AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS OF PERSONAL, HISTORICAL, AND NON-NOSTALGIC ADVERTISING ON CONSUMER RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT: Using a theory-driven approach, this study investigates whether and/or to what extent consumers’ information-processing tendencies and ad-based responses are differentially influenced by the introduction of nostalgic cues (either “personal” or “historical” in nature) embedded in an advertisement. The results support hypothesized expectations that personal nostalgia (a yearning for one’s past) generally outperforms both historical and non-nostalgic advertising when measures of self-directed thoughts, positive affect, and attitude toward the ad are considered. However, when cognitive measures (i.e., brand/message-related cognitive responses and message recall) are considered, a personally nostalgic ad is shown to be comparable to a historical nostalgic ad, but inferior to a non-nostalgic ad. Regression results utilizing cognitive response data further indicate that individuals’ brand attitudes are differentially influenced by the type of nostalgia evoked. Practical and theoretical implications for the study’s findings are discussed, and future research directions are presented.

The world is full of people whose notion of a satisfactory future is, in fact, a return to the idealized past.

—Robertson Davies, A Voice from the Attic (1960)

Although the marketing/consumer psychology literature acknowledges that nostalgia (an individual’s yearning for the past) is a marketing tool with the potential to have a significant impact, surprisingly little empirical work has been conducted in an advertising context to delineate the information-processing and consumer response differences that may exist between nostalgic and non-nostalgic ad types. Moreover, although nostalgia is often conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising varying forms and types, for the most part, empirical studies to date have not made this distinction when examining nostalgia advertising effects. For example, it has not been established whether or to what extent a nostalgic ad that prompts consumers to recall “the good times” of their past (a personally experienced nostalgia) will be more or less effective in generating positive brand responses vis-à-vis an ad that is nostalgia-evoking but takes consumers back to a time that they have never personally experienced (historical nostalgia). Nor has it been established whether some forms of nostalgic advertising offer communication-related benefits over non-nostalgic advertising executions. Such an inquiry has not only theoretical importance in that it helps to further delineate the factors and processes contributing to brand judgments resulting from nostalgic reflections (see, e.g., Baker and Kennedy 1994; Muehling and Sprott 2004) but also practical importance: From a segmentation perspective, advertisers and marketers must recognize that consumers’ responses to nostalgia-based advertisements depend, in part, on how well the nostalgia “connects” with the individual. As rock star Lou Reed once quipped, “I don’t like nostalgia unless it’s mine.”

It is well documented that successful advertising creates a perception in the minds of consumers that the advertisement is speaking to them, with the ultimate goal of encouraging the establishment of a “personal connection” between the consumer and the marketed brand/product (Escalas 2004; Krugman 1967). Nostalgia is one mechanism suggested by researchers to encourage self-referencing among individuals (Belk 1991; Braun-LaTour 2007; Krishnamurthy and Sujan 1999; Muehling and Sprott 2004; Olsen 1995). It is considered a special form of affect and emotion (Holak and Havlena 1998) and has been offered as a means to psychologically profile the marketplace (Goulding 2001; Holbrook and Schindler 1994). In a recent empirical investigation, Muehling and Sprott (2004) found evidence to suggest that nostalgic cues in advertising are capable of enhancing the production of self-referencing nostalgic thoughts and, ultimately, in helping to shape consumers’ attitudes toward the ad and advertised products.

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The authors, who contributed equally to this manuscript, thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and David Sprott for his assistance in the conceptual and data collection phases of the study.
brand. Consistent with the findings of this and other research in support of nostalgia’s potential effectiveness, it is no small wonder that marketers continue to capitalize on the popularity of nostalgia-based themes in their advertising/communications efforts (Elliott 2009).

Although nostalgia would appear to benefit from its ability to generate favorable affect as well as encourage self-referencing, concerns have been raised that evoking self-directed thoughts in a nostalgia advertising context may sometimes lead to undesirable side effects, in that generation of these thoughts may actually distract consumers from attending to the advertiser’s central message (Muehling and Sprout 2004; Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993). Thus, for advertisers considering the use of a nostalgic advertising format, a potential trade-off may lie between attempting to generate favorable emotions (affective responses) while simultaneously encouraging consumers to focus on and recall the brand/message-related aspects of the advertisement. It is our contention (discussed further in a subsequent section of this paper) that, due to their self-referencing nature, the elicitation of some types of nostalgic reflections (namely, personal nostalgic thoughts) may actually undermine (detract from) an ad’s ability to communicate relevant message points.

In the current study, we test a notion that has been presented in the nostalgia advertising literature (Baker and Kennedy 1994) but heretofore has not been empirically tested, that is, that consumers may respond differently (i.e., process information and make brand/advertising judgments that are more/less affectively charged) when exposed to advertising that is designed to elicit various types of nostalgia. Consistent with the theorizing and empirical work of Batcho (1998), our view of nostalgia is memory-based and “past-oriented”—associated with individuals’ warm feelings for or a yearning to return to their past—as opposed to “present-oriented” (a reaction against an unhappy current life) or “future-oriented” (concern over or dismay about what may lie ahead). Such a theoretical perspective appears to be in concert with what marketers hope to achieve with their nostalgic-themed promotions—that is, to generate more favorable feelings associated with a product/service rather than to reduce negative feelings. Understanding how nostalgia influences consumer responses would, therefore, appear to be a theoretically relevant and managerially useful research question.

BACKGROUND AND REVIEW

Despite the significant progress that has been made over the past two decades, surprisingly little empirical research has been undertaken to determine the differential effects of various types of nostalgia on consumer judgment processes (cf. Marchegiani and Phau 2005), even though the use of personal and historical nostalgic ad formats are relatively commonplace in the media (Martin and Lee 1999; Reisenwitz, Iyer, and Cutler 2004; Unger, McConocha, and Faier 1991). Studies focusing on the effects of nostalgia can be traced as far back as Hofer’s (1688) dissertation on the topic, although it was not until the early 1990s that it became a subject of research interest in the marketing/advertising domain. Among early research efforts, the works of Belk (1990), Havlena and Holak (1991), Hirsch (1992), Holbrook and Schindler (1991), and Stern (1992) were instrumental in defining and categorizing the construct, as well as establishing its theoretical underpinnings. Generally conceptualized as a “positively valenced complex feeling, emotion, or mood produced by reflection on things (objects, persons, experiences, ideas) associated with the past” (Holak and Havlena 1998), nostalgia and the associations it helps to produce is expected to establish a network of mental and emotional connections between a brand/product and the consumer. Moreover, nostalgia is believed not only to help consumers connect with the past but to help them define their own self-identities (Belk 1991).

Unlike autobiographical memories, which are recollections about events in one’s own life (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992; Tulving 1985), nostalgic memories are characterized as “idealized” recollections of the past (i.e., as seen through rose-colored glasses) and may include thoughts about personally experienced as well as vicariously experienced events (e.g., events that could not have happened in one’s own lifetime). In addition, although responses to nostalgic cues are often considered affective in nature, research has indicated that the feelings generated by nostalgia are distinct from generalized affect (Baker and Kennedy 1994). In contrast to ads prompting an autobiographical memory, the use of nostalgic references in advertising provides advertisers with a much broader array of events and experiences from which to evoke consumers’ emotional responses. And unlike responses to many other ad executions (humor, sex, fear appeals), the affect associated with nostalgia is often characterized as “bittersweet”—evoking both happy and sad emotions, sometimes simultaneously (Davis 1979; Hirsch 1992; Holak and Havlena 1998; Wildschut et al. 2006).

Furthermore, the growing body of literature on the topic of nostalgia acknowledges that it may consist of several orders and types. For example, Davis’s (1979) seminal work on the topic argued from a sociological perspective that at least three orders of nostalgia may exist: first order (simple), second order (reflexive), and third order (interpreted) nostalgia. Davis’s notion of first-order nostalgia is most consistent with marketers’ and consumer psychologists’ perspectives (and the one adopted in the present study), in that it is a nostalgia based on individuals’ perceptions that “things were better then than now.” Second- and third-order nostalgia are characterized by more critical and introspective evaluations by individuals—challenging the veracity of their own nostalgic recollections.
(reflexive nostalgia) or questioning their own reactions to the nostalgia itself (interpreted nostalgia).

Stern’s (1992) Journal of Advertising article was among the first to identify various forms of nostalgia in an advertising/marketing context. In particular, Stern referred to two nostalgia types—personal and historical—distinguished by a variety of elements (including: setting, plot, action, characters, values, tones) and time. According to Stern, the most important temporal element associated with historical nostalgia is the “presentation of the past as the time before the audience was born” (1992, p. 13), whereas personal nostalgia is an idealization of a “personally remembered” past (p. 16). Of relevance to the current investigation, an examination of the nostalgia literature also suggests that “personal” versus “historical” nostalgic cues may vary in their ability to evoke self-referencing thoughts (Baker and Kennedy 1994). Furthermore, vicariously experienced, simulated (“historical”) nostalgia is expected to elicit emotions and informational-processing tendencies distinct from those evoked by “real” (“personal”) nostalgia (Baker and Kennedy 1994). For personal as well as historical nostalgia, the “connectedness” of the consumer to the brand may be established via one’s identification with a social group (social identity) (Batcho 1998; Sierra and McQuitty 2007), as well as by the perceptions of a shared “communal” past (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Davis 1979; Holbrook and Schindler 1994). For personal nostalgia, however, these connections are likely to be based on traces of memory from an event in one’s own life and are therefore more connected with the self, whereas for historical nostalgia, they may be the result of fantasy (Stern 1992), simulation (Baker and Kennedy 1994), or vicariously experienced events (Holak, Havlena, and Matveev 2006). Baker and Kennedy (1994) note that personal (real) nostalgia is more analogous to an exemplar, whereas historical ( simulated) nostalgia is comparable to a prototype—a more abstract representation of an event.

In addition to “real” (personal) and “simulated” (historical) nostalgia, Baker and Kennedy introduced the notion of a “collective nostalgia”—a yearning for a past representing “a culture, a generation, or a nation” (1994, p. 171). Expanding on this categorization, Holak and Havlena (1998) introduced two separate dimensions on which nostalgic experiences may be classified: (1) the personal versus collective nature of the experience, and (2) whether the experience is directly (personally) or indirectly (vicariously) experienced (the focus of the present investigation). (For an application of this typology in a cross-cultural context, see Holak, Havlena, and Matveev 2006 and Holak, Matveev, and Havlena 2007.)

Although nostalgia has been implicated in numerous behavioral research contexts, including self-concept, brand loyalty, brand meaning, the human senses, consumption preferences, literary criticism, collective memory, and emotions (cf. Muehling and Sprott 2004), Marchegiani and Phau (2005) point out that empirical tests of the benefits and costs of employing nostalgic themes in advertising (versus using non-nostalgic ads) have typically operationalized nostalgia as a unified concept, rather than as consisting of personal and historical forms. As will become evident in the following sections, however, distinguishing between these two forms is not inconsequential. Each is expected to stimulate a different mental process, resulting in different cognitive and affective outcomes. And it is important to note that these differences may impact the extent to which a consumer associates the advertised brand with his or her own self-concept (Stern 1992).

**HYPOTHESES**

**Personal Connections**

One important distinction between personal and historical nostalgia involves the extent of memory associated with each. Symons and Johnson (1997) have noted that the self-structure in memory has superior elaborative and organizational properties with respect to information processing. As such, personal nostalgia, with its direct association to actual events in one’s life should produce a more extensive associative network than that of historical nostalgia. According to Network Theory (Anderson 1976; Collins and Loftus 1975), memory is represented as an interlinking network of nodes representing a variety of concepts, each varying in strength based on its importance to that concept. During the retrieval of information from memory, concepts are activated along with their associations throughout the network. When and if the activation from two concepts intersects, the path between the two becomes more readily available to the individual for information-processing and decision-making purposes (Ratcliff and McKoon 1981). In this fashion, memories can be retrieved, along with the emotional concepts that are linked to them in the network.

Nostalgia research provides evidence that nostalgic cues placed in ads are capable of priming specific thoughts about a personally experienced event (Holbrook and Schindler 1991; Muehling and Sprott 2004). Baker and Kennedy (1994) proposed that the intensity of nostalgia is expected to be greatest when a direct experience has occurred. Similarly, Escalas (2004) observed that narrative processing (creating stories or imposing a storylike structure on events) creates or enhances self–brand connections. This self-referencing occurs when information is processed by relating it to aspects of one’s own personal experiences (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). According to Brown, Keenan, and Potts (1986), all episodic memories are by definition self-referencing memories. Therefore, for ads containing personal nostalgic cues, we would expect aroused memories to be more salient and retrievable, given that they
are based on actual events experienced by the consumer (Tulving 1985).

Yet, given the vicariously experienced (“other-directed”) nature of historical nostalgia, one would not expect to find a memory structure as deeply rooted in the self (Stern 1992) and therefore less likely to elicit self-directed thoughts at the time of ad exposure. Moreover, although non-nostalgic ads may contain self-referencing prompts (e.g., “imagine yourself using this product”), the memory store used to assist in consumer decision making is likely to contain fewer self–brand connections primarily because the consumer may have had limited experiences with the product from which to draw on, and because the level of involvement is expected to be lower. Furthermore, anticipatory self-referencing involves imagined experiences about one’s future; these mental representations are expected to be less detailed than those for retrospective self-referencing, similar to what might be expected for nostalgic ads (Johnson et al. 1988). In contrast to personal nostalgic memories (which are specific, emotionally charged, long-lasting, and of significance to the self-system), the memory used to process a non-nostalgic ad is not expected to be as rich in context and as significantly tied to the self in many instances (Belk 1990; Krugman 1967). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H1: Exposure to a “personal nostalgic” ad (as compared with a “historical nostalgic” ad or non-nostalgic ad) will result in more self-directed thoughts.

Affective Outcomes

Although the number of published works devoted to empirically examining the relative effectiveness of nostalgic advertising is relatively small, there is a consistent pattern of findings supporting the positive effects of nostalgia on consumers’ affective responses. In comparison to a non-nostalgic ad, nostalgic ads have been shown to generate more favorable attitudes toward the ad (Aad) and advertised brand (Aab) (Muehling and Sprott 2004; Pascal, Sprott, and Muehling 2002; Reisenwitz, Iyer, and Cutler 2004). Given the positively biased nature of nostalgic thoughts (Davis 1979; Holak and Havlena 1998), nostalgia advertising researchers have typically employed Affect Transfer Models of persuasion (Burke and Edell 1989; MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986; Zajonc 1980) as the theoretical explanation for a nostalgia advertising advantage: The positive feelings generated at the time of ad exposure are transferred to the ad and advertised brand.

Consistent with this line of reasoning, one should also expect personal nostalgic ads to produce a more positively charged set of emotional responses than historical nostalgic ads, as a result of their more direct ties to the self, that is, personal connections (Holak, Havlena, and Matveev 2006). Debevec and Iyer (1988) and Debevec and Romeo (1992), for example, observed that when participants were exposed to messages facilitating personal relatedness—similar to what we would expect for personal nostalgic ads—individuals’ attitudes toward the advertised products were more positive than when the messages did not facilitate personal relatedness (see also Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). Likewise, Escalas (2004) found evidence supporting the notion that narrative processing (storylike processing, similar to what could be expected during exposure to a nostalgic ad that makes reference to an event in one’s life) was positively related to self–brand connections, which in turn had a positive influence on brand attitudes. Furthermore, research in a sports management context (Moore and Homer 2008) has shown that as the incidence of self–brand connections increases (as we hypothesize to be the case for personal nostalgic ads), the favorability of brand evaluations is also enhanced. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H2: Exposure to a “personal nostalgic” ad (as compared with a “historical nostalgic” ad or non-nostalgic ad) will result in:

(a) a generally more positive feeling (positive affect),
(b) a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement (Aaad), and
(c) a more favorable attitude toward the advertised brand (Aaab).

To a lesser extent, we should also expect historical nostalgic advertising to generate more favorable affective responses than its non-nostalgic counterpart. Nostalgia advertising—whether personal or historical in nature—is expected to evoke more positively charged emotional responses than advertising devoid of a nostalgic reference (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Muehling and Sprott 2004). Consistent with this reasoning, we hypothesize:

H3: Exposure to a “historical nostalgic” ad (as compared with a non-nostalgic ad) will result in:

(a) a generally more positive feeling (positive affect),
(b) a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement (Aaad), and
(c) a more favorable attitude toward the advertised brand (Aaab).

Cognitive Outcomes

In contrast to the hypothesized relationships presented so far—which propose an advantage for nostalgic ads in terms of their ability to generate more favorable affective responses and self-directed thoughts—the cognitive outcomes of ad exposure (i.e., the number of brand-/message-related points processed and recalled) are expected to exhibit a pattern of relationships in favor of non-nostalgic ads. Under non-nostalgic ad exposure conditions, individuals’ attention to and retrieval
of message-related points are expected to be more pronounced than under personal or historical nostalgic ad exposure conditions. Information-processing outcomes are a function of the amount of mental effort individuals devote to the stimulus, as well as their mental capacity to process, that is, cognitive load (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; Miller 1956). As such, this expected reversal of outcomes for nostalgic versus non-nostalgic advertisements is hypothesized to occur as a result of an information-processing “distractor” effect caused by individuals’ nostalgic reflections.

The nostalgia literature suggests that nostalgic reflections are likely to be high in visual imagery and are also more likely to be more personally relevant. Baker and Kennedy, for example, note that because of ad-induced imagery in nostalgic reflections, individuals are “better able to picture in their mind the actual event which has been elicited by a certain stimulus” (1994, p. 171). Noting that imaging is believed to be a cognitive process that requires mental resources that compete for resources with other cognitive tasks, Unnava, Agarwal, and Haugtvedt (1996) have shown that processing of ad message points is inhibited when individuals’ attention is focused on image-evoking thoughts at the time of ad exposure. Similar findings have been obtained in other advertising contexts and when personally relevant or idiosyncratic thoughts were the primary research focus (Bolls and Muehling 2007; Chowdhury, Finn, and Olsen 2007; Coulter and Punj 2007; Craik et al. 1996; Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993; Yalch and Sternthal 1984).

Investigations more closely aligned with nostalgia research (e.g., Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993) have provided evidence to support the notion that message-based product features become less accessible when consumers focus on an autobiographical episode (a self-referencing thought from the past). These authors posited that self-referencing is an attention-assuming task that interferes with the encoding of new information. Similarly, Sullivan (1981) observed that self-referencing results in mental associations that interfere with information processing. Two theoretical explanations for this expectation have been offered: (1) an ability-based view (the self represents a large and complex cognitive structure, and therefore, demands more cognitive effort; Yalch and Sternthal 1985), and (2) a motivational perspective (the relevance of self-related information is high and therefore acts as a distractor from other information sources) (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992).

As such, when nostalgic reflection is encouraged, higher levels of affect are expected to be experienced, but with a concomitant reduction in analysis of and recall of product information. Consistent with this notion, participants in Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman’s (1992) study produced a significantly lower proportion of thoughts related to the product’s features and attributes in the autobiographical memory condition compared with participants in the product focus or general situation conditions. And in their examination of the impact of self-referencing on persuasion, Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1996) found that participants recalled more material from advertisements when the ads encouraged a moderate rather than extremely high level of self-referencing. Given that personal nostalgic ads are expected to involve self-directed processing tendencies similar to those observed for autobiographical memories, the following hypothesized relationships are expected:

**H4:** Exposure to a “personal nostalgic” ad (as compared with a “historical nostalgic” ad or a non-nostalgic ad) will result in:

- (a) fewer brand-/message-related thoughts generated, and
- (b) fewer ad message points recalled.

Likewise, we should expect a similar, though less pronounced pattern of relationships for individuals exposed to historical nostalgic versus non-nostalgic advertisements. Consistent with the rationale given for personally nostalgic ads, the thoughts evoked by historical nostalgic ads, while less vivid and personally relevant than personal nostalgic ads, should nonetheless encourage mental imaging that is not as directly aligned with the advertised message or product. This increased imagery-based processing is expected to interfere with individuals’ focus on and subsequent retrieval of message-based information. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

**H5:** Exposure to a “historical nostalgic” ad (as compared with a non-nostalgic ad) will result in:

- (a) fewer brand-/message-related thoughts generated, and
- (b) fewer ad message points recalled.

**Impact on Brand Evaluations**

Muehling and Sprott’s (2004) study provided preliminary evidence that nostalgic cues placed in advertisements are capable of influencing the thought processes of consumers during ad exposure. These authors did not specifically examine the relative influence these thoughts may have on brand attitudes, however, nor did they distinguish between nostalgia ad types. Given the pattern of findings hypothesized above, we would expect that consumers’ brand attitudes—formed as a result of exposure to nostalgic and/or non-nostalgic ads—would be a function of the emphasis placed on processing (responses to) various aspects/elements of the ads. Consistent with Cognitive Response Theory (Greenwald 1968; Huang and Hutchinson 2008; Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Wright 1973), ad-based persuasion (brand attitude formation/change) is mediated by the amount and type of thoughts consumers generate in response to the message, the ad’s executional features, the source of the
communication, and so forth. The salience (relative importance) and valence (positive or negative charge) of each aspect at the time of exposure helps determine its contribution to attitude formation (Kisielius and Sternthal 1986).

In addition to this largely cognitive process, Epstein’s (1994) Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory proposes an experiential process by which persuasion takes place (see also Buck et al. 2004) and which is relevant to an investigation of nostalgia’s effects. The experiential system is thought to interact with the cognitive system and is comprised of two interrelated processes often associated with nostalgia: self-referencing and emotional responding. In an advertising context, self-referencing involves the process of relating the communication to aspects of one’s life—often through the activation of personal memories. Self-referencing (as would be expected in personal nostalgic ad exposure conditions) has been shown to increase positive attitudes toward a product (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). Similarly, emotional responding (especially the generation of positive feelings) has also been documented as a prevalent outcome of exposure to nostalgic advertisements (cf. Pascal, Sprott, and Muehling 2002). In a health-related context, Dunlop, Wakefield, and Kashima (2010) found empirical support for the notion that self-referencing is associated with stronger emotions, arguing that emotional responses arise from feelings of self-identification.

As such, given the hypothesized nature of individuals’ responses to a personal nostalgic ad vis-à-vis the other ad types, we would expect self-directed thoughts and general nostalgic thoughts to play a more prominent role in influencing brand evaluations in the personal nostalgia condition due to their relative salience and emotionality. Furthermore (and consistent with the findings of Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner [1993] in an autobiographical memories context), the arousal of personal memories from the past is expected to reduce the impact that ad-related message points have on consumers’ brand judgments.

For individuals exposed to the historical nostalgia ad, self-directed thoughts are expected to be less prevalent, and therefore, should play a diminished role in influencing brand attitudes. Instead, a greater influence from general nostalgic thoughts—emotional responses in reference to a distant, vicariously experienced past—is expected for these individuals. On the other hand, individuals exposed to a non-nostalgic ad are not expected to be distracted by nostalgic reflections, given the unlikely nature of these thoughts being evoked during ad processing. For these individuals, brand-/message-related thoughts are expected to be most salient, and are therefore expected to play a greater role in influencing their brand judgments.

Findings have supported the robustness of the relationship between ad-related affect and brand evaluations in numerous advertising contexts (Brown and Stayman 1992). As such, we expect ad-focused thoughts to contribute to brand attitude formation, irrespective of whether a nostalgic theme is present or whether it is personal or historical in nature. These expectations lead us to suggest the following pattern of relationships:

H6: Consumer brand attitudes will be influenced by:

(a) self-directed, general nostalgic, and ad execution–related thoughts for individuals exposed to a “personal nostalgic” ad;
(b) general nostalgic and ad execution–related thoughts for individuals exposed to a “historical nostalgic” ad; and
(c) brand-/message- and ad execution–related thoughts for individuals exposed to a non-nostalgic ad.

METHOD

Stimuli

Three experimental ads were developed for purposes of testing the hypothesized relationships. The visual elements of each ad (silhouettes of young people, with a setting sun in the background) were held constant across all three ads. But the verbal elements of the ads were altered, in an attempt to elicit the desired nostalgic/non-nostalgic response. For example, the headline of the personal nostalgia ad read: “Your High School Summers. It was a time like no other . . . hanging out with your friends . . . teenage romances . . . summer vacations,” followed by “Wouldn’t it be great to return to those times?” Structured in a similar fashion, the historical nostalgia ad headline read: “Summer of Woodstock. It was a time like no other . . . it was Woodstock and Jimi Hendrix . . . muscle cars . . . love beads and flower children,” followed by “Wouldn’t it have been groovy to live back then?” Lastly, in the non-nostalgic stimulus ad, the headline made reference to a contemporary time period (e.g., “Summer of 2008”) and emphasized “is” as opposed to “was” (“It is a time like no other . . . warm days and cool nights . . . a time for vacation . . . and relaxation”), followed by “Wouldn’t it be great for it to always be like this?”

Each ad concluded with a set of four statements about eight product features that were held constant across all ad conditions. (See Figures 1–3.)

The ads were printed in color on 8.5 × 11.5-inch sheets of paper and placed in a document protector, presented in stimulus binders. A fictitious and neutral brand name of digital camera (Foton FDx) was featured in the ads to ensure that participants would have no preexisting brand beliefs or personal experiences that might influence the measured outcomes central to the study (e.g., brand evaluation, positive affect, nostalgic thoughts, self-directed cognitions). The name Foton was identified after pretesting 42 fictitious brand names (with a sample similar to that used in the main study). Foton was perceived by pretest participants as the most neutral of the
brand names evaluated ($M = 4.03$, seven-point scale) with the smallest standard deviation ($SD = 1.17$). A digital camera was selected as the focal product for the ads because it provided a flexible context for ad design and was a product for which the sample of participants is a target market.

The ads were pretested on a sample of 27 participants (similar to those used in the main study) to determine whether they evoked the desired nostalgic response. During the pretests, participants were presented a stimulus ad with appropriate manipulation instructions and were then administered three nostalgia measures (described below). Participants perceived the ads as designed, $F(2, 27) = 4.79, p < .01$, regarding the overall evoked nostalgia scale. Specifically, the personal nostalgic ad evoked more nostalgia ($5.39$ versus $3.96; t = 2.78, p < .01$) than the non-nostalgic ad. The historical nostalgic ad evoked more nostalgia than the non-nostalgic ad ($4.88$ versus $3.96; p = 1.89, p < .05$). The personal and historical nostalgic ads were perceived to evoke equal levels of general nostalgia ($t = 1.33, p > .05$).

The second part of the pretest revealed that the type of nostalgia evoked by the nostalgia ads (personal or historical) was as desired. The personal nostalgic ad scored higher on the personal nostalgia scale than the historical nostalgic ad ($5.14$ versus $3.85; t = 2.53, p < .01$) and the non-nostalgic ad ($3.50; t = 2.75, p < .01$). In contrast, the historical nostalgic ad scored higher on the historical nostalgia scale than the non-nostalgic ad ($3.67$ versus $1.84; t = 2.44, p < .01$).

**Sample and Procedures**

Participants from the main study consisted of 269 undergraduate students recruited from a major university, who were offered entrance into a drawing for a $50 gift certificate for their participation. Twenty participants who were randomly assigned to the historical nostalgia ad condition were eliminated from further analysis because they were old enough to have personally experienced the Woodstock era (i.e., making the ad potentially personally nostalgic rather than historically nostalgic for them). Consequently, a final sample of 249 respondents resulted and was used to test the hypotheses.
Participants ranged in age from 19 to 60 with a mean age of 25.6 years. Men showed a slightly higher representation in the sample, accounting for 52.4% of participants. Participants were randomly assigned to treatment conditions (personal, historical, or non-nostalgic) in research sessions lasting approximately 35 minutes. At the start of each research session, participants were briefed in general terms about the nature of the study. To promote authenticity, participants were told that this was an advertising study sponsored by an ad agency interested in consumers’ reactions to a promotional product. The participants were then given a binder containing specific task instructions and one of three stimulus ads (condition-specific) along with an initial questionnaire containing a thought-listing task and an envelope in which to place completed surveys. Task instructions directed participants to view the advertisement while completing the thought-listing task. When finished with the thought elicitation task, participants were then presented a second questionnaire containing the remaining dependent measures and manipulation checks. When finished with this task, participants were given a final questionnaire containing a message recall task. When all participants had finished with the recall item, envelopes containing completed questionnaires were collected and participants were debriefed and then thanked for their cooperation.

Measures

Cognitive Responses

The outcome measure of thoughts elicited by the advertisement was captured through a thought elicitation exercise, consistent with thought protocol procedures described in the literature (Wright 1980). Participants were asked to list all thoughts that came to mind as they were viewing the ad. Nineteen boxes/spaces were provided on the questionnaire for this task. Directions instructed participants to list only one thought per space. Once this portion of the exercise was completed, participants were instructed to review each thought and evaluate its valence by designating it as a positive, negative, or neutral thought.

Three judges, blind to the experimental conditions of the study and working independently, subsequently coded participants’ thoughts. Thought categories consisted of: (1) brand-/message-related thoughts (e.g., “Foton has a lot of megapixels”); (2) self-directed thoughts (e.g., “I thought of my family vacations”); (3) ad execution–related thoughts (e.g., “the colors in the ad were rather dark”); (4) general mentions of nostalgia (e.g., “a time from the past”); and (5) miscellaneous/other thoughts (e.g., “I wish this exercise was over”). Interjudge reliability for the coding was .82, with disagreements resolved by majority rule.

Consistent with the literature, two types of measures were created from the coded thoughts. One measure was a simple count of the number of thoughts from each category, such as the number of brand-/message-related thoughts, number of self-directed thoughts, and so forth. The other measure was a valenced index of thoughts. Indices were produced by subtracting the number of negative thoughts in a category from the number of positive thoughts from that same category, yielding valenced indices of brand/message thoughts, self-directed thoughts, and so forth.

Attitude Measures

Brand attitudes ($A_b$) and attitudes toward the ad ($A_{ad}$) were assessed using standard measures used extensively in previous research. Attitude toward the brand was constructed by averaging four items on seven-point scales anchored by bad/good, dislike very much/like very much, unfavorable/favorable, worthless/valuable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$). Similarly, attitude toward the ad was developed by averaging responses to four, seven-point scales anchored by bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive, and unpleasant/pleasant (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .96$).
**Positive Affect**

Participants were asked what their feelings had been when exposed to the ads, using a 19-item scale adapted from Burke and Edell (1989). Sample items capturing participants’ feeling states included: “joyous,” “affectionate,” “embarrassing,” “loving,” “annoying,” and so forth, evaluated on seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). A principal components analysis of the 19 items yielded two factors with eigenvalues substantially greater than one, which together explained 65% of the variance in the data. The two factors represented positive and negative feelings. The average of the 11 positive feeling states (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$) was used to form the positive affect measure for the current study.

**Message Recall**

An open-ended question asked participants to list all product features they could remember from the advertisement viewed. Each participant’s list of recalled features was coded 0–8, with 0 representing no product features correctly recalled, to 8, reflecting all product features correctly recalled. This process produced a message recall score for each participant and was used for hypotheses testing.

**Nostalgia**

Nostalgic responses to the experimental treatments were measured in three ways. First, the level of general nostalgia evoked by the ad was measured using a 10-item evoked nostalgia scale, adapted from Pascal, Sprott, and Muehling (2002). Items included statements such as “Reminds me of the past,” and “Makes me feel nostalgic” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .97$). Second, a personal nostalgia index was formed by summing, then dividing, responses to six, seven-point items on Likert scales that focused on past events in participants’ lives. Items included statements such as “Makes me think about persons, places, or things from my youth,” and “Makes me reminisce about a time in my life” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$). The third measure of nostalgia tapped participants’ historical nostalgic responses to the ads, and included items such as “Makes me feel good about a previous time—a time before my birth,” and “Makes me reminisce about a time before my birth” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$).

**RESULTS**

**Manipulation Checks**

In addition to the pretests of the manipulations noted previously, additional ANOVA (analysis of variance) and follow-up tests for each of the three measures of nostalgia (general nostalgia, personal nostalgia, and historical nostalgia) were performed on participants from the main study. Consistent with pretest findings, individuals in the two nostalgia ad conditions reported significantly higher levels of general nostalgia ($M_{Personal} = 4.75; M_{Historical} = 4.03$) than individuals exposed to the non-nostalgic ad, $M = 3.19$; $F(1, 248) = 25.90$, $p < .01$; all follow-up $t$-values $> 3.65$, $p < .01$. In addition, analyses involving the personal nostalgia and historical nostalgia scaled indices indicated that individuals in the personal nostalgia treatment condition had significantly higher personal nostalgia scores ($M = 4.63$) than individuals in the historical ($M = 3.40$) or non-nostalgia ($M = 2.67$) ad treatment conditions, $F(1, 248) = 43.14$, $p < .01$; all $t$-values $> 3.12$, $p < .01$. Likewise, individuals in the historical nostalgia treatment condition had higher scores on the historical nostalgia index ($M = 3.72$) than individuals in either the personal nostalgia ($M = 2.21$) or non-nostalgia ($M = 1.68$) ad conditions, $F(1, 248) = 52.69$, $p < .01$; all $t$-values $> 2.96$, $p < .01$.

**Tests of the Hypotheses**

**Hypothesis 1**

The first hypothesis proposed that exposure to a personal nostalgic ad would generate more self-directed thoughts among study participants than would a historical nostalgic ad or a non-nostalgic ad. ANOVA tests supported this expectation, $F(1, 249) = 15.97$, $p < .01$. Planned follow-up tests between each ad treatment condition indicated that the personal nostalgic ad generated significantly more self-directed thoughts ($M = 1.71$) than either the historical nostalgic ad ($M = .58$, $t = 4.08$, $p < .01$) or the non-nostalgic ad ($M = .56$, $t = 4.59$, $p < .01$), consistent with H1 expectations. There was no significant difference in the number of self-directed thoughts between the historical and non-nostalgic ad conditions ($t = .11$, $p > .05$), as expected.

This pattern of responses across ad treatment conditions was identical when the ratio of self-directed thoughts to total thoughts (as opposed to the total number of self-directed thoughts) was analyzed, $F(1, 242) = 14.83$, $p < .01$. Over 29% ($M = 29.50\%$) of all cognitive responses generated by participants exposed to the personal nostalgic ad were self-directed in nature—a significantly greater proportion than those generated by participants in the historical nostalgic ad condition ($M = 12.35\%$, $t = 3.81$, $p < .01$) or in the non-nostalgic ad condition ($M = 10.67\%$, $t = 4.86$, $p < .01$), offering further support for H1.

Furthermore, consistent with our theoretical expectations, the nature of the self-directed thoughts was generally positive across all three ad treatment conditions. However, significantly more positive self-directed thoughts were generated in the personal nostalgic group ($M = 1.40$) than in the historical ($M = .48; t = 3.60, p < .01$) or non-nostalgic ($M = .38; t = 4.60, p < .01$) ad groups, as might be expected.
The second set of hypotheses proposed that exposure to nostalgic ads (personal or historical) would generate more positive feelings and a more favorable attitude toward the ad and advertised brand than a non-nostalgic ad, with personal nostalgic ads producing the most favorable responses. Significant ANOVA test results supported these expectations for the three affective measures (positive affect, \( F_{[1, 248]} = 7.67, p < .01 \); attitude toward the ad, \( F_{[1, 248]} = 8.79, p < .01 \); and brand attitude, \( F_{[1, 248]} = 5.73, p < .01 \)). Follow-up tests indicated that the personal nostalgic ad generated significantly more positive affect (\( M = 4.22 \)) and favorable attitudes toward the ad (\( M = 4.35 \)) than either the historical nostalgic ad (\( M_{\text{PosAff}} = 3.85; M_{\text{Ad}} = 3.78 \)) or the non-nostalgic ad (\( M_{\text{PosAff}} = 3.49; M_{\text{Ad}} = 3.39 \)), providing support for \( H_2a \) and \( H_2b \). (See Table 1.)

Follow-up tests for \( H_3 \)—comparing the historical nostalgic ad to the non-nostalgic ad—supported the hypothesized superiority of the historical nostalgic ad on measures of positive affect (\( M = 3.85 \)) and brand attitudes (\( M = 3.74 \)). These means were significantly higher than those obtained for the non-nostalgic ad (\( M_{\text{PosAff}} = 3.49; M_{\text{Ad}} = 3.44 \)), providing support for \( H_3a \) and \( H_3c \). Regarding the measure of \( A_{\text{ab}} \), no statistically significant difference was observed between the historical (\( M = 3.78 \)) and non-nostalgic (\( M = 3.39 \)) ad groups, although the means were in the predicted direction. Therefore, \( H_3b \) was not supported.

Hypotheses 4 and 5

The third set of hypotheses predicted that (in comparison to historical and non-nostalgic ads) personal nostalgic ads would generate fewer brand-/message-related cognitive responses and less recall of message points. ANOVA tests confirmed these expectations for both measures, \( F(1, 248) = 3.10, p < .05 \), for brand/message thoughts, and \( F(1, 248) = 4.92, p < .01 \) for message recall. A follow-up examination of mean differences across groups indicated that significantly fewer brand-/message-related thoughts were generated in the personal nostalgic ad group (\( M = 4.01 \)) than in the non-nostalgic ad group (\( M = 3.44 \)), providing support for \( H_4a \). When the two nostalgic ad types were compared to one another, however, a nonsignificant difference in \( A_{\text{ab}} \) was obtained (\( t = 1.50, p > .05 \)), although the means were in the predicted direction (\( M_{\text{Personal}} = 4.01; M_{\text{Historical}} = 3.74 \)). Overall, as hypothesized, these findings indicate that both types of nostalgic ads generated more favorable \( A_{\text{b}} \) than the non-nostalgic ad. However, the difference in \( A_{\text{b}} \) between the two nostalgia ad types was not significantly different. Therefore, only partial support was obtained for \( H_2c \).

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Personal (P) (( n = 89 ))</th>
<th>Historical (H) (( n = 69 ))</th>
<th>Non-nostalgic (N) (( n = 91 ))</th>
<th>Findings*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothesized</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of self-directed thoughts</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>( P &gt; H, N; H = N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( A_b )</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>( P = H; P &gt; N; H &gt; N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( A_{\text{ab}} )</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>( P &gt; H, N; H = N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>( P &gt; H, N; H &gt; N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>( P = H; P &lt; N; H &lt; N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of brand/ message thoughts</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>( P = H; P &lt; N; H = N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ad execution thoughts</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>( P = H = N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valenced ad execution thoughts</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-.49</td>
<td>-.81</td>
<td>( P = H = N )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of thoughts</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>( P = H = N )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* > and < denote mean differences significant at \( p < .05 \) or better; = denotes nonsignificant mean differences.
Regarding H4b, significantly lower message recall was observed in the personal nostalgic ad group ($M = 1.73$) than in the non-nostalgic ad group ($M = 2.80$). However, similar to the pattern of findings reported for H4a (brand/message thoughts), the mean difference in message recall between the personal nostalgic ($M = 1.73$) and the historical nostalgic ($M = 1.88$) groups was not large enough to reach statistical significance ($t = .49, p > .05$), providing only partial support for H4b.

Follow-up tests for H5 supported the expectation that message recall would be lower in the historical ad condition ($M = 1.88$) than in the non-nostalgic ad condition ($M = 2.80$; $t = 2.78, p < .01$), in support of H5b. However, the mean difference for brand/message thoughts between the historical ($M = 1.45$) and the non-nostalgic ($M = 1.76$) ad groups was not large enough to reach statistical significance ($t = .97, p > .05$), thereby offering no support for H5a.

It should be noted that while the nostalgic and non-nostalgic ad manipulations generated significantly different levels of affect and cognition among our participants (as hypothesized), the ad treatments did not have a significant influence on other measures of consumer response. For example, significant differences across ad treatment groups were observed for the self-directed thoughts measure and brand-/message-related thoughts measure, but no differences were observed for the total number of thoughts generated, $F(1, 248) = .33, p > .05$. (See Table 1.) This finding suggests that the ad manipulations influenced the type of processing rather than the amount of processing in which our participants were engaged. Furthermore, participants generated no more or fewer thoughts about the ad’s executional features across the three ad treatment groups, $F(1, 248) = 1.95, p > .05$. The valence of these responses was also no more or less positive across groups, $F(1, 248) = 2.65, p > .05$, suggesting that our participants were not differentially influenced by the ads’ layout, images, or design, but rather were responding to the nostalgic cues embedded in the ads.

**Hypothesis 6**

The final set of hypotheses predicted that brand evaluations would be differentially influenced as a result of the information-processing strategies employed by individuals exposed to a nostalgic or non-nostalgic ad. For individuals exposed to the personal nostalgic ad, we expected three types of valenced thoughts (self-directed, general nostalgic, and ad execution–related thoughts) to contribute most significantly to brand attitude formation. For the historical nostalgic ad, we expected only general nostalgic and ad execution–related thoughts to be most influential. And for the non-nostalgic ad, we expected brand-/message-related as well as ad execution–related thoughts to predominate.

Separate regression analyses were conducted to investigate the relationships for each ad treatment condition. For each analysis, brand attitude was the dependent variable, and valenced indices for all four thought categories (self-directed, brand-/message-related, general nostalgic, and ad execution–related thoughts) were entered as the independent variables. The results of these analyses appear in Table 2.

As hypothesized (H6a), the brand attitudes of individuals exposed to the personal nostalgic ad were influenced by valenced self-directed ($\beta = .26$) and ad execution–related ($\beta = .30$) thoughts (both factors significant at $p < .01$). However, though not hypothesized, valenced brand-/message-related thoughts ($\beta = .38$) were also found to be significant, whereas the hypothesized general nostalgic thoughts ($\beta = .07$) were not.

For individuals exposed to the historical nostalgic ad, brand attitudes were significantly influenced by both general nostalgic thoughts ($\beta = .27$) and ad execution–related thoughts ($\beta = .50$)—in support of H6b. However, the brand attitudes for these individuals (similar to those of individuals in the personal nostalgia condition) were also shown to be influenced by the valenced brand-/message-related thoughts ($\beta = .25$) evoked at the time of ad exposure.

Consistent with H6c expectations, the brand attitudes of individuals exposed to the non-nostalgic ad were significantly influenced by only two types of valenced thoughts: brand-/message-related ($\beta = .33$) and ad execution–related thoughts ($\beta = .33$), generated at the time of ad exposure. As hypothesized, general nostalgic ($\beta = -.11$) and self-directed thoughts ($\beta = .17$) had no significant influence on shaping the brand attitudes of these individuals.

**DISCUSSION**

For nearly two decades, consumer researchers have sought to more fully understand the effects of nostalgia on consumers—recognizing its multifaceted and complex nature in a variety of settings. Yet it has generally been operationalized in empirical studies of advertising effects as a unidimensional construct. While progress has been made, no single theory seems to have emerged to explain why/how “nostalgia works”—especially in an advertising context. In the present study, insights were drawn from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including self-referencing, network theory, affect transfer, cognitive load, cognitive response theory, and cognitive-experiential self-theory. In doing so, an attempt was made to not only explain the effects of nostalgic vis-à-vis non-nostalgic advertising, but to lay the foundation for future research regarding how various types of nostalgia (e.g., personal and historical) may respond differently in the marketplace.

Baker and Kennedy aptly noted, "different levels of nostalgia may suggest that there are differences in the intensity of the
emotions and the vividness of the memories which are elicited” (1994, p. 173). The findings of the current study support this notion by more specifically identifying a significant factor contributing to these differences, that is, the extent to which a nostalgic ad may help stimulate self-directed thought. The elicitation of self-directed thoughts (especially in a personal nostalgic condition) appears to be a key factor in prompting favorably affective responses (positive feelings, more favorable A) among individuals. At the same time, our empirical evidence supports the notion that these self-directed thoughts may have contributed to a reduction in message-/brand-based information processing and recall.

One of the key contributions of the current study, however, is not in its comparison of a nostalgia ad form to a non-nostalgic one. Instead, this study is among the first to examine differences in consumer response as a function of the type of nostalgia (personal versus historical) elicited. The findings here suggest that personal nostalgia may be more effective than historical nostalgia in producing affectively charged responses (namely, self-directed thoughts, positive feelings, and favorable A_b) than historical nostalgia. When cognitive measures of response (brand/message-related cognitive responses and message recall) and A_b are considered, however, the more personalized and emotionally charged nature of personal nostalgic advertising appears to offer no distinct advantage over the historical nostalgic ad.

In combination, these results offer rather compelling evidence that the type of nostalgia employed in advertising does matter, especially as it pertains to relevant consumer response variables. The results of our regression analyses offer additional evidence in support of this notion. In the non-nostalgic condition, brand attitudes were shown to be influenced primarily by valenced brand-/message-related and ad execution thoughts. For the nostalgic ads, however, the influence of message- and ad-related thoughts on brand attitudes was augmented by either self-directed or general nostalgic thoughts—depending on the type of nostalgia evoked. For the personally nostalgic ad, for instance, the influence of self-directed thoughts on brand attitudes was more pronounced, whereas for the historical nostalgic ad, general nostalgic thoughts were found to be more influential in shaping brand attitudes. We contend that the additional influence of either self-directed or general nostalgic thoughts (both of which were positively charged) may have contributed to individuals’ more favorable brand attitudes in the two nostalgia ad conditions, as compared with individuals exposed to the non-nostalgic ad.

It is interesting to note that although we found evidence that the introduction of a nostalgic theme in advertising may serve as an information-processing distractor—especially in the case of personally nostalgic ads—our findings indicate that valenced brand/message-based thoughts nonetheless contributed to the formation of individuals’ brand attitudes. Despite the fact that participants in the nostalgia ad conditions expended mental effort in generating self-directed and nostalgia-related thoughts, the few thoughts that they did generate toward the advertised message were, nonetheless, instrumental in shaping brand attitudes. While our data do not provide us with a means of testing this notion empirically, we surmise that nostalgia-evoking ads (similar to ones used in the current study) may heighten consumers’ involvement and (consistent with Elaboration Likelihood Model predictions) may enhance the relative importance of message-based ad elements on attitudinal judgments (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) even when they are less prevalent.

This study should be of particular import to those who are using or are considering using nostalgic cues in their advertising efforts. As Davis (1979) noted, individuals tend to become particularly nostalgic during the stressful times in their lives—yearning for a simpler and more comfortable existence that they associate with the past. With the economic, social,
and environmental concerns consumers currently face, it is no surprise then that marketers have embraced the use of nostalgic themes in their advertising. Consider, for example, a Coleman commercial currently airing on network television that uses "home movie"–like nostalgic images of families engaged in traditional summer camping trips as a means to connect with viewers. No product claims are made in the commercial, but one is left with a warm feeling and a reminder of how Coleman products have been part of many family experiences for a long time.

The findings of our study offer support for the use of such a campaign (versus one that makes no reference to the past), but they also suggest that the brand attitudes resulting from exposure to the ad may be most favorable if the viewer has personally experienced the events depicted in the ad. For individuals who can relate to the events but only vicariously (i.e., they never camped as a child with their families, but can imagine what it might have been like), their attitudes toward the ad sponsor are not likely to be as favorable. Such a finding reinforces the notion that advertisers’ use of segmentation studies is critical in developing a target marketing strategy that has broad-based appeal (i.e., will reach as many potential customers as possible) while also attempting to personalize the message by focusing on people, places, and things with which the target market can personally connect.

Our findings also draw attention to the trade-off that advertisers must consider when creating nostalgia-based advertising campaigns. If advertisers expect to sway their target audiences by use of persuasive brand attribute–based message points, a non-nostalgic campaign may be the better option, given our finding that consumers are more likely to focus their thought processing on (and be able to more effectively recall) ad message points when no nostalgic references are made in an ad. On the other hand, if advertisers are relying more heavily on an affect-transfer mechanism to generate favorable brand attitudes (i.e., that positive feelings generated by exposure to the ad will result in favorable brand attitudes), a nostalgia-based campaign that relies on nostalgic images and references would appear to be a more effective approach, in that the nostalgia-themes ads employed in our study were generally superior to the non-nostalgic ad in generating more favorable affective responses.

Despite the concerns often raised about a self-referencing distractor effect, which suggests that the retrieval of vivid memories might act to hinder the processing of product-related thoughts (e.g., Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman, 1992; Meysers-Levy and Peracchio 1996), our findings indicate that although focus on a message may indeed be more limited in nostalgia ad conditions, this information-processing tendency does not appear to have a significantly detrimental effect on influencing brand attitudes. Such a finding suggests that advertising managers still need to concern themselves with message-based ad elements within a nostalgic advertising format, for these elements were found to also have an influence on brand perceptions/evaluations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although we believe the current research study extends the advertising discipline’s understanding of nostalgia’s influence on consumers, further empirical investigation is warranted. For example, additional research is needed to determine what role prior brand beliefs play in influencing advertising outcomes when nostalgic themes are employed. Though we used a fictitious brand, in keeping with the primary objectives of our study, it would be useful to see how consumers might react to a nostalgic ad for a brand/product in which they have had previous personal experiences. Furthermore, how and to what extent these personal experiences evoke a nostalgic response would be worth further consideration. For example, one would expect that an individual’s experience with a brand that is associated nostalgically with a time from the past (e.g., Butterball brand turkeys and Thanksgiving dinners at grandma’s house) might elicit a much different response than if the previous experiences with the brand are not directly linked to a nostalgic reflection from the past (e.g., “I’ve been wearing Nike shoes for the past 20 years, but don’t associate the Nike brand with any historical or personal event in my life”). Such an investigation would help determine to what extent nostalgia is separable from a person’s self–brand connection. And with respect to a brand’s persona, it is not clear to what extent a new brand on the market might successfully employ a nostalgia-based advertising campaign that attempts to integrate message points (e.g., product attributes) with a nostalgic theme. Nostalgia may “work” for Coleman, which has a long and deeply rooted past, but might it be potentially beneficial to a new market entrant for whom no nostalgic link has been previously established and/or for an innovative new product that just recently came into existence? The nostalgia literature would benefit by further investigating and delineating the characteristics of products/services that are more (or less) amenable to nostalgia-based advertising appeals.

Furthermore, our study did not employ a brand belief measure, so we are unable to determine whether the reduced attention to message points and lower product recall scores that we observed might have had a detrimental effect on our participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the product to deliver on its advertised benefits. Incorporating measures of brand attribute beliefs would help us to better understand the information-processing tendencies of consumers and the concomitant effects that brand beliefs may have on shaping brand attitudes within nostalgic advertising contexts.
Another area that should encourage additional research pertains to ad executional characteristics in nostalgia-themed ads. In this research, we employed verbal elements embedded in the ad copy to evoke a nostalgic response. Other research has shown that visual elements within an ad can significantly contribute to intensifying emotional responses from individuals (Chowdhury, Olsen, and Pracejus 2008) and can contribute to more favorable brand and ad attitudes (Mitchell 1986; Rossiter and Percy 1983). Future research might consider manipulating nostalgia through both visual and verbal cues. In doing so, we might consider their relative strengths: Is “visual only” more powerful than “verbal only,” or is there an additive (perhaps multiplicative) effect if both verbal and visual ad cues reinforce the nostalgia?

In the current study, print stimuli were used to test nostalgia’s influence. Still another area of investigation concerns the medium used to convey the advertisement, that is, does the nature of the medium used in the nostalgia-themed ad influence viewers’ responses? It may be that a television ad or interactive Internet-based communication may promote a stronger, more intense emotional response from the viewer than that generated from a print ad. If such is the case, it is not clear how more intense emotions may serve to further distract individuals from focusing on the advertised message points, or conversely, create a stronger bond between the individual and the advertised brand when nostalgia responses are evoked.

Likewise, future research might endeavor to see whether individual differences such as age or gender act to affect nostalgia’s influence in advertising. In this study, the average age of participants was in the mid-twenties. We may have found that nostalgia’s influence on brand and ad attitude might have been more pronounced had we sampled an older population, since nostalgia is argued to be particularly prominent as one passes through various life stages (Davis 1979). That we did obtain a nostalgia effect for relatively young people offers some support for the robustness of nostalgia’s influence on individuals.

Finally, for reasons of parsimony, our study incorporated only two types of nostalgia: personal and historical. Future nostalgia research would benefit by employing other forms of nostalgia that recognize not only its “experience” dimension (directly versus indirectly/vicariously experienced life events), but its personal versus collective/communal dimension as well (cf. Holak, Havlena, and Matveev 2006).

If, indeed, nostalgia is not only a psychological construct but a “transient mood state” impacted by external influences, it will become increasingly important for advertisers and marketers to more fully understand the factors that may enhance or inhibit its occurrence (Batcho 1995) to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. At a minimum, we hope the current study serves as a catalyst prompting additional research on this fascinating sociopsychological and behavioral-based marketing phenomenon.

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