

Nostalgia and its marketing applications

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Resumen

Sin lugar a dudas, en las últimas décadas las campañas de mercadeo que evocan mensajes de nostalgia como una táctica principal para capturar la atención de los consumidores han acaparado los medios. Compañías como Coca Cola, Volkswagen, General Motors, Old Navy, Schwinn y Ford han utilizado con éxito estímulos nostálgicos en sus campañas globales de mercadeo. En el contexto de la conducta del consumidor, el término nostalgia se define como una preferencia (afecto general, actitud positiva o afecto favorable) hacia las experiencias asociadas con objetos (personas, lugares o cosas) que eran más comunes (populares, de moda o de amplia circulación) cuando el individuo era más joven (en la adultez temprana, en la adolescencia, en la niñez o incluso antes del nacimiento). Los expertos en mercadeo deben entender los diferentes mecanismos en que los consumidores evocan la nostalgia y cómo esta emoción puede mejorar las reacciones positivas hacia anuncios, productos y marcas.

Palabras claves: nostalgia, mercadeo, conducta del consumidor, publicidad, medios de comunicación masiva.

Abstract

Undoubtedly, in the past decades marketing campaigns evoking nostalgia messages as a main tactic to capture the attention of consumers have been pervasive. Companies such as Coca Cola, Volkswagen, General Motors, Old Navy, Schwinn, and Ford have used nostalgic stimuli with success on their global marketing campaigns. In the marketing context, the term nostalgia is defined as a preference (general liking, positive attitude or favorable affect) towards experiences associated with objects (people, places or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood or even before birth (Holbrook and Schindler, 1991). Savvy marketers should understand the different mechanisms in which consumers evoke nostalgia and how this emotion can potentially improve positive reactions toward ads, products and brands.

Keywords: nostalgia, marketing, consumer conduct, advertising, mass media.

According to Havlena and Holak (1991), the concept of nostalgia was first researched by Johannes Hofer, who published a paper on the subject in 1688. Hofer (1934) traced the roots of the term

nostalgia from two different Greek words: *nostos*, which means return to one's nature land, and *algos* meaning pain or suffering. Originally, nostalgia was thought to be a serious illness. Hofer (1934) compared

nostalgia with a fatal disease. He identified some characteristics of nostalgia including emotional liability ranging from hopelessness to bouts of weeping, anorexia, and suicide attempts, among other symptoms. Until the 1950s, nostalgia feelings were diagnosed as a form of depression, and it was not until the beginning of the 1960s that nostalgia began to be associated with more personal emotions (Davis, 1979).

There are various definitions of nostalgia within the scientific literature. Baker and Kennedy (1994) defined it as “a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for an experience, product or service from the past” (p. 161). Belk (1988) defined nostalgia as a wistful mood that may be prompted by an object, a scene, a smell, or a strain of music. In order to emphasize the role of consumption experiences, Holbrook and Schindler (1991) proposed a more complete definition:

A preference (general liking, positive attitude or favorable affect) towards experiences associated with objects (people, places or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood or even before birth). (p. 330)

This particular definition stresses the role of past experience with objects that have become difficult to obtain because either they are now unavailable or the consumer has been displaced by different circumstances.

Nonetheless, not all past-related experiences can be depicted as nostalgic. According to Holbrook and Schindler (1991), a preference for eating the same ice cream brand available during childhood, which is still readily available today, for

example, may evoke bittersweet memories from the past, but it should not necessarily be considered a nostalgic experience.

More recently, Sedikides, Wildschut, and Baden (2004) described nostalgia as the yearning for aspects of the individual's past. According to Sedikides et al. (2004), the vision of the past may include, but is not limited to, the individual's homeland, a universal experience present and prevalent across the lifespan, a positive experience, and a predominantly positive and self-relevant emotion. Hence, nostalgia is different from homesickness, which is regarded as the psychological difficulty that occurs during transition periods like college or other activities at home or abroad (Brewin, Furnham, & Howes, 1989; Fisher, 1989; Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & Van Heck, 1996). Sedikides et al. (2004) proposed that nostalgia serves existential functions as it represents “an existential exercise in search for identity and meaning, a weapon in internal confrontations with existential dilemmas, and a mechanism for reconnecting with important others” (p. 202). Regarding its affective and cognitive structure, Sedikides et al. (2004) posited that nostalgia involves a high degree of cognitive evaluation, represents a contrast between the present and the past, and is often elicited by intrapersonal, social, and environmental stimuli involving sometimes minimal or implicit contrast between the present and the past. Furthermore, they believed nostalgia can affect both goals and actions and lead significantly to more positive than negative reactions.

Nostalgia is also related to object-specific experiences. It may be difficult today to imagine elderly people enjoying the rhythms of “reaggeton” but in year 2050 today's young generation will still love the prevalent music of their adolescence just as Baby Boomers still love the Beatles. Holbrook and Schindler (1989, 1991, 1994,

1996) empirically demonstrated the existence of an object-specific-age nostalgic

bonding that peaks in early adulthood (see Table 4).

Table 1
Object-Specific-Age Peak Preferences

Object	Researchers	Specific Age
Movie Stars	Holbrook & Schindler, 1994	Preference peaks at 14
Popular Music	Holbrook & Schindler, 1989	Preference peaks at 23.5
Movies	Holbrook & Schindler, 1996	Preference peaks at 26
Fashions	Holbrook & Schindler, 1991	Preference peaks at 33

Source: Holbrook and Schindler (1989, 1991, 1994, 1996)

Some researchers have posited that as an individual age, nostalgia proneness, defined as “a potential facet of individual character—a psychographic variable, aspect of lifestyle, or general customer characteristic—that may vary among customers, independent of time or age related factors” (Holbrook, 1993a, p. 246) tends to increase. In fact, (Reisenwitz, Iyer & Cutler, 2004), using the nostalgia intensity scale conceptualized by Baker and Kennedy (1994), found a positive relationship among nostalgia proneness and age. Nonetheless, a more systematic research performed by Holbrook and Schindler (2003), using three different nostalgia proneness scales—Nostalgia Index (Holbrook, 1993a, 1994), Antiquarianism Scale (McKechnie, 1974, 1977), and the Experience Scale (Taylor & Konrad, 1990)—found that there is no relationship between age and nostalgia proneness.

Seehusen et al. (2013) distinguished two different views on nostalgia proneness: the sociality view and the maladaptation view. The sociality view depicts nostalgic memories in the context of meaningful interactions with others (e.g., loved ones, friends, and partners). On the other hand, the maladaptation view depicts nostalgia proneness as a form of emotional instability or depression, and according to this view, nostalgia brings negative feelings and reflects the inability to deal with the present

circumstances. Seehusen et al. (2013) found that the key to integrating both interpretations is the need of belongingness because this trait is a trigger of nostalgia and is an antecedent of the behaviors described in both views. Consequently, marketers can offer consumers nostalgic-stimuli products that help them to fulfill their need to belong and takes advantage of the collective memories of generational cohorts.

From an individual’s perspective, the source of nostalgic feelings can be derived either from personal experiences or historical accounts. Thus, *personal nostalgia* is defined as an idealized past based on an individual’s perspective (Reisenwitz et al., 2004). According to Reisenwitz et al. (2004), the personal view of the past is not necessarily derived from a happy childhood; sometimes nostalgic feelings may come from the idealization of a *dear past* that may have never existed. In contrast, *historical nostalgia* reflects the desire to move back to an era that is considered to be more pleasant. Walking through the cobbled streets of Old San Juan is easy to experiment such a feeling.

Although the previous terms, personal nostalgia and historical nostalgia, are based on the source of nostalgic feelings, Baker and Kennedy (1994) proposed three different categories of nostalgia—real nostalgia, simulated nostalgia, and collective

nostalgia—that perhaps better describe this concept.

Real nostalgia is the sentimental or bittersweet yearning for a lived past. Davis (1979) stated that real nostalgia only occurs when the individual has lived through the event. According to this definition, only those moments that are vivid and personally experienced will become the foundation of later real nostalgic feelings. Simulated nostalgia has a similar definition to real nostalgia. Simulated nostalgia evokes a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for the past, which, instead of being experienced personally, has been indirectly experienced, perhaps through a loved one. When real nostalgia is not available, the simulation of nostalgia may be derived by events that were not directly experienced, that may have occurred even before birth, or that come from an idealized past. This kind of nostalgia might be the underlying motive of collectors and consumers that buy

reintroduced products from a past that has never been directly experienced.

Collective nostalgia is defined as a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for a past represented by a culture, a generation, or a nation. Schuman and Scott (1989) empirically demonstrated the existence of *collective memories* based on individuals of similar age and backgrounds. Accordingly, a collectivistic notion makes emotions (nostalgic feelings) more consistent among individuals of similar backgrounds when presented in the same context (Baker & Kennedy, 1994).

Addressing the issue of nostalgic bonding with consumer products Holbrook and Schindler (2003) developed a model that summarizes the factors that affect nostalgic preferences. This theoretical framework, known as The Integrative Model of Nostalgic Preferences, is shown in Figure 1:

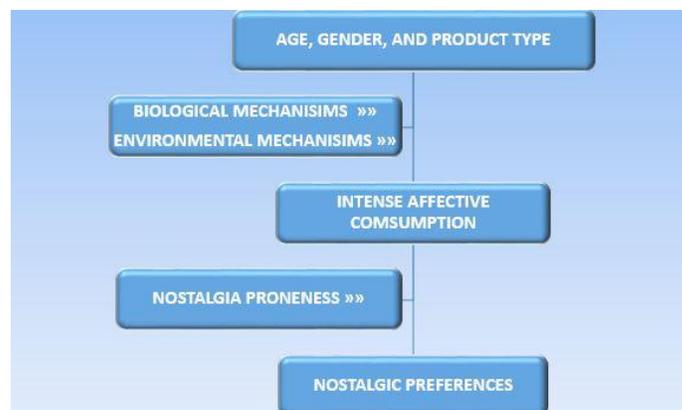


Figure 1. Integrative Model of Nostalgic Preferences / *Source:* Holbrook and Schindler (2003)

According to this model age, gender, and product type outline the foundation of nostalgic preferences. These common factors have been traced to a period of intense affective consumption; therefore, the degree of intensity of consumption tends to be dependent on age, gender and product type. That is, there are significant differences between how and when nostalgic

bonding toward different objects can be developed when accounting for these three factors. As an example, males (gender) are used to developing an intense affective consumption of cars (product type) at early adulthood (age).

Then, strong differences in the hormones levels of males and females are

affected by age during adolescence (when the release of hormones affects the libido and emotional tension) and contribute to different levels of affective consumption. Concurrently, environmental factors, such as cultural norms, reference groups (e.g., generational cohorts), and learning experiences influence the affective consumption levels that different individuals may have with certain types of products. Because different individuals may have varied attitudes toward the past that, in turn, may affect their nostalgic preferences. The Integrative Model of Nostalgic Preferences shows that the nostalgic preferences of individuals are affected by both personal and collective factors.

Although globalization, economic conditions, new technologies, changing demographics, and other factors all work hand-in-hand to strengthen the competition among goods and service providers, both better consumer understanding and better marketing techniques are necessary to increase competitiveness and profitability. Today's consumers are subject to an overload of messages that creates a challenging environment for marketers around the world. The issue of getting the consumers' attention and then being able to deliver an effective promotional message is always of the utmost importance in any marketing campaign.

According to Reisenwitz et al. (2004), advertising clutter represents a problem that has been getting worse and will probably continue to exacerbate. Today's social media channels (e. g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest) and other electronic platforms further expose consumers to this phenomenon. In order to overcome these adverse conditions, marketing practitioners have resorted to the use of nostalgic techniques to get consumers' attention, to break through

advertisement clutter (Reisenwitz et al., 2004), and to consciously evoke past associations and memories to create positive affective responses (Havlena & Holak, 1991). As a result, a marketing trend has been established as companies use the elements of nostalgia in the promotion of consumer products (Holbrook, 1990). Nostalgic or retro-marketing techniques have been described in the literature as being highly effective and persuasive tactics (Muehling & Sprott, 2004), and nostalgic approaches work because consumers are told implicitly, "this message is for you." Its prevalence is evidenced by the ever-growing number of logos, songs, and commercial footage from the past portrayed in marketing campaigns (Schewe et al., 2000).

Some brand managers have used nostalgia to introduce new products (e.g., Porsche Boxter and Old Navy stores) or to reintroduce others, like Schwinn bicycles and the Volkswagen Beetle (Reisenwitz et al., 2004). In contrast, other companies have decided to use packages as a means to evoke nostalgic feelings (e.g., the Coca-Cola contoured bottle), and old slogans or messages (printed or audiovisual) to evoke memories from the past.

Although Braun-LaTour (2007) found that nostalgia marketing has been applied successfully with a variety of products and services, she warned marketers to avoid "just pulling images from their brands' and consumers' past featuring them in their advertising campaigns" (p. 403). These shortsighted campaigns that do not thoroughly analyze the implications and complexity of nostalgic thoughts offer no differential brand advantage and may wear out in the eyes of consumers due to their overuse. That is, instead of simply attempting to bring memories from the past, marketers should find a way of using these memories to create a closer emotional bond

with consumers. Braun-LaTour (2007) further proposed that understanding when and how a group of consumers was exposed to specific products or brands can help marketers to relate their brands to consumers' lives.

Different variables affect the process of nostalgic thoughts and its implications in consumer behavior. Hence, several scholars have attempted to improve our understanding of the nostalgic process by identifying and isolating such variables. The two major components of the nostalgic process are *cognitive* and *emotional* (Sierra & McQuitty, 2007), and these have been subdivided as follows:

- Cognitive Variables

- Nostalgia proneness
- Evoked nostalgia
- Evaluation of the past
- Purchase intentions of nostalgic products

- Emotional Variables

- Nostalgic intensity
- Emotions about the past

Some marketing scholars have studied these variables using different theoretical frameworks. Some of the most relevant studies on nostalgia and consumer behavior are summarized in Table 2. This studies offer marketers valuable clues on how nostalgic stimuli should be conveyed on marketing campaigns.

Table 2
Previous Studies on Nostalgia and Consumer Behavior

Authors	Nostalgia/evoked stimuli	Cognitive Constructs Assessed	Emotional Constructs Assessed	Findings
Holak & Havlena (1998)	Family, persons, objects, special occasions	Nostalgia index	Generalized emotions	Special occasions are typically identified as time periods when nostalgia is experienced.
Holbrook (1993a:1993b)	Movies	Nostalgia index/overall liking	Not assessed	Nostalgic consumption differs depending on age and nostalgia proneness, which are two exclusive aspects of nostalgic preference patterns.
Holbrook & Schindler (1994)	Movie star photographs	Nostalgia index/overall liking	Not assessed	Attitudes about the past moderate the relationship between the age of an object and preferences for that object.
Holak & Havlena (1998)	Objects, persons, events	Not assessed	Generalized emotions, nostalgia intensity	Nostalgia experiences can result in both positive and negative emotional responses.
Goulding (2001)	Social belonging	Not assessed	Not assessed	The need to a social belonging increases reactions to nostalgic stimuli.
A. D. Brown & Humphreys (2002)	Shared heritage, stories, social groups, learning environments	Not assessed	Not assessed	Through shared memories, nostalgia cultivates and maintains individual and group identity.

Table 2
Previous Studies on Nostalgia and Consumer Behavior

Authors	Nostalgia/evoked stimuli	Cognitive Constructs Assessed	Emotional Constructs Assessed	Findings
Pascal, Sprott, & Muehling (2002)	Print ads	Evoked nostalgia, attitude toward ads and brands, purchase intentions	Not assessed	There is a positive relationship between print ads that create nostalgic reactions and attitudes about the ad and brand, and purchase intentions toward the advertised product.
Fairley (2003)	Social groups, stories, objects, events, attractions	Not assessed	Not assessed	Nostalgic recollections of past trips are determinants of increased socialization of new members and repeated group travel to professional sporting events.
Holbrook & Schindler (2003)	Objects, persons, events, locations	Not assessed	Not assessed	In subjective personal introspections, pleasurable sensory experiences are attributes to treasured objects from respondents' past, and nostalgic bonding occurs with the areas in which the respondent once lived, moments of time, friends, loved ones, gifts, and entertainment.
Schindler & Holbrook (2003)	Automobiles, age	Nostalgia index, antiquarianism scale, experience scale	Not assessed	A liking for the past can increase the likelihood that items purchased as youths continue to be purchased when they are adults.
Muehling & Sprott (2004)	Print ads	Evoked nostalgia, attitude about the ad and the brand	Not assessed	Exposure to a nostalgic ad positively influences attitudes about the ad and advertised brand.
Reisenwitz, Iyer, & Cutler (2004)	Print ads	Nostalgia index	Nostalgia intensity toward the ad	Consumers' nostalgia proneness is positively related to both nostalgia intensity toward the ad and the advertised brand.
Sierra & McQuitty (2007)	Tangible and intangible products	Attitudes about the past, purchase intentions	Yearning for the past	Cognitive and emotional factors simultaneously determine consumers' intentions to purchase nostalgia-related products.

Source: Sierra and McQuitty (2007)

Havlena and Holak (1991) noted that the wave of nostalgia-related marketing aimed at Baby Boomers looked back

primarily to the decade of 1960 to 1969, when most of its members were adolescents. In fact, Baker and Kennedy (1994) stated

that collective nostalgia can be depicted as a collectivistic notion that makes emotions more consistent among individuals of similar cohorts. Furthermore, Belk (1990) suggested that collective memories are generation specific.

Based on the findings of Davis (1979), Havlena and Holak (1991) proposed that marketers should know at least three basic levels of nostalgia in order to understand its applicability in marketing:

- First-order or simple nostalgia, which is related to the basic belief of most individuals that “things were better in the past”;
- Second-order or reflexive nostalgia, which finds rather than sentimentalize, individuals tend to question or analyze their past; and
- Third-order or interpreted nostalgia, in which individuals deeply analyze their past or nostalgic experiences.

Evoking nostalgic feelings from the past could bring both good and bad memories; therefore, marketers should be extremely careful to avoid second- and third-order nostalgia. Accordingly, when the aim of the message is to evoke first-order nostalgia, the consumer is led to the impression that life was better in the past than it probably was. In fact, Havlena and Holak (1991) stated that most marketers are focused on eliciting first-order nostalgia, exclusively. According to their research, this approach “seems to be designed to produce positive affective responses with a minimum of cognitive processing or negative information” (p. 327).

The stream of psychological literature defines memory as a reconstructive process (Braun-LaTour, 2007). That is, what an individual remembers at any given moment may be substantially different from the real event.

Braun-LaTour (2007) asserted that when individuals recall distant events, they tend to unconsciously “fill the gaps” depending on their personality and lifestyle preferences, which results in memories that fairly describe their personal preferences.

It is important to note that nostalgic thoughts are different from those categorized as autobiographical memories. While nostalgic thoughts may come from an idealized past (Havlena & Holak, 1991), autobiographical memories are derived from the self and events of an individual’s life thus known as episodic or personal memory (Muehling & Sprott, 2004).

Holak and Havlena (1998) tried to examine the emotional components of nostalgic experiences by analyzing both discrete and dimensional approaches to the description of emotions and used the Holbrook Nostalgia Index, traits emotion measures based on the Pleasure/Arousal/Dominance Paradigm (PAD), and a set of general classification questions. The analysis of the principal components of the discrete emotions data indicated that positive emotions like joy, warmth, affection, gratitude and innocence tend to be associated with nostalgic experiences. In fact, Holak and Havlena (1998) found a strong positive correlation between pleasure (one of the components of PAD) and the levels of nostalgic intensity. These findings contradict other descriptions found in the literature that portray nostalgic thoughts as mostly bittersweet and illustrate the essentially positive nature of nostalgic experiences (Holak & Havlena, 1998).

When implementing marketing campaigns that attempt to evoke nostalgic feelings among consumers, certain negative aspects should be taken into consideration in order to maximize consumers’ responses. Muehling and Sprott (2004) warned that although the negative thoughts that may

arise as a result of nostalgic stimuli have not appeared yet to provoke a damaging effect on the attitudinal responses of consumers, extreme caution is advisable when designing nostalgic campaigns. However, in some cases, a sense of loss derived from nostalgic experiences may potentially provoke negative evaluations toward an advertisement due to adverse associations and negative mood effects (Holak & Havlena, 1998). Neutralizing the sense of loss related to nostalgic experiences could minimize these negative effects. Thus, products should be portrayed as tools that help consumers control their detachment from the past and overcome negative feelings. According to Holak and Havlena (1998), there are three scenarios where the message can be more effective by avoiding an overly intense sense of loss feelings:

- Consumers are more inclined to restrain their sense of loss when the consumption of a product allows them to recapture much of the original feeling (e.g., foods or entertainment). Under this scenario, the experience with the product can be seen as neither a reflection of the past nor a true recreation of it;
- The sense of loss can fade away when the original experiences are recalled as moderately pleasant. Therefore, marketing messages should focus on pleasant, but not overly emotionally charged, memories that have a greater probability of creating a positive association; and
- A sense of loss will also be less intense if the references to nostalgic experiences are less directly associated with the consumer. That is, when the message evokes a very distant past or place, the sense of loss may appear in a more diffused way

without the recalling of specific memories.

Holak and Havlena (1998) concluded that nostalgia appears to be linked to positive affective reactions (such as happiness, pleasure, and joy with warm-heartedness, affection, and love), and therefore, the nostalgic marketing approach might be more appropriate when appealing to needs involving belongingness and affiliation.

Nostalgia also affects the way consumers spend money. According to Lasaleta, Sedikides, and Vohs (2014), by fostering *social connectedness*, nostalgia decreases individuals' desire for money. These authors describe social connectedness as "a key consequence, and the lack of it as a key antecedent of nostalgia" (p. 714). Hence, when nostalgic feelings are elicited, social connectedness rises, and when people feel socially disconnected, their desire for nostalgia increases. The findings of Lasaleta et al. (2014) are relevant for marketers, particularly those considering the use of nostalgic cues in marketing campaigns because their study demonstrates that nostalgic feelings can reduce both the price sensitivity of consumers and the resistance to spending money. The term social connectedness and its effects on nostalgia is consistent with both the *sociability view* (Seehusen et al., 2013) that depicts nostalgia as dependent on interactions with others and the concept of generational cohorts (based on belonging to generational groups).

The huge successes attained by companies and organizations evoking nostalgia and re-introducing old products (such as Coca Cola, Volkswagen, Schwinn, General Motors, Old Navy, Ford, and ultimately the political campaign of president Donald Trump: "Make America Great Again") illustrate how powerful can

nostalgic cues be among consumers and even electoral voters. Still, marketers should have extreme care on how nostalgic messages are conveyed in order to achieve positive results.

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