

# Analysis of the Driving Path of Nostalgia Marketing on Brand Extension Evaluation

Yilong Zhu\*

Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, 571126, China

\*Corresponding author: 13637655987@163.com

**Abstract:** In the current competitive market environment, nostalgia marketing has emerged as a significant strategy for brand extension by fostering emotional resonance. Existing research has yet to systematically elucidate its intrinsic driving pathways. This study proposes that nostalgia marketing influences brand extension evaluation through three distinct pathways: nostalgic trust simplifies cognitive processing; emotional resonance facilitates the transfer of positive attitudes; and self-connection achieves profound identity recognition. These three pathways form a progressive mechanism from cognition to emotion and exhibit mutually reinforcing effects. The multi-path theoretical model developed in this research breaks through the traditional limitation of attributing nostalgic effects merely to emotional factors, providing a new perspective for understanding the operational mechanism of nostalgia marketing and offering practical implications for brand extension strategies.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia Marketing; Brand Extension; Driving Pathways; Cognitive Simplification; Emotional Transfer; Self-Connection

## Introduction

Brand extension serves as a core component of corporate strategy, whose effectiveness hinges on consumer evaluation of the extended product. Traditional theories, grounded in frameworks of functional fit and image consistency, struggle to fully explain the formation mechanism of evaluations within nostalgic contexts. With the widespread application of nostalgia marketing, its unique impact on brand extension — through awakening emotional memories and constructing collective identity — requires urgent theoretical elaboration. Existing research insufficiently explores the cognitive role of nostalgic trust and the deeper mechanisms of self-connection, lacking a systematic integration of multiple driving pathways. Based on theories of self-continuity, social identity, and embodied cognition, this study constructs a theoretical model illustrating how nostalgia marketing drives the evaluation of brand extensions. It reveals the mechanisms and interactions of three pathways: cognitive simplification, emotional transfer, and self-connection. This research breaks through the traditional cognition-dominant paradigm, incorporates affective and identity factors to refine the theoretical system of brand extension, and provides theoretical guidance for enhancing the acceptance of extended products through nostalgia marketing.

## 1. The Theoretical Link Between Nostalgia Marketing and Brand Extension

### 1.1 The Psychological Connotation and Emotional Value of Nostalgia Marketing

#### 1.1.1 The Theoretical Foundation of Nostalgia Psychology

From a psychological perspective, the efficacy of nostalgia marketing originates from three core theoretical underpinnings. Self-continuity theory explains the inherent need of consumers to maintain a cross-temporal self-identity through nostalgic experiences. Social identity theory reveals how nostalgia strengthens group belonging through shared memories. Embodied cognition theory clarifies the crucial role of multi-sensory cues in triggering nostalgic experiences. Collectively, these theories form the psychological foundation of nostalgia marketing.

#### 1.1.2 The Dual Dimensions of Emotional Value

Nostalgia marketing constructs an emotional value with a distinct dual structure. At the micro-level,

it activates specific fragments from an individual's life history, generating feelings of warmth and belonging, and creating psychological effects of emotional repair and reinforced self-identity. At the macro-level, it awakens symbols of intergenerational shared memory, constructing an emotional community that transcends individual experience and establishing the brand as a vehicle for cultural transmission. This dual emotional value accumulates the necessary emotional capital for brand extension.

### ***1.1.3 The Dynamic Process of Emotional Generation***

The formation of nostalgic emotion follows a specific psychological pathway. The process begins with perceptual cues, such as retro aesthetics and era-specific symbols, triggering emotional memories. It then progresses through narrative reconstruction, which guides consumers to idealize the past. This culminates in the formation of an emotional bond that deeply embeds the brand into the consumer's self-concept. This complete emotional generation pathway ensures the stability and sustainability of nostalgic emotional value.

## ***1.2 The Intrinsic Formation Process of Brand Extension Evaluation***

### ***1.2.1 The Dual Assessment of Cognitive Fit***

When evaluating a brand extension, consumers spontaneously initiate a dual comparison mechanism. The surface-level assessment, based on category similarity, focuses on explicit characteristics such as product domain and usage context. The deep-level assessment, based on brand concept consistency, involves abstract attributes such as brand personality and value proposition. The relative weighting of these two assessment mechanisms depends on consumer involvement and product type, collectively forming the cognitive basis for evaluation<sup>[1]</sup>.

### ***1.2.2 The Moderating Role of Emotional Transfer***

According to the affect-as-information theory, the consumer's emotional connection with the parent brand creates an emotional halo that directly influences their initial attitude towards the new product. This phenomenon exhibits a characteristic asymmetry: positive affect can effectively buffer the negative evaluation arising from cognitive misfit, whereas negative affect is difficult to be fully offset by a high degree of cognitive fit. The strength of this emotional transfer is moderated by factors such as brand relationship strength and emotional involvement.

### ***1.2.3 The Complex Mechanism of Evaluation Integration***

During the evaluation integration stage, cognitive and affective information undergo a complex interactive process. When cognitive information aligns with affective signals, the formation of evaluation follows a reinforcement principle. When the two are in conflict, a compensation mechanism is initiated. This integration process is significantly influenced by contextual factors such as the consumer's knowledge level and time pressure for decision-making, ultimately culminating in an overall evaluation of the brand extension.

## ***1.3 The New Logic Provided by Nostalgic Contexts for Brand Extension***

### ***1.3.1 The Fundamental Shift in Evaluation Criteria***

Traditional brand extension theory is primarily built upon a logic of functional relevance and image consistency, whereas the nostalgic context constructs a new evaluation paradigm based on spatiotemporal association and shared meaning. Within a nostalgic context, the focus of consumer evaluation shifts from "whether the new product can perform its function" to "whether the new product can integrate into the nostalgic world of meaning constructed by the brand." This shift significantly reduces the weight given to functional relevance.

### ***1.3.2 The Reconstruction of the Rationale Basis***

Within the traditional framework, the legitimacy of an extension primarily stems from the transferability of technical expertise or the similarity of usage contexts. In contrast, within the nostalgic framework, legitimacy is established upon spatiotemporal consistency and emotional coherence. This reconstruction of rationale enables brands to transcend product category boundaries and achieve extensions based on the brand's spiritual essence.

### ***1.3.3 The Unique Pathway of Value Creation***

Brand extension within a nostalgic context demonstrates a distinct model of value creation. Traditional extensions primarily rely on the transfer of functional value, whereas extensions in nostalgic contexts focus on the co-creation of emotional and symbolic value. New products gain a unique emotional positioning by integrating into the nostalgic narrative constructed by the brand. Simultaneously, through their modern interpretation, they enrich the brand's nostalgic connotations, thereby forming a two-way flow of value<sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2. Multiple Pathways Driving Brand Extension Evaluation**

### **2.1 Cognitive Simplification Based on Nostalgic Trust**

#### ***2.1.1 The Formation Mechanism of Nostalgic Trust***

The emergence of nostalgic trust stems from the perceived authenticity and spatiotemporal stability constructed by a brand through continuous narrative. When a brand consistently employs visual symbols, linguistic styles, and emotional tones characteristic of an era, consumers gradually develop a perception of the brand's spatiotemporal consistency. This perception of consistency reinforces the brand's role positioning as a "witness of an era," leading consumers to form positive judgments regarding the brand's historical authenticity and social recognition. The coherence and credibility of the brand's nostalgic narrative directly influence the strength of this trust establishment, while narrative discontinuity or clear anachronisms can undermine this foundational trust.

#### ***2.1.2 The Process of Cognitive Simplification***

In the context of brand extension, nostalgic trust significantly simplifies the consumer's cognitive process by activating a heuristic processing mode. When encountering an extension product, consumers tend to rely on their established trust in the brand as a decision-making shortcut, rather than conducting a comprehensive and detailed evaluation of the product's attributes. This cognitive simplification manifests specifically as a presumption of safety regarding the new product's quality, a default acceptance of brand promises, and a lower sensitivity to potential risks. The degree of cognitive simplification is positively correlated with the depth of brand nostalgia; the simplifying effect is most pronounced when the brand's nostalgic narrative possesses internal consistency and highly aligns with the consumer's personal experiences<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### ***2.1.3 Influencing Factors***

The strength of the cognitive simplification pathway is moderated by several key factors. The consumer's level of expertise serves as a significant moderating variable; consumers with limited product knowledge rely more heavily on brand trust to simplify decision-making. Time pressure during decision-making similarly strengthens the tendency towards cognitive simplification; in time-constrained situations, consumers are more inclined to directly apply existing trust for quick judgments. Furthermore, the perceived risk associated with the product category also affects the efficacy of this pathway, with dependence on trust cues being more pronounced in high-risk product categories.

### **2.2 Attitude Transfer Stemming from Emotional Resonance**

#### ***2.2.1 The Activation Mechanism of Emotional Resonance***

The activation of nostalgic emotional resonance relies on the synergistic effect of multi-sensory cues. By recreating visual elements, auditory symbols, and even olfactory memories specific to a particular era, brands construct a complete multi-sensory nostalgic scenario. These sensory cues serve as emotional triggers, effectively awakening positive emotional fragments within the consumer's memory and generating compound emotional experiences such as warmth, pleasure, and security. The intensity of emotional activation depends on the authenticity and typicality of the cues, with highly typical era-specific symbols capable of producing a stronger emotional arousal effect.

#### ***2.2.2 The Dynamic Process of Attitude Transfer***

The transfer of affective attitudes adheres to the specific principle of affective consistency. The consumer's positive affect towards the parent brand naturally generalizes to the extension product,

forming an emotional preset towards the new offering. This transfer process exhibits a characteristic asymmetry: positive affect can effectively buffer negative evaluations arising from cognitive misfit, whereas negative affect is difficult to be fully offset by a high degree of cognitive fit. The effectiveness of the transfer is influenced by the strength of the affective connection, where a strong emotional bond can support a greater degree of category extension.

### ***2.2.3 The Unique Value of the Affective Pathway***

The emotional resonance pathway holds irreplaceable and distinctive value in brand extension evaluation. Compared to the cognitive pathway, the affective pathway exhibits greater inclusivity towards extension products, enabling brands to achieve more substantial category extensions. The effects of the affective pathway are also more enduring, as the brand attitudes formed through emotional resonance possess higher stability and resistance to interference. In highly homogenized market environments, the affective pathway can provide unique differentiation advantages for brand extensions.

## ***2.3 Profound Identification Rooted in Self-Connection***

### ***2.3.1 The Foundation of Self-Connection Formation***

The establishment of self-connection relies on the deep integration of the brand into the consumer's personal identity narrative. By awakening significant memory fragments from the consumer's life history, nostalgic brands become indispensable elements in constructing the individual's sense of self-continuity. When the era-specific ethos and values represented by the brand are highly congruent with the consumer's self-definition, the brand transforms from an external consumption object into a symbolic vehicle for self-expression. The depth of this connection depends on the degree of interweaving between the brand narrative and the consumer's personal experiences; a deep interweaving can generate a strong sense of identity<sup>[4]</sup>.

### ***2.3.2 The Mechanism of Profound Identification***

Profound identification rooted in self-connection influences brand extension evaluation through an assessment of identity consistency. Consumers subconsciously incorporate the extension product into the extended domain of their self-concept, conducting a latent judgment of identity fit. When a new product can reinforce the consumer's self-continuity or enrich their identity expression, it results in a profound acceptance based on identity affirmation. This identification transcends simple cognitive trust or affective liking, manifesting as the consumer viewing the extension product as an important vehicle for expressing and perpetuating their self-identity.

### ***2.3.3 The Enduring Value of the Identification Pathway***

Once established, the profound identification pathway demonstrates remarkable stability and persistence. Compared to other pathways, brand relationships rooted in self-connection possess greater resistance to interference and self-repair characteristics. Even when confronted with temporary product issues or negative information, consumers with profound identification tend to adopt a more forgiving attitude. This deep connection not only significantly enhances consumer acceptance of brand extensions but also cultivates highly loyal brand advocates, thereby laying a solid foundation for the brand's long-term development.

## **3. Construction of the Theoretical Model of Driving Pathways and Research Prospects**

### ***3.1 Systematic Definition of Core Theoretical Variables and Proposition Deduction***

#### ***3.1.1 Conceptualization and Operational Definitions of Key Variables***

The theoretical model of how nostalgia marketing drives brand extension evaluation is established based on the precise definition of core variables. As the key independent variable at the model's input, the conceptual definition of nostalgia intensity must encompass two fundamental dimensions: emotional arousal and cognitive activation. The emotional dimension manifests as the degree of emotional resonance experienced by consumers when exposed to nostalgic marketing stimuli, while the cognitive dimension is reflected in the perceived level of the brand's historical authenticity. The mediator variable system comprises three core constructs: nostalgic trust reflects the consumer's reliability judgment formed based on the brand's nostalgic narrative; emotional resonance indicates the

intensity of the consumer's positive affective response to nostalgic appeals; self-connection measures the degree of overlap between the brand image and the consumer's self-concept. The outcome variable, brand extension evaluation, should adopt a multi-dimensional measurement approach, including the two fundamental aspects of cognitive evaluation and affective evaluation, to ensure the comprehensive capture of the end effects of the driving pathways<sup>[5]</sup>.

### ***3.1.2 Logical Deduction of Theoretical Propositions and the Hypothesis System***

Based on the theoretical relationships among the variables, a comprehensive system of research propositions can be constructed. Foundational propositions establish a direct positive relationship between nostalgia intensity and brand extension evaluation, providing the starting point for model construction. Mediating effect propositions systematically elaborate the mechanisms of the three pathways: the mediating role of nostalgic trust between nostalgia intensity and the cognitive dimension of extension evaluation constitutes the core proposition; the mediating effect of emotional resonance between nostalgia intensity and the affective dimension of extension evaluation forms a key corollary; the transmission pathway of self-connection, as a deep-level mediator, between nostalgia intensity and the overall dimension of extension evaluation represents the focal point of theoretical innovation. Comparative propositions focus on examining the relative effect strengths of the three pathways, anticipating that the self-connection pathway will demonstrate the most significant and enduring driving effect. Collectively, these propositions form the hypothetical foundation of the theoretical model, providing clear direction for empirical testing.

## ***3.2 Structure of the Overall Theoretical Model and Path Relationships***

### ***3.2.1 Systematic Construction of the Multiple-Parallel-Path Model***

By integrating the core variables and research propositions, a comprehensive theoretical model is constructed to explain how nostalgia marketing drives brand extension evaluation. This model adopts a multiple-mediator parallel structure, clearly delineating the complete causal chain from nostalgic marketing stimuli to brand extension evaluation. The cognitive simplification pathway transmits its influence through the variable of nostalgic trust, primarily affecting the rational judgment dimension of extension evaluation. The emotional transfer pathway realizes its effect through the variable of emotional resonance, mainly impacting the affective response dimension of extension evaluation. The profound identification pathway, with self-connection as its core mediator, exerts a comprehensive and profound influence on the overall dimension of extension evaluation. The model specifically emphasizes the hierarchical relationship among the pathways, progressing from superficial cognitive trust to deeper emotional resonance, and ultimately reaching the core level of self-connection, thereby forming a pattern of progressive influence.

### ***3.2.2 Path Interaction Mechanisms and Moderating Effects***

The theoretical model provides an in-depth revelation of the complex interrelationships among the different pathways. A significant mutually reinforcing effect exists between the cognitive and affective pathways; the establishment of nostalgic trust provides a cognitive foundation for emotional resonance, while the deepening of emotional resonance, in turn, strengthens the stability of that trust. Together, these two pathways create the necessary conditions for the establishment of self-connection, and once self-connection is formed, it further consolidates the strength of both cognitive trust and emotional resonance. This positive feedback mechanism among the pathways endows the driving process with a dynamically reinforcing character. The model also identifies several important moderating variables, including consumer nostalgia proneness, product category fit, and brand positioning consistency. These variables moderate the strength and direction of the path effects at different nodes, thereby enhancing the model's contextual adaptability<sup>[6]</sup>.

## ***3.3 Theoretical Innovation Value and Future Research Directions***

### ***3.3.1 Theoretical Contributions and Academic Value***

The theoretical model constructed in this study holds multiple innovative values for the fields of nostalgia marketing and brand extension theory. The breakthrough of the theoretical framework is reflected in its clear distinction of the driving pathways into three functional levels, overcoming the limitation of traditional research that simplistically attributes nostalgic effects to affective factors. The innovativeness of the conceptual system lies in its first systematic articulation of the central role of self-connection in nostalgia marketing, providing a new perspective for understanding the deep-seated

mechanisms of nostalgic brands. The progressiveness in methodology is evident in the multi-path interaction mechanisms revealed by the model, which provide a theoretical basis for explaining the stability and persistence of nostalgia marketing effects. Collectively, these theoretical advancements enrich the theoretical system of nostalgia marketing and establish a solid foundation for subsequent research.

### **3.3.2 Future Research Directions and Trajectories**

Based on the established theoretical model, several promising research directions warrant further exploration. Cross-cultural comparative research holds significant theoretical value, as examining the stability of the driving pathways across different cultural contexts can reveal the universality and specificity of nostalgic psychology. A systematic investigation of moderating variables is urgently needed, particularly concerning the influence mechanisms of consumer individual difference variables on path selection. Methodological innovation research shows considerable potential; the introduction of neuroscience methods could provide physiological evidence for the existence of the driving pathways, utilizing techniques such as EEG and eye-tracking to directly observe the neural substrates of nostalgic responses. The application of longitudinal research designs can track the long-term evolution of nostalgia marketing effects, revealing the temporal dynamics of the driving pathways. Advancing these research directions will continuously refine the theoretical system of nostalgia marketing and propel the field towards deeper development.

## **Conclusion**

This study systematically synthesizes the theoretical relationship between nostalgia marketing and brand extension, constructing a multiple-pathway model that elucidates how nostalgia marketing drives brand extension evaluation. It reveals the intrinsic mechanisms and interactions of three distinct pathways: cognitive simplification, emotional transfer, and self-connection. Specifically, nostalgic trust simplifies the consumer's cognitive evaluation of extension products through heuristic processing; emotional resonance transfers the consumer's positive attitude from the parent brand via an emotional halo effect; and self-connection fosters deep consumer identification with the extension product through an assessment of identity consistency. These three pathways demonstrate a progressive relationship from superficial cognition to profound identification, and exhibit a mutually reinforcing dynamic interaction mechanism. The theoretical value of this research lies in its breakthrough beyond the unitary explanations of nostalgia marketing effects found in traditional studies, proposing a multi-level, multi-path driving model that provides a new perspective for understanding the formation mechanism of brand extension evaluations within nostalgic contexts. Future research may delve deeper into several directions: cross-cultural comparisons can examine the universality and cultural specificity of the driving pathways; systematic investigation of moderating variables can clarify the boundary conditions of path effects across different contexts; the introduction of neuroscientific methods could provide physiological evidence for the existence of these pathways; and longitudinal research designs could track the dynamic evolution of nostalgia marketing effects. Advancing these research directions will further refine the theoretical framework of nostalgia marketing, offering more precise guidance for brand extension practices.

## **References**

- [1] Chen, Pengfei. *A Study on the Influence of Consumer Stereotypes on the Evaluation of Chinese Time-honored Brand Extensions*. 2024. Shijiazhuang Tiedao University, MA thesis.
- [2] Tian, Qingyuan. "Innovative Research on Packaging Design for Time-honored Brands Based on Nostalgic Emotion." *Packaging and Design*, no. 01 (2024): 124-125.
- [3] Cui, Huihui. *A Study on the Influence of Young Consumers' Nostalgic Emotion on Purchase Intention in Online Communities*. 2022. Liaoning University, MA thesis.
- [4] Zeng, Hang. *A Study on the Impact of Cultural Fit on Brand Extension Evaluation for Time-honored Brands*. 2021. Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, MA thesis.
- [5] Yang, Qianqian. *A Study on the Influence of Nostalgic Emotion on Brand Cognition Based on the ABC Model*. 2021. Jinan University, MA thesis.
- [6] Chu, Minghui. *A Study on the Relationship Between College Students' Nostalgic Memory and Purchase Intention Toward Domestic Time-honored Brands*. 2021. Jilin University, MA thesis.