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ECHOES OF THE DEAR DEPARTED PAST: SOME WORK IN PROGRESS ON NOSTALGIA

Morris B. Holbrook, Columbia University
Robert M. Schindler, Rutgers University - Camden

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ABSTRACT -

This paper provides a brief preview of some work in progress on the phenomenon of nostalgia in consumer behavior. It begins by introducing some background considerations and key definitions. It then reviews an initial finding on what appears to be a nostalgia-related preference peak in musical tastes. Three limitations in this study suggest directions for further research. The resulting work in progress involves three studies designed to address various aspects of these three limitations.

NOSTALGIA IS OLD

The phenomenon of nostalgia is almost as old as life itself.

Metaphorically, when God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, they very soon had reason to look back with longing to how nice things had been in the good old days. Since then, a wistful desire to recapture the dear departed past has haunted mankind.

Many agree with M. H. Abrams (1971) that this impulse to regain Paradise - to achieve a reconciliation with Lost Innocence and a reunification with the Prelapsarian Beauty of the World - is the essence of romanticism. Thus, Homer's Odysseus struggles to return home, and the hero of Joyce's Ulysses repeats a comparable journey. Poets like Milton in Paradise Lost, novelists like Proust in Remembrance of Things Past, songwriters like Lennon and-McCartney in "Yesterday," and screenwriters like George Lucas in "American Graffiti" have constantly reiterated similar themes. And, as Bart Giamatti (1989) never tired of reminding us, our National Pastime replays the urge to come home at least 52 times per game, weather permitting.

In sum, then, it seems fair to say that the sense of nostalgia has always inextricably infused our consciousness of the basic human condition.

NOSTALGIA IS NEW

Nevertheless, nostalgia has recently received renewed attention from popular journalists and marketing practitioners observing the contemporary scene in America. Many commentators feel that the role of nostalgia in modern society is increasing, perhaps because the multitudinous Baby-Boom Generation has now started to reach an age at which nostalgia begins to matter in a Big Way.

Thus, for example, Becky Holman recently told a columnist for the Minneapolis Star Tribune that "people are studying nostalgia today the way they studied sex in advertising three years ago" (Meyers 1990, p. 1D). We see evidence of this nostalgia boom everywhere we look - in reruns of the old Jackie Gleason programs and the formation of the Royal Association for the Longevity and Preservation of the Honeymooners (R.A.L.P.H.); in the reassessment of Richard Nixon and a new willingness to reconsider him as something more human(e) than he seemed at the time of Viet Nam and Watergate; in the emergence of Victorian and Country-Kitchen fashion trends and the introduction of such fad-oriented magazines as Victoria, Memories, and Joe Franklin's Nostalgia; in the resurgence of 1950s Rock 'n' Roll and
Perhaps most conspicuously for consumer researchers, nostalgia-related themes have begun to permeate the clutter of advertising that fills our daily exposure to the mass media. Thus, once again, Campbell soups are "M'm, M'm, Good." Once again, Timex watches can claim to "take a licking and keep on ticking." Once again, Coke can want to "teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." And, once again, Clairol can pose the profound problem, "Does She or Doesn't She?"

NOSTALGIA IS NEGLECTED

Yet, somewhat surprisingly, nostalgia has received relatively little attention from academicians in general and from scholars devoted to the study of consumer research in particular. Appropriately enough, some members of the Consumer-Behavior Odyssey - who identify so strongly with the quest described by Homer and by Joyce - have explored such nostalgia-related themes as collecting, the sacredness of ancestral objects, leaving home, or possessions and the sense of past (Belk 1990). But, to our knowledge, the present Special Topic Session at ACR is the first forum to address the phenomenon of consumer nostalgia in an explicit and systematic way.

NOSTALGIA IS DEFINABLE

Fred Davis (1979), the one sociologist who has pursued the theme of nostalgia at considerable length, views nostalgia as a longing for the past or a "yearning for yesterday." We might expand or extend this view by defining nostalgia more broadly as a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable 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).

Notice that, in this definition, we consider nostalgia to include far more than just those poignant, bittersweet impulses associated with early life events in a way often characterized as "sentimental" or "sappy." Rather, our view of nostalgia covers any and all liking for past objects that, for whatever reason, are no longer commonly experienced. For example, someone who used to eat Oreo cookies as a child but who now avoids sweets altogether for reasons of weight control could harbor a nostalgic longing for Oreos even though they are still widely available to others. Notice also that some controversy exists concerning whether one can feel nostalgia toward objects from history, but we shall not enter this debate beyond saying that it does seem possible to identify psychologically with figures, experiences, or cultural moments dating from before one's own birth - as, for example, in the case of movie Westerns that evoke reminiscences of a bygone era in 19th Century America.

Davis (1979) goes further to distinguish three levels or "orders" of nostalgia. As with other phenomena related to consumer behavior, these have been anticipated and brilliantly illustrated in songs by David Frishberg.

Level I is analytic and involves an interpretive exploration of questions about nostalgia. Thus, for example, one of Frishberg's songs presents a sensitive probing of his own homesickness after moving from the Big Apple to Los Angeles. It asks the titular question, "Do You Miss New York?," but couches this in a tone of ironic ambivalence: "Do you miss the thrill, the subways, the schlepping? And is it second nature, still, to watch where you are stepping?" (Frishberg 1981).

Level II is reflexive and involves the self-conscious investigation of themes that characterize the nostalgic impulse. For example, as Holbrook (1989) argues is one of his columns for the ACR Newsletter, Frishberg's song entitled "The Dear Departed Past" is the definitive masterpiece in this genre. It explicitly raises such issues as, "Can one feel a real nostalgia for a time and place one never even knew?" (Frishberg 1985).

Level I is expressive and simply conveys the desire to return to the good old days or even the potentially unconscious belief that things used to be better than they are now. As a quintessential manifestation of this feeling (one intimately connected to the ethos of baseball), we would offer one of Frishberg's old songs newly recorded on compact disc (Frishberg 1990). The song is entitled "Matty" and presents Frishberg's tribute to the great right-handed pitcher, Christy Mathewson, who played for the New York Giants from 1900 to 1916 and who won 373 games (tied for third best in history). This song merits our consideration because it carries the spirit of nostalgia to exalted heights that achieve nearly messianic proportions (cf. O'Quinn 1990).

Specifically, the song connects the name of "Matty" to a series of terms associated with the spiritual or the sacred - words like "great," "soul," "true," "trust," "faith," "hallowed," "mightiest," "miracle," "sweat," and "God." Moreover, the musical line emphasizes these connections by repeating a dramatic fall in the melody that coincides with the words "soul," "down to do or die," "miracle," and "God Himself." Then, at the song's climax, a key change from F-natural to A-flat entails a transformation and thereby reflects a metaphoric transmutation of Matty the baseball player into a kind of heroic Christ-like figure: "I'd swear that God Himself had sent His Right-Hand Man to see us through." And it was you, Matty, it was you." In this context, the phrase "Right-Hand Man" carries at least three salient and multiply-charged meanings. First, Matty was a right-handed pitcher. Second, he won a lot of ball games - more than almost anyone else, ever - and was certainly a handy guy to have around. Third, at the level of nostalgic hero worship, he bears some resemblance to Christ - who, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty." Lest we doubt this association, we should recall Matty's real name which is never explicitly mentioned in the song itself - Christy Mathewson.

This minor masterpiece lasts just three minutes but will boundlessly repay the investment in time and energy of anyone who chooses to track it down and to listen with care.

NOSTALGIA IS DEMONSTRABLE

If we define nostalgia as a longing for or favorable affect toward things from the past, it bears a clear relation to a phenomenon demonstrated by Holbrook and Schindler (1989) for the case of popular music. Very briefly, we proposed that esthetic tastes might reflect a tendency analogous to imprinting in which certain species form irreversible attachments to objects encountered during certain critical periods in their early lives (Lorenz 1951). In the movie The Big Chill, for example, former classmates from the University of Michigan reconvene for a funeral and spend the weekend eating the same foods, wearing the same clothes, talking the same talk, and listening to the same music that they enjoyed when they were in college. We suggested that this tendency, if generalizable, might cause preferences to reach their peak for music that was popular when a consumer entered the stage of late adolescence or early adulthood.

To test this hypothesis, we played popular songs from the years from 1932 to 1986 for a sample of 108 respondents ranging in age from 16 to 86 years old. Affective responses were aggregated not by songs, but rather by song-specific ages. This way of analyzing the data showed a clear and strong nonmonotonic tendency for respondents to prefer music that was popular when they were young adults. Peak preference occurred at 23.5 years of age, with a multiple correlation coefficient of $R = 0.84$.

Colloquially, this finding suggests that whatever music you liked when you first reached maturity will continue to please you best for the rest of your life. If so, depending on your point of view, you are the victim or the beneficiary of musical nostalgia.

NOSTALGIA IS DEEPER THAN THAT

But nothing is ever that simple. Thus, the study on musical tastes entails at least three limitations that invite further investigation.
First, the study applies primarily to preferences for popular music. Questions arise concerning whether the findings will generalize to esthetic tastes in other areas of music (jazz, classical), other art objects (films, novels), and other types of consumer products (clothing, grooming aids, food).

Second, the study suffered from one potential methodological flaw. Subjects listened to the musical selections in small groups varying in size from 14 to 61 people. This aspect of the design raises the possibility of alternative hypotheses based on potential sequence effects and/or possible biases due to social contagion. For example, in a worst-case scenario, if respondents watched the faces and body language of similarly aged people in their groups, some potential biasing effects could possibly have occurred. Further, conceivable artifacts due to order effects could not be definitively ruled out.

Third, the study neglected the possibility that different people might experience different degrees or different age-related peaks of preference toward the same objects. For example, the preferences for college graduates might peak later than those for high-school dropouts; those who lived in a dormitory or a sorority/fraternity house in college might experience the nostalgic effect more strongly than those who lived at home; women might display nostalgic reactions more strongly than men - or vice versa. Most saliently in the present context, people might differ in their levels of nostalgia proneness.

Subsequent research, still in progress, has begun to focus on the questions raised by these three limitations. For ease of exposition, we shall begin by considering the third.

### THE NOSTALGIA INDEX

Work in progress by Holbrook (1990) has developed a Nostalgia Index intended to assess individual differences in the tendency to feel nostalgic impulses. This index of nostalgic proneness consists of 20 statements related to the general theme that “things were better in the good old days,” each accompanied by a nine-point numerical scale of agreement/disagreement. Half of the items are scored in the positive, half in the negative direction: e.g., “They don’t make ’em like they used to” (+) versus “Newer is almost always better” (-). After the appropriate scale reversals, the summative score of these ratings forms a 20-item Nostalgia Index that can be assessed for reliability and tested for validity.

Such assessments appear to support the reliability and validity of the Nostalgia Index. A recently completed study on 72 marketing students showed good reliability (alpha = 0.80) and promising predictive validity in explaining general preferences (e.g., musicians, singers, songs, TV shows, baseball stars, automobiles - r = .37) and specific preferences for films (e.g., musicals versus war stories - r = .61). Such results give us some confidence that the Nostalgia Index may capture some of the individual differences of importance in further accounting for the formation of preference peaks (Holbrook 1990).

### THE GENERALIZABILITY OF NOSTALGIC PEAKS

A second study in progress addresses the question of whether the phenomenon of peak preferences in consumer tastes for music can be generalized to other areas of esthetic experience and, if so, whether it reflects the kinds of individual differences just described. Here, the relevant stimuli are models in fashion advertisements selected from issues of Vogue and Esquire published during the period from 1932 to 1988. Groups of respondents view slides of these ads and evaluate their responses to the fashion styles of the models on nine-point scales of general liking. As an extension of the earlier findings for musical tastes, we expect fashion preferences to show a nonmonotonic relation with ad-specific age, peaking somewhere in late adolescence or early adulthood. Further, we would expect the degree of peaking (the extent of nonmonotonicity or, in other words, the strength of the quadratic term) to increase with nostalgia proneness (as measured by the aforementioned Nostalgia Index) or possibly to shift to the left for the high- versus low-nostalgia respondents (as reflected by a nostalgia-moderated change in the slope for the linear term).

### INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DATA TO TEST THE NOSTALGIA HYPOTHESES

A third study, currently beginning the phase of data analysis, addresses all three of the limitations mentioned earlier. Specifically, it examines affective responses toward the visual appearance of movie actors and actresses and how these do or do not reflect preference peaks moderated by individual differences in nostalgia proneness.

The key stimuli for this third study are 64 photographs of film stars dated from the 1920s to the 1980s. In individually administered questionnaires, respondents have rated their degrees of liking for the appearances of the stars in these photos on nine-point preference scales, with the pictures presented in a different randomized order to each respondent. Each student in two marketing classes administered these questionnaires to two respondents drawn from the general population and differing in age by at least 30 years. This procedure provides roughly 200 sets of responses, collected in randomized orders at the individual level, from real people (not business students) covering a wide range of ages. Also, each respondent completed the aforementioned 20-item index of nostalgia proneness.

Briefly, other than the important difference in methods for collecting the data (intended to rule out alternative hypotheses concerning possible methods artifacts), the hypotheses to be tested in this third study resemble those under investigation in the work on fashion preferences described earlier. Thus, we expect preferences for photos of the stars to peak at a star-specific age somewhat in late adolescence or early adulthood. Further, we expect this preference peak to become more exaggerated (a stronger quadratic term) or to move to the left (a downward shift in the linear term) at higher levels of the Nostalgia Index.

### CONCLUSION

If individual differences in the Nostalgia Index moderate the degree or position of preference peaks for tastes toward fashion models and movie stars in the manner just envisioned, we believe that we shall have progressed some distance in the direction of generalizing the effect found for musical tastes and tying it to personality characteristics related to nostalgia proneness.

Thus, we believe that the research previewed here is important because it fits into a programmatic stream that focuses on the nostalgia-related development of consumer tastes in such areas as music, movies, literature, television, fashion, food, and other aspects of esthetic consumption experiences. It extends a focus that has already produced highly suggestive results in the area of popular music. Moreover, it addresses questions concerning the role of nostalgia - the subject of the present Special Topic Session at ACR - that must remain close to the heart and mind of any consumer researcher who maintains both a scientific interest and a human fondness toward issues connected with the Dear Departed Past.

### REFERENCES


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