

# **Historical Nostalgia Intensities: effects on Cognition, Attitudes, and Intentions**

**Chris Marchegiani, Ian Phau, Curtin University of Technology**

## **Abstract**

This paper compares the effect of high, medium and low levels of historical nostalgic reactions in consumers exposed to a historical nostalgic advert on cognitive, attitudinal, and purchase intention reactions. These important consumer reactions are found to be effected in some way due to the change in historical nostalgia intensity. Although nostalgia has been explored in the past, effects of historical nostalgia specifically are generally unexplored. This paper begins to fill this important empirical gap.

## **Background and Hypothesis Development**

### **Nostalgia**

Nostalgia is generally described as "a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favourable affect) toward 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)" (pp. 330 Holbrook and Schindler 1991). It is seen as a highly effective marketing appeal and affects a wide range of consumer responses (Muehling and Sprott 2004). Although previous studies have tested nostalgia in a unified form, recent research shows that nostalgia may be generated from either a personally remembered past (personal nostalgia: 'the way I was') or from a time in history before one was born (historical / communal nostalgia: 'the way it was') (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Havlena and Holak 1991; Hirsch 1992; Holak and Havlena 1992; Stern 1992). Based on previous theory and research, each of these distinctly different responses are expected to follow differing cognitive paths as personal nostalgia makes use of the respondent's autobiographical memories (Brewer 1986; Neisser 1988), also called personal (Brewer and Pani 1983) or episodic (Tulving 1972, 1984) memory, while historical nostalgia by definition does not do so. Instead it calls on collective memory (Halbwachs 1950; Meyers 2001) and employs a more 'fantasy' approach (Stern 1992).

This is of importance as salient thoughts are often self-referencing and thus may influence mental-processing activity when attitudes are formed and retrieved (e.g. Greenwald 1968). This is expected to result in variations to other consumer responses, such as attitudes and intentions. Due to the obvious importance of these reactions, it is important to understand the effect varying intensities of historical and personal nostalgia specifically have on reactions. This paper deals with the historical nostalgic reactions by examining possible changes in some of the most important reactions of consumers; namely cognition, attitudes and purchase intentions. Three groups of respondents, low (LHN), medium (MHN), and high (HHN) historical nostalgia, are compared. The following hypotheses and underpinnings for their construction are presented.

### **Cognition**

Nostalgia is shown generally as a positive reaction, generally selective and often filtered through "rose-colored glasses" (Belk 1990, 1991; Havlena and Holak 1991; Holak and Havlena 1992; Holbrook and Schindler 1991; Stern 1992). Cognitive responses are commonly

shown to be effected by nostalgia (Baker and Kenedy 1994; Belk 1991; Davis 1979; Holak and Havlena 1998; Holbrook and Schindler 1991; Muehling and Sprott 2004). However, no empirical knowledge is available on the effects of specifically historical nostalgia on cognitive reactions. As nostalgia is generally seen as positive, and is expected to encourage changes in particular types of thoughts and number of thoughts, the following is presented.

H1: As the level of historical nostalgia increases as shown by the historical nostalgic scale, we will see a significant:

- a) Increase in the number of thoughts overall
- b) Increase in the total number of positive thoughts
- c) Decrease in the total number of negative thoughts
- d) Increase in the number of historical nostalgia related thoughts
- e) Decrease in the number of advert execution related thoughts
- f) Decrease in the number of brand / message related thoughts
- g) Increase in the valenced indices of historical nostalgic thoughts
- h) Increase in the ratio of historical nostalgic related thought to total thoughts

### **Attitudes and Intentions**

Attitudes Towards the Advert (Aad), Attitude Towards the Brand (Ab), and Intentions to Purchase the Brand (Ib) are commonly explored consumer behaviour reactions in many advertising appeals (Pascal, Sprott and Muehling 2002; Muehling and Sprott 2004). However, as discussed, effects dependent on the intensity of historical nostalgia specifically have been unexplored. Due to the positive nature of nostalgia and the follow on effects of Aad, Ab, and Ib, we propose the following:

H2: As the level of historical nostalgia increases as shown by the historical nostalgic scale, we will see a significant positive increase in:

- a) attitude towards the advert
- b) attitude towards the brand
- c) intention to purchase the brand

## **Method and Results**

### **Method**

An original broadcast style advertisement containing cues related to historical nostalgia (Stern 1992) was produced and pre-tested to ensure the intended nostalgic reaction (historical) occurred. Kodak, a brand successfully used in previous studies of nostalgia (e.g. Muehling and Sprott 2004), was depicted in the advert. A total of 407 usable respondents were collected and an inter-quartile split based on their score on the historical nostalgic scale (Marchegiani and Phau 2007) was used to result in LHN and HHN groups of 102 respondents each, and with 203 respondents in the MHN group. Respondents were delimited to ages 18-25 in order to ensure a homogenous sample, and were collected from a student sample. Past studies to explore nostalgic reactions (Muehling and Sprott 2004; Baker and Kennedy 1994) have successfully used student sample groups as nostalgia concerns all persons, regardless of age, gender, social class, ethnicity, or other social groupings (Greenberg, Koole, and Pyszczynski 2004).

Table 1 shows a summary of results and should be referred to for clarification of significance between the groups of nostalgic intensity and for mean and standard deviation scores. Significant differences in mean scores between the groups are measured using One-way ANOVA.

## **Cognition Results**

To collect cognitive responses, as in line with previous studies respondents were asked to list all thoughts that came to mind as they viewed the adverts (e.g. Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990) and were given three minute to complete this task (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 1998). They then were instructed to evaluate the thoughts as positive, negative or neutral by placing a '+', '-', or '0' respectively next to each thought (Wright 1980). As per existing literature and studies (Baumgartner, Sujan and Bettman 1992; Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner 1993; Muehling and Sprott 2004) coding of the thoughts listed by the respondents was conducted at a later stage by two trained judges working independently, blind to the treatment conditions (initial agreement rate 79%). Three of the categories from Muehling and Sprott's (2004) study were utilised identically (brand-/message-related, advert execution-related, and miscellaneous). The fourth category of 'nostalgia-related' was divided into 'personal-nostalgia related' and 'historical-nostalgia related' resulting in five independent groups. As per Muehling and Sprott (2004) simple counts, ratios and valenced indices were explored, although with the purpose of exploring historical nostalgic reactions specifically. Results are as follows:

### **H1a) Increase in the number of thoughts overall**

When comparing the low Historical nostalgic group to the medium the number of thoughts overall increased significantly. The high historical nostalgic group strangely did not share this significance. This shows an increase from low to mid historical nostalgia persuaded more thoughts overall to occur, but this failed to happen in the high intensity cases.

### **H1b) Increase in the total number of positive thoughts**

These results indicate that the intensity of historical nostalgia has a significant effect on the number of positive thoughts overall (regardless of 'type' of thought) when comparing the medium and high level to the low. However, it also indicates that no significantly greater change occurs when elicited high levels in this case (although it is not detrimental to do so).

### **H1c) Decrease in the total number of negative thoughts**

The level of historical nostalgia has a significant effect on the number of negative thoughts overall when comparing low level to the high, but no significant change from low to medium, or medium to high. In this case, marketers should be aware that while they receive the benefit of less negative thoughts by producing high levels of historical nostalgia (compared to low), if they are moving from the medium to high level no significant benefit is achieved.

### **H1d) Increase in the number of historical nostalgia related thoughts**

As the level of historical nostalgia as judged by the historical nostalgic scale increases, so too does the number of historical nostalgic thoughts

### **H1e) Decrease in the number of advert execution related thoughts**

No significant changes occurred between levels of historical nostalgia in relation to this thought. This suggests that the increase in cognitive processing used in processing the

historical cues did not have a corresponding negative effect on the viewer's ability to process advert execution related thoughts.

H1f) Decrease in the number of brand / message related thoughts  
No significant effect was found. This result is as per H1e.

H1g) Increase in the valenced indices of historical nostalgic thoughts  
This indicates that the level of historical nostalgia has a significant effect on the valenced indices of historical thoughts, but that to have a significant effect reaching the mid level only necessary as, although not detrimental, no significantly greater benefit is received from elicited high levels in relation to this response.

H1h) Increase in the ratio of historical nostalgic related thought to total thoughts  
As each level of historical nostalgia increases, so does the ratio of historical to total thoughts, showing historical reaction encourage more thoughts of a particular nature.

### **Attitudes and Intentions Results**

Commonly used items (e.g. Cox and Cox 1988; Holbrook 1993; Holbrook 1994; Holbrook and Schindler 1994; Krishnamurthy and Sujana 1999; Bruner, James and Hensel 2001; Muehling and Spratt 2004) to measure Aad, Ab, and were completed by respondents. Cronbach's Alpha for each scale was .85, .90, and .93 respectively.

Results show the following for each hypothesis:

H2a: As Historical Nostalgia increases there is a significant increase in positive Attitude towards the Advert when experiencing high as compared to low or medium historical nostalgia. However, there is no significance in those experiencing medium as opposed to low levels of historical nostalgia. This means that a high level of historical nostalgia would need to be achieved before significant effects on Aad were seen. Additionally, as the high historical nostalgia level is experiencing significantly more positive Aad than the medium historical nostalgia group, it indicated a larger 'jump' in consumer reactions from the medium to high level.

H2b: As Historical Nostalgia increases to a high level there is a significant increase in positive Attitude towards the Brand compared to the low level. However, no significant benefit is achieved moving from the medium to high level. Thus if a medium level was being achieved with little to no effort, the extra effort in increasing respondents to a high level of historical nostalgia would not significantly increase the respondent's attitude towards the brand. However, achieving the high level of historical nostalgia is of significantly greater benefit in terms of Ab if the level of historical nostalgia is otherwise low.

H2c: As Historical Nostalgia increases to a high level there is a significant increase in positive Ib compared to the low level. However, as per H2b, no significant benefit is achieved moving from the medium to high level. Thus if a medium level was being achieved with little no effort, the extra effort in increasing respondents to a high level of historical nostalgia would not significantly increase the respondent's intention to purchase the brand. However, achieving the high level of historical nostalgia is of significantly greater benefit in terms of attitude towards the brand if the level of historical nostalgia is otherwise low.

Any consumer reaction that affects the attitudes and intentions of consumers is clearly of importance to marketing practitioners. These results showing the difference in effects dependent on the level of historical nostalgia are essential details to be aware of should practitioners choose to evoke such a response in consumers. Previous to this study these results were empirically untested.

### **Conclusion, Limitations and Future Directions**

The significant changes shown in consumer behaviour as a result of the intensity of historical nostalgic reactions are of clear importance. As we are able to evoke to some degree historical reactions specifically in consumers, more in-depth understanding and prediction of reactions are of use. The results show that historical nostalgia can effect various cognitive, attitudinal, and intentional reactions in consumers, but they also show that at times consumers must reach at least a high level of historical nostalgia before any significant change is seen (for example in order to effect Aad), while changing some reactions only require a mid level response with no benefit existing moving from the medium to high level (for example increasing the number of positive thoughts).

Understanding the reactions that we are expected to observe in consumers allows better prediction and thus knowledge as to whether it is worthwhile for practitioners to strive for particular levels of historical nostalgic reactions, and to better profile consumers reactions based on their nostalgic proneness or historical nostalgic level score towards an advert.

There is a need for future research in order to further our understanding of nostalgia and to fulfil some gaps in this study. Firstly the inclusion of non-nostalgic reactions as a control would be of value. Additionally, non-student samples should be explored and analysis undertaken exploring any variations in reactions based on age, gender, cultural groups, differences in product categories, use of fictional products, and different historical cues.

Furthermore, as nostalgia is implicated in a wide variety of consumer behaviours, historical nostalgia's specific effect on these reactions are also of importance. While this study does have its limitation and gaps, it provides the evidence necessary to suggest that future work looking at historical nostalgia (and indeed personal nostalgia also) as two separate reactions is of worth.

Table 1: Summary of results

	Historical Nost. intensity comparison of groups					
	Low to Med	Med to High	Low to High	Low Mean & (sd)	Med Mean & (sd)	High Mean & (sd)
Increase in the number of thoughts overall	Sig.	n.s.	n.s.	5.70 (2.17)	6.48 (2.73)	6.47 (2.65)
Increase in the total number of positive thoughts	Sig.	n.s.	Sig.	3.49 (1.99)	4.24 (2.34)	4.65 (2.36)
Decrease in the total number of negative thoughts	n.s.	n.s.	Sig.	1.00 (1.34)	0.76 (1.15)	0.55 (0.84)
Increase in the number of historical nostalgia related thoughts	Sig.	Sig.	Sig.	1.05 (1.27)	2.16 (2.01)	2.80 (2.25)
Decrease in the number of advert execution related thoughts	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	2.25 (1.93)	2.24 (2.15)	1.83 (1.93)
Decrease in the number of brand / message related thoughts	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.90 (1.16)	1.18 (1.48)	1.05 (1.28)
Increase in the valenced indices of historical nostalgic thoughts	Sig.	n.s.	Sig.	0.68 (1.14)	1.38 (1.58)	1.75 (1.66)
Increase in the ratio of historical nostalgic related thought to total thoughts	Sig.	Sig.	Sig.	0.17 (0.19)	0.33 (.27)	0.42 (.26)
Positive increase in Aad	n.s.	Sig.	Sig.	6.57 (1.53)	6.90 (1.43)	7.07 (1.41)
Positive increase in Ab	n.s.	n.s.	Sig.	6.54 (1.39)	6.79 (1.32)	7.07 (1.41)
Positive increase in Ib	n.s.	n.s.	Sig.	5.91 (1.94)	6.37 (1.90)	6.89 (2.04)

Significance ( $p < .05$ ), mean score in groups (with standard deviation in parenthesis).

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