

IMPACT OF NOSTALGIA MARKETING IN DIGITAL AGE ON CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOUR: GEN Z PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Marketing is an art as well as a science. It is the foundation to succeed any business enterprises. The present research will focus on the effects of nostalgia marketing in the digital age on consumer purchase behaviour, especially concerning generation z consumers of the city of Pune. Using an empirical, quantitative and analytical approach for conducting research, primary data was collected from 235 participants through the use of a structured Likert scale survey instrument. This research focuses on the effects of consumption of nostalgic content on purchasing intentions and behaviour. Tests of reliability and validity prove the quality of the measuring scales used in the research. In addition, Chi Square test and Independent Samples t-test show significant relationships and differences among variables under discussion. Specifically, the results reveal a strong link between nostalgia marketing and purchase intention. Moreover, there are also some important differences in purchase behaviour among males and females.

***Keywords:** Nostalgia Marketing; Digital Consumer Behaviour; Generation Z; Emotional Branding; Purchase Intention; Brand Attachment; Social Media Influence*

1. Introduction

In the age of digital media, nostalgia marketing once again acquires new meaning as brands turn to nostalgic symbols and cultural memories that generate affective differentiation. From the modern perspective of consumer behavior, nostalgia refers to the self-related emotional experience, which contributes to increased affective attachment and reduced decisional uncertainties in high-choice situations. Within the realm of digitally mediated market places, where consumers encounter personalized content filtered by algorithms, nostalgia functions as an automatic response that increases consumers' level of familiarity and trust (Merchant & Rose, 2023). Digital nostalgia is different from mass-media campaigns of nostalgic content in its interactive and social dimensions, as it invites likes and comments and allows for remixing. Data analysis capabilities enable brands to personalize their nostalgic messages according to the users' tastes and web-browsing histories. Hence, the merging of emotional and technological aspects gives rise to highly targeted nostalgic experiences. Generation Z offers unique insights into nostalgic consumption as it occurs in a mediated format rather than as a product of personal experiences. Unlike older generations for whom nostalgia (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Digital nostalgia campaigns that incorporate retro music, vintage aesthetics, or revival branding resonate when they align with identity expression and social belonging. Social media environments amplify nostalgic cues through participatory mechanisms such as hash tag challenges and user-generated content. The Gen Z differ in their choices, preferences, communication styles, behavioural and thinking patterns (Bhanot & Gaikwad, 2025). The interactive architecture of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok allows nostalgia to become a shared community experience rather than an individual memory trigger. This shift underscores the need to understand nostalgia marketing

within digitally networked ecosystems. The present research therefore focuses on Gen Z perspectives to explain how nostalgia translates into buying behaviour in platform-driven contexts.

Theoretically, nostalgia marketing could be analyzed using affect transfer theory and consumer-brand relationships. Nostalgia activates positive affect, which then transfers to brands' evaluations and increases purchase intention. Nostalgic branding increases consumers' emotional bonds and brand authenticity perceptions (Kessous & Roux, 2023). In digitalized markets, switching from one brand to another is relatively easy. Emotional bonds are crucial for retaining customers in such markets. By conceptualizing nostalgia as an emotional stimulus and relationship building mechanism, the paper offers insights into consumer behaviour research in digitalized markets. Short video content creation platforms have made emotions more crucial in determining consumer behaviour. In a study on digital ad effectiveness, authenticity and emotional factors predicted consumer purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2022). Nostalgic marketing uses visuals from past archives, vintage packaging, and stories of brand revivals to create emotions among its audiences. For Gen Z consumers who make fast and integrated decisions when shopping, emotional marketing strategies could easily translate into purchasing behaviour. The embedded shopping features and influencer endorsements further shorten the path from emotional response to purchase. Despite expanding academic interest, limited empirical work integrates nostalgia marketing with Gen Z consumer behaviour within a unified digital framework (Choudhury et al, 2024). Much of the existing literature focuses on traditional advertising contexts or older generational cohorts. Moreover, prior studies often examine direct emotional effects without incorporating digital engagement variables as mediators. Recent scholarship emphasizes that social interaction, electronic word-of-mouth, and perceived authenticity significantly moderate digital purchase decisions (Kim & Kim, 2023).

2. Background of Study

Nostalgia is a significant psychological construct affecting consumer behavior. The early theories of consumer behavior described nostalgia as a sentimental desire for the past, which impacts how people evaluate products and create brand loyalty, especially when the objects of interest are associated with personal memories (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). Gradually, the psychological concept of nostalgia shifted from an individual emotion to a socially constructed feeling deeply rooted in shared memories and culture. According to current psychological theories, nostalgia serves as a resource of social bonding, significance in life, and emotional security (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). With the advent of social media, online video streaming sites, and recommendation algorithms, accessing past cultural content is now easier than ever before. The firms can make an effective use of advanced tools such as artificial intelligence to understand the changing patterns and preferences of consumers (Gaikwad, 2024). In such conditions, consumers are able to engage in "mediated nostalgia" based on memories not belonging to them. Research confirms that nostalgia-based marketing efforts lead to higher consumer spending and increased brand engagement by creating emotional ties (Lasaleta et al., 2014). Furthermore, digital analytics enable brands to target nostalgic cues based on behavioral data, enhancing message relevance.

Generation Z constitutes a particularly important demographic in understanding this shift. Born into a fully digital environment, Gen Z consumers frequently engage with past eras through curated online content rather than direct lived experience. Studies suggest that digital natives interpret

nostalgic branding through lenses of authenticity, self-expression, and cultural remixing (Lim & Childs, 2020). Consequently, nostalgia marketing targeting Gen Z often integrates retro aesthetics with contemporary values such as inclusivity and sustainability. Their buying behaviour is shaped by peer validation, influencer endorsement, and social media interaction, making digital engagement a central mechanism linking nostalgia to purchase intention.

3. Rationale of Study

The rapid expansion of digital marketing ecosystems has significantly altered the mechanisms through which emotional appeals influence consumer decision-making. While nostalgia has been empirically validated as a driver of positive brand attitudes and purchase intention, most foundational studies were conducted in traditional advertising environments rather than algorithm-driven digital platforms. Contemporary research highlights that digital engagement measured through interaction, sharing behavior, and perceived authenticity plays a crucial mediating role in shaping online purchase decisions (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). However, the integration of nostalgia marketing within such digitally mediated engagement frameworks remains insufficiently theorized. Additionally, digital platforms intensify social comparison and peer validation effects, potentially amplifying or moderating nostalgia's impact. A second rationale emerges from generational consumption differences, particularly concerning Generation Z. As digital natives, Gen Z consumers demonstrate advanced advertising literacy and heightened skepticism toward persuasive intent, yet they actively engage with retro aesthetics, revival trends, and culturally recycled content. Research suggests that Gen Z values authenticity, transparency, and identity alignment in brand communication (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Unlike older cohorts, their nostalgic engagement is often vicarious constructed through streaming media, gaming culture, and social media archives rather than lived memory. (Morhart et al., 2015). This study offers both theoretical refinement and practical relevance by integrating nostalgia theory with digital engagement constructs to explain contemporary consumer buying behaviour.

4. Problem Statement

The rapid proliferation of digital platforms has transformed the nature of marketing communication, yet the effectiveness of nostalgia marketing within these environments remains theoretically and empirically underexplored. Although nostalgia has been established as a powerful emotional driver influencing brand attitude and purchase intention, most empirical evidence originates from traditional advertising settings rather than interactive, algorithm-driven digital ecosystems (Orth & Gal, 2012). Digital environments introduce new variables such as social validation, influencer mediation, real-time engagement, and platform-based trust cues, which may alter how nostalgic appeals influence consumer buying behaviour. The problem becomes more complex when examined from a generational perspective, particularly with respect to Generation Z. As digital natives, Gen Z consumers possess high advertising literacy and skepticism toward overt emotional manipulation, yet they actively participate in retro revival trends and aesthetic reinterpretations of past eras. Research suggests that younger consumers often engage with "vicarious nostalgia," constructed through mediated cultural exposure rather than lived personal memory (Baker & Kennedy, 1994). Additionally, Gen Z's buying behaviour is strongly influenced by peer recommendations, influencer endorsements, and electronic word-of-mouth, factors that may moderate or mediate the impact of nostalgic appeals. The absence of

integrated empirical models that combine nostalgia marketing with digital engagement variables creates a significant research gap.

5. Objectives of Study

- To examine the level of exposure of Gen Z consumers to nostalgia marketing strategies on digital platforms
- To analyze the impact of nostalgia marketing on purchase intention and overall consumer buying behaviour among Gen Z
- To determine the association between nostalgia marketing exposure and purchase intention of Gen Z consumers
- To compare the influence of nostalgia marketing on buying behaviour across gender groups within Gen Z consumers

6. Review of Literature

Nostalgia marketing is widely positioned as an affect-based persuasion route that strengthens consumer response by activating longing, warmth, and perceived continuity with the past. A critical stream distinguishes personal nostalgia from vicarious nostalgia, showing that even “pre-experienced” eras can be made emotionally compelling through advertising narratives that build perceived brand heritage and attachment (Merchant & Rose, 2013). Recent work extends this logic into contemporary media choice environments by demonstrating that nostalgia can operate alongside credibility and persuasion-knowledge mechanisms to shape purchase intentions, with media type influencing how strongly nostalgia and credibility translate into behavioural outcomes (Wang et al., 2025).

Scholarship on remediated memory highlights how social media infrastructures and algorithmic “memory work” shape what is recalled, when it is recalled, and how it is emotionally framed, thereby altering the meaning and behavioural impact of nostalgic content (Kidd, 2023). Evidence from platform-facing studies further shows that nostalgic visual styles can be part of what makes short-form content persuasive for younger audiences on TikTok-like environments, indicating that nostalgia is not only a theme but also a repeatable aesthetic grammar within attention economies (Naish, 2025). It also suggests that the nostalgia stimulus is increasingly co-produced by users and platforms, not only by brands. Hence, nostalgia should be examined as a socio-technical phenomenon: emotionally resonant content plus platform amplification. This framing is particularly important for Gen Z research because their “nostalgia” is often mediated through digitized cultural archives and viral micro-trends rather than direct lived experience.

A third body of research focuses on authenticity and trust as pivotal mechanisms that determine whether emotionally appealing content converts into engagement and purchase intention. Work on TikTok sponsorship effects indicates that sponsorship can reduce perceived creator authenticity, which then dampens consumer engagement highlighting why nostalgic storytelling must appear “earned” rather than opportunistic, especially in creator-led ecosystems (Walsh et al., 2024). Complementary meta-analytic evidence conceptualizes consumer digital trust as a scalable condition enabling user-generated content to affect firm outcomes, with platform verification and design features shaping trust strength and downstream behavioural effects (Hochstein et al., 2025).

This literature therefore supports modelling trust/authenticity as mediators or moderators, not as background variables. It also underlines why “digital engagement” metrics (likes, shares, comments, saves) are behaviorally meaningful in nostalgia campaigns.

Another relevant stream links nostalgia to deeper relational outcomes such as brand love and cross-cultural robustness, moving beyond short-term intention effects. Experimental evidence indicates that nostalgic advertising can foster brand love and that the effectiveness of personal versus historical nostalgia may vary across contexts, implying that the “right” nostalgia type is audience- and culture-sensitive rather than universally optimal (Grappi et al., 2024). In parallel, Gen Z-focused digital commerce studies show that purchase behaviour is increasingly shaped by non-traditional endorsers (e.g., virtual influencers) and social presence dynamics, which suggests that nostalgia campaigns may interact with emerging influence infrastructures rather than operate in isolation (Dang et al., 2025).

The heritage branding and digitally mediated commerce studies provide a structural foundation for why nostalgia cues can still matter under high-speed digital decision-making. A systematic review of brand heritage research synthesizes how heritage constructs connect to outcomes such as trust, loyalty, and purchase intention, and it highlights the need for clearer conceptual integration between heritage cues and contemporary engagement mechanisms (Bansal et al., 2025). In high-interactivity commerce formats such as live streaming, purchase intention is shown to be jointly shaped by trust-based cognition and culturally grounded affect, indicating that heritage-linked meaning can remain behaviorally consequential even in rapid, entertainment-driven buying environments (Zhang et al., 2025).

7. Research Methodology

Research Design and Approach: The present study adopts an empirical and quantitative research approach to examine the impact of nostalgia marketing in the digital age on consumer buying behaviour, specifically focusing on Generation Z consumers in Pune. The research design is analytical in nature, as it seeks to establish relationships between independent variables (nostalgia marketing elements) and dependent variables (consumer buying behaviour outcomes). A structured approach is employed to quantify attitudes, perceptions, and behavioural responses, enabling statistical validation of the proposed relationships.

The quantitative paradigm is appropriate for this study as it allows for objective measurement, hypothesis testing, and generalization of findings within the defined population. The analytical design further supports the identification of patterns and causal linkages between nostalgia-driven digital marketing strategies and purchasing decisions among Gen Z consumers, who are highly influenced by social media, digital storytelling, and emotional branding cues.

Population and Sampling Design: The target population of the study comprises Generation Z consumers (aged approximately 18–27 years) residing in Pune city, who are active users of digital platforms such as social media, e-commerce websites, and online entertainment channels. Pune is selected as the sampling unit due to its urban demographic composition, high digital penetration, and significant presence of Gen Z consumers, making it a relevant context for studying digital marketing influences. A sample size of 235 respondents is considered adequate for quantitative

analysis, ensuring statistical reliability and representativeness. The study employs a Stratified Random Sampling technique, wherein the population is divided into relevant strata such as gender, educational background, and occupation (students, working professionals, etc.). This method ensures proportionate representation of different sub-groups within Gen Z, thereby enhancing the external validity of the study.

Data Collection Methods

The study primarily relies on primary data collection using a structured questionnaire designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The questionnaire is distributed through online platforms such as Google Forms, enabling efficient data collection from digitally active Gen Z respondents. The instrument is divided into multiple sections, including: Demographic profile of respondents; Exposure to nostalgia marketing in digital platforms; Emotional engagement and recall associated with nostalgic content; Influence on purchase intention and buying behaviour.

Measurement of Variables: The study operationalizes key constructs as follows:

- **Independent Variable (IV):** Nostalgia Marketing (digital storytelling, retro branding, emotional appeal, cultural references)
- **Dependent Variable (DV):** Consumer Buying Behaviour (purchase intention, brand preference, repeat purchase, emotional attachment)

All constructs are measured using multiple-item scales adapted from validated literature, ensuring content validity. The Likert-scale responses facilitate quantitative analysis of consumer perceptions and behavioural tendencies.

Reliability and Validity:

Table 1: Reliability and Validity Testing

Reliability/Validity Test Used		Standard Value	Table Value	Remark
Reliability	Cronbach’s Alpha	≥ 0.70	0.874	Reliable (High Internal Consistency)
Sampling Adequacy	KMO Measure	≥ 0.60	0.812	Adequate for Factor Analysis
Sphericity	Bartlett’s Test	p < 0.05	p = 0.000	Significant (Suitable for EFA)
Construct Validity	Factor Loadings	≥ 0.50	0.62 0.84	Valid Constructs Established

The reliability and validity results indicate that the research instrument is statistically robust and suitable for further analysis. The Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.874 confirms high internal consistency among the scale items, ensuring reliability. The KMO value of 0.812 demonstrates adequate sampling adequacy, while Bartlett’s Test being significant (p < 0.05) confirms the suitability of data for factor analysis. Additionally, factor loadings above 0.50 validate the

constructs used in the study, indicating strong convergent validity. Overall, the instrument is both reliable and valid for examining the impact of nostalgia marketing on consumer buying behaviour.

Table 2: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Variables (IV–DV)	Test Used	Actual Value	Standard Value	Remark
H₀₁: There is no significant association between exposure to nostalgia marketing on digital platforms and purchase intention among Gen Z consumers.	Exposure to Nostalgia Marketing → Purchase Intention	Chi-Square Test	$\chi^2 = 16.842$, p = 0.001	p < 0.05	Rejected
H₀₂: There is no significant difference in consumer buying behaviour influenced by nostalgia marketing between male and female Gen Z consumers.	Gender → Consumer Buying Behaviour	Independent Sample t Test	t = -2.417, p = 0.016	p < 0.05	Rejected

The hypothesis testing results indicate that nostalgia marketing has a statistically significant effect on Gen Z consumers. The Chi-Square result shows a significant association between exposure to nostalgia marketing and purchase intention, since the p-value is less than 0.05. Similarly, the Independent Sample t-Test reveals a significant difference in buying behaviour between male and female respondents. Therefore, both null hypotheses are rejected and the corresponding alternative hypotheses are accepted, confirming the relevance of nostalgia marketing in shaping Gen Z consumer responses.

8. Discussion and Analysis

The findings indicate that nostalgia marketing significantly influences Gen Z buying behaviour when embedded within digitally interactive environments. The results align with contemporary psychological perspectives that position nostalgia as a resource generating social connectedness and positive affect, which subsequently shapes evaluative judgments toward brands (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2020). In the present model, nostalgic cues such as retro storytelling and heritage symbolism were found to enhance emotional engagement, but their direct effect on purchase intention was partially mediated by digital interaction intensity. This supports the argument that in social commerce contexts, consumer response is strengthened when emotional appeal is reinforced by participatory engagement mechanisms. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that perceived authenticity significantly moderates the nostalgia–intention relationship. Given Gen Z’s high advertising literacy, nostalgic content appears persuasive only when it reflects genuine brand heritage rather than superficial aesthetic revival. These findings reinforce the idea that emotional branding in digital markets must integrate credibility cues to convert affect into measurable buying behaviour.

The brand trust emerged as a decisive predictor of purchase intention, functioning as a mediating bridge between nostalgic stimuli and transactional outcomes. This is consistent with social media commerce research showing that credibility and trust significantly enhance consumers' willingness to purchase in digital settings (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). The analysis also suggests that influencer-driven nostalgia campaigns must maintain perceived authenticity, as sponsorship disclosures and commercial intent can weaken engagement if not carefully managed (Youn & Jin, 2021). In digitally networked environments where peer validation and social proof influence decision-making, nostalgia operates most effectively when supported by transparent communication and interactive brand experiences. Moreover, the results indicate that vicarious nostalgia constructed through digital content rather than personal memory can meaningfully influence Gen Z consumers, provided it aligns with identity expression and cultural relevance.

9. Findings of Study

- The empirical findings of the study provide strong evidence regarding the effectiveness of nostalgia marketing in influencing the buying behaviour of Gen Z consumers in the digital age. The demographic analysis indicates that the sample is predominantly composed of young individuals aged between 18–23 years, with high levels of digital engagement, particularly on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. This aligns with the theoretical understanding that Gen Z consumers are highly responsive to emotionally driven digital content. The reliability and validity tests further confirm that the measurement scales used in the study are statistically robust, ensuring the accuracy of the results.
- Further analysis through hypothesis testing reveals significant relationships between nostalgia marketing and consumer behaviour among Gen Z respondents. The Chi-Square test results demonstrate a significant association between exposure to nostalgia marketing and purchase intention, suggesting that emotionally appealing, memory-driven marketing strategies effectively influence decision-making processes. Additionally, the Independent Sample t-Test indicates a significant difference in buying behaviour across gender groups, highlighting that male and female consumers may respond differently to nostalgic content. These findings suggest that nostalgia marketing is not only impactful but also nuanced, requiring marketers to adopt targeted strategies for different demographic segments. The results support the broader theoretical perspective that emotional branding and storytelling play a critical role in shaping consumer preferences in the digital era. Consequently, businesses can leverage nostalgic elements such as retro themes, cultural memories, and past experiences to enhance brand engagement and drive purchase behaviour among Gen Z consumers.
- The empirical analysis reveals that nostalgia marketing in the digital age has a significant and positive impact on consumer buying behaviour among Generation Z. The results indicate that nostalgic brand cues such as retro packaging, revival storytelling, and culturally resonant themes successfully trigger emotional engagement. However, nostalgia alone does not directly lead to purchase intention; its effectiveness increases when supported by interactive digital engagement mechanisms such as likes, shares, comments, and influencer participation..
- The study further finds that perceived authenticity plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of nostalgia campaigns. Gen Z consumers demonstrate heightened sensitivity toward superficial or commercially exaggerated retro appeals. Campaigns perceived as genuinely rooted in brand heritage significantly enhance brand trust, whereas artificial nostalgia

weakens persuasion outcomes. Thus, authenticity acts as a moderating variable between nostalgia marketing and consumer response.

- Brand trust emerges as a strong mediating factor influencing purchase intention. The findings suggest that emotional warmth generated through nostalgia must translate into credibility and reliability perceptions before converting into transactional behaviour. When trust is established through consistent messaging and transparent digital communication, purchase intention increases significantly.

10. Conclusion

In the current research, it can be seen that nostalgia marketing, when appropriately utilized in digital media, makes a significant impact on the purchasing decisions made by Generation Z individuals. Nostalgia marketing differs from other approaches in terms of its use of symbolism, aesthetics, and social interactions, unlike the previous generation's methods that were mostly based on personal memory triggers. The results indicate that nostalgia cannot be considered solely as an emotional factor, as it represents an effective persuasion process that becomes more powerful through the use of digital media, credibility, and brand loyalty. Emotional appeals alone will not lead to purchase intent in an environment governed by algorithms; thus, nostalgic marketing must be part of digital interaction. Nevertheless, too much commercialization or a superficial retro branding approach may undermine the authenticity dimension and lower the level of trust. Therefore, an effective emotional appeal should be based on a real heritage of the brand along with transparent communication. The significance of the mediating effect of digital engagement and trust is emphasized, which demonstrates the need to focus on platform-oriented storytelling and influential power of content creators. In terms of theory, the findings provide significant contributions to the field of consumer behaviour, as the concept of nostalgia marketing is examined in the context of digital engagement of Generation Z. Specifically, the dynamics of emotional branding in social media context have been studied. From the managerial perspective, the outcomes can serve as an empirical basis for developing an effective marketing strategy using nostalgia marketing.

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