

# The Scent of a Brand: The Proustian Phenomenon and Meaning-Making in Fast-Food Branding

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## Abstract

Despite scent being an obvious by-product of fast food, there has been little research on its role in the meaning-making of fast food brands. Previous studies have typically focused on scents as cues for brand recognition, brand recall and triggering behaviors. The meaningful autobiographical memories that a scent elicits and its role in branding remain relatively unexplored. This study explores how the Proustian phenomenon (odor-evoked autobiographical memories) allows consumers to form meanings and relate to brands in personal and endearing ways. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 participants who were exposed beforehand to the scent of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Thematic analysis was used to determine the autobiographical memories evoked and the meanings attached to the brand's scent. The findings revealed that the scent associated with a fast-food brand carries deep-seated memories and meanings attached to personal experiences that consumers associate with the brand. The study confirmed that the Proustian phenomenon triggered by a fast-food brand's scent can be leveraged in brand building. The findings suggest that the scent of a brand offers semiotic properties that can be used to evoke consumers' personal and emotional relationship with the brand, thus allowing the brand to communicate with consumers in more meaningful ways.

**Keywords:** Fast Food, Scent, Autobiographical Memories, Proustian Phenomenon, Branding.

## Introduction

Scents and aromas provide potent stimuli that can trigger long-forgotten memories, causing them to be recollected in startlingly vivid detail. Such odor responses are referred to as the Proustian phenomenon, named after the French novelist Marcel Proust, who wrote about a protagonist who experienced a flood of memories that were triggered by the scent of a Madeleine biscuit dunked in tea (Bartolomei, 2017). The Proustian phenomenon has been described as the ability of odors to spontaneously cue autobiographical memories that are

highly vivid, affective, and old (Bartolomei, 2017; Chu & Downes, 2000). Odor-evoked autobiographical memory is strongly associated with emotion and vividness (De Bruijn & Bender, 2018; Markowitsch, 2008), making it capable of influencing a person's decisions in the future. The average person can easily relate to this – when we encounter certain scents, nostalgic memories come flooding back, which may prompt us to do something about it.

Numerous studies have reported on the merits of leveraging scent in marketing. Scent has been found to increase consumer preference (Berčík et al., 2021; Herz et al., 2022), affect evaluation (Erraja et al., 2020; Madzharov, 2015), improve experience (Flavian et al., 2021; Leenders et al., 2019), influence choice (Lichters et al., 2022; Madzharov, 2015) and stimulate purchase (Phillips et al., 2019). Studies typically focus on how the sensory experience of the scent itself activates behaviors. Nevertheless, few studies exist concerning scent in branding from the perspective of the Proustian phenomenon – the meanings via the biographical memories that a scent elicits and how those meanings contribute to building a brand.

In branding, studies on scent are typically inclined toward its effects on brand awareness, recall, and image rather than the meaning these memories bring to the consumers. Rupini and Nandagopal (2015) found that odor can build awareness and create an image of a brand in the short and long term. Errajaa et al. (2020) observe the positive effects of a specially designed scent on the brand image and brand loyalty towards the Merignan Hotel in France. Other studies attest to the positive effects of scent on consumer behavior in branding (e.g., Goldkuhl & Styven, 2007; Kivioja, 2017; Madzharov et al., 2015; Minsky et al., 2015).

However, as mentioned by Kotler et al. (2018), Keller (2013), and Thellefsen and Sørensen (2013), developing and giving meaning to a product or service is precisely what the process of branding is about. Brand meanings are closely related to episodic and autobiographical memories (Herz & Brunk, 2017). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research investigating the relationship between brand meaning and olfaction with respect to the previously mentioned types of memories.

The benefits of using scent are not lost on marketing practitioners in the industry. The use of scent in marketing can be traced back to the 1950s with AromaRama and Smell-O-Vision, used to infuse movie theatres with appropriate odors (Walsh, 2020). Lindstrom (2005a), in his book *Brand Sense*, quotes Singapore Airlines' example of using a proprietary scent, Stefan Floridian Waters, as a body scent for the airline's cabin crew, as a fragrance in the cabin and soaked into the in-cabin hot towels.

Indeed, scent is a powerful tool brands use to engage consumers. Using scents can facilitate effective communication (Lindstrom, 2008) and improve marketing performance (Lindstrom, 2005a). Due to its highly evocative and emotional nature (Bartolomei, 2017; Chu & Downes, 2000), autobiographical memories triggered by scents can also engage consumers.

Branding is defined as the process of giving meaning to a specific organization, company, products or services by creating and shaping a brand in the minds of the consumers brand (Keller, 2013; Kotler et al., 2018; Thellefsen & Sørensen, 2013). Since odors carry specific meanings (Cerulo, 2018), therein lies the relationship between the Proustian phenomenon and branding. Understanding this relationship may reveal a new dimension of scent's contribution to branding and marketing. Therefore, the possible contribution of scent via the Proustian phenomenon in branding and marketing warrants further scrutiny and understanding.

In addressing the literature gap and providing greater insights on the Proustian phenomenon in branding, we are guided by the following questions: (1) How does the Proustian phenomenon manifest itself in the scent of a brand?; (2) What do the memories evoked by

the scent of a brand mean to consumers?; and (3) What is the significance of the memories and their meanings to the brand?

We hope to foster an understanding that there is more to olfactory tactics than mere behavioral responses among consumers – its semiotic underpinnings are equally important in helping build brands. This realization may further strengthen the value of olfaction as a means of brand communication among marketers.

### **The Case for Kentucky Fried Chicken**

The KFC brand presents an appealing case. The distinctive smell of its original recipe fried chicken is a familiar scent to consumers worldwide, and Malaysians are no exception. Moreover, the fact that the scent is unique to the brand has been cleverly leveraged in recent years to promote the brand in creative ways. For example, the brand's iconic original fried chicken recipe scent has been used in special fireplace logs that give off the scent of the original recipe fried chicken when burned in winter (Breijo, 2020) and in KFC-scented sunscreen for use in summer (Addady, 2018). The brand even partnered with Crocs, the sandal producer, to create a range of KFC-scented accessories, or 'jibbitz' for Crocs sandals (Brown, 2020). From these examples, it is safe to conclude that marketers agree that the scent is uniquely KFC and easily identifiable among consumers, making it as much of a brand asset as the logo itself.

KFC is one of the biggest fast-food chains in Malaysia, with over 700 outlets nationwide (Asman, 2020). KFC is frequently advertised in Malaysian media, making it a familiar brand among Malaysians. As such, the familiarity of the brand, its products, and its unique and recognizable scent make it a particularly suitable subject for this investigation.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Scent, Memory and Emotions**

The powerful effects of scent on memory are invaluable to brands looking to create a lasting emotional connection with consumers. Solomon (2018) explains that these effects on consumers arise from the sense of smell being accommodated in a unique manner by the limbic system, which is the most primitive part of the brain. While a single common relay station, called the thalamus, regulates all the other senses, the sense of smell is unique, having a dedicated relay station hardwired to the areas of the brain that govern memory and emotion (Bartalomei, 2017). Being in direct physical contact with those areas allows the sense of smell to immediately trigger powerful, vivid memories and emotions with minimal conscious effort.

As a result, the sense of smell has a unique place in our neurobiological make-up that influences how we behave. Whether or not we are aware, we covet odors, and the average person can remember no less than 10,000 scents (Rupini & Nandagopal, 2015). Because we remember scents and because of the way our olfactory system is neurobiologically hardwired to the limbic system, we inevitably attach memories to them and allow them to trigger emotions. This relationship between scent, memory and emotion forms the foundation of the Proustian phenomenon.

#### **Proustian Phenomenon – Odor-Evoked Autobiographical Memory**

Conway et al. (2019) explains that autobiographical remembering is a dynamic process that reaches into an individual's memories across the person's lifetime periods and is always accessed by the content. Fivush (2011) further adds that autobiographical memory comprises

an integrated collection of memories of past experiences into an overarching life narrative. Autobiographical memory depends on complex interactions between episodic memory contents, associated emotions and a sense of self-continuity throughout one's life (Conway, 2019). Furthermore, Markowitsch (2003) notes that autobiographical memory is closely related to emotion and vividness, which may strongly influence a person's decisions in the future. All these point to the fact that autobiographical memories are significant to a person's life story (Hughes, 2004).

According to Chu and Downes (2000), the best trigger of autobiographical memory is scent, hence the term *odor-evoked autographical memory* or the Proustian phenomenon. Herz and Schooler (2002) further add that scents evoke more emotional and evocative autobiographical memories and do it better than visual or verbal cues. Herz and colleagues consistently find in their experimental studies that odor-evoked memories are more vivid and personal than those associated with other modalities (Herz, 2010).

Herz (2016) suggests that odor-evoked memories are strong nostalgic triggers. Engaging in nostalgic reminiscence brings about several positive psychological benefits, such as improved self-esteem, a stronger connection to one's past, and elevated optimism while infusing life with meaning. Studies in consumer nostalgia have documented the effects of scent-evoked memories on behaviors akin to the Proustian phenomenon (Orth & Bourrain, 2015). Nostalgia offers various benefits to brands, such as creating enchantment and re-enchantment (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019) and enhancing brand relationships (Youn & Doodoo, 2021).

Autobiographical memory contributes to a person's life narrative and shapes future decisions (Fivush 2011; Markowitsch 2003). As Hughes (2004) points out, these long-term memories may be encoded in the presence of a particular scent at the time. Furthermore, once evoked by scent, it delivers a potent combination of emotions and vividness (Chu & Downes, 2000; Herz & Schooler, 2002) that brings back to life important past experiences. Herz (2016) also adds to this mix the sense of meaning that odor-evoked autobiographical memories bring.

### **Scent and Brand Meaning**

Sensory memory that comes from olfaction is turned into short- and long-term memory, subsequently forming associative networks and schema as meanings develop during the creation of knowledge structures (Solomon 2018). The process allows us to learn, create knowledge, and make sense of the brands surrounding us.

Thellefsen and Sørensen (2013) argue that brands become meaningful and imbue themselves with certain lifestyle values by successfully negotiating their meaning with consumers. Additionally, they explain that emotion constitutes the basis for the integration of present, past and future based on memory – it represents the past, related to memory and the future in a way related to expectation. Thellefsen and Sørensen (2013) posit that brands negotiate desired emotions with consumers as they do with meanings. The best brands are those capable of putting consumers in the emotional state they strive for.

The work of Thellefsen and Sørensen (2013) establishes the relationship between emotion, meaning and branding. This highlights the importance of the semiotic potential of a brand that allows it to communicate values. The semiotic aspect of branding is cognitive, and according to Thellefsen and Sørensen (2013), it is concerned with creating meaning, memories and experiences, and emotions.

In this study, we seek to bridge the gap between the Proustian phenomenon and the use of scent in branding and marketing as they are premised on similar components – meaning,

memories, experiences and emotions. The literature also shows the semantic aspect of scent, where these scent-triggered memories contain meanings that are significant to the self (Cerulo, 2018; Degel et al., 2001; Holland et al., 2005). Together, they contribute to how a consumer perceives and experiences a brand (Hultén, 2010; Krishna et al., 2009; Lindstrom, 2005b; Morrin & Ratneshwar, 2003). *Figure 1 illustrates how odor-evoked autobiographical memories might contribute to a brand.*

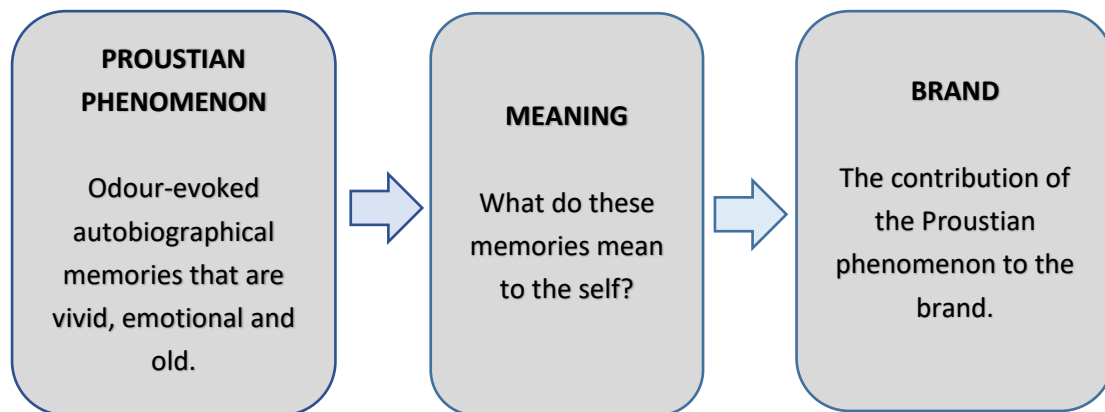


Figure 1. Proustian phenomenon and the meaning-making of brands

*In the case of KFC, this relationship brings up the question – what is the significance of the meaning of the scent in the branding of KFC? This leads to the objectives of this research, which are (1) to investigate the Proustian phenomena in the scent of KFC’s original recipe fried chicken, (2) to explore the meanings in the memories evoked by the scent of KFC’s original recipe fried chicken and, (3) to identify the contribution of the Proustian phenomenon towards KFC as a brand.*

### Methodology

Meaning-making involves subjective experiences, with each person interpreting brands, experiences and memories related to a brand differently. Similarly, memories are highly personal, and accessing them requires the person to explain and elaborate upon their recollections to communicate them. A qualitative approach was employed to explore the breadth and depth of this phenomenon. Data was collected through in-depth interviews to gain a rich and descriptive data set.

The nature of the Proustian phenomenon is such that a scent trigger is required. In assessing olfaction, sense-making and meaning attribution, the work of Cerulo (2018) in psychology was used in the data collection process. It involves using scent to trigger the Proustian phenomenon, followed by a one-to-one interview.

### Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Multiple studies have indicated the popularity of fast food, such as KFC, among university students in Malaysia (Abdullah, 2015; Habib et al., 2011; Syafiqah et al., 2018). As such, university students between 19 and 24 years of age who had consumed KFC were approached through announcements in online student groups for voluntary participation in a study related to sensory marketing. It was not revealed to the participants that the research focuses on KFC. They were then asked to complete a screening

questionnaire to ensure they consumed fast food, including KFC. The final sample consists of seven male and three female participants.

### **Data Collection Process**

Before each interview session, the authors purchased freshly cooked original recipe KFC chicken and placed a sizeable piece in an unmarked, airtight, opaque plastic container. The lid was opened partially, enough to release the scent without revealing the content. The chicken was covered in serviette to prevent the participant from gaining any visual cues. The container was then heated in a microwave to activate the scent. The participants were asked to inhale the scent coming out from the container. The interview was then conducted with the scent wafting throughout the interview.

The thematic analysis approach was utilized following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendation. The analysis began with the authors familiarizing themselves with the data by reviewing each interview and transcribing the conversation. Next, the initial coding was created, where elements in the transcription were labeled, grouped and then analyzed for emerging patterns or sub-themes. These sub-themes were reviewed, grouped, and defined as the main themes before the final analysis.

### **Research Findings**

As noted by Hussain (2014) when conducting his case study on KFC among consumers, all participants in this present study could correctly identify the food item and brand by olfaction alone and initially reacted by expressing their hunger or craving. However, once the ice had been broken and participants felt more comfortable with the interviewer, they started to share the fascinating and intimate memories evoked by the scent. Each participant was asked and encouraged to elaborate on these memories and discuss the surrounding contexts and stories that may be related to them.

### **Identifying the Proustian Phenomenon**

When asked what the scent of KFC's original fried chicken reminds them of, the participants recalled old memories related to the scent. With the sole exception of Female Participant 6, almost all the stories shared by participants were old, vivid and emotional, consistent with the characteristics of the Proustian phenomenon as described by Chu and Downes (2000; 2002). The scent often transported them as far back as their elementary school years, bringing back vivid and emotional memories they could describe in surprising detail. The following excerpts illustrate the vivid memories and personal meanings evoked by the KFC scent presented to them during the interview.

*Male Participant 1 (MP-1).*

To this participant, the scent of KFC reminded him of his early high school days when he would play truant:

*"Uhh... it reminds me during my high school, during my high school I always skip class, go to the Metro Kajang eating KFC because it's the only affordable chicken so far."(MP-1)*

In this vivid memory, he was able to recall in explicit detail what happened during those moments of truancy:

*"I remember the whole scene where, OK I skip school [...] OK one of my friends supposed to be the head of the student [...] Then we all climb the gate and then we ran away, find the bus stop immediately, jump on the bus and we went to*

*Metro Kajang. So, the first thing I saw is the KFC and Metro side by side [...] I said OK let's go to the KFC first then we go to the movies. So, we ate KFC after that we go to watch movie. If I'm not mistaken, it's about Agent 47 The Hitman. So, after that we went to the arcade play game like normal kids do." (MP-1)*

This incident was emotionally special to him as it gave him a taste of rebellion and a sense of independence for the first time – that school was not the only place to learn things. This was clear in his comment when asked about the significance of this episode of truancy:

*"It's a habit. But if there's nothing to do in the school, so it must have to do outside the school." (MP-1)*

The episode of truancy related to his KFC experience highlights his rebellious character and the sense of self-emancipation it brings. He believed that learning could be done outside of school if the school had nothing to offer, which displays not only a diminished view of schooling but also a firm, hard-headed belief in himself that allows him to break away from the bonds of conventional wisdom. This would play out in an interesting way later in life – despite his truancy, the participant had managed to do well enough to get into a renowned university and run a vape business throughout his university years. That business venture was successful enough to enable him to parade a VW Golf bought with his own money, a surprising accomplishment for any university student. It is noted that his truancy and change in behavior was prompted by peer pressure. Therefore, from his recollection, the emerging sub-themes were friends, breaking the rules, escaping, and blazing one's own path. These point toward a central theme of self-conviction.

*Female Participant 2 (FP-2)*

The scent of KFC reminded her of her elder brother, who had developed a liking for KFC when he was little:

*"I remember that my brother loves KFC. My brother loves KFC since he was very young." (FP-2)*

She went on to describe in great detail her brother's behavior when they were children when the mother had left a bucket of KFC at home, indicating that the memory was vivid:

*"... when we came back, we saw him eat an entire bucket. On the floor, don't know why, why are you eating this in the middle of the road [way]? He wouldn't actually offered to anyone." (FP-2)*

Her brother was described as a bit of a social misfit. He had difficulty socializing and had spent the months before the interview languishing at home after quitting his job due to workplace bullying, struggling to find the motivation to move on. These details gave context to what she added in the interview:

*"He always comes back from work with KFC or whenever he's upset after work, he buys us KFC." (FP-2)*

The memory evoked by the scent of KFC revolved around her awkward elder brother. From her description, KFC was his comfort food, indicating a strong undercurrent of concern toward his emotional well-being. She noted her brother's awkward behavior, such as when he refused to share the KFC with his family and his unusual indulgence in KFC after a bad day at

work, again pointing to a sense of concern towards him. The emerging sub-themes from her interview were personal concern, dismay and comfort food. The central theme is family.

*Male Participant 3 (MP-3)*

The scent of KFC took MP-3 back to his childhood days when his elder brother was still alive. Together with his brother, they would pester their mother to buy KFC, and they would fight over the wing and drumstick pieces:

*“I remember... In primary school, when I get the cravings, I will pester my parents for KFC until they cave in. That was when I was still a kid [...] And I remember fighting with my brother for our favorite chicken parts. He liked the wing and the drumstick. I can see him annoyed when I reached for the drumstick.” (MP-3)*

He then explained that his brother tragically died in a motorcycle accident the year before. The scent of the KFC triggered a number of painful memories that served to remind him of his tragic loss:

*“Previously when we go out for meals as a family, my brother was always with us. This year however, my brother is no longer with us [...] So when we go out for meals, I can feel that the void, it feels like the family is not complete.” (MP-3)*

The emotional pain carried by the memories triggered by the scent of KFC came across repeatedly, especially when he described the difference in their habit when buying KFC. There is now less cohesion, and deciding to buy KFC now requires a discussion:

*“[...] Previously, when we want to get KFC, we would just decide on KFC without much discussion or hesitation. But now... we would discuss where to go, when before we would just head out.” (MP-3)*

At this point, he associated KFC with the good times he had spent with his brother and his family. Nevertheless, he missed his brother in the present and pointed out as much when noting that nowadays, he often finds himself eating KFC alone. He went on to note that when they do eat KFC together as a family, his brother's absence is strongly felt. His description of his memory is colored by the loss and longing that stems from the fact that the happy family he once enjoyed has been diminished by the tragic loss of his elder brother the year before. Here, the emerging sub-themes were longing, the death of a brother and wishing for a complete family, all of which point toward the bigger theme of family.

*Female Participant 4 (FP-4)*

As for this participant, the scent of KFC vividly brought to mind a particular incident during her primary school years:

*“At that time, my dad had just received his salary. One night, he brought home the family pack. I was in standard six [...] At that time, I just came back from school. I always waited for my dad to get home. That day, he came home late, usually he would come home around six. But that night, he did not come home until eight, pass the Isya' prayer time. And when he came home, he had the KFC*



*family pack for us. My brother commented that this rarely ever happen! My dad said... I received my bonus, that's why!" (FP-5)*

The autobiographical nature of this memory was apparent when she referred to the memory as belonging in the 'good old days,' strongly hinting at the souring relationship between her and her father since then. It was a pivotal point in her life:

*"When I was little, that happens a lot. But as we grow, Dad rarely indulges us anymore [...] When I was six years old, in second grade, sixth grade... When we went out, I would pull Dad's hand to go to KFC. Haa... Dad will take me there. But when I grow older, he does not do that anymore [...] He was not very strict when I was young, but he is strict now [...] He is constantly reprimanding, always angry." (FP-5)*

There is a clear emotional focus in her autobiographical memory evoked by the scent of KFC. The vivid recollection of the day her father came home at night to surprise everyone with KFC shows a longing for the old days when the relationship between her and her father was better. There is a growing distance between her father and her, which she admits is due to her behavior growing up. In fact, on several occasions during the interview, she keeps highlighting how much the father's attitude towards her has changed over the years, indicating resentment and disappointment. Coming across as a young lady with unresolved issues with her father that have been festering under the surface for years, there is a feeling that this resentment and disappointment will play a role in future years. The emerging sub-themes are emotional distance, resentment, and disappointment. All of which point towards the more significant theme of relationship.

#### *Male Participant 5 (MP-5)*

This participant clearly remembers his childhood when they went to a mall as a family. He vividly describes the journey that put them in contact with the KFC scent.

*"When Ampang Park is still there, when I went there with my family we need to go into the basement car park and we need to go through the gate. And then, above that is KFC and Pizza Hut. So every time we open the window to get the ticket, the parking ticket, the smell will come into our car. At that time I was just a school boy." (MP-5)*

This memory evoked by the scent of KFC is special to him as he considers it a rare moment of relatively luxurious indulgence.

*"... we used to eat KFC a lot during my childhood, not that that frequent la... uhh if, just like... because I'm from middle lower, middle-income family, we usually have KFC during payday or maybe something special, birthday... or someone got a great exam result..." (MP-5)*

Interestingly, socioeconomics is a point that this participant repeatedly brings up throughout the interview when discussing the memory that the scent of KFC evokes in him:

*"My childhood is not that [...] I, I didn't come from, from a family that has all the luxury [...] For me, that's... uhh, eating something nice like KFC or maybe McDonalds or even A&W at that time is already, uh... feels great for me, it's*

*already a luxury for me [...] I grew up in a family where uhh even an Astro [pay tv] is something, something very... oohh if we have it oohh we are a rich family [...] So yeah I do value that memory". (MP-5)*

This memory's emotional and autobiographical nature is evident in how it shapes his attitude toward food as he grows into adulthood. His recollection shows that he is acutely aware of his socioeconomic background, describing a KFC fast food meal as a luxury and indulgence. He mentioned that the family could rarely afford a vacation, making the family trips to Ampang Park, where he found KFC's scent something special and memorable. He grew up not having fancy gadgets and spent his free time the old-fashioned way by going out to play football. Therefore, he developed a special appreciation towards the opportunity to enjoy a KFC meal, leading to his insistence to not skimp on food now in his adult years.

*"...I don't really mind spending on food. Yeah, yeah, so sometimes uhh... it might be...aiyaa it is alright if it is a little expensive... then it's fine. The other things like maybe uhh gadgets, maybe t-shirt or clothes, I do, I do care if I spend too much. But food, I don't really mind." (MP-5)*

From here, the emerging sub-themes are luxury, appreciation, and socioeconomics. All of which point towards the more prominent theme of indulgence.

#### *Female Participant 6 (FP-6)*

FP-6's mind takes a short trip back through time to her early days in the university when she was exposed to the scent of KFC:

*"To be honest I eat fried chicken, but I don't love fried chicken. My friends do. We have KFC in front of our university and whenever I am reminded of the fried chicken or something like this scent, I am always reminded [...] no when I was in second year or first year when we gather together in KFC just for... to eat the fried chicken [...] Once we enter third year and fourth year, we no longer hang out together." (FP-6)*

She later clarified that although she generally dislikes fried chicken, she developed a liking for KFC because of her friends. This short memory trip back to her first year in the university was primarily a result of her having recently spoken with her friends over the phone, recounting the nostalgic days they had spent in KFC near the campus. The participant then went into great detail describing how they had just decided to go to KFC on a whim late at night, jumped on their mopeds and stayed there until closing hour just chatting over just two pieces of KFC chicken. It is a sense of freedom that she misses greatly today, and this meaning is further underscored when she says that although her parents had taken her to the KFC outlet near her house many times before, these were nowhere near as memorable as the visits she made with her friends.

*"OK, I have lived near KFC near my house for... how many years already. I often spend my time eating KFC with my family. We have lots of memories there actually. But the first time I go to KFC and spend my time... at night... alone without my parents... instead I'm with my friends... that's why I think triggers my memory when it comes to KFC." (FP-6)*

FP-6's recollection is influenced by the fact that she had been talking to her friends about KFC recently. However, there is a sense of nostalgia in her description of the memory triggered by the scent of fried chicken, revolving around her friends from her first year in the university. She mentions the camaraderie and the freedom they enjoyed going out to KFC beyond the campus gates whenever they wished, even late at night. Pursuing this topic further reveals a person relishing the joy of breaking free from the confines of her family life and the sense of emancipation that comes with it.

This interview reveals the emerging sub-themes of newfound freedom, independence, and friendship, pointing towards the theme of liberation.

*Male Participant 7 (MP-7)*

MP-7 was particularly moved by a memory of his older brother taking him under his wings to work at his establishment. On MP-7's last day at work, his brother took him to a KFC restaurant where they shared stories of their childhood. To him, this is a special moment marking his journey into adulthood, leaving his hometown, family, and brother to go to university.

Moving forward, MP-7's eyes sparkled when he related a story about a girl he once dated. The memory seemed very personal, but he was eager to divulge. He remembers the times when they would go to a mall and spontaneously walk into a KFC restaurant without discussing it beforehand. They would always sit at the same table. He revealed that their first date was at the KFC restaurant to break their fast during the Muslim fasting month. He also fondly remembers their disagreements at the restaurant, with him having no clue what exactly he had done wrong, but all these were related with a smile. He, however, looked forlorn when talking about their last time together at KFC:

*"It just reminds me of the brief time that we have with a person. But even then, there's always the memories that can remind us of them." (MP-7)*

For MP-7, the scent of KFC first took him through a nostalgic journey of brotherly love and lost love. Both point to the overall theme of relationships.

*Male Participant 8 (MP-8)*

MP-8 shared stories of the escapades he used to have with his sister going to a nearby KFC restaurant without their parents' knowledge. At the time, both were in elementary school. He explained that they would save their school allowances and use that money to get on a bus and have KFC at a nearby mall.

*"My sister would tell mom that I have extracurricular activities... there's always something at school. I was active in the school's dikir barat singing. So my sister would use that as an excuse." (MP-8)*

The flashback brought a cheeky smile, almost proud of his naughty streak. His memories include the smell of KFC – the mall was small he could immediately smell the delicious aroma when the door opened. To them, being able to sneak out of the house on these occasions felt like an outstanding achievement, and having KFC was the *pièce de résistance*. However, the memory is also significant for MP-8 as it reflects the closeness with his sister. Today, both often reminisce about the good old days. As the sister is now married and just had a baby, going out together is no longer something that they can often do, but they remain close with the memories of their KFC adventures reminding them of their special bond.

MP-8's interview highlights the habit of sneaking out and his brotherly love for his sister, pointing to the central theme of indulging in brother-sister escapades.

*Male Participant 9 (MP-9)*

The accounts from MP-9 revolved around family occasions in which KFC was central. MP-9 recounted the numerous occasions when the family celebrated his and his siblings' achievements by having KFC. He clarified that in his family, KFC was only reserved for special occasions; thus, getting KFC was very special.

He also talked about the family's *gotong-royong* (much like a working bee) that his father would organize. His father, an architect, loves to do home renovations, often requiring the whole family to help. These events would end with buckets of KFC, something the entire family looks forward to after spending the entire day working. For MP-9, having KFC was his father's way of not only rewarding his children for their hard work but also as a way of bonding. The central theme is family.

*Male Participant 10 (MP-10)*

While more reserved than the other participants, MP-10 was keen to talk about the times spent with his sibling and parents at a KFC restaurant in his hometown. When he was growing up, there were not that many KFC or other fast-food restaurants around. Going to KFC was a treat, and the family usually spent time at the restaurant rather than bringing the food home. Interestingly, he explained that his parents were somewhat health conscious; therefore, going to KFC was regarded as an indulgence for their parents wanting to please their children.

**Meanings of the memories evoked by the scent of KFC**

The emerging sub-themes and themes suggest that for the participants, the meaning of KFC goes beyond merely a type of fast food. These sub-themes and themes are fascinating as they paint a colorful collage of meaningful and emotional experiences that each participant holds dear. Altogether, they hold the key to answering what the memories evoked by the scent of KFC mean.

The findings suggest that the scent of KFC can evoke autobiographical memories that constitute the Proustian phenomenon, as Chu and Downes (2000) posited. From the interviews conducted with these ten participants, these memories are as diverse as they are fascinating because they are experiences that are unique to each individual. However, as Cerulo (2018), Degel et al. (2001), Holland et al. (2005), Keller (2013), Kotler et al. (2018), Thellefsen and Sørensen (2013) observe, the key lies in the meanings, which is what ultimately makes the Proustian phenomenon relevant to the brand.

Labeling the themes or meanings from the interviews allows us to see how they relate to the brand. This process is illustrated in Figure 2. Each participant's sub-themes point towards an overall meaning or central theme. The meanings or main themes obtained from all ten participants reveal their relationship with the KFC brand.

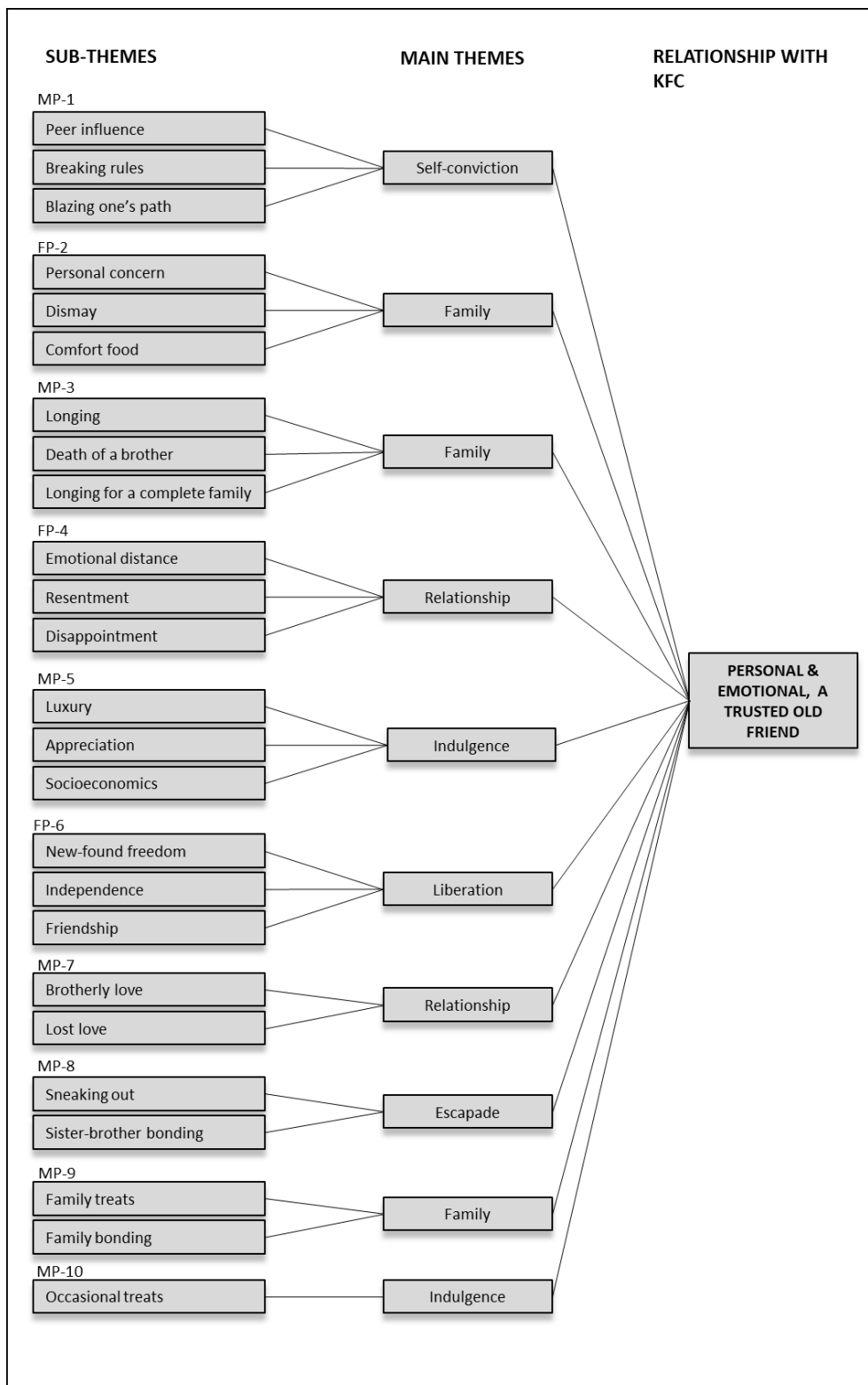


Figure 2. Odor-evoked autobiographical memories and the meaning-making of KFC

The analysis reveals that the scent of KFC can trigger autobiographical memories that are very diverse, unique and individual. The thematic analysis of these interviews revealed that the meanings range from self-conviction and family to relationship and liberation. No single meaning binds them all together because these are all derived from the diverse experiences

of each individual with different backgrounds and contexts. However, the themes of family and relationships reverberate strongly with the participants.

### **Meanings Derived from the Proustian Phenomenon and the KFC Brand**

Kotler et al. (2018) and Thellefsen and Sørensen (2013) emphasize the importance of meaning to a brand. A brand has to mean something in order to matter to consumers. Additionally, a brand need negotiate its meanings with consumers in order to gain their acceptance in the first place.

The meanings revealed in Figure 2 indicate a very personal relationship with KFC. While diverse and seemingly unconnected, the meanings gleaned from the odor-evoked autobiographical memories of the participants, such as self-conviction, family, relationship, escapade, indulgence and liberation, are all highly personal experiences that came from personal interactions with the brand and its product. These memories and their meanings are something special and unique that these participants hold dear because they are highly personal and emotional. This also indicates that the brand had touched their lives in meaningful, emotional and personal ways, going beyond the functional as merely a type of food that satisfies their hunger. KFC is much like a trusted old friend who has been with the participants through all the ups and downs.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The study revealed three major findings. Firstly, we found that the scent of KFC was highly recognizable, with all the participants being able to identify KFC solely through exposure to the scent. Without any other sensory cues, such as logo or packaging, the participants could immediately identify the name of the brand and exhibit positive attitudinal responses. This finding is consistent with past studies that demonstrated strong links between brand scent, recognition and attitude (e.g. Erraja et al., 2020; Madzharov, 2015) thus supporting the idea that scent is a valuable brand cue. Secondly, and more importantly, this study demonstrated that the scent of KFC triggered the Proustian phenomenon, whereby exposure to the scent produced autobiographical memories linking the KFC brand to significant events and important people in the life of participants. Some of the memories recalled were fond childhood memories in which KFC was often included in special family events such as birthday parties, suggesting that brand scents are highly valuable for nostalgic branding. This finding extends our knowledge of scent branding in that beyond acting as a cue to recognition, recall and attitude, the scent of a brand acts as an associative link to important events in the life of consumers. Thirdly, this study revealed that the Proustian phenomenon triggered by the scent of KFC is an invaluable semiotic resource. The scent elicits meanings that are specific to the participants, revolving around the evoked autobiographical memories with the KFC brand interwoven in their life stories.

The findings of this study suggest that the Proustian phenomenon is not merely a simple matter of literary speculation, as this research was able to trigger it using the scent of KFC. The personal and emotional nature of the meanings elicited from the autobiographical memories evoked by the scent of KFC indicate the participants' relationship with the brand. The memories revolve around deeply personal experiences and are recalled with emotion through a palpable sense of regret, nostalgia, concern and longing. This is notable as the meanings gleaned from them show that their relationship with the KFC brand is memorable, elevating the brand above the lesser perceived ones in their mind. In other words, they

perceive the brand favorably as it has a personal and emotional relationship with them. The brand means a great deal to them via their lifelong experience with it and its distinctive scent. Kotler et al. (2017) observes that Marketing 4.0 starts with making marketing more human-centric by humanizing brands with human-like attributes and that 'humanized brands are more appealing' (p. 81). Moreover, as far as humanizing is concerned, being personal and emotional always helps. Thus, the meanings of the autobiographical memories derived from the scent of KFC illustrate a personal and emotional relationship between the participants and the brand, highlighting the humanizing effect these memories have on the brand.

This personal and emotional relationship with a brand is also beneficial as it makes the brand feel more special and unique to the consumer. Therefore, in addition to scent's ability to improve beneficial behavioral reactions such as brand perception, purchasing propensity and brand recognition, it also triggers memories that underscore the consumer's relationship with the brand in a personal and emotional way. In short, scent can help consumers establish a personal and emotional connection with a brand via the Proustian phenomenon.

Establishing that the Proustian phenomenon can contribute to a brand by helping consumers connect to it in personal and emotional ways is quite an exciting revelation in the sense that it not only agrees with the findings in the works of Chu and Downes (2000; 2002), but also adds on to it. Their investigation into the Proustian phenomenon helps define what it is but falls short of exploring its implication in branding and marketing.

In the case of Fivush (2011), Hughes (2004), and Markowistch (2003), who found that autobiographical memory plays a role in a person's life narrative and future decisions, the findings in this present study also suggest the same is true for odor-evoked autobiographical memories. The personal and emotional nature of the meanings derived from the memories evoked by the scent of KFC has influence on the participants' life narratives, leading to their current attitudes towards their families, and relationships as well as their sense of self-conviction, indulgence, and liberation.

Other scholars in the areas of branding and marketing tend to take the conventional research trajectories by looking at the role of scent in improving brand recall, perception, recognition and purchasing behavior (Chatterjee, 2015; Hultén 2010; Krishna et al., 2010; Lindstrom 2005; Morrin & Ratneshwar, 2003). Hepola et al. (2017) go further by adding that scent helps improve emotional engagement. However, their study was done from the perspective of sensory brand experience, not odour-evoked autobiographical memory. Again, this study contributes further to these streams of research from the perspective of the Proustian phenomenon by showing that the autobiographical memories evoked by scent can also help cement a more personal and emotional relationship with the brand.

### **Practical Implication and Suggestions for Future Research**

Therefore, the practical implication of this is a possible shift in how marketers look at the use of olfaction in marketing and branding. As illustrated by the examples of how KFC currently uses its scent, the aim has been more towards establishing brand recall (in the case of the KFC scented fire logs and candles as well as the KFC-carrying mailman, for example). The assumption is that the scent of KFC makes consumers think of the brand, be prompted to visit KFC for a meal and have a generally pleasant experience when in the store. A multitude of literature in the field of marketing supports this, as much exist in proving time and again the usefulness of olfaction in influencing consumer behavior towards a brand – this is the very basis of Hultén's (2010) concept of multi-sensory brand experience and Lindstrom's (2005b) concept of broad sensory branding. What the Proustian phenomenon now adds to the table

is the realization that scent can also be used to establish and strengthen a more personal and emotional relationship between the consumer and the brand. Going beyond just helping consumers recall the brand, enticing them to make a purchase and have a generally good time in doing so, scent can also be used to remind consumers of their personal and emotional relationship with the brand, which benefits brands in a different dimension as they now strive to humanize themselves. This has the exciting potential to broaden both the understanding and the use of olfaction in branding among marketers.

Given the limited scope of this study with KFC as the focal brand, further research should investigate the Proustian phenomenon more comprehensively in other brands with a distinctive scent. The selection of KFC in this study was prompted by the authors' knowledge of the familiarity of the scent with Malaysian consumers. However, it begs whether such findings are replicable in other brands or in non-food products and how the meanings will manifest in those brands.

Furthermore, with the promising insights in this study, further investigation should also be conducted to understand the factors influencing the Proustian phenomenon. In what ways can the Proustian phenomenon be evoked and enhanced? Are there any moderators to the phenomenon? A more detailed understanding of these factors will help explain how the Proustian phenomenon can be implemented effectively.

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