

**Exploring How Virtual Reality Shapes Generational Nostalgia in Consumers**  
**The Impact of Virtual Reality on personal and historical Nostalgia**

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Marketing communication strategies have always been geared towards the emotional involvement of the consumer. Although most of the marketing literature has focused on stimuli generating a positive emotional reaction, many scholars have highlighted the effectiveness of other types of emotions. Among these, nostalgia – understood as an emotional yearning or wistful affection for the past (Routledge et al., 2011) – has attracted the attention of both academics and practitioners in recent years (Bi et al., 2023).

Extant studies have shown the effectiveness of nostalgia in marketing communication and how it can generate positive emotional reactions (Wildschut et al. 2006), boost self-esteem, and improve feelings of social connection and existential meaning (Zhou et al. 2008). In advertising, marketers use nostalgic-based strategies to establish a link between the promoted product and a consumer's younger memories (i.e., personal nostalgia) or to convey the wish to escape contemporary life and go back to a bygone era that was thought to be better than the present (i.e., historical nostalgia). While emotional or affective reactions reflect the sensations that are expressed in such events, cognitive components originate from past experiences and are based on recall (Jain et al., 2019).

Nostalgia is more than just an emotion; it embodies a complex amalgamation of emotional processes that arise from high-level cognitive elaboration (Wildschut et al., 2006). Nostalgia serves as a psychological resource for coping with distress. Immersive technologies like Virtual Reality may result in effective technological solutions to deliver nostalgic content to consumers. By providing an immersive experience, they may allow consumers to project themselves into the past, use vintage products, and explore old places. However, such experience may elicit different reactions among older individuals who have lived in these places and used those products, and the new generations.

Based on these considerations, the present paper aims to respond to the following *Research Questions: How do immersive technologies, specifically Virtual Reality, enhance or alter nostalgic-based marketing communication strategies? In specific, how do generational differences respond to nostalgic-based marketing communication strategies in a Virtual Reality environment?*

### **Methodology and empirical context**

To investigate the psychological consequences of personal versus historical nostalgia experienced by consumers, we first explore the phenomenon under study with a qualitative approach through individual interviews and experiential focus groups and, second, we adopt a 2x2 between subject study. The aim of the study is to compare the effects in Virtual Reality (VR) and non-VR environments in both Gen Z and Gen X cohorts. The first phase of the study consists of the immobile observation of the virtual environment, while the second phase adds the possibility of moving inside the virtual room. Participants will be immersed in a scenario designed to evoke nostalgic elements of the 1980s. Gen Z and gen X subjects are exposed to stimuli selected via pre-test. In the Non-VR Condition, participants will experience similar nostalgic stimuli presented without the immersive VR environment. During both nostalgia induction phases, participants' arousal activity is measured using electromyography (EMG), galvanic skin response, heart rate variability and eye tracking. Following the neurophysiological phase designed to evoke nostalgia, participants will complete an Implicit Association Test and conclude with the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Barrett et al., 2010).

### **Conclusions and implications**

We expect that in a virtual reality environment nostalgia will be experienced through arousal differently in the two groups of people studied. Although both groups are expected to encounter nostalgia with heightened emotional intensity, the nature of this nostalgic engagement manifests distinctively. Younger generations' responses will be linked to imagination and aesthetic appreciation. In contrast, individuals with personal nostalgia, rooted in recollection and episodic memory. We expect to see smaller arousal differences between the two generations during the free exploration phases, as if there was a switch between historical and personal nostalgia for Gen Z given the possibility of moving.

### **References upon request**