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Том II



5-7 ноември 2026 г.

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# МАРКЕТИНГ, ВОДЕН ОТ НОСТАЛГИЯТА В ЕРАТА НА ИЗКУСТВЕНИЯ ИНТЕЛЕКТ – ВЪЗМОЖНОСТИ, ПРЕДИЗВИКАТЕЛСТВА И ТЕНДЕНЦИИ

**Ас. д-р Стелиана Василева**[1]

**Резюме:** *В ерата на изкуствения интелект (ИИ) носталгията се утвърждава като мащабируема емоционална стратегия в маркетинга. Разработката анализира как персонализацията, задвижвана от ИИ, усилва носталгичните послания, като очертава ключовите възможности за ангажиране, нововъзникващите тенденции и предизвикателствата, свързани с автентичността, етиката и автономията на потребителите.*

**Ключови думи:** *маркетинг, воден от носталгията; изкуствен интелект (ИИ); носталгия, водена от изкуствен интелект (алгоритмична носталгия); генеративно съдържание; алгоритмична персонализация*

**JEL:** M31, M39, M30

# NOSTALGIA-DRIVEN MARKETING IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) – OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND TRENDS

**Assistant professor Steliana Vasileva, PhD**

**Abstract:** *In the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), nostalgia has become a scalable emotional strategy in marketing. This paper analyzes how AI-driven personalization amplifies nostalgic appeals, outlining key opportunities for engagement, emerging tendencies, and challenges related to authenticity, ethics, and consumer autonomy.*

**Keywords***: Nostalgia-Driven Marketing; Artificial Intelligence (AI); AI-Driven Nostalgia (Algorithmic Nostalgia); Generative Content; Algorithmic Personalization*

**JEL:** M31, M39, M30

## 1. Introduction

The rapid integration of AI has fundamentally restructured the marketing landscape, shifting the paradigm from broad demographic targeting to hyper-personalized, real-time consumer engagement. Current research suggest that AI in the global marketing market was valued at approximately $15,8 billion for the year 2023 and is expected to grow to over $107 billion by 2028 (MarketsandMarkets, 2023). While the technological discourse often centers on efficiency and

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predictive accuracy, the most successful contemporary strategies are those that leverage AI to amplify human emotion. Among these emotional drivers, nostalgia has re-emerged as a dominant psychological anchor, providing consumers with a sense of continuity and comfort in an increasingly changeable and automated world.

Nostalgia-driven marketing is well-established as a tool for enhancing brand equity and consumer preference (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003; Muehling & Pascal, 2011). Historically, research has focused on the reminiscence bump, where consumers form lasting attachments to products associated with their youth (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989; Schindler & Holbrook, 2003 ). With the advent of Web 2.0, nostalgia transitioned into a communal experience, facilitated by digital archives and social media sharing (Goulding, 2001; Belk, 2013). Recent literature has begun to explore the technological mediation of memory, noting how digital platforms curate collective pasts (Garde-Hansen, 2011). Furthermore, studies on AI in Marketing have extensively covered algorithmic personalization as discussed by Chung et al., 2016, the development of generative content creation (Huang & Rust, 2021), and the impact of chatbots on customer service as noted by Davenport et al. (2020). Scholars such as Campbell et al. (2020) and Hoffman and Novak (2018) have investigated how AI and smart objects shape consumer experiences, yet the focus remains largely on functional utility rather than the complex emotional mechanics of machine-generated sentimentality.

Despite the wealth of research on both nostalgia and AI independently, there is a critical missing link regarding how Generative AI (GenAI) alters the authenticity and perception of nostalgic appeals. Current models lack a framework for understanding synthetic nostalgia – where AI generates retro-aesthetics or memories for historical periods the consumer never actually experienced. While AI can scale emotional appeals, it risks creating an authenticity erosion (Beverland, 2005) that may alienate savvy consumers. There is a profound lack of empirical and theoretical synthesis addressing whether an algorithmically curated past can sustain the same psychological depth as organic human memory, or if it merely functions as a hallucinated marketing facade (Kozinets et al., 2023).

This paper aims to bridge this gap by examining the evolution of nostalgia-driven marketing within the AI epoch. The core argument is that while AI offers unprecedented opportunities for scalability and emotional resonance, it simultaneously introduces ethical vulnerabilities regarding data autonomy and the commodification of memory. This research contributes to both fundamental and applied marketing theory by: (1) proposing a new taxonomy for AI-mediated nostalgia, (2) identifying the generational shifts in how digital natives consume reconstructted history, and (3) providing a strategic framework for practitioners to balance machine efficiency with emotional authenticity.

The subsequent sections of this paper are structured in the following manner. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of nostalgia and the technical capabilities of GenAI. Section 3 discusses the primary opportunities, including

hyper-personalized retro-targeting and synthetic content creation. Section 4 addresses the critical challenges, specifically the risks of emotional manipulation and algorithmic bias. Section 5 analyzes emerging trends, such as the hybridization of human-AI creativity. Finally, Section 6 offers practical implications for marketers and suggests directions for future research into the ethics of automated sentiment.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

The convergence of human sentimentality and machine intelligence requires a multi-layered theoretical lens. This section traces the transition of nostalgia from a purely psychological phenomenon to a digitally mediated strategic asset, before exploring the technical and anthropological frameworks that define AI's role in this evolution.

### *2.1. The Evolution of Nostalgia in Marketing: From Personal to Mediated*

Nostalgia was traditionally conceptualized as a binary experience: *personal nostalgia* – rooted in direct individual experience, and *historical nostalgia* – a yearning for a past era prior to one's birth (Muehling & Pascal, 2011; Pentina & Amos, 2011). Early marketing models relied on the reminiscence bump, targeting formative years to trigger brand loyalty (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). However, in the age of liquid modernity, the past has become a resource that can be easily influenced and/or reshaped by digital flows (Bauman, 2000; Niemeyer, 2014). This has brought in mediated nostalgia, where collective memories are not just recalled but actively curated and remixed by social media algorithms (Garde-Hansen, 2011). Consequently, nostalgia is no longer a static look backward but a fluid, socially constructed resource engineered through digital touchpoints.

### *2.2. Generative AI and Emotional Analytics: Engineering Sentiment*

The emergence of GenAI transforms nostalgia into a data-driven science of statistical mimicry. Large Language Models (LLMs) and Diffusion Models do not feel. They perform emotional analytics by identifying linguistic and visual patterns associated with sentimentality (Campbell et al., 2020). LLMs replicate the voice of a decade with mathematical precision, while Diffusion Models synthesize vintage aesthetics – such as Polaroid-style grain – creating hyper-real pasts that may feel more authentic than reality itself (Baudrillard, 2019; Huang & Rust, 2021). In this context, AI acts as a sentimental engine, capable of scaling resonance by predicting which specific nostalgic triggers will engage a given user segment.

### *2.3. Theoretical Synthesis: Social Identity and Cyborg Anthropology*

To understand AI-mediated memory, the paper integrates Social Identity Theory (SIT) with Cyborg Anthropology. SIT suggests that consumers use nostalgic brands to reinforce belonging to specific cultural groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). When AI curates these memories, it reinforces in-group identities through

algorithmic curation. However, Cyborg Anthropology offers a deeper explanation for the synthetic nostalgia of younger generations. As consumers rely on AI to archive and retrieve memories (e.g., smartphone montages), the boundary between biological memory and machine-generated content blurs (Belk, 2013; Hoffman & Novak, 2018). AI thus moves beyond reflecting the past to co-creating a techno-social reality where machine-optimized imagery becomes a legitimate part of the consumer's identity.

## 3. Opportunities: Scaling the Reminiscence Bump

The integration of GenAI into nostalgia-driven marketing shifts the strategy from a one-size-fits-all retro appeal to a high-velocity, individualized engagement model. By leveraging machine learning and generative tools, brands can now move beyond broad generational stereotypes to target the specific intersection of personal history and cultural memory.

### *3.1. Hyper-Personalization through Retro-Targeting*

Traditional nostalgic campaigns often targeted broad cohorts, such as Millennials or Baby Boomers, based on shared cultural milestones. However, AI-enabled retro-targeting allows for the detailed identification of individualized reminiscence bumps – the specific period in a person's life where their tastes and brand preferences were most deeply encoded (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). By analyzing first-party data and social media engagement patterns, AI systems can predict the exact year or sub-culture that triggers the strongest emotional response for a single user (Chung et al., 2016).

This level of personalization extends to synthetic reminiscence, where AI generates custom content – such as personalized playlists, retro-filtered advertisements, or on this day digital artifacts – that align with a user's unique digital history. This shift from mass nostalgia to N-of-1 nostalgia enhances emotional engagement and targeting efficiency, significantly reducing the ad fatigue often associated with generic digital marketing (Davenport et al., 2020).

### *3.2. AI-Generated Brand Ambassadors and Synthetic Reanimation*

One of the most profound applied opportunities lies in the use of AI to reanimate historical brand assets or deceased ambassadors. Through deep-fake technology and sophisticated Diffusion Models, marketers can revive iconic figures from a brand's heritage to interact with modern audiences in real-time (Campbell et al., 2020).

This synthetic reanimation allows legacy brands to maintain continuity in their brand narrative while adapting to contemporary platforms. For instance, an AI-generated version of a 1950s spokesperson can participate in a TikTok challenge or provide personalized customer service via a chatbot, bridging the gap between historical trust and modern utility (Huang & Rust, 2021). These AI-generated ambassadors serve as powerful nostalgic cues that activate vicarious

nostalgia, particularly among younger digital natives who value the aesthetic and storytelling potential of retro icons even without direct prior exposure (Muehling & Pascal, 2011; Rauschnabel et al., 2022).

### *3.3. Efficiency in Predictive Sentiment and Content Creation*

Beyond consumer-facing applications, AI provides fundamental research benefits by quantifying the sentiment ROI of nostalgic assets. GenAI tools can rapidly iterate thousands of variations of a retro visual – adjusting color saturation, grain, and typeface – to determine which specific aesthetic combination maximizes click-through rates for a specific demographic (Hoffman & Novak, 2018). This reduces the cost of creative production and allows for a more liquid approach to nostalgia, where the past is not just preserved but constantly optimized for the present digital ecosystem (Bauman, 2000; Niemeyer, 2014).

## 4. Challenges: The Ethics of Automated Emotion

While the scalability of AI-mediated nostalgia offers clear strategic advantages, it introduces a complex array of ethical and psychological risks. As marketers move from reflecting history to hallucinating it, the boundaries between persuasion, manipulation, and deception become increasingly porous.

### *4.1. The Authenticity Erosion and the Hallucinated Past*

The primary risk of AI-driven nostalgia is the erosion of perceived brand authenticity. Authenticity is often rooted in a brand's consistent adherence to its historical truth (Beverland, 2005). GenAI, however, operates through statistical mimicry, often producing hallucinations – historical artifacts or narratives that feel nostalgic but never actually existed. This creates a hyper-real past (Baudrillard, 2019) that may alienate consumers once the synthetic nature of the content is revealed. If consumers perceive a brand is faking a shared history, the resulting authenticity gap can lead to significant brand devaluation and consumer cynicism (Kozinets et al., 2023; van Dijck, 2007).

The tension between AI's capacity for high-fidelity replication and the inherent risk of historical hallucination creates a strategic paradox for contemporary marketers. To clarify these trade-offs, Table 1. outlines the primary dimensions of AI-mediated nostalgia, contrasting the strategic opportunities with the corresponding ethical vulnerabilities and their ultimate impact on brand equity.

*Table 1. The Paradox of AI-Mediated Nostalgia*

| Dimension | Opportunity (The Strategic Gain) | Challenge (The Ethical Risk) | Impact on Brand Equity |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Authenticity** | High-fidelity retro-aesthetics | Hallucinated pasts and synthetic fraud | Potential erosion of trust |
| **Engagement** | Hyper-personalized reminiscence bumps | Emotional manipulation and exploitation | Increased cynicism/reactance |
| **Inclusivity** | Automated translation of global trends | Algorithmic bias and cultural erasure | Marginalization of sub-cultures |
| **Scalability** | Instant generation of retro content | Devaluation of human creative „soul“ | Commodity trap (low differentiation) |

*Source: Autor's own.*

*4.2. Algorithmic Bias and the Homogenization of Memory*

Algorithms are only as inclusive as their training data. In nostalgia marketing, this poses a risk of algorithmic exclusion, where AI models favor dominant Western or majority-group histories while marginalizing the nostalgic triggers of minority cultures (Beer, 2013). When AI curates collective memory, it risks creating a homogenized, sanitized version of the past that ignores diverse cultural nuances, thereby failing to engage multi-cultural segments and reinforcing historical biases (Davenport et al., 2020; Noble, 2018).

*4.3. Emotional Manipulation and Data Autonomy*

AI's ability to identify a user's reminiscence bump with surgical precision raises concerns regarding emotional manipulation. By targeting individuals at their most psychologically vulnerable – using memories to trigger self-continuity needs – marketers risk exploiting consumer emotions rather than enhancing them. Furthermore, the use of personal data to engineer these emotional states creates a privacy-personalization paradox, where the consumer's autonomy is compromised by the very systems designed to delight them (Hoffman & Novak, 2018).

## 5. Trends and Generational Shifts: Reconstructing the Unlived Past

The landscape of nostalgia is undergoing a demographic transformation, as the reminiscence bump shifts from lived experience to algorithmic curation. This section explores how digital natives, particularly Gen Z, are utilizing AI to engage with a past they never inhabited, a phenomenon that challenges traditional longitudinal models of consumer behavior.

*5.1. Gen Z and Anemoia: The Rise of Digitally Reconstructed History*

While older cohorts typically experience nostalgia for personally lived events, younger consumers are increasingly exhibiting anemoia – a profound longing for a time period they did not personally experience (Boym, 2001; Niemeyer, 2014). For Gen Z, this is facilitated by AI-driven platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where generative algorithms resurface and remix 1990s and 2000s

aesthetics. Unlike traditional historical nostalgia, which relies on archival accuracy, digitally reconstructed nostalgia is participatory. Gen Z uses AI filters and generative tools to insert themselves into these retro narratives (Belk, 2013). This creates a hybrid memory where the boundary between historical fact and machine-generated fiction is intentionally blurred to serve contemporary identity needs (Rauschnabel et al., 2022).

*5.2. Algorithmic Curation of Collective Memory*

The shift toward AI-mediated trends has replaced organic cultural vibe shifts with algorithmic curation. AI does not merely reflect what was popular in the past. It predicts which elements of the past will perform best in the current attention economy (Beer, 2013). This has led to the retro-future trend, where GenAI combines mid-century modern design with futuristic themes, a style frequently adopted by luxury and tech brands to signal both heritage and innovation (Kozinets et al., 2023).

*5.3. The Hybridization of Human and Machine Creativity*

A burgeoning trend in the industry is Centaur Marketing – the collaboration between human creative directors and generative models to produce nostalgic content. This hybridization ensures that while AI provides high-fidelity retro assets, human intuition provides the soul and cultural context necessary to avoid the uncanny valley – a state where AI-generated content becomes repulsive because it mimics human emotion too closely but fails to achieve genuine soul (Huang & Rust, 2021).

To synthesize these generational shifts and the evolving role of technology, Table 2 maps the transition from biological memory to the current state of synthetic nostalgia. This model illustrates how the Engine of Recall has shifted from the human mind to algorithmic processors, fundamentally changing the consumer's relationship with the past.

*Table 2. The Evolutionary Pipeline of Nostalgic Marketing*

| **Phase** | **1. Biological Nostalgia** | **2. Mediated Nostalgia** | **3. Synthetic Nostalgia** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Primary Cohort** | Boomers & Gen X | Millennials | Gen Z & Gen Alpha |
| **Primary Input** | Direct Lived Experience | Digital Archives & Social Media | Big Data & Algorithmic Prompts |
| **Engine of Recall** | **The Human Brain** (Episodic Memory) | **The Search Engine** (Curation) | **The Generative Model** (Reconstruction) |
| **Core Phenomenon** | The Reminiscence Bump | Collective Digital Memory | Anemoia (Unlived Nostalgia) |
| **Marketing Goal** | To *Trigger* a specific memory | To *Curate* a shared past | To *Engineer* a personalized past |
| **Authenticity Type** | Historical Accuracy | Social Validation | Aesthetic Resonance |

*Autor's note: Direction of Evolution: From Internal Cognition to Externalized Algorithm*
*Source: Autor's own.*

*5.4. Descriptive Synthesis of the Evolutionary Pipeline*

Table 2 outlines a clear trajectory of externalization. In the first phase, nostalgia was a closed system reliant on an individual's actual biography. In the second phase, the emergence of Web 2.0 allowed nostalgia to become a shared system, where digital traces (photos, videos) replaced fading personal recollect-tions (Belk, 2013).

The current third phase, Synthetic Nostalgia, represents a generative system. Here, AI models (LLMs and Diffusion Models) do not require the consumer to have lived through an era. Instead, the AI calculates the most probable nostalgic aesthetic based on current trends and generates a reconstructed reality. This allows Gen Z to consume a 1990s aesthetic that is technically hallucinated by an algorithm but feels emotionally authentic because it aligns with their modern identity performance (Garda, 2013; Kidd & Nieto McAvoy, 2023).

## 6. Applied Framework and Real-World Implications

As the boundaries between human memory and machine synthesis continue to blur, marketing practitioners require a robust framework to navigate the authenticity paradox identified in this research. Section 6 translates the preceding theoretical analysis into a strategic toolset for marketing managers.

*6.1. The Authentic-AI Strategic Matrix*

To bridge the gap between fundamental research and applied marketing, the paper proposes the Authentic-AI Strategic Matrix (see Table 3). This framework allows managers to categorize their nostalgic AI initiatives based on two critical axes: the *Source of Content* (Historical vs. Synthetic) and the *Target Emotional Depth* (Functional vs. Existential).

By mapping a campaign onto this matrix, brands can identify the requisite level of human oversight needed to avoid the uncanny valley.

*Table 3. The Authentic-AI Strategic Matrix for Nostalgia Marketing*

| Strategy | The Reanimator | The Remixer | The Hallucinator | The Archivist |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mechanic** | Reviving deceased icons/ spokespeople via Deepfakes. | AI-enhanced updates of existing brand assets. | Generating Anemoia aesthetics (unlived pasts). | AI-powered search of historical consumer data. |
| **Risk Level** | **High** (Ethical/ Legal) | **Low** (Visual Consistency) | **Medium** (Authenticity Erosion) | **Low** (Privacy/Data) |
| **Consume r Impact** | Intense Vicarious Nostalgia | Brand Continuity | Identity Performance | Personal Recognition |
| **Human Role** | Ethical Vetting and Consent | Creative Refinement | Cultural Contextualization | Data Governance |

*Source: Autor's own.*

*6.2. Managerial Recommendations: Balancing Efficiency and Soul*

The application of this matrix suggests that practitioners must prioritize Techno-sociality – the balancing of algorithmic efficiency with human-centric empathy (Beer, 2013). Research indicates that while AI can maximize the scale of a campaign, the resonance remains dependent on human-perceived authenticity (Beverland, 2005). The paper recommends three core pillars for real-world implementation:

✓ *Transparency in Synthesis:* Brands should utilize Generative Disclosure when using synthetic ambassadors to maintain trust.

✓ *Cultural Sensitivity Audits:* To reduce the risk of algorithmic exclusion (Noble, 2018), brands must audit training datasets to ensure nostalgic appeals are inclusive of minority histories.

✓ *Hybrid Creativity (Centaur Teams):* Final creative approval should remain human-centric to ensure the sentimental engine does not produce emotionnally manipulative or hallucinated narratives that contradict the brand's core heritage.

## 7. Conclusion and Future Directions

The integration of GenAI into nostalgia-driven marketing marks a shift from the passive retrieval of the past to the active, algorithmic reconstruction of sentiment. This research has demonstrated that while AI offers unprecedented opportunities for hyper-personalized retro-targeting and the reanimation of brand heritage, it simultaneously introduces an authenticity paradox that risks eroding long-term consumer trust. The hybridization of human creativity and machine intelligence represents the next frontier of emotional marketing. By integrating the Authentic-AI Strategic Matrix into their workflow, brands can leverage the power of the past to build a more resonant future, turning nostalgia from a static archive into a dynamic, strategic asset. Ultimately, the success of AI-mediated nostalgia depends on a brand's ability to maintain the human soul of a narrative while utilizing the machine precision of the algorithm.

While this paper provides a conceptual foundation for AI-mediated nostalgia, several avenues for future empirical and theoretical research remain:

✓ Empirical Validation of the Uncanny Valley: Future research should utilize neuro-marketing tools (e.g., eye-tracking, fMRI) to measure real-time consumer reactions to deep-fake brand ambassadors. This would help identify the exact threshold where synthetic reanimation shifts from being nostalgic to disturbing.

✓ Longitudinal Effects on Brand Trust: There is a critical need for longitudinal studies examining whether hallucinated pasts lead to authenticity fatigue over time. Researchers should investigate if Gen Z's preference for anemoia (unlived nostalgia) remains stable or if it transitions into a demand for analog historical accuracy as they age.

✓ Cross-Cultural Algorithmic Bias: Further studies are required to explore how AI-driven nostalgia impacts non-Western markets. Investigating how algorithms handle post-colonial nostalgia or diverse cultural heritage will be essential to preventing the homogenization of collective memory.

✓ Immersive Nostalgia in the Metaverse: As marketing moves into spatial computing and VR, research should explore Immersive Nostalgia – where AI recreates 3D, interactive historical environments. This presents new challenges for data privacy and the psychological impact of living in a reconstructed past.

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