Buletinul Ştiinţific al Universităţii Politehnica Timişoara
Seria Limbi moderne

Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timişoara
Transactions on Modern Languages

Vol. 25, Issue 1 / 2026

The Key to Success—Rebranding Communist Goods between Nostalgia and Cultural Identity

Iuliu RAȚIU*

Abstract: Communist nostalgia and business initiatives joined hands in the last few decades to revive economic brands such as Eugenia, Brifcor, Farmec, Rom, Pegas or Cheia. Fighting for market share, most of these brands ignored the harsh realities of communism, relied on name recognition and took advantage of the retro vibe of nostalgia and past glamor. This essay addresses the economic and cultural impact the rebranding of some of these items had on contemporary popular consumption habits, with a focus on the (re)branding of the soap Cheia by analyzing its relevance as a beauty product and cultural artefact before, during and after communism. In doing so, the essays shows that the investigation of rebranding of communist goods for the free market can shed light both on the cultural and economic value of those goods during communism and on the cultural taste and economic behavior of present consumers.

Keywords: branding, culture, memory, nostalgia, communism, post-communism

1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to showcase the transition from buying something from your youth, a nostalgic gesture, to falling in for marketing tactics and partaking in consumerism as an identity-making experience, when you consume something from your parents' and grandparents' past. The items thus are no longer perceived as consumer products, but signifiers of a past beautifully wrapped in advertising glitter. Communist nostalgia and business initiatives joined hands in the last few decades to revive economic brands such as *Eugenia*, *Brifcor*, *Farmec*, *Rom*, *Pegas* or *Cheia.* Fighting for market share, most of these brands ignored the harsh realities of communism, relied on name recognition and took advantage of the retro vibe of nostalgia and past glamor.

* Lecturer, PhD, Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, Babeș-Boliay University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, E-mail: iuliu.ratiu@econ.ubbcluj.ro

BUPT

I will address first the economic and cultural impact the rebranding of some of these items had on contemporary popular consumption habits. I will then focus on the (re)branding of the soap *Cheia* by analyzing its relevance as a beauty product and cultural artefact before, during and after communism. I will conclude by suggesting that the investigation of rebranding of communist goods for the free market can shed light both on the cultural and economic value of those goods during communism and on the cultural taste and economic behavior of present consumers. Thus, communist planners and capitalist marketers are connected via brands which speak volumes about shifts in economic output, consumer expectations, social politics and cultural preference.

Some brands predate communism and to a certain extent originate outside of the national state as it was established at the end of the First World War. This means that when they were launched as communist brands they had already been on the free market before the Second World War. Therefore, those who revived the brands after the fall of communism nostalgically reached back to brand recognition during communism and conveniently relied on the tradition and economic viability of the products from their pre-communist past. As recent political events show, analysing this interplay between memory, nostalgia, and the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2014), could help explain why more and more Romanians are nostalgic for the communist past. For instance, according to a July 2025 INSCOP survey, 77,2% of respondents considered Romania was a wealthier country before 1989 than it is now, 55,8% consider that the communist regime was rather good for Romania, and 66,2% think dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was a good leader.

2. Rebranding Nostalgia

While sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists argue that nostalgia for the past is actually a reflection of the present and analyse the various factors influencing voters' preference for nationalist populist parties, such as misinformation, social media abuse, conspiracy theories and overreliance on a providential leader (Botan et al., 2025), I suggest that looking at economic branding and rebranding practices might help explain the cultural and marketing aspects of nostalgia. By examining the economic and cultural impact of rebranding, I argue that the resurgence of communist-era brands reinterprets socialist legacies and illustrates the shifting nature of consumer identity, memory, and desire.

Communist nostalgia has become a powerful emotional and commercial force in post-socialist societies. Brands that survived the fall of the regime, or were resurrected decades later, function not only as commodities but also as cultural signifiers. The post-1989 Romanian marketplace did not merely replace the planned economy with globalized consumerism. It actively reappropriated elements of socialism, wrapping them in capitalist marketing strategies.

This reappropriation is especially evident in the resurrection of the *Rom* chocolate bar. Rom's "American style" ad campaign in 2011 deliberately contrasted the brand's Romanian communist roots with American consumer culture, only to

BUPT

ultimately reaffirm Rom's identity as a "true Romanian product." The ad campaign, which replaced the Romanian flag on the wrapper with the American flag, featured slogans such as "Try the New Rom" "Patriotism Won't Feed You," "The American Dream Now in the Romanian Chocolate" and "Let's Build America Here." Such strategies reveal an interplay between Western values and local heritage, capitalizing on national identity and the desire for authenticity.

What many of these brands shared was a reliance on name recognition, an advantage they held over new, foreign, or unfamiliar products. This strategy, however, came at a cost: it often led to a glossing over of historical realities. These rebranded products appealed to the emotional memory of their consumers, who remembered the security or simplicity of their youth—even if that youth occurred during a time of scarcity, censorship, and state control.



Figure 1. Rom bars on display in local grocery stores, featuring small flags inviting customers to celebrate the national day. Photo taken by the author.

The *Rom* campaign also played into then-current political and economic hardships in the wake of the global economic crisis of 2008-2009, when the precarity of real life made people seek refuge in a sweetened national past. More recently, tentatively going against the propagandistic appropriation of national traits by extremist rhetoric (which might harm them economically), Kandia Dulce, the company that owns the *Rom* brand, ran a marketing campaign before the 2025 National Romanian Day in which they invited Romanians to join the national *hora* and celebrate Romanian style (Fig. 1).

Similarly, Kaufland, an important retail store, revived the communist slogan "Nicio masă fără pește" "No meal without fish" (Fig. 2) which is a tongue in cheek reference to life before 1989 as fish was one of the few items consistently available in state-run stores, in stark contrast to other food products which were often scarce or rationed.

These examples show how brands could reclaim national symbols and slogans in a playful, non-extremist way by pushing back against political hijacking of identity. This way, marketing and branding professionals seem to be deliberately re-using national imagery and slogans that might otherwise be monopolized by extremist or

BUPT

nationalist rhetoric by reaching out creatively to customers who came of age during communist or have a reasonable understanding of the past. In contrast, to younger consumers, rebranding is nothing more than manufacturing demand. As a case in point, GoodMills, an international conglomerate headquartered in Vienna, Austria, operating two dozen mills in seven countries, promotes its local flour brand *Titan* to teach consumers how to bake traditional *pandișpan cu vișine* –sour-cherry cake.



Figure 2. A supermarket seafood display, under a sign reading "No meal without fish." Photo taken by the author.

The full recipe for the cake is printed on the packaging, together with the watermill logo of the brand, nutrition information, and the ubiquitous barcode. The symbolism is there: the interplay between the archaic watermill and the modern barcode signifies the endless capitalist churning of product after product after product in a world full of pastries made with carefully selected Romanian grains and following traditional recipes!

3. The Key to Rebranding: the *Cheia* Case

The brand *Cheia* has a long history that predates Romania's communist period. Initially produced in the 19th century, *Cheia* gained national fame in the interwar period, when it was known for its high quality and distinctive scent. Its logo—a key, which also gives the brand its name—symbolized both elegance and trustworthiness. During communism, *Cheia* became a standardized, mass-produced good. Like many other products of the era, it was functional, affordable, and widely available, but rarely luxurious. While some viewed it as a symbol of everyday resilience, others associated it with the lack of choice and personal expression under the socialist regime. However, the brand survived, even as its market value and cultural prestige declined.

In the post-1989 years, the local beauty market was flooded with foreign cosmetics, from French perfumes to German body washes. In this highly competitive landscape, *Cheia* initially faded into obscurity. However, in the 2010s, the brand was reinvigorated by entrepreneurs who recognized its nostalgic and cultural value. The rebranding strategy emphasized both heritage and purity—touting *Cheia*'s traditional formulas, natural ingredients, and historical legacy. Ads highlighted phrases like "from the time of our grandparents" or "the original Romanian soap," tapping into collective memory while positioning *Cheia* as a sustainable, authentic alternative to multinational

BUPT

cosmetic brands. When the new owners revived the brand, they called the company *Apollo Cheia*, just to be able to claim the brand's entire history.

In doing so, they attached their origin to that of their supposed competitors, which are now well-established multinational corporations such as P&G, Colgate, J&J, Nivea, and thusly they justified the need to revive a communist brand which could have directly competed with successful Western heritage brands. It's important to point out here that, presumably, it took the Braunsteins, the initial late 19th century owners about 20 years to brand one of their products as "Romanian soap" and that during the interbellum period the soap was mostly advertised to the middle-class. During the Second World War, the soap under the name of "Străjerul sănătății" ("The Guardian of Health," a nod to the fascist movement of interwar Romania) was given to Romanian soldiers, who used it as a universal cleaning product to wash both their bodies and their uniforms. According to the new owners' historical makeover, German officers highly appreciated the "deluxe" versions of the soap, which they considered superior to German brands and closer to French ones Then, during communism, the soap was so bad, that it was used for everything, being an all-purpose soap used for cleaning carpets and other household items. Its universal appeal, then, contributed to its branding and rebranding, so much so that it became part of the popular culture with sexist jokes such as "Vrei să cucereşti Femeia? Foloseşti săpunul Cheia!?" "Do you want to conquer the woman? Then use the *Cheia* soap"or "Ce și-ar fi dorit Femeia? Dacă nu săpunul Cheia!" "What would a woman want? If not the *Cheia* soap?" These so-called slogans today accompany some men care products!

Consulting their catalog, one immediately becomes impressed by the variety of their products. The company offers a diversified portfolio of natural and eco-friendly products centered on traditional soapmaking, spanning personal care, household cleaning, and specialty uses. The range includes solid and liquid soaps for hands, body, face, hair, shaving, and intimate hygiene, alongside natural shampoos, deodorants, and grooming products. Complementing personal care, the company provides biodegradable laundry detergents, multi-purpose household cleaners, and niche products such as car-care soaps. Many items draw on historical Romanian formulations and emphasize natural ingredients, sustainability, and minimal environmental impact, positioning the brand at the intersection of heritage craftsmanship and contemporary ecological consumption.

Cheia's gift box offering comprises curated, story-driven packages that pair the brand's natural personal-care products with thoughtfully designed, reusable, and biodegradable packaging. Central to this segment is the *Cartea și săpunul (The Book and the soap)* collection, in which soaps, scrubs, oils, and related items are presented in book-like wooden boxes that evoke heritage and craft, and are marketed as luxurious, narrative-rich gifts for diverse recipients and occasions. Examples range from thematic rituals, such as a chocolate-scented relaxation set, to gender- or purpose-oriented assortments, as well as historical-inspired collections that reinterpret traditional formulations within gift presentations.

BUPT

The “Personaj istoric” (Historical characters) collection (see photo below) transforms tiny blocks of natural soap into miniature sculptures that honor famous figures from Romanian history, ranging from antiquity to the communist period. Each of these statuettes is hand-poured and hand-crafted, much like chocolate figurines, using artist-designed molds and a traditional saponification process. What ties these disparate objects together is not a strict academic curation but the concept of “remembering through scent and form.” The creators emphasize that these soap figures invite a sensory connection to history that goes beyond mere text or plastic models.

They are meant to spark curiosity and serve as conversation pieces, all while aging naturally — the soap hardens and yellows over time, adding to its old-world character. Each statuette in the series includes a printed biographical snippet (in Romanian and sometimes English) on the back of its packaging. Some other statuettes extend the series into more controversial or eclectic territory — for instance, a figure of Nicolae Ceaușescu appears in themed collections tied to Romania’s communist era. At times, the communist dictator’s figurine is out of stock, meaning probably that it might be in high demand (Fig. 3).

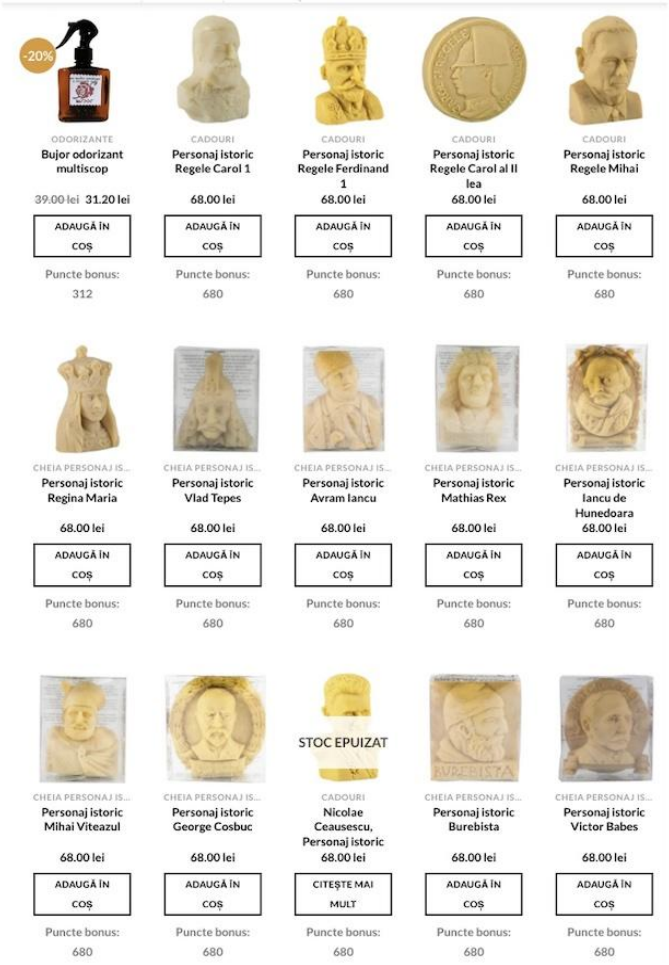


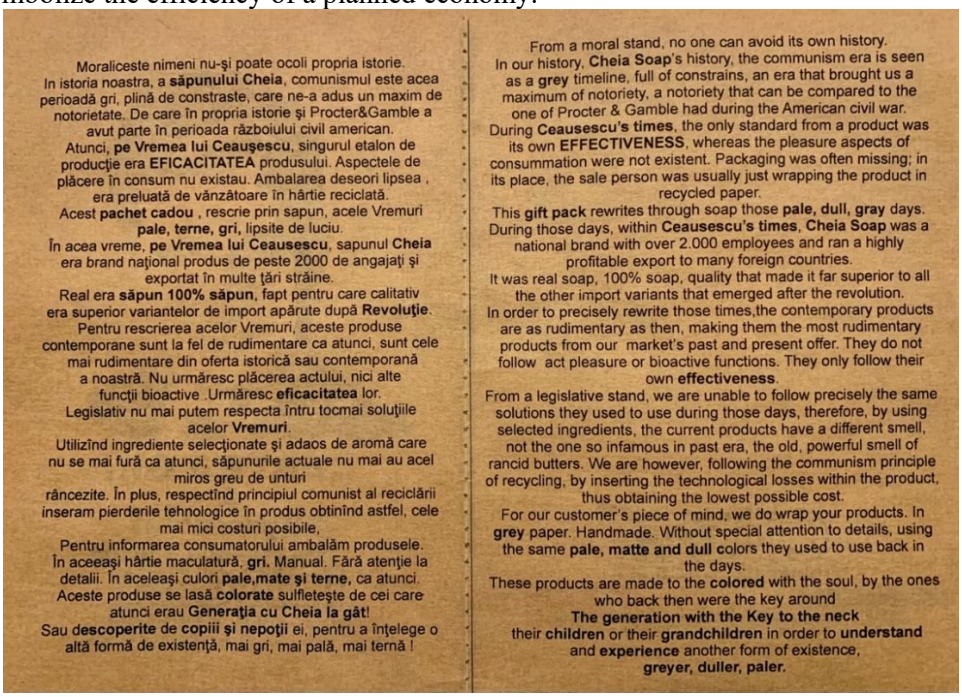
Figure 3. Catalog of bar soaps from the Historical Characters collection. Print screen, sapunulcheia.ro.

Therefore, what makes this brand stand out is the tentative gesture to directly wrestle with and perhaps (un)wittingly embrace “vremea lui Ceaușescu”, that is, Ceaușescu’s time. If one could not directly order Ceaușescu’s figurine, one could still

BUPT

get a hold of it by purchasing *Cartea gri a săpunului Cheia* (The Gray Book of Cheia Soap), which is a historic-themed gift set that evokes the look and feel of everyday life under communism in Romania. The set includes: a small statuette of the dictator, a bar of laundry soap, three bars of scented soap and a booklet, more precisely a folded piece of paper, with text on the inside and the dictator's photo on the cover. For marketing purposes, the product is intentionally designed to echo the utilitarian and austere character of soap products from that era, prioritizing functional effectiveness over sensory qualities, while using selected contemporary ingredients and minimal packaging to make the historical concept accessible and eco-friendly. This particular gift set is conceived as a narrative object that reconstructs the material culture of late socialist Romania through soap as an everyday artifact. Presented in a book-shaped, biodegradable box, the package mimics the austerity and the standardization of the 1980s domestic environment. Even the dictator's face on the packaging and on the cover of the booklet inside brings to mind the ubiqutous presence of Ceaușescu's portrait displayed everywhere during his reign. Rather than emphasizing indulgence or cosmetic performance, the set foregrounds historical memory and use-value, translating a period defined by scarcity into a curated, reflective gift experience that merges heritage storytelling with contemporary sustainable design.

According to the booklet (Fig. 4), *Cheia* was supposedly embraced during communism as a reliable, everyday commodity whose practicality was meant to symbolize the efficiency of a planned economy.



Moraliceste nimeni nu-şi poate ocoli propria istorie.
In istoria noastra, a **săpunului Cheia**, comunismul este acea perioadă gri, plină de constraste, care ne-a adus un maxim de notorietate. De care în propria istorie şi Procter&Gamble a avut parte în perioada războiului civil american.
Atunci, **pe Vremea lui Ceauşescu**, singurul etalon de producţie era **EFICACITATEA** produsului. Aspectele de plăcere în consum nu existau. Ambalarea deseori lipsea , era preluată de vânzătoare în hârtie reciclată.
Acest **pachet cadou** , rescrie prin sapun, acele Vremuri **pale, terne, gri,** lipsite de luciu.
În acea vreme, **pe Vremea lui Ceausescu**, sapunul **Cheia** era brand naţional produs de peste 2000 de angajaţi şi exportat în multe ţări străine.
Real era **săpun 100% săpun**, fapt pentru care calitativ era superior variantelor de import apărute după **Revoluţie**.
Pentru rescrierea acelor Vremuri, aceste produse contemporane sunt la fel de rudimentare ca atunci, sunt cele mai rudimentare din oferta istorică sau contemporană a noastră. Nu urmăresc plăcerea actului, nici alte funcţii bioactive .Urmăresc **eficacitatea** lor.
Legislativ nu mai putem respecta întru tocmai soluţiile acelor **Vremuri**.
Utilizînd ingrediente selecţionate şi adaos de aromă care nu se mai fură ca atunci, săpunurile actuale nu mai au acel miros greu de unturi
râncezite. În plus, respectînd principiul comunist al reciclării inseram pierderile tehnologice în produs obtinînd astfel, cele mai mici costuri posibile,
Pentru informarea consumatorului ambalăm produsele. În aceeaşi hârtie maculatură, **gri.** Manual. Fără atenţie la detalii. În aceleaşi culori **pale,mate şi terne,** ca atunci.
Aceste produse se lasă **colorate** sufletește de cei care atunci erau **Generaţia cu Cheia la gât**!
Sau **descoperite** de **copiii şi nepoţii** ei, pentru a înţelege o altă formă de existenţă, mai gri, mai pală, mai ternă !

From a moral stand, no one can avoid its own history.
In our history, **Cheia Soap**'s history, the communism era is seen as a **grey** timeline, full of constrains, an era that brought us a maximum of notoriety, a notoriety that can be compared to the one of Procter & Gamble had during the American civil war.
During **Ceausescu's times**, the only standard from a product was its own **EFFECTIVENESS**, whereas the pleasure aspects of consummation were not existent. Packaging was often missing; in its place, the sale person was usually just wrapping the product in recycled paper.
This **gift pack** rewrites through soap those **pale, dull, gray** days.
During those days, within **Ceausescu's times**, **Cheia Soap** was a national brand with over 2.000 employees and ran a highly profitable export to many foreign countries.
It was real soap, 100% soap, quality that made it far superior to all the other import variants that emerged after the revolution.
In order to precisely rewrite those times,the contemporary products are as rudimentary as then, making them the most rudimentary products from our market's past and present offer. They do not follow act pleasure or bioactive functions. They only follow their own **effectiveness**.
From a legislative stand, we are unable to follow precisely the same solutions they used to use during those days, therefore, by using selected ingredients, the current products have a different smell, not the one so infamous in past era, the old, powerful smell of rancid butters. We are however, following the communism principle of recycling, by inserting the technological losses within the product, thus obtaining the lowest possible cost.
For our customer's piece of mind, we do wrap your products. In **grey** paper. Handmade. Without special attention to details, using the same **pale, matte and dull** colors they used to use back in the days.
These products are made to the **colored** with the soul, by the ones who back then were the key around
The generation with the Key to the neck
their **children** or their **grandchildren** in order to **understand** and **experience** another form of existence,
greyer, duller, paler.

Figure 4. Two-page promotional flier in Romanian, with English translation, detailing the legacy of the Cheia brand during communism. Photo taken by the author.

BUPT

The branding did not necessarily focus on glamour or luxury; instead, it underscored its egalitarian values. In this incarnation, the soap was seen as a utilitarian product, valued for its effectiveness, hence its current association with a collective identity around the name of the product and not the product itself: the latchkey children, left on their own, with the house key around their necks, using a soap with no appeal, while their parents were busy building the socialist society!

Do they sell soap or ideology? Is this an attempt to whitewash the past? To re-write it? To rebrand it? To re-package it? What we have with the *Cheia* soap statuettes is a fascinating mix of commerce and cultural storytelling. Historical figures such as Queen Mary, Mihai Viteazul, Vlad Țepeș or Nicolae Ceaușescu are carefully selected and simplified, their messy, complex histories flattened into clean, visually appealing icons. These figures are then packaged into collectible artisanal objects, turning history into a tangible product. The soap itself becomes secondary to the story it tells: it sparks curiosity, evokes national heritage, and offers a sense of identity and continuity. Desire is gently engineered rather than organically discovered, so consumers are not just buying soap—they are buying symbolic belonging, a way to display and participate in a curated vision of the past. In the end, what we see is commodified memory: history transformed into décor, ideology wrapped in a consumable, and identity sold one scented statuette at a time.

Today, *Cheia* is no longer merely a soap brand—it is a cultural artefact, a symbol of a lost era that now holds renewed relevance. In a world increasingly concerned with natural products, authenticity, and sustainability, *Cheia* has been reimagined both as a relic and as a trendsetter. Its minimalist packaging and vintage aesthetic align well with global movements that value *slow living* and *conscious* as opposed to *conspicuous* consumption." Among the various reintroduced brands, *Cheia* serves as an example for understanding rebranding in a post-communist context.

However, this transformation is not devoid of contradictions. *Cheia*'s appeal rests in part on its commodification of memory. Consumers buying *Cheia* today are not just purchasing soap; they are buying into an alternate story—one that often sanitizes the struggles of life under communism in favor of a warm, filtered vision of the past. The rebranding has effectively turned *Cheia* into both a luxury good and a national symbol, sold in boutique stores, online platforms, and sometimes even exported as a piece of Romanian heritage.

The changes in the marketing narrative of *Cheia* reflect broader shifts in cultural values. The product now carries layers of meaning—it is at once a reminder of a collective historical memory and tentatively a contemporary symbol of cosmetic and spiritual self-care. This duality not only drives sales but also catalyzes discussions about the intersection of history and modern consumer culture. Yet, the ambivalence of a product coming from a gray world might mean more than just nostalgic rebranding.

BUPT

4. Cultural Rebranding

This transformation did not occur in isolation. Rather, it unfolded within a broader global climate marked by skepticism toward mass-produced consumer goods and a growing fatigue with hyper-commercialized branding. Consumers have increasingly gravitated toward products that promise simplicity, transparency, and a sense of rootedness. In this context, *Cheia*'s understated design and historical associations function as powerful semiotic tools. The brand does not announce its value through spectacle or abundance but communicates meaning through variety, need, and implication. What is marketed is not novelty, but continuity.

The so-called theory of the "movement of meaning" (McCracken, 1988) helps clarify this process. Cultural meaning, Grant McCracken argues, travels from the socially constituted world into consumer goods and from goods into individual lives. *Cheia* absorbs meanings associated with endurance, modesty, and national continuity, which contemporary consumers then appropriate as part of their self-narratives. The soap thus becomes a symbolic resource rather than a purely utilitarian object.

The renewed interest in *Cheia* also coincides with a generational shift in consumer priorities. Younger consumers in post-communist societies often experience a paradoxical relationship with the past. While they did not directly endure material shortages, political repression, or ideological control, they inherited the afterimages of those conditions through family narratives, domestic objects, and cultural memory. *Cheia*, as a tangible remnant of this past, offers a way of engaging with history without confronting its full weight. It allows for an encounter with the past that is intimate yet controlled, familiar yet (de)politicized.

This phenomenon can be understood through Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory*, which describes how later generations relate to experiences they did not live through directly but inherit via stories, images, and material culture (Hirsch, 2012). *Cheia* operates as a postmemorial object, allowing younger consumers to access the emotional texture of the communist period through mediated consumption rather than lived experience.

Among the various reintroduced brands, *Cheia* serves as an example for understanding rebranding in a post-communist context. Post-communist rebranding is not merely a marketing exercise but a cultural negotiation. After 1989, Romanian society experienced a radical restructuring of economic systems, social hierarchies, and symbolic values. Brands that survived from the communist period were often associated with scarcity, uniformity, and state control. Their revival requires a careful disentangling of material memory from ideological stigma. This process involves selectively retaining certain affective associations while discarding others deemed incompatible with contemporary values.

Furthermore, the collapse of socialism produced not only economic restructuring but also a profound symbolic vacuum. In this vacuum, objects from the socialist era were either rejected or re-signified (Verdery, 1996). *Cheia*'s revival

BUPT

exemplifies this "reordering of value," as a product once defined by necessity and lack of choice is reclassified as authentic, ethical, and desirable.

Brands such as *Eugenia*, *Rom*, and *Dero* have undergone similar processes of nostalgic rehabilitation. In a sense, post-communist nostalgia in Romania is not only about political longing, but it also reflects a desire for social coherence, predictability, and moral legibility—qualities perceived as lacking in the post-transition period (Mihăilescu, 2020). *Cheia* fits well within this logic, offering symbolic stability in a fragmented cultural landscape.

Unlike Western heritage brands that emphasize uninterrupted tradition, *Cheia*'s narrative is one of interruption and rediscovery. Its revival is framed not as continuity but as recovery—an act of cultural remembrance that acknowledges absence and loss. This framing mirrors the broader post-1989 experience, in which Romanian society has had to reconstruct identity from fragments rather than inherit it intact.

Svetlana Boym's distinction between *restorative* and *reflective nostalgia* is particularly useful here (Boym, 2001). Restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct a stable, idealized past, while reflective nostalgia dwells in ambivalence, longing, and loss. *Cheia*'s branding oscillates between these two modes, offering comfort and familiarity while avoiding direct engagement with historical trauma.

The hardships of scarcity, lack of choice, and systemic control are reinterpreted as simplicity and resilience. Material limitation becomes aesthetic minimalism. What was once imposed necessity is reframed as intentional restraint. This aestheticization does not necessarily deny historical suffering, but it renders it emotionally manageable and commercially viable.

Concepts such as *sites of memory* (Nora, 1989) and *memory culture* (Huyssen, 2003) further illuminates this shift. In late modernity, memory increasingly circulates through aesthetic and commercial forms rather than through institutionalized history. Objects like *Cheia* function as portable sites of memory, embedding historical narratives in everyday routines rather than public commemoration.

The changes in the marketing narrative of *Cheia* reflect broader shifts in cultural values. The product now carries layers of meaning—it is at once a reminder of a collective historical memory and a contemporary symbol of cosmetic and spiritual self-care. This duality not only drives sales but also catalyzes discussions about the intersection of history and modern consumer culture. The incorporation of self-care into *Cheia*'s narrative is particularly revealing, particularly as a *technology of the self* (Foucault, 1988) which helps explain how such practices encourage individuals to regulate themselves according to dominant cultural norms. Currently, self-care has gained prominence in response to burnout, alienation, and the pressures of economic productivity. By associating a historically utilitarian product with rituals of care and mindfulness, *Cheia* is repositioned within a therapeutic discourse. It is as if washing with *Cheia* becomes not just a hygienic act, but a moment of reflection, authenticity, and reconnection with self and heritage. The same is true when eating a *Rom* chocolate bar or an *Eugenia* cookie, riding a *Pegas* bike or driving a *Dacia* model.

BUPT

5. Conclusion

This essay analyses the economic and cultural reinterpretation of communist brands as part of a larger phenomenon dealing with communist nostalgia. Scholars such as Ruxandra Cesereanu (2003) and Lucian Boia (1997) explored how post-communist cultural production negotiates trauma through aesthetic distance and emphasized Romania's ongoing struggle with historical myth-making, by noting the tendency to replace critical historiography with emotionally resonant narratives. In this sense, *Cheia*'s branding contributes to a "soft" mythology of the past, privileging affect over analysis. Rather than confronting the violence and repression of the past directly, cultural artifacts often translate these experiences into symbolic or metaphorical forms. *Cheia* participates in this broader cultural strategy by transforming historical endurance into sensory familiarity. This ambivalence may reflect a deeper cultural tension between abundance and a sense of belonging. While contemporary consumer culture offers unprecedented choice, it often lacks symbolic depth. Objects like *Cheia* reintroduce a sense of belonging, even if that meaning is selectively constructed. Thus, *Cheia* forces us to confront how memory is negotiated in everyday life. It demonstrates how history can be softened, aestheticized, and made intimate—but also how it continues to shape identity and desire. The soap's quiet presence on a bathroom shelf becomes a site where private ritual and collective memory intersect.

Ultimately, *Cheia*'s revival is not simply a marketing success story but a cultural case study. It reveals how post-communist societies grapple with memory, how consumer culture absorbs critique, and how nostalgia functions simultaneously as comfort and distortion. Whether *Cheia* represents meaningful engagement with history or a convenient myth depends less on the product itself than on the conversations it provokes, and the critical frameworks applied to it. This cultural repackaging raises critical questions: What does it mean to long for products from a time of hardship? Is nostalgia being exploited for profit? And what does this say about the economic behavior and cultural taste of contemporary consumers, especially younger generations who may never have lived under communism but still feel emotionally connected to its material culture? For younger generations, the communist period exists primarily through mediated forms: family stories, photographs, domestic objects, school curricula, and popular culture. *Cheia* offers a tangible connection to this inherited past without requiring direct confrontation with its political realities. It allows for engagement without responsibility, intimacy without accountability. However, as the INSCOP survey shows, nostalgia for the communist past is on the rise, a worrying trend which reflects both a desire to engage selectively with history while avoiding its ideological weight and a mechanism to cope with the difficulties of daily life.

References

Boia, Lucian. 1997. *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*. București: Humanitas.
Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
Cesereanu, Ruxandra. 2003. *Imaginarul violent al românilor*. București: Humanitas.

BUPT

Foucault, Michel. 1988. *Technologies of the Self*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1992. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Huyssen, Andreas. 2003. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
INSCOP Research. 2025. *Prezentare INSCOP: Raport sondaj comunism*. Accessed July 22, 2025. inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/22.07.2025-Prezentare-INSCOP-Raport-Sondaj-Comunism-1.pdf.
McCracken, Grant. 1988. *Culture and Consumption*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Mihăilescu, Vintilă. 2020. *Socio-hai-hui prin Arhipelagul România*. Iași: Polirom.
Nora, Pierre. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26: 7–24.
Săpunul Cheia. n.d. sapunulcheia.ro.
Verdery, Katherine. 1996. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

BUPT