



Exploring the elements of consumer nostalgia in retailing: Evidence from a content analysis of retailer collages



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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on consumer nostalgia in the retailing environment to identify the types of nostalgic memories evoked by remembering a retailer and the elements associated with such nostalgic memories. A projective technique involving collage construction enabled informants to reflect their feelings about, memories of, experiences with, or relationships with a retailer that they have selected. The findings uncovered three distinct types of retailer-related consumer nostalgic memories and six elements that comprise retailer-related consumer nostalgic memories. The findings of the study offer a comprehensive understanding of retailer consumer nostalgia. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Nostalgia, a commonly and frequently experienced feeling, is defined as an “individual’s desire for the past or a liking for possessions and activities of days gone by” (Holbrook, 1993, p. 245). The use of nostalgia has grown increasingly popular in the marketing of products and services (Baker and Kennedy, 1994; Lasaleta et al., 2014; Rindfleisch and Sprott, 2000; Spaid, 2013). Marketers connect consumers with their memories by adding a mix of nostalgic components to their product designs and advertising campaigns (Chen et al., 2014). Nostalgia brings to mind pleasant feelings (Baumgartner et al., 1992; Sujan et al., 1993) evoked by autobiographical memories, defined as memories of past personal experiences (Brewer, 1986) that are “symbolic to the consumer” (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007, p. 45). Thus, understanding consumers’ autobiographical memories with brands, especially their earliest and defining memories, gives managers a useful means to uncover consumers’ relationships to their brands and their current and future preferences (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; LaTour et al., 2010). Furthermore, autobiographical nostalgic memories have been found to generate high levels of emotions and positive consumption intentions (Babin and Borges, 2009; Chen et al., 2014; Ford and Merchant, 2010; Lasaleta et al., 2014; Sujan et al., 1993).

While nostalgia has received considerable attention in the realm of advertising (e.g., Ford and Merchant, 2010; Sujan et al., 1993), branding (e.g., Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Brown et al., 2003; Kessous, 2015), product development (e.g., Roberts, 2014), and general consumer consumption contexts (Havlena and Holak, 1996),

relatively little research has been conducted in a retail setting (Orth and Bourrain, 2008; Spaid, 2013). While previous research has found that autobiographical memories are evoked naturally and spontaneously in response to various marketing stimuli (Baumgartner et al., 1992) and many consumption memories involve retail experiences (Babin and Borges, 2009), little is known about the types of nostalgic memories evoked by remembering a retailer and the elements of retailing that are associated with such memories, despite the suggestion that in “no place is nostalgia more on display than the retail environment” (Spaid, 2013, p. 419). Retail memory, or “knowledge accumulated through repeated retail and service experiences that influence consumer experiences,” gives meaning to what the consumer sees and experiences today (Babin and Borges, 2009, p. 161). Nevertheless, to date, research in retailing has identified only a few atmospheric cues (Chen et al., 2014; Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2014; Orth and Bourrain, 2008) and the marketing mix (4Ps: place, promotion, price, and product; Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; Spaid, 2013), and recreation of traditional ritual (Hamilton and Wagner, 2014) as potential triggers of nostalgic memories that positively influence consumers’ shopping behavior in a retail environment. Such consideration, however, restricts the comprehensive understanding of the key elements of consumer nostalgia in retailing. Furthermore, while fostering consumer nostalgia increases customer-retailer love (Ortiz and Harrison, 2011; Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012) along with a sense of place identity and perceived bonds with employees and other customers in a retail service context (Brocato et al., 2015), consumer nostalgia has received little attention as an avenue for firms to develop the customer-

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retailer relationship.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify, categorize, and define the distinct types of retailer-related nostalgic memories and the elements of retailing experiences that contribute to nostalgic memories. In doing so, we employ a projective technique involving collage construction (Belk et al., 1997; Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Koll et al., 2010) which “offer(s) insights into consumers’ understanding of the structure and subjects of nostalgic experience” (Havlena and Holak, 1996, p. 41).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Sections 3 and 4 describe the research method and findings respectively. Finally, Section 5 presents the discussion, implications and limitations, and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. The meaning and the role of consumer nostalgia

The word “nostalgia” is derived from the Greek *nostos*, meaning homecoming, and *algos*, meaning pain, grief, or distress. Nostalgia was originally defined by Johannes Hofer as a severe form of homesickness in Swiss mercenaries in 1688. In the 1950s, nostalgia was still listed as a mental disorder diagnosis (Havlena and Holak, 1991). Recently, social psychologists have demonstrated that nostalgia should be considered a human strength rather than a mental illness (Sedikides et al., 2008; Wildschut et al., 2006). Moreover, nostalgic experiences lead individuals to consciously recollect positive relationships they had in the past with others, and this process increases their feelings of self-positivity (Wildschut et al., 2006).

The integration of nostalgia in marketing research is relatively new (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989; Kessous, 2015). There are broadly two main conceptualizations of consumer nostalgia: one that concerns objects that can inspire it (e.g., Holbrook and Schindler, 1989; Rindfleisch and Sprott, 2000) and the other that focuses on personal experiences and outcomes of it (e.g., Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Brocato et al., 2015; Holak and Havlena, 1998; Lasaleta et al., 2014). The first conceptualization considers nostalgia as a preference for things from the past (Holbrook, 1993). Nostalgia in this form occurs without personal experience with the pertinent object or event. Research originating from this conceptualization has been primarily concerned with the antecedents of nostalgic preferences. The latter conceptualization views nostalgia as an emotion that arises from the recollection of a meaningful memory that reflects the self and identity (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Brocato et al., 2015). In this sense, nostalgia is a subset of autobiographical memories with the reflection on past objects, persons, or experiences that are positive valenced (Hirsch, 1992). Our work corresponds to the latter conceptualization.

There also has been a diverse attempt to categorize nostalgia. Some individuals show a higher tendency for and proneness to nostalgia than others (Batcho, 1995). Holbrook (1993) defined nostalgia proneness as “a facet of individual character – a psychographic variable or aspect of life-style, or a general customer characteristic – that may vary among consumers” (p. 246) and offered a nostalgia-proneness scale. Similarly, Batcho (1995) viewed nostalgia proneness as a personality trait and developed the 20-item Nostalgia Inventory (NI) scale. However, Wildschut et al. (2006) and Merchant et al. (2013) noted that measures for nostalgic proneness focus only on “the propensity to get nostalgic” (trait nostalgia; Merchant et al., 2013, p. 15), while ignoring the “in-the-moment feelings of nostalgia” (state nostalgia; Wildschut et al., 2006, p. 986). Thus, Wildschut et al. (2006) developed a three-item scale to measure nostalgic feelings (e.g., “Right now, I am feeling quite nostalgic”, “Right now, I am having nostalgic thoughts.”, and “I am feeling nostalgic at the moment.”) and Merchant et al. (2013) created a multidimensional scale composed of past imagery, positive emotions, negative emotions, and physiological reactions dimensions to measure the cognitive and emotional elements of nostalgia. Our study focuses

on state nostalgia prompted by remembering a retailer to uncover retailer-related consumer nostalgic memories and the elements that comprise retailer-related consumer nostalgic memories rather than trait nostalgia as an individual characteristic.

Another interesting contrast of nostalgia concerns the extent to which it reflects personal and vicarious nostalgia (Goulding, 2002; Merchant and Rose, 2013). Personal nostalgia is about the actual lived past, whereas vicarious nostalgia evokes a period outside of the individual's living memory (Goulding, 2002). Merchant and Ford (2008) proposed that personal nostalgia is composed of autobiographical memories and the emotions these memories evoke, while vicarious nostalgia is composed of the fantasized reality in the minds of individuals and the emotions it evokes. While companies frequently attempt to evoke vicarious nostalgia through the use of nostalgic products, promotions (advertising), services, or retail environments, our study is interested in exploring personal nostalgia evoked by remembering a retailer and further examining the elements associated with such nostalgic memories. Thus, the current study investigates nostalgia from the context of personal nostalgia, not vicarious nostalgia.

The difference between private versus collective nostalgia is also worth noting. The distinction is made based on the degree to which nostalgia reflects individual or collective experience (Havlena and Holak, 1996). While private nostalgia refers to a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for the personally experienced past, collective nostalgia refers to that for the past which represents a culture, a generation, or a nation (Baker and Kennedy, 1994; Wildschut et al., 2014). As the current research examines individual-level rather than a group-level nostalgia, our research focuses on private nostalgia.

Furthermore, researchers have made other categorizations of nostalgia, including restorative versus reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001), traditional nostalgia versus neonostalgia (Jameson, 1991), and depending on the extent to which nostalgia reflects time (i.e., nostalgia as a regret of time passed) versus space (i.e., nostalgia as homesickness) versus social (i.e., nostalgia as a need to belong) aspects of culture (Kessous, 2015). Nostalgia is “a fuzzy and somewhat messy construct because of the different levels or forms in which nostalgia reflections may occur” (Baker and Kennedy, 1994, p. 172).

Nevertheless, nostalgia can provide marketers with crucial memory stories for understanding consumers’ thoughts and feelings about a brand (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007). Memory is a reconstructive process (Braun, 1999; Schacter, 2008) that brings to mind a recollection of the past rather than an exact reproduction of the past. Among a lifetime of experiences, only a small portion will be stored and therefore those memories reveal important symbolic meanings about the brand (Sujan et al., 1993) and are remembered more positively than they actually are (Merchant and Ford, 2008). Nevertheless, there has been little effort to understand the nature of consumers’ autobiographical memories evoked by remembering a retailer. When retail consumers are asked to recall their relationship to the retailer of their choice, what types of autobiographical memories will emerge to represent their feelings about, memories of, experiences with, or relationships with the retailer that they have selected? What will be the characteristics of the nostalgic memories evoked by remembering a retailer? Between the general accounts of memories of one's past personal experiences with a retailer and the specific memories with a particular reference to a date or occasion, which memory will appear more frequently and why? Moreover, will any memories concerned with the retailer's specific features and attributes be recalled? If so, what will be the theoretical and managerial implications of this finding? Thus, the present study aims to identify the types of retailer-related nostalgic memories.

2.2. Cues that evoke consumer nostalgia

Consumer nostalgia is evoked by a variety of triggers (Holbrook and Schindler, 2003). Marketing stimuli such as ads often evoke autobio-

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