Managing the Complexity of Nostalgia: a Study of Affective and Cognitive Consequences of Nostalgic Advertising Among Consumers

Ekta Srivastava, Indian Institute of Management Lucknow India
Satish Maheswarappa, Indian Institute of Management Lucknow India

We suggest ways to predict the affective outcome of ambivalent nostalgia through nostalgic ad executional variables and develop a link between nostalgia and cognitive processing style. We also investigate outcomes in the form of self-brand connection and willingness to pay a premium. We conduct four studies using content analysis and experiments.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketers are trying hard to expand equity and enhance relevance of their brands for the consumers of today by leveraging the emotion of nostalgia. The basis lies in a study by NBC Universal Integrated Media (2013) which showed that brands that connected to the past acquired top positions in Brand Power Index. Nostalgic advertising which gained popularity in recent years is based on cues/themes that flash back to the past. The Google reunion ad introduced in November 2013, targeting its Indian user base, is a perfect example of how effectively brands can tap into consumers’ nostalgia.

The extant literature on nostalgia can be categorized into: researcher focusing on 1) advancing conceptual understanding of nostalgia (Stern 1992), 2) identifying antecedents (Lovallof, Smeesters and Mandel 2010), 2) scale development and measurement of various dimensions of nostalgia (Holbrook 1993), 3) exploring relationships with other concepts such as possessions (Belk 1990), heritage visiting (Goulding 2001) and materialism (Rindfleish, Freeman and Burroughs 2000), 4) determining consequences such as ad and brand attitudes, purchase intention (Muehling and Pascal 2011; 2012), (5) examining role of moderators such as gender, nostalgia proneness and attitude towards past, and (Schindler and Holbrook 2003), (6) content analysis to examine types and frequency of nostalgic ads (Madrigal and Boerstler 2007).

This research attempts to advance understanding of the emotional content of nostalgia. For this, we first examine the complex ambivalent nature of nostalgia which means that nostalgia evokes both positive and negative affect simultaneously. We develop and test some executional cues to make it more and more positive and less and less negative. We try to extend our literature by examining cognitive consequences such as processing styles. We also attempt to investigate final outcome variables such as Self-Brand Connection (SBC) and Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTP) for advertised brands. We also try to add to literature on content analysis by investigating elements used to evoke nostalgia and type of products/services using nostalgic advertisements in Indian context.

We have taken support from following theories to develop our conceptual framework around nostalgia: Affect-As-Information approach (AAI) (Schwarz and Clore 1996), Cognitive Tuning hypothesis (Bless et al. 1990), Cognitive Regulation mechanism (Bless and Fiedler 2006), Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory (CEST) (Epstein 1994) and Self-congruity theory (Sirgy 1986). These theories have not been applied previously to the studies of nostalgic consumer behaviour.

As we are investigating the influence of positive and negative feelings evoked through nostalgia on cognitive processing, we take support from AAI, cognitive tuning hypothesis and cognitive regulation mechanism (Schwarz and Clore 1996). AAI approach, cognitive tuning hypothesis and cognitive regulation mechanism can be applied to specific emotions such as nostalgia. Further, we take support from Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory (CEST) to define two types of cognitive processing styles, and self-congruity theory to investigate SBC as an outcome of nostalgia. According to Muehling and Pascal (2011), CEST is a relevant theory for an investigation of the effects of nostalgia.

Hypothesis 1: Nostalgia would result in a complex ambivalent affective response

Hypothesis 2a: Stimulus’s ability to recapture past results in stronger positive affective response to nostalgia

Hypothesis 2b: Stimulus’s ability to recapture past results in weaker positive affective response to nostalgia

Hypothesis 3a: Stimulus’s ‘Good past, Good present’ perception results in stronger positive affective response to nostalgia

Hypothesis 3b: Stimulus’s ‘Good past, Good present’ perception results in weaker negative affective response to nostalgia

Hypothesis 4: Positive affective response to nostalgia among individuals lead to the use of top-down processing style for evaluating a nostalgic stimulus

Hypothesis 5: Negative affective response to nostalgia among individuals lead to the use of bottom-up processing style for evaluating a nostalgic stimulus

Hypothesis 6: Top-down processing style adopted for a nostalgic stimulus results in a stronger SBC as compared to bottom-up processing style

Hypothesis 7: Top-down processing style adopted for a nostalgic stimulus results in a stronger WTP as compared to bottom-up processing style

We begin by identifying emotional appeals, specifically nostalgic appeals, in Indian television ads through content analysis. The intention was to gauge the presence of nostalgic appeals in Indian advertising and select ads to be used as nostalgic stimuli for our further studies.

In Study 1, we content analyzed 700 Indian TV ads aired between January 2013 and December 2013. Our inter-coder reliability range from 0.81 to 0.98 which meet the criteria suggested by Kasparian (1977).

Study 2A was conducted to empirically verify that nostalgia is a complex ambivalent emotion. We exposed 164 respondents to three nostalgic ads selected through pre-testing on a sample of 47 students using a 6-items 7-point scale on Nostalgia, as used in past research (Muehling and Pascal 2011; 2012). We measured the ambivalence through 53-items 5-point feelings inventory adapted from Burke and Edell (1989).

In study 2B, we examine executional variables in nostalgic ads which may enhance the positive valence and reduce the negative
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Valence in nostalgia. We exposed 45 subjects to a Google reunion ad in order to evoke nostalgia (Mean = 5.39 on 6-item seven-point scale of nostalgia) (Muehling and Pascal, 2011; 2012). Then, these subjects were exposed to vignettes which were developed to manipulate valence in nostalgia– ‘Ability to recapture past’ vs ‘No ability to recapture past’ and ‘Good past, Good present’ perception and ‘Good past, Bad present’ perception.

In study 3, we examined the influence of nostalgia on cognitive processing style. We exposed 60 subjects to a nostalgic Google reunion ad followed by vignettes (‘ability to recapture past’ vs ‘no ability to recapture past’) to manipulate positive and negative affective response to nostalgia. Then, they were shown an informative Google print ad which was created for the purpose of this study. We adopted the method used by Keller and Block (1996) to measure the extent of top-down and bottom-up processing.

In study 4, we examine the influence of cognitive processing styles on SBC and WTP. For this, we induced positive mood and negative mood among 57 subjects by adopting the method used by Chang and Pham (2013). Then, manipulation check for top-down and bottom-up processing style was done using the procedures given by Keller and Block (1996). SBC was measured by adopting scale used by Escalas (2004) while WTP was measured by adopting scale used by Netemeyer et al. (2004). The results of study 1 revealed that nostalgic appeals are not very rare in India and comprise 12% of all emotional appeals used.

In study 2A, three factors resulted from 37 items - upbeat, negative and warm factor - which was consistent with Burke and Edell (1989). This was further tested via CFA (Chi Sq. (606, 164) = 823.48, p=0.00, RMSEA= 0.047, CFI = 0.98). The factor structure, thus obtained, gave support to hypothesis 1.

In study 2B, we found that negative valence of nostalgia was lesser for those who were exposed to the condition- ‘ability to recapture past’ (Mean = 1.37, SD = .50; t = 3.29, df=19, p < .01) and ‘Good past, good present’ (Mean = 1.55, SD = .49; t = 2.46, df=22 p < .05) than those who were exposed to the condition- ‘no ability to recapture past’ (Mean = 2.31, SD = .81) and ‘Good past, bad present’ (Mean = 2.13, SD = .65). On the other hand, there was no significant difference in the positive valence among conditions- ‘ability to recapture past’ and ‘no ability to recapture past’ and ‘Good past, good present’ perception and ‘Good past, bad present’ perception. Thus, we found support for hypothesis 2b and 3b while hypothesis 2a and 3a were not supported.

In study 3, we found that recall score was higher in case of negative affect condition of nostalgia (Mean = 5.13, SD = 2.86; t=-2.64, df=58, p < .05) than that in case of positive affect condition of nostalgia (Mean = 3.34, SD = 2.33). Higher recall score implied that bottom-up processing was used in case of negative affect condition of nostalgia (Keller and Block 1996), thus supporting hypothesis 4. Moreover, imagery was higher in case of positive affect condition of nostalgia (Mean = 5.24, SD = 1.15; t = 3.37, df=58, p < .01) than that in case of negative affect condition of nostalgia (Mean = 4.23, SD = 1.18). Higher imagery implied that top-down processing was used in case of positive affect condition of nostalgia (Keller and Block 1996), thus supporting hypothesis 5.

In study 4, we found that SBC was higher when top-down processing style was used (Mean = 3.94, SD = 1.12; t = 2.17, df = 55, p < .05) than that in case of bottom-up processing style (Mean = 3.25, SD = 1.27). We also found that WTP was higher when top-down processing style was used (Mean = 4.76, SD = 1.35; t = 2.38, df = 55, p < .05) than that in case of bottom-up processing style (Mean = 3.98, SD = 1.14). Thus, we found support for hypothesis 6 and 7.

First, we extend the literature by empirically showing that nostalgia is an ambivalent emotion through a different methodology. In addition, we identify executional cues in nostalgic ads to minimize the negative valence of nostalgia and they can be used by advertisers to predict the outcome of nostalgia. We prescribe the cognitive processing style which would be adopted when either the positive or negative valence is dominant in nostalgia. Thus, the current research can be used by marketers to prescribe the level of information to be disclosed in case of positive or negative affective response so that persuasive impact of nostalgic ads is maximized. Moreover, we determine the influence of positive and negative affect of nostalgia on SBC and WTP. Marketers use nostalgia to increase consumers’ connection to brands and charge premium from such brands by carefully manipulating affective response to nostalgia.

REFERENCES


