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Blissed by the past: Theorizing media-induced nostalgia as an audience response factor for entertainment and well-being

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ABSTRACT

Research found media to contribute to human well-being via hedonic and non-hedonic entertainment experiences. In this connection, research has seldom taken memories about preceding media exposure into consideration for their impact on present media use. Media-induced nostalgia—defined as bittersweet and fundamentally social emotion that is elicited by remembering or re-experiencing media content and technologies from the past—serves a self-oriented, existential and social function. We propose that by serving these functions, media-induced nostalgia contributes to hedonic and non-hedonic entertainment experiences and influences psychological and subjective well-being. We review existing literature on two-process models of entertainment, well-being, and nostalgia. Consequently, we provide a framework for integrating media-induced nostalgia into the complex field of media entertainment.

1. Introduction

Over the years | gathering memories | laughter and tears | echo in my heart. | I really feel my past is more than a silly souvenir. | Where we'll go only time will show, | but where we've been we'll hold within. | No time's better than yesterday. | Close your eyes and come with me to Nostalgia World. *The Real Group* (2009)

Old media content is popular: People enjoy watching old series on *YouTube*, catching Pokémon—little monsters well known in the 1990s—with their smartphones, attending parties with music from the 1980s and 1990's, and celebrating the sequels of the *Star Wars* saga, whose first part appeared 1977. *Nostalgia* is defined as a social emotion elicited by yearning for the past (Sedikides et al., 2015). Several studies have found nostalgia to be elicited when thinking about past media use (e.g., Wulf & Rieger, 2018) and when being confronted with past media content (Natterer, 2014). In spite of the topicality of nostalgia for today's society, nostalgia as media response has been largely unaddressed in social scientific research. That is, research is yet lacking theoretical considerations that explain why people turn to old media content and technologies and how people benefit of this specific media exposure. This manuscript provides a framework for integrating nostalgia as a media-response into existing theory on media experiences and a model that links nostalgia with media experiences and well-being.

To begin with, being nostalgic should highly connect to concepts of recent developments in entertainment theory. Research found two different outcomes of entertainment consumption (Vorderer, 2011): While hedonic entertainment experiences comprise aspects of fun and suspense in media offerings (Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012), challenging and need-satisfying media content evokes non-hedonic (also termed *eudaimonic*) experiences. These experiences encompass a feeling of appreciation and deeper experiences of the

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human condition (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). With regard to hedonic experiences, catching Pokémon and dancing to music from the 1980s and 1990s is of course a highly enjoyable and funny leisure time activity. On the contrary, non-hedonic experiences seem to be highly influenced by the proximity to the user's biography (Khoo, 2016) and can have an important retrospective impact on life (Greenwood & Long, 2015). Therefore, nostalgia represents a novel view from this biography-centered perspective on hedonic and non-hedonic entertainment experiences.

Nostalgia was also found to contribute to human well-being in several ways: Being reminded on who they were and what they achieved in life, individuals are provided with meaning in life (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, Juhl, & Arndt, 2012). They feel related to loved ones (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006), and experience an increased self-confidence (Baldwin & Landau, 2014). For those reasons, nostalgia was identified a fundamental resource for human well-being (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Juhl, 2013). Hence, as expressed by *The Real Group's* (2009) lyrics, a human's past entails more than sheer memories, namely the chapters of one's individual biography, which is worth reading again.

Additionally, both hedonic and non-hedonic entertainment experiences also contribute to well-being: For instance, hedonic video games' positively influence subjective vitality (Reinecke, Klatt, & Krämer, 2011). With attention to non-hedonic media responses, they are a crucial factor for psychological well-being (Hofer, 2013; Rieger et al., 2015). People start contemplating and reflecting issues such as morality, gratitude and meaning within their own life. Hence, media experiences contribute to human well-being via several mechanisms, in a similar way as those mechanisms identified within research on nostalgia.

In conclusion, research has analyzed the ways how nostalgia and media experiences contribute to well-being, and discussed several examples showing that biographical closeness to media content and technologies fosters nostalgia. Nonetheless, theoretical considerations yet have not integrated previous findings on nostalgia, (entertainment) media, and well-being. We propose that nostalgia induced by reminiscing previously used media content and technologies—in the following '*media-induced nostalgia*'—fosters well-being through the experience of hedonic and non-hedonic entertainment experiences. Shedding light on this relation will help research understand processes underlying hedonic as well as non-hedonic media experiences and mechanisms contributing to well-being, which have yet been difficult to uncover (Vorderer & Reinecke, 2015).

2. Media-induced nostalgia

Nostalgia has been investigated and discussed by a variety of research disciplines. Contingent on the specific point of view, the scientific discourse varies regarding the underlying questions of interest, the methodology used, and the implications of the findings. Approaches within cultural, memory, and media studies conceptualize nostalgia as a cultural (memory) practice in society and map the role that mass and social media take in this cultural process (cf. Lizardi, 2015; Niemeyer, 2014; Pickering & Keightley, 2006). In turn—and more in the focus of the current paper—empirical (media) research such as psychology rather focusses on the individual experience of nostalgia, for instance, when thinking about the past or being confronted with past media consumption (cf. Natterer, 2014; Sedikides et al., 2015). In this research tradition, Sedikides et al. (2015) define nostalgia as “a self-conscious, bittersweet but predominantly positive and fundamentally social emotion” (p. 190).

A prototype analysis of the experience of nostalgia revealed that people agree on nostalgia as a concept that fosters central features such as *memories, the past, personal meaning, longing/yearning, social relationships, and childhood/youth* (Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012). These findings have been replicated for various cultures showing that nostalgia is a pancultural emotion (Hepper et al., 2014). As a consequence, nostalgia arises when thinking about such past-time events and achievements, beloved people (Wildschut et al., 2006), and self-relevant artifacts such as media content and technologies (Bonus, Peebles, Mares, & Sarmiento, 2017; Wulf & Rieger, 2018).

Media constitute a particular access to nostalgia as photographs, texts, or films contain personal memories (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). For instance, Knowles (2015) states that with the recent boom of retro and vintage (cf. Keightley & Pickering, 2014), there is an “overwhelming array of contemporary practices of looking back” (Paragraph 4). Such vintage objects embrace cultural biographies which—when used again—constitute an act of memory practice. Media content and technologies can thereby become projection places and tools to perform nostalgia (Niemeyer, 2015).

In regard to *media nostalgia*, there are different conceptualizations. For instance, Menke (2017) defines media nostalgia as nostalgia with “media culture, technology, or content [...] at the center of nostalgic longing” (p. 630). He further demarcates *media* nostalgia from *mediated* nostalgia. In this differentiation, media nostalgia is “nostalgia toward media” (p. 630) triggered for example by re-experiencing media from one's past (such as a movie one had watched as a child), whereas mediated nostalgia depicts being nostalgic of media that refer indirectly to one's past (e.g., a scene of a first kiss reminds an individual of her or his own first kiss). He further distinguishes between nostalgic media products that have been created by the future user her- or himself (such as family photographs) and products that are created of media industries to elicit nostalgia.

Conversely, as one of the first following an empirical methodology in entertainment research, Natterer (2014) contrasts *personal* and *historical* media nostalgia. *Personal* media nostalgia is induced when people are confronted with media they had been exposed to when the media originally were aired. Personal nostalgia embraces personal attitudes and feelings to these contents. On the contrary, *historical* media nostalgia is induced when people get in contact with contemporary content that refers to a time before one's birth. As examples, Natterer (2014) names movies such as “*The Artist, 12 Years a Slave, Ray, [and] Once Upon a Time in the West*” (p. 163). People do not have a *personal* connection to the time this content takes place, but they may appreciate the time it refers to.

Given the variety of definitions and conceptualizations of media nostalgia, at this point of elaboration, we need to clarify *our* understanding of *media-induced nostalgia* as the main construct of this manuscript. We refer to nostalgia as the mixed-emotional experience as described in the psychological literature (cf. Sedikides et al., 2015). With media being the source or trigger of this

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