

Nostalgia, autobiographical memories and brand strategy: Marketing to the ‘Post-World War I’ generation

Aurélie Kessous ^{a,}

a INSEEC Business School, 27 avenue Claude Vellefaux 75010 Paris, France

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Aurélié Kessous

INSEEC Business Schools

27, avenue Claude Vellefaux

75010, PARIS

<Tel: +33 603 484 933

<Fax: +33 142 056 361 >

E-mail: akessous@inseec.com

AURÉLIE KESSOUS

is the author of numerous articles on the role of nostalgia in the relationship between consumers and brands. A researcher at INSEEC, her work mainly falls into the field of retro-marketing and nostalgic brands. The results of her studies have been published in international academic journals such as *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* in 2008, *Recherche et Applications en Marketing* in 2010, *Management et Avenir* in 2011 and 2012, *Décisions Marketing* in 2014, and also in English language journals, for example, *Marketing ZFP: Journal of Research and Management* in 2013.

Abstract

Although nostalgia is trendy and attracts marketing managers, its usage is not without risk. Nearing the end of their lives, for the 'post-World War II' generation, this can lead to feelings of sadness. Thus, this paper specifically focuses on the 'post-war generation' and compares the actual benefits it derives from consuming nostalgic brands with the competitive advantages it offers to nostalgia-based management professionals. This paper answers this question: how do the post-war generation's benefits translate into competitive advantages? In order to answer this question, two complementary qualitative studies have been conducted. The first was performed among a sample of 20 consumers, born between 1928 and 1947, while the second was performed among a sample of eight marketing managers

whose companies target this generation. Two thematic analyses were conducted after the integral transcription of the interviews. The first highlights the main emotional benefits associated with the post-war generation's nostalgic consumption behaviour. The second shows the competitive advantages and risks for nostalgic brands targeting the post-war generation.

Keywords

nostalgia, nostalgic brands, retro-marketing, brand strategy, post-World War II generation, generativity

INTRODUCTION

In the rear view mirror, does the future still have a future? In this digital age, the black and white vintage theme is back in vogue. With the feeling that ‘things were better in the past’, consumers are promoting the values of a time gone by. Progress spells danger. Recessions are multifaceted and global. Consumers need reassurance and feel emotional about the past. ‘Making something new out of the old’ is the brands' new motto as they ride the nostalgia wave. This retro trend has become an international phenomenon and is affecting the entire marketing mix. Thus, product design itself is meant to be nostalgic, with retro flagship models being redesigned, such as the BMW Mini, adapted from the 1959 Austin, or the launch of the New Vintage collection by Yves Saint Laurent in 2009. Other brands have chosen to re-run their best historical adverts, such as the detergent brand Persil, for its 100th anniversary to capitalise on its longevity accompanying consumers in their lives from the ‘good old days’ until now, thus enhancing brand credibility and authenticity. Finally, a nostalgic atmosphere can be achieved through the interior design. Ralph Lauren boutiques are pervaded by a nostalgic ‘WASP America’ atmosphere. The Louis Vuitton Cabinet d'Ecriture itself takes its inspiration from the 17th and 18th-century cabinets of curiosities, in that it is laid out like an English garden and showcases antique items of the brand's heritage.

Capitalising on the emotions it arouses among consumers, nostalgia gives brands a sense of credibility, authenticity, durability and quality, as well as emotional bonding – thus attracting the interest of managers. Although marketing practitioners widely use nostalgia as a communication tool, no study has, up to the present, ever adapted nostalgic brand communication to nostalgic consumer profiles. Four types of academic about nostalgia research can be discerned: (1) research that took an interest in antecedents¹ and its consequences on consumers' relationships with brands;² (2) research that worked on the

psychological functions of nostalgia;³ (3) research that focused on the measurement of consumer 'nostalgia proneness'⁴ and, on the other hand, on the nostalgic character perceived in an advert;⁵ (4) finally, research that endeavoured to conceptualise retro-marketing and to define the characteristics of retro-innovative brands.⁶

Although nostalgia is trendy and attracts marketing managers, its usage is not without risk.⁷ Nearing the end of their lives, for the 'post-World War II', this generation can lead to feelings of sadness.

Thus, this paper specifically focuses on the 'post-war generation' and compares the actual benefits it derives from consuming nostalgic brands with the competitive advantages it offers to nostalgia-based management professionals. This paper answers this question: how do the post-war generation's benefits translate into competitive advantages? In order to answer this question, two complementary qualitative studies have been conducted. The first was performed among a sample of 20 consumers, born between 1928 and 1947, while the second was performed among a sample of eight marketing managers whose companies target this generation.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section describes the history and the cognitive and affective characteristics of nostalgia. The second section outlines the emotional benefits related to the post-war generation's nostalgic consumer behaviour. Finally, the last section highlights the advantages and highest risks of nostalgic branding, targeting this generation.

NOSTALGIA: HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS

Although nostalgia is an old concept coined by the medical profession in 1688, its inclusion in marketing research works is recent.¹

In marketing, academics suggest multiple definitions of nostalgia: a mood;⁸ a preference;⁹ a state;¹⁰ a desire;¹¹ an emotion;¹² or:

a bittersweet affective reaction, possibly associated with a cognitive activity and which is felt by an individual when an external or internal stimulus has the effect of transposing him or her into a period or an event from an idealised recollection of the past which may or may not be part of his/her personal experiences.¹³

This paper agrees entirely with the latter quote as it emphasises the cognitive and affective aspects.

The cognitive characteristics of nostalgia: 'An idealisation system of a posteriori memories'

A reason to justify the use of nostalgia in brand communication strategies is the idealisation of 'a posteriori' memories. Nostalgic memories, brought back to the present, are not an exact account of the past. Beyond memory failures due to age, nostalgia filters the negative aspects of different events. Nostalgic perspective is informative (selection of acts among what has been an 'a priori' past), transformable (in changing memory semantic content), creative (in inventing events). It translates into a gap between these situations perceived by embellishment. It is thus possible to distinguish several levels of nostalgia, both real and simulated.

The affective characteristics of nostalgia: Endured or desired reaction?

Nostalgia is an ambiguous concept, which may sometimes be defined as a 'bittersweet emotion' (static inclination) or as an exclusively morbid or happy phenomenon (dynamic inclination).

Static inclination presupposes the coexistence of both positive and negative states of nostalgia. The positive dimension is linked to past events recalled and idealised with time and to 'ipseity' – the subjective part of one's personal identity. The negative dimension refers to the irreversibility of passing time and to 'alteration' – the irremediable transformation of things.

On the other hand, dynamic inclination reflects affective disorders as a consequence of nostalgia, whether it is felt to be a happy or morbid experience. It thus refers to two forms of nostalgia: one linked to memory – whose positive aspect is the ability to mentally retrieve an absent object; one linked to desire – whose negative aspect lies in the inability to physically reach a beloved object. Nostalgia may thus be endured (impossibility to escape it) or desired (deliberate recall of memories).

This first part thus justifies the use of the nostalgic concept in brand management. Two complementary qualitative studies were performed among a sample of 20 consumers and eight marketing managers, with the aim of identifying the benefits that the post-war generation associates with nostalgia and its use in managerial practices. Table 1 describes the methodology used.

Table 1 Methodology used in the two qualitative studies

STUDY 1: INTERVIEWS WITH CONSUMERS

Sample

The sample is composed of 20 persons – all part of the post-war generation – with the same number of men and women.

Description of the interviews (1.0–1.5 hours)

Altogether, 20 face-to-face individual interviews were conducted at the interviewees' homes, located in two towns in Southern France. In order to stimulate reflection, scenarios were used. Four sheets representing the four stages of life were presented (childhood/adolescence, traditional celebrations, early adulthood and final stages of life). Each consisted of six images (three colour and three black and white) and a scenario (four typical verbatim statements). They were presented in chronological order so as to allow for a progressive understanding of the different stages of life. The interview guide addressed five topics: (1) gathering of memories associated with brands/objects on the sheet; (2) identification of brands/objects associated with the different stages of life, but not necessarily represented there; (3) presence or absence of the brand/object in the respondent's current life; (4) identification of the individual's psychological anchoring in one of the four sheets; (5) associating words with each sheet.

Analysis of the consumers' responses

A thematic analysis was conducted after the integral transcription of the interviews. It highlights the main emotional benefits associated with the post-war generation's nostalgic consumption behaviour

STUDY 2: INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONALS

Sample

Altogether, eight marketing managers, using a nostalgia-based strategy, agreed to participate in the interviews. In order for the study to address various cases, they were selected from different industry sectors, ie advertising agencies specialising in intergenerational campaigns, the automotive, delicatessen food, clothing and transport industry. They were contacted by e-mail and presented with the study subject – nostalgia and brand strategies – and interview guide, at the end of 2010.

Description of the interviews (30–45 min)

For practical reasons, the eight managers were asked the following questions by telephone: (1) why use nostalgia and target the post-war generation? (2) benefits derived; (3) methods used to create nostalgia; (4) tools used to assess the success of the strategy; (5) adjustments in the strategy if a competitor uses the same positioning; (6) potential strategic evolutions.

Analysis of the marketing managers' responses

The interviews were recorded with the approval of the interviewees and then transcribed. The transcriptions were then reviewed by the respondents. A thematic analysis was conducted and validated by two other researchers.

EMOTIONAL BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH THE POST-WAR GENERATION'S NOSTALGIC CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

The post-war generation is meritocratic and values self-discipline and work. They were born at a time of social advancement (paid leave, 40-hour working week, secular education, etc) and were particularly affected by the Second World War's human and economic losses. Team spirit, obedience and social conformity are for them the important factors of success. They experienced the hardship and deprivations of the Second World War and they now tend to show an attachment to brands focusing on well-being and health. An example illustrating this is Banania with the following catch lines: D.C.A. 'Défense contre l'anémie' ('the fight against anemia') and 'Après l'alerte, le réconfort' ('relax after the scare'). In addition, the analysis of the interviewees' responses highlights two emotional benefits related to nostalgic consumer behaviour: the need to remember and the 'extension of oneself' in time.

The need to remember

Nostalgia is here treated as an adaptive phenomenon that aims at helping individuals keep their identity throughout the major transitions in a life cycle.¹⁴ Nostalgic consumer behaviour satisfies the quest for memory, needed to remember one's ancestors. These remedies serve as retrospective landmarks in the present day. They are the guardians of memory, the evidence of a bygone past. This is illustrated with the example of Suzette – a retired woman born in 1945:

The only thing that belonged to my husband that I have kept is his Dupont. I should have thrown it away, cursed it, because he was a smoker and that's what killed him but...he liked it. It's a part of him that is still with me...

'The positive effect' of older people's autobiographical memory explains why they perceive nostalgic brands as superior to traditional brands¹⁵. The elders' memories, brought back to the present, are idealised with time and past choices are seen as better choices. This is what Robert's (a retired man born in 1947) narrative illustrates here:

Banania is our breakfast. At school, after the war, we were given hot chocolate drinks and it was important for us. At home, before this time, we had only plain milk, without chocolate powder. When we started adding chocolate, it was scrumptious, a real delight; and all the hot chocolate drinks we can find today don't have the same

pure and strong taste as Banania did. They're full of chemicals, they're industrial and processed.

The extension of oneself in the future: Generativity

As if part of the family inheritance, nostalgic brands are passed down to the next generations, satisfying the post-war generation's generative tendencies. Generativity implies that the extension of the future perspective is linked to one's own mortality.¹⁶ It shows the desire to care for future generations by handing down a physical capital (goods) and intangible assets (knowledge) to their descendants. Throughout their narratives, the respondents underline that the continuous use of these nostalgic brands, even beyond death, will allow them to 'not fall into oblivion', 'to 'live on' and 'to artificially share the daily lives of their descendants'. They will virtually continue to exist beyond death and have a 'post mortem future'. Besides giving them a symbolic immortality after their passing away, the post-war generation highlights that these brands will also contribute to their descendant's well-being. This is noteworthy in Eliane's narrative – a 67-year-old retired woman:

My children know my story with Floraline because I used to cook it for them when they were tired. I told them: 'My mother would cook that when I was tired; it can only do you good'. Now, my daughter cooks Floraline for my grand-daughters when they're not feeling well and she tells them the story. And I know this anecdote will stay with them all along their lives, even when I'm gone...

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES AND RISKS FOR NOSTALGIC BRANDS TARGETING THE POST-WAR GENERATION

The interviewed marketing managers underline that the competitive advantage for their brands guarantees their quality and longevity. Longer-lasting brands mean, for some consumers, stability as they have survived the passing of time. In order to satisfy the need to remember and achieve some kind of immortality, brands can play the uniqueness card and put an accent on the symbolic and transmissible dimensions of the object. Here, the added value of nostalgia is a very unique brand heritage. Patek Philippe, a Swiss watch brand founded in 1839, is a good example. Its values 'respect the past/fascination with the future' and its 'Generation' campaigns, in vogue since 1996, reinforce an intimate link with their customers. Patek Philippe's black and white advertisements and the famous claim: 'You

never actually own a Patek Philippe watch. You merely look after it for the generation to follow' contributes to the awakening of nostalgic feelings. The brand targeted fathers and sons, first. Having successfully established the intended positioning, the company started portraying mothers and daughters, thus extending their markets from masculine to feminine.

Other brands can set an example by emphasising their authentic character. In the sweets industry, Werther's original advert shows a grandfather giving sweets to his grandson. The slogan ('I remember the first time my grandfather gave me my first Werther's Original sweets. I was 4... And today I AM the grandfather') does not specifically focus on the taste of the sweets but on the traces left in one's memory. It is the Proust madeleine effect. The love of sweets then becomes a sweetness handed down from generation to generation and tends to be associated with special rituals (celebrations, important events, birthday parties, etc).

Similarly, Azzaro, in the perfume industry, features three generations with strong family bonds in his campaign for the Chrome perfume and shows a real connection between them. Figure 1 highlights the intergenerational bond in these three advertising campaigns.

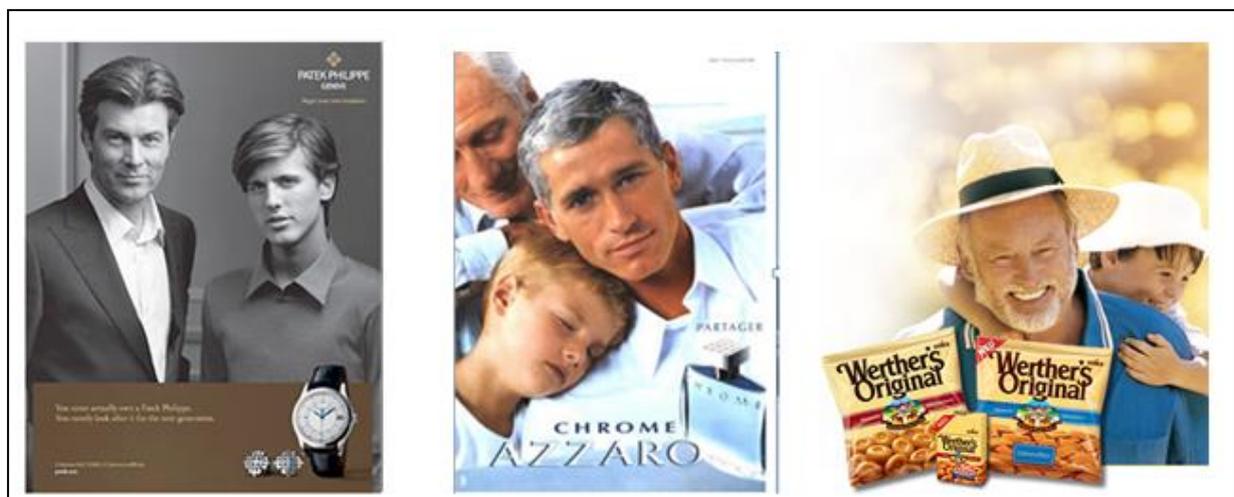


Figure 1 Intergenerational advert campaign targeting the post-war generation

Although targeting the post-war generation allows nostalgic brands to create an image of quality and longevity, their management is subject to risk. Satisfying the generative tendencies of these individuals is like associating nostalgia with mourning. Thus, the awareness of one's finite nature can lead to the rejection of the brand. The second managerial risk is also for the brand to convey an old-fashioned, ageing image, being then unable to spark the interest of the descendants.

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