

Nostalgia, Technology and the Lonely Consumer: Literature Review and Propositions

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Resumo

Despite the popularity of social networks and technologies that foster social interaction, the excessive use of technology is increasing the number of consumers who feel lonely. Lonely consumers may be likely to show unique consumption patterns, as compared to consumers who do not feel lonely. A high level of loneliness is highly distressing and elicit several compensatory mechanisms to restore social connectedness, such as seeking social support. An alternative strategy for coping with loneliness is to augment subjective perceptions of social support by drawing on nostalgic memories. In this sense, the lonely consumer tends to show preferences for nostalgic products because nostalgia has a restorative function in response to loneliness by fostering social connectedness. This theoretical paper explores the relationship between technology and the demand for nostalgic products and services, and presents a comprehensive literature review on nostalgia, technology and loneliness. We provide propositions to be tested in future studies, that have implications for theory and practice.



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Abstract

Despite the popularity of social networks and technologies that foster social interaction, the excessive use of technology is increasing the number of consumers who feel lonely. Lonely consumers may be likely to show unique consumption patterns, as compared to consumers who do not feel lonely. A high level of loneliness is highly distressing and elicit several compensatory mechanisms to restore social connectedness, such as seeking social support. An alternative strategy for coping with loneliness is to augment subjective perceptions of social support by drawing on nostalgic memories. In this sense, the lonely consumer tends to show preferences for nostalgic products because nostalgia has a restorative function in response to loneliness by fostering social connectedness. This theoretical paper explores the relationship between technology and the demand for nostalgic products and services, and presents a comprehensive literature review on nostalgia, technology and loneliness. We provide propositions to be tested in future studies, that have implications for theory and practice.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Consumer Behavior, Loneliness, Social Connectedness, Technology.

Introduction

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. ... Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? ... And suddenly the memory revealed itself (Marcel Proust, 1913).

In one of the most classic scenes of contemporary literature, the French writer Marcel Proust depicts the moment when the simple act of tasting a French pastry triggered a nostalgic memory described as an “extraordinary thing”, and an “exquisite pleasure”, in contrast with the “disasters innocuous” of his life. Nostalgia, a sentimental longing for one’s past (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018), is a complex yet pervasive aspect of the human condition (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003), rooted in human nature (Boym, 2008). It is a self-conscious, bittersweet but predominantly positive and profoundly social emotion, prevalent, universal, and experienced across ages. As a social emotion, nostalgia is often evoked during social encounters or conversations with close others (Sedikides et al., 2015).

A variety of additional sources qualify as triggers of the nostalgic feeling (Sedikides et al., 2015). Examples of internal triggers are discomfoting states, such as negative emotions – sadness, depression, boredom, and loneliness (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008), discontinuities in the life cycle (Davis, 1979; Stern, 1992), and stressful moments – middle-aged crises, retirement, loss of a loved one, divorce (Davis, 1979). Those moments of discontent may have the effect of increasing the nostalgic feeling, since the search for nostalgic memories is a source to neutralize

negative feelings (Wildschut et al., 2006). Thus, nostalgia can be considered a benign mechanism (Wildschut et al., 2006), which increases the individual's psychological well-being (Routledge et al., 2011), as well as protects and promotes their mental health (Zhou et al., 2008).

In the last decades, nostalgia has attracted considerable attention from writers, journalists, consumers and marketing researchers (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003), and widely used in marketing tactics (Barauskaitė & Gineikienė, 2017). The nostalgic retro trend has become an international phenomenon, affecting the entire marketing mix (Kessous, Roux, & Chandon, 2015). As a consequence, the use of nostalgia in products and advertising can influence the consumer, resulting in a more favorable attitude toward the product and ad, purchase intentions (Bambauer-Sachse & Gierl, 2009; Ju et al., 2016) and a propensity to pay more for the products and services capable of reliving pleasant memories of a past time (such as adolescence and childhood) or even of a period not experienced personally (Lasaleta, Sedikides, & Vohs, 2014).

The nostalgic marketing (Ju et al., 2016) may to some extent be a reaction against the stresses of modern life. The more consumers' lives become defined by technology, the stronger will be their desire to refer to slower, cozier times (Euromonitor, 2012; Turkle, 2017). This statement is particularly true to the Millennials generation, whose use of modern technology is what distinguishes them from other generations (Ordun, 2015). "Tethered selves, they try to conjure a future different from the one they see coming by building on a past they never knew. In it, they have time alone, with nature, with each other, and with their families" (Turtle, 2017, p. 265).

Marketers have studied how antecedents of nostalgia can lead to greater preference for nostalgic products and services (Loveland, Smeesters, & Mandel, 2010; Ju et al., 2016; Kim, 2017). "As marketers increase their understanding of the complexities that trigger nostalgia, they will be better able to create products that appeal on an emotional level" (Kopf & Wolf, 2007, p. 838). However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has studied the excessive usage of technology as an antecedent of nostalgia. We assume that the excessive usage of technology can be an antecedent of nostalgic feeling, since the continuous use of technological equipment may lead to an increase in the level of loneliness (Moody, 2001; Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009), an important trigger of nostalgia (Wildschut et al., 2006), and we developed two overall propositions.

First, we propose that the excessive use of technology may lead to negative effects on psychological well-being, such as loneliness (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009), defined as a painful feeling of being isolated (Weiss, 1973; Russell et al., 1980; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Masi et al., 2011). When social technologies are used to escape the social world and withdraw from the "social pain" of interaction, feelings of loneliness are increased (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2018). Second, we propose that an individual who feels lonely may be likely to show different consumption patterns (e.g., preference for nostalgic products or services), as compared to non-lonely people, in the process of regulating the emotional pain (Kim et al., 2017). Lonely individuals seek refuge in nostalgic experiences (Wildschut et al., 2011; Sedikides et al., 2015), because they often involve interactions between the self and close others, regulating deficiencies in social connectedness caused by loneliness (Wildschut et al., 2006).

Our study provides insights to investigate the relationship between the excessive use of technology and the preference for nostalgic products and services, and to explain the underlying mechanisms within such relationship, through the mediation effect (loneliness). Technology is entrenched in our everyday life, and its ongoing use also links to heightened psychological distress (Chesley, 2005). Several researches have been made about technology and its “dark side” (Chesley, 2005; Thomée, Harenstam, & Hagberg 2011; Lee et al., 2016), and the use of nostalgia may help to reduce some of the negative effects of the overuse of technology.

Theoretical Development

A Brief History of Nostalgia

The word “Nostalgia” is based on two Greek roots: “nostos”, meaning to “return to one’s native land,” and “algos”, meaning “pain, suffering, or grief” (Holak & Havlena, 1992; Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). Although the term was not coined until the late seventeenth century, references to its meaning can be traced back as far as the writings of Shakespeare, Caesar, Hippocrates, and Homer (Wildschut et al., 2006). According to Holbrook & Schindler (1991, p.330), “the sense of nostalgia has always inextricably infused the consciousness of the basic human condition”.

Johannes Hofer, the Swiss physician who first used the term in 1688, referred to nostalgia as a psychiatric disorder, “a cerebral disease of essentially demonic cause” (Hofer, 1934/1688, p.387). Its symptoms included respiratory disturbances, irregular heartbeat, insomnia, circulatory disturbances, and high blood pressure (McCann, 1941). The view of nostalgia as a medical or neurological disease persisted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Sedikides et al., 2015). By the beginning of the twentieth century, nostalgia came to be considered a psychosomatic disorder, a condition similar to melancholia or depression (McCann, 1941), with symptoms of sadness, anxiety, and anorexia (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016).

It was only in the mid-twentieth century that nostalgia began to take on its current meaning, which includes more positive than negative feelings (Holbrook & Schindler, 2006; Loveland, Smeesters, & Mandel, 2010) of an idealized past (Stern, 1992). The sociologist Fred Davis (1979) was one of the first researchers to consider nostalgia as a positive evocation of the past, involving negative feelings about the present and the future, manifested by the belief that life was better in the old days. This misunderstanding was due to an inferential error. “Scholars drew an inference from the temporal coincidence of nostalgia and misfortune, concluding that nostalgia causes psychological problems. Instead, they should have concluded that misfortune triggers the onset of nostalgia as a coping mechanism” (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016, p.319).

Today, nostalgia is defined as a sentimental longing for one’s past, a self-relevant albeit deeply social emotion. A bittersweet but predominantly positive emotion (Sedikides et al., 2015).

It arises from personally meaningful recollections of momentous (i.e., atypical) life events (e.g., graduations, anniversaries, vacations) that center on close relationships (e.g., family, friends, partners) or childhood. In nostalgic reverie, the mind is ‘peopled’ as one reestablishes symbolic connections with important others. One views the past fondly through rose-colored glasses, misses it, and may yearn to return to it; one feels tender and content, yet tinged with longing (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016, p.319).

The integration between nostalgia and consumer research took place in the last decades of the twentieth century (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989).

A Retromarketing Revolution

In the late twentieth century, there was substantial discussion concerning the emotional aspects of products, and the fantasies they were able to fulfill (Fontenelle, 2017). The seeking of emotional arousal was posited to be a major motivation for the consumption of certain product classes (Holbrook, 1980). At this point, nostalgia began to be used as a marketing tool (see Holbrook & Schindler, 1989). According to Havlena and Holak (1991, p.323), “one notable trend as we leave the 1980’s and enter the decade of the 90’s is the increasing visibility of nostalgia in marketing, advertising, and entertainment media”. At that time, “despite the popularity of nostalgic products and messages, little research has studied nostalgia within the context of consumer behavior”. Today, nostalgia is widely used in marketing tactics (Barauskaitė & Gineikienė, 2017) and has caught the attention of researchers in a variety of fields, including psychology, anthropology, history and marketing (Kopf & Wolf, 2007). The nostalgia movement may to some extent be a reaction against the stresses of modern life. The more consumers’ lives become defined by technology, the stronger will be their desire to refer to slower, cozier times (Euromonitor, 2012; Turkle, 2017).

In the field of consumer behavior, this paper adopts the conceptualization of nostalgia with emphasis on the role of consumption experiences, proposed by Holbrook and Schindler (2003, p.108), as “a preference (general liking, positive attitude or favourable effect) towards experiences associated with 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)”. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003, p.133) called the use of nostalgia in marketing a “retromarketing revolution”, “a big hit with twenty-first century consumers” (p.134), a “search for authenticity in an inauthentic world” (p.140).

In 2012, a study by Euromonitor International confirmed that most consumers have a positive view of the past and are willing to buy products that can help them to recreate such feelings (Euromonitor, 2012). In 2016, the same research group stated that interest in the nostalgia theme continues to guide the aspirations and buying choices of many consumers (Kasriel-Alexander, 2016). The perception of a brand as nostalgic highlights the tendency that consumers have to “materialize their memories”, and to transform the intangible (memory) into tangible (product or service) (Kessous & Roux, 2008). A research made by Wildschut et al. (2006) reported that approximately 80% of the participants felt nostalgic at least once a week, and almost half of the sample (42%) reported feeling nostalgic at least three or four times weekly. These results show that it is not difficult to instigate the feeling of nostalgia in most consumers.

In Brazil, retromarketing has become popular among consumers and influenced many product launch decisions (Portugal, 2013). In 2019, the singers Sandy & Junior, successful among children and teenagers in the 90s and 2000s, announced the tour *Nossa História* [Our Story] to celebrate 30 years of career, with shows in 11 Brazilian capitals. The tour takes place 12 years after their last official show as a duo and will be composed only of their hit songs (Nogueira,

2019a). The announcement of the return of Sandy & Junior has increased the sales of their CDs and DVDs (Gois, 2019), and fans are spending up to R\$ 4,000.00 to attend all the tour's shows (Boll, 2019). The reaction of the public was so successful that the tour has gained new dates after having sold out in no time (Nogueira, 2019b).

The re-edition of popular toys already accounts for a significant portion of the sales of some brands, in a market that generated R\$ 6.3 billion in 2017, according to the *Associação Brasileira de Fabricantes de Brinquedos* [Brazilian Association of Toy Manufacturers]. Toy maker *Estrela*, for example, has between 15% and 20% of its revenue from old toys. Faced with the success of retromarketing, *Estrela* has adopted a strategy of relaunching a classic toy or game every year. In 2017, the company brought back the legendary toy Falcon. At the launch, the action figure sold out at stores such as Ri Happy and Toy Boy (Souza, 2018).

One of the advantages of brand relaunches is that the investment for the manufacture of the products has already been done, reducing costs (Euromonitor, 2012). Furthermore, although they require adaptations, their marketing strategies have already been tested in the market (Souza, 2018). Moreover, one of the greatest attractions of retromarketing is the encouragement that older generations voluntarily bring to the younger generation. Parents, uncles and older siblings who have had good experiences in the past influence children, nephews, and younger siblings, increasing the potential audience (Kessous & Roux, 2010; Rosa, 2018). Although it seems counter-intuitive, retromarketing is stimulated by new digital technologies. Sites such as YouTube allow new generations to have more contact with the culture of the past than previous generations. Before, those who liked and old band, for example, had a hard time finding and listening to recordings (Rosa, 2018).

In the games and puzzles segment, other classics that are again successful are the games *Perfil* and *War*, as well as *Can Can* (cards) and *Quest* (Q&A), all in *Grow Jogos e Brinquedos'* repertoire since the 1970s. Together, retro games and jigsaw puzzles account for 38% of the company's revenue, which has grown over since 2016. This high number shows that traditional toys constitute a means of encouraging coexistence among people, while the internet usage makes interaction more difficult. A survey of Euromonitor consumption trends made in 2016 showed increasing dissatisfaction with the isolation and over-information of the virtual world (Souza, 2018).

In March 2018, the Brazilian beer Brahma relaunched the bottle labels corresponding to the years in which Brazil was the World Cup champion. The release was accompanied by an advertising for television with the same jingle that became popular in the conquest of the 1994 title. Pedro Adamy, Marketing Director of Brahma, declared that "the labels carried the memory of the moment when the Brazilian had felt they were number one. We wanted to re-awaken this feeling in the fans" (Beer Art, 2018). The more positive the emotions that are evoked by a nostalgic ad, the more positive is consumers' attitude toward the ad (Bambauer-Sachse & Gierl, 2009).

But why is nostalgia a successful marketing strategy? First, we must ask what causes nostalgia.

What Causes Nostalgia?

Remembering the past is a fundamental process of the human being, which separates us from other animals (Neisser, 1988). The nostalgic feeling may be triggered by internal states (Sedikides et al., 2015), motivated by moments of discontent with the current situation (Davis, 1979).

Negative emotions such as sadness, depression, boredom, loneliness (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008), and feelings of threat (Routledge et al., 2011) are antecedents of nostalgia, since the search for nostalgic memories is a means of neutralizing negative emotions. Likewise, lonely people, with less propensity to social support, are more inclined to nostalgic feeling (Wildschut et al., 2006). “Nostalgia serves to counter discomforting states and restore psychological equilibrium” (Sedikides et al., 2015, p. 207).

Technology and Loneliness

The consequences of technology usage (Internet, smartphone and/or social media usage) can be an antecedent of nostalgic feeling, since the continuous use of a technological equipment may lead to an increase in the level of psychological distress (Chesley, 2005). Kim, LaRose & Peng (2009) have shown that uncontrolled or compulsive Internet use has been known to have negative effects on psychological well-being, such as depression and loneliness. The Internet operates as a more attractive, but ultimately leaner and less satisfying medium for human interaction, thereby leading users to feel an increased sense of loneliness (Song et al, 2014), defined as a painful feeling of being isolated (Weiss, 1973; Russell et al., 1980; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Masi et al., 2011).

When social technologies are used to escape the social world and withdraw from the “social pain” of interaction, feelings of loneliness are increased. Therefore, excessive social Internet use increases loneliness and may be responsible for contributing to the rise in loneliness in modern society (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2018). The feeling of loneliness also might be a consequence of using a mobile phone excessively, instead of having face-to-face communications (Tan, Pamuk, & Dönder, 2013).

Song et al. (2014) have shown that higher usage of Facebook has been found to be associated with greater loneliness. In contrast, Hunt et al. (2018) have shown that experimentally limiting social media usage on a mobile phone to 10 minutes per platform per day for a full three weeks had a significant impact on well-being. Both loneliness and depressive symptoms declined in the experimental group. In summary, we expect that the excessive use of technology (such as Internet, smartphone and/or social media usage) provokes feelings of loneliness. More formally:

P1: The excessive use of technology positively affects loneliness.

Loneliness and Nostalgia

The need to belong is inherent to the human being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). “Loneliness, or subjective social isolation, is a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (the quality of) certain social relationships” (de Jong-Gierveld, 1987, p.120). A high level of loneliness is highly distressing and elicit several compensatory

mechanisms to restore social connectedness (Williams, Forgas, & Von Hippel, 2013), such as seeking for social support (Asher & Paquette, 2003). However, the request for support from social networks may be hampered by factors of individual (shyness, poor social skills) and situational (relocation, immigration) origin. “An alternative strategy for coping with loneliness is to augment subjective perceptions of social support by drawing on nostalgic memories” (Zhou et al., 2008, p.1023).

Nostalgia is a powerful mechanism for cooperation in situations of social threat. The past, when properly utilized, can strengthen psychological resistance to the vicissitudes of life. Nostalgic memories may function primarily as a way of dealing with loneliness because they increase subjective perceptions of social connection (Zhou et al., 2008). Qualitative descriptions of nostalgic experiences indicate that such experiences involve interactions with close people, such as friends, family, and partners (Holak & Havlena, 1992). Thus, nostalgic memory reinforces the idea of social bonds, neutralizing negative feelings, and increasing the sense of security and the perceived capacity of people to form, maintain and develop interpersonal relationships (Wildschut et al., 2006).

According to Zhou et al. (2008), loneliness affects the perception of social connection in two different ways: i) first, loneliness reduces the perception of social bonds, but it increases nostalgic feeling; ii) then nostalgia increases the perception of social connectedness. In other words, while the direct effect of loneliness is to reduce the perception of belonging, its indirect effect is to increase that perception through nostalgia. Lonely people, even though they have a low perception of belonging, are more inclined to nostalgic engagement. Such engagement, in turn, increases the perception of social connection (Zhou et al., 2008). “Nostalgia is a prevalent and fundamental human experience, that serves several key psychological functions” (Wildschut et al., 2006, p. 990). Thus:

P2: Loneliness positively affects levels of nostalgia.

P3: Technology positively affects users’ nostalgia, and this relationship is mediated by loneliness.

The Lonely Consumer

Despite the popularity of social networks and technologies that foster social interaction, more consumers feel lonely now than before. However, marketers have paid almost no attention to the impact of loneliness on consumer behavior (Wang, Zhu, & Shiv, 2011). Relational deficiencies (such as loneliness) can lead to compensatory consumptions. In other words, negative emotions often determine the consumption behavior. Therefore, “consumers who feel lonely may be likely to show different consumption patterns, as compared to non-lonely consumers, in the process of regulating the emotional pain” (Kim, 2017, p.19). When the individual perceives this consumption pattern as an effective regulatory strategy, this affect regulation mechanism is enhanced (Andrade & Cohen 2007).

Since nostalgia may trigger positive memories from the past, consumers encountering distressing events or feelings (e.g. social exclusion, loneliness) may express preferences for nostalgic

products (Batcho, 1995; Holbrook and Schindler 2003; Zhou et al. 2008). By consuming nostalgic products, these consumers may be able to recover a sense of belonging and thus successfully cope with distressing events (Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010). It seems plausible that a consumer who feels lonely may show preferences for nostalgic products because nostalgia has a restorative function in response to loneliness by fostering social connectedness (Wildschut et al., 2006; Routledge et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2011). Thus:

P4: Nostalgia positively affects lonely consumers’ preference for nostalgic products and services.

The conceptual relationships that compose the proposed framework of nostalgia is graphically represented in Figure 1.

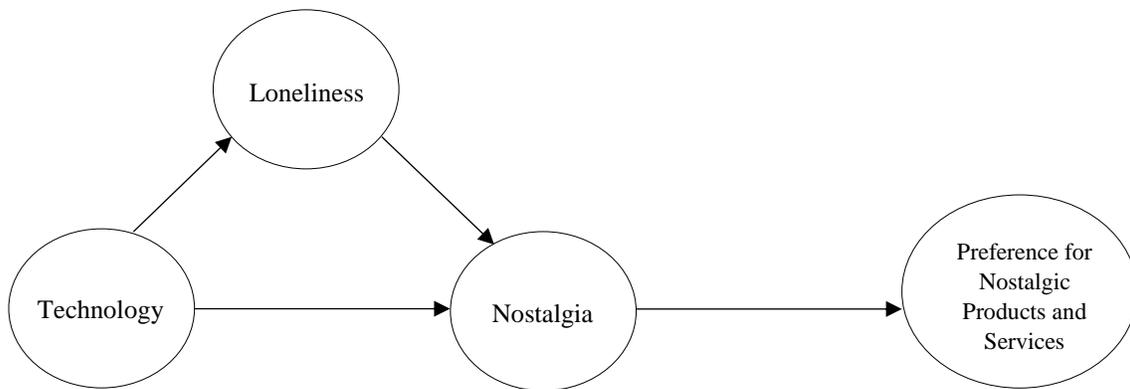


Figure 1. Nostalgia framework

Final Remarks

Based on the literature on nostalgia (including its antecedents and outcomes), this theoretical paper presumes that, in instigating emotional loneliness, excessive technology usage arouses in consumers nostalgic feelings (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2009). To nullify these negative effects caused by the current technological context, nostalgia contributes to the strengthening of social connectedness as a mechanism to relive memories of past group events, when someone felt a sense of belongingness and acceptance (Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). In this sense, in order to recover such experiences, the lonely consumer tends to show preferences for nostalgic products because nostalgia has a restorative function in response to loneliness by fostering social connectedness (Wildschut et al. 2006; Routledge et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2011). Our propositions attempt to provide a starting point for future inquiry and to instigate researchers to study the relation between excessive technology usage and nostalgia in a consumption context.

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