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Rebranding the past: The revival of Unitra as a cultural and nostalgic brand in contemporary Poland

Rebranding przeszłości – odrodzenie Unitry jako marki kulturowej i nostalgicznej we współczesnej Polsce

Abstract

The Polish brand Unitra, once a flagship of domestic hi-fi electronics during the socialist era, has recently returned to the market in a symbolically charged form. Revived by Michał Kiciński, co-founder of CD Projekt, Unitra is no longer merely a relic of the past but a premium brand deeply embedded in discourses of national pride, technological nostalgia, and cultural revalorization. This paper explores the cultural dynamics behind the reactivation of Unitra, analysing how owners and consumers engage with and contribute to the brand's new meaning. Using a case study enriched by critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper examines how narrative representations reconstruct the symbolic legacy of Unitra. The analysis contributes to the literature on cultural branding, nostalgic consumption, and post-socialist brand heritage by situating the revival of Unitra within broader cultural shifts in Polish society.

Keywords

marketing communication, cultural branding, retro branding, heritage branding, discourse analysis

JEL: M30, M31, M37

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing scholarly and commercial interest in the revitalisation of historical brands (Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016; Halwani, 2021; Mähnert et al., 2024; Urde et al., 2007). These branding efforts are often closely linked to wider processes of the renegotiation of collective identities (Brown, 2001; Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012;

Streszczenie

Polska marka Unitra, w okresie PRL flagowy producent krajowej elektroniki hi-fi, niedawno powróciła na rynek w szczególnym kontekście symbolicznym. Reaktywacja marki dokonana przez Michała Kicińskiego, współzałożyciela CD Projekt, wznowiła Unitrę nie tyle jako relikw przeszłości, lecz jako markę premium głęboko osadzoną w dyskursach dumy narodowej i nostalgii technologicznej. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje kulturowe mechanizmy stojące za ponownym uruchomieniem marki, koncentrując się na tym, w jaki sposób właściciele i konsumenci współtworzą jej nowe znaczenia. Wykorzystując metodykę studium przypadku wzbogaconą o jakościową krytyczną analizę dyskursu, artykuł bada, w jaki sposób dyskursy publiczne rekonstruują symboliczne dziedzictwo Unitry. Artykuł stanowi wkład do literatury dotyczącej brandingu kulturowego, badań nad nostalgią konsumencką oraz dziedzictwa marek w kontekście postkomunistycznym, osadzając fenomen Unitry w szerszych przemianach kulturowych zachodzących we współczesnym polskim społeczeństwie.

Słowa kluczowe

komunikacja marketingowa, branding kulturowy, retrobranding, branding dziedzictwa, analiza dyskursu

Merlo & Perugini, 2015). Yet, within the Polish or Central and Eastern European context, this line of inquiry remains significantly underexplored (Grębosz, 2016), despite a growing number of relevant cases emerging in the region. In the Czech Republic, the Favorit car, once a hallmark of socialist industrial design, has been revived (Dalecki, 2025), while in Romania, the resurrection of the Pegas bicycle brand mirrors a similar trajectory (Gilet, 2017).

A compelling case that illustrates the relevance of this phenomenon in Poland is the revival of the Unitra brand. Once the flagship electronics consortium of the Polish People's Republic, Unitra has re-emerged under the leadership of Michał Kiciński, co-founder of CD Projekt (a leading Polish company in the gaming industry). The brand, long associated with domestic innovation and the engineering aspirations of the socialist state, had largely vanished in the wake of the systemic transformation. Its recent comeback is taking place amidst broader cultural shifts, including a renewed appreciation for domestic craftsmanship and a widespread societal desire for Polish brands to regain international relevance (Koryś, 2024; Piatkowski, 2018).

The goal of this study is to explore the case of Unitra as a means to examine the cultural mechanisms that underpin retrobranding in a local, post-socialist context. The analysis addresses thus the following questions: (1) What cultural meanings are attributed to the revived Unitra brand by contemporary Polish consumers? (2) What discursive mechanisms and narratives support the brand's reactivation? Drawing on Douglas Holt's (2004, 2016; Holt & Cameron, 2010) theory of cultural branding, particularly his genealogical method of brand analysis, this study situates Unitra within a broader literature on retro and heritage brands (Brown, 2001; Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012; Dion & Borraz, 2015; Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016; Merlo & Perugini, 2015). Here, Unitra is understood not merely as a commercial entity, but as an identity brand that responds to the symbolic needs of contemporary Polish consumers (Serwański, 2021). Its current cultural resonance aligns with discourses of nostalgia, national pride, and symbolic recognition, discourses that carry particular weight in semi-peripheral postsocialist societies (Dunn, 2008; Hoyer, 2023; Koryś, 2024; Wallerstein, 1976). These symbolic meanings emerge from a network of cultural texts, including brand communications, consumer narratives, media representations, and institutional discourses, all of which shape the cultural legitimacy of the brand's reactivation.

The study adopts a qualitative methodological framework, combining case study research (Czakoń, 2016c, 2016b) with critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995, 2013) to reconstruct the multi-level genealogy of the Unitra brand (Holt, 2004). This approach enables the analysis of both brand communication and the broader cultural and socioeconomic discourses that surround it. Empirical material includes press coverage, marketing content, and user-generated commentary on social media, with particular attention to moments of symbolic intensity, for example, public responses to the bankruptcy of Diora (a historic partner of Unitra) (Czuba-Skarżyńska, 2025) or the controversy over

the repainting of a vintage Unitra mural in Wałbrzych (Węgrzyn, 2025).

This article contributes to three key strands of research in marketing and consumer culture. First, it advances the theory of cultural branding (Cayla & Arnould, 2008; Heilbrunn, 2005; Holt, 2003, 2004; Pineda et al., 2022) by contextualising it within the underexplored region of Central and Eastern Europe (Serwański, 2021, 2023). Second, it deepens scholarship on heritage and retro brands (Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012; Dion & Borraz, 2015; Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016; Merchant & Rose, 2013), illustrating how brands are not only managed as assets but are actively reconstructed as cultural heritage by consumers themselves. Third, it shows how identity brands emerge from the affective, political, and ideological tensions present in societies undergoing systemic transformation.

The article is structured as follows: the following section outlines the historical trajectory of Unitra, from its socialist prominence to its post-1989 disappearance and contemporary revival. This is followed by a review of the relevant theoretical frameworks, including cultural branding, heritage branding, and retro branding. The subsequent methodology section details the application of Holt's genealogical method (Holt, 2004; Testa et al., 2017) and critical discourse analysis. Finally, the empirical section presents the brand "genealogy" of the Unitra brand.

Historical context: The rise, fall, and revival of Unitra

The Unitra brand (pol. *Zjednoczenie Przemysłu Elektronicznego i Teletechnicznego* – the Unitra Association of Electronic and Telecommunications Industry) was established in 1961 as a state owned union comprising several dozen Polish electronics manufacturers (Kaczyńska, 2020). During the socialist era, it emerged as a flagship symbol of national technological competence. Unitra's diverse product portfolio, including radios, amplifiers, turntables, cassette tape recorders, and televisions, became ubiquitous in Polish households. At the same time, export activities bolstered the international visibility of Unitra devices, particularly within the Comecon bloc (an abbreviation of Rada Wzajemnej Pomocy Gospodarczej – the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), but also in select Western European markets, where products were sold under alternative brand names.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Unitra assumed a unique symbolic role – it embodied the modernizing aspirations of the Polish People's Republic, expressed a form of technological patriotism, and conveyed the desire to participate in global progress despite systemic limitations. Its most iconic achievement

from this period was the WSH 205 amplifier (Czuba, 2023). Although Unitra did not function as a brand in the contemporary marketing sense, it was an umbrella name encompassing production facilities such as Diora, Fonica, Kasprzak, and Eltra, it became a metonym for the domestic electronics sector. For generations of Polish consumers, Unitra products were more than utilitarian devices; they represented pride and admiration.

The systemic transformation initiated in 1989 brought radical change. The dissolution of the Unitra association resulted from a combination of privatisation processes, factory bankruptcies, and the influx of technologically superior Western products. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Unitra effectively disappeared from public view, both as a manufacturer and as a brand. Although products from legacy factories like Eltra continued to function (Kaczyńska, 2020), they did so without a unifying brand identity or coherent strategic positioning.

The first attempt to revive the brand occurred in 2014, when the Unitra name was reregistered and briefly reintroduced (Suchocki, 2014). At a press conference marking the reactivation, new products were showcased under the Unitra name, including in-ear headphones and a tube amplifier. The event was staged with nostalgic flair, referencing the communist period, guests were served Turkish-style coffee in traditional glass cups (Suchocki, 2014). However, the initiative failed to gain traction among consumers, and the brand fell silent for nearly a decade. One possible explanation is that the headphones marketed under the Unitra brand were manufactured in China, which may have clashed with consumer expectations regarding domestic production (Kosiński, 2014).

The last revival occurred in 2021 and marked a substantial shift in both aesthetics and business model. Spearheaded by Michał Kiciński, co-founder of CD Projekt, this renewed initiative sought to reposition Unitra as a premium audio brand. New products such as amplifiers, headphones, and analogue turntables retained stylistic references to the design codes of the Polish People's Republic, while simultaneously meeting the quality demands of contemporary audiophile markets. The brand's communication strategy emphasized its precision craftsmanship, analogue nostalgia, and pride in Polish industrial heritage (Kubasik, 2023).

Unitra's resurgence coincided with a broader cultural trend in Poland celebrating industrial motifs. The revalorization of national competence, particularly in sectors such as electronics that had been virtually dismantled after 1989, reemerged as a salient theme in public discourse (Piatkowski, 2018). A symbolic flashpoint occurred in 2025, when the Diora factory in Świdnica declared bankruptcy. The ensuing negotiations between Unitra and the

bankruptcy trustee generated intense media coverage and emotional public response. The episode was framed as an effort to "rescue heritage" and reestablish industrial continuity (Czuba-Skarzyńska, 2025). A more charged episode followed: a local dispute over the removal of a historical Unitra-Diora mural from a tenement in Wałbrzych (Węgrzyn, 2025). The reactivation of Unitra was thus not merely a business decision, it became part of a broader cultural discourse on a renewed form of economic patriotism. As demonstrated in the following sections, the brand has been redefined through the interplay of consumer discourse, media narratives, and strategic branding practices.

Conceptual background

Cultural branding and socio-cultural meaning of brands

Theory of cultural branding emphasizes that strong brands are built by forging deep connections with the national culture (Holt, 2004, 2006b; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Testa et al., 2017). Iconic brands succeed not merely through product features or emotional benefits, but by embodying identity myths and cultural values that resonate with society. They compete with other cultural products, like films, songs and books for its identity share by addressing collective tensions and ideals. From a CCT (Consumer Culture Theory) research stream perspective (E. J. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; E. Arnould & Thompson, 2018; Rokka, 2021), brands are thus seen as cultural artifacts and symbolic resources (Hatch & Rubin, 2006; Heller, 2016; Holt, 2006a; Smith & Speed, 2011; Spry et al., 2021). Their value emerges from socio-cultural meanings attached to them by consumers, not just from functional attributes. In the contemporary economic paradigm, products and services do not primarily serve a functional purpose for consumers; rather, they primarily signify something within the social reference systems (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson, 1997). In practice, this means that reviving a dormant brand requires tapping into relevant cultural narratives and myths. Research on "sleeping beauty" brands (Dion & Mazalovo, 2016), formerly beloved brands that went dormant, shows that a key success factor in revival is how the brand resonates with the collective memory of a community. In a new market context (such as reviving a legacy brand in contemporary Poland), the brand must connect with local cultural values, historical nostalgia, or national identity to unlock its latent potential. In short, brand revitalization is not just a marketing exercise but a cultural one: the resurrected brand must mean something

compelling in today's culture, allowing consumers to identify with it in light of their shared histories and values (Serwański, 2023).

Brand heritage as a component of brand equity

The heritage of a brand, its history, longevity, and values, has been recognized as a valuable brand asset. Indeed, Aaker (1997) was among the first to identify brand heritage as a component of brand equity, presaging a stream of research that treats heritage as a distinct facet of branding (Boissieu & Chaney, 2024; Mähner et al., 2024; Taha & Abdelfattah, 2023; Wiedmann et al., 2011). Urde, Greyser, and Balmer define brand heritage as “a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in an organizational belief that its history is important” (Urde et al., 2007, p. 3). In essence, a heritage brand is one that embeds its value proposition in its history and traditions. Such a brand can be deliberately positioned as timeless and is perceived to carry enduring meanings from the past into the present and future. This is how Bernard Arnault, CEO of the LVMH Group, conceptualized brand heritage, recognizing that its timeless quality is exceptionally difficult to cultivate: “The problem is that the quality of timelessness takes years to develop, even decades. You cannot just decree it. A brand has to pay its dues – it has to come to stand for something in the eyes of the world” (Wetlafuer, 2001 p. 122).

However, from a postmodern perspective, brand heritage emerges as a more ephemeral and mutable phenomenon than the aforementioned statements imply (Holt, 2006a, 2018), and is by no means timeless, as this study of Unitra will demonstrate. Rather, it is deeply embedded in historical context and shaped by sociocultural transformations. Its cultural significance expanded during the communist era in Poland, experienced a sharp decline during the democratic transition, and has witnessed renewed growth in recent years, contingent upon shifting definitions of the consumer context.

Regardless of these disputes, brand heritage contributes to brand equity by strengthening stakeholder trust, authenticity, and loyalty (Aaker, 2004; Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016). A storied history gives consumers a sense of a brand's reliability and authenticity, which can differentiate it from less established competitors (Dion & Borraz, 2015). Studies find that a rich heritage provides a basis for building trust and can even reduce perceived purchase risk (Urde et al., 2007). For example, a long-standing legacy signals that the brand's core values and quality have stood the test of time, which can justify premium pricing and inspire consumer loyalty. Heritage “holds value for the customer and

other stakeholders, is specific to the brand, and difficult for competitors to imitate”, thereby leading to sustained brand equity (Dion & Borraz, 2015 p. 77–78). It also adds an aura of sincerity to the brand image (the sense that the brand stands for something), and often brings perceptions of authenticity and credibility to marketing communications (Merchant & Rose, 2013). In short, heritage enriches the brand's symbolic capital, a particularly important consideration when reactivating lapsed brands.

Over the past two decades, academic literature has deepened our understanding of brand heritage. Researchers have examined the core attributes that constitute brand heritage and make it salient. For instance, Banerjee (2008) and Urde et al. (2007) explored the pillars of brand heritage, such as a brand's history, core values, and consistency over time, that imbue it with meaning. Other studies have investigated consumers' perceptions of heritage brands: how consumers respond to brands with long-standing legacies or historical symbolism (Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012; Merchant & Rose, 2013; Rose et al., 2016). Findings generally show that consumers often perceive heritage brands as premium, trustworthy, and authentic, which can positively affect brand preferences (Merchant & Rose, 2013; Wiedmann et al., 2011). Further work has looked at how brands leverage their heritage through marketing actions, for example, maintaining historical narratives in communications, preserving founding values, or curating vintage imagery and archives (Dion & Borraz, 2015; Urde et al., 2007). This stream of research underscores that actively managing a brand's heritage can strengthen its equity and differentiation in the marketplace.

Retrobranding and the revival of “sleeping beauty” brands

Industry practitioners often refer to long dormant brands with nostalgic appeal as “sleeping beauties” (Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016). This metaphor highlights that while the brand has been “asleep” (absent from the market), it retains latent equity and allure that can be reawakened. Classic examples include luxury or heritage brands that went out of business for years and were later revived by new owners (e.g. Orient Express). Managers use the term sleeping beauty to denote a dormant brand with strong heritage and unrealized potential in consumers' minds. Such brands are no longer active commercially, yet consumers may still conjure up memories or positive associations linked to the brand's past. In the context of the Polish market, one might think of legacy brands from the communist era or early post-communist 1990s that disappeared but left behind a cultural imprint, these could be considered

sleeping beauties awaiting revival. For instance, the legendary Pani Walewska creams returned to the market in 2024 (Żelazowska, 2025).

To revive a sleeping beauty brand, companies typically pursue one of two broad strategies: brand revitalization or retrobranding (Hallegatte, 2014). Both approaches start from the same point, an old brand associated with the past that needs a comeback, but they diverge fundamentally in execution and in the intended relationship between the brand's past and present. Brand revitalization aims to modernize the brand, bringing it decisively into the present day. It is updated to contemporary tastes and standards, and while it may nod to its history, the goal is to shed any "old-fashioned" image and reframe the brand as relevant for modern consumers. As Hallegatte explains, "brand revitalization brings the brand into the present" (2014, p. 10), refreshing its sources of brand equity and creating new ones so that an outdated brand is transformed into a contemporary brand. This often involves renewing the product line, redesigning logos or packaging with a modern look, and launching updated marketing campaigns.

Retrobranding, in contrast, deliberately retains and even reinforces the brand's association with the past. Rather than updating the brand to be completely modern, retrobranding finds value in the nostalgia itself. As Hallegatte puts it, "retrobranding keeps, and occasionally reinforces, the association with the past" (2014, p. 11). In other words, the past is not something to overcome but something to celebrate and leverage as the central selling point. It involves relaunching the brand as a kind of homage to its own history. The resurrected product or brand identity intentionally evokes earlier eras, through vintage designs, old logos or mascots, revival of product recipes, or heritage storytelling. Crucially, this does not mean simply reissuing an old product without changes. Often they combine old fashioned forms with cutting-edge functions to harmonize the past with the present. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) describe Volkswagen New Beetle relaunch, which was engineered with modern automotive technology but styled closely after the 1960s Beetle and even advertised with a cheeky slogan, "Less flower. More power", nodding to its hippie roots.

From a consumer culture standpoint, retrobranding leverages the power of nostalgia in consumption (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019; Merchant & Rose, 2013). Nostalgic brands enable consumers to reconnect with the past, whether it's their own youth or a by-gone time, and this can evoke powerful emotions. Studies confirm that nostalgia has a tangible impact on consumer attitudes (Merchant & Rose, 2013). For example, a comparative study of young consumers in France and Poland found overwhelmingly

positive responses to nostalgic brands, especially those considered "generational" (i.e. brands emblematic of the consumers' parents' or grandparents' era) (Grębosz, 2016). Even consumers with no lived experience of a brand's heyday can develop affection for the romanticized image of that past.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that reviving a brand in today's market calls for a keen understanding of cultural branding and heritage. A dormant brand's history can be a source of value, either as inspiration for a refreshed brand image, or as the core of a retro appeal. Cultural branding theory reminds us that brands become icons by fitting culturally and historically significant narratives. Heritage branding research provides the tools to identify what past attributes and values make a brand special. And retrobranding research distinguishes the strategic choices in how the past is used, to reinvent the brand for the present, or to intentionally transport consumers into the past. A successful brand reactivation, especially in a context like Poland with its unique historical backdrop, will likely blend these insights. By doing so, marketers can transform a "sleeping beauty" into a thriving contemporary brand that still feels like an old friend.

Methodology

This study was conducted within the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes understanding the social world through the subjective experiences and meaning making processes of individuals (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992, 2016; Kostera, 1996). Rather than seeking universal laws, this approach grounds explanation in the lived reality of social actors, their consciousness, interpretations, and symbolic interactions (Thompson, 1997). It assumes that social reality is constructed through meanings and intersubjective relations, and that the role of the researcher is to uncover how these meanings emerge, function, and evolve (Bogunia-Borowska, 2004; Hałas, 2006, 2013; Hirschman, 1986). An interpretive and qualitative orientation is therefore essential for capturing the complexity and embeddedness of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than reducing it to decontextualized variables.

The primary research strategy employed was the case study method (Czakon, 2016c, 2016a). This approach is empirical and inductive in nature, enabling a detailed and holistic examination of a single case, often chosen for its uniqueness or complexity. The case study methodology allows for an in depth understanding of a phenomenon within its real-life context and supports the integration

of diverse data sources, such as archival materials, media content, and social media commentary. It is particularly well suited for exploring how and why a phenomenon unfolds in a specific way, making it valuable for investigating emerging or undertheorized topics. In this study, the selected case is the brand Unitra. Its marketing communication, as well as the cultural narratives surrounding its revival, serve as the focal point of analysis.

The second methodological pillar is critical discourse analysis (CDA), an interdisciplinary approach situated at the intersection of linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies (Duszak & Fairclough, 2008; Fairclough, 1995, 2013; Warzecha, 2014). CDA is concerned with uncovering the ways in which language constitutes and reproduces power relations, ideologies, and social structures. It involves analysing how discourse, broadly understood as systems of meaning embedded in texts, narratives, and communicative practices (Dijk, 1990), functions as a medium through which societal norms and hierarchies are negotiated and sustained (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2011). CDA operates on three interrelated levels (Fairclough, 1995). At the micro level, it examines textual features such as vocabulary, metaphors, rhetorical structures, and narrative strategies. At the meso level, it explores discursive and intertextual practices, including how texts are produced, disseminated, and received, as well as how they reference and recontextualize other cultural materials. At the macro level, it analyses broader sociopolitical and historical conditions, including institutional ideologies, economic systems, and power dynamics that shape and are shaped by discourse. This framework allows for a comprehensive examination of how brand narratives both reflect and participate in wider social processes (Serwański, 2021).

These two approaches, case study and CDA, are integrated through the lens of “brand genealogy”, a method developed by Douglas Holt, dedicated to the cultural analysis of brands (Holt, 2004). Holt proposes a historical and hermeneutic approach to brand analysis that moves beyond static or psychological conceptions of brand meaning. Instead, he argues for a cultural perspective, whereby brands are understood as dynamic entities that engage with and are shaped by evolving social tensions and ideologies. Genealogical analysis involves also a three-tiered framework. The first level concerns the analysis of the brand’s communications, advertisements, social media, promotional narratives, and other textual artefacts, aligned with the micro level of CDA. The second level focuses on the cultural discourse surrounding the brand, identifying intertextual references (e.g., news articles, films, music, historical or public events or personas) and tracing patterns of meaning that circulate across

society. This phase draws on qualitative interpretation, the iterative comparison of diverse cultural texts to reveal narrative structures or symbolic logics. The third level involves situating the brand within its broader sociopolitical and economic context, taking into account historical trajectories, systemic constraints, and macro level developments that condition both brand messaging and consumer reception. This iterative and reflexive process allows the researcher to triangulate findings across levels, culminating in a multidimensional account of how the brand acquires and transforms meaning over time (Hatch & Rubin, 2006; Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Testa et al., 2017).

In sum, the methodology adopted in this study combines the case study method (to enable close empirical engagement with a single phenomenon) and critical discourse analysis (to examine the interplay between text, context, and ideology) within an interpretive epistemological framework. This combination facilitates a genealogical reconstruction of the Unitra brand, shedding light on the historical transformations of its cultural meaning. Rather than conceptualizing the brand as a fixed identity in the minds of consumers (Aaker, 1991; K. Keller, 2002, 1993), this approach views it as an evolving cultural object, embedded in, and responsive to broader social discourses. Such a methodological stance enables a more nuanced and context sensitive understanding of branding as a cultural practice.

Findings

The resurgence of the Unitra brand, once a hallmark of Polish electronics during the communist era, defies simplistic explanations based solely on the creation of durable and distinctive associations in consumers’ minds (Keller, 1993, 2003). When approached through the lens of socio-cultural theory (Fournier et al., 2008; O’Guinn & Muñoz, 2005; Thompson, 1997), which situates consumer behaviour within historically evolving cultural frameworks, the phenomenon becomes more comprehensible. Unitra’s contemporary positioning, rooted in nostalgia and the ideology of technological patriotism, has enabled the creation of an identity platform that facilitates engagement with consumers around local sociohistorical tensions.

In recent years, there has been a notable intensification of discourses surrounding national pride in Poland’s economic and technological achievements, particularly in the domains of industry, innovation, and exports (Piatkowski, 2018). These narratives extend beyond media commentary or state economic policy; they increasingly permeate consumption

practices and brand narratives (Belk, 1988; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Schau, 2018). In the case of Unitra, these dynamics have contributed to the emergence of what Holt and Cameron (2010) term an identity market, a cultural strategy context in which brands function as symbolic tools for negotiating cultural tensions and redefining collective identity (Serwański, 2021, 2023). Official brand communications, consumer generated content, and broader media representations consistently articulate the perceived potential of Polish engineering, pride in domestic production, and a symbolic reconnection with Poland's industrial legacy. Upon returning to Poland, an astronaut Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski, emphasized the social importance of his mission, stating: "It is incredibly important that engineers and scientists are visible in the public sphere" (Uznański-Wiśniewski, personal communication, 2025). Such statements reflect a clear reversal of the postsocialist peripheral narrative identified by Dunn (2008). Where earlier narratives were often marked by an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West, contemporary discourse emphasizes the affirmation of local competence, occasionally taking the form of symbolic revanchism.

This reconstruction of a national production ethos positions Unitra as a conduit for the myth of industrial continuity and resilience, a response to the collapse of domestic industry following the 1989 transformation (Dunn, 2008, 2017). From a critical discourse perspective, particular attention must be paid to the use of terms such as "our", "Polish", "real", and "handmade", which are frequently juxtaposed against disparaging descriptors of globalized goods such as "Chinese junk", "plastic rubbish", and "mass produced Western imports". These binary oppositions create symbolic boundaries that distinguish authentic, local, and rooted brands from placeless alternatives.

Within this discursive configuration, the revival of Unitra aligns with the core principles of cultural strategy practice (Holt & Cameron, 2010). The brand functions as a cultural resource through which consumers navigate the ideological tension between a socialist past and a capitalist present. Notably, the narrative of "unfulfilled potential" is frequently invoked, a cultural myth suggesting that Poland could have become a global technological leader were it not for geopolitical constraints and the disruptions of post-1989 market reforms (Lipiński, 2025). While such a myth resists resolution in terms of objective truth or falsehood (Napiórkowski, 2018), it persists as a potent symbolic resource. Through both consumer narratives and the brand's own communication strategies, Unitra facilitates not only the purchase of a product but also a collective act of symbolic restitution through market engagement (Belk, 1988).

The historical background of aspirations for the restoration of national industry

The long-term suppression of Polish scientific and technological development, rooted in the legacy of the 18th-century partitions and further entrenched in the period after World War II, constitutes a critical cultural backdrop for contemporary practices of retrobranding and brand genealogy in Poland (Butterwick-Pawlikowski, 2020; Koryś, 2024). As Douglas Holt (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010) asserts, brands achieve cultural iconicity when they effectively interpret and symbolically address social tensions. In the Polish context, a particularly salient tension revolves around the narrative of lost national innovation potential, commonly referred to as the myth of "burnt inventions" (pol. *spalone wynalazki*) (Lipiński, 2025).

This narrative draws upon a series of well-known historical examples of abandoned technological initiatives, including the Mikrus microcar (only 1728 units were manufactured), the stifled development of Poland's own computing industry, and the technologically subordinated status of Polish electronics within the RIAD (Unified System of Electronic Digital Machines) framework, an initiative led by the USSR and Comecon countries. Collectively, these episodes have been woven into a cultural memory that casts Polish industry as both a victim of external geopolitical dependency and a reservoir of domestic ingenuity that was never fully realized. Importantly, as noted by economic historian Wojciech Morawski (cited in Lipiński, 2025), responsibility for these missed opportunities lies not solely with foreign actors such as the Soviet Union, but also with internal political and economic elites.

A genealogical analysis of the discourses surrounding brands such as Unitra reveals that this historically rooted trauma now serves as the foundation for contemporary demands for symbolic restitution. In this light, the revival of so-called "sleeping beauties" (Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016) is not simply an exercise in nostalgic branding, but rather a manifestation of a deeper desire to redress historical injustices through cultural means (Michalak, 2023). Within this framework, the symbolic reactivation of an industrial brand, fulfils a therapeutic function and enables the restoration of collective dignity. A notable example is a 2025 promotional campaign by a Warsaw based developer, which highlighted the industrial heritage of the Służewiec district. In marketing materials for a new residential investment, the area was described as "Silicon Valley (1970–1990)," with a specific reference to the "legendary Unitra factory" (Archicom, 2025). This invocation illustrates how the brand has been embedded in the local memoryscape as a marker of technological prestige.

Unitra's identity market. Consumption as an expression of pride

These sociocultural phenomena contribute to the emergence of an identity market surrounding Unitra (Serwański, 2021, 2023). In such a market, consumer choices are driven less by pragmatic utility and more by a desire to make symbolic declarations about personal identity and cultural values (Schau, 2018). Brands such as Unitra, but also the reactivated Błonie (a Polish watch manufacturer) function as emblems through which consumers express pride in their national heritage and in Polish technological accomplishments.

These brands' marketing strategies align with the principles of cultural brand strategy (Holt & Cameron, 2010), centred on the creation or revitalization of iconic brands embedded in collective identity narratives. The Błonie watches, for instance, are positioned for consumers who appreciate uniqueness and nostalgic elegance. The brand's creators openly acknowledge that "they compete with sentiment and the desire to stand out, because it's cool to have a Błonie watch on your wrist" (Licner, 2014). Similarly, Unitra's contemporary products, such as amplifiers and turntables, offer more than technical functionality; they carry historical and identity value. Presenting itself as a bridge between tradition and modernity, Unitra situates its offerings as both a reference to the golden era of Polish audio and as high-quality equipment suitable for the 21st century (Unitra, 2025). Objects featuring aesthetics from the Polish People's Republic serve a dual function: for older generations, they evoke nostalgic memories; for younger ones, they act as tools for identity construction and engagement with the history of Polish design.

These celebratory strategies are not without its critics. Across social media platforms, sceptical voices challenge what they perceive as myths propagated by the branding campaigns. Some commentators point out that Unitra was not originally a standalone brand but a union of manufacturing companies such as Diora and Tonsil, arguing that a logo alone cannot recreate the quality of the past (niecodziennyszczon, 2023). Others voice concern over the authenticity of the reactivation, fearing a recurrence of earlier disappointments: "just like when Tonsil came back, ordinary Chinese stuff with a different sticker," laments a user on the Polish platform Wykop (KolorowyWielkiSwiatPolski, 2023). Further critiques depict the project as megalomaniacal and economically unviable: "15,000 PLN for an amplifier to start with? Who will buy it? Make something budget-friendly with good sound. Something that will beat Nady, Audiolab or Magnat ma900" (Dżudas-q8o, 2023); and "This is a business where the cards are dealt by large

corporations, mostly Asian, based on semi-free labour, which themselves have great difficulty selling because the market is saturated" (Marek_B, 2023). These counternarratives highlight the presence of ironic, cynical, and disillusioned perspectives that contest the legitimacy of Unitra's cultural strategies. Yet supporters push back, arguing that Unitra operates under a different philosophy, one grounded in local production and product durability. These exchanges reflect a broader discursive struggle over the meaning and authenticity of the brand. It is important to recognize that during the early years of Poland's economic transition, many Poles themselves contributed to the devaluation of domestic products in favour of Western alternatives. As one online commenter recalls: "People who were used to communist brands often producing crap looked at Western and Asian brands with unthinking admiration. I know because I was like that myself. Polish? That's definitely crap. Technics is better. Sanyo is better. Goldstar is better" (Blogoslawiony-Twarozyc, 2023). This statement illustrates the depth of the post-1989 crisis of confidence in domestic production.

Discourse on engineers as national heroes

A recurring theme in contemporary public discourse is the growing appreciation for Polish "engineering thought" as well as the country's manufacturing and craft traditions (Kubasik, 2023). The reactivation of the Unitra brand has become a salient symbol of this trend. When Unitra's return to the market was first announced, the media heralded it as "a cult Polish company, the pride of the 1970s and the dream of many Poles" (Kubasik, 2023) now resuming the production of audio equipment in Warsaw. The initiative's stated mission is to restore the former prestige of domestic audio production. For instance, one video on Unitra's official channel describes the relaunch as "more than just a refresh of the historic logo, it is a tribute to Polish engineering and an attempt to restore its rightful place in the modern world of technology" (Unitra, 2025). The narrators of these promotional materials are often the engineers themselves.

Within the discursive framing adopted by brand co-authors Adrian Krupowicz and Michał Kiciński, a clear contrast is drawn between Poland, as a historically underappreciated country with significant engineering potential, and the West, which dominates the global market due to financial and logistical advantages. "I wanted to do something in my country and show that it was done here," declares Krupowicz. "What interested me most was missing; electroacoustics disappeared from Unitra's field of interest" (Żebruń, 2023). According to the framework of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough,

1995), such statements participate in the construction of collective subjectivity, where the figure of the Polish engineer becomes a vehicle for expressing regained agency. Thus, the return of Unitra is not merely a business project but also an attempt to restore the voice of under-recognized specialists.

Public reception has been largely enthusiastic. As one user expressed: “Gentlemen, respect. Finally, made in Poland” (s.g.7848, 2023). Notably, one of Unitra’s former engineers also voiced support for the brand’s revival: “I am one of the few surviving employees of the design office at Diora in Dzierżoniów. I was the designer of almost all tape recorder mechanisms, starting with the MMS 101, then the MMS 102, 103, and subsequent models. I worked at Diora for 28 years. I was very pleased to hear about the revival of the Unitra brand. I hope that production will be launched and the brand will reappear on the shelves” (Ćwirko, 2023). Such comments illustrate how the reactivation of Unitra resonates not only with consumers but also with individuals directly involved in its legacy, reinforcing its role as a vehicle for both nostalgia and industrial pride. The new Unitra employs also a team of young engineers, operating its own production facility, and conducting advanced testing in-house. As one of the brand’s representatives remarked, “If we encountered a problem, we simply solved it. We came up with many solutions, such as a way to switch the buttons in the amplifier with a remote control. We also manufactured the arm and motor for the turntable ourselves” (Czuba, 2023).

Of particular note is the emphasis on domestic competence and the conscious decision to avoid outsourcing production to Asia, a common industry practice. While this strategy increases production costs, it also preserves the brand’s cultural positioning and supports its authenticity claims. As Daniel Kostrzewa of the new Unitra points out, “our products, from concept to final result, are made in Poland” (Czuba, 2023), despite the economic incentives to produce more cheaply in China. This rhetoric represents a reversal of a longstanding inferiority complex in which Polish engineers were framed primarily as low-cost labour for Western corporations. Now, they are presented as creators of high-quality products within their own country.

The discourse also underscores the continuity of Poland’s engineering legacy. Contemporary projects are framed as heirs to the technological achievements of the past, even if some users with a “good memory” acknowledge the mixed quality of products during the communist era. The brand tends to adopt a positive stance toward that era, frequently referencing the traditions and technical successes of the PRL while simultaneously distancing themselves from its negative political

connotations. A telling example appears in Michał Kiciński’s messaging: even in an anti-communist household, owning a Unitra Radmor radio in the 1970s was seen as “a breath of modernity” and a source of pride in possessing world class equipment (Kubasik, 2023).

Technology as a vehicle for cultural dignity

The nostalgic revival of Unitra, as any cultural brand, was driven by broader sociocultural conditions, specifically, a local discourse centred on the restoration of national agency. This discourse became particularly visible during the widely publicized participation of a Polish astronaut in an international space mission. It represents the third and broadest contextual layer in the cultural positioning of brands, as articulated by the methodology of brand genealogy (Holt, 2004). From this perspective, the spaceflight of Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski may be interpreted as the apogee of Poland’s reawakened collective aspirations.

In summer 2025, the event was widely commented upon in public discourse, especially in the media, where it was framed through rhetoric of national pride and Poland’s symbolic reentry into “great history.” Particularly notable is the statement made by the President of Poland, who declared that “the Republic is once again becoming part of great history” (Sucharska, 2025). The phrase “once again” implies a prior rupture, presumably during the communist period, marked by systemic subordination and the marginalisation of national ambitions, as evidenced by previously abandoned computing, aviation, and automotive projects (Lipiński, 2025). Uznański’s participation thus became a form of symbolic compensation for decades of technological exclusion. This symbolic function closely parallels Unitra’s attempt, through branding practices, to recover the prestige and agency lost during the post-1989 transformation and subsequent market “colonisation” by Western brands.

It is telling how profoundly the narrative of spaceflight was embedded in questions of identity. The President’s statements notably focused not on the mission’s scientific contributions, but rather on its “deep symbolic dimension” and capacity to “inspire young Poles” (Sucharska, 2025). This aligns with Holt’s (2004) model of the mythological function of cultural symbols, which are deployed to work through social tensions, in this case, Poland’s exclusion from the domains of global modernity. The rocket, in this narrative, becomes a vehicle for national pride, a symbol that asserts “we can,” that “we exist” not only on the margins, but as legitimate participants in the global order. Uznański’s flight is thus part of a broader cultural discourse

which, as demonstrated in the Unitra case study, centres on the symbolic reclamation of economic agency. Both discourses, of space conquest and of retro branding, share a common ideological logic. They affirm that Poland is not merely a consumer of global progress, but also its co-creator, within the most advanced technological frontiers.

The dream of global Polish brands

With the resurgence of respect for domestic industry comes a renewed aspiration for the emergence of strong Polish brands capable of competing on a global scale. In both media and business discourse, particularly on platforms such as LinkedIn, which brings together professionals and industry experts, there is a clear emphasis on achieving lasting success internationally. As Michał Kiciński, primary investor in Unitra, states: “The company’s task is to show that it can create audio equipment that competes with the best brands in the world” (Czuba, 2023). Early reports on Unitra echoed this sentiment: “There is enormous faith in the success of the Polish brand,” highlighting the hope that it would once again gain international recognition (KGŁ, 2023). This ambition also resonates in other nostalgia driven ventures. The creators of the revived Błonie watch brand openly assert that they intend to leverage “Polish sentiment” (Licner, 2014) as a strategic asset while striving to deliver quality on par with leading global competitors.

Consumers often reveal a latent aspiration for a strong Polish technology brand capable of competing with Western counterparts. As one of them noted: “The revival of Unitra was probably a dream of many people. If I were filthy rich, I would gladly revive it myself. Just as we see Bose or Harman logos on good audio systems in Audi or BMW cars, in my dreams, Izera will feature Unitra/Tonsil” (924Tomek, 2023). Another express a desire for Unitra “to be a Polish NAD” (referring to NAD Electronics, the Canadian high-end audio manufacturer) (Domster, 2023), and declare: “Finally, we can show what we can do” (TuSzczecin, 2023). Those statements underscore the symbolic void in Poland’s industrial imagination, a gap that reactivated brands like Unitra strive to address.

The discourse surrounding Unitra’s reactivation consciously distances itself from the brand’s earlier revival attempt in 2014, which partially relied on the rebranding of imported Asian products (Kosiński, 2014). “It hurts me that «Born in Poland» does not mean the same thing as «Made in Poland»,” remarked Adrian Krupowicz in a public statement. Michał Kiciński reinforced this stance: “Importing finished products from China was out of the question” (Żebruń, 2023). These remarks constitute a discursive rejection of globalist production mod-

els, presenting them as both culturally inauthentic. In their place, an alternative vision of national capitalism is constructed, based on local manufacturing and control of technological processes.

Heritage stewardship in practice. Unitra’s attempt to rescue Diora

In summer 2025, the public was informed of the bankruptcy of Diora Świdnica, one of the oldest and most recognisable Polish consumer electronics brands, which had operated continuously for nearly 80 years (Czuba-Skarżyńska, 2025). As a consequence of the bankruptcy, 115 employees were laid off, and the future of the plant, along with its technological achievements, was cast into uncertainty. In response, Unitra publicly declared its willingness to take action to preserve Diora. As Daniel Kostrzewa, president of Unitra, emphasised: “Diora is not just a brand, it is a piece of history and thousands of hours of work by Polish craftsmen, engineers and technicians. We will do everything we can to ensure that this story does not end in an obituary” (Czuba-Skarżyńska, 2025).

These statements go beyond PR rhetoric. They reflect a broader cultural shift in the perception of brands, which, as exemplified by the Unitra case, are no longer seen solely as carriers of market value but increasingly as institutions with responsibility for the preservation of national heritage. Unitra’s involvement extends beyond symbolic gestures. The company has initiated formal discussions with Diora’s bankruptcy trustee, expressing its readiness to provide both financial and operational support. This marks Unitra’s transition from a reactivated brand into an entity engaged in active industrial and social intervention. As Kostrzewa noted, “We simply cannot remain indifferent to this situation” (Czuba-Skarżyńska, 2025).

This stance aligns with the broader discourse of economic patriotism analysed throughout this paper, discourses that have been gaining traction in contemporary Polish society (Piatkowski, 2018). At the same time, Unitra’s intervention may be interpreted as a form of brand activism (Moorman, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020) rooted in local values. As such, the brand moves from a nostalgic symbol to a form of social institution and emerges as an active actor, one that not only commemorates the past but also intervenes in its trajectory.

The conflict over Unitra Diora’s mural as a discourse of resistance

Also in 2025, a local dispute emerged in Wałbrzych concerning the overpainting of a longstanding advertisement that had adorned one of the

city's tenement buildings for decades. The inscription, which reads "HiFi radio for everyone. Unitra Diora," was replaced with a new mural depicting a character from children's and young adult literature (Węgrzyn, 2025). While the project was received with enthusiasm by children and some local residents, many older inhabitants of Wałbrzych voiced their opposition to what they perceived as the erasure of a symbol of the city's industrial heritage. Users commented: "The Unitra advertisement was timeless. Certain mementos of our times should be cherished," and "I remember this advertisement from my childhood. I would prefer it to be restored rather than these daubs" (Węgrzyn, 2025). From the perspective of discourse analysis, as employed in this study, the conflict over the mural reveals more than an aesthetic disagreement. It exposes a deeper interpretation struggle over the value of the past (and the products from the past) and exemplifies how brands, especially those rooted in industrial heritage, can become flashpoints in disputes over collective memory.

Discussion

A sociocultural analysis of Unitra's revival, presented in this study, reveals how heritage and cultural branding operates as a vehicle for identity driven desires and tensions in Poland. The brand has been consequently reimagined as a retrofuturistic and ideological symbol that resonates with national pride, the desire for local agency, and a resistance to global competition. A discourse centred on Polish economic achievements, particularly in industry and technology, combined with a renewed desire for domestic products and services, has facilitated the emergence of a robust identity market (Holt, 2004, 2016; Holt & Cameron, 2010; O'Guinn & Muñoz, 2005). In this context, brands such as Unitra are no longer perceived merely as consumer goods, but as narrative devices through which stories of Polish creativity and ambition are told. Its revival strategy relies on embedding the brand within broader cultural and historical frameworks which enables consumers to express their identities and aspirations through brand affiliation (Schau, 2018).

Within these discourses, the aspiration for a globally competitive Polish brand acquires symbolic significance. The success of such a brand serves as a collective affirmation that "Poles can do it" at the international level. Crucially, this success is expected to stem not only from nostalgic appeal, but from genuine product quality, reflected in an emphasis on engineering excellence. Whether this combination of sentiment and ambition will result in

sustained market performance remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the popularity of positive narratives surrounding Polish creativity signals a deep cultural need for recognition and appreciation of domestic craftsmanship. In this sense, a new economic myth appears to be materializing: the myth of a strong Polish brand capable of shaping consumer choices through symbolic power. However, nostalgic narratives can also obscure the historical ambivalence of the socialist era, selectively idealizing the past in response to contemporary identity needs.

The main contribution of this study lies in positioning the reactivation of Unitra as a compelling case at the intersection of cultural branding and retrobranding (Brown, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016) within the underexplored context of postsocialist societies. Unlike in Western retrobranding, local setting is more likely to evoke imaginaries of modernity, progress, and belonging in societies marked by geopolitical marginalisation.

Thus, the study yields three primary conclusions. First, the symbolic capital of local industrial heritage remains a potent resource in brand revitalization. Unitra, originally a state owned conglomerate in communist Poland, evokes not only retro charm but also a collective memory of national agency (Lipiński, 2025). This aligns with prior research on retrobranding (Brown et al., 2003; Hallegatte, 2014), which underscores the importance of historical authenticity and emotional resonance in consumers' brand evaluations. Second, consumer discourse, as captured in online commentary, media narratives, and symbolic conflicts (e.g., the Diora mural controversy), reveals that Unitra is consumed not only as a product but also as a medium of identity expression (Belk, 1988; Schau, 2018). For many, supporting this brand signifies affirmation of Polish engineering and technological competence. This supports the central premise of cultural branding theory (Holt, 2004, 2005; Testa et al., 2017), which posits that iconic brands resolve ideological tensions by offering mythic responses to collective anxieties. Third, the Unitra case illustrates the ambivalence inherent in such brand reactivations. While the brand elicits excitement and national pride, it also faces critique related to pricing strategies. These tensions are characteristic of heritage brands, which must reconcile symbolic meaning with market expectations (Dion & Borraz, 2015; Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016).

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the potential for heritage brands to be revitalized not merely through aesthetic nostalgia but via local discourses of technological legacy and national pride. The Unitra case underscores the strategic importance for brand managers of engaging with those specific cultural narratives. They must be credibly managed through coherent

storytelling and responsiveness to consumer expectations. Drawing on the methodology of brand genealogy, this research demonstrates how brand equity can be driven by local, deep seated cultural trends, rather than by “strong, favourable, and unique” psychological associations typical for consumer-based brand equity models (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003).

Aligning cultural mythology with market relevance requires not only compelling imagery but also active leadership (as seen in the Diora intervention in Wałbrzych) (Węgrzyn, 2025) and heightened sociocultural sensitivity. Retrobranding efforts should also avoid romanticizing the past at the expense of present-day relevance. Unitra’s attempt to position itself in the premium hi-fi segment illustrates the challenge of harmonizing nostalgic appeal with the functional demands of contemporary audio consumers. Criticism regarding high prices highlights the need for more differentiated

brand architectures that can accommodate both symbolic identity and broader accessibility.

This study has limitations. It focuses on a single brand and relies on qualitative analysis, which while offering rich insight, limits generalizability. Future research could pursue comparative analyses of reactivated brands across Central and Eastern Europe to examine whether similar cultural dynamics manifest in other postsocialist contexts. Relevant cases include the Skoda Favorit car in the Czech Republic or Pegas bicycles in Romania. Such analyses could illuminate both shared patterns and local specificities in the revival of heritage brands in the region. Another limitation lies in the emphasis on discourse and symbolic meaning. While essential to understanding a brand’s cultural resonance, further studies could incorporate behavioural data, such as purchasing patterns and brand loyalty metrics, to assess the translation of discourse into consumer action.

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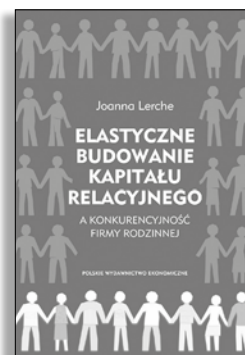
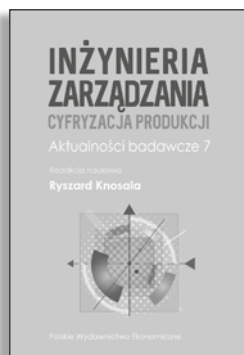
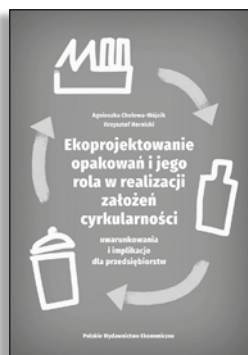
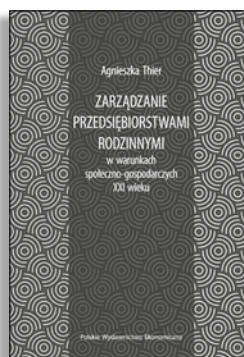
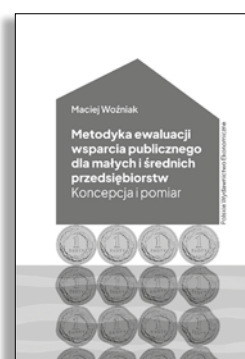
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