

Nostalgic consumption: The hierarchical process of psychology, experience, and behavior

Daniel Nilsen & Ji Hye Kang
The University of Rhode Island

Introduction: Nostalgia has a significant impact on consumer behavior and marketing strategies. It is generally seen as a preference for past experiences (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003) or a longing for the past (Veresiu *et al.*, 2018). Previous research has viewed nostalgic consumption as linked to an individual's past and an emotional response. However, recent studies suggest that nostalgia, as a mood, is translated into nostalgic modes, reflecting how an individual experiences nostalgia with their current personal needs and desires (May, 2017). This highlights the need for further research to understand the nostalgic consumption process better.

The mainstream media has reported on the growing market for collectible items reminiscent of individuals' youth (e.g., Rusak, 2021), particularly among Millennial males interested in "boy toys" from the 1980s and 1990s (Silverman, 2021). However, surprisingly, nostalgic consumer behavior within the category of toys has received little attention in previous research.

To address this gap in the literature, the present research developed a model examining the nostalgic consumption process under psychologic, experiential, and behavioral states, focusing on male Millennials and nostalgic toys (Figure 1). The study adopted the Cognitive Hierarchy Model as a theoretical framework, which suggests theoretical flows from abstract cognitions (e.g., psychologic mood) to mid-range, domain-specific cognition (e.g., nostalgic mode) to specific behaviors (Homer & Kahle, 1988).

Hypothesis development: The psychological state is based on Terra Management Theory, which suggests that humans develop coping mechanisms to mitigate fundamental fear, including death anxiety (Routledge, 2015). Nostalgia creates a barrier between negative thoughts (Routledge, 2015) and the need to belong (NTB) among individuals as a method of defense against death anxiety (e.g., Routledge *et al.*, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2011). So, we hypothesize that death anxiety (DA) will increase both nostalgia proneness (NP) (H1a) and the need to belong (NTB) (H1b).

Next, we examine how these coping strategies (i.e., NP and NTB) influence the experience of nostalgia. Nostalgia can be positively or negatively charged, depending on an individual's emotional response (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). Hence, the nostalgic proneness (mood) could lead to a negative experience with the present object, focused on the past with a negative perspective of the present (Hartmann *et al.*, 2019). The positively charged nostalgic mode can be seen as progressive or playful nostalgia, as it is either applied to the present or utilized in ironic ways (Hartmann *et al.*, 2019). We propose that NP will increase both reluctant nostalgia (RN) (H2a) and playful nostalgia (PN) (H2b).

While prior research has not explored the direct relationship between NTB and nostalgic modes, we infer that there may be a correlation based on Loveland *et al.*'s (2010) study, finding

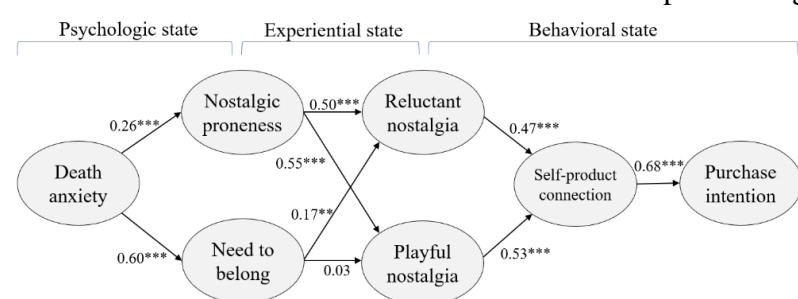
that participants who experienced NTB sought comfort in nostalgic food items such as candy. Thus, we propose that NTB increases RN (H3a) and PN (H3b).

Nostalgia can provide meaning to products, leading individuals to use products and brands to derive self-meaning (Shrum *et al.*, 2013). In addition, nostalgic modes alter how people perceive items and increase connections with the products (Zhou, 2019). As such, we propose that both RN (H4) and PN (H5) will increase self-product connections (SPC).

Finally, prior research has shown that the stronger a consumer's connection with a product, the higher their purchase intention (e.g., Zhu, 2019). Jensen's study (2020) supports this relationship by evidencing in Gen Y participants that as nostalgia for a brand increases, the brand's trust increases, leading to a higher purchase intention based on the feeling of comfort nostalgia provides (Jensen, 2020). Therefore, we propose that SPC will increase purchase intentions of the nostalgic products (PI) (H6).

Methods: 400 survey data were collected through Qualtrics in Fall 2022, targeting males born between 1982 and 1995. Based on the literature reviews, we used 61 items using a 5-point Likert scale with seven constructs presented in the research model (e.g., "The idea of death troubles me." is for DA and "How often do you experience nostalgia?" for NP.). In addition, three questions regarding gender, age, and familiarity with nostalgic retro games and toys were asked initially to filter participants relevant to this research. Before the survey, the clarity of the questions and relevance of visual stimulus for nostalgic toys items were confirmed through two pretests, a survey with small sample size and a focus group interview with males Millennials.

Results and discussions: We followed the two-step modeling, measurement model test, and structural model test,



$\chi^2 = 717.83$, $df = 341$, p -value = .00; RMSEA = .05; 90% CI for RMSEA = .05 - .06; CFI = .95; SRMR = .07

* p -value < .05 ; ** p -value < .01; *** p -value < .001

Figure 1. The result of the structural model test

recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) using Lisrel 9.30. Through the first measurement model test, 26 items were removed to confirm each construct's acceptable level of composite reliability (CR) and convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Cronbach's alpha for the constructs ranged from .76 to .92, placing it at an acceptable level.

Except for the H3b, all hypotheses in psychologic, experiential, and behavioral states are significant at $p < .001$. The effect of DA on NP and NTB is positive, but the effect is much more substantial on NTB ($\gamma_{31} = .60$ for NTB). The effect of NP on RN and PN was more substantial than one of NTB on two nostalgic modes ($\beta_{42} = .50$ and $\beta_{52} = .55$ for NP; $\beta_{43} = .17$ for NTB). In the behavioral state, two nostalgic modes were found to have significant positive impacts on the

SPC ($\beta_{64} = .47$ for RN and $\beta_{65} = .53$ for PN). Finally, the effect of SPC on PI was found to be the strongest among all relationships in the research model ($\beta_{76} = .68$)

Discussions and implications: This research offers a new and comprehensive perspective on nostalgic consumer behavior, with significant implications for understanding why consumers behave the way they do concerning nostalgic products. The research revealed the path from NP, two nostalgic modes, SPC, to PI provides robust explanations on the nostalgic consumption of nostalgic products. Hence either RN- or PN-evoking marketing would contribute to sales of nostalgic toy products targeting male Millennials with high nostalgic proneness. However, death anxiety had more substantial impacts on NTB that did not strongly influence the two nostalgic modes. Hence, future research may need to investigate other antecedents of nostalgic proneness for a better understanding of the comprehensive process. Also, we must be careful in generalizing the findings as the research focuses on a specific population and product.

References:

- Anderson, J.C., & Gerbing, D.W. (1988). Structural equation modeling in practice: A review and recommended two-step approach. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 103 No. 3, pp. 411-423.
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D.F. (1981), Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002224378101800104>
- Hartmann, B. J., & Brunk, K. H. (2019). Nostalgia marketing and (re-)chantment. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 36(4), 669-686.
- Holbrook, M. B., & Schindler, R. M. (2003). Nostalgic bonding: Exploring the role of nostalgia in the consumption experience. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour: An International Research Review*, 3(2), 107-127.
- Homer, P. M., & Kahle, L. R. (1988). A structural equation test of the value-attitude-behavior hierarchy. *Journal of Personality and social Psychology*, 54(4), 638.
- Jones, B. L., Parker-Raley, J., & Barczyk, A. (2011). Adolescent Cancer Survivors: Identity Paradox and the Need to Belong. *Qualitative Health Research*, 21(8), 1033–1040. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732311404029>
- Loveland, K. E., Smeesters, D., & Mandel, N. (2010). Still preoccupied with 1995: The need to belong and preference for nostalgic products. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(3), 393–408. <https://doi.org/10.1086/653043>
- May, V. (2017). Belonging from afar: Nostalgia, time and memory. *The Psychological Review*, 65(2), 401-415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12402>
- Pickering, M., & Keightley, E. (2006). The modalities of nostalgia. *Current sociology*, 54(6), 919-941.
- Routledge, C., Arndt, J., Sedikides, C., & Wildschut, T. (2008). A blast from the past: The terror management function of nostalgia. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44(1), 132–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.11.001>

- Rusak, R. (2021, November 2). *Embrace your inner child with this nostalgic '90s Play-Doh set*. Nerdist. Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <https://nerdist.com/article/90s-nostalgia-grown-up-play-doh-set/>
- Silverman, A. (2021, April 5). *Millennials, not Gen Zers, are driving the recent physical and digital collectibles boom*. Morning Consult. Retrieved March 21st, 2023 from <https://morningconsult.com/2021/04/05/millennials-nfts-collectibles/>
- Shrum, L., Wong, N., Arif, F., Chugani, S. K., Gunz, A., Lowrey, T. M., Nairn, A., Pandelaere, M., Ross, S. M., Ruvio, A., Scott, K., & Sundie, J. (2013). Reconceptualizing materialism as identity goal pursuits: Functions, processes, and consequences. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(8), 1179–1185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2012.08.010>
- Veresiu, E., Babic-Rosario, A., & Robinson, T. (2018). Nostalgicising: A Performative Theory of Nostalgic Consumption. *NA-Advances in Consumer Research*, 46, 823-824.
- Zhu, X., Teng, L., Foti, L., & Yuan, Y. (2019). Using self-congruence theory to explain the interaction effects of brand type and celebrity type on consumer attitude formation. *Journal of Business Research*, 103, 301-309.