3.09	0.86	1.00	2.67	3.11	3.67	5.00
Generational non-nostalgic brands	965	2.79	0.84	1.00	2.33	3.00	3.25	5.00
Transgenerational nostalgic brands	998	3.29	0.55	1.36	2.94	3.33	3.67	4.92
Transgenerational non-nostalgic brands	1000	2.81	0.62	1.14	2.38	2.82	3.21	4.93

Note: N\* – number of respondents.

**Table 7.** The results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test for nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands

Source: Own study.

Group	N	Z	p	r
All nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands	993	20.407	0.000	0.748
All generational nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands	813	10.722	0.000	0.406
All transgenerational nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands	994	20.451	0.000	0.756

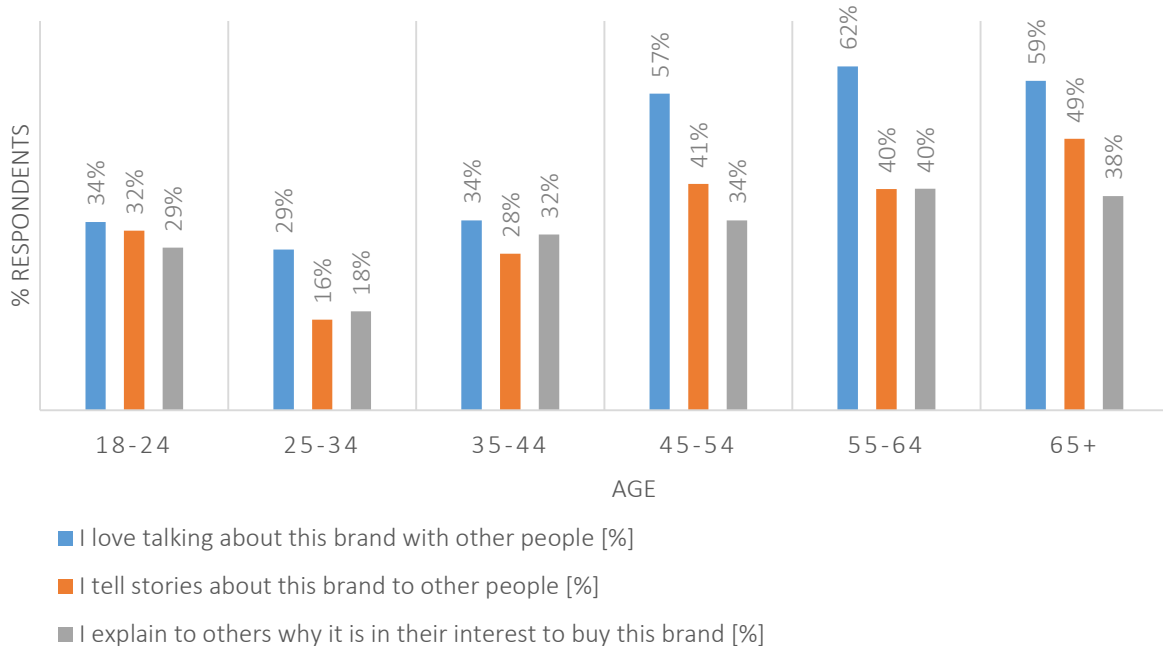
The strength of dependence for each brands group is strong, only for generational brands it is moderate (but statistically significant).

This can be due to a lower tendency for memories of the past or less time to talk about brands.

For generational brands, consumer storytelling is common among older respondents (Figure 1). The most active in telling stories are respondents from 55-64, 65+ and 45-54 age groups. The least active are consumers aged 25-34, slightly different from the respondents from groups 18-24 and 35-44.

The results of qualitative research based on the focus group interviews confirmed the results of a quantitative study and allowed for the formulation of cognitive conclusions, clearly indicating the possibility of using the phenomenon of consumer storytelling in practice in marketing communication of nostalgic brands addressed to all con-

Source: Own study based on research results.



**Figure 1.** Consumer storytelling for generational nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands in specific age groups

sumer groups, but especially older consumers. The results of the study confirmed that in most cases, respondents show manifestations of nostalgic attitudes regarding positive memories of childhood and youth. The emotions expressed during the study can be described as sentimental. In all cases, it has been demonstrated that nostalgia has personal character by referring to individual experiences. Respondents' memories of brands provoked

recalling stories from childhood and youth. Study participants definitely did not act in isolation, but stimulated and inspired each other to tell stories. The exchange of information between participants was intuitive and direct. Women were definitely more active during this study. The choice of focus group interviews helped to understand consumers' feelings and added value to the data from the quantitative study.

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## CONCLUSION

Branding has gone so far beyond its commercial origin that its impact on social and cultural reality has become practically immeasurable. Emphasizing a strong nostalgic personality through brand positioning is the first step towards developing strong brand equity. The next stage is a well prepared communication campaign and brand promotion using a range of tools usually known as the promotional mix. This allows developing the relations with consumers through the appropriate communication process.

Brand storytelling has always been an important part of its communication. Nowadays, brands are realizing that they can use the power of stories to express their values and reinforce customer relationships. Besides, with new technologies, consumers expect more brand-related content and influence the presentation of brands. Consumers create stories about nostalgic brands and are happy to share them. Given the strength of personal storytelling, it is worth encouraging consumers to share stories about the brand, which can become an important element of word-of-mouth communication.

Research conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods proves that Polish consumers represent nostalgic attitudes towards the brands associated with their past and have a tendency to develop their own stories about these brands. Consequently, while shopping and seeing a familiar logo, consumers can recall nostalgic associations that will increase the desire to choose the product evoking a sense of security and authenticity.

The hypothesis predicted that consumer storytelling occurs more frequently in case of nostalgic brands than in case of brands perceived as non-nostalgic. The research results show that this hypothesis is supported.

This paper has provided a better understanding of the importance of consumer storytelling in communication of nostalgic brands. From a managerial point of view, the potential of consumer storytelling as an element of nostalgic brands communication was presented.

The limitations of the study should be underlined. The sample is limited to the Polish consumers, and the studied brands represent only eight categories of products. It is recommended to conduct similar studies in other countries and for different products categories.

Telling a story about a brand and talking about it allow consumers to relive selected events in their lives and helps to evoke memories. The conducted research confirms the positive relationship between the nostalgic character of transgenerational brands and word-of-mouth communication, which confirms the theses of Ladhari (2007), Moore and Bowman (2006), and Moore et al. (2002). Meanwhile, the theses of Escalas (2004) and Delgado and Escalas (2004) were confirmed that brands strongly related to a consumer's identity create a narrative referring to the consumer's personal history.

Storytelling about past experiences is an ubiquitous part of social interaction. Regardless of who we contact, we often talk about the past, sharing past experiences. This serves not only to express one's own identity, but also to create interpersonal bonds based on a sense of shared history. Attitudes towards nostalgic brands are both cognitive, affective and behavioral in nature. As the cognitive component, we can point to consumers' opinions about nostalgic brands based on their experiences and memories. The affective component is expressed by an emotional connection with a nostalgic brand, associated with a person's life story and evoking specific connotations. In turn, the behavioral element manifests itself in the choice of a nostalgic brand and the willingness to talk about it and recommend it to others.

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