

Research Article

An exploration of flashbulb memory

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Accepted by Comelia Pechmann, Editor; Associate Editor, Vicki Morwitz

Received 3 January 2013; received in revised form 14 June 2015; accepted 18 June 2015
Available online 22 June 2015

Abstract

Flashbulb memory (e.g., memory of one's personal situation in relation to an extraordinary event, such as a surprise marriage proposal) has yet to be closely studied by consumer researchers, and its underlying processes remain a subject of ongoing investigation. These memories can be vivid and confidently held for years after the inciting event, and when maintained as such, they appear to often include information about brands and products that were present during the original action. Maintenance of flashbulb memories depends on engagement in extensive rehearsal over time, and this is enabled by oral but not written sharing of the episode.

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Keywords: Flashbulb memory; Rehearsal; Communication

Introduction

Consider the following account of a marriage proposal, which was recorded by a 31-year-old female informant, approximately three years after the occurrence:

I drove by myself to Fabian's restaurant, and I was running about five minutes late, because I had to stop for gas. I started to apologize, and then I realized that everyone was watching and smiling. I also noticed that my boyfriend was dressed up, wearing a jacket from Ralph Lauren that I got him for Christmas. Then I saw the ring box. I was so happy! I still get goose bumps.

The sharpness of this account stands in contrast to a second one from the same time period. This was provided by the same respondent and reported after a similar three-year delay.

We saw the movie *Music and Lyrics* one night that summer that we were engaged. Back then, he got to choose the movies most of the time, but I guess I got to pick, and so we saw a chick flick. Afterward, we got dinner somewhere.

From a marketing research perspective, it is fascinating to note that there is a greater level of detail in the first memory and that it captures a richer tapestry of consumable goods. In fact, four times as many brands and products are specifically called out in the first vignette (Fabian's restaurant, gas, Ralph Lauren jacket, ring) as in the second (*Music and Lyrics* movie). Why did the protagonist remember the exact restaurant and precisely what was worn by her partner in the first case but not in the second?

The reason may be that the proposal account offers an example of what has been termed "flashbulb memory." Flashbulb memory is a potent type of autobiographical memory that can be formed after an extraordinary event takes place. In comparison with other autobiographical memories, flashbulb memories are considerably more vivid, include more contextual detail, and are more confidently held (Talarico & Rubin, 2003). As an iconic example, many Americans report remembering keen and specific details of the moment in which they first learned of the 9/11 attacks.

Given the potential for consumable goods to be embedded in the fine points of flashbulb memories, as evidenced by the proposal example, this phenomenon may be of interest to marketers who seek ways in which their brands, products and services can gain high memory accessibility. The advantages of high accessibility are widely heralded (Sinha & Naykankuppam,

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2013), with a key benefit being preferred status in consideration and choice sets (Nedungadi, 1990).

At the same time, there is an inherent challenge. While flashbulb memories are initially formed as powerful and highly articulated memories, it has also been acknowledged that they are “not indelible” over time (Tinti, Schmidt, Sotgiu, Testa, & Curci, 2009) and can, in fact, run the risk of fading (Talarico & Rubin, 2007). That said, as the proposal account illustrates, there *are* cases in which these memories can successfully retain their heightened potency even years after formation (Brown & Kulik, 1977). These observations raise the question of how and when the enhanced vibrancy of an initially formed flashbulb memory—including its many contextual details and the brands and products that may be incorporated—may be maintained over time. This issue is central to the current research.

Literature review

Flashbulb memories capture one’s *personal circumstances* in relation to very unusual events. The name reflects a high level of contextual detail and acute perceptual qualities in these memories, which even years after an instigating event, can feel photo-like (Brown & Kulik, 1977).

Researchers in cognitive psychology have distinguished flashbulb memory from everyday autobiographical memory (henceforth, referred to more concisely as “everyday memory”) on both conceptual and phenomenological grounds. Conceptually, flashbulb memory and everyday memory are thought to differ in prevalence and to emerge from different sorts of situations. Everyday memories arise from relatively *ordinary events* of one’s life, such as a nice evening with a friend or a vacation experience (Krishnamurthy & Sujan, 1999; Sujan, Bettman, & Baumgartner, 1993). By contrast, flashbulb memories are more rare and follow *extraordinary events* that are quite distinctive, highly consequential and strongly emotional (Conway et al., 1994; Finkenauer et al., 1998). Triggering incidents for flashbulb memories are often, though not always, surprising in nature (Curci & Luminet, 2009). They may also be public or private in scope (Harvey, Flanary, & Morgan, 1986; Pillemer, Koff, Rhinehart, & Rierdan, 1987; Thomsen & Berntsen, 2003). Although an inciting event may be a joyful occurrence, such as the fall of the Berlin wall or a marriage proposal, flashbulb memory may also spring forth from a tragic occasion such as the attacks of 9/11 or an incident in which personally devastating news is received (Berntsen & Thomsen, 2005; Bohn & Berntsen, 2007; Scott & Ponsoda, 1996; Tinti, Schmidt, Testa, & Levine, 2014).

Supplementing this conceptual distinction, flashbulb memory and everyday memory are also believed to differ reliably on phenomenological dimensions related to vividness and confidence. With regard to vividness, although most autobiographical memories may contain contextual information (Krishnamurthy & Sujan, 1999) and may be more detailed than nonautobiographical memories (Baumgartner, Sujan, & Bettman, 1992), flashbulb memories stand out in the greater number and range of situational details that are reported (Berntsen & Thomsen, 2005; Brown & Kulik, 1977; Conway et al., 1994). Further, and consistent with standard construals of the vividness construct (McGill & Anand,

1989), flashbulb memory features tend to be concrete, evoke elaborate imagery, and have an air of sensory, temporal and/or spatial proximity. Flashbulb memories are also more likely than everyday memories to have the immediacy of a first-person perspective, to capture emotional intensity and to resonate with perceptual vibrancy (“I still get goose bumps;” Bohn & Berntsen, 2007; Talarico & Rubin, 2003, 2007).

From a consumer psychology standpoint, the findings of heightened vividness suggest some intriguing, and as yet, unexplored possibilities. In particular, given the abundant situational detail that flashbulb memories capture, it is conceivable that these memories may provide a repository of brand and product information that can be retrieved when the memory is re-experienced. This premise follows from an observation that consumers’ watershed life experiences often operate against a backdrop in which brands and products are present and play a supporting role. Thus, for instance, when the proposal story is revisited, the products and branded items that appeared within it (e.g., restaurant, gas, jacket, ring box) may also be brought to mind, as well as specific, perceptual features of these brand and products.

Moreover, these items may be recalled with a high degree of confidence, which may bode well for later choice processes that involve the remembered brands (Tsai & McGill, 2011). Indeed, one of the most reliable findings in the literature on flashbulb memory is that people seem to universally believe that their keen recollections of these episodes are accurate (Bohn & Berntsen, 2007; Conway, Skitka, Hemmerich, & Kershaw, 2008; Talarico & Rubin, 2003, 2007). Although some question whether this confidence is well-placed (Talarico & Rubin, 2003), a number of prior flashbulb memory studies have, in fact, demonstrated high consistency in recall (Conway et al., 2008; Curci & Luminet, 2006, 2009; Shapiro, 2006).

Formation and maintenance of flashbulb memory

Two processing stages are thought to underlie flashbulb memory: initial formation and maintenance (Finkenauer et al., 1998). *Formation* of a flashbulb memory is thought to begin immediately upon exposure to an extraordinary event (Brown & Kulik, 1977). In this stage, a person is prompted to stop, take note, and record information that is present in the personal context of the exceptional occurrence. Variables that affect the likelihood of attending to and encoding the details of the situation are thus expected to have significant effects in this stage (Brown & Kulik, 1977; Conway et al., 1994). Examples are the importance and emotion-arousing qualities of the initial event. In the introductory illustrations, for instance, the marriage proposal was an important and emotionally profound occasion, which would have immediately prompted rich encoding of its details as a flashbulb memory. By contrast, the dinner-movie date with the fiancée was not as significant and emotionally moving, and thus a blander and less finely articulated everyday memory was formed instead.

Flashbulb memories that are generated at the initial formation stage are then candidates for a follow-up *maintenance* stage, which is conceived to extend through the remaining life of a

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