The Effect of Nostalgic Consumption on the Activation of the Interdependent Self and Prosocial Behavior

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This paper tests the idea that nostalgic consumption experiences can activate the interdependent self and promote prosocial behavior towards unknown others. Three experiments demonstrate empirical evidence to support this notion: nostalgic cookies and video clips (vs. non-nostalgic ones) render participants more interdependent, decrease interpersonal distance, and increase participants’ helping behavior.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009265/volumes/v39/NA-39

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Coke and Pepsi have recently introduced “throwback” versions of their soft drinks. The packages and advertising are expected to increase people’s preferences for the product in times of anxiety and loneliness (Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010), because the warm feelings associated with the past generate positive affect and foster social connectedness (Wildschut et al. 2006; Wildschut et al. 2010). This sentimentally longing for a period of the past is called nostalgia. Despite its ubiquity, little is known about whether nostalgia can affect overt interpersonal behavior and the process by which that might happen. In the present paper, we want to further advance knowledge about nostalgia in various ways. Specifically, we examine whether nostalgia affects people’s view and construal of the self, and the interpersonal behavioral consequences of this shift in self-construal. We test our idea in the context of consumption cues. Whereas past research often activated nostalgia by explicitly asking participants to reflect on a nostalgic event, we want to examine whether emotions of nostalgia can also be triggered by seemingly neutral consumption experiences (i.e., watching a video clip, eating a cookie).

Although negative emotions might be part of nostalgic recollections (e.g., disappointments, losses), nostalgia is a predominantly positive emotion (Wildschut et al. 2006), which involves a strong social component. Most nostalgic recollections contain memories of interactions with close others, such as family members, friends, and partners (Wildschut et al. 2006). The social component of nostalgia is also reflected in the connection between loneliness and feelings of nostalgia (Zhou et al. 2008), because nostalgia can be a source of social connectedness and increase people’s perceived interpersonal competence (Wildschut et al. 2010). These findings suggest that nostalgia highlights the association between the self and close others. However, the question remains whether nostalgia also affects one’s self-view in relation to others in general.

One of the defining elements in the perception and construal of the self is the interconnectedness with other people. An interdependent self-construal defines the self in relation to others, whereas an independent self-construal perceives the self as a bounded and independent entity with unique personal traits (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Interdependent self-construal reflects the self as socially embedded and emphasizes the connectedness to others. This seems to be consistent with nostalgic themes. Indeed, although people can differ in their chronic inclinations towards interdependent versus independent self-construals, both types of self-construal can coexist within the individual and may be activated in different contexts (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee 1999). Interdependent self-construal is associated with a stronger preference for closeness with others, emotionally, psychologically, and physically (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Holland et al. 2004). This increased preference for closeness to others is not only limited to significant others, but also to unknown others. This preference for interpersonal closeness is further translated into an other-focused and prosocial orientation. Indeed, interdependent self-construal increases people’s inclination to engage in volunteering and probability to donate to charity (Ashton-James et al. 2007).

In three studies, we examined whether a nostalgic experience activates an interdependent self and affects interpersonal behavior. Whereas in past studies nostalgia was activated by either a negative experience (e.g., loneliness) or explicitly asking participants to reflect on a nostalgic event, in the present studies we tested whether seemingly neutral consumption cues related to the past can also activate nostalgia. Specifically, we asked participants to watch a video clip or consume a product that reminds them of the past.

In experiment 1, we asked participants to fill out the Twenty-Statement Test (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954) to assess their self-construal (Gardner et al. 1999; Mandel 2003), after they watched a video clip either from a nostalgic television show or from a non-nostalgic television show. The results indicated that participants who watched a nostalgic video (M = 6.35, SD = 2.34) reported more interdependent self-construals compared to participants who watched a non-nostalgic video (M = 3.80, SD = 2.07, F(1, 38) = 13.71, p < .01). These results provide initial support for the hypothesis that nostalgia increases the interdependence of people’s self-construals. Experiment 2 replicated and corroborated the findings of experiment 1 using a behavioral measure (physical proximity to others) and a different nostalgic manipulation. Specifically, we found that after consuming a nostalgic cookie (M = 1.54, SD = 1.02) (vs. a non-nostalgic cookie, M = 2.19, SD = 1.03, F(1, 59) = 6.77, p < .05), participants sat closer to an unknown person.

The last experiment showed that consumption of nostalgic cookies (vs. consumption of non-nostalgic cookies) rendered participants more helpful. Participants in the nostalgic condition were more likely to help an unknown other to pick up pens from the floor (71%) compared with those in the non-nostalgic condition (37%), χ²(1, N = 48) = 5.15, p < .05. This effect is mediated by an enhanced interdependent self-construal.

Our findings extend research on nostalgia and nostalgic consumption in several ways. First of all, our studies showed that a nostalgic experience can alter how the self is defined and construed. That is, nostalgia promotes an interdependent self-construal. This construal may have potential implications for cognitive, motivation, and other behavioral correlates. Second, our findings indicate that nostalgia not only makes people feel close to significant others, but also fosters a general preference for interpersonal closeness, even to unknown others. Third, whereas past research activated nostalgic feelings by manipulating negative experiences or explicitly asking people to recall a nostalgic experience (Wildschut et al. 2006, 2010; Zhou et al. 2008), we successfully manipulated nostalgic feelings by presenting participants with ordinary consumption cues related to the past (a video in Experiment 1 and a cookie in Experiments 2-3), things that people encounter frequently in daily life. This seems to suggest that any experience or object that reminds people of the past can induce nostalgia.

REFERENCES


