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Nostalgic Emotional Appeals for Smoking Prevention
Syed A. Hussain & Maria K. Lapinski

Nostalgia-evoking messages are used to promote consumer products, but their use for encouraging healthy behaviors is not well understood. This study examines the use of nostalgia as an emotional appeal to influence attitudes and reduce smoking behavior. The study hypothesized that exposure to a nostalgic public service announcement (PSA) will result in (a) more negative attitude toward smoking; and (b) increased intention to limit smoking, relative to a control. Participants exposed to the nostalgia-evoking PSA expressed more negative attitudes toward smoking and stronger intentions to limit smoking than did participants exposed to nonnostalgic messages. The findings suggest nostalgic appeals as a promising strategy for smoking prevention messages.

Keywords: Attitude; Emotion; Health Communication; Nostalgia; Smoking

Tobacco remains one of the leading causes of over 10 different cancer types and the leading cause of premature death and other illness; the economic impact of tobacco-related illnesses exceeds $193 billion annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2008). Evidence is accumulating that strategically designed communication efforts can play a role in reducing smoking uptake and prevalence; many government and not-for-profit organizations have initiated communication campaigns and research efforts studying public service announcements to reduce tobacco uptake (Kang, Cappella, Strasser, & Lerman, 2009; Strasser et al., 2009). Antismoking efforts often use emotional appeals; commonly fear in combination with efficacy messages (Wong & Cappella, 2009).

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Although fear appeals have been used extensively to discourage hazardous behaviors, their ability to influence behaviors among young adults may be less effective than with other populations. For example, the evaluation of the Truth campaign in Florida found fear appeals to be ineffective at creating positive attitudes and beliefs among teens about not smoking (Sly, Heald, & Ray, 2001). Fear appeals tend to be less effective than other types of appeals in cases where people are already aware of a behavior’s hazardous effects (Hastings & MacFadyen, 2002). Young adults recognize when a message based on a fear appeal is trying to scare them, find the message not relevant to them (Hastings & MacFadyen, 2002), and think that they would not suffer similar consequences (Kempf & Harmon, 2006). The fact is, many smokers are aware of smoking-related health hazards, and around two-thirds want to quit (Lader, 2008).

Acknowledging that smoking is a physiologically addictive behavior and that communication can have only a limited effect, new communication strategies should be identified to influence peoples’ attitudes toward smoking and reduce uptake. As such, this study tests hypotheses regarding the use of nostalgia as a persuasive emotional appeal to influence attitudes and intentions.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia has both cognitive and affective dimensions (Belk, 1990). Cognitive aspects of nostalgia are linked with memories, while affective aspects relate to the emotions evoked from these memories. Evoking certain memories can also evoke the associated emotions the same way they were felt when first experienced (Braun-LaTour & LaTour, 2013). Because the past is full of both pleasant and unpleasant memories, nostalgia commonly evokes both sadness and happiness (Holak & Havlena, 1992). However, nostalgia has been predominantly identified with positive emotions (Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008).

A tendency toward nostalgia may function as a personality characteristic; people with high nostalgia proneness are more responsive to nostalgic emotional appeals in advertising (Zimmer, Little, & Griffiths, 1999) and tend to consume nostalgia-evoking products as a way to experience the feeling (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). When people get older they develop a preference for the good old days (Davis, 1979); however, young people experience nostalgia as well (Batcho, 1995). A study that examined the feelings evoked at the time of graduating found students feeling nostalgia with a mix of happiness and regret (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001).

Activating Nostalgia Through Communication

Nostalgia can be triggered by a variety of stimuli (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003), including those that are unique and novel (Rubin, Rahlal, & Poon, 1998). Memorable events are retained more in the autobiographical memory, and recounting those events can trigger nostalgic experience (Sehulster, 1989). When thinking about the past, people think about an object of interest as well as the time before they lost it.
(Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport, 2000). People feel especially nostalgic when faced with a threatening situation (Sedikides et al., 2008). Certain concrete threats, such as loss of health and ability, can increase nostalgia for the past when things were better (Milligan, 2003).

Advertisers have tapped into the powerful outcomes and emotions associated with nostalgia to appeal to a variety of audiences (Marchegiani & Phau, 2010). Nostalgic appeals function to strengthen consumers’ attitude toward a brand and increase purchase intentions (Schultz, 2012). Nostalgic appeals have been used in Super Bowl ads (Vásquez, 2012), social media feeds (Parekh, 2012), and retrobranding of consumer products (Stephen, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). A classic example is of a Tesco Christmas ad (https://goo.gl/ghyjN4). The success of this type of appeal in the for-profit communication realm holds promise for promoting prosocial behaviors.

Although there is no formal theory of how and why nostalgic appeals might influence health attitudes or behaviors, this study represents an initial proof of concept about how they may function. Nostalgic messages are unique from other forms of message appeals that focus only on a single positive (warmth) or negative (fear) emotion because nostalgia possesses shades of both positive and negative emotions. As such, a single action tendency is not likely to explain their effects (Dillard & Peck, 2001). By focusing on life events that are likely to have positive associations, nostalgic messages gain the attention of viewers and may motivate additional message processing. The positive emotions resulting from the message may become linked to the behavior in the mind of the viewer and promote good feelings toward it. This study proposes that the use of nostalgic emotional appeals in smoking public service announcements (PSAs), will result in greater evoked nostalgia, more negative attitudes toward smoking behavior, and increased behavioral intentions to reduce smoking relative to a control message. Nostalgia proneness will be tested as a covariate. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of empirically designing and testing a nostalgic appeal in smoking reduction PSAs; as such, our first prediction tests whether an antismoking message can evoke nostalgia. The remaining two predictions examine the impact of a nostalgic PSA on attitudes and intentions. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

\[H1: \text{Relative to a control message, exposure to a nostalgic PSA will result in greater evoked nostalgia.}\]

\[H2: \text{Relative to a control message, exposure to a nostalgic PSA will result in more negative attitudes toward smoking.}\]

\[H3: \text{Relative to a control PSA, exposure to a nostalgic PSA will result in greater behavioral intention to limit smoking.}\]

**Method**

**Study Design**

The study involved an experimental design with two levels of message appeals (nostalgic/control) embedded in a video PSA. Attitude toward smoking and behavioral intention to reduce smoking were measured as dependent variables. All study procedures were approved by the university’s institutional review board.
Participants

Participants who reported that they smoke cigarettes were recruited from a participant pool in a college at a large Midwestern University (N = 169). Participants’ age ranged from 18 to 39 (M = 21.47, SD = 2.50). Study participants were Caucasians (66.3%), Asians (26%), African Americans (3.6%), and Hispanics (1.8%). Two-thirds of the participants (63.3%) were female.

Procedures

The study was conducted using Qualtrics online survey design software. Following informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two message conditions. After watching the message, participants completed measures of evoked nostalgia, attitude toward smoking behavior, behavioral intention to limit the number of cigarettes, nostalgia proneness, and demographics.

Message Design

A nostalgic PSA was developed to cultivate the feelings of nostalgia. To develop the PSA, publicly available nostalgic images were collected, and a video PSA was created through nonlinear editing and voice-over. The script consisted of nostalgia-evoking statements gathered from blogs about nostalgia (e.g., http://thenostalgiablog.com/). The experimental group watched the nostalgic video message, whereas the control group watched a car oil-change video. Both videos were of equal duration (2 minutes and 24 seconds). The nostalgic stimuli can be viewed here: http://bit.ly/1oeHV0B. The message was piloted with a small sample prior to the final study, and modifications were made to the messages; details are available from the authors.

Measurement

Evoked nostalgia

The extent to which nostalgia was induced by the stimulus was measured using the Advertising Evoked Personal Nostalgia Scale; prior research provides evidence for scale reliability and validity (Merchant, Latour, Ford, & LaTour, 2013). The past imagery subscale measures nostalgic cognitions and is a 14-item Likert-type scale with a 5-point response format from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); e.g., “I was transported to the past.” Higher scores indicating greater nostalgic cognitions as a result of the message (Cronbach’s α = .93). The positive (warmth, peaceful, pleasant, relaxed, calm) and negative (sadness, anxiety, tense, guilty, depressed, regret) emotion subscales assess emotions evoked from nostalgic messages using a 5-point, Likert-type response format. The mean, standard deviation, Cronbach’s alpha, and correlations for all scales are presented in Table 1.
**Attitude**

Standard measures of attitude were used to assess evaluations of smoking behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Cronbach’s alpha for the seven-item index (bad/good, dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive, useless/useful, foolish/wise, insensible/sensible) was .92. Higher scores represent more positive attitude toward smoking.

**Behavioral intention**

Participants responded to standard (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) Likert-type items on a 7-point scale to rate their intention to limit smoking cigarettes drawn from prior research (“In the next two weeks, how likely is it that you will limit the number of cigarettes you have in a given day?”). Higher scores indicate greater intention to reduce cigarette consumption.

**Nostalgia proneness**

Nostalgia proneness was measured using five Likert-type items drawn from the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Barrett et al., 2010)—for example: “How often do you experience nostalgia?”—on a 7-point scale with higher items indicating greater nostalgia proneness.

**Results**

To test the first prediction, nostalgia proneness was included as a covariate because of its significant association with evoked nostalgic cognitions ($r = .27$), following Tabachnick and Fidell (2001). The ANCOVA indicated that the nostalgic video evoked greater levels of nostalgic cognitions ($M = 3.37, SD = .50$) than did the control video, $M = 2.56, SD = .72$; $F(1, 166) = 65.68, p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .28$; $r = .55$. The message also influenced the experience of positive emotions—control $M = 2.55, SD = .69$; nostalgic message $M = 3.63, SD = .64$; $F(1, 166) = 103.60, p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .38$; $r = .63$. The nostalgic message influenced the experience of negative emotions—control $M = 2.36, SD = .85$, nostalgic message $M = 2.63, SD = .71$; $F(1, 166) = 5.09, p < .03$; partial $\eta^2 = .03$; $r = .17$. The data are consistent with the first prediction.

To test the second prediction, biological sex was included as a covariate because of its association with attitude ($r = -.20$). The data were consistent with the second hypothesis. Controlling for biological sex, participants exposed to the nostalgic video showed more negative attitudes toward smoking—$M = 2.09, SD = .92$; $F(1, 166) = 4.42, p < .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$; $r = .17$—than did participants exposed to the nonnostalgic video—$M = 2.33, SD = .72$. The effect of biological sex on attitudes was significant ($p < .001$), with women exhibiting more negative attitudes toward smoking.

The analysis did not indicate an effect for the messages on behavioral intent. Participants exposed to the nostalgic messages on PSA—$M = 3.23, SD = 1.54$; $t(166) = -1.033$, $p < .30$—did not differ from those who viewed the control in intention to smoke—
### Table 1: Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics for All Scales: Evoked Nostalgia, Positive Emotions, Negative Emotions, Behavioral Intention to Limit Smoking, Attitude Toward Smoking, and Nostalgia Proneness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Evoked nostalgia</th>
<th>Positive emotion</th>
<th>Negative emotion</th>
<th>Intention to limit smoking</th>
<th>Attitude toward smoking</th>
<th>Nostalgia proneness</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Evoked nostalgia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotion</td>
<td>.566*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotion</td>
<td>.465*</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to limit smoking</td>
<td>.309*</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.198*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude smoking</td>
<td>-.068</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>-.077</td>
<td>-.250*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostalgia proneness</td>
<td>.287*</td>
<td>.199*</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>-.127</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01.
Thus, the data were not consistent with the third hypothesis. In order to determine the predictors of behavioral intent, the correlations among all study variables were examined (Table 1). Based on these results, multiple regression using OLS estimation was conducted with nostalgic cognitions, positive and negative emotions, and attitudes as the predictor variables and intent to limit cigarettes as the criterion variable. These data indicate that both nostalgic cognitions and attitude toward smoking are significant predictors of behavioral intent, but the effects of positive and negative emotions are marginal—\( R = .40, \ SE = 1.40, F(4,163) = 7.68, p < .01; \) see Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( B )</td>
<td>( SE )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.392</td>
<td>.631</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evoked nostalgia</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>.213</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>-.208</td>
<td>.163</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward smoking</td>
<td>-.402</td>
<td>.128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^* p < .001\)

Discussion

Considering the success nostalgic appeals have enjoyed in marketing consumer products, a unique opportunity exists to understand their utility for communication of prosocial behaviors such as reducing cigarette smoking. A key hurdle faced by public health communicators is rejection and avoidance of the health message, especially by younger audiences, but nostalgic appeals might overcome these challenges. The data presented here indicate that nostalgic PSAs about smoking can influence young smokers’ nostalgic cognitions and emotions relative to a control. The data show that the evoked cognitions, along with attitudes, function to predict intentions to reduce cigarette consumption but that emotional response had little direct impact. Further, nostalgic messages can influence attitudes toward smoking relative to a control. Taken together, these findings provide a promising picture for the use of nostalgic appeals in smoking-cessation efforts.

There are several explanations for the efficacy of nostalgic appeals that bear additional scrutiny. Nostalgia-themed PSAs approach consumers through their most cherished and personal memories, making them more engaging for participants. Our data show they can cause nostalgic thinking about messages, and this influences attitudes and behaviors. Although the appeal tested here evoked both positive and negative emotions, these emotions did not directly predict behavioral or attitudinal...
outcomes. It is likely that the relationship between the messages and the emotions evoked is complex and could be untangled through additional research.

We chose to combine measures of discrete emotion following earlier theorizing on nostalgia (Marchegiani & Phau, 2010). Yet there is significant debate in the literature regarding discrete versus composite emotions (see Dillard & Peck, 2001) and research to indicate the unique effects of discrete emotions on behavioral and attitudinal outcomes; this bears additional scrutiny in the context of nostalgic appeals. An additional explanation, not tested here, is that nostalgic appeals reduce defensive responses to messages; future research can test this possibility. Based on our analysis of the literature, there is little prior evidence for the ways in which nostalgic appeals function in smoking prevention, and our findings hold promise for both practice and theory development in this arena.

There are several limitations to this study that bear mention. Importantly, because of the physiologically addictive nature of tobacco, communication efforts may have limited impact on influencing action. This study is further limited by measuring intent versus actual behavior; it was not possible to measure behavior in this case because of the nature of the focal behavior. The intention measure consisted of a single item drawn from prior research, making it impossible to assess scale reliability, but this decision was made strategically because of the nature of the behavior and the fact that there were additional items, unreported here, to measure information-seeking intent. Additionally, future research could test high- and low-nostalgic stimuli. This study tried creating such stimuli but couldn’t do so because of resource limitations. Finally, this study was limited to young smokers, and the effects are likely to be different for older participants. Past studies have shown that age is a moderator in evoking nostalgia, and as people grow older they tend to have increased intensity of nostalgic thoughts and feelings. Questions remain about what this means for response to nostalgic appeals.

In sum, this study provides promising results for the role of nostalgic appeals in influencing smoking attitudes and behaviors and basis for further research on role of nostalgia in prosocial communication. Future research can explore the theoretical questions raised regarding messages that evoke both positive and negative emotional response and test their utility for other public health risks.

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**References**


