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Nostalgia as a Tool to Revitalize brands: a case study of the Barbie and Super Mario Bros films

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to explore the relationship between nostalgia, brand perception and brand community, aiming to provide insight in effectively revitalizing through brand extension. Further, we aim to assess whether a shift in brand perception is a prerequisite for brand revitalization.

Methodology: This qualitative study utilized focus groups to explore the use of nostalgia in brand extensions and its impact on brand perceptions, focusing on the cases of Barbie and Super Mario Bros films. The research design is comparative, with separate focus groups for each film to delve deeper into the theme of nostalgia.

Findings: The study shows how the effective evocation of strong nostalgic feelings has an important role in the revitalization of brands. Strong brand communities in combination with personal nostalgia are shown to influence brand perception and positive attitudes to brand extensions.

Original/value: This paper's contribution lies in its exploration of the multifaceted relationship between nostalgia and brand revitalization in the context of brand extensions, further identifying brand communities as an important dimension.

Keywords: Nostalgia branding, Brand Revitalization, Brand Extension, Brand Perception, Brand Community, Barbie, Super Mario Bros

Paper Type: Research paper

Introduction

In the world of marketing and consumer behavior, brands must constantly adapt to ever-changing dynamics and expectations. If brands are not consistently updated and reinforced, the brand image and awareness will eventually diminish (Keller, 1999).

Brands have the power to shape consumer perceptions, evoke emotions, and influence purchase decisions (Kapferer, 2012). To stay relevant and vital in the face of shifting consumer preferences, brand revitalization has emerged as a strategic approach. Brand revitalization involves infusing new life into established brands (Dev & Keller, 2014). It is not enough for a brand to simply exist in order to make a “comeback”, they need to innovate (Kapferer, 2012).

In 2023, Barbie and Super Mario Bros extended their brands by releasing films, each earning more than one billion dollars in revenue. Furthermore, both films respectively held the position of being the highest-grossing box office film worldwide at one point of the year (Box Office Mojo, 2023). Both brands have a long history, as the first Barbie doll was released in 1959 (Dean, 2023), and the first Super Mario Bros game was released in 1985 (Nintendo, n.d). The brands have multiple generations of consumers who have nostalgic feelings about them (Carr, 2023).

Nostalgia is a powerful, value-enhancing emotion for consumers (Kapferer, 2012). The positive emotions evoked by nostalgic stimuli can promote consumer purchases of nostalgic brands. Although nostalgia has been shown to have a strong effect on

consumer behavior, few research studies have been conducted of nostalgia branding (Orth & Gall, 2012; Brown, 2001). Having witnessed the remarkable successes of Barbie and Super Mario as nostalgic brand extensions, this study aims to explore how the nostalgic attributes of these brands contributed to their revitalization. In order to investigate this, the following research questions were asked:

- *How does nostalgia affect brand revitalization in the eyes of consumers?*
- *Is a change of brand perception needed to revitalize brands?*

Literature review

Brand Revitalization

In order to maintain vitality and meet changing needs and desires of consumers, brands should consistently renew their concept and message, according to Kapferer (2012). Brand revitalization is a strategy to set a brand back on a path of growth, recreating a consistent flow of sales. It is also a tool to reach new potential growth markets, when original consumers are no longer able to guarantee the brand’s success (Kapferer, 2012).

Dev and Keller (2014) describe brand revitalization as combining old with new, adding important new components to the existing brand. Brown et al. (2003) argues that for a brand revitalization to be successful, the brand should be able to awaken strong memories and stories for its consumers and inspire a longing for community. Notably, brand revitalization has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on brand attitudes and purchase intentions among consumers (Chen, 2021).

Keller (1999) discusses how some brands need to return to their roots in order to regain brand equity, while others have to more fundamentally change their brand meaning. Kapferer (2012) further emphasizes that brand revitalization requires both updating the brand's overall offerings while staying authentic to its core identity.

Brand Nostalgia

Numerous definitions of brand nostalgia have been suggested, but the one presented by Holbrook and Schindler (1991, p. 330) has become the benchmark. Their definition is as follows: *"A preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)"*. Consumers experience a complex emotional response to nostalgia, comprising both negative and positive emotions. However, the positive aspects are often more dominant, leading to a sense of warmth, security, gratitude and longing (Holak & Havlena, 1998; Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). Considering this, nostalgia is not necessarily characterized as a singular emotion, but rather as a combination of various emotions tied to past experiences (Jun, Park & Kim, 2022).

Recent research on nostalgia has identified two categories: personal nostalgia and collective nostalgia. Personal nostalgia is rooted in direct personal experiences, often tied to individual achievements and self-confidence (Holak, Matveev &

Havlena, 2007). In contrast, Jun, Park and Kim (2022) argue that collective nostalgia is grounded in shared memories and interactions within a group. The authors propose that personal nostalgia tends to enhance one's self-positivity, while collective nostalgia increases social connectedness. As a result, it is suggested that consumers are more likely to assess brand extensions favorably when exposed to cues associated with collective nostalgia rather than those related to personal nostalgia (Jun, Park & Kim, 2022).

Youn (2020) argues that the use of nostalgia in brands is an important dimension to strengthen the consumer brand relationship and also to motivate the consumers to participate in brand communities. Brands deliberately use elements from the past to create a sentimental link between the brand and the consumer. This helps reconnect the consumer with close individuals with whom they once shared the experience of consuming the brand together (Youn, 2020). Evidently, brand nostalgia plays a role in enhancing brand equity, increasing brand relevance and strengthening personal connections to a brand (Banerjee & Shaikh, 2022).

A "nostalgia proneness scale" has been presented by Holbrook (1993) that has been tested in various memory-rich contexts, such as with movies. The study shows that nostalgia proneness goes beyond the influence of their age or the era they grew up in. It suggests that some people have a greater inclination toward experiencing and expressing nostalgia compared to others, even when they share a similar age. The proneness reflects an individual's tendency to be emotionally

affected by and attached to historical or sentimental aspects of life, depending on the individual's character or psychographic profile (Holbrook, 1993).

Brand Community

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) define a brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand.". McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) take on a customer-centric perspective of brand community, where the customer experience shapes the existence and meaning in these communities. In such brand communities, highly integrated members share a deep emotional connection with the company. They are motivated to actively contribute to the brand's success and well-being, effectively acting as brand ambassadors. Communities can be based on different commonalities that bring its members together (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). For this paper, the common denominator for the brand communities in question is nostalgia.

Brand Extensions

According to Keller (2016), brand extensions are an integral part of brand strategy. Brand extensions include using an established brand to introduce a new product to a new market or to a different product category (Keller & Aaker, 1992). An important factor to consider when introducing a new brand extension that greatly affects consumers' attitudes towards the brand is the perceived similarity between the new product and the "parent" brand, according to Huang et al. (2017). In other words, how well the new

product suits the parent brand will affect how the consumers perceive the brand.

A study by Banerjee and Shaikh (2022) found that consumers that experience nostalgic feelings towards a brand are more likely to purchase the new products that a brand introduces. Additionally, their study also concluded that the consumer's positive feelings and memories towards a parent brand tend to reflect to the brand extensions. This study is supported by Jun, Park and Kim (2022) and their study on the effects of nostalgia marketing on consumer's perception of brand extensions. However, Shields and Johnson (2016) highlighted an important aspect with regards to brand extensions and consumer acceptance. Their study found that consumers are more accepting towards small to moderate changes to the parent brand, but larger changes are often not well received and met with resistance.

Brand perception

Today we live in a world where brand perception relies on the customer's perceived value rather than the function and quality of a product (Simpson, 2017). Brand perception is an essential concept in marketing that consists of consumer's emotions, experiences, and thoughts about a product, service, or brand (Kirsch, 2023). Further Kirsch (2023) states that perception of a brand is primarily mental associations but plays an important role when creating emotional connections between the brand and consumers since customers take their sentiments into account when choosing between different brands. The better a customer feels about a brand, the more loyal they become. The perception of the brand is all about the

brand's reputation (Duberg, n.d). According to Kapferer (2012), the start of brand management is the product or service, which serves as the primary driver of perceived value, therefore it is essential to understand how consumers perceive a brand. Further, Kapferer (2012) states that communication plays a role in organizing and structuring tangible perceptions and adding intangible ones. Brand perception can be seen as “[...]what people believe a brand represents, rather than what a brand says it represents.” (Kirsch, 2023).

Methodology

This study adopts a *qualitative research* methodology using focus groups. This method was chosen to gain in-depth understanding of a complex phenomena that requires a nuanced discussion. Although other data collection methods, such as interviews and quantitative surveys were considered, the primary objective was to encourage discussions that could generate new insights and ideas. Additionally, the intention was to gain a deeper understanding of participants' views and experiences, leading to the choice of conducting focus groups. This methodology is inductive, constructionist, and interpretive (Bryman, Bell, & Harley 2019).

This qualitative study seeks to investigate the strategic use of nostalgia in brand extensions as a means to revitalize and change brand perceptions. The study explores the cases of Barbie and Super Mario Bros, with a particular emphasis on how these brands utilize films as brand extensions to evoke nostalgia for the purpose of revitalizing and changing brand perceptions.

To analyze the case study of Barbie and Super Mario Bros, a literature review was carried out and two focus groups were conducted to gain a deep understanding of the selected cases. As the study utilizes qualitative focus groups to investigate the research question, the findings of the study can not be generalized to a broader context (Bryman, Bell & Harley 2019). Since there have been two cases, the research design is a comparative design as suggested by Bryman, Bell & Harley (2019).

The objective of conducting focus group interviews was to collect primary data from customers who have experienced the Barbie and Super Mario Bros films, with the aim of unraveling how the use of nostalgia has affected their perception of the brand. The focus group consisted of a *focused interview*, “[...]in which interviewees are selected because they ‘are known to have been involved in a particular situation’.” as Bryman, Bell, and Harley (p. 463, 2019) state. Two focus groups were conducted with a total of eleven individuals. They were divided into two focus groups, one for each movie, to ensure in-depth insights and interactive discussions.

The decision to conduct separate focus groups for each film was made to ensure that the results obtained from these groups are comparable. By doing so, we could prioritize and centralize the discussion around the theme of nostalgia within each film. This approach allowed participants to delve deeper into their emotional connections, memories, and perceptions specific to the individual film, without the potential for comparison between the films overshadowing the focus on nostalgia. In the Barbie focus group, there were six

participants, four women and two men. In the Super Mario focus group, there were five participants, two men and three women. The selection criteria for the interview participants was chosen to focus on the young adults demographic aged 20-29, who have watched either Barbie or Super Mario Bros movies that were released in 2023. This generation grew up with Barbie and Super Mario during a period when these brands were immensely popular with kids, allowing us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of nostalgia in filmmaking. Bryman, Bell & Harley (p. 68, 2019) states “It embodies the logic of comparison, in that it implies that we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations.”.

To receive valuable and reliable answers from the focus groups for the study, theories centered on Brand Revitalization, Brand Nostalgia, Brand Community, Brand Extension, and Brand Perception were used as a theoretical framework when creating the interview questions.

In the course of conducting focus group interviews, we encountered certain challenges. One significant challenge relates to the potential issue of leading questions, which could influence participants' responses. To address this concern, a methodological adjustment was made to ensure the formulation of neutral and non-leading questions, preserving the integrity of the data collection process.

Furthermore, another challenge revolved around the group dynamic, specifically in creating an environment where all participants felt that their opinions are

valued. This was addressed through the facilitation of an open and inclusive atmosphere. Participants were explicitly informed that all viewpoints and perspectives were not only welcomed but also actively encouraged. It was emphasized that there existed no definitive right or wrong responses, and the aim was to initiate discussions featuring a wide range of insights and viewpoints.

Another concern during the development of this paper revolved around the process of defining the study's limitations and selecting appropriate theories and frameworks. To address this, a structured approach was implemented, involving a critical review of relevant literature to define study limitations and a thorough assessment of theories and frameworks for their relevance to the research objectives.

Presentation of Cases

Barbie

Barbie is the name of the iconic doll introduced by the toy company Mattel in 1959 (Dean, 2023). It has come to be a cultural phenomenon and a popular toy for young girls. The aim of the Barbie doll was to provide girls with an adult-like doll that could explore different career possibilities (Dean, 2023). Over the coming decades, Barbie has become one of the most recognizable toys worldwide and has become a huge part of pop culture. Mattel has expanded its Barbie franchise beyond dolls to animated films, TV shows, video games and Barbie-themed merchandise (Mattel Creations, n.d).

The success of the Barbie doll has come with controversy, one of the main

controversies being its lack of diversity in the earlier years. For many years, Barbie was only available in accordance with stereotypically Western beauty ideals, with blonde hair and blue eyes. The brand was largely criticized for not offering more diverse options. The first black and hispanic dolls named Barbie were introduced in 1980 (Mattel Shop, n.d). The brand has also been criticized for adhering to unrealistic body types. The stereotypical Barbie is famously very slim, with a narrow waist and long legs. The exaggerated figure and its unattainable beauty ideals have led to negative self-esteem and body image issues among primarily young girls. Diverse body sizes were not available for Barbies until 2016 when the brand released a “curvy” Barbie doll (Rodriguez, 2022).

Barbie has also been under controversy for reinforcing traditional gender roles. Early editions of the Barbie dolls had careers such as fashion designer, flight attendant, ballerina, and nurse (Carey, 2018). These were stereotypically female-dominated careers in the early sixties and reinforced the idea that women have slim career options.

The Mattel company has expanded its range of Barbie products to include more diverse Barbie dolls. Today, their Barbie collection features Barbies with 35 different skin tones, 97 hairstyles and 9 body types (Mattel Shop, n.d). The brand even includes disabilities, like the wheelchair Barbie (DeVault, 2022). The brand has also expanded Barbie’s career options and recently included more careers in politics, medicine, and engineering (Carey, 2018).

In July of 2023, a new live-action Barbie film was released. The film was highly anticipated by viewers, and it was set to be a box-office hit (Dockterman, 2023). The film offered a new feminist perspective on the Barbie character. The storyline challenges the outdated ideals associated with Barbie and addresses gender inequality in today’s world. The film has been a global hit, and after only three weeks of running in the cinema, the film earned a billion dollars at the box office (Rothenberg, 2023) and has so far been the highest-earning film of 2023 (The Numbers, 2023).

With the release of the Barbie trailer, anticipation for the film led it to become a cultural phenomenon, a so-called *Barbie craze*. Many Barbie fans decided to dress up for the film screenings. Dressing up in *Barbiecore* largely consists of pink clothing and vintage Barbie-branded items. The trend spread largely due to social media, where fans were showing off their outfits for the film premiere (Solá-Santiago, 2023). Another cultural phenomenon related to the Barbie film release was *Barbenheimer*, which is a term used to describe the release of two very different and opposing films. One being the feminist comedy Barbie, and the other being the dark biographical thriller Oppenheimer. The two films were set to release on the same day, July 21, 2023. The contrast between the two films quickly became a meme and viral trend on social media. The *Barbenheimer* trend worked as unintentional marketing of the two films, which further led to the success of the films (Barber, 2023).

Super Mario

Super Mario (also known as *Super Mario Bros*) is a popular video game franchise, known globally across the world. The game franchise was created in 1985 by Nintendo, a Japanese video game company (Nintendo, n.d). The Super Mario games' main character is an Italian plumber named Mario, but the game also features other characters such as his brother Luigi, Princess Peach, and Bowser. The game is set in different imaginary worlds, and the aim of the game is to avoid enemies and leap over hurdles to get to the next level (Iyer, 2020).

Super Mario is loved globally and has become a huge part of gaming and pop culture. In 2016, even the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, dressed up as Super Mario for the closing ceremony of the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro (Tan, 2021). The game has evolved greatly throughout the years, from racing-style games with *Mario Kart* to multiplayer-style games with *Super Mario Party* (Muldoon, 2023). The best-selling Nintendo Switch game as of 2023 is *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, with over 55 million copies sold (Cooper, 2023).

The Super Mario gaming franchise has generational appeal, with a history of over 30 years. The family-friendly game has evolved a lot throughout the years, however, the core of the gameplay remains consistent, which enables old players to enjoy the game just as much as newer ones (Zahran, 2023). The game can create a sense of nostalgia among older players, which could also inspire them to introduce the game to their children. Furthermore, the Super Mario franchise is generally not

considered controversial. It has always been considered family-friendly and light-hearted, however, minor controversies include lack of diversity and representation (Jacobs, 2023).

In April 2023, the highly anticipated Super Mario Bros film was released. It was an animated film with an intriguing storyline and featured the beloved characters from the Super Mario franchise, Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach, Toad, Bowser, and many more. The film was immediately a very successful box office hit. Within just a week of its release, the Super Mario film became the highest-grossing film based on a video game (Makuch, 2023). The film also held the title of the highest-grossing film of 2023 until it was overtaken by the *Barbie* film in September (The Numbers, 2023). A key factor that led to the film's success was that although it was primarily aimed at children, it appealed to multiple generations of fans. Additionally, the film catered to the sense of nostalgia of the older generations of fans (Murphy, 2023).

Empirical results

Barbie focus group

The Barbie focus group consisted of six participants, as previously described. All of the participants stated at the beginning of the session that they had seen the Barbie movie in theaters.

All six participants had some degree of nostalgia attached to the Barbie brand, even if the extent of the connection varied among them. Half of the group had themselves played with Barbie dolls frequently as children. One participant mentioned how they played with Barbies

sometimes, even if they preferred the competitor brand called Bratz. The two final participants discussed how they didn't play with Barbies themselves very often as children, but that they had a nostalgic connection to the brand through siblings and friends. One participant said: *"As a younger brother to an older sister, as a child I didn't have much of a choice on what to play with. So, I have numerous memories of my sister and I playing with all different types of Barbies."* Overall, the participants agreed that they all had a nostalgic connection to the brand, even if some participants had a stronger connection than others.

The initial reaction when first hearing that there would be a film was mainly positive among the participants. Multiple participants used the word *"thrilled"* to describe their feelings after first hearing about the film. One participant then brought up how they first thought the movie would be for children, and how they were surprised when it turned out to be aimed at older audiences. Most of the group vocally agreed with this statement and further discussed how it initially was a bit unclear who the movie would be targeted towards.

When discussing their reasoning for watching the movie, the participants agreed that there was a great amount of social media hype surrounding them that motivated them to attend a movie screening. They discussed how the Barbie movie was popular on social media and widely discussed among friends. This was mentioned as an important reason why the participants were excited to see the movie, as they wanted to be part of the community surrounding it. This was

especially true for those who had weaker nostalgic ties to the Barbie brand, meaning that the hype surrounding the film was the more important motivator for them.

Four of the participants said that they dressed up in pink when they went to see the movie, as part of the *Barbiecore* trend. One participant described how the atmosphere in the theater was *"electric"*, in that the crowd was very responsive and loud. Many in the group agreed that the theater experience had been something beyond the ordinary.

Opinions on the film's use of nostalgia varied in the group. Some participants praised the movie for effectively incorporating nostalgia from different eras of Barbie's history, while others noted that some references were less recognizable, such as discontinued Barbie dolls. However, the overall nostalgic essence of Barbie was well-received. The group particularly enjoyed the humor that mirrored how kids used to play with Barbie, including humorous portrayals like Barbie's ability to fly down stairs, plastic food, and a solid pool. Another notable element was "Weird Barbie," a character reminiscent of dolls altered during childhood play. Many participants related to this experience, and the movie successfully translated the nostalgic feeling of playing with Barbie as a child into a film experience.

The whole group agreed that their nostalgic ties to the Barbie brand was a determining factor in why they decided to watch the movie. They also agreed that nostalgia made them experience and resonate with the movie on a deeper emotional level.

The participants later discussed how the film had affected their perception of the Barbie brand. Most agreed that their perception had changed in a positive light. Before the movie, some felt in line with the critique targeted toward Barbie, that the dolls have contributed to an unrealistic beauty standard for women. They felt that the movie addressed the issue in a clever way, managing to turn Barbie into a more “feminist role model”. Two participants felt differently as they felt that the movie was an act of “woke-washing”, meaning that the movie was only being inclusive mainly for economic gain. One of them still argued that it was good that the movie was inclusive, but that it could be interpreted as a bit too “intentional” and “forced”.

One participant brought up how after the movie they felt more inclined to potentially buy a Barbie doll in the future, as a parent. This was followed by a discussion about how the movie was mainly targeted toward young adults, rather than children. The group expressed how they thought the movie had been effective in reaching young parents, reminding them of their childhood. This, they resonated, could lead to more parents buying Barbie dolls for their kids.

Super Mario focus group

As previously mentioned, the Super Mario focus group comprised five participants who were selected based on their recent viewing of the movie. Four of the participants expressed that Super Mario video games had played a significant role in their childhood, spending numerous hours between the ages of 7 and 11 playing on either Nintendo or Wii consoles. The

fifth participant, while not playing Super Mario video games frequently due to not owning them, still associated Super Mario with their childhood, as they would play it when visiting their friends.

All participants shared the opinion that their primary motivation for watching the movie was based on feelings of nostalgia. They agreed that if it had been any other animated movie without an emotional connection, they wouldn't have watched it, as it wouldn't have been appropriate for their age. They acknowledged that they might not have been the target group of the movie, but the nostalgic elements were strong enough to make them watch the Super Mario movie. One participant said, *“I wanted to watch the movie because I was so curious to see how they would be able to turn a video game into a movie. I never thought it would be something possible”*. They all agreed that apart from the nostalgic feelings that were evoked, their curiosity was a significant factor in their decision to watch the movie.

When asked about their feelings while watching the movie, all participants recognized numerous elements from the original Super Mario video games. They discussed that the movie's environment closely resembled the various levels of the game, which brought back memories of their childhood. This feeling of nostalgia was further heightened by the movie's storyline and characters mirroring those of the game. One participant shared that the similarity in plot reminded them of the excitement they had felt when playing the game. Furthermore, another participant highlighted that the movie successfully introduced new elements that set it apart from the game, making it even more

interesting. All participants agreed that the nostalgic elements shaped their overall perception of the movie.

When participants shared their opinions about Super Mario post-movie, a wide range of perspectives were discussed. Three participants speculated that Super Mario games may regain popularity among young parents who wish to provide their children with a similar childhood experience. However, they believed that the games would likely be more popular on new consoles such as the Nintendo Switch, as opposed to the same format as their own generation. All participants agreed that the younger generation, unfamiliar with Super Mario games, would most likely become curious about them after watching the movie. They believed that the movie served as an effective means to attract not only existing customers but also new ones to the brand.

All participants agreed on the fact that their perception of Super Mario hasn't changed as they will most likely always associate it with the game. However, the movie evoked memories of their childhood and made them excited to play the game again. One participant said: *"As soon as I got home from the cinema I connected my old Wii console to the TV and played Super Mario Bros all night with my sister"*. One participant stated that in order for the movie to change their perception of the original brand, it would've needed to resonate with them on a deeper emotional level. However, there was a consensus that the movie had a deeper meaning for the younger generation.

Analysis and Discussion

Nostalgia as a Motivator

The empirical results, from the Barbie and Super Mario focus groups, demonstrates that both movies have effectively integrated the old and the new by introducing new elements alongside the already recognized nostalgic components. This aligns with what Dev and Keller (2014) describe as an important factor in revitalization. Furthermore, all respondents agreed that these brands evoked strong childhood memories, which is another vital element contributing to the successful revitalization of both brands, in accordance with Brown et al. (2003).

Chen (2021) stated that brand revitalization exerts a positive influence on brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This argument finds support in the empirical results, which indicated that respondents believed there would be an increase in the popularity of Super Mario video games among the younger generation today. Moreover, they expressed a willingness to purchase Barbie dolls for their children in the future due to their improved brand attitude toward the Barbie brand following the movie.

The communities of Barbie and Super Mario are non-geographically bound but emotionally connected, consistent with Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) definition. Super Mario's community primarily focuses on shared gaming experiences, contributing to collective nostalgia. In contrast, Barbie's community is defined through individual childhood stories that align more with personal nostalgia. Collective nostalgia, as indicated by Jun, Park, and Kim's (2022) research, leads to

an increased acceptance of brand extensions. The discussion held with the Super Mario focus group suggested that the movie effectively utilized collective nostalgia as many felt that their memories grounded in shared experiences, as suggested by Jun, Park and Kim (2022). The Barbie movie also leveraged feelings of collective nostalgia, although it primarily emphasized personal nostalgia. According to Jun, Park, and Kim (2022), consumers are more likely to view brand extensions favorably when exposed to collective nostalgia. However, in the case of Barbie, the brand community significantly contributed to positive brand extension acceptance. Demonstrating the effectiveness of brand communities, particularly when combined with personal nostalgia.

The debut of the new Barbie film within the Barbie brand community aligns with the notion emphasized by Brown et al. (2003), regarding the importance of robust brand communities in the revitalization process. The "*Barbie-craze*" and the popularization of "*Barbiecore*" by the Barbie community reflect strong enthusiasm and popularity for the brand. In contrast, the Super Mario brand community did not present the same level of rise in popularity following the revitalization of the brand with the release of the new movie. This, despite the Super Mario brand also possessing a global presence and nostalgic elements, it lacked the strength that the Barbie brand community has.

Furthermore, the strong community surrounding the brands in question, especially Barbie, seems to have been a

strong motivation for consumers with a low nostalgia proneness, attracted to the brand through this feeling of community.

The empirical results demonstrate that the brand extensions of Barbie and Super Mario have been well-received, which supports the findings of Banerjee and Shaikh (2022) that consumers with a strong sentimental link to the brand tend to accept new products. However, in contrast to the statement by Huang et al. (2017) that the perceived similarity of a brand extension to its 'parent' brand affects consumer attitudes, the empirical results reveal otherwise. Despite the Barbie movie presenting a drastically different image from what the respondents remembered from their childhood, it was still embraced, and there were mainly positive attitudes toward the brand today. This contradicts the notion that high perceived similarity is always a prerequisite for favorable consumer responses. In the case of the Mario movie, the high perceived similarity to the original brand evoked strong nostalgic feelings and a sense of longing for the participants' childhoods. However, this high similarity did not significantly alter their perception of the Mario brand; instead, it revitalized their connection to it.

Considering Keller's (1999) discussion about the significance of brands either returning to their roots or redefining their brand meaning, the insights gathered from both the Barbie and Super Mario focus groups offer valuable perspectives. Within the Barbie focus group, it becomes apparent that many participants believed the Barbie movie effectively embraced inclusivity and attempted to shift the brand's meaning. Although there were discussions about potential

“woke-washing”, they all agreed that the brand made an effort to transform its image. This aligns with Keller's (1999) implication that certain brands need a fundamental shift in brand meaning to revitalize. On the other hand, the Super Mario focus group's experience suggests that the brand did not undergo a change in its brand meaning. Instead, it successfully leveraged nostalgic elements to boost its popularity, in line with the concept of "returning to their roots." Further exploration of this theme will be undertaken in the following section.

Changes of Brand Perception

Kirsch (2023) mentions that brand perception consists of consumer's emotions, experiences, and thoughts about a brand. The study shows that participants in the Barbie focus group have different degrees of emotional engagement through nostalgia for the brand. Some participants had stronger connections due to childhood play, and others had nostalgic associations through friends and siblings. Duberg (n.d) argues that brand perception is all about the brand's reputation. Therefore, it is essential for the brand to change its brand perception positively, especially when the brand has faced criticism. Most of the participants in the focus group stated that after watching the Barbie movie their perception of the brand had changed positively. The film has addressed its critical parts about promoting unrealistic and stereotypical beauty standards and now representing Barbie as more empowering, diverse, and inclusive. Some participants felt that the change of perception was driven by economic gain, described as “woke-washing”. The participants' first positive reactions upon

hearing about the film indicate that nostalgia had the power to evoke strong, positive emotions and anticipation. This aligns with Holbrook's (1993) study, that brand perception is influenced by nostalgia proneness such as the consumer's individual tendency to be emotionally affected or attached to experiences, depending on their character or psychographic profile.

Community and social media have played an important role in the Barbie movie. The participants in the focus group highlighted the role of community and social media hype in motivating them to watch the film. This shows how brand perception is influenced by trends, where consumers aren't just receivers of marketing but active members of brand communities, in accordance with McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002). The *Barbiecore* trend, dressing in pink and attending screenings, illustrates the power of community and its impact on brand perception. The electric atmosphere experienced during the screening also reflects the influence of brand communities in boosting consumer engagement. The strong brand community around Barbie highly integrates consumers to share a deep emotional connection with the brand and motivates them to actively contribute to the brand's success as argued by McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002). This further aligns with Kapferer's (2012) suggestion that communication can influence how people perceive tangible and intangible perceptions related to brand, product, and concept. Communication helps organize and structure these perceptions to create a certain image or understanding of the brand.

The Super Mario Bros focus group noted nostalgia as the motivation for watching the film. They acknowledge that the film might not have been aimed for their age group, but the strength of the nostalgic elements motivated them to watch it. This aligns with Kirsch's (2023) argument of brand perception, that customers take their sentiments into account when choosing between different brands. If not for the emotional connection with the brand, these participants might not have engaged with the Super Mario Bros brand.

While the film did not noticeably change the participants' perception of the Super Mario brand, it did reignite their interest in the original game. The participants stated a belief that the film could attract new audiences, especially younger generations who are unfamiliar with the Super Mario games. This is in line with the idea that brand perception goes beyond the existing customer base. It is a tool for expanding the brand's reach and engaging new consumers, as observed by Kirsch (2023).

Both Barbie and Super Mario Bros make great use of nostalgic elements to create a sentimental link with the customers. The Barbie movie addressed important issues and made a positive change and impact on consumers' perception of the brand. On the other hand, the Super Mario Bros movie brought back nostalgia and sparked existing customers, possibly drawing in new ones.

Conclusion

The study showed that nostalgia was a determining motivator for consumers to watch the films and interact with the

brands in question. Without the nostalgic connection to the brands, they would have felt less inclined to do so. Nostalgia can be interpreted as a common denominator, bringing people together through a sense of shared experiences and emotions.

Barbie had previously met critique, while Super Mario had not to the same extent. The focus group of the Barbie movie identified that their perception of the brand had changed after watching the film. The same did not apply to the Super Mario film, who perceived the brands in the same way as before. This implies that a controversial, yet nostalgic brand may use brand extension as a tool to change perceptions of their original brands. However, changing brand perception is not a prerequisite to successfully revitalize brands.

The study demonstrates how the use of nostalgic elements in brand extensions and strong brand communities contribute to successful brand revitalization. These findings provide valuable insights for brands seeking to navigate the constantly changing landscape of consumer expectations and values.

Theoretical Implications

This study has underscored the influential role of nostalgia in brand revitalization. We have found a connection between nostalgia, community and successful brand extensions. The study emphasizes that integrating nostalgic elements alongside new components is an important factor in the success of brand extensions, aligning with established theories. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of evoking strong childhood memories to strengthen

the brand's connection with consumers.

This study underscores the powerful impact of nostalgia as a driving force for brand revitalization, aligning with established theoretical frameworks. Beyond the traditional notions of brand reputation, the research reveals how emotional connections can exert a transformative effect on how consumers perceive brands.

Additionally, the study introduces a valuable distinction between two fundamental approaches to brand revitalization. Some brands embark on the path of redefining their meaning to adapt to changing times, while others return to their core identity, relying on nostalgia to reconnect with their audience. This distinction offers a nuanced view of brand strategies, providing theoretical insights that resonate with contemporary marketing dynamics

Managerial implications

Firstly, our study has demonstrated that brands can make significant changes in their brand extensions, compared to the 'parent' brand, and still receive positive reactions that can lead to a positive change in perception. It is not always necessary to maintain a high level of similarity to the parent brand for acceptance, as suggested in previous studies. At times, it is, in fact, necessary for the 'parent' brand to undergo substantial changes to revitalize the brand in a more successful manner.

Secondly, for brands, the inclusion of nostalgic elements, particularly in brand extensions, can reignite interest among existing customers and attract new ones.

This is demonstrated through how strong brand communities can attract new consumers who do not score high on the nostalgia proneness scale.

Thirdly, brands can use nostalgia in brand extensions as a tool to modernize brand perception. Embracing diversity and inclusivity is pivotal in modern brand revitalization, aligning with evolving societal norms and consumer concerns. Furthermore, this study also finds that brand extensions do not need to be perceived as highly similar to the original brand, when it comes to nostalgic brands.

Lastly, building strong brand communities in combination with personal nostalgia can significantly influence brand perception and consumer acceptance of brand extensions. Brands should therefore adapt their strategies to reach broader demographics while maintaining core nostalgic elements that resonate with existing and old consumers when creating brand extensions.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has limitations to consider. It relies solely on focus group discussions for data collection, and utilizing additional methods could enhance reliability. Small sample sizes from a specific demographic group also limit the generalizability. It is important to note that the primary aim of this study was not to achieve broad generalizability; however, these limitations restrict the applicability of the findings to wider contexts.

Further research can expand by using larger samples, diverse cases, and cross-generational studies to gain a

broader perspective on nostalgia-driven brand extensions. Comparative analyses with other brand extension strategies and research in different cultural contexts would offer a more comprehensive understanding of brand extension strategies.

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Appendix

Focus group questions:

1. What was your initial reaction when you heard that there would be a new movie based on *Super Mario Bros/Barbie*? Why did you decide to watch the movie?
2. Do you have any personal connections or nostalgic memories associated with *Super Mario Bros/Barbie* from your childhood?
3. What specific nostalgic elements from the original brands did you notice in the movies? Were they successful?
4. How do you think the use of nostalgia affected your experience of the movies?
5. What do you believe is the most important message the movies attempted to convey about *Super Mario Bros/Barbie* as brands?
6. After watching the movies, has your perception of the *Super Mario Bros/Barbie* brand changed in any way? How?
7. How do you think these movies might impact the brand image and popularity of the brands among *younger generations*?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience of the movie and its impact on your perception of the brand?