'The good old days': An examination of nostalgia in Facebook posts

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ABSTRACT

Humans are reflective, adaptive, and social. They recall the past, sometimes discuss these recollections with others and become nostalgic; yet, previous research has not examined nostalgia in social media. This paper investigates the expression of nostalgia within Facebook conversations. The specific themes of nostalgic longing and the expression of personal emotions are investigated in two studies. Study 1 examines 375,857 Facebook posts, and Study 2 expands on this by comparing a sample of 10,000 Facebook and 10,000 general (non-nostalgic) posts. Content analyses of these posts reveal significant evidence of nostalgic expressions in Facebook conversations. Cluster analysis reveals newer themes of nostalgic longing related to family, life stories, historical events (presidential elections, man on the moon and Gandhi), spirituality, appreciation of life, romanticism and fun. General posts tend to focus on spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment greetings, emotions, and day of the week. Nostalgic posts, in contrast, are more reflective, more emotional, and frequently include both positive and negative emotions, which is consistent with a deeper, bittersweet character to nostalgia. The concurrent utilization of past- and present-tense words in nostalgic posts suggests that, for some Facebook users, nostalgia helps interpret and navigate present circumstances. The research concludes with theoretical and managerial implications.

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1. Introduction

Facebook attracts a global audience of over 1 billion people (Ljepava et al., 2013). About half of all internet users utilize Facebook (Hachman, 2012) to communicate with friends, family, coworkers, and interest groups. They publish personal diaries, post videos and photos, express opinions, interact with others, and establish virtual groups and communities based on shared interests (Leung, 2013). This engagement along with its sheer ubiquity has increased both popular and academic interest in understanding Facebook discussions.

Why do people use Facebook? They use it for socializing, entertainment, and to pass-time (Subramanyam et al., 2008; Pempek et al., 2009; Hunt et al., 2012). Recent research has examined users' personality traits (Ryan and Xenos, 2011) and emotional state, specifically, loneliness and depression (Moreno et al., 2011). However, little research has been done to examine nostalgia (a longing for the past) in user-generated content. Nostalgia can drive Facebook conversations; anecdotal evidence suggests that people frequently become nostalgic (remember the good old days) while interacting on Facebook (New York Times, Dominus, 2008) and that, "Even the young hang out like codgers on a virtual porch, chuckling about how time flies" (Time, Poniewozik, 2014, p. 66). Nascent academic research further supports reminiscing when utilizing computer-mediated environments. People collect digital mementos, read their past Facebook posts and reflect on their memories in human–computer interfaces (Bowena and Petrelli, 2011; Kalnikait and Whittaker, 2011; Zhao et al., 2013; Tejaswi Peesapati et al., 2010).

Facebook presents a unique platform for nostalgic recollections with friends and family. It is conducive to "in the moment" expressions of meaning-rich content (De Choudhury and Counts,

2012), which is consistent with nostalgic discussions. Although a substantial body of research exists on nostalgia in general—in offline contexts (e.g., Holbrook, 1993; Batcho, 1995; Wildschut et al., 2006), research has not explored nostalgic content within the online realm and more specifically Facebook conversations. This research fills this gap in the literature through two quantitative studies. Study 1 examines the themes and sentiments of 375,857 public Facebook posts with nostalgic content. Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 by comparing 10,000 nostalgic posts to a baseline sample of 10,000 general posts; both obtained from a database containing both private and public posts.

This research has several theoretic contributions: (1) It adds to the social media literature by presenting significant evidence of nostalgic expressions in Facebook conversations. (2) Our research reveals that the emotions expressed in Facebook conversations tend toward the positive and often contain mixed emotions (with approximately 40% of all nostalgic posts containing both positive and negative emotions, 37% containing only positive emotions, and less than 6% of posts containing only negative emotions). These findings expand and clearly document the bittersweet nature of nostalgia discussed and debated in previous (offline) literature. In addition, our research: (3) documents that nostalgic posts concurrently contained words associated with both the past and present tense; and (4) builds on previous consumer research on objects of nostalgia, and augments this literature by revealing new topics of online nostalgic longing, such as life stories, historical events (presidential elections, man on the moon and Gandhi), appreciation of life, romanticism, and fun. These findings will be useful not only for developing targeted marketing communication programs, but also, more generally, for developing diary centric tools which allow for nostalgic self-reflection by embedding in social networks enhanced capabilities for revisiting prior memories.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The paper first presents a literature review on nostalgia and Facebook social networks, along with research questions. Then, the method and findings of the two studies are discussed, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Nostalgia

There is much academic discussion on nostalgia. Some have described it as a fatal disease, which everyone experiences at one time or another (Hofer, 1934). Others have called it a hook of continuity in changing times (Tannock, 1995). They argue that the more dissatisfied consumers are with present life, the more they long for and want to revert to the past (Baker and Kennedy, 1994). Others argue that aging baby boomers are becoming increasingly nostalgic (Unger et al., 1991). There are cognitive as well as affective dimensions to the experience of nostalgia (Baumgartner, 1992). The cognitive side focuses on memories of the past, while the affective side centers on emotions evoked by these memories. Nostalgia elicits both positive and negative emotions (Holak and Havlena, 1992). By remembering the past, people feel warmth, joy and affection (Holak and Havlena, 1998), but at the same time, there is a feeling of sadness and loss because the past cannot be recreated (Holak and Havlena, 1998). Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1980) distinguishes nostalgia from reminiscence, by describing reminiscence as the act of remembering the past and nostalgia as the bittersweet affect that accompanies certain memories. Therefore, Batcho (2007) concludes that "one can remember without being nostalgic but one cannot be nostalgic without remembering" (page 362).

Some individuals show a higher propensity (proneness) for nostalgia than others (Holbrook, 1993). Therefore, even among the same age group, some people are more nostalgic than others. Nostalgia proneness has been examined as a facet of a person's personality. Batcho (1998) posits that nostalgia prone people have a high capacity for emotion, which increases the likelihood of experiencing both "sweet" and "bitter" emotions. Individuals in the high nostalgia group, moreover, were found to perceive the past as more favorable than those in the low nostalgia group (Batcho, 1998).

Nostalgia is evoked by a variety of triggers such as sensory input (pleasurable sensory experiences from the past); links with the individual's homeland (bonding with objects associated with a distant land); items that remind the individual of rites of passage, friends and loved ones (objects representing close social relationships); objects linked with aspects of continuity and security; and finally items associated with the arts, culture and entertainment (Holbrook and Schindler, 2003). Descriptions of nostalgia treat it as a preference for the past (Holbrook and Schindler, 1991), a positive emotion (Wildschut et al., 2006), a negative emotion (Belk, 1990), or a combination of positive and negative emotions (Holak and Havlena, 1998). Merchant et al. (2013); p. 6 recently integrated this literature to provide a comprehensive definition of nostalgia that encompasses both its cognitive and affective elements; that is, nostalgia is a multi-dimensional experience, "a reflection on the past, comprising of a mix of memories and multiple emotions."

Nostalgia has been studied in a variety of contexts and has several positive outcomes; although loneliness may trigger nostalgia (Wildschut et al., 2006), nostalgia enhances perceptions of social support, reduces loneliness (Zhou et al., 2008), and may fulfill a consumer's need to belong (Loveland et al., 2010). Furthermore, nostalgia influences consumer attitudes towards advertising (Merchant et al., 2013), charitable donations (Merchant et al., 2011), and preferences for a variety of products and services, including automobiles (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007), foods, cosmetics (Loveland et al., 2010), songs (Batcho, 2007), arts/entertainment (Holbrook and Schindler, 2003), and movies (Holbrook, 1993). Recent evidence also suggests that people reminiscence and reflect over memories using human–computer interfaces, like apps such as MemoryLane, or while reading their past Facebook posts (Bowena and Petrelli, 2011; Kalnikait and Whittaker, 2011; Zhao et al., 2013; Tejaswi Peesapati et al., 2010). However, the occurrence and content of such reminiscence, the recall of memories and associated emotional states and sentiments remains underexplored. More scholarly work is required to explore the online expression of nostalgia (topics, sentiments, tense) on social media sites like Facebook, and to compare on-line nostalgic expressions to general, non-nostalgic posts.

2.2. Facebook social network

With over 1 billion users, Facebook is the largest social network in the world (Ljepava et al., 2013). Students spend approximately 30 min every day on Facebook, mainly for social interactions with family and friends (Subramanyam et al., 2008; Pempek et al., 2009); indeed, some students are so engaged in Facebook that the social network is almost an addiction for them (Patterson, 2012). Exploring the psychological motives for using Facebook, Nadkarni and Hofman (2012) recently found that Facebook usage is motivated by two primary needs—the need to belong and the need for self-preservation. Moreover, using Facebook can reduce a student's perception of loneliness (Yu et al., 2010) and is associated with enhanced feelings of social connections (Sheldon et al., 2011).

Examining why people post on Facebook, Joinson (2008) asked 137 people to first generate words and phrases that describe how they use Facebook. He then took these 46 items and tested them with a sample of 241 users, which resulted in seven uses of Facebook (social connection, shared identities, content, social