

The Mechanism of Nostalgic Sentiment in Brand Identity Formation: An Empirical Study Based on 500 Questionnaires from Generation Z

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Abstract: Nostalgia, as an emotional recollection of past experiences, has become an important means for people to seek psychological comfort in today's rapidly changing social environment. This sentiment evokes a sense of familiarity within, alleviating the pressures of reality. Meanwhile, nostalgia has evolved into a prominent trend in the consumer sphere. In the realm of marketing, companies have begun leveraging consumers' nostalgia in brand promotion, advertising design, and product promotions, achieving notable success. Whether it's retro-designed products or cultural content recreating bygone scenes, both have gained consumer favor-particularly among Generation Z, who place a strong emphasis on emotional connections. Based on this, this study utilizes data from 500 valid questionnaires to construct a theoretical model with psychological distance as the mediating variable, systematically analyzing the pathways through which nostalgic sentiment influences brand identity. The findings reveal that nostalgic sentiment not only directly enhances brand identity but also indirectly elevates identity levels by narrowing the psychological distance between consumers and brands. These discoveries provide crucial theoretical foundations and practical guidance for brands to implement precise nostalgic marketing and establish deep emotional connections.

Keywords: Nostalgia; Psychological Distance; Brand Identity; Generation Z

1. Introduction

Nostalgia is a longing for the past or an affection for tangible or intangible objects associated with bygone times. When individuals feel distanced from the period they cherish, nostalgic sentiments arise. [1] Nostalgia significantly

influences brand identification and consumer decisions, connecting them to brands. As society evolves, nostalgia has been proven to significantly influence brand identification and consumer decision-making, serving as a core psychological mechanism connecting consumers to brands. [2] As the market continues to expand, according to the 2024 Snack Market Trend Insights Report released by Magic Mirror Insights, the growth rate of discussions about nostalgic snacks reached 74.1%, while the growth rate of childhood memories under snack-related topics hit 107.9%. This indirectly confirms consumption growth driven by nostalgia [3]. At the same time, research on nostalgia's impact on brand identity has proliferated. However, these studies predominantly focus on "various groups" within society, explaining consumer decision-making through a universal mechanism. This approach overlooks the fact that the specific nostalgic sentiments held by each generation differ. Furthermore, most existing literature concentrates on consumer-triggered long-term nostalgia-the natural accumulation of nostalgic feelings from prolonged product use and its subsequent conversion into brand identity-while neglecting research on the mechanisms through which short-term nostalgia and immediate experiences influence brand identity.

Therefore, addressing these limitations, this paper builds upon existing research by introducing the qualifier "Generation Z" to focus specifically on the nostalgic sentiments of this demographic, exploring pathways to achieve efficient brand identification. Furthermore, this study will adopt the "Earth Nostalgia Scale" developed by He Jiaxun within the Chinese cultural context. This 14-item scale will concentrate on the "personal nostalgia" dimension to ensure research specificity. Simultaneously, the study introduces the "psychological distance" as a mediating variable

to elucidate the mechanism through which short-term nostalgia transforms into brand identification. By expanding the explanatory boundaries of nostalgic sentiment on brand recognition from the consumer perspective, this research aims to refine the mediation model linking “nostalgic sentiment-psychological distance-brand identification.” This addresses gaps in existing literature, ultimately providing precise operational guidelines for Gen Z and effectively guiding corporate practices.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1 Identity Theory

Identity theory originates from two foundational theories: self-identity and social identity. Self-identity theory (Giddens, 1998) emphasizes that individuals achieve value recognition and self-construction through self-reflection [4]; Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1986) focuses on the social identities individuals form through group affiliations. [5] In this study, nostalgia serves as the core mechanism through which Generation Z constructs self-continuity and group belonging, influencing brand identity via two pathways: First, by evoking emotional connections to past selves (e.g., classic IPs, retro products), it helps individuals strengthen self-identity in a rapidly changing society; Second, it delineates “group” boundaries through shared nostalgic objects (e.g., childhood animations, era-specific pop culture), reinforcing group belonging via shared memories, thereby fostering brand identity formation at the social identity level. Therefore, nostalgia serves as a mechanism that bridges cultural fractures across time and space, reinforcing cultural identity.

2.2 Symbolic Interactionism

Centered on Mead's “ego-alter ego” dialogue mechanism, symbolic interactionism emphasizes how individuals construct social order and self-awareness through symbolic interactions. [7] Research conceives brands and their nostalgic elements (e.g., visual cues and narrative environments) as “symbols” of shared memory. By engaging with such symbols through consumption, Gen Z consumers are involved in a continuous conversation between the ‘ego’ and the ‘alter ego’: reconstituting self-continuity on the one hand through individualistic nostalgic symbols; reaffirming social identity as members of communities on the other through collective

symbolic congruence. This symbolic interaction is particularly evident in the realm of the internet. The continuous evolution of the internet has fostered characteristics of high interactivity, vast information capacity, and rapid transmission speed. It provides opportunities for direct communication between individuals, offering a richer and more immediate platform for expressing nostalgic sentiments. Simultaneously, it broadens people's social circles, forming a pervasive sociocultural phenomenon [8].

2.3 Field Theory

Bourdieu's field theory centers on the “field-capital-habitus” framework, conceptualizing social space as a structure where actors compete for capital according to specific rules. [9] In today's digital media landscape, cultural symbols from the millennial era are being revitalized through nostalgia. They are re-emerging in various forms within Generation Z's sphere of influence, collectively forming a nostalgic atmosphere that resonates widely [10]. This study views Gen Z's nostalgic consumption as a dynamic field where actors-including brands, consumers, and media-compete for the cultural capital embodied in “nostalgia.” Nostalgic elements emerge as scarce cultural capital, effectively defining the field's power structure. Generation Z's “nostalgia habitus,” shaped by their specific generational context, naturally positions nostalgic consumption as a strategy for self-construction and group belonging. Consumers vie for cultural position within the field through brand choices, essentially constructing self-identity and social recognition via capital operations.

Theoretical Integration and Positioning for Research

This study employs identity theory to explain the identity construction processes through nostalgic feelings at the individual and collective levels. It utilizes symbolic interactionism in explaining the meaning transmission and identity construction processes in the course of interactions through nostalgic symbols. Finally, field theory is employed to reveal the underlying social structures and relations of power in nostalgic consumption. These three theories-theories of psychological motivation, interactive processes, and social structures respectively-logically explain how nostalgic emotions drive brand identification by the intervening process of psychological distance.

These theoretical foundations also provide space for empirical validation of the dual-pathway model of "long-term-reunion." Because the mediatized production and commercialized marketing of nostalgia have become core issues, they merit in-depth exploration [11] so that this study aims to comprehensively capture the multifaceted dimensions of nostalgic sentiment in contemporary consumption. Consequently, the questionnaire design encompasses multiple entertainment and everyday consumption domains, including film and television, music, childhood snacks, and classic products. This approach seeks to systematically examine the pathways through which nostalgic triggers across different dimensions influence brand identification.

2.4 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on this, the study proposes the following core hypothesis: Nostalgic sentiment exerts a significant positive influence on Gen Z's brand identification. Second, psychological distance mediates the relationship between nostalgic feelings and brand identity. To further elucidate the differing mechanisms across nostalgic triggers, this study distinguishes two types of nostalgic feelings: "long-term usage nostalgia" and "reunion nostalgia." Their respective effects within the aforementioned model will be examined to more precisely delineate the dual pathways through which Gen Z's nostalgic feelings influence brand identity.

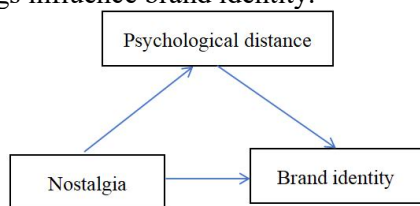


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

To empirically test the research hypotheses, this study rigorously followed the established scales and procedures. For data collection, specific procedures included designing and compiling the questionnaire on the "Wenjuanxing" platform, followed by targeted distribution of the questionnaire link via social media. Eligible consumers were invited to participate in the survey to ensure data quality and validity.

This study utilized the "QuestionStar" platform to generate and collect survey questionnaires distributed across different age groups. The

objective was to screen and select consumers born between 1995 and 2009, representing the "Generation Z" demographic, as the survey subjects. The questionnaire included one lie-detection question, with a reasonable completion time of 0.5 to 3 minutes. Questionnaires were deemed invalid if the lie-detector question was answered incorrectly, if completion time was extremely atypical, or if respondents did not fall within the Generation Z age range. During the formal survey phase, 500 questionnaires were distributed. After rigorous screening, 492 valid questionnaires were recovered, yielding a response rate of 98.4%. Furthermore, SPSS statistical software was employed to process and analyze the recovered valid questionnaire data. Following data cleaning and filtering, a series of regression models were constructed using stepwise regression analysis. This methodology systematically examined the potential mediating effects of psychological distance by sequentially testing: the influence of nostalgic sentiment on brand identity, the influence of nostalgic sentiment on psychological distance, and the combined effect of both variables on brand identity when simultaneously incorporated into the model.

4. Empirical Results and Analysis

4.1 Results

To examine the mediating effect of psychological distance between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity, three regression models were constructed using stepwise regression analysis. Model 1 analyzed brand identity as the dependent variable and nostalgic sentiment as the independent variable. Results indicated in Table 1 that nostalgic sentiment significantly and positively predicted brand identity, with regression coefficient $B=0.148$, standard error = 0.024, $t=6.261$, $p<0.001$, $\beta=0.381$. Model fit: $R^2=0.145$, adjusted $R^2=0.141$. F-test result: $F(1,231)=39.197$, $p<0.001$, indicating overall model significance. Model 2 conducted regression analysis with psychological distance as the dependent variable and nostalgic emotion as the independent variable. Results indicate nostalgic emotion significantly and positively predicts psychological distance: regression coefficient $B=0.090$, standard error = 0.036, $t=2.520$, $p<0.05$, $\beta=0.164$. The model fit was $R^2=0.027$,

adjusted $R^2=0.023$. The F-test result was $F(1,231)=6.352$, $p<0.05$, indicating overall model significance. Model 3 conducted regression analysis with brand identity as the dependent variable and nostalgic sentiment and psychological distance as co-independent variables. Results indicate nostalgic sentiment still significantly and positively predicts brand identity: regression coefficient $B=0.135$, standard error=0.023, $t=5.753$, $p<0.001$, $\beta=0.346$;

Psychological distance also significantly and positively predicted brand identity, with regression coefficient $B=0.148$, standard error = 0.042, $t=3.494$, $p<0.001$, $\beta=0.210$. Model fit: $R^2=0.188$, adjusted $R^2=0.181$. F-test result: $F(2,230)=26.651$, $p<0.001$, indicating overall model significance. Combining the results from all three models reveals that psychological distance partially mediates the relationship between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity.

Table 1. Data for Testing the Mediating Effect of the Option “I have been Using or Purchasing these Products for a Long Time”

	brand identity					Psychological Distance					brand identity				
	B	SE	t	p	β	B	SE	t	p	β	B	SE	t	p	β
Constant	-0.485	0.402	-1.207	0.229	-	7.032**	0.610	11.537	0.000	-	-1.526**	0.493	-3.097	0.002	-
Nostalgia	0.148**	0.024	6.261	0.000	0.381	0.090*	0.036	2.520	0.012	0.164	0.135**	0.023	5.753	0.000	0.346
Psychological Distance											0.148**	0.042	3.494	0.001	0.210
R ²	0.145					0.027					0.188				
Adjusted R ²	0.141					0.023					0.181				
F value	$F(1,231)=39.197$, $p=0.000$					$F(1,231)=6.352$, $p=0.012$					$F(2,230)=26.651$, $p=0.000$				

Table 2. Mediation Effect Test

Item	Meaning	Effect	95% CI		SE
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Nostalgia => Psychological Distance => Brand Identity	Indirect Effect	0.013	0.006	0.070	0.016
Nostalgia => Brand Identity	Direct Effect	0.135	0.089	0.181	0.023
Nostalgia => Brand Identity	Total Effect	0.148	0.101	0.195	0.024

The Bootstrap method was employed to examine the mediating effect of psychological distance between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity. The effect size, 95% confidence interval (CI), and standard error (SE) are presented in Table 2. The indirect effect size of psychological distance was 0.013, SE=0.016, with a 95% CI of [0.006, 0.070]. This interval does not contain zero, indicating that nostalgic sentiment can indirectly influence brand identity through psychological distance, with a significant indirect effect. The direct effect size of nostalgic sentiment on brand identity was 0.135, SE=0.023, with a 95% CI of [0.089, 0.181]. This interval did not contain zero, indicating that after controlling for psychological distance, nostalgic sentiment still directly and positively influenced brand identity, with a significant direct effect. The total effect of nostalgic sentiment on brand identity was 0.148, SE=0.024, with a 95% CI of [0.101, 0.195]. Since the interval does not contain zero, the total effect is significant. Combined with the results from the previous stepwise regression, this further confirms that psychological distance partially mediates the relationship between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity.

The mediating effect test for the option “Even if I haven't used/purchased these items for a long time, seeing them again still feels familiar and reminds me of my past.”

To examine the mediating effect of psychological distance between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted. First, a regression model was constructed with brand identity as the dependent variable and nostalgic sentiment as the independent variable. Results indicated in Table 3 that nostalgic sentiment significantly and positively predicted brand identity ($B = 0.795$, $SE = 0.147$, $t = 5.393$, $p=0.000$, $\beta=0.454$). The model's R^2 was 0.206, adjusted R^2 was 0.203, and the F-value was 66.673 ($df1=1$, $df2=257$, $p=0.000$), indicating good model fit. Second, a regression model was constructed with psychological distance as the dependent variable and nostalgic emotion as the independent variable. Results indicated that nostalgic emotion significantly and positively predicted psychological distance ($B = 7.196$, $SE = 0.282$, $t = 25.529$, $p=0.000$, $\beta=0.280$). The model's R^2 was 0.079, adjusted R^2 was 0.075, and the F-value was 21.901 ($df1=1$, $df2=257$,

$p=0.000$), indicating effective model fit. Finally, a regression model was constructed with brand identity as the dependent variable and nostalgia and psychological distance as co-independent variables. Results indicated that psychological distance significantly and positively predicted brand identity ($B = 0.071$, $SE = 0.032$, $t = 2.205$, $p=0.028$, $\beta=0.127$). Concurrently, nostalgic sentiment continued to significantly and positively predict brand identity ($B=0.079$,

$SE=0.011$, $t=7.279$, $p=0.000$, $\beta=0.418$), though its β value decreased compared to the first regression model ($\beta=0.454$). The model's R^2 was 0.221, adjusted R^2 was 0.215, and the F-value was 36.270 ($df1=2$, $df2=256$, $p=0.000$), indicating satisfactory model fit. In summary, psychological distance partially mediated the relationship between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity.

Table 3. Data for Testing the Mediating Effect of the Option “Even if I haven't used/Purchased these Items for a Long Time, Seeing Them Again Still Feels Familiar and Evokes Memories of the Past.”

	Brand Identity					Psychological Distance					Brand Identity				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β
Constant	0.795**	0.147	5.393	0.000	-	7.196**	0.282	25.529	0.000	-	0.281	0.275	1.022	0.308	-
Nostalgia	0.086**	0.011	8.165	0.000	0.454	0.094**	0.020	4.680	0.000	0.280	0.079**	0.011	7.279	0.000	0.418
Psychological Distance											0.071*	0.032	2.205	0.028	0.127
<i>R</i> ²	0.206					0.079					0.221				
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.203					0.075					0.215				
<i>F</i> value	$F(1,257)=66.673$, $p=0.000$					$F(1,257)=21.901$, $p=0.000$					$F(2,256)=36.270$, $p=0.000$				

Table 4. Mediation Effect Test

Item	Meaning	Effect Value	95% CI		Standard Error SE Value
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Nostalgia => Psychological Distance => Brand Identity	Indirect Effect	0.007	0.006	0.076	0.018
Nostalgia => Brand Identity	Direct Effect	0.094	0.054	0.134	0.020
Nostalgia => Brand Identity	Total Effect	0.071	0.008	0.135	0.032

To further validate the mediating effect of psychological distance between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity, a confidence interval method was employed for testing. Results indicate in Table 4 that the indirect effect of nostalgic sentiment on brand identity through psychological distance is 0.007, with a standard error of 0.018. Its 95% confidence interval is [0.006, 0.076], which does not include zero, indicating a significant indirect effect. The direct effect of nostalgic sentiment on brand identity was 0.094, with a standard error of 0.020 and a 95% confidence interval of [0.054, 0.134]. Since the interval did not include zero, the direct effect was significant. The total effect of nostalgic sentiment on brand identity is 0.071, with a standard error of 0.032 and a 95% confidence interval of [0.008, 0.135]. Since the interval does not contain zero, the total effect is significant. Given that both direct and indirect effects are significant, it is confirmed that psychological distance partially mediates the relationship between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity. Specifically, nostalgic sentiment directly and positively influences brand identity while also indirectly and positively affecting

brand identity by increasing psychological distance.

4.2 Discussion

This study empirically examined the mechanism through which nostalgia sentiment influences Gen Z brand identity and verified the psychological distance's mediating effect. The findings not only verify both proposed hypotheses but also reflect implicit difference in the mechanism based on different nostalgic triggering routes, and provides new theoretical contributions and practical implications for grasping Gen Z's nostalgic consumption psychology.

4.2.1 Direct driving effect of nostalgic sentiment on brand identity

Analysis robustly indicates that nostalgic sentiment significantly and positively predicts Gen Z's brand identity (H1 holds). This finding aligns with the classic arguments of Holbrook & Schindler (1996), reaffirming the efficacy of nostalgia as a positive emotional force in the consumer domain. More importantly, this study offers deeper explanatory insights into this effect through the lenses of identity formation,

symbolic interactionism, and field theory [12].

For Generation Z, retro products-such as old anime and retro snacks-are not just commodities; they are signs for self-identity construction. Buying those symbols loaded with collective memory, they embed the symbolic value of brands in their self-concept through ongoing conversation between the "ego" and the "id," hence achieving deep brand identification.

4.2.2 The key mediating role of psychological distance

Another core finding of this study is that psychological distance plays a significant partial mediating role between nostalgic sentiment and brand identity (H2 holds). This implies that nostalgic sentiment not only directly influences identity but also exerts indirect effects by narrowing the psychological distance between consumers and brands. This conclusion aligns with scholars such as Zhao's interpretation of psychological distance, which posits that psychological distance represents consumers' perception of the degree of separation between products and brands. As psychological distance narrows, consumers require less information to make purchasing decisions, thereby enhancing their willingness to buy [13].

Specifically, nostalgia functions as an emotional trigger that transforms brands from cold, external market objects into warm, relatable "participants" within consumers' personal life narratives. When brands connect with consumers' personal histories or shared memories through nostalgic elements, the psychological barrier between them rapidly dissolves. This sense of "in-group" familiarity significantly lowers consumers' psychological defenses, enhances their receptivity to brand messages and emotional resonance, thereby paving the way for brand identity formation. Bootstrap analysis indicates that this indirect effect is significant in both nostalgia pathways, demonstrating the universality of psychological distance as a mediating mechanism.

4.2.3. Mechanistic differences between nostalgia pathways and marketing implications

Whereas mediation models hold across both nostalgia paths, the specific coefficient comparisons record varying underlying mechanisms. Whereas, for "long-term usage nostalgia," the direct impact of nostalgic affect on brand identification ($B=0.135$) overwhelmingly surpasses its indirect impact through psychological distance (0.013), this

indicates that nostalgia from long-term customs and belief derives its strength from a virtually automatic, resolved affective reliance, with psychological distance reduction playing the role of supplementary to this purpose.

To the contrary, in the case of "reunion-type nostalgia," while both the direct effect ($B=0.079$) and the indirect effect (0.007) are relatively small in absolute value, they are themselves relatively more balanced. This suggests that in consumers with nostalgia induced by momentary recall, the rapid diminution of psychological distance during the process of the brand-consumer "reunion" is comparatively more significant for fostering brand identification. This sense of "instant familiarity" is important in making them re-accept and connect with a brand that has faded out of their lives.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Summary

This study, grounded in the nostalgic consumption phenomenon among Generation Z, constructed and validated a nostalgic emotion-brand identity influence model with psychological distance as the mediating variable through surveys and data analysis. The research confirms that nostalgic emotions not only directly and positively influence Generation Z's brand identity but also indirectly strengthen this identity by narrowing the psychological distance between consumers and brands. Furthermore, by distinguishing between "long-term usage" and "reunion" nostalgia triggers, the study deepens our understanding of nostalgia's operational mechanisms. It reveals that nostalgia rooted in stable trust exhibits stronger direct effects, whereas nostalgia based on momentary recall relies more heavily on the mediating role of psychological distance reduction.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Marketing Implications

Theoretically, the contributions of this study primarily exist in: First, through integrating identity theory, symbolic interactionism, and field theory organically, it profoundly elucidates the underlying psychological processes by which nostalgic sentiment results in brand identity-specifically, how nostalgic symbols help Gen Z consumers construct self-continuity and group membership, thereby inducing brand

identity construction. Second, by differentiating and experimentally testing the functions of two nostalgia pathways within a composite model, it explains the process model of "how nostalgia influences brand identity." This addresses literature gaps in the absence of attention to instant, short-term nostalgia experiences, advancing the theory refinement of nostalgia marketing.

Furthermore, the findings of this study aim to provide clear guidance for brand practices. For brands with historical heritage (such as classic domestic brands), it is essential to continuously reinforce their stable image of "long-term companionship." By sharing stories of the brand's evolution alongside users' personal growth, brands can solidify direct and deep emotional connections. Expanding the innovation scope of nostalgic products enables them to stay relevant and effectively integrate with contemporary demands. By enhancing nostalgic products through technological advancements, we can increase their appeal to a broader audience. Nostalgia serves as a mechanism that bridges cultural divides across time and space, thereby strengthening cultural identity [6].

Conversely, brands that aim to attract new consumers or re-attract old consumers with nostalgic elements should try to maximize the impact and recognizability of "reunion moments." Through the precise restoration of nostalgic landscapes, the application of classical visual symbols, and the exploitation of emotional narratives, they can instantly narrow psychological distance with consumers, thereby accelerating brand identity construction.

5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

While this study's focus on Gen Z individuals born between 1995 and 2009 holds representativeness, it did not account for influences such as cultural differences, developmental environments, and regional variations. Future research could expand the sample scope to include youth populations nationwide or across diverse cultural backgrounds to test the model's universality. Second, this study primarily employed cross-sectional data, revealing correlations and mediating mechanisms among variables but unable to rigorously infer causality. Future research could utilize experimental methods or

longitudinal tracking studies to further validate causal relationships between variables. Finally, while this study centered on psychological distance as the core mediating variable, future exploration of alternative mediating mechanisms or moderating variables could contribute to a more comprehensive theoretical framework.

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