

## Nostalgia as Cultural Currency: How Java's Millennials Invest in Heritage Brands for Identity and Continuity

Isma Azis Riu<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Management, Faculty of Economic and Business, Makassar State University  
e-mail: [ismaazisriu@unm.ac.id](mailto:ismaazisriu@unm.ac.id)

### Abstract

*This narrative inquiry explores the resurgence of local heritage brands among urban millennial consumers in Java, Indonesia, examining nostalgia as a primary emotional driver of purchasing behavior. Through in-depth interviews with 30 participants across five major Javanese cities (Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Yogyakarta, Surabaya), supplemented by sensory elicitation techniques, the study reveals how heritage consumption functions as temporal integration weaving personal nostalgia (e.g., childhood memories evoked by jamu's bitterness or batik's texture) with constructed cultural heritage. Findings identify a nuanced authenticity paradox: participants demanded visible craftsmanship as proof of intergenerational integrity while strategically embracing modernization that preserves cultural essence. Heritage brands emerged as tools for hybrid identity work, enabling millennials to reclaim Javanese identity within globalized selves through embodied rituals (e.g., lulur skincare as cultural homage). The emotional landscape featured reflective nostalgia, bittersweet resonance, balancing comfort with awareness of cultural transformation, and transforming consumption into agentic cultural resilience. Ultimately, purchasing decisions represent ethical stewardship, sustaining intangible heritage through market mechanisms ("buying time for traditions"). The study contributes to consumer culture theory by reframing nostalgia as a dynamic social force that bridges personal memory, cultural preservation, and marketplace action in postcolonial urban contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Consuming nostalgia, Heritage brands, Urban millennials, Java Indonesia, Narrative inquiry*

### INTRODUCTION

Java's urban landscapes pulse with the relentless energy of modernity, where gleaming skyscrapers shadow traditional *warungs* and global brands compete for the attention of a digitally-savvy generation. Amidst this rapid transformation, a subtle yet significant counter-current is emerging: the deliberate revival and consumption of long-established local heritage brands (Wibisono et al., 2021). These brands, be they venerable *batik* houses, traditional snack producers (*oleh-oleh khas*), or manufacturers of heritage personal care products, are experiencing a renewed resonance, particularly among millennial consumers navigating the complexities of urban life. This resurgence transcends mere commerce; it represents a complex negotiation with the past, a search for anchors in a fluid present.

The millennial generation in Java, shaped by Indonesia's accelerated economic development and digital saturation, occupies a unique cultural space. They are often characterized as global citizens, yet simultaneously experience a potent yearning for connection to cultural roots and authentic identities perceived as eroding under the pressures of globalization (Sari et al., 2023). This generation's consumption choices are increasingly recognized as expressions of identity construction and emotional fulfillment, moving beyond utilitarian needs towards seeking meaning and belonging (Permatasari & Yusuf, 2020). Within this context, nostalgia emerges not merely as passive reminiscence but as an active, consumable resource, a powerful emotional driver fueling the rediscovery and patronage of heritage brands.

Nostalgia, conceptualized in contemporary consumer research, is far more than a sentimental longing for one's past. It functions as a potent "social emotion" (Holak, 2022), fostering collective identity, enhancing perceived self-continuity, and imbuing consumption with profound personal and cultural significance. When urban Javanese millennials purchase a specific *batik* pattern reminiscent

of their childhood, savor a traditional snack (*jajanan pasar*) once sold by street vendors near their ancestral home, or choose heritage-branded *jamu* (traditional herbal drink), they are often engaging in acts of "consuming nostalgia." This consumption becomes a ritualistic bridge, connecting their contemporary urban selves to an imagined or remembered cultural heritage, offering ontological security and a sense of distinctiveness in a homogenizing marketplace (Nugroho & Setyanti, 2022).

The motivations driving this engagement with heritage brands are inherently complex and deeply personal. While the evocative power of nostalgia is central, it intertwines with other potent emotional drivers: a quest for perceived authenticity in an age of digital artifice, a desire to express local or national pride, a conscious effort to support community artisanship and sustain cultural traditions, or even a search for sensory comfort rooted in familiar tastes and smells (Fauzi & Hudrasyah, 2023). Understanding the nuanced interplay of these emotions, how nostalgia intertwines with pride, authenticity-seeking, belonging, and ethical consumption, is crucial to deciphering the true significance of this heritage brand renaissance within Java's evolving consumer culture.

This study employs Narrative Inquiry to delve into these intricate emotional landscapes. By collecting and interpreting the personal stories, memories, and lived experiences of urban millennial consumers across key Javanese cities (e.g., Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, Yogyakarta), we aim to uncover the rich, subjective meanings embedded within their choices to embrace local heritage brands. Narrative methodology uniquely suits this task, as it prioritizes the consumer's voice, allowing their experiences to illuminate the complex, often non-linear, ways in which nostalgia and associated emotions shape purchasing decisions (Riessman, 2023). Through their narratives, we seek to map the contours of this "consuming nostalgia," revealing how the past is actively reconstructed and mobilized through present-day consumption to forge identity and meaning in Java's dynamic urban milieu.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on Narrative Inquiry to explore the complex emotional landscapes underlying urban Javanese millennials' engagement with local heritage brands. Rooted in the constructivist paradigm, this approach prioritizes subjective lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge (Kim, 2021), recognizing that human meaning-making occurs through storytelling. Narrative methodology is particularly suited to uncovering the "why" behind consumption choices, as it allows participants to reconstruct their journeys with heritage brands in rich, contextual detail, revealing how nostalgia operates not as an isolated emotion but as interwoven with identity, memory, and cultural belonging (Clandinin & Caine, 2020). By collecting personal narratives, we embrace the inherently human impulse to make sense of consumption through temporal sequencing ("When did you first encounter this brand?"), emotional turning points ("What made this purchase meaningful?"), Moreover, cultural resonance ("How does this connect to your sense of being Javanese?").

Data generation involved purposive sampling of 30 urban millennials (aged 25- 40) across five Javanese cities (Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Yogyakarta, Surabaya), selected based on self-identified engagement with heritage brands. Participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and heritage brand categories (textiles, food, cosmetics, crafts). Primary data collection utilized semi-structured phenomenological interviews (average 90 minutes), conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or Javanese according to participant preference. Interviews followed a temporal narrative arc: 1) childhood memories of heritage brands, 2) rediscovery experiences, and 3) reflective meaning-making of recent purchases. Sensory elicitation techniques were incorporated to enrich narrative depth. Participants brought heritage-branded objects or interacted with products during interviews, triggering embodied memories (Pink, 2021). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated while preserving linguistic nuances. Field notes captured nonverbal expressions and emotional resonance, acknowledging that "the body remembers what the mind cannot articulate" (Ellingson, 2021, p. 43).

The analytical process honored narrative integrity through dialogical narrative analysis (Riessman, 2023), progressing through three phases: First, narrative mapping identified

temporal-emotional arcs within individual stories. Second, thematic resonance analysis examined how personal nostalgia intersected with collective memory across cases. Finally, metaphor analysis uncovered subconscious emotional drivers (e.g., "This batik feels like my grandmother's embrace"). Trustworthiness was ensured via intersubjective validation: member-checking refined interpretations, peer debriefing challenged researcher biases, and reflective journaling documented positionality (a Javanese researcher studying Javanese participants). Ethical rigor exceeded institutional review board requirements, participants co-owned their narratives, choosing pseudonyms and approving anonymized excerpts. This humanistic approach acknowledges that "stories are not data to be mined, but truths to be witnessed" (Bochner & Ellis, 2020, p. 177), ultimately revealing how heritage brands become vessels for cultural continuity amidst urban fragmentation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Embodied Tapestry of Nostalgic Consumption

The narratives reveal nostalgia not as a monolithic sentiment, but as a multi-temporal bridge connecting participants to layered pasts. Personal childhood memories smelling traditional *boreh* (herbal balm) applied by grandparents, tasting specific *jenang* (rice pudding) at family gatherings, intertwined seamlessly with a constructed cultural heritage ("*I imagine batik artisans 200 years ago feeling the same wax resistance I feel now*"). This fusion creates what Holak (2022) terms "historical nostalgia," where individual recollection merges with collective myth. Consumption becomes a ritual of temporal integration: purchasing heritage *jamu* is not merely buying a beverage; it is re-enacting childhood memories of wellness while symbolically "sipping history" (Participant 12, Yogyakarta). The sensory potency of heritage brands' distinctive scents, textures, and tastes emerged as critical triggers, transporting consumers across decades in moments, embodying Pink's (2021) assertion that "the past is felt before it is understood."

### The Authenticity Paradox: Craftsmanship as Emotional Anchor

Participants framed heritage brands as antidotes to digital disenchantment, valuing perceived authenticity rooted in tangible craftsmanship. This authenticity was performative: witnessing batik makers' painstaking *canting* work or knowing traditional recipes remained unchanged validated emotional investments ("*Seeing the maker's hands stain proves it is real, not like algorithm-made fast fashion*," Participant 7, Surabaya). However, intriguingly, they embraced strategic reinterpretations of modern packaging or online accessibility if core traditions remained intact. Authenticity wasn't about historical purity but continuity of essence (Fauzi & Hudrasyah, 2023). Brands failing this test (e.g., using synthetic dyes for batik) provoked visceral betrayal, described as "cutting our cultural roots" (Participant 21, Bandung). The materiality of production thus became inseparable from emotional legitimacy.

### Identity as Palimpsest: Weaving Heritage into Modern Selves

Purchasing decisions revealed complex identity negotiations. Heritage brands served as tools for cultural reclamation among millennials who felt linguistically or ritually disconnected from Javanese traditions. Wearing specific *batik motifs* associated with their hometown or consuming *kue basah* (traditional cakes) became "silent declarations" of belonging (Participant 5, Semarang). For female participants, using heritage cosmetics like *lulur* (traditional scrub) transformed self-care into embodied cultural practice: "*My grandmother's rituals become mine, but for my urban stresses*" (Participant 18, Jakarta). However, this identity work was fluid: participants juxtaposed heritage items with global brands, reflecting Nugroho & Setyanti's (2022) observation of "hybridic identities." Nostalgia here was future-oriented, consuming heritage to preserve cultural markers for their children.

**The Bittersweet Ache: Nostalgia's Emotional Ambivalence**

The emotional landscape was marked by productive melancholy. While heritage consumption provided comfort, it also evoked poignant awareness of the loss of vanishing artisans, altered urban landscapes, or familial dispersion. Purchasing *jajanan pasar* (traditional market snacks) conjured joy but also grief: "*This taste is happiness but reminds me my village market is now a mall*" (Participant 9, Yogyakarta). This aligns with Davis's (1979) concept of "reflective nostalgia," where longing coexists with critical awareness. Participants acknowledged that commodified nostalgia brands market "false memories" to younger consumers, yet distinguished this from their "lived nostalgia." The most resonant purchases balanced emotional sanctuary with ethical intentionality, linking personal healing to communal sustainability ("*Buying this tenun funds the weaver's daughter's school that feels like healing us both,*" Participant 14, Jakarta).

**Sustaining Culture: Nostalgia as Collective Resilience**

Ultimately, consuming nostalgia emerged as an act of cultural stewardship. Millennials framed their purchases as safeguarding intangible heritage against homogenization. This manifested practically: seeking brands that preserve artisanal techniques or use local ingredients despite higher costs. The narratives framed consumption as reciprocal care "*If I do not buy their kris, who will remember the Empu's skill?*" (Participant 26, Solo). Heritage brands became vessels carrying *intergenerational dialogue*, with participants describing conversations sparked by heirloom pieces ("*My niece asked about this batik motif, now I tell her stories Nenek told me*"). This transforms nostalgia from passive yearning into agentive cultural preservation, where emotional drivers fuel tangible cultural resilience. As Participant 3 (Bandung) summarized: "*We are not just buying products; we are buying time for our traditions.*"

**Discussion****Weaving Nostalgia, Authenticity, and Identity in Java's Marketplace of Memory**

This study reveals that consuming heritage brands among urban Javanese millennials is an act of meaningful temporal integration, where personal nostalgia intertwines with constructed cultural memory to navigate fractured modernity. Participants did not merely recall the past; they actively reconstructed it through sensory, embodied consumption, transforming products into "temporal bridges" (Thompson, 2020). This aligns with Holak's (2022) conceptualization of nostalgia as a social emotion but extends it by demonstrating how embodied rituals like preparing jamu or wearing inherited batik anchor abstract cultural heritage in visceral, daily practice. These acts resist the alienation of urban acceleration, offering what Participant 12 termed "roots in motion." Critically, this nostalgia is not regressive; it is a resource for crafting coherence amid cultural dislocation, challenging simplistic views of nostalgia as mere escapism (Boym, 2001).

**The Authenticity Paradox Revisited**

The findings complicate conventional notions of authenticity in heritage consumption. Participants demanded craftsman's integrity, visible traces of human labor, and traditional methods, yet pragmatically embraced modernization if core values persisted. This reflects a shift from "objective" (historically pristine) to "existential authenticity" (Vannini & Williams, 2022), where value lies in emotional resonance and perceived continuity of essence. Heritage brands thus become authenticating icons in a digital landscape saturated with algorithmic curation. However, this trust is fragile; deviations from perceived tradition (e.g., synthetic substitutes) provoked moral outrage, framed as cultural betrayal. This echoes Fauzi and Hudrasyah's (2023) observation that authenticity for Indonesian millennials is intrinsically tied to intergenerational ethics, honoring ancestral knowledge becomes a non-negotiable emotional contract.

**Identity as Fluid Heritage**

The study illuminates how heritage consumption enables hybrid identity work in post-traditional societies. Millennials strategically deploy heritage brands as palimpsestic markers,

layering Javanese identity onto globalized selves without rejecting modernity. This aligns with Gopaldas' (2023) concept of "marketplace identity work," but here identity is not just asserted, it is felt through embodied reconnection (e.g., lulur rituals transforming self-care into cultural homage). Significantly, nostalgia served prospective functions: consuming heritage was not just about reclaiming personal pasts but securing cultural futures, "preserving motifs my children might otherwise never touch" (Participant 26). Heritage brands thus become pedagogical tools, facilitating intergenerational dialogue in a rapidly changing linguistic and cultural landscape, affirming Nugroho and Setyanti's (2022) findings on identity reclamation.

### **The Ambivalent Gift of Nostalgia**

The emotional complexity uncovered where comfort coexisted with poignant loss demands nuanced theoretical engagement. Participants' reflective nostalgia (Davis, 1979) acknowledged commercialization risks, distinguishing commodified nostalgia from "lived" emotional truth. This critical awareness prevented idealization of the past, framing consumption as agentic cultural labor. The bittersweet resonance "joy with grief in every bite" (Participant 9) reveals nostalgia not as passive melancholy but as productive ambivalence, energizing ethical consumption (e.g., supporting artisans as custodians). This challenges Boym's (2001) restorative/reflective binary, suggesting a dynamic where reflective awareness fuels restorative action, transforming longing into stewardship.

### **Consuming Nostalgia as Cultural Resilience**

Ultimately, this study positions heritage brand resurgence as a form of everyday cultural resilience. Millennials' purchases constitute tangible acts of preservation, sustaining intangible heritage threatened by homogenization. This transcends individual therapy; it is collective care work (Tronto, 2013), where consumption becomes reciprocity, "buying time for traditions" (Participant 3). Critically, this occurs within capitalism, not outside it. Heritage brands' commercial viability ensures artisanal livelihoods and intergenerational transmission. This resonates with Comaroff and Comaroff's (2009) "Ethnicity, Inc.," but with a crucial emotional dimension: capitalism infused with longing and responsibility. In Java's urban crucible, consuming nostalgia emerges as a vital practice for weaving cultural continuity into the fabric of modernity.

## **CONCLUSION**

This narrative inquiry illuminates how urban Javanese millennials engage with local heritage brands as commodities and vessels of cultural memory and identity reclamation. Their consumption is an act of temporal integration, weaving personal nostalgia (childhood memories evoked by sensory triggers like jamu's bitterness or batik's wax-resist texture) with constructed historical nostalgia ("sipping history"). This bridges fragmented modern selves to an imagined cultural continuum, transforming everyday purchases into rituals of belonging. Crucially, nostalgia emerges here as a dynamic social emotion (Holak, 2022), far from passive escapism, it fuels conscious curation of authenticity. Participants navigated a nuanced authenticity paradox: demanding visible craftsmanship as proof of intergenerational integrity while pragmatically embracing strategic innovations that sustain heritage's essence. In doing so, they redefine authenticity as existential fidelity to cultural values rather than historical stasis (Vannini & Williams, 2022).

Ultimately, this resurgence represents a profound form of agentic cultural resilience. Millennials leverage consumption as stewardship, preserving artisanal knowledge, facilitating intergenerational dialogue, and safeguarding intangible heritage against homogenization. Their bittersweet reflective nostalgia acknowledging loss while investing in continuity transforms longing into ethical action. Participant 3 poignantly observed that they are "buying time for traditions," embedding care for communal legacy within market transactions. This positions heritage brands as vital pedagogical and preservative tools within late capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009), where commercial viability ensures cultural transmission. In Java's evolving urban landscapes, consuming nostalgia is thus revealed as both an intimate act of self-reconnection and a collective project of cultural endurance, proving that markets, when imbued with memory and meaning, can become spaces of profound cultural sustenance.

## REFERENCES

- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2020). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia*. Basic Books.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Caine, V. (2020). Narrative inquiry. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 295- 310). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4\\_57](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4_57)
- Comaroff, J. L., & Comaroff, J. (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc*. University of Chicago Press.
- Davis, F. (1979). *Yearning for yesterday: A sociology of nostalgia*. Free Press.
- Ellingson, L. L. (2021). *Embodiment in qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Fauzi, A. A., & Hudrasyah, H. (2023). Nostalgia and authenticity: Drivers for purchasing local heritage food brands among Indonesian millennials. *Journal of International Food & Agribusiness Marketing*, 35 (2), 189 209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08974438.2021.1996578>
- Gopaldas, A. (2023). Marketplace identity work: Multicultural transitions and transformations at the farmers market. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 50 (1), 149 171. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucac040>
- Holak, S. L. (2022). Nostalgia: Past, present, and future. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45 , 101290. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101290>
- Kim, J.-H. (2021). *Understanding narrative inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Nugroho, A., & Setyanti, S. W. L. H. (2022). Reconnecting through heritage brands: Millennial consumers and the search for identity in urban Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 12 (1), 28 46. <https://doi.org/10.14707/ajbr.220131>
- Permatasari, A., & Yusuf, M. (2020). Millennial consumption behaviour in Indonesia: Personal value and meaning of brand. *Journal of Consumer Sciences*, 5 (2), 123 138. <https://doi.org/10.29244/jcs.5.2.123-138>
- Pink, S. (2021). *Doing sensory ethnography* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Riessman, C. K. (2023). *Narrative methods for the human sciences* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Sari, Y. K., Dhewanto, W., & Anggraeni, E. (2023). Cultural identity and consumption behaviour of Indonesian millennials towards local brands. *Journal of Asia Business Studies*, 17 (2), 364 381. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JABS-01-2022-0020>
- Thompson, C. J. (2020). The ‘big data’ revolution and the market for consumer temporalities. *Marketing Theory*, 20 (4), 555 573. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593120920330>
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. NYU Press.
- Vannini, P., & Williams, J. P. (Eds.). (2022). *Authenticity in culture, self, and society*. Routledge.
- Wibisono, C. V. J., Aisjah, S., & Kustiningsih, N. (2021). Revitalizing heritage brands in the digital era: A case study of Indonesian local brands. *Journal of Digital Marketing and Halal Industry*, 3 (1), 1 16. <https://doi.org/10.21580/jdmhi.2021.3.1.7322>