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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

The Effect of Societal Nostalgia on Future Optimism and Public Policy Endorsement

Canice M C Kwan , Lingnan (University) College, Sun Yat-sen University, China

Shirley Y Y Cheng, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

Alex S L Tsang, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

This research demonstrates that yearning for the society's past enhances optimism toward the future of that society, which boosts consumers' confidence and their propensity to endorse risky policies. Such effects occur only when consumers reflect on the society's past (vs. present) and are mediated by enhanced identification with the society.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers feel nostalgic not only toward their own personal past, but also toward a society's past in which the individuals might not personally experience (Davis 1979). In practice, reminiscence about a society's past has been used as an effective marketing appeal (Muehling and Pascal 2011). This type of nostalgia is not less common than reminiscences about one's personal past (Holbrook 1993; Sedikides et al. 2006; Wood 2010). However, its effects other than those on advertising effectiveness have not been systematically examined.

Focusing on societal nostalgia, we show that it increases optimism towards the society's future. While this effect seems to parallel the effects previously shown with personal nostalgia (Cheung et al. 2013), we show that it is driven by a distinct process. That is, societal nostalgia enhances identification with the society, which is based on a common social category rather than relational bonds with others (Sedikides and Brewer 2001). Specifically, we conceptualize that a nostalgic experience can be associated with relational or collective identities (Brewer and Gardner 1996), depending on the emphasis of the reflection. For example, individuals often reflect on nostalgic events in their student life. These events are associated with the relational self if the focus is on their personal relationships with others, such as their cohorts or even acquaintances (Wildschut et al. 2014). However, these events can also relate to a person's collective identity if the reflection focuses on the self as a student of one's alma mater (i.e., a depersonalized social entity). According to identity theories, the nostalgia effects observed in prior research concern relational identities. Nostalgia of this sort is evoked by the reminiscences of a person's own past and leads to a positive affect and a sense of social connectedness. This connectedness in turn bolsters one's self esteem, induces upbeat feelings about the future, and elicits optimism. Societal nostalgia, on the other hand, concerns individuals' collective identity of being a member of a society. It enables individuals to re-experience the successes and failures of the past society. These experiences augment the extent to which being a member of the society, as a collective identity, fulfills the need to maintain a meaningful identity. Thus, identification with the society can be consolidated as an individual reminisces nostalgically about the society's past.

Enhanced identification has implications for how people perceive the society. People who identify with a group tend to believe that their fellow members work as a cohesive unit for collective welfare (Brewer and Kramer 1986), thereby feeling less vulnerable to societal changes (Jenson 1998, 2002) and forseeing a reasonable chance to succeed (Stanley 2003). Besides, identification also associated with reduced social uncertainty (Hogg 2000, 2009). Taken together, identification with a society gives rise to the belief that everyone in that society is likely to restrict their self-interests to preserve a collective good (Brewer and Kramer 1986). Therefore, we predict that societal nostalgia enhances identification and, with it, an optimistic outlook toward the society's future and actions for social progress.

In four experiments, we examined the effects, the mechanism, and boundary condition of societal nostalgia, with similar procedure and manipulation. We specifically manipulated nostalgia along two independent dimensions: temporal foci (past vs. present) and content (personal vs. societal). In the past conditions, participants wrote

about a food stimulus (a traditional snack or coffee) in relation to their childhood or the past society (personal vs. societal). In the present conditions, they wrote about the stimulus in relation to their daily life or the society today respectively. In the control condition, they wrote a description about the features of the stimulus. Then in ostensibly unrelated tasks, all participants rated their mood, reported their optimism towards the society's future, and responded to other measures concerning possible processes and decisions.

In a 2 (temporal foci: present vs. past) \times 2 (content: personal vs. societal) design, study 1 demonstrated that societal nostalgia boosts societal optimism, and that this effect is due to nostalgic reminiscences about the society's past and not a mere activation of the concept of society. In a similar design with an additional control condition, study 2 validated the proposed mechanism, showing that identification with the society mediates the effects of societal nostalgia on optimism and consumer confidence). Study 3 employed a single-factor between-subjects design (three level, societal past vs. personal past vs. control) and provided converging evidence for the proposed account. It also showed that societal nostalgia makes participants more risk-taking in public policy endorsement but not in their personal decisions. To distinguish the identification-based and the connectedness-based account, in study 4, participants listed either the general attributes of the members in the society or their negative characteristics before the nostalgia treatment. The results indicated that the effects of societal nostalgia were independent of member evaluation while the effects of personal nostalgia may attenuate when unfavorable thoughts about the members were salient. Across the four studies, societal nostalgia had little effect on mood, perceptual contrast (competence, studies 1-3; general evaluation of society, study 4), and changes in psychological distance (temporal construal, studies 2-3; self-construal, study 3; construal level such as abstract-concrete and global-local thinking, study 4).

To conclude, societal nostalgia has received scant attention in the literature. This paper explores the psychological effects of this specific type of nostalgia on individuals' perceptions about the society's future and decisions for the society. These effects were evident across cultures (Hong Kong and US) for both traditional and mundane (coffee) stimuli. However, they did not occur when people thought only about the society at present. Drawing upon identity theories, we validated that societal nostalgia lies in an impersonal identification process rather than interpersonal bonds, and it evokes a unique psychological process that cannot be explained by several intuitive alternative accounts. However, we did not contend that the identification process (and its downstream effects) is the only pathway of influence. Other psychological effects, such as those induced by high-level construal, stemming by societal nostalgia await further investigation.

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