

## **Nostalgia in Advertising: A content analysis**

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**Abstract:** *Prior research has found nostalgia to be a commonly utilized and highly effective advertising appeal, significantly altering important consumer responses including cognition, emotions, attitudes, and purchase intention. While content analysis focusing on nostalgia has been conducted previously, much of this research may not be an accurate representation of the current period in time or of countries other than where the research takes place. This manuscript is a preliminary investigation which intends to revise and extend the current knowledge of nostalgic dimensions in advertising, including information on nostalgic themes utilized and product categories using the appeal.*

**Keywords:** content analysis, nostalgia, advertising

### **BACKGROUND, UNDERPINNINGS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The use of nostalgia as an advertising tool has been shown to significantly influence a number of important consumer reactions including self-concept, brand loyalty, brand meaning, the human senses, consumption preferences, literary criticism, collective memory, emotions, and many more (Muehling and Sprott 2004). Nostalgic responses are also shown to affect any person, regardless of their age, gender, social class, ethnicity, or other social groupings (Sedikides, Wildschut and Baden 2004), although some individuals may be more prone to nostalgic impulses, depending on a number of variables (Holbrook 1993). This makes the appeal particularly attractive to marketers as a nostalgic advert containing the right cues can appeal to a large group of consumers.

The advertising literature commonly describes nostalgia as “a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favourable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)” (Holbrook and Schindler 1991, pp. 330). Although originally rooted in psychology, the concept has been developed through sociology and marketing into what has been identified as a highly effective and persuasive marketing and advertising tactic (Naughton and Vlasic 1998).

In terms of how nostalgia works, it is generally described as an emotional process (e.g. Holak and Havlena 1998; Stern 1992) rather than a cognitive memory process (Belk 1990), although it has been shown to influence the respondents thought type and order (e.g. Muehling and Spratt 2004). Thus, both theories on the cognitive and memory processes (i.e. thought processing and retrieval) (e.g. Tulving 1972, 1984) and emotions are important theoretical underpinnings for understanding the effects of nostalgia. As shown in Muehling and Spratt (2004), there is considerable support in the advertising literature for the relationship between ad-evoked emotional responses (feelings) and a consumer's formation of an attitude towards the brand and formation of an attitude towards the advertisements / expression of likeability to the advert itself (Aaker, Stayman, and Hagerty 1986; Batra and Ray 1986; Edell and Burke 1987; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1984; Machleit and Wilson 1988; Mitchell, 1986; Ray and Batra 1983; Stayman and Aaker 1988).

Nostalgic reactions may be caused by a number of elements, including music, photographs, movies, events (often 'special' or 'momentous'), settings, odors, advertisements, clothing, people's appearance, heritage, retailing, furniture, gifts, 'close others' (family members, friends, partners), political imagery, threatening stimulus, and as a deliberate response to an uncomfortable psychological state, to name a few (Allen, Atkinson, and Montgomery 1995; Areni, Kiecker and Palan, 1998; Goulding 2001; Greenberg, Koole and Pyszczynski 2004; Havlena and Holak 1991; Hirsch 1995; Holak and Havlena 1992; Howell 1991; Lowenthal 1981; Norman 1990; Schindler and Holbrook 1993; Tannock 1995; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt and Routledge 2006; Witkowski 1998). The marketplace commonly uses nostalgia in a number of ways. For example, 80's icons ALF and Mr-T appear in adverts as spokespeople (and spoke-alien) discount phone services and candy bars in the 2000's (Cosgrove and Prasso 2002). The use of celebrities is not only used as a cue for those that grew up in the period being represented. For example, Steve McQueen and Jimi

Hendrix are using in Mustang commercials aimed at a generation that may not have experienced these personalities directly (LaReau 2004). Thus it seems subsets of nostalgia, in this case Personal and Historical nostalgia (see Marchegiani and Phau 2010a, Stern 1992) are both used to appeal to consumers. Adverts from a previous period have even been linked to television programming with a number of adverts from the 70's for current brands shown during episodes of "That 70's Show" which ran from 1998 - 2006 (Elliott 2001). Super Bowl XLIV (2010) was indicated by Elliott (2010) as "the nostalgia bowl" with a range of brands bringing back commercial, past icons, themes, and music in an attempt to bring about nostalgic reactions to the young and old (Elliott 2010, Graff 2010).

It is evident that nostalgia is used regularly in advertising, but an accurate indication of just how much use is a more difficult question. While there seems to be concurrence that nostalgia's use as an advertising appeal is important, the true value of further research without further first obtaining empirical documentation of its actual frequency of use in current advertising may be inaccurate. Similarly, the categories of goods and services that consumers may be persuaded to purchase by eliciting a nostalgic reaction are discussed in prior research, although these findings may not be entirely pertinent in today's market or in various locations. An empirical study of the content analysis of television advertisements (1031 ads appearing on network TV in a two week period on American television in 1987) by Unger, McConocha and Faier (1991) identified six elements in advertising that have nostalgia-evoking qualities. 'Period-oriented symbols' (used 30% of the time) and 'Period-oriented music' (28%) are indicated as the most prevalent with the other elements being references to past family experiences, the olden days, old brands, and patriotic references. Knowledge of these elements is significant to marketers as if they choose to employ nostalgia in their campaign, as they must be aware of how it can be evoked and the extent of the

appeal's use in the market place, combined with product categories, can also reveal insights into the tendencies of the competition to use nostalgia.

While the Unger, McConocha, and Faier (1991) study is highly cited and conducted with rigor, it is possible that the findings are relevant only to the examined location and period in which it was performed. This is the first gap that the intended study hopes to fulfill by examining nostalgia in television advertising under a new geographic region (Australia) and a more recent time period (2010). The elements of nostalgic advertising will also be reviewed to examine if there are new or alternative elements of nostalgia being used in today's market. Also in addition to the study this work is based on, the content analysis data will include not only product categories and nostalgic elements, but information on perceived target market gender, brands, and time slots where the nostalgic elements are used to identify patterns in use. Some of this information can then be weighed against prior studies to provide a snapshot comparison between time periods and countries, although the data will be limited in the sense that any difference will at this stage not be able to be attributed to one of or the other. However, with future research this may be revealed. Finally, after the content analysis is complete a selection of adverts containing specific nostalgic elements may be taken and tests on attitude towards the advert and brand undertaken with consumers to assist in establishing which elements are perhaps more powerful in producing positive responses in consumers. This leads to a number of research questions for the intended study, some of which are drawn from Unger, McConocha, and Faier's (1991) study and some which are original to this study:

R1: How is nostalgia in advertising defined? Might there be taxonomy of different nostalgic appeals?

R2: How often do nostalgic advertisements actually appear on television? Which nostalgic elements occur most often in advertisements containing nostalgic cues?

R3: Are nostalgic appeals used more frequently for certain product categories, brands, time slots, or when aimed towards a particular gender?

R4: Which of the nostalgic elements result in more positive attitude towards the advert and attitude towards the brand?

## **METHOD, SAMPLE, AND MEASURES**

In order to catalogue the use of nostalgia and nostalgic elements content analysis is appropriate as it provides "...a scientific, quantitative, and generalizable description of communications content (Kassarjian 1997, p. 10). Content analysis is also indicated as an appropriate method to establish new patterns to assist in formulating new theories, and to identify patterns that support existing theories (Kolbe and Burnett 1991; Shabbir and Thwaites 2007). The method intended for use is modelled chiefly on the work by Unger, McConocha, and Faier (1991) who examine the use of nostalgia in television advertising in the USA. The first step in defining and measuring a concept is to specify its domain. Following Unger, McConocha, and Faier's (1991) method, for Phase One of the study 150 undergraduate students will be asked to provide written responses to the following open-ended question:

"Many advertisements that we see today are nostalgic or contain elements of nostalgia. Please describe any nostalgic ads you can think of and describe what in the ads makes them nostalgic".

The responses will be coded and tabulated to identify nostalgic elements. Nostalgic elements identified in previous studies include references to past family experiences, references to "olden days", period-orientated symbolism, period-orientated music, references to old brands, and patriotism (Unger, McConocha, and Faier 1991), however, new elements may be revealed. After coding an expert panel of ten judges will be asked to assess the

dimensions to see if they perceive the lists as complete. This includes addition of dimensions containing other elements that make advertisements nostalgic and removal of those which they believe do not belong. Adding or dropping dimensions will occur only when 50% of the panel agree and justify their position. As discussed, a change in elements is possible, and on face value one element that appears to be missing in previous studies is the nostalgic value of adverts that are simply 'brought back' from a previous period without change. For example, the 'I Love New York Broadway' adverts, which had not run for more than two decades, were brought back on a September 11 anniversary (O'Connell 2002). These adverts may not even contain nostalgic cues within the advert strategy, but are now being used as a nostalgia cue themselves as viewers think back to a time when they first saw the advertising. Of course, for this form of nostalgia to be successful viewers would have needed to be exposed to the advert the first time around and have sufficient memory to recognise the advert as being 'brought back', unless the period is clearly depicted in the advert.

After these dimensions are finalised the content analysis will begin as Phase Two of the research. Adverts selected for the analysis will be collected over two week period. Three hour time periods (09:00 – 12:00, 13:00 – 16:00, and 19:00 – 22:00) across the three highest rating networks in Australia (7, 9, 10) have been chosen to draw the sample from. The time periods chosen ensure a range of dayparts are selected and the three networks in the study are all free-to-air and in 2009 had a combined viewing audience of 77.1% of the free-to-air viewing market in Australia, and 79.1% on a 10-year average (2000-2009) thus providing a good representation of the market (Screen Australia 2010). Table 1 provides a proposed design of the procedure for a one day, one channel, and one time slot period, with only 8 adverts and only 6 nostalgic elements used as an example. A total of 126 of tables similar to this will be required for analysis (3 channels x 3 times = 9 tables per day x 14 days). All periods will be recorded to hard drives and played back for the purpose of reviewing each advertisement's

content. This will assist in ensuring the researchers are not rushed and accurate evaluations can be made on each commercial based on the evaluative criteria. Duplicate nostalgic adverts will remain in the sample as this will be an indication of media weight which accurately represents the frequency in which the audience is exposed to advertising containing the cue being examined, as per prior studies (e.g. Huhmann and Brotherton 1997; Unger, McConocha, and Faier 1991). A code sheet indicating product categories would be produced based on prior studies, and a list of rules produced establishing when the target audience should be indicated as being male, female, or either.

**Table 1 – proposed data collection procedure**

<b>Day</b>	1								
<b>Channel</b>	7	<b>Advert #</b>							
<b>Time</b>	09:00 – 12:00	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
See code sheet	Product category								
Name	Brand								
M=1 F=2 E=3	Gender								
Yes = 1 No = 2	<b>Nostalgic element present?</b>								
	Nostalgic element #1 (xxxx)								
	Nostalgic element #2 (xxxx)								
	Nostalgic element #3 (xxxx)								
	Nostalgic element #4 (xxxx)								
	Nostalgic element #5 (xxxx)								
	Nostalgic element #6 (xxxx)								

Two judges will separately assess each advert after extensive training is completed. Training will include comprehensive definitions of each category being recorded and examples of each nostalgic element being utilized in the marketplace. The judges will then record adverts containing nostalgic elements identified in Phase One of the study. Product category, targeted gender, brand, and time slot where the advert occurs will also be documented. Each advert may contain more than one nostalgic element in its execution, and



elements may appear in visual and / or verbal forms. A pre-test using a subset of the total sample will be performed as an initial test of consistency between the judges. Upon completion of the coding Interjudge reliability will be conducted by percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa, and chi-squared tests will examine nostalgic advert and element frequency among the groups.

In order to provide increase this study's contribution to practitioners, Phase Three will examine the attitude towards the advert (Aad) and brand (Ab) in an experiment requiring respondents to view a number of these adverts and respond to survey style questions. Aad and Ab are expected to be measured by semantic differential scales (7-point) made up of 4-items each. These instruments have a Cronbach's alpha equal to or greater than .90 in previous studies (Marchegiani and Phau 2010b, Muehling and Sprott 2004; Pascal, Sprott and Muehling 2002). The item statements for the 'Attitude Towards the Advert' and 'Attitude Towards the Brand' instruments follow respectively; Bad / Good, Unfavourable / Favourable, Negative / Positive, Unpleasant / Pleasant; [and] Bad / Good, Dislike very much / Like very much, Unfavourable / Favourable, Worthless / Valuable. However, as each advert may contain more than one element of nostalgia and the number of nostalgic adverts in the two week period is unknown, the procedure for this analysis will need to be examined after Phase Two of the study. It is expected that ANOVA will be used for this analysis.

## **EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

This study will provide an accurate snapshot of the television advertising in Australia in terms of the use of nostalgic appeals. Prior authors expressed the need for studies to be undertaken at future periods to establish the longevity of nostalgia as an advertising appeal as they expressed concern that proliferation of the technique could diminish its attention getting power (Balakrishnan 2004, Unger, McConocha, and Faier 1991). A high frequency of

nostalgic cues in television advertising will assist in supporting the need for continued research into the various aspects of nostalgic appeals in advertising. By examining the product categories that use nostalgia a portion of the 'rules of the game' when using this appeal can be established. Conclusions of why product categories indicated as heavier users of nostalgia can be drawn providing insight into current marketing techniques. Brand managers in these categories can then choose to embrace this appeal if the brands using the technique in the category are perceived as successful, or perhaps may be warned against nostalgic appeals if not. Previous studies have shown nostalgic appeals to be prominent in food, beverage, automotive, and medicine adverts, and whether this holds true in the period and market examined in this study will be revealed.

This research will also examine the target audience gender and time slots to establish if the market place is more prone towards and specific group of consumers or daypart. In addition, Phase Three of the study will take the understanding of specific nostalgic elements further by exploring attitudes towards the advert and brand when specific nostalgic elements are present. This is an important contribution for practitioners in deciding which of the expected many nostalgic elements to include in their advertising as the findings will provide an indication of the effectiveness of each element or combination of elements.

A number of limitations and future direction are expected to be identified in the study. First, like content analysis studies before it, this research will provide a snapshot of the current situation which may be limited to location and time period. This suggested as nostalgia has been shown to experience 'resurgences' throughout history and as a result of world or local events, often when or where negative sentiments are being experienced as nostalgia assists in coping with negative feelings by allowing consumers to momentarily resort to an idealised past (Stern 1992; Greenberg, Koole, and Pyszczynski 2004). Longitudinal studies would provide a more accurate representation of nostalgia use in the

marketplace. Additionally, nostalgia's use in media other than television, and in a variety of cultures, should be examined.

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