

## Granny bakes cakes: grandmothering and consumption in food brands

### A avó que faz bolo: representações da avosidade e do consumo em marcas de alimentos

Luis Mauro Sá Martino<sup>1</sup> 

**ABSTRACT:** Given the growing use of grandmother's images in homemade cake brands, this paper analyses the characteristics of cake factories' brands in order to outline some aspects of the relationship between grandmotherhood, branding, and consumption. Based on the analyzes of their websites, it was possible to observe that brands employ grandmothering as strategy to add a particular symbolic value to its products that develops threefold: (1) they place the product into a larger picture of what is to be an idealization of grandmothering; (2) they associate the figure of grandmother with old age, love, and caring, which manifests in the food; and (3) they kindle a nostalgia of an idealized past evoked by the figure of the grandmother. These elements are discussed against a background of social consumption and age studies.

**Keywords:** *grandmothering; grandmothers; consumption; brand; cakes.*

<sup>1</sup>Faculdade Cásper Líbero, Faculdade Paulus de Tecnologia e Comunicação, Fundação Escola de Comércio Álvares Penteado – São Paulo (SP), Brazil.

Editors: Gisela Grangeiro da Silva Castro , Maria Collier de Mendonça  and Milena Freire de Oliveira-Cruz 

**RESUMO:** Diante da crescente utilização da figura de avós em marcas de bolos caseiros, este artigo analisa as características das marcas das fábricas de bolos para delinear alguns aspectos da relação entre avosidade, marcas e consumo. Baseado na análise de suas páginas na Internet, foi possível observar que as marcas trazem a avosidade como estratégia para agregar um valor simbólico especial aos alimentos, o que se desenvolve de três maneiras: (1) insere o produto na representação do que seria uma idealização da avosidade; (2) associa a figura da avó à velhice, ao amor e ao cuidado, manifestados na comida; e (3) desperta uma nostalgia de um passado construído, evocado pela figura da avó. Esses elementos são discutidos à luz de estudos sobre consumo social e faixa etária.

**Palavras-chave:** *Avosidade; avós; consumo; marca; bolos.*

## Introduction

According to data from a 2024 CNN Brazil report, every month, two of the largest cake franchises, Casa de Bolos and Fábrica de Bolos Vó Alzira, sell nearly 2,250,000 cakes. The text treats these data as part of what it calls the “boom” of homemade cakes in Brazil (CNN BRASIL, 2024). Beyond the numbers, the two brands share a common element: the reference to the grandmother figure. In the case of Fábrica de Bolos Vó Alzira, the reference is in the brand name, whereas Casa de Bolos refers to the theme on the company’s history page. At the same time, an exploratory look at the sweets market — in some cases, at stores scattered throughout the city — reveals this association also in other brands such as Bolo da Vovó, Bolos da Vó Lola, Doces Vó Nena, and Vovó Palmirinha Doces, as well as Vó, quero bolo!. This recurrence gives rise to a question: why associate grandmothers with this type of product? Why have these brands — which, it should be noted from the outset, do not constitute a statistical sample, but merely an exploratory one — chosen to explore this relationship? What symbolic values may be attached to it?

The concern at the origin of this paper stems from the observation of the progressive presence, in the urban landscape of several cities, of cake shops that associate “grandmother” with a branding narrative as a sales strategy. In choosing this type of brand, there were interconnections related to gender and age group in the figure of the “grandma”, which should also be considered as an evocation of memory issues from an imagined collective past.

Methodologically, an exploratory approach was adopted using search engines on websites and social media platforms, employing the terms “bolo” (cake) and “vovó” (grandma), as well as related expressions such as “doce” (sweet), “vó” (granny), and “avó” (grandmother). Contextual information was also sought to select the most representative brands for the study. These two procedures made it possible to define a corpus which, without claiming statistical or demographic representativeness,

exhibits the necessary characteristics for the conduct of a qualitative analysis of the brands.

From this survey, the online pages and accounts were searched for the section related to each brand's history, usually titled "Our history" or "Who we are". The texts presented were then analyzed based on the unfolding dimensions of the general research question, with these histories being treated as markers of brand strategy (WOTTRICH, 2017).

The construction of the theoretical framework sought to follow some clues presented by the empirical object, working from Bourdieu (2005; 2019) in order to understand the notions of "age range" and the arbitrariness implicit in it, as well as from hooks (2022) and Federici (2018) in order to understand gender issues and the link with memory and affectivity. It is worth noting that the text does not seek to provide a more developed interpretation of the authors' ideas, but rather to employ their conceptions in the interpretation of the object from the entry points present in the analyzed brands. Therefore, there is no section dedicated to conceptual discussion; instead, the concepts are presented in their interconnections with the object. The aspect related to brand entrepreneurship, due to its importance, would require more space than is possible in one article and is thus reserved for further discussion — for this debate, see Han (2018).

In what follows, the text is divided into three parts:

- (1) the strategy of combining the expressions "cake" and "grandmother" within a sense of "comfort" in the consumption of the product;
- (2) the perspective of grandmotherhood and old age in the use of the term "grandmother";
- (3) how this combination triggers the idea of an idealized past and a memory that add symbolic value to the brands.

Each of these developments activates some specific concepts for the proposed interpretation.

## The connection between food and grandmotherhood

A first aspect to understand the brand's symbolic strategies is to observe the linguistic components involved in the construction of the name. Beyond any possible triviality, the expression “grandma's cake” encompasses an intersection of components that points to a specific reading and the practice of consumption, focused on the delineation of its symbolic aspect.

The first component of the expression, “cake”, is one of the oldest human foods, made primarily of flour, eggs, milk, yeast, some type of fat, usually vegetable oil or butter, and sugar. Mixed in various proportions, these ingredients are oven baked and served after cooling. Variations based on this initial component potentially extend to infinity.

The versatility of the recipe and its possibilities for adaptation opens up the possibility of multiple forms of social use. It allows the food to be present in a range of situations and consumption conditions: as says Bourdieu (2005; 2019), there are a series of arbitrary factors involved in the decision-making regarding the allocation of a given good within the context of symbolic consumption; a closer observation makes it possible to understand how the associations established between the product and its social use are interwoven with various layers of meaning.

Human eating practices are far from being a sole answer to a biological need. They take on a series of ritual and symbolic aspects associated with the act of eating (RÉGNIER; LHUISSIER; GOJARD, 2006). A meal can be considered a microcosm of the social environment in which each of its elements reveals, in part, the lines of force present in its composition.

One of these may be the individuals involved in the act: who is eating? Who takes, or can take, part in a meal? One does not eat with just anyone, anywhere. Being present at a meal also means the exercise of the right and possibility — inequality in food distribution relegates countless human beings to food insecurity and exclusion, so that the simple act of eating something already implies a position in the social sphere.

When this threshold of food insecurity is crossed, that is, from the moment there is the possibility of choosing the food, it is possible to observe

some more symbolic aspects with which food is imbued. This movement can be made from two other related questions: when and what is eaten (RÉGNIER; LHUISSIER; GOJARD, 2006).

As a symbolic element, food becomes endowed with a series of regularities, necessarily accompanied by prohibitions, responsible for framing its social use: the word “cake” is related to moments such as breakfast or an afternoon snack, and remains excluded from lunch and dinner, except as a dessert — and, even then, not just any type of cake would be offered in that situation.

This can be perceived, even at an initial level, through the frequent adjectivations of the word “cake”, suggesting not only its direction towards this or that occasion, but also presupposing specific differences in its composition and appearance.

For example, the expression “wedding cake”, “bridal cake”, or “birthday cake”, instead of indicating something about the composition of the food, as in “chocolate cake” or “cornmeal cake”, suggests something about the social ritual for which it is intended and where it can be consumed: “The aroma coming from the oven that invaded the street made it clear that this was a special moment that would become unforgettable” (VÓ, QUERO BOLO, n.d., n.p., author’s translation)

What, then, would be the specificity of a “grandmother’s” cake?

Unlike adjectives referring to flavor, such as “chocolate” or “cornmeal”, or to the occasion of consumption, such as “birthday” or “wedding”, the expression refers to the sphere of production: “grandmother’s” in the sense of having been made by a particular social group. This is the type of symbolic association that may be analyzed through certain questions about the expression — and, in this sense, dismantling what Bourdieu (2019) calls “mental automatism” requires flirting with the challenge to the most elementary common sense: why “grandma’s cake”? What would make “grandma’s cake” different from “mother’s cake” or “aunt’s cake”? These questions, which might seem obvious — or even absurd at first glance — allow us to observe how the arbitrary elements of the social tend to be considered as foundations for truths legitimized by

their very use: in a hypothetical society in which the aunt occupied the social place of grandmotherhood, the “aunt’s cake” could be endowed with the same characteristics attributed to “grandma’s cake”.

The products related to this semantic field suggest a connection to an idealized and somewhat “simpler” world from an imagined “good old times”.

And so, contrasting with the complexity of contemporary life and the hectic pace of the modern world, the simplicity of homemade cake has been gaining increasing prominence, allowing our customers to enjoy special moments with loved ones, strengthening bonds and fostering relationships. (CASA DE BOLOS, n.d., n.p, author’s translation)

At this point, “grandma’s cake” would appear to be a relatively “simple” way — also considering that “simple” and “complex” are relative terms within a possible range — to prepare food geared towards a lighter meal. It is in this sense that another aspect of the association with grandmotherhood present in these brands can be explored. This leads to the next item.

### **The condition of grandmotherhood as part of the brand**

At first glance, being a grandmother is one of the modalities of contemporary aging. However, it is necessary to immediately problematize the association between “grandmother” and “old age”: biologically, the perspective of “being someone’s grandmother” does not necessarily imply a connection with the idea of “old age” insofar as both conditions constitute social constructs of a relational nature. It is therefore worth considering that the effectiveness of the construction “grandma’s cake” may be related to the strength of the symbolic association between two presuppositions: every grandmother is “old”, and “old age” has a single valid definition for all people.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference when considering the elderly, people who are white, black, or Indigenous, as well as gender issues and

the intersections related to access to goods and services. Thus, problematizing old ages presupposes important distinctions, conceived through the intersection of viewpoints and lived experiences. (PAVIN; TELLES, 2023, p. 7, author's translation).

“Grandmotherhood” is a relational category connected to an age-related characteristic, and one possible analytical path is to understand these two categories. This aspect of the social bond becomes visible when considering, at the level of common sense, that a grandmother is primarily defined by the existence of granddaughters and grandsons. The legal validity of kinship indicates that the consanguinity in a direct lineage, spanning two generations, characterizes the condition of being someone's grandparent (ANJOS *et al.*, 2019; FRANÇA; AGUIAR, 2025; ROSA, 2018).

The brands draw on broader conceptions of the resonances of this notion within society. The symbolic strategy of allocating the idea of “grandmother” comes into play within an intertwining of social perceptions surrounding the meaning of the expression: it is associated with categories referring to a constant affective regime linked to grandmotherhood, understood as a continuous exercise of “love”, “warmth” and “affection”, the latter associated with care.

Thus, in the brands analyzed, there is a connection of meanings in which a woman above a certain age — two other debatable arbitrary categories—would be endowed with positive characteristics that would qualify her as “granny”, “grandma” or “grandmother”.

In this sense, is it possible to question the gendered dimension of the association: why grandmothers? None of the brands analyzed uses “grandpa's cake” as a brand name: the age-based association is permeated by a strong gender marker, anchored in centuries of history, in which the division of labor is at the center of the issue.

Following Federici (2018; 2019), this is a contemporary manifestation of a millennia-old conception regarding the reduction of women to domestic work, resulting from their allocation to the domestic sphere



and the corresponding tasks, such as caring for children, cleaning, doing laundry and, more closely related to this study, cooking. According to Federici (2018), domestic work refers to practices little valued or not valued at all, contrasting with the symbolic value placed on caring for the public sphere. Although it is not part of the empirical object of this research, the description of Doces Vó Nena evokes this sense of grandmotherhood:

In the founders' childhood, coconut candy was already part of their most memorable moments. It made the visits to Aunt Helena's house not only very pleasant but also delicious. It was a fundamental part of all the lists of items that the family patriarch, Mr. Hamilton, was supposed to bring back home, or rather, to the farm, there in Maracás, Bahia, in the late 1980s. (DOCES VOVÓ NENA, n.d, n.p., author's translation)

It is possible to address the association of "grandmother" with the notion of old age more directly. The analyzed brands translate these two notions interchangeably through their iconography: the grandmother is represented with some traits culturally identified with an elderly person. The social meaning of this type of representation refers to what seems to be an expectation, reinforced by the brands, that the exercise of a certain type of grandmothering, referring to the caring act of preparing food — in this case, a cake —, would take place in more advanced stages of life.

As for the grandmothers, these figures are still recognized in a romanticized way, seemingly destined to offer advice and comfort to their grandchildren. It is forgotten that they are also human beings, with unfinished stories, with ambivalent and poorly processed feelings toward their own parents, like any other human being. (PINTO; ARRAIS, BRASIL, 2014, p. 47, author's translation).

This perspective deserves some exploration.

In a study dedicated to the theme of generations, Mannheim (1993) develops some aspects of this concept, taking as a starting point the perspective that the term designates a specific type of sociability that could

not be reduced to a “group” in the sense of people sharing common interests. A generation is certainly endowed with several common aspects shared by individuals who were born more or less at the same time and who, therefore, share the same historical moment, experienced within the particular conditions of each person and collectivity.

A generation, for Mannheim, refers to people who, because they were born in a close time interval, share some of the characteristics of that moment. Generation is a dimension of the field of common experience responsible for characterizing human groups as such, especially insofar as they share the same events of their time — from the point of view of the individual and the groups, the time of a generation is “their time” (for example, in the sense of the common expression “in my time...”) and is thus distinguished from both those who came before and those who will come after.

That sound of the “old” gate opening, the pitter-patter of excited little feet running down the hallway, and shouting: “Grandma, I want cake!”, “Grandpa, soda!”. It didn’t even seem like that boy had traveled 300km with his parents to visit his grandparents in the city of Jaú (VÓ, QUERO BOLO!, n.d., n.p., author’s translation)

This allows an understanding of the relational nature of the concept of generation: they will be “new” or “old” according to the possible definitions at a given moment in the linearity of time. Every “new generation” tends to become, at some point, the dominant generation. Then, after an interval of one or two decades, this dominant generation — occupying the main decision-making positions in its respective fields — eventually becomes the “old generation”, facing the emergence of a new one. As Oliveira, Vianna, and Cárdenas (2010, p. 463) indicate, “old age is a multifactorial concept, encompassed not only by biological and chronological transformations but also by social and cultural issues.”

This means considering that the attribution of meaning to old age associated with grandparenthood, understanding them from the representations of markers, is based on an assumption of generational division

in which the “grandmother” necessarily refers to a social age model and is, to some extent, supported by demographic regularity: having a granddaughter or grandson is a social marker of the passage of time historically associated with old age. “Grandparents are mostly listed in Brazilian demographic surveys as elderly, and they provide a preface to the aging of the population and also to family changes in contemporary times” (SILVA; CORREA, 2014, p. 125).

In this way, associating “grandma” with “old age” is a symbolic strategy for the social positioning of a group — and, in branding terms, for associating it with other representations that, taken together, contribute to the construction of the layers of meaning involved in the product’s creation. This placement grounded on a generational marker could lead to another question: what aspect of temporality does the product seek to address? This leads to the next section of the text.

### **Speaking to “granddaughters and grandsons”: brand addressing**

The use of the idea of “grandma” by the analyzed brands allows one to consider to whom this type of communication is addressed — not in terms of what might be considered the product’s target public, for the purposes of this article, but rather in terms of its broader resonances in society. The choice of an image-discursive representation to be associated with a product involves complex decision-making in advertising — there is nothing gratuitous or random in the association of old age with grandmothering and the consumption of a particular type of food, namely cake. In other words, it would be possible to ask — with some formal freedom — for whom grandma bakes her cake. Beyond any anecdotal tone, the question helps to elaborate the symbolic layers built upon the product indicated in the previous items.

What does the image of an “old” person mean? A signifier endowed with multiple dimensions and the object of disputes in everyday life, the word “old” and its correlates, such as “old age”, “aging” and “old person”,

form part of a vocabulary surrounded by taboos in society. As Jane Prétat (1997) recalls, old age is rarely valued in contemporary Western society, and is, to a large extent, the object of what the author describes as the “horror” of what is old and of the representations associated with this condition.

The range of medical treatments, therapies, and aesthetic procedures, whether cosmetic or pharmaceutical in nature, offered to delay — or even interrupt — the aging process suggests that the pursuit of eternal youth has as its counterpart the fight against old age (MARTINO, 2022; 2025). In an interview with Mendonça and Castro (2016, p. 153), researcher Laura H. Clarke indicated that “there is increasing pressure on men and women to display a youthful appearance, framed within a narrative of successful aging that has been adopted by gerontologists, pharmaceutical companies, and consumer culture on a global scale”.

It would be possible to ask why, in an ageist society in which the horror of old age and aging are intertwined, beyond the discursive dimension, in a whole set of practices and services aimed at maintaining eternal youth, companies choose grandmotherhood as an image for their brands. It might seem, at first glance, almost paradoxical: in a society that overvalues youth, choosing a grandmother as a brand image would entail an immediate risk of failure. According to Mendonça and Ferreira (2014, p. 121), “new approaches emerge from the field of audiovisual representations, which point to the existence of differentiated old age, and one of the forms of differentiation occurs through gender.”

If, from a relational perspective, the idea of “grandmother” finds its complement in the notion of “granddaughter/grandson,” it may not be wrong to think that the consumer is addressed in this way by the brand. If the cake is made by “grandma”, the complementary figure in the space of representations circulating in society would be a granddaughter or grandson. While the field of production is linked to a possibility of old age, the expectation of consumption deals

with the image of granddaughters and grandsons. The representations linked to the grandmother, in the space of cake production, awaken a memory — real or imagined — of childhood as a happy, almost idyllic time, in which a dedicated grandmother made cakes with a simplicity that becomes part of the representation: the cake was then as simple as life. An idealized old age corresponds to an idealization of childhood.

What would this childhood be like? The discourse of the brands suggests an idealized one, far from any issues — such as gender, class or race — that could deny this image:

Who doesn't have some childhood memory that brings tears to their eyes just by remembering those moments that have been immortalized in our minds, almost always linked to the taste and aroma of that delicious homemade cake? (VÓ, QUERO BOLO!, n.d., n.p., author's translation)

Nostalgia for a time not lived is a powerful contemporary consumer product, especially when fueled by a sense of reclaiming an imaginary past happiness (BAUMAN, 2023). Nostalgia tends to highlight the positive aspects of the past within an idealized perspective. There is also an association with a specific image of “grandma”: an advertising professional, quoted by Mendonça and Ferreira (2014, p. 129), remarks that “in an ad in which the family is present, ‘grandma’ is always represented by a figure with white hair and blue eyes (preferably), and not by a younger grandmother, more similar to the bodily characteristics of the Brazilian woman”.

Faced with a past constructed in this positive way, the sense of the passage of time always implies a loss, expressed in phrases such as “back then was better...” or “in my time it was better...” and similar ones. Since this past is no longer accessible, it is possible to elaborate and re-elaborate it according to the demands of the present: as such, discourse about the past is always mobile and approximate (BAUMAN, 2023).

There is a work of memory present in the association between grandmotherhood and food. Evidently, not all relationships between grandmothers and grandchildren were good, and even less so were they associated with the preparation of specific dishes. When one takes into account the fact that most households are headed by women and that the condition of being a grandmother does not alleviate the burden of women's work in any way, if it does not increase it, the figure of a "granny who bakes cakes" is associated not only with nostalgia, but above all with a constructed memory:

**VÓ, QUERO BOLO!** was born from its founder's desire to preserve those memories and moments that are truly important in our lives—situations that seem simple and commonplace, but which only over time reveal their magic and charm. (VÓ, QUERO BOLO!, n.d., n.p., author's translation)

Memory, as summarized in previous studies (JELIN, 2019; MARTINO, 2022), is a process in which issues of brain biology and culture intertwine. Far from automatic, memory is a mental activity in constant dialogue with perception and imagination (HALBWACHS, 1993). Socially, remembering and forgetting, and deciding what will be remembered or forgotten, are closely linked with political aspects regarding what—and how—will be remembered, preserved, recovered, or even constructed, in contrast to what will be lost. Due to memory's proximity to imagination, it is entirely possible to remember, in good faith, something that never happened.

The transmission of cultural memory, life stories told through photos, food recipes or songs, and commensality, for example, value the elderly, give them a place of importance and bring motivation. (MOURA; PIRES, 2025, p. 12, author's translation).

Socially, the association between imagination and memory also reveals that history, as a discourse, might legitimize and delegitimize people and groups according to the conditions of a given moment:

remembering and forgetting, as historical and social factors, contribute directly to the understanding of which present will be remembered — and in what way (RICOEUR, 1978). The example below presents the figure of the grandmother in this context:

The year was 2010. The world was still feeling the effects of the 2008 economic crisis. With one of her sons unemployed, Grandma Sonia's family, like all Brazilians, was also struggling to meet their financial obligations. The children considered starting their own business, facing the challenge of creating something that would involve an attractive investment, engage the family, and be enjoyable. Since it was already a family tradition to gather around the table for afternoon tea, always with a warm cake fresh from the oven made by Grandma Sonia's talented hands, the children saw that they could bring these special moments into the business world. (CASA DE BOLOS, n.d., n.p., author's translation).

Thus, the use of “grandma's cake” refers to the temporality of an imagined memory, linked to a time — which may never have existed — with more care and less concern, framed by the grandmother's affection objectified, among other things, in the preparation of a certain food. “The relationship between social memory and grandmotherhood can be built collectively, in the exchanges of knowledge and recollections that grandmotherhood creates and, at the same time, are remembered” (PAVIN; TELLES, 2023, p. 19).

If there is a politics of memory related to what will be socially remembered, under what conditions, and what will be forgotten, it is also worth noting, with Jelin (2019), a symbolic economy of memory referring to the social forms of consumption of the past. Nostalgia presents itself as a symbolic good capable of being added to a variety of goods and services insofar as, by presenting itself as an idealized version of the past, it can quickly counteract the problems of the present. The nostalgic affection of an imaginary grandmother, in the cake brands analyzed, refers to a solid, long-lasting type of

relationship based on mutual love — the ritual of preparing and sharing a cake returns here in this guise.

When considering the conditions of existence of affective relationships in contemporary times, based on hooks (2023) or Bauman (2005), the remembrance of a love free from difficulties and, in a way, accessible, presents itself as a symbolic value to be added to the brand. Its manifestation in the cake reinforces this type of bond, working not in the sphere of the past as it was, but in the desire for a past as one would like it to have been.

## Conclusions

The association between grandmotherhood and consumption in cake brands allows for some interpretations of the commercial success of this connection. In the same way that, throughout the text, it was possible to locate a symbolic aspect in its production, a perspective on the social uses of food was observed, objectified in a certain ritualism in the social act of eating a certain type of cake. Grandmotherhood, framed in terms of the figure of the “grandma”, refers at the same time to a regime of affections and to a collectively imagined memory of a past presented as “simpler” than contemporary complexity.

A quintessential product of some contemporary fast-food models, the snack, while presumably excluded from “serious” meals, confers upon the “grandmother’s cake” certain almost playful aspects derived from its association with this type of occasion, which may be understood, at least partially, as the interruption of a flow of activities for a brief moment of eating. However, it is important not to take too far a perspective based on the social allocation of cake consumption without considering that this allocation is also related to the type of food involved: just as there are various types of cake, there is a wide variety of situations for which they are intended — a point that deserves further attention in future studies.



Thus, the consumer gets a sense of belonging in the nostalgia of an idealized past, perhaps unreal but no less strong for that. This dynamic is reinforced by the presentation of the bond with a grandmother who, in the transition of age groups, may demographically refer to childhood and even, ultimately, to a specific family model in which the relationship between grandmother, granddaughters and grandsons is close enough to allow the sharing of a common type of meal: in this case, the snack for which a cake is prepared. But not just any cake — “grandma’s cake”.

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## About the author

*Luis Mauro Sá Martino*: Graduated in Communication from Faculdade Cásper Líbero, with a Master's and PhD in Social Sciences from Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo. He was a research fellow at the School of Political, Social and International Studies at University of East Anglia (2008–2009). He is a professor at Faculdade Cásper Líbero, Faculdade Paulus de Tecnologia e Comunicação, and Fundação Escola de Comércio Álvares Penteado. Email: lmsamartino@gmail.com

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