

Childhood Brand Nostalgia, Perceived Self-Continuity and Brand Loyalty

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Abstract

Research on retro and nostalgic consumption has gathered much interest in the recent past, but little is known about the role of nostalgia in buffering psychological threats such as loneliness, particularly in the context of brand consumption. In this study, we adopt the perspective of emotional loneliness with which we examine the role of childhood brand nostalgia in building brand loyalty. We posit that the negative emotion of loneliness triggers individuals to engage in nostalgia, particularly towards brands that relate to their childhood. This phenomenon is operationalized in this study by the construct of childhood brand nostalgia. We draw on consumer brand relationship theory and develop a sequential mediation model to explain the mediating processes of how emotional loneliness, nostalgia and perceived self-continuity create childhood brand nostalgia and ultimately contribute to brand loyalty. The results from a sample of 211 respondents suggest that when individuals are emotionally lonely, they are likely to engage in nostalgia to enhance their need for perceived self-continuity. Subsequently, the need for perceived self-continuity is fulfilled by the consumption of childhood brand nostalgia as well as by developing a long-term relationship with the brands that are associated with their childhood. Most importantly, our findings imply that emotionally lonely individuals use childhood brand nostalgia to retrieve their fond childhood memories to enhance their perceived sense of connectedness, which in turn may be a means to manage emotional loneliness.

Keywords: childhood brand nostalgia, brand loyalty, perceived self-continuity, emotional loneliness, consumer-brand relationship.

JEL classification: M31

1. Introduction

Retro marketing and nostalgia marketing have become growing marketing trends. For example, consumers tend to indulge in retro consumption informed by reminiscing about old automobile models (Brown, et al., 2003). As for nostalgia consumption, past research has demonstrated that individuals use products or brands to evoke positive affective memories from their childhood as a means to reconnect with their past (Holbrook and Schindler, 2003). Over the years, the stream of research on nostalgia in marketing has expanded from the effects of nostalgia on advertising (Merchant, et al., 2013; Muehling and Pascal, 2011) and differences in individual experiences of nostalgia, with need to belong as a predictor of nostalgic consumption preferences (Loveland, et al., 2010) to building consumer-brand relationships with nostalgic brands (Kessous, et al., 2015). However, little is known about how nostalgic brands may help to buffer the psychological distress of consumers.

Previous psychology literature has identified an interesting phenomenon about the dual-role function of nostalgia, which is both a trigger and a natural resource that promotes psychological well-being. According to Wildschut, et al. (2011), nostalgia is a self-relevant positive and social emotion triggered during emotional distress such as loneliness. Its psychological function of increasing self-perceptions of social connectedness and fostering self-continuity could help individuals make psychological adjustments and infuse meaning into in their lives (van Tilburg, et al., 2019). For example, nostalgia is triggered by negative experiences of loneliness (Wildschut, et al., 2006; Zhou, et al., 2008), the need to belong (Loveland, et al., 2010), threats to feelings of value and purpose (Routledge, et al., 2011), awareness of one's own mortality (Juhl, et al., 2010) and boredom (van Tilburg, et al., 2013). On the other hand, when nostalgia is regarded as a social emotion, it restores positive feeling through heightening perceived social connectedness and social support (Zhou, et al., 2008). In addition, as nostalgia is a self-relevant emotion, it fosters self-continuity (Sedikides, et al., 2015; Zou, et al., 2018) as a compensatory mechanism that enhances self-identity across time.

Drawing upon the aforementioned literature on nostalgia, this study aims to examine the role of nostalgia and how it may serve as a personal means to help people reduce loneliness through developing a long-term brand relationship with their childhood brands. The study makes a twofold contribution. First, our study is the first attempt to provide a framework that explains the processes of the development of brand loyalty through childhood brand nostalgia from the perspective of loneliness. Second, our study highlights the importance of the role of perceived self-continuity in nostalgia marketing with regards to building a long-term consumer-brand relationship.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Nostalgia is the yearning for products or activities that are linked with one's idealised past (Sierra and McQuitty, 2007). Often, nostalgia reminds individuals of their personal past (Davis, 1979), and it increases feelings of interaction with close others in the context of momentous life events (Holak and Havlena, 1992; Wildschut, et al., 2006). Empirical evidence shows that consumers are fond of purchasing popular brands that have a rich heritage such as childhood brands to feel reconnected with their significant others, with whom they have felt attached to since they were a child (Ju, et al., 2016). Subsequently, nostalgic bonding develops. Over time, this form of nostalgic attachment leads to the development of a strong consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998). Previous psychology literature demonstrates that the need for nostalgia increases when one is lonely (Wildschut, et al., 2006). As nostalgia is a self-relevant positive and social emotion, it can be used to foster social connectedness and provide social support to alleviate loneliness (Zhou, et al., 2008). However, we question whether lonely individuals could feel emotionally connected to their childhood brands to reduce loneliness; how this can be done is still unclear. Thus, this line of inquiry becomes the focal point of our study.

2.1 Understanding loneliness

Loneliness is defined as the discrepancy between actual and ideal social relationships (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). In addition, Weiss (1973) posits that loneliness is comprised of both emotional loneliness (i.e., the lack of intimate relationships with significant others, such as friends, family and loved ones) and social loneliness (i.e., the lack of social relationships). In the current research, we focus on the study of emotional loneliness by aiming to re-establish emotional bonding with close others through nostalgia instead of increasing physical interactions through social relationships. Specifically, we develop a model that emphasises how emotionally lonely individuals could fulfil their emotional and attachment needs – that is, to

feel emotionally connected with close others – through nostalgic engagement with their childhood brands.

2.2 Emotional loneliness and nostalgia

Previous literature suggests that individuals need to have a sense of belongingness for survival. Baumeister and Leary (1995) posit that the need to belong is a basic human need to maintain physical and psychological well-being. In turn, unmet needs of belongingness will lead to social anxiety and loneliness (Mellor, et al., 2008). On the other hand, literature from psychology reported that nostalgia is a psychological resource for managing loneliness (Wildschut, et al., 2011). Empirical evidence shows that nostalgia provides perceived social support (Zhou, et al., 2008) and fosters a sense of belongingness (Loveland, et al., 2010) with which one can manage loneliness. Drawing on the need-to-belong theory, we posit that lonely individuals could engage in nostalgia to reduce loneliness by establishing a sense of belongingness when a physical relationship with close others is not available. Therefore, it is postulated that:

H1: Emotional loneliness has a positive effect on nostalgia.

2.3 Childhood brand nostalgia

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), individuals have an innate need to feel attached to their attachment figures – such as parents, romantic partners or friends – for protection. This notion of attachment needs begins in infancy and extends into adulthood, in which individuals seek parental love to romantic intimate relationships and social relationships to avoid loneliness (Weiss, 1973). Consistent with attachment theory, consumers feel attached to nostalgic objects or brands, which produces feelings of security and protection (Zhou, et al., 2013). In this study, we examine whether the consumption of childhood brands, prompted by nostalgia, could trigger memorable nostalgic reverie and, in turn, foster perceived closeness and strengthen social connectedness with close others. Specifically, the construct of childhood brand nostalgia is operationalized in this study to measure this phenomenon. Shields and Johnson (2016, p. 368) define childhood brand nostalgia as ‘a positively valenced emotional attachment to a brand because of the brand’s association with fond memories of the individual’s non-recent lived past’. In this study, we posit that nostalgia induces childhood brand nostalgia. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Nostalgia has a positive effect on childhood brand nostalgia.

2.4 Perceived self-continuity

Besides increasing social connectedness, nostalgia also fosters self-continuity (Sedikides, et al., 2015). Self-continuity is conceptualized as an important self-function in autobiographical memory that link remembered selves consistently over lived time (Ju, et al., 2016). Psychology literature suggests that self-continuity is associated with psychological adjustment (Sedikides, et al., 2008). This can be further explained by looking through the lens of identity continuity. For example, lonely individuals connect their past self-identity to their present self-identity. As a result, this constancy of self-identity helps lonely individuals to manage uncertainties that they experience in life, which in turn helps them to enhance their life meaning (van Tilburg, et al., 2019). Consistent with the aforementioned psychology literature, nostalgia is found to signal and reinforce consumers’ self-identities (Sierra and McQuitty, 2007). Recent marketing research demonstrates that nostalgic marketing has an impact on perceived self-continuity, which in turn leads to purchase intention (Ju, et al., 2016). However, the relationship between perceived self-continuity and identity construction – developed through nostalgic consumption to build a long-term brand relationship – is still unclear.

Previous literature demonstrates that nostalgia counteracts perceived self-discontinuity (Best and Nelson, 1985). In other words, Best and Nelson (1985) contend that individuals who suffer from a lack of perceived self-continuity will have a greater need for nostalgia. Specifically, we assert in this study that lonely individuals have a desire to maintain perceived self-continuity to manage psychological distress and uncertainty caused by loneliness. By doing so, lonely individuals are triggered to maintain a consistent self-concept drawn from the past through nostalgia, especially from their childhood memories. Thus, we posit that the engagement of childhood brand nostalgia could help lonely consumers to use their past self-identity to construct their present self-identity, which in turn enhances perceived self-continuity. Therefore:

H3: Emotional loneliness has a positive effect on perceived self-continuity.

H4: Perceived self-continuity has a positive effect on nostalgia.

H5: Perceived self-continuity has a positive effect on childhood brand nostalgia.

2.5 Building a strong consumer-brand relationship

In our study, we hypothesize that childhood brand nostalgia is a predictor of the development of a long-term brand relationship between childhood brands and lonely individuals. According to the consumer-brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), consumers can develop a relationship with nonhuman agents such as brands in the same fashion as they would cultivate an interpersonal relationship. However, not all types of brands are suitable for becoming a ‘relationship partner’ that can develop into a lasting consumer-brand relationship. In light of the ‘relationship partner’ paradigm (Fournier, 1998), we posit that lonely consumers would regard their childhood brands as ‘emotional childhood partners’. We posit that these childhood brand partners could enable lonely consumers to rekindle nostalgic fond memories of past consumption with their childhood close others, which in turn enhances perceived social support. Thus, we posit that emotionally lonely individuals are likely to develop a long-term relationship with their childhood brands to fulfil their needs for security and protection from close others. Thus, it is postulated that:

H6: Childhood brand nostalgia has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

2.6 The mediating role of childhood brand nostalgia

We postulate that childhood brand nostalgia plays an important mediating role in our study. First, we hypothesize that emotionally lonely individuals desire to enhance their perceived self-continuity to manage fear and uncertainty in life. We posit that they would draw upon their past identity through childhood brand nostalgia to construct their current self-identity in order to form perceived self-identity, which in turn develops brand loyalty. Therefore:

H7: Childhood brand nostalgia mediates the relationship between perceived self-continuity and brand loyalty.

Second, we posit that emotionally lonely individuals need to engage in nostalgia to enhance their sense of belongingness with close others, which in turn increases their need to engage in childhood brand nostalgia and, ultimately, builds brand loyalty. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H8: Childhood brand nostalgia mediates the relationship between nostalgia and brand loyalty.

In addition, we also examine the processes of how emotionally lonely individuals develop brand loyalty through childhood brand nostalgia through a multiple sequential mediation model in our study. Therefore, it is postulated that:

H9: Perceived self-continuity and childhood brand nostalgia sequentially mediate the relationship between emotional loneliness and brand loyalty.

H10: Nostalgia and childhood brand nostalgia sequentially mediate the relationship between emotional loneliness and brand loyalty.

H11: Perceived self-continuity, nostalgia and childhood brand nostalgia sequentially mediate the relationship between emotional loneliness and brand loyalty.

2.7 Research model

Based on the above discussion, we posit that emotionally lonely individuals are triggered by both perceived self-continuity and nostalgia. In addition, we postulate in our study that the engagement of childhood brand nostalgia could be used as a personal mechanism to reduce loneliness. Specifically, we hypothesize that lonely individuals would seek their perceived self-continuity in childhood brand nostalgia. Ultimately, this strong emotional bond with their emotional childhood partners would lead to brand loyalty. Accordingly, we examine both the direct and indirect relationships of emotional loneliness, nostalgia, perceived self-continuity, childhood brand nostalgia and brand loyalty in our proposed model, which is presented in Figure 1.

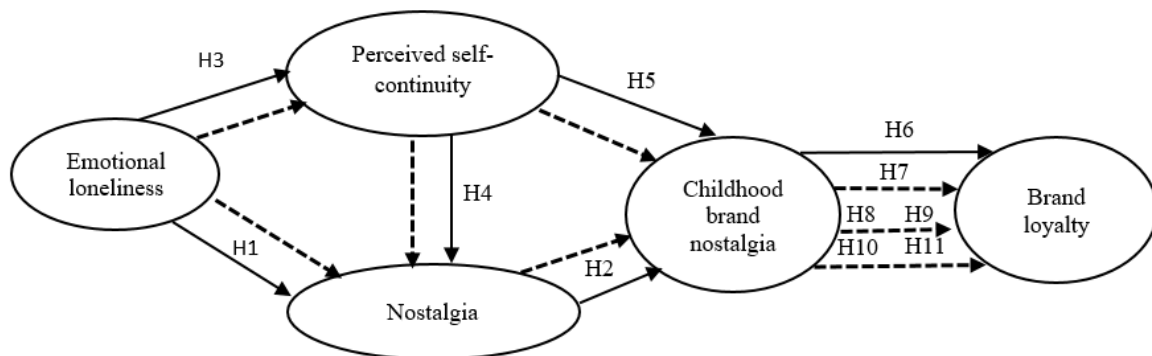


Figure 1. Research model

*the dotted line represents the mediating relationships

3. Data collection

The convenient sampling method was used in this study. Online questionnaires were distributed to 600 respondents in Malaysia via email. A total of 280 respondents completed the online questionnaires, and 211 usable questionnaires were obtained for this study. The respondents ranged from 18 to 60 years old.

4. Measurement of variables

To increase the validity of the study, the items in the questionnaires were adopted from previous studies. All items were measured using seven-point Likert scales. Emotional loneliness was accessed using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) developed by Russell (1996). Nostalgia was measured by adopting the scale constructed by Barrett, et al. (2010). Perceived self-continuity was measured using the scale developed by Ju, et al. (2016). Childhood brand nostalgia was measured with a scale adopted from Shields and Wiggins (2016). Brand loyalty was measured using the scale adapted from Toledo and Lopes (2016).

5. Model testing

Model testing was conducted using PLS-SEM (Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling) with SmartPLS Version 3.2.7 software.

5.1 Measurement model

The reliability and validity of the constructs were tested in the measurement model. Table 1 shows that all items have Cronbach alpha > 0.7 , and composite reliability ranged between 0.86 to 0.96, which was above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair, et al., 2018). The results indicated that this study has high internal consistency and reliability. When assessing the validity of the constructs, both the convergent and discriminant validity were measured. The results showed that the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs was found to be greater than the recommended value of 0.5 (Hair, et al., 2018); thus, convergent validity was confirmed. In addition, the square root of AVE for all constructs was greater than the latent variable correlations (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), thus establishing discriminant validity.

Table 1. Results of the Measurement Model

Constructs	Items	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Emotional loneliness	EM1	0.835	0.914	0.933	0.698
	EM2	0.838			
	EM3	0.861			
	EM4	0.765			
	EM5	0.848			
	EM6	0.861			
Perceived self-continuity	PS1	0.806	0.791	0.862	0.810
	PS2	0.827			
	PS4	0.723			
	PS5	0.763			
Nostalgia	NO1	0.846	0.922	0.939	0.719
	NO2	0.856			
	NO3	0.882			
	NO4	0.884			
	NO5	0.810			
	NO6	0.830			
Childhood brand nostalgia	CB1	0.932	0.948	0.962	0.864
	CB2	0.945			
	CB3	0.923			
	CB4	0.919			
Brand loyalty	BL1	0.872	0.868	0.908	0.712
	BL2	0.844			
	BL3	0.077			
	BL4	0.701			

5.2 Structural model

After evaluating the reliability and the validity in the measurement model, the structural model was analysed. Table 2 presents the results of the coefficients of the direct paths with the t-statistics and the significant level resulting from bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples.

As hypothesized, the results of the path coefficient revealed that emotional loneliness had a significant and positive effect on nostalgia ($\beta = .172$, $p < .05$) and perceived self-continuity ($\beta = .252$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H1 and H3 were supported. The results suggested that emotionally lonely individuals tend to have needs for perceived self-continuity and nostalgia. In addition, the results showed that perceived self-continuity had a positive effect on nostalgia ($\beta = .351$, $p < .001$). Thus, H4 was supported. Subsequently, the results of the path coefficient showed that both nostalgia ($\beta = .180$, $p < .05$) and perceived self-continuity ($\beta =$

.347, $p < .001$) had a significant impact on childhood brand nostalgia. Therefore, H2 and H5 were supported. However, the effect of perceived self-continuity on childhood brand nostalgia was much greater than nostalgia ($\beta = .347$ versus $\beta = .180$). Thus, the results implied that the desire to engage in childhood brand nostalgia was triggered more by perceived self-continuity, which was the need to construct consistent self-identity from past to present life rather than the need to engage in nostalgic feelings from the good old times of childhood. In addition, the results revealed that childhood brand nostalgia had a significant impact on brand loyalty ($\beta = .307$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H6 was supported.

Table 2. Results of the Structural Model and Hypotheses testing (Direct effects)

Hypotheses	Relationship	Path Coefficient	T-statistics	P-value	Decision
H1	Emotional loneliness → Nostalgia	0.172	2.455	.014	Supported
H2	Nostalgia → Childhood brand nostalgia	0.180	2.416	.016	Supported
H3	Emotional loneliness → Perceived self-continuity	0.252	3.486	.000	Supported
H4	Perceived self-continuity → Nostalgia	0.351	5.666	.000	Supported
H5	Perceived self-continuity → Childhood brand nostalgia	0.347	4.544	.000	Supported
H6	Childhood brand nostalgia → Brand loyalty	0.307	5.317	.000	Supported

Table 3 presents the results of the mediation analysis between the indirect relationships of (i) perceived self-continuity and brand loyalty (H7), (ii) nostalgia and brand loyalty (H8) as well as (iii) the sequential mediation of emotional loneliness and brand loyalty (H9–H11).

Based on the findings in Table 3, the results indicated that the relationship between perceived self-continuity and brand loyalty mediated by childhood brand nostalgia was significant ($\beta = .107$, $p < .01$). Thus, H7 was supported. In addition, the results showed that the relationship between nostalgia and brand loyalty mediated by childhood brand nostalgia was marginally significant ($\beta = .055$, $p = .053$). Thus, H8 was marginally supported. As for the sequential mediation relationship, the results imply that the sequential mediation of emotional loneliness and brand loyalty through perceived self-continuity and childhood brand nostalgia ($\beta = .027$, $p < .05$) was significant. Thus, H9 was supported. However, the sequential mediation of emotional loneliness via nostalgia and childhood brand nostalgia to brand loyalty was not significant ($\beta = .009$, $p = .141$). Thus, H10 was not supported. Similarly, the sequential mediation of emotional loneliness via perceived self-continuity, nostalgia and childhood brand nostalgia to brand loyalty was not significant in H11 ($\beta = .005$, $p = .164$). Thus, H11 was not supported. As shown in Table 3, the mediating effects in H1 to H9 were further confirmed by the absence of a zero value between the lower level bootstrapped confidence interval (LLCI) and the upper level bootstrapped confidence interval (ULCI) (Preacher and Hayes, 2004; Zhao, et al., 2010). Thus, all the aforementioned mediating relationships were confirmed except for H10 and H11, as both have p-values exceeding .05.

The model's predictive accuracy of the research model was assessed with the coefficient of the determination score of R^2 (Hair, et al., 2018). The R^2 results of the model indicated that 8.5 percent of the variance in perceived self-continuity, 5 percent of the variance in nostalgia, 20 percent of the variance in child-brand nostalgia and 9.4 percent of the total variance in brand loyalty explained the model. At first glance, 9.4 percent of the total variance in brand loyalty may seem a rather low predictor of the model. This is because the objective of this study was to examine the process of how emotional loneliness can be triggered by childhood brand nostalgia, which in turn leads to brand loyalty. Therefore, in this model, the childhood brand construct was only used as a direct construct to predict brand loyalty rather than being used in

combination with several constructs to predict brand loyalty. In addition, Henseler, et al. (2016) recommended that the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) be used as a measure for the goodness of fit for PLS-SEM. A value less than 0.08 is considered a good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Since this study's model SRMR was 0.07, we can report that this study's model had a good fit.

Table 3. Mediation Analysis

Path	Path Coefficients	T-statistics	P-value	Confidence interval (95%)	
				LLCI	ULCI
H7: Perceived self-continuity → Childhood brand nostalgia → Brand loyalty	.107	3.193	.001	.050	.181
H8: Nostalgia → Childhood brand nostalgia → Brand loyalty	.055	1.939	.053	.009	.120
H9: Emotional loneliness → Perceived self-continuity → Childhood brand nostalgia → Brand loyalty	.027	2.153	.031	.009	.058
H10: Emotional loneliness → Nostalgia → Childhood brand nostalgia → Brand loyalty	.009	1.474	.141	.001	.026
H11: Emotional loneliness → Perceived self-continuity → Nostalgia → Childhood brand nostalgia → Brand loyalty	.005	1.391	.164	.001	.014

6. Discussion and future research directions

The purpose of this study is to examine how lonely individuals engage in nostalgia, construct consistent self-identities through their childhood brands, and ultimately build long-term brand relationships to reduce loneliness. The use of childhood brands is crucial in our study for the following reasons. First, we posit that emotionally lonely individuals could restore their perceived social connectedness with their close others by evoking their memorable past consumption experiences through engaging with their childhood brands. Second, we posit that emotionally lonely individuals are triggered by nostalgia because of their needs to construct self-identities that are consistent with their past selves, in particular, from their childhood. Third, we predict that childhood brand nostalgia leads to brand loyalty.

As hypothesized, the results suggest that emotionally lonely individuals engaged with childhood brand nostalgia as a coping mechanism to manage loneliness. Specifically, the findings suggest that emotionally lonely individuals may trigger to form perceived self-identities to manage uncertainty first. Subsequently, these individuals may engage with childhood brand nostalgia to enhance their perceived social connectedness with their close others. Therefore, the results imply that emotionally loneliness individuals may regard childhood brands as trusted emotional brand partners, whom they have known since their formative years (i.e., childhood) and with whom they can form long-term brand relationships. As a result, the findings revealed that childhood brand nostalgia is the outcome to perceived self-continuity and a predictor of brand loyalty.

This paper contributes in several ways to both theoretical and practical aspects. First, a novel brand relationship model (i.e., emotional loneliness, childhood brand nostalgia, perceived self-continuity and brand loyalty) was developed and validated as a potential mechanism to manage loneliness in this study. Second, the paper further expands the

understanding of the relationship partner metaphor through the lens of lonely individuals from the consumer-brand relationship context. We examined how lonely individuals develop an intimate bond with their childhood brands, similar to the bonds of an interpersonal relationship. Third, we extended the retro and nostalgia marketing literature by examining the psychological effects of nostalgia in relation to childhood brand nostalgia. Specifically, we have identified childhood brands as the potential emotional brand partner that may trigger memorable nostalgia moments that foster perceived social connectedness with close others, even when physical interactions with significant others is momentarily absent. Fourth, we examined the psychological construct of perceived self-continuity as a predictor of child brand nostalgia. We contend that emotionally lonely individuals have a desire to maintain perceived self-continuity, by extending their past self-identity to the present self-identity, through childhood brand nostalgia to manage psychological distress and loneliness. As a result, the development of a trusting, committed and loyal brand relationship with their childhood brands reduces loneliness. Lastly, we further examined how emotional loneliness individuals develop long-term brand relationship. We have found that both perceived self-continuity and childhood brand nostalgia sequentially mediated the relationship between emotional loneliness and brand loyalty. These findings support practical contributions by enabling brand managers to devise marketing communication campaigns that emphasise the formation of deep emotional connections with lonely individuals through their childhood brands to help them ease the pains of loneliness.

This research is not without limitations. Though this research provides a novel contribution to studies of emotional loneliness, it only focuses on using childhood brands as emotional partners to build a long-term relationship with lonely individuals. However, there is still a lack of consumption experience in this study. Thus, we recognise that future research may use a sensory marketing approach to stimulate the real customer's experience – such as using perfume, oldies music or mum's homecooked food – to establish perceived social connectedness with close others through external sensory cues that trigger nostalgia and reduce emotional loneliness. Further, the current findings restrict the understanding of social loneliness and the symbolic meanings that brands may play in the construction of social identity to combat loneliness. Thus, we recommend looking at research on brand communities to manage social loneliness in future research.

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