

Nostalgia in the entertainment industry: the Case of Pokémon Go and The Little Mermaid

Nostalgia en la industria del entretenimiento: El caso Pokémon Go y La Sirenita

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Abstract

Nostalgia-based marketing strategies have garnered significant attention in recent times owing to their ability to evoke deep emotions and influence consumer behaviour. However, the success of nostalgia-based marketing is not a foregone conclusion. The effectiveness of nostalgia depends on the characteristics of the product and the target audience. This study uses qualitative research to explore the boundaries of strong nostalgia-triggered feelings in two different entertainment products: the 2015 video game *Pokémon Go* and Disney's 2023 remake of *The Little Mermaid*. Interpretative analysis revealed two key concepts that are crucial to understanding target audience attitudes and behaviour: habituation and changes in the core features of the original product. A delicate, nuanced balance is required between respect for the essence of the original nostalgic product and the introduction of innovations to prevent habituation. This balance is crucial in order to preserve the core features that lead to the formation of personal and collective childhood memories.

Keywords: strong nostalgia, remake, childhood, dopamine, collective nostalgia.

Resumen

Las estrategias de marketing basadas en la nostalgia han atraído una atención significativa en los últimos tiempos, cautivando a los especialistas en marketing por su capacidad para evocar emociones profundas e influir en el comportamiento del consumidor. Sin embargo, el éxito del marketing basado en la nostalgia no está garantizado. La eficacia de la nostalgia depende de las características del producto y del público objetivo. Este estudio tiene como objetivo profundizar la comprensión de la nostalgia fuerte, empleando una investigación cualitativa para explorar los límites de los sentimientos provocados por la nostalgia en dos productos de entretenimiento distintos: el videojuego *Pokémon Go* de 2015 y la nueva versión de Disney de *La Sirenita* de 2023. El análisis interpretativo reveló dos conceptos clave para comprender las actitudes y el comportamiento del público objetivo: el fenómeno de habituación y los cambios en las características centrales del producto original. Así, se requiere un delicado equilibrio entre respetar la esencia del producto nostálgico original e introducir innovaciones para evitar la habituación. Este adecuado balance es crucial para preservar las características centrales que son parte integral de la formación de los recuerdos personales y colectivos de la infancia.

Palabras clave: nostalgia fuerte, remake, infancia, dopamina, nostalgia colectiva.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia-based marketing strategies have garnered significant attention in recent times, captivating marketers for their ability to evoke deep emotions and influence consumer behaviour (Shin and Parker, 2017; Pichierri, 2023; Weingarten and Wei, 2023). Research on the delineation of nostalgia, its causes, and consequences has gained momentum in both theoretical and practical domains (e.g., Behler et al., 2021; Juhl and Biskas, 2023; Lasaleta, Werle and Yamin, 2021; Sedikides and Wildschut, 2023; van Tilburg, Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018; Zhang, Zhang, and Yu, 2023).

Rynänen and Heinonen's (2017) study delved into the distinctions between nostalgic and other recalled consumption experiences, emphasizing the significance of temporal frames, particularly childhood memories, in triggering strong feelings of nostalgia. The entertainment industry frequently harnesses nostalgia, reviving older stories, shows, and formats in both gaming and motion pictures (Bowman and Wulf, 2023). Nostalgia has become a popular element in market differentiation strategies, with examples such as the relaunches of classic video games and Disney's remakes of iconic movies.

However, the success of nostalgia-based marketing is not guaranteed, as highlighted by Barauskaitė and Gineikienė (2017). The effectiveness of nostalgia depends on product characteristics and the target audience. This study aims to deepen the understanding of strong nostalgia in two distinct entertainment products: the 2015 video game *Pokémon Go* and Disney's 2023 remake of *The Little Mermaid*. Despite *Pokémon Go*'s initial success, its popularity waned over time, while *The Little Mermaid* faced global backlash due to casting choices, overshadowing its box office success (Shoard, 2023).

Qualitative research was employed to explore the boundaries of nostalgia-triggered feelings in these products. Interpretative analysis revealed two key concepts crucial for understanding target attitudes and behaviour: the habituation phenomenon and changes in the core features of the original product.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Historical Evolution of the Concept

The term *nostalgia* was coined in the 17th century by Johannes Hofer, combining the Greek words *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain or grief), encapsulating the bittersweet emotion associated with a longing for one's homeland (Hofer, 1688/1934). Hofer defined nostalgia as "the melancholy that originates from the desire to return to one's homeland".

In the realm of psychology, nostalgia was historically considered potentially harmful to mental well-being. Presently, the American Psychology Association (APA) defines nostalgia as "a longing to return to an earlier period of life recalled as being better than the present" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). It signifies the yearning or desire to revisit a time or place where one recalls their surroundings and reality as being more blissful. However, historical perspectives on nostalgia have varied. In Ziickert's review (1768), nostalgia was described as a disease that could lead to insanity or death due to the emotional disturbance it generated, portraying it as a mental ailment.

Over time, different conceptualizations emerged. Haspel (1974) contributed to the evolving definition by characterizing nostalgia as "the patient investigates the past due to a harsh present. The past means security and starts looking rosy". Notably, the mention of "security" in this definition opens the possibility of considering nostalgia as a means to feel secure.

In more recent years (1980 to the present), authors have shifted away from the initial concept of nostalgia as being a disease or a source of depression. There is now a general consensus in defining it as a mood that elicits positive, negative, or bittersweet emotions (Rana et al., 2020). Nostalgia is commonly perceived as idealized

recollections of the past, viewed through rose-coloured glasses. It evokes pleasant feelings associated with autobiographical memories, defined as memories of personal experiences (Shin and Parker, 2017).

In summary, this brief review of the evolution of the term *nostalgia* explains: (1) its initial consideration as being a mental disease triggered by a strong desire to return home, potentially leading to insanity or death; (2) a 20th-century shift in perspective, highlighting that nostalgia often involves recalling the past for the perceived feelings of safety and the positive connotations that it evokes; and (3) the recognition that nostalgia is often evoked by autobiographical memories.

2.2. Nostalgia as an Emotional Process

Nostalgia is more than a simple memory; it is an emotional process (Belk, 1990). Consequently, responses to stimuli evoking nostalgia can vary based on individual differences and triggering mechanisms. Rana et al. (2020) assert that consumer and marketing drivers influence nostalgia, where consumer drivers encompass personal factors influencing individual experiences of nostalgia, and marketing drivers involve variables related to the marketing process (e.g., product packaging, design, jingles, and marketing campaigns).

While nostalgia is distinct from memories, Baker and Kennedy (1994) note that memories are constructed from experiences, with more direct experiences being recalled more vividly. The generation of nostalgia is particularly associated with unique experiences, constant practices, or long-standing engagements. Additionally, nostalgic memories are constructed from episodic memory, encompassing social bonds, engaging in hobbies, and significant life events (Rana et al., 2020).

Yang, Izuma, and Cai (2023) highlight that nostalgia engages brain regions associated with four core components of emotion: self-reflection, autobiographical memory, emotion regulation, and reward. These regions collectively form a "nostalgic brain", and encountering nostalgic cues prompts the co-production of nostalgia.

Of particular interest in market research is the reward mechanism associated with nostalgia (Shaw and Bagozzi, 2017). Yang, Izuma, and Cai (2023) emphasize that nostalgia is rewarding as it promotes positive affect (pleasantness) and facilitates approach-oriented behaviour, such as seeking rewards and pursuing goals. The release of dopamine is a key biochemical process in this mechanism (Oba et al., 2016). Dopamine, a neurotransmitter and hormone, is released in the brain during activities that induce feelings of happiness, motivation, focus, and alertness. Conversely, low dopamine levels can lead to feelings of tiredness, lack of motivation, and sadness (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Dopamine plays a crucial role in the mental process of nostalgia, as the brain recalls special childhood moments to replenish dopamine levels, fostering motivation and happiness.

As noted by Sedikides and Wildschut (2023), nostalgia is an approach-oriented emotion with various motivational influences on human functioning, including goal pursuit, inspiration, optimism, and approach motivation.

2.3. Strong Nostalgia

Ryynänen and Heinonen (2018) identified four temporal frames in which memories from consumer experiences can be classified: (1) Strong nostalgia from childhood; (2) Light nostalgia from one's youth; (3) Recent past events; (4) Consumption practices to be promoted in the future.

The age at which a particular moment was initially experienced is crucial, as the most nostalgically recalled experiences tend to originate from childhood years (ages 3 to 14). Memories from this period are often imbued with emotions from childhood and are narrated as meaningful, described positively or bittersweetly as the "good old days". This classification is known as strong nostalgia. In contrast, light nostalgia is associated with

experiences from adolescence years (ages 15 to 25). It involves memories where the individual recalls a significant and emotional moment from their lives, actively participating in the narrated action.

Strong nostalgia, specifically related to childhood experiences linked to a brand, is termed childhood brand nostalgia (Shields and Johnson, 2016). This phenomenon is defined as a positively infused emotional attachment to a brand due to the brand's association with fond memories of the individual's non-recent lived past. Importantly, the developed emotion in this context is characterized as positively loaded.

Due to the pervasive exposure to brands during childhood, where children aged 11-13 years in New Zealand encounter an average of 554 brands per 10-hour day (Watkins et al., 2022), there exists a substantial opportunity for brands to reconnect with the same target audience in later years. This advantage lies in having built a strong emotional connection through childhood exposure to these brands.

2.4. Social Dimension of Nostalgia

Nostalgia, while inherently personal, possesses a distinct social dimension. According to Juhl and Biskas (2023), nostalgia fosters a sense of connectedness with others, and this social connectedness, in turn, bestows intrapersonal psychological benefits such as a sense of meaning in life, self-continuity, optimism, and inspiration. Lammers (2023) further defines collective nostalgia as a form contingent upon conceiving of oneself in terms of a particular social identity.

Considering the social factor in defining nostalgia is essential. For instance, Layous and Kurtz (2023) characterize nostalgia as a bittersweet, yet predominantly positive emotion felt when reflecting on personally meaningful memories, especially those shared with close others. Behler et al. (2021) highlight the social connectedness function of nostalgia as a mechanism through which positive psychological benefits are conferred. Nostalgic memories, they suggest, predominantly encompass social content, such as recollections of close others, significant social events, or tangible objects reminiscent of loved ones.

Shared emotions play a vital role in constructing the social identity of individuals. Some authors distinguish collective nostalgia (or group-based nostalgia) from personal nostalgia. As Martinovic et al. (2018) note, while individual-level nostalgia is personal longing for a past personally experienced, group-based nostalgia can manifest as a longing for a past not individually experienced but transmitted through collective memory. Linked to collective nostalgia is the concept of historical nostalgia, defined as a preference or yearning for people, places, or things (e.g., media) from a distinct time or decade in the past, even preceding one's birth (Natterer, 2014).

2.5. Nostalgia-Triggered Products in the Entertainment Media

As highlighted by Zhang, Zhang, and Yu (2023), there is a growing preference among individuals to watch classic old movies and TV series (COMTS) compared to new ones. Notably, some people continue to choose COMTS for leisure, even if they have watched them before, and in some cases, multiple times. This repeated-watching behaviour is considered a significant cultural phenomenon, contributing to the formation of collective memory, generational identity, and cross-generational communication and understanding.

The belief in the superiority of content consumed during one's youth is a prevalent sentiment, and nostalgic messages, on average, enhance advertising persuasion (Weingarten and Wei, 2023). From a marketing perspective, nostalgic products extend their target audience by reaching the same generation that engaged with them years before and attracting a new generation influenced by collective memory or parental recommendations. Holbrook and Schindler (1996) elucidate that parents often choose toys and media for their children based on their own exposure, maintaining an interest in the continuation of stories that have captivated them for a long time.

The success of TV series like *Stranger Things* exemplifies this strategy. While primarily a teenage drama on Netflix, its setting in the 80s appeals to individuals who lived through that era, desiring to relive the associated iconography (Figure 1). Simultaneously, it attracts a new generation of teens drawn to the story and the effect of collective memory, growing up with a shared past featuring recognizable iconography. Additionally, parents recommend the series to their children, aiming for them to experience a narrative reminiscent of their own youth.



Figure 1

Screenshot from *Stranger Things* showing the 80's iconography
Orazi and Van Laer, 2022

Reviewing examples from Natterer (2014), Makai (2018), and Bowman and Wulf (2023), it becomes evident that nostalgic products are prevalent in the video game and motion picture industries, signalling a growing trend in the entertainment sector. Technological advancements play a crucial role in this trend, enabling the recreation of old scenarios through visual effects that were previously unattainable.

2.6. Overview of the Cases Analysis: *Pokémon Go* and *The Little Mermaid*

In 1996, the digital world was introduced to a phenomenon known as *Pokémon*, with *Pokémon Green* and *Pokémon Red* swiftly becoming a cultural sensation in RPGs, evolving into the highest-grossing media franchise in global history (Hallman, 2023). Fast forward to 2016, and The Pokémon Company International, in collaboration with Niantic, launched *Pokémon Go* (Figure 2), a mobile game that captivated the world by utilizing augmented reality technology. The game's success was attributed to its nostalgic appeal, featuring the first generation of Pokémon from the 90s, targeting individuals who grew up with the original games and associated media (Harboth and Pape, 2019; Bowman and Wulf, 2023).



Figure 2

Promotional Pokémon Go image
Pokemongolive, (2024)

Disney, on the other hand, faced a different challenge during the 90s. Despite being widely esteemed as one of the world's premier companies, the company experienced a decline in its empire during this period. However, Disney recognized the potential for nostalgia and began releasing live-action remakes of its classic animated films from the 90s, such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992). These remakes served to tap into the nostalgia of adults who had grown up with the original films while at the same time introducing the stories to a new generation. This strategic move initially proved successful, generating profitable projects that aligned with Weingarten and Wei's theory about the marketability of old media content.



Figure 3
The Little Mermaid 2023 poster
Disney (2024)

The Little Mermaid (2023) (Figure 3), however, presents an interesting case study. Despite its financial success, grossing \$465 million worldwide and ranking as the fifth biggest Hollywood release of the year (Collider, 2023), the film has faced negative public reactions. While initially targeting adults with nostalgic ties to the original 1989 film, the adaptation has not been universally accepted. Many viewers expressed discontent with changes made in the film compared to its predecessor, signalling a departure from the expected result of providing the audience with a happy trip down memory lane. This situation presents an opportunity to investigate a case where a nostalgia-based product did not meet the anticipated reception.

3. METHODS

3.1. *Pokémon Go*

A qualitative narrative semi-structured interview was conducted between June 12th and June 25th, 2023, involving six women and seven men aged 20-29. The interview focused on three distinct areas related to the Pokémon franchise:

1. **Personal History and Relationship with the Franchise:** Participants were questioned about their childhood and early adulthood experiences with the Pokémon franchise, aiming to assess the existence of memories that could evoke nostalgia.
2. **Desire for a Game with AR and Pokémon Features:** The interview explored whether participants had a previous desire for a game combining augmented reality (AR) technology and the Pokémon franchise.
3. **Experience with the Pokémon Go Campaign:** Participants shared their experiences with the launch of Pokémon Go in the summer of 2016, as well as their feelings towards the game in the subsequent years.

All participants were given the option to participate in research on nostalgia-based products, ensuring that they were familiar with the subject matter. Subsequently, individual one-on-one interviews were conducted through video calls and recorded for comprehensive analysis of the gathered responses.

Upon completion of all the interviews, the key ideas and responses were documented. Responses were categorized based on the participants' level of nostalgia proneness. Following this initial categorization, the answers were further analysed in the context of the existing literature review. This analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind the participants' responses, their emotional experiences, and the implications of their sentiments in the realm of nostalgia research.

3.2. *The Little Mermaid*

During the same time frame as the Pokémon Go surveys, a qualitative narrative semi-structured interview was conducted with seven women and seven men, all aged 20-29. The interview explored three distinct areas related to the Disney franchise:

1. **Personal Relationship with Disney Animated Classics:** Participants were asked about their childhood experiences and upbringing in relation to Disney animated classics. These questions served as a foundation for understanding the nostalgic connections individuals had with these movies, akin to a "nostalgia assessment".
2. **Value of Traditional Animation and the Need for Adaptation:** Questions in this segment aimed to uncover the participants' preferences regarding traditional animation and their opinions on the necessity for adaptations in future times. Additionally, the interview assessed personal perceptions and preferences towards distinctive elements from childhood movies and their impact on expectations for remakes.
3. **Experience with *The Little Mermaid* (2023) and Previous Live-Action Adaptations:** The participants shared their experiences, opinions, preferences, and feelings towards *The Little Mermaid* (2023) and other significant live-action adaptations. The interview covered various aspects such as advertisement consumption, product preferences, and their consumption experience.

Despite the 34-year gap between the original movie and the adaptation, the younger age group (20-29 years old) was deemed reliable due to the enduring cultural and sociological impact of the original film in the 90s and early 2000s. *The Little Mermaid* was released in Spain on May 26th, 2023, and for those who hadn't seen the film by the time of the interview, questions were adapted to focus on opinions, feelings, and advertisement consumption. More emphasis was placed on other remakes that could provide insights into the matter.

The procedure for recording and analysing participant responses mirrored that of the *Pokémon Go* case.

4. RESULTS

4.1. *Pokémon Go*

4.1.1. *Personal history from childhood (nostalgia assessment)*

The aim was to determine if the interviewed individuals had nostalgic connections with the Pokémon franchise. Quotes obtained from this part ranged from "I personally have not played the games myself; however, when I was a child, I used to watch the TV series with my siblings, or I played with the cards and tokens with my friends at school" to "I have been playing since I was seven years old; my favourite Pokémon will always be this particular one". All participants had anecdotes regarding the franchise, yet the commonality among them was the feelings and memories associated with Pokémon.

When asked the question, "What has this franchise given you?" all participants reported similar answers. For example, one participant said, "It's difficult to put into words. Pokémon means so much to me. First of all, it gave me a childhood; I will always carry all those cartridges and adventures around with me". Another individual stated, "I can't say they made me the person I am today, but they gave me the opportunity to become that person. There are a lot of great people that I would never have met if it was not for Pokémon, and now those people mean the world to me". All the responses were along these lines, and some individuals even echoed what others had said without having previously met them, indicating a shared sentiment toward the franchise.

By this point in the interview, a commonality among the answers was a palpable nostalgic connection. All the participants, to a greater or lesser extent, had memories from their childhood involving social interactions with emotional value that had had a meaningful impact on their lives. This could be interpreted as the feeling known as 'collective nostalgia'—a shared nostalgia among a group of people that can lead to a more intense feeling of belonging, countering loneliness. All the participants discussed the shared feelings among their Pokémon fan friends and the experiences they lived through together.

Recalling the needs that nostalgia fulfils, all were satisfied: these memories encompassed personal interactions with those around them, countering loneliness, likely attributed to collective nostalgia. Usually, these memories were full of good feelings like enthusiasm, surprise, happiness, relaxation, and relief, which they could resort to when feeling in a bad mood. Some individuals even attributed a value to Pokémon regarding their own lives and the shaping of the people they are today (meaning in life).

After these findings, the investigation turned to whether there was any desire for this game to occur and, regardless of the answer to this question, how these individuals remembered the moment they downloaded the game and spent the summer of 2016 catching these creatures.

4.1.2. Desire for a game like Pokémon Go

Participants were asked the following question: "I want you to return to the time when you were a child and fully loved the franchise. If you could have wished for anything (as impossible as it may seem) from Nintendo related to Pokémon, what would you have wished for?" Although the answers were somewhat mixed, with some expressing a desire for higher quality subsequent games or more creative liberty, a common childhood desire emerged: "I would have wished for Pokémon to exist in the real world". Some participants expressed this sentiment directly, while others provided indirect responses, such as desiring a specific Pokémon as a pet or wanting a variety of plushies.

Even for those who did not wish for Pokémon to exist in the real world, their desires were often influenced by strong nostalgia. For example, one participant stated, "I would have wished for the content from previous games to be incorporated into the following ones. For example, after finishing the new game, you unlock the possibility of reviving the previous ones in the new game's world". Another participant expressed a desire for older games to be remade with the new technology that Nintendo is using for more recent games.

Therefore, it became evident that Pokémon fans strongly associate their desires with nostalgia. Pokémon is synonymous with childhood, relief, happiness, and a moment in their lives that they cherish to this day.

4.1.3. Analysis of Pokémon Go Consumption

After evaluating the nostalgic connection with Pokémon and the desire for these creatures to exist in the real world, the subsequent set of questions focused on

analysing the stages of consumption for each interviewed person regarding Pokémon Go. The stages of consumption that were examined include:

- a. First Notice of the Game: This involved assessing the sources of initial information, such as publicity, advertisements, and promotional content. This encompassed everything from trailers released on the official Pokémon YouTube channel to conversations with friends about the free public release of the game.
- b. Motives for Downloading: This stage involved exploring the motives that led individuals to desire and download the game to their phones.
- c. Gaming Experience: This stage delved into the participants' experiences during the initial days of playing and how they lived through the summer of 2016 when the game reached its peak popularity.
- d. Fulfilment of Needs: Participants were asked about the point at which they felt their needs were met and they no longer had the motivation to continue playing.
- e. Present Opinion of the Game: Finally, participants were asked about their current opinion of the game and the overall experience they enjoyed.

When asked about their first notice of the game, the most devoted fans, who also expressed a strong desire for a game like this to exist, exhibited excitement while recalling the moment they watched the trailer. Responses varied from expressions like “I had never thought of this way of playing; it was surprising and seemed interesting to me” to “I didn’t actually see the trailer, but I got dragged all around my city by my friends who were seriously into playing it”. The most enthusiastic fans conveyed sentiments like, “I was so in awe I could not believe it. I was going to be able to live my childhood dream. I even kept my expectations low for the game just in case it did not turn out that good. In the end, it was better than I’d anticipated”.

Notably, one response highlighted a key feature of nostalgia. The participant mentioned, “When I saw the trailer, they showcased a moment in which every person that had downloaded the app could go on a big event to fight Mewto (an important Pokémon), and I remembered the movie in which it was first introduced, and the feeling of teamwork was a main feature in the movie. I felt like I could belong to a group of people fighting it. I was really looking forward to it”. This indicated that the feature was perceived as a motive to download the game, influenced by nostalgia and personal experiences.

Moving forward from these high expectations and emotional experiences, the investigation turned to the participants' actual gaming experiences. Those who appeared more excited mentioned, “*Pokémon Go* made us kids all over again. I felt like the 10-year-old kid I once was the whole time I was playing. So, I spent the whole summer doing that; I wanted it to go on for as long as possible”. However, a few participants admitted that their primary motivation was to connect with their closest social relationships: “I was not that eager to play, but my friends were so hyped up and excited that I spent the whole summer tagging along; they didn’t stop playing. Don’t get me wrong, I had so much fun in the end”.

Despite the game reaching its peak popularity in 2016, there came a time when the craze stopped and stabilized, indicating that consumer motivations and needs had been met, leading to a decline in engagement (Figure 4). When asked if they still played to this day, all participants mentioned that they had soon stopped playing. Those who still played admitted that their level of engagement was much less intense than in 2016. Some participants acknowledged that they quit playing when their friends did so, suggesting that their needs were primarily social. However, the most nostalgic players revealed that they stopped playing because “it was more of the same again and again; there were no more surprises after a few months of playing. It was good fun discovering Pokémon in my town and trying to catch them; however, once you have done that a few times and there are no more friends to play with, the initial happiness kind of melts away, and catching Pikachu is not exciting anymore”.



Figure 4

Evolution in Pokémon Go's annual active players by year
Own elaboration graph with data from Business of Apps (2024)

4.2. The Little Mermaid

4.2.1. Personal history: childhood movies (nostalgia assessment)

The questions posed to the participants varied based on their degree of affiliation with Disney classics, their childhood habits related to these films, and their exposure to other media representations of mermaids or sirens, as more specific inquiries would be made about the new remake.

The responses indicated a nostalgic connection from their early childhood to their teenage years with Disney classics. Participants recalled sitting in front of a TV with a VHS tape, describing the experience as being filled with flashy lights, colourful cartoons, and catchy songs that are still remembered and sung by participants nowadays. Memories of watching these films with siblings or close family members confirmed social interaction in these nostalgic memories. For instance, one participant expressed, "I do not actually recall the first time I watched a Disney movie, but I know that there was always one on the TV in my living room. My mom used to come home with a VHS of the film, and I still enjoy those films to this day because they are so fun and colourful and are part of my life".

Given the childhood memories associated with these films, when participants were asked, "What do these films represent to you? What feelings do you have towards them now?" the vast majority of responses reiterated their nostalgic value. Participants described these films as representing their childhood, evoking feelings of carefree joy. One participant mentioned, "They are my childhood. It makes me feel like there are no worries whatsoever because that was how I felt at that moment". Another participant highlighted the impact of princess-themed movies, stating, "These movies, especially those with princesses, filled me with hope: I believed I could become a mermaid one day or a princess, or that I would be able to see one in real life if I got lucky. Now I know it was just a fantasy, but I loved that fantasy so much".

Inquiring about the mermaid theme, specifically Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* and other media, revealed a consistent trend, particularly during the 2000s when participants were children. Most women admitted to having experienced two contrasting portrayals of mermaids. In productions like *H2O: Just Add Water* (2006-2010) and *Pichi Pichi Pitch* (broadcast in Spain in 2009), mermaids were depicted as mythical but friendly creatures with fish tails, women's bodies, beautiful colours, and whimsical qualities. However, in

productions like *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011), mermaids were portrayed as predators using enchantments to lure men to the depths of the sea, as in a horror story.

This distinction is noteworthy because women interviewed about how their perception of mermaids was shaped as they grew up consuming these productions admitted to choosing the more friendly and fantastical version rather than the dark and obscure one, expressing a high interest in the concept of real-life mermaids. This preference aligns with the portrayal chosen by the latest Disney remake, a point that will be explored further.

4.2.2. *Desires and preferences*

Once it had been established that Disney classics held a nostalgic appeal for the participants, the subsequent inquiry aimed to gauge whether a remake of these stories would be valued enough to attract viewership, merchandise purchases, and rekindle engagement in the Disney franchise due to its nostalgic appeal.

Initially, the study sought to understand the value participants placed on traditional animation and their openness to different styles, particularly live action. In response to the question, "Do you think traditional animation is the optimal medium for telling these stories or do you consider it OK to innovate in this aspect?" there was an openness expressed towards innovation in movie-making styles. However, a significant number of participants expressed a belief that the traditional 2D animation used in classics was perfectly suitable, more appealing to children, and preferable for telling these stories. Traditional animation was considered integral to classics, with participants stating sentiments like, "I love innovation in this field, people in the industry are making great things and creating new styles. However, I think that 2D animation is getting left behind and that is a pity. I want to see more traditional animation", and "Of course, you can evolve and come up with new innovations; however, those stories and films are tied to traditional animation".

Despite this preference for traditional animation, the participants also communicated a desire and curiosity to see their favourite characters in real life. Comments like, "When these remakes get announced, we all get excited because we've been wondering how these characters would look in the real world for years" highlighted the anticipation for live-action adaptations. The desire to witness beloved characters in a real-life context was evident, and participants felt compelled to watch these remakes due to the importance of the original films in their lives.

The study identified that the initial appeal driving people to watch these remakes was rooted in personal nostalgia. However, as the trend continued, it began triggering collective nostalgia. Consequently, a contradiction emerged in consumers' reactions to this trend and style in the new movies. While participants said that they enjoyed having the opportunity to see their favourite characters in the real world, they also voiced reservations, stating, "I don't usually like remakes because there are always some mistakes, and in *The Little Mermaid*, those mistakes were even more obvious." This prompted further investigation into the nature of these perceived mistakes.

4.2.3. *Reactions and opinions regarding the remakes: What is missing?*

Over the past decade, remakes have become a prevalent product, not only proving lucrative for Disney, as seen in the Pokémon case. However, discomfort seems to be a commonality associated with these films, evident from initial perceptions and subsequent negative reviews. To explore consumer opinions on these remakes, specific films and details were scrutinized.

It is crucial to note that the trend of live-action remakes commenced in 2010 when Tim Burton directed the remake of *Alice in Wonderland*. This film garnered appreciation from enthusiasts of the director's work as well as fans of the original story. Participants who claimed to have watched the film emphasized the

preservation of "core physical and personality traits" in the characters. An interview extract exemplifies this sentiment:

Interviewer: Have you seen Tim Burton's remake of *Alice in Wonderland*? If so, what do you think of it? Did he do a good job? What differences did you notice between this remake and the latest ones?

Participant: "I have always been a Tim Burton fan; I love his style of storytelling. I personally like this remake because they took the initial idea, expanded the universe, and changed the tone a little bit (to fit Burton's style). They did not change the most important characters: Alice was still a little English girl, blonde, young, curious, rebellious; the Mad Hatter was great as well. That's what I like about remakes: you are selling me the same story but slightly changed or adapted to new styles. But you must be careful because with too many changes, the story is diluted and lost. This was not the case here".

This inevitable comparison between consumers' pre-established perceptions and the portrayal in newer remakes is attributed to selective retention (Gajjar, 2013). Consumers tend to prefer the original concept in both physical and personality traits, rejecting deviations from their expectations.

In other interviews about *Maleficent* (2014) and *Cruella* (2021), participants valued the preservation of physical appearance and personality while expanding the stories.

Considering *The Little Mermaid*, with Halle Bailey portraying Ariel, nearly all criteria for potential success were met: (1) Nostalgic appeal; (2) Desire for a live-action format; (3) Desire and preference for *The Little Mermaid* remake; (4) Expansion of the story and new content. The remaining aspect was determining if the change in Ariel's physical appearance contributed to the public's rejection and discomfort and if nostalgia played a role.

While not every participant had seen the remake, they were aware of the changes and had seen the original film as children. This initial perception and likely nostalgic connection with Ariel, Sebastian, and the other characters influenced their responses, which could be summarized as follows: "The casting of a black actress with locks to play Ariel, originally portrayed as a Caucasian girl with straight crimson hair, caused rejection. It feels like Ariel no longer belongs, appealing more to political and inclusivity trends. Consumers prefer Disney to create new stories for diversity, not to alter old classics. Changes to CGI characters such as Sebastian, Flounder, and Scuttle were unsettling and did not compare to their original representations (Figure 5). Innovate with new material rather than recycle and blend with innovation, resulting in a mediocre product".



Figure 5
Flounder Sebastian and Scuttle in *The Little Mermaid* remake
Disney (2024)

These statements highlight the immense value consumers place on original characters, especially when associated with childhood memories and nostalgia. Attempts to introduce significant changes may result in a product less favoured by the audience, disrupting their established perceptions.

5. DISCUSSION

Watching the same movies and playing the same games as people did in their childhood provides a means to recapture those formative years, holding profound significance in this nostalgic reliving, given the inherent impossibility of turning back time. This research underscores the pervasive impact of strong emotional connections with childhood experiences and iconographies, which continue to influence consumption patterns in adulthood.

Both Disney and The Pokémon Company sought to leverage an emotional need by triggering nostalgia as the primary strategy for marketing their products, albeit with varying degrees of success. These products evoked personal and collective nostalgia, not necessarily essential for the act of playing the game or watching the movie during childhood. Instead, they became integral to the construction of relevant childhood memories, fostering a shared iconography that forms an essential part of the "good old days".

Consequently, the significance of these products transcends the tangible items themselves, aligning with Baudrillard's (1994) postulates regarding the concept of hyperreality. This is exemplified in the participants' desire for Pokémon to exist in the real world or the aspiration to be a mermaid or princess, highlighting companies' power to create narratives around their products and build a reality based on shared signs. In this context, the nostalgia effect is empowered not only by personal consumption memories but also by shared iconography, be it collective or historical nostalgia.

The Pokémon Company successfully engaged the world in a *Pokémon Go* craze, so intense that it halted traffic in New York when a crowd rushed to Central Park where a rare Pokémon had appeared (Worley, 2016). During that summer, it was hard to find someone who had not heard about the game or who had not played it with friends.

Nostalgia is rewarding as it produces pleasantness and activation, primarily through the dopamine circuit. Therefore, generating anticipation is crucial for increasing people's activation levels, making advertising campaigns linked to these products essential for this purpose. This explains the initial eagerness of people to get hold of the game. However, the capacity to feel positive affect through the same level of repeated stimuli diminishes with time (Dijksterhuis and Smith, 2002). Consequently, a habituation phenomenon occurs when the stimulus remains relatively unchanged, and the intensity of the emotion decreases. In other words, rewards decrease with each additional play. This does not necessarily mean losing the most loyal consumers but may lead to the abandonment of variety-seeking consumers (Zhang, 2022).

Experiencing the *Pokémon Go* video game was a one-of-a-kind journey that a generation was compelled to undertake. However, people did not want to remain in that state forever. Once they had become acquainted with what the game had to offer, the inclusion of "new" Pokémon, though not genuinely novel, became inconsequential. Once nostalgia had released the dopamine people needed, the initial enjoyment became something players got used to, and they started quitting the game when they perceived that nothing new was coming. Nowadays, *Pokémon Go* has 80 million players worldwide, which may seem impressive. However, compared to the number of people who played in 2016, this reveals a substantial decrease in global interest in the game. In 2016, *Pokémon Go* had 232 million players (*Pokémon Go* Revenue and Usage Statistics, 2023).

Regarding the case of *The Little Mermaid*, Shields and Johnson (2016) provide insights that explain the reasons behind it. Their study showed that consumers who are nostalgic toward a specific brand have a positive attitude toward the original version of the brand, leading them to perceive the brand as having changed more than less nostalgic consumers. Additionally, when the change to the brand is perceived as significant, individuals highly nostalgic for a brand exhibit a significantly negative attitude and behaviour

toward the changed brand compared to their less nostalgic counterparts. These insights are crucial for understanding *The Little Mermaid* case.

Since the release of *Snow White* in 1937, The Walt Disney Animation Company has been unveiling iconic films and characters. Even a century later, individuals who experienced their childhood during the Golden Era of Animation cherish and rewatch those films when they need a boost of dopamine or just to have a good time. Inspired by this, Disney adopted a strategy to maintain its leadership in the cinematic and entertainment sector, reusing old material to release remakes that would attract both children and adults (those with nostalgic connections to the original movies) while making significant profits for the company without taking the risks associated with new ideas and products.

While some of these remakes, like *Maleficent* in 2014, were loved by the public, others did not achieve the anticipated success and even sparked extreme anger and discomfort among fans, as seen in the latest *The Little Mermaid* remake. Why did one remake work while the other was disliked?

Maleficent ticked all the boxes: it had an iconic character (nostalgic connection); the remake expanded the universe of *Sleeping Beauty* and explained a bit more about the characters' motivations (adding new content to avoid habituation and maintain the attention of variety-seeking audiences); enjoyable scenery; and, perhaps most importantly, the physical appearance and personality of the characters remained unchanged. This allowed people to connect with their memories more easily. However, when we look at Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, a major difference in physical appearance between the original cartoon character and that of the live-action remake is evident, leaving most nostalgic fans confused and angry.

Analysing *Pokémon Go* and *The Little Mermaid* together reveals an apparent contradiction in the results. Repetition can lead to boredom, pushing consumers toward variety-seeking (Zhang, 2022). However, at the same time, consumers who are nostalgic toward a brand are likely to perceive differences in the way the brand is understood (schemas) compared to non-nostalgic individuals (Shields and Johnson, 2016). As Shields and Johnson (2016) explained, brand schemas incorporate affective associations with the brand, as well as knowledge and information about the brand. This suggests that consumers nostalgic for a brand will incorporate those nostalgic feelings into their schema for the brand. Changes in these components relevant to consumers of this schema can lead to a negative feeling toward the product due to the disruption of consumer expectations. Balancing these two mirror forces is a challenge for marketers and will depend mainly on the features of the nostalgic product and how consumers interact with it. Additionally, the core features that build the episodic memory of consumers should be preserved (Juslin and Västfjäll, 2008). Once this kind of "code" is respected, innovations and new content could help avoid the decrease of dopamine due to repetition.

Marketers specializing in emotional marketing are aware of these emotional needs, which is why campaigns targeting nostalgia exist. It may be said that everyone needs nostalgia. However, when companies rely solely on nostalgia, there comes a moment when the same stimulus does not produce the same effect. This is when consumers search for something else more rewarding. If an alternative is not found, companies may end up like Niantic and The Pokémon International Company. They relied solely on the nostalgic appeal of their product, which was strong due to a preexisting loyal customer base. However, it all disappeared within a year.

5.1. Limitations and Further Research

This research is subject to several limitations, which can be encapsulated as follows:

1. *Semi-Structured Format*: The interviews employed a semi-structured format, resulting in variations across interviews while adhering to overarching objectives. The diverse range of questions elicited disparate responses, potentially yielding less revelatory statements that could inadvertently align with preconceived, biased theories.

2. *Non-Representative Sample*: The non-random selection of participants, who shared common cultural and demographic traits, renders the sample non-representative. This limitation raises concerns about the generalizability of findings beyond the specific characteristics of the participants.

3. *Focus on The Little Mermaid*: Regarding Disney, *The Little Mermaid* movie emerged as a focal point, yet a substantial number of participants had not viewed it during the inquiry. Consequently, responses were shaped by socially accepted opinions rather than individually and autonomously formed perspectives. Although this introduces a potential for socially biased answers, participants who had not viewed the movie were specifically questioned about their engagement with promotional content related to it.

The identification of these limitations underscores the need for caution in interpreting the study's findings. Future research endeavours could illuminate strategies for effectively integrating nostalgia and new content in marketing initiatives, particularly within the audiovisual industry. Building upon prior research by Pandelaere, Millet, and Van den Bergh (2010), which demonstrated a preference for original music over cover versions when the original was heard first, examining audience preferences for original versions vis-à-vis remakes and reboots in the movie industry presents an intriguing avenue for exploration. The prevalence of remakes and reboots, notably in the superhero movie genre, has amplified the relevance of such investigations over recent decades.

5.2. Conclusion

Both Disney and The Pokémon Company embarked on a strategic journey to capitalize on emotional needs by leveraging strong nostalgia, both at a personal and collective level, as the primary marketing strategy for their products. The qualitative study conducted revealed valuable insights into the role of nostalgia in product release and promotion. However, a nuanced and delicate balance is required between respecting the essence of the original nostalgic product and introducing innovations to prevent habituation. This delicate balance becomes crucial in preserving the core features that are integral to the formation of personal and collective childhood memories.

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