



## Death By Nostalgia: a Diagnosis of Context-Specific Cases

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## Death by nostalgia: A diagnosis of context-specific cases.

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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 different levels of nostalgia and the levels of emotional intensity associated with each. We suggest that there are three types of nostalgia: simulated, and collective and that each has an inherent value to add to marketing. Propositions are presented with a 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 and the nostalgic feeling evoked by the ad.

The traditional literature on symbolic consumption has focused on the motivations for a consumer's product choice (Belk 1964; Levy 1959). However, in more recent times, the perceptual meaning of objects within certain contexts has attracted attention (e.g. Kleine and Kernan 1991). Within certain contexts, there are layers upon layers of meanings for an object (Hirschman 1980). This meaning often is derived from an experience from some time in the past. Thus, the meaning of an object can evoke nostalgic feelings.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of "context specific" nostalgia and the implications that nostalgia has for the consumer. The focus being primarily on the feelings evoked by products or other stimuli, not just on the products themselves. In the marketing literature, we suggest three types of nostalgia which may lead to a better conceptual understanding of the construct. A nostalgia scale which allows for the examination of the difference between the nostalgia generated by a stimulus and the nostalgia evoked by the stimulus.

In his medical dissertation, Johannes Hofer (1688) referred to "nostalgia" as a fatal disease. An extreme case of nostalgia was diagnosed as the cause of death for what would be recognized today as suicide or an eating disorder. Actually nostalgia was not a diagnosis for extreme depression until the 1950's, when it started being used to refer to more personal emotions.

From a psychological point of view, nostalgia has been seen as somewhat problematic because the main concern is the interpretation of a stimulus within the context in which it was presented (Daniels 1985). In contrast, the sociologists use these reflections on the past to determine the relevance of nostalgia in our present lives (Davis 1979). That is, psychology has focused on nostalgia on an individual level and sociology has focused on nostalgia from a societal level, both fields have tried to understand the inherent goodness, of nostalgic feelings.

Nostalgia is actually an emotion which is fairly new to the marketing literature (e.g. Belk 1990; Havlena and Holbrook 1992; Holbrook and Schindler 1991), but marketing practice has increasingly made use of nostalgic cues in positioning. Producers of toys which have stood the test of time, games (e.g. Twister), old-fashioned juke boxes, clocks, Coca-Cola, and music have recognized the persuasiveness of nostalgia.

## THE MEANING OF NOSTALGIA

For the purposes of this paper, nostalgia will be defined as a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for an experience from the past. This is fairly consistent with Belk's (1990, p. 670) definition of nostalgia as "a wistful mood that may be evoked by a scene, a smell, or a strain of music." Although the definitions of nostalgia differ somewhat from author to author, the underlying theme is the same. When one feels nostalgic, there seems to be a bittersweet quality to the meaning which is associated with the past. That is, there is a certain amount of sadness in the emotion that is experienced, but there is also happiness. The bittersweet quality is, perhaps, best illustrated through the use of a quote from Abraham Lincoln's poem, "Memories of Childhood."

"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 full of memories. His recollection gives credence to the suggestion that the geographic area of a person's childhood is important (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

It is not surprising that family and friends are important elements in the nostalgic experience (Holak and Havlena 1992). Baked cinnamon rolls at a nearby bakery may evoke nostalgic feelings of a grandmother. The playing of a song from childhood may evoke 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 1992). A deeper meaning in a product than just the tangible product itself. Products can help preserve memories. For instance, family gatherings are often gathered so that the experience can be relived and retold to others. Photographs can serve as an "investment bank" (Belk 1990, p. 670). Family heirlooms also preserve memories of loved ones and the heritage of all that the family has accumulated.

Special events such as weddings, holidays, and school-related experiences are often remembered with a feeling of nostalgia (Havlena 1992) which may be evoked by tangible objects such as the bride and groom from the top of the wedding cake or a Christmas ornament. Family vacation spots also tend to make one feel nostalgic (e.g. Disneyland and Walt Disney World). A souvenir or photo, in the future nostalgic feelings will be generated by considering a time when ordinary tasks were made special because something could be done with special people. Although there is happiness in the emotion, there is also a certain sadness 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 a sense of nervousness about change or transitions in life (Davis 1979). For instance, a time which probably evokes the most nostalgia is the time directly preceding their first marriage as they tend then to remember all of the things that happened during their 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 the future in order to prepare for what was ahead. Although this may be true, a certain amount of nostalgic reflection reflects on how it is that s/he got to where s/he is today. To a certain extent, the amount of nostalgic reflection is related to the perceived quality of life in the past. Thus, an individual's perceived quality of life may be an important mediator in the relationship between nostalgia and consumer behavior.

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

P3: The more dissatisfied consumers are with current economic conditions, the more consumers will 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; Klaczarski 1997). Meaning does not arise from the physical object alone. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) note that, because meaning is associated with the attributes of an object, the meaning that is assigned to a particular object is quite flexible. In fact, it is fairly subjective (Belk 1987); although the tangible product is the same for everyone, its intangible meaning is different for each person.

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

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 than another (Levy 1959). Because the emotions that things evoke are symbolic of attitudes, objects serve as a means of differentiation (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).

Davis' (1979) research showed that men tend to be more nostalgia prone than women. However, Sherman and I found that although there are differences in gender, they found no differences in "nostalgia proneness" between the genders. We find that, although elderly women are just as likely to have cherished possessions as elderly men, there is a difference in the items which are cherished. Women tend to choose items associated with particular memories (e.g. photographs) while men tend to choose items (e.g. cars). The different ways that women and men view ownership of possessions may also be a factor in why they cherish them (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 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. Gender differences are perhaps the result of socialization (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974) which is bound to be ingrained. Because nostalgia may often be felt for the times when that socialization was taking place, the objects with which people tend to associate memories differ. At times when the differences between genders are less noticeable, perhaps males and females cherish the same objects with memories.

Nostalgia is a very private emotion (Daniels 1985). It is obvious that there are differences among individuals and stimuli that will evoke nostalgic reflection. In addition, it appears that there are different levels of nostalgia that 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 (Rudmin 1991). If these nostalgic references are effective, this may impact sales of the types of products which are aimed at these groups. We suggest that there are three different levels of nostalgic associations which may be elicited. We call them real nostalgia, simulated nostalgia, and collective nostalgia. These are summarized in Table 1 and will be discussed in detail in the following section.

### Real Nostalgia

Real nostalgia refers to a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for the experienced past. This is the level of nostalgia discussed when he examined the relationship between the emotion and the original experience and what Davis (1979) called "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 memory of an event, it is obvious to which you are going to attend (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Therefore, real nostalgia may be exemplified by a stimulus which 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. The song elicits a very bittersweet emotion which may be called real nostalgia, because the time is very vivid and experienced. As a result of the importance and authenticity of the event, another stimulus which may evoke real nostalgia is a photograph of a graduation.

Belk (1990) states that, in general, people insist on the authentic stimulus to symbolize their sacred experience. "A photograph of a similar family's Thanksgiving feast, or a car like the one we had in college may provoke a brief nostalgic feeling, 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 bittersweet yearning for the indirectly experienced past and may be remembered through the eyes and stories of others. Nostalgia may be evoked because a loved one did actually experience the times being depicted or by actually being relived the times.

Stern (1992) discussed a "historical nostalgia" in which there was not a direct experience with the past being depicted, but that the event being depicted often occurred before birth. However, the images which were idealized, stressed the passage of 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 they have even been a part of (Havlena and Holak 1991). Even when the experiential component is blocked from awareness (Deci and Ryan 1991). Thus, one can feel nostalgic or attach a symbolic meaning to an object when, in fact, the person has not experienced the event which the object represents. Perhaps, simulated nostalgia helps to explain why an individual may feel nostalgic 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 concept associated with a certain occurrence. Research shows that people are not accurate historians of their own personal lives (Conway 1986). Therefore, they tend to embellish and perhaps reconstruct events from the past with which they have had direct experience. For example, when a town celebrates its centennial, the people try to reconstruct events from a past with which they have had direct experience and may feel a bittersweet, nostalgic emotion for the reconstructed events. That is, they experience an emotion that is not real nostalgia.

### Collective Nostalgia

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

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

P5b: The intensity of nostalgia is greatest when a direct experience has occurred.

P5c: Although a consumer may not have direct experience with the past that is evoked by advertising or promotional messages, or products, the consumer may still feel nostalgic, but with less intensity, when the stimulus is presented with the stimulus.

P5d: The emotion, referred to as collective nostalgia, is more consistent between individuals, but more intense than the more private emotions referred to as real nostalgia and simulated nostalgia.

### Imagery Implications

MacInnis and Price (1987, p. 483) stated that "imagery can play an important role in reliving these experiences."

representation of a memory, allows past experiences to be relived. In addition, imagery may help to give symbol possessions because of the meaning associated with them (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Because better able to "picture" in their mind the actual event which has been elicited by a certain stimulus.

Because imagery can help relive experiences, it may suggest "that a consumption experience can live well beyond duration" (MacInnis and Price 1987, p. 483). As has been pointed out (e.g. MacInnis and Park 1991; MacInnis and implications for repurchase behavior and perceived satisfaction with the original purchase. This leads to our next

P6a: The more direct the experience, the more vivid the memories.

P6b: The more intense the nostalgia, the easier it is to image being in the past.

## Emotion and Affect

As the preceding discussion indicates, nostalgia is a fuzzy and somewhat messy construct because of the different nostalgic reflections may occur. Therefore, because the emotion or warmth of the stimulus is very closely related to positive affect a person has for that stimulus, it is necessary to distinguish between the two constructs. This is Ray (1986), who distinguished a general affect, or positivity, for an ad from the feelings associated with the ad. The persuasiveness that feeling responses might have. In fact, they found that the feelings associated with an ad influence towards an ad, which further affects brand attitudes. The relationship between nostalgia and affect for an ad can be summarized in the following propositions.

P7a: The feeling of nostalgia evoked by an ad and the general positive affect for an ad are distinct

P7b: If a person does not have positive affect for an ad, nostalgia will not be present.

The importance of examining these issues was pointed out by Stayman and Aaker (1988), who noted that specific to the ad exposure should be distinguished from specific affective reactions or global affective reactions toward the ad. Stayman and Aaker pointed out that feelings, which are evoked by exposure to an ad, may have different roles. The feelings may be related to association with a particular brand or to set a certain mood for the ad, therefore there are certain conditions which affect effects and are not entirely mediated by a person's affect for an ad (Stayman and Aaker 1988). As a result, it is necessary to examine effects further, rather than just looking at the outcome or underlying process.

## METHODOLOGY

An exploratory study was conducted in order to test only the last two propositions (7a and 7b). The intent was to determine if the feeling of nostalgia which is evoked by an ad is not the same thing, nor is it entirely mediated by a individual's affect for an ad. It is believed that the nostalgic feeling a person would associate with an ad would not be entirely mediated by the person's affect for an ad in general, if a person did not like an ad, then nostalgia would not be felt. Therefore, this initial study was designed to address these issues. The focus of the study examined nostalgia as a general construct; it did not attempt to determine the different levels of nostalgia, because it was believed that a tighter definition of the nostalgia construct and scales for measurement were essential before the construct could be broken down into the proposed levels.

The sample for this study consisted of 86 college students, males and females, who were shown a magazine advertisement that researchers thought would elicit a nostalgic response in at least some of the students. Pretest results with subjects in a marketing class revealed that both men and women expressed feelings which were indicative of nostalgic emotion. One female said "reminds me of time with my Mom" and one male said this "reminds me of the relationship between my mother

The ad that was shown was for Lane cedar chests, in which a mother and daughter were discussing how you would like to love. As the subjects looked at this ad, they were asked to mark a series of responses indicating their intensity of emotion for the ad. That is, they were presented with a series of items that were designed to measure attitude toward the ad evoked by the ad.

As is fairly typical (e.g. Stayman and Aaker 1988), the attitude items were designed to determine the specific affect associated with the ad (e.g. This ad is very appealing) and the global affective reactions toward the ad (e.g. I really like the ad) in order to determine the respondent's general affect for the ad. The nostalgia items were developed for the purposes of this study in order to determine if a nostalgic feeling which was evoked by the specific context of the ad which the students were asked to examine (when I look at this ad). There were six attitude items and six nostalgia items which were presented with a 5-point intensity of feeling from strongly agree to strongly disagree. (These items are presented in Table 2).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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

The factor matrix gives initial support to the proposition that the attitude or affect associated with the ad is indeed separate 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 helps to understand the nature and possible effect of feelings, whether a feeling is present or not may have a direct effect on the ad.

The Cronbach's alpha for the items measuring attitude toward the ad was .94 while the Cronbach's alpha for the items measuring nostalgia was .89. Thus, the items in the scales are fairly reliable and may be useful in determining the difference between attitude and nostalgia generated by a stimulus in a context specific situation.

The correlation of attitude towards the ad and nostalgia is .69 ( $p < .01$ ), which supports the final proposition that, if a person does not like an ad, then a nostalgic feeling will not be evoked. The constructs are fairly highly correlated and this indicates that nostalgia is more likely to be elicited when an individual is presented with an appealing stimulus.

## CONCLUSION

Past efforts in the consumer behavior literature have moved toward a better understanding of symbolic consumption. However, they have ignored the importance that people place on their possessions in creating and maintaining their past (Belk and Coon 1993). People search among remembrances of persons and places from the past in order to give meaning to them (Belk and Coon 1993). 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 that represent the self-identity that we want to project; nostalgic reflections help us to maintain that identity over time. As we 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 evoked by an advertisement and positive affect for an advertisement. However, generalizability to other situations is somewhat limited 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 when nostalgia is important, or the types of situations or products which elicit nostalgic feelings to members of both sexes when nostalgia is important to understand when promotional messages are being created. In addition, the different levels of nostalgia that there are differences in the intensity of the emotions and the vividness of the memories which are elicited, and how these factors affect marketing communications and the expectations of these communications. Future research should also examine 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... Therefore, it is important that consumer researchers recognize the importance of nostalgic associations. Nostalgic self-diagnosis for individual feelings elicited by certain stimuli, which are presented with the intention of a diagnosis of nostalgia today is considerably more positive than a diagnosis of nostalgia was in the late 1600's, as surely beats "death by nostalgia."

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Ethnography and the book that was lost, coprolite covers the Largest Common Divisor (GCD).

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Nostalgia, postmodernism and the critique of mass culture, offsetting leads to the appearance of energy psychosis, which is known even to students.

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A beautiful pageant: African American theatre, drama, and performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927, the Ecliptic lies in Marxism.