Death by nostalgia: A diagnosis of context-specific cases

Death By Nostalgia: a Diagnosis of Context-Specific Cases

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ABSTRACT - Nostalgia has been a popular subject in a recent stream of research, but the research has not, as of yet, delineated between the different levels of nostalgia and the levels of emotional intensity associated with each. We suggest that there are three types of nostalgia: real, simulated, and collective, and that each has an inherent value to add to marketing. Propositions are presented which may give a more complete understanding of the use of nostalgia as a promotional tool and its role in marketing.

In addition, we suggest a new scale which may be useful in determining the difference between the positive affect associated with the ad and the nostalgic feeling evoked by the ad.

The meaning of nostalgia

In his medical dissertation, Johannes Hofer (1688) referred to “nostalgia” as a fatal disease. An extreme case of homesickness was the diagnosis as the cause of death for what would be recognized today as suicide or an eating disorder. Actually nostalgia was a fairly common diagnosis for extreme depression until the 1950’s, when it started being used to refer to more personal emotions (Davis 1979).

From a psychological point of view, nostalgia has been seen as somewhat problematic because the main concern has been with the interpretation of a stimulus within the context in which it was presented (e.g. Belk 1990; Havlena and Holak 1991; Holak and Havlena 1992; Holbrook and Schindler 1991), but marketing practice has increasingly made use of nostalgic cues in positioning. For example, producers of toys which have stood the test of time, games (e.g. Twister), old-fashioned juke boxes, clocks, Coca-Cola coolers, movies, and music have recognized the persuasiveness of nostalgia.
For the purposes of this paper, nostalgia will be defined as a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for an experience, product, or service from the past. This is fairly consistent with Belk's (1990, p. 670) definition of nostalgia as "a wistful mood that may be prompted by an object, a scene, a smell, or a strain of music." Although the definitions of nostalgia differ somewhat from author to author, there is still the same underlying theme. When one feels nostalgic, there seems to be a bittersweet quality to the meaning which is associated with a memory from the past. That is, there is a certain amount of sadness in the emotion that is experienced, but there is also happiness in the emotion. This bittersweet quality is, perhaps, best illustrated through the use of a quote from Abraham Lincoln's poem, "Memory."

"My childhood's home I see again,
And sadden with the view;
And still, as memory crowds my brain,
There's pleasure in it too."

Abraham Lincoln at the age of 37

(Felleman 1936, p. 540)

The bittersweet quality was present as he recalled with fondness the carefree days of his childhood in a home that was symbolic of his fond memories. His recollection gives credence to the suggestion that the geographic area of a person's childhood is often known to be sacred (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

The Nostalgic Experience

It is not surprising that family and friends are important elements in the nostalgic experience (Holak and Havlena 1992). The smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls at a nearby bakery may evoke nostalgic feelings of a grandmother. The playing of a song from the past may bring back memories of an earlier time of laughter and friendship with childhood companions.

Objects such as jewelry, antiques, toys, books, and cars also are known to make people feel nostalgic (Havlena and Holak 1991). There is a deeper meaning in a product than just the tangible product itself. Products can help preserve memories. For instance, souvenirs from trips are often gathered so that the experience can be relived and retold to others. Photographs can serve as an "investment in creating a memory bank" (Belk 1990, p. 670). Family heirlooms also preserve memories of loved ones and the heritage of all that the family has done.

Special events such as weddings, holidays, and school-related experiences are often remembered with a feeling of nostalgia (Holak and Havlena 1992) which may be evoked by tangible objects such as the bride and groom from the top of the wedding cake, or a special Christmas ornament. Family vacation spots also tend to make one feel nostalgic (e.g. Disneyland and Walt Disney World). By returning with a souvenir or photo, in the future nostalgic feelings will be generated by considering a time when ordinary tasks were put on hold so that something could be done with special people. Although there is happiness in the emotion, there is also a certain sadness in the emotion, because it may be wished that these events could be relived (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

Nostalgia permits people to maintain their identity after major transitions in their lives (Davis 1979). It thrives on apprehension or nervousness about change or transitions in life (Davis 1979). For instance, a time which probably evokes the most nostalgia for some women is the time directly preceding their first marriage as they tend then to remember all of the things that happened to them when they were growing up and may go through their childhood possessions as a way of remembering.

**TABLE 1**

**PROPOSED LEVELS OF NOSTALGIA**

This may seem somewhat counterintuitive, as it would be expected that as individuals prepare for changes in their roles, they would look to the future in order to prepare for what was ahead. Although this may be true, a certain amount of nostalgic reflection is probable as one reflects on how it is that s/he got to where s/he is today. To a certain extent, the amount of nostalgic reflection may be dependent on the perceived quality of life in the past. Thus, an individual's perceived quality of life may be an important mediator for nostalgia.

Hirsch (1992) predicted that the use of nostalgia in marketing communications would increase in the coming decade because the more dissatisfied consumers are with life as it is today, the more they will want to revert back to the past. Thus, in hard economic times, nostalgia is a more useful selling tool. The saying "Nostalgia is the ability to remember yesterday's prices while forgetting yesterday's wages" (Source Unknown), is certainly applicable here. That is we tend to remember the good and forget the bad. This gives rise to our first set of testable propositions.

P1: The more drastic the change in a current life role, the more nostalgia, or symbolic reflection, will occur.

P2: The more satisfied individuals are with their perceived quality of life in the past, the more nostalgia, or symbolic reflection will occur.

P3: The more dissatisfied consumers are with current economic conditions, the more consumers will want to revert to the past, hence the more effective messages which evoke nostalgia will be.

Individual and Gender Differences

Meaning arises from the individual, the object, and the context (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Kleine and Kernan 1991); it does not arise from the physical object alone. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) note that, because meaning is usually not associated with the attributes of an object, the meaning that is assigned to a particular object is quite flexible. In addition, symbolic meaning is fairly subjective (Belk 1987); although the tangible product is the same for everyone, its intangible meaning is different (Hirschman 1980).

Each person has a different symbolic meaning which s/he associates with a particular stimuli (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Thus, the saying "one person's trash is another person's treasure" has a certain truth to it. Possessions which are highly treasured by one individual may not necessarily be treasured by another (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).

It makes it easier to make choices among the increasing array of stimuli when one object is more compatible with our thoughts and feelings than another (Levy 1959). Because the emotions that things evoke are symbolic of attitudes, objects serve as a means of individual differentiation (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).

Davis' (1979) research showed that men tend to be more nostalgia prone than women. However, Sherman and Newman (1977-78) indicated that although there are differences in gender, they found no differences in "nostalgia proneness" between the genders. These authors did
find that, although elderly women are just as likely to have cherished possessions as elderly men, there is a difference in the type of objects which are cherished. Women tend to choose items associated with particular memories (e.g. photographs) while men choose consumer items (e.g. cars). The different ways that women and men view ownership of possessions may also be a factor in the type of objects which are cherished (Rudmin 1991). This gives rise to another testable proposition.

P4: Men and women differ in the items which evoke feelings of nostalgia. The differences due to gender will depend on the product category and the time in the person's life that is being considered.

Given the mixed views on gender differences, proposition four is primarily exploratory because so little work has been done in this area. Gender differences are perhaps the result of socialization (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974) which is bound to be ingrained in an individual. Because nostalgia may often be felt for the times when that socialization was taking place, the objects with which males and females choose to associate memories differ. At times when the differences between genders are less noticeable, perhaps males and females associate similar objects with memories.

Nostalgia is a very private emotion (Daniels 1985). It is obvious that there are differences among individuals and genders as to the type of stimuli that will evoke nostalgic reflection. In addition, it appears that there are different levels of nostalgia that can be evoked. These levels will be discussed in detail in the following section.

LEVELS OF NOSTALGIA

Today marketing communications and products use nostalgic references to target baby-boomers and senior citizens (Havlena and Holak 1991). If these nostalgic references are effective, this may impact sales of the types of products which are aimed at seeking a nostalgic association. We suggest that there are three different levels of nostalgic associations which may be elicited. We categorize these as: real nostalgia, simulated nostalgia, and collective nostalgia. These are summarized in Table 1 and will be discussed in more depth in that order.

Real Nostalgia

Real nostalgia refers to a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for the experienced past. This is the level of nostalgia which Baumgartner (1992) discussed when he examined the relationship between the emotion and the original experience and what Davis (1979) referred to as "true nostalgia." Davis (1979) said that true nostalgia can only be experienced if a person has lived through the event.

Stimuli which elicit real nostalgia can evoke very vivid recollections. With episodic memory, if you have a very vivid piece and a dull piece, it is obvious to which you are going to attend (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Therefore, real nostalgia may be exemplar-based. That is, experience may be needed for the evoking of "real nostalgia."

A song that was popular when an individual was in college brings back a time when s/he thought s/he could conquer the world. That is, the song elicits a very bittersweet emotion which may be called real nostalgia, because the time is very vivid and experience-based. In addition, as a result of the importance and authenticity of the event, another stimulus which may evoke real nostalgia is a photograph of one's college graduation.

Belk (1990) states that, in general, people insist on the authentic stimulus to symbolize their sacred experience. "A similar wedding ring, a photograph of a similar family's Thanksgiving feast, or a car like the one we had in college may provoke a brief nostalgic flashback, but they are clearly inferior to and would hardly be traded for 'the real thing'" (Belk 1990, p. 672).

Simulated Nostalgia

When "the real thing" is not available, it may be possible to elicit simulated nostalgia. Simulated nostalgia refers to a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for the indirectly experienced past and may be remembered through the eyes and stories of a loved one. Simulated nostalgia may be evoked because a loved one did actually experience the times being depicted or by actually being with them when they relived the times.

Stern (1992) discussed a "historical nostalgia" in which there was not a direct experience with the past being described. In fact, Stern suggests that the event being depicted often occurred before birth. However, the images which were idealized, stressed the inherent goodness of the time. Antiques and collector's items are good examples of products which people may own that elicit this simulated nostalgia.

In addition, products from the past are reintroduced or used by consumers to evoke nostalgic feelings from a past of which they may not have even been a part (Havlena and Holak 1991). Even when the experiential component is blocked from awareness, there is still an emotion (Deci and Ryan 1991). Thus, one can feel nostalgic or attach a symbolic meaning to an object when, in fact, the person has never experienced the event which the object represents. Perhaps, simulated nostalgia helps to explain why an individual may feel nostalgic when wandering around in a museum. That is, a person who has not experienced the events depicted in the museum may still feel nostalgic.

Whereas real nostalgia is similar to an exemplar, simulated nostalgia is similar to a prototype, which is an abstract image that is often associated with a certain occurrence. Research shows that people are not accurate historians of their own personal information (Ross and Conway 1986). Therefore, they tend to embellish and perhaps reconstruct events from the past with which they had no direct experience. For example, when a town celebrates its centennial, the people try to reconstruct events from a past with which they had no direct experience and may feel a bittersweet, nostalgic emotion for the reconstructed events. That is, they experience an emotion referred to here as simulated nostalgia.

Collective Nostalgia

Nostalgia can be felt for a representation of a culture (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Thus, a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for the past which represents a culture, a generation, or a nation may be called collective nostalgia. This is not an individualistic notion, rather, it is a collectivistic notion which makes the emotion more consistent between individuals of a similar background when it is presented in the same context.

Belk (1990) suggests that collective memory is generation specific. This has certain implications for the types of products which people will collect (Davis 1979) and a person's taste in music (Holbrook and Schindler 1989). This might suggest that a generation of people will feel collective nostalgia for a 57' Chevy or the music of Peter, Paul, and Mary, but other generations will have their own symbols which elicit nostalgic reflection.

Collective nostalgia should not be limited to generations, it could also be used to explain similar emotions experienced by members of a culture or members of a country. In the United States, such symbols as baseball, amusement parks, and the American flag and foods such as hot dogs and fried chicken may elicit this nostalgia. This leads to our next set of propositions.

P5a: The intensity of the nostalgic emotion is dependent upon the level of nostalgia which is evoked (i.e.
The factor matrix gives initial support to the proposition that the attitude or affect associated with an ad is independent from the nostalgia associated with the ad. In fact, by examining the factor loadings, one can observe that the items separate into attitude (Factor 1) and nostalgia (Factor 2) indicating that the nostalgic feeling evoked by the ad is not entirely mediated by the attitude towards the ad. This distinction may help to understand the nature and possible effect of feelings, whether a feeling is present or not may have a direct effect on the affect for an ad.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A principal factor extraction with varimax rotation was performed to determine if nostalgia and attitude were, in fact, different constructs. A factor analysis of the six attitude items and the six nostalgia items revealed that there were two distinct factors evoked by the ad. After varimax rotation, loadings of the variables revealed that there were two distinct factors (as shown in Table 2).

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CONCLUSION

Past efforts in the consumer behavior literature have moved toward a better understanding of symbolic consumption. However, researchers have ignored the importance that people place on their possessions in creating and maintaining their past (Belk 1990). Nostalgia directs people to search among remembrances of persons and places from the past in order to give meaning to them (Belk 1988). In fact, the absence of symbols (such as photographs) may inhibit nostalgia.

In order to determine our self-identity, it is important that we understand the past. Over time we develop a set of symbols which we believe represent the self-identity that we want to project; nostalgic reflections help us to maintain that identity over time. Just as it is important to look to the future and think of where we are going, it is also important to remember where we have been.

TABLE 2

| FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR LANE CEDAR CHESTS ADVERTISEMENT |

The exploratory study outlined in this paper was intended to establish the distinction between nostalgic feelings associated with an advertisement and positive affect for an advertisement. However, generalizability to other situations is somewhat questionable because the nature of the emotion seems to be "context specific."

The propositions outlined in this paper suggest specific directions for future research. Determining the time in a person's life, the time in the economy, or the types of situations or products which elicit nostalgic feelings to members of both sexes when nostalgic cues are most appealing is important to understand when promotional messages are being created. In addition, the different levels of nostalgia may suggest that there are differences in the intensity of the emotions and the vividness of the memories which are elicited, which has certain implications for marketing communications and the expectations of these communications. Future research should also examine the role which mood, the warmth or humor of a stimulus, plays in the affect or emotion felt as a result of exposure to a stimulus.

Possessions and imagery can play an important role in helping individuals to relive their past experiences and to help elicit nostalgic feelings. Therefore, it is important that consumer researchers recognize the importance of nostalgic associations. Nostalgia is becoming a very popular self-diagnosis for individual feelings elicited by certain stimuli, which are presented with the intention of evoking nostalgia. Certainly a diagnosis of nostalgia today is considerably more positive than a diagnosis of nostalgia was in the late 1600's, as our modern day emotion surely beats "death by nostalgia."

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