

**A COMPARISON OF COGNITIVE RESPONSES  
BETWEEN PERSONAL AND HISTORICAL NOSTALGIA**

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# **A COMPARISON OF COGNITIVE RESPONSES BETWEEN PERSONAL AND HISTORICAL NOSTALGIA**

## **ABSTRACT**

This research compares the effects of Personal and Historical Nostalgia on the cognition of respondents. Using an experimental research design and 806 respondents the type, ratio, and valence of thoughts when exposed to these specific nostalgic types were collected. Both nostalgic conditions were successful in stimulating specific types of nostalgic thoughts, showing a clear distinction between the two that is commonly overlooked. Personal nostalgia was found to stimulate a more positively valenced set of thoughts compared to Historical, but it resulted in fewer brand / message, and ad execution related thoughts. Comparative implications of using these two appeals are discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Significant differences in this important consumer behaviour reaction would indicate a need for practitioners and academics alike to ensure they approach nostalgic appeals as two specific types, rather than the commonly used ‘unified’ way of simply ‘nostalgia’. It would also highlight the beneficial and detrimental effects on cognition of each type. The paper begins with a brief background and theoretical underpinnings before moving to hypotheses development. Method is revealed next, and analysis/discussion of the results follows. Finally, limitations and future direction are discussed.

## **BACKGROUND AND UNDERPINNINGS**

Nostalgia in its unified form is examined extensively by authors and these findings are widely available (e.g. Muehling and Sprott 2004; Baker and Kennedy 1994; Belk 1991; Davis 1979; Holak and Havlena 1998; Holbrook and Schindler 1991). As such, the focus of this background is on the concept of Personal and Historical Nostalgia, and why these two forms of appeal are being comparatively examined in terms of their effect on cognition. The recent focus on the variations of nostalgia that exists, namely Personal and Historical Nostalgia, is the key focal point for this research. To put it very briefly, Personal Nostalgia occurs when reactions are generated from a personally remembered past (Personal Nostalgia: ‘the way I was’), while Historical

Nostalgia deals with reactions generated from a time in history that the respondent did not experience directly, even a time before they were born (historical / communal nostalgia: 'the way it was') (Havlena and Holak 1991; Stern 1992). This being the case, it is logical that personal nostalgia therefore deals with Autobiographical Memory retrieval (e.g. Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993), while Historical Nostalgia which can deal with a time that one did not experience directly, or even before he / she was born (Stern 1992), does not share this trait. Instead Historical Nostalgia will draw upon Collective Memory (Halbwachs 1950, 1992). The variation in cognitive retrieval taking place is expected to have significantly effects on responses important to practitioners and academics alike. This is further explored in the hypothesis development.

### **HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

A common first step in responses to advert appeals is the thoughts retrieved / generated by the consumer by means of their memory / thought process. Memory / thought retrieval roots reside in psychology and marketers have adapted the theories related to memory to explain the marketing outcomes. Firstly, concerning memory, literature on memory accessibility suggests salient thoughts should be more easily retrieved and produced in greater quantity than less salient thoughts (Bettman 1979; Craik and Lockhart 1972; Wright 1980). Research in this area also shows salient thoughts are often self-referencing (or 'personal connections' Krugman 1967) and thus may influence mental-processing activity when attitudes are formed or retrieved (e.g. Greenwald 1968). The importance of these results to this research follows.

Havlena and Holak (1991) suggest that using ad executional elements (music, jingles, visual images etc.), advertisers may be capable of explicitly encouraging 'nostalgic reflection' (i.e. retrieval of memories of past times). While nostalgic thoughts differ from autobiographical memories (Muehling and Sprott 2004), as they generally provide a 'filtered' version of the past (Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Stern 1992), nostalgic thoughts are by nature still self-referencing thoughts, or 'personal connections', (Krugman 1967) due to their connection or association with an individual's real or idealized past (Belk 1990; Holak and Havlena 1992). Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993) found that ads that encourage autobiographical memories retrieval evoke more thoughts about those experiences and higher levels of net

positive affect than ads not encouraging such memory retrieval. These autobiographical memories by definition are 'self-referencing'. According to studies by Muehling and Spratt (2004) the most salient thoughts of consumers exposed to nostalgic evoking print adverts, were those that made a connection (often a personal connection) to something from the past (among those thoughts elicited by respondents exposed to a nostalgic ad) thus nostalgic cues should be capable of evoking a more salient group of responses. Therefore, through the original concept of memory retrieval and accessibility, a consumer subjected to a nostalgic cue laden advert should show experience the following: that nostalgic thoughts are more easily retrieved and produced at a greater proportion to total thoughts (Muehling and Spratt 2004). In regards to total thoughts when exposed to either a nostalgic or a non-nostalgic print advert, Muehling and Spratt (2004) found participants produced approximately the same number of thoughts. This suggests that nostalgic ads may prompt a certain type of thought production, as opposed to simply prompting more thoughts in general to be produced, which is contrary to the hypothesis and literature that proclaims salient thoughts should be produced in greater quantity than less salient thoughts (Bettman 1979; Craik and Lockhart 1972; Wright 1980). However, this study tested nostalgia as a 'unified' concept, not taking into account the existence of Personal and Historical Nostalgia.

Nostalgia is associated with emotional (feeling) responses (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Belk 1991; Davis 1979; Holak and Havlena 1998; Holbrook and Schindler 1991), and literature shows that assumption may be made that nostalgic thoughts are generally positive (filtering out thoughts that are unpleasant) (Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Stern 1992). Muehling and Spratt (2004) found that a more positively valenced set of nostalgic thoughts was produced when exposing their sample to nostalgic (as compared to non-nostalgic) print adverts, but again, this did not test the comparison in Personal and Historical Nostalgia. Finally, Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993) and Williams and Faber (1999) caution that using adverts that encouraging the retrieval of autobiographical memories may act as a distracter by evoking fewer thoughts about the advertised product's features than adverts not encouraging such form of memory retrieval. Thus, advertisers may inadvertently cause product-related thoughts to be less accessible. The concept of testing the number of brand / message-related thoughts when exposed to nostalgic adverts was empirically tested by

Muehling and Sprott (2004) where they found that the number of brand / message related (product) thoughts generated during ad exposure is not significantly different between treatment groups. Although this is regarding simply the number of brand / message related (product) thoughts, as opposed to the feature recall and brand evaluation tested by Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner (1993) which found when autobiographical memories (self referencing, as per nostalgic thoughts) were encouraged it resulted in reduced analysis of, and memory for, product information in consumers. This study, however, also tested nostalgia only as a unified type. As can be seen, this aspect requires further attention. It should also be noted that previous studies (see Muehling and Sprott 2004) have hypothesised nostalgia's affect as eliciting a greater number of nostalgic thoughts, as well as a greater proportion of nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts, as one hypothesis. This researcher believes that these two findings should be separated, as although consumers may have a 'greater number of nostalgic thoughts' when exposed to the advert, they may not have greater proportion of nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts. The significance, if any, of this occurrence will be tested.

The key focus of this study is to fill the gap in the literature on the uses / implications of Personal and Historical Nostalgia, as recommended by previous academics (see Muehling and Sprott 2004). As previously stated, it has been suggested that salient thoughts should be more easily retrieved and produced in greater quantity than would less salient thoughts (Bettman 1979; Craik and Lockhart 1972; Wright 1980). Havlena and Holak (1991) and Stern (1992) found that nostalgic thoughts may be generated from either a personally remembered past (Personal Nostalgia) or from a time in history before one was born (historical / communal nostalgia). As the Personal Nostalgia is more self-referencing by definition and thus salient (as in line with the previous revealed evidence on Autobiographical Memory), a marketer may choose to use Personal Nostalgia in place of Historical (due to the self-referencing nature). The prior discussed nature of nostalgic thoughts may also indicate Personal Nostalgia will evoke a more positively valenced set of these thoughts. But as Personal Nostalgia by definition is more 'self-referencing', in reference to the knowledge that this may act as a distracter of brand/message thoughts (Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993; Williams and Faber 1999), marketers may find Personal Nostalgia will result in even fewer brand/message related thoughts generated at the time of ad exposure (as

compared to historic nostalgia). The remaining thought type category (ad-execution) may suffer from this same fate, however based on previous research there does not seem to be a difference suggested as a result of the change in cognitive reaction type. As discussed, previous studies look at nostalgia as a unified concept, although there has been clear indication that Personal and Historical evoked nostalgia may produce different results. Thus the hypothesis is formed:

H1: Compared to respondents experiencing a Historical Nostalgic reaction, respondents experiencing a Personal Nostalgic reaction will significantly experience:

- a) a greater number of personal nostalgic thoughts
- b) a smaller number of historical nostalgic thoughts
- c) a greater proportion of personal nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts
- d) a smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts
- e) an increase in positively valenced personal nostalgic thoughts
- f) a decrease in positively valenced historical nostalgic thoughts
- g) a greater number of total thoughts
- h) a more positively valenced set of thoughts
- i) fewer brand / message-related thoughts
- j) no change in ad-execution related thoughts

## **METHOD**

The study used an experimental design. Respondents were exposed to one of two constructed broadcast style adverts laden with personal or historical nostalgic cues. These ads were pre-tested in focus groups with respondents similar to that of the main study to ensure suitability.

### **Measures**

A thought elicitation exercise was used in order to collect data on the thoughts generated by respondents. This consisted of respondents writing down their thoughts and self evaluating the valence. Two judges working independently, blind to the treatment conditions, coded the thoughts. Thoughts received one of five codes: Personal Nostalgia related, Historical Nostalgia related, brand / message-related, ad execution-related, or miscellaneous. From these results total counts, valenced indices, ratios, and mean scores can be produced to test the hypothesis. This process was followed from previous studies, including research on nostalgia (e.g. Muehling and

Sprott 2004; Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 1998; Wright 1980; Homer 1990; MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch 1986; Baumgartner, Sujan and Bettman 1992; Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner 1993; Calder, Insko, and Yandell 1974). A manipulation check in the form of scales developed to test for each nostalgic response independently from one another was also undertaken to ensure respondents were experiencing the intended form of nostalgia (Marchegiani and Phau 2007a, 2007b). Respondents were allocated into a specific nostalgic group based on these results. Finally, demographic information was collected.

### **Sample**

The total usable number of respondents experiencing Personal Nostalgia was 514. The Historical Nostalgia group was comprised of 292 valid responses. The mean age of the personal nostalgic group was 20.55, and the historical 20.42. A t-test showed no significant difference in age between the personal ( $M = 20.55$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) and historical ( $M = 20.42$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ) groups ( $t(804) = 0.89$ ,  $p = .37$ ). The personal group had 47.5% males, 52.5% female, and the historical group 49% males, 51% female. Student sampling was used. Students have been proposed as being representative of general consumers (DelVecchio 2000; Yavas 1994) and young people are targeted with both nostalgic appeals.

## **ANALYSIS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A summary of these results, the mean, and standard deviation scores for each measure can be seen at Table 1. Results of analysis are discussed within the context of each part of:

*H1: Compared to respondents experiencing a Historical Nostalgic reaction, respondents experiencing a Personal Nostalgic reaction will significantly experience:*

- a) a greater number of personal nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experienced a significantly higher number of personal nostalgic thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(735.37) = 17.55$ ,  $p = .000$ ). This result is a positive indication of the appropriateness of the adverts used and scales developed in Phase One of this research. This shows us that those indicated as experiencing Personal Nostalgia by the scale do in fact have a higher numbers of personal nostalgic related thoughts. The result of this hypothesis, in combination with H<sub>1b</sub>), also indicated distinctly different thoughts occurring in those experiencing Personal Nostalgia as opposed to Historical Nostalgia. This supports the

hypothesis underpinning the research that different cognitive responses are occurring under each specific type of nostalgic response. Specifically we can say that it seems respondent are drawing on their own ‘personal connections’ (see Krugman 1967) or ‘autobiographical’ memory (e.g. Brewer 1986; Neisser 1988). This alone signifies that the purpose of this research, that is, to distinguish Personal and Historical Nostalgia as separate appeals not only theoretically, but also to provide academic and managerially sound reasons for this to happen, is met at least in this circumstance. Knowing that respondent’s thoughts are significantly different between the two nostalgic groups is likely to have major implications for marketers employing nostalgic appeals. Of course, the magnitude of these changes in terms of implications will be understood in perspective upon conclusion of all hypotheses.

b) a smaller number of historical nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

Historical Nostalgia group experienced a significantly higher number of historical nostalgic thoughts than those experiencing Personal Nostalgia ( $t(345.76) = -13.80, p = .000$ ). As discussed in similarity with H<sub>1a</sub>, this result shows that those indicated as experiencing Historical Nostalgia as a result of the advertising appeal they were exposed to do in fact have a higher number of Historical Nostalgia based thoughts. This shows that not only do those experiencing Personal Nostalgia have a significant increase in personal thoughts, but also that those respondents experiencing Historical Nostalgia have a significant increase in a nostalgic based thoughts that are not personal; namely historical instead. The cognitive response in this case being based more on ‘collective’ memory (Halbwachs 1950; 1992).

c) a greater proportion of personal nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experienced a significantly greater proportion of nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(796.64) = 21.23, p = .000$ ). This result provides indication of the salience of thoughts being produced as respondents felt Personal Nostalgia, in addition to the suitability of the advert and scale used. Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993) also found that adverts that encourage retrieval of autobiographical memories evoke more thoughts about those experiences.

d) a smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experienced a significantly smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(370.68) = -16.11, p = .000$ ). Similar to the result in H<sub>1c</sub>, this shows that the proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts increases in those experiencing Historical Nostalgia. This indicates the power and salience of such thoughts.

e) an increase in positively valenced personal nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experienced significantly a higher positively valenced set of personal nostalgic thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(701.05) = 16.49, p = .000$ ). This result indicates that not only are personal nostalgic thoughts more common under the personal condition, but also that these thoughts are significantly more positive in nature. This supports the literature (e.g. Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Holbrook and Schindler 1991; Muehling and Sprott 2004; Stern 1992) in that nostalgic responses are generally considered to be of a positive / pleasant nature. A higher level of net positive affect in ads encouraging autobiographical responses compared to ads not encouraging such memory retrieval was also found by Sujon, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993).

f) a decrease in positively valenced historical nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experienced significantly a lower positively valenced set of personal nostalgic thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(349.04) = -11.34, p = .000$ ). As per H<sub>1e</sub>, the historical nostalgic group also experienced more positively valenced historical thoughts than the Personal Nostalgia group. This indicated that both Personal and Historical Nostalgia are generally positive / pleasant reactions, but that the type of the valenced thought is dependent on the nostalgic response type experienced.

g) a greater number of total thoughts - REJECTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia did not experience a significantly greater number of total thoughts than those respondents experiencing a Historical Nostalgia based response ( $t(804) = 1.43, p = .15$ ). This result indicates that the type of nostalgia being experienced does not significantly affect the number of thoughts in general, but rather the type or subject of the thoughts (as evidenced by H<sub>1a, b, i, j</sub>). This result is reminiscent of Muehling and Sprott's (2004) study where those experiencing a unified nostalgia advertising appeal in comparison to a non-nostalgic appeal did not produce a higher number of thoughts in general than the non-nostalgic appeal, but instead prompted a certain type of thought, as is the case in this study.

h) a more positively valenced set of thoughts - ACCEPTED

Respondents indicated as feeling Personal Nostalgia experienced a significantly more positively valenced set of thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(804) = 4.90, p = .000$ ). The previous hypothesis exploring nostalgic thoughts have shown that there has been a more positively valenced set of thoughts occurring in-sync with the form of nostalgia being felt. However, the finding of this hypothesis is of significance as it shows that not only does Personal Nostalgia result in positive personal nostalgic thoughts, but such a response also changes the valence of the entire cognitive set in respondents. This hypothesis makes no distinction between nostalgia, ad-execution, brand / message related or even miscellaneous thoughts, but we still see a significantly more positive cognitive response in the subjects. This generally positive reaction supports the literature that indicated that those experiencing positive nostalgia, especially those of an autobiographical nature, might transfer these feelings to other responses (in this case, other thoughts). This transfer affect of positive personal nostalgic reactions on to overall thoughts may have lead-on effect to emotions, attitudes, and intentions. Essentially it indicates Personal Nostalgia as having a different (in this case, more positive) effect.

i) fewer brand / message-related thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experienced significantly fewer brand / message-related thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(535.77) = -2.90, p = .004$ ). This supports the literature (e.g. Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993) in showing that personal nostalgic reactions, which are generally more salient and autobiographical in nature than historical, result in a decrease in thoughts about the brand / message, likely due to a combination of the personal thoughts being more salient and thus occurring in place of other thoughts, showing them as somewhat of a distraction to other cognitive subjects. This is a possible problem for products and brands wishing to employ Personal Nostalgia, but who still desire viewers to concentrate on the message being divulged.

j) no change in ad-execution related thoughts - REJECTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia did actually experience significantly less ad-execution related thoughts compared to those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ( $t(804) = -.32, p = .751$ ). This indicates the type of nostalgia experienced affects not only brand / message thoughts and nostalgic related thoughts, but also ad-execution related thoughts. This is possibly similar to the concern of researchers (e.g. Sujan,

Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993) that by increasing autobiographical memories, consumers will think less about the brand and message portrayed in the advert (as per H<sub>1j</sub>). This result could signify less need for using celebrities, special effects and other ad execution related stimulus when using Personal as opposed to Historical Nostalgia as consumers spend less time cognitively processing these elements anyway due to their concentration being on their Autobiographical Memory process instead. However, where ad-execution thoughts are expected to be beneficial for the brand, Personal Nostalgia may act as an unwanted distraction.

**Table One: Summary of Results**

<b>Hypothesis 1 (Personal vs. Historical)</b>	<b>Accept / Reject</b>		<b>Personal Mean (sd)</b>	<b>Historical Mean (sd)</b>
a) a greater number of personal nostalgic thoughts	Accepted	Number PN Thoughts	3.71* (3.65)	0.60 (1.40)
b) a smaller number of historical nostalgic thoughts	Accepted	Number HN Thoughts	0.34* (0.87)	2.17 (2.17)
c) a greater proportion of personal nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts	Accepted	Ratio PN to Total thoughts	0.51* (0.37)	0.09* (0.19)
d) a smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts	Accepted	Ratio HN to Total thoughts	0.05* (0.14)	0.33 (0.28)
e) an increase in positively valenced personal nostalgic thoughts	Accepted	Valence of PN Thoughts	+2.97* (3.15)	+0.44 (1.11)
f) a decrease in positively valenced historical nostalgic thoughts	Accepted	Valence of HN Thoughts	+0.21* (0.68)	+1.36 (1.65)
g) a greater number of total thoughts	Rejected	Total Numb. Thoughts	6.73 (3.07)	6.42 (2.73)
h) a more positively valenced set of thoughts	Accepted	Valence of Thoughts	+4.43* (3.41)	+3.24 (3.07)
i) fewer brand / message-related thoughts	Accepted	Brand/msg Thoughts	0.79* (1.19)	1.01 (1.25)
j) no change in ad-execution related thoughts	Rejected	Ad-execution Thoughts	1.65* (1.96)	2.23 (2.16)

## **SUMMARY DISCUSSION OF RESULTS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

As a general overview of the results it is clear that Personal and Historical Nostalgia are clearly two distinct appeals and that future research should treat them as such, instead of the commonly used ‘unified’ view. This is evidenced in part by the specific nostalgic type of thought being experienced ( $H_{1a, b, c, d}$ ), which, as discussed, theory suggests is drawing on different memory types (autobiographic vs. collective). Secondly, we see that Personal Nostalgia has some benefits over Historical in producing more positively valenced thoughts in general, however, some possibly trade-offs occur in the drop in brand/message related thoughts. The drop in ad-execution related thoughts may be beneficial when there is an expense to produce the adverts, but could be counter-productive where execution is hoped to be a focal point

for the consumer. Simply put, academics and practitioners should be aware of the two varying nostalgic types and their differing effects on respondents. While student populations are considered representative of general consumers (DelVecchio 2000; Yavas 1994) and are considered suitable for this research, future research may want to replicate this study under varying age groups to add generalisability and examine any effects of age on the results. Any changes as a result of culture may also be worthwhile. Perhaps the most limiting aspect is this paper explores only cognitive reactions in respondent, which are just one aspect of consumer response. Similar undertakings on emotions, attitudes, and intention should be conducted.

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