

Nostalgia in post-socialist Russia: Exploring applications to advertising strategy[☆]

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Abstract

This article investigates nostalgia in post-socialist Russia from a consumer behavior perspective. The research includes the following components: 1) an overview of nostalgia and nostalgia proneness as a personality trait among Russians in the context of recent societal changes, 2) an analysis of four categories of nostalgia (personal, interpersonal, cultural, and virtual) and themes in nostalgia experiences provided by Russian respondents, and 3) a discussion of specific stimuli and advertising content in the Russian marketplace designed to evoke individual and collective nostalgia. The major nostalgia themes—specifically, the break-up of the Soviet Union, nature, and food—identified in the Russian responses are related to advertising and marketing elements for Russian products. The article also discusses the implications of consumer nostalgia for marketing and advertising strategy in the post-socialist Russian economy.

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Nostalgia has recently attracted attention in marketing and consumer research. This article explores the relationship of nostalgia to product marketing and advertising in Russia, a country that has experienced significant political, social, and economic changes during the last 15 years. Such cultural transitions may produce nostalgic sentiments that exhibit an overall similarity among members of the society, but that also differ based on individuals' own life experience and situation (Davis, 1979).

1. Purpose of the research

This exploratory study examines some of the cultural transitions experienced by Russians related to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the creation of a market economy. It uses

qualitative data provided by Russian consumers to identify common themes related to nostalgia. We also identify and discuss examples of current Russian advertising and branding that use strategies intended to evoke nostalgia.

2. Background on nostalgia

While early writing on nostalgia tended to view it as a pathological condition (Hofer, 1688/1934), nostalgia has come to be considered a sociological phenomenon that helps individuals maintain their identities in the face of major life transitions (Davis, 1979). Nostalgia has attracted the attention of marketers, particularly within the last 20 years, who have attempted to evoke the emotional response through product management, advertising themes, music, and leisure activities (Havlena and Holak, 1991).

2.1. The four classes of nostalgia

Discussions of nostalgia in the literature identify two separate dimensions on which nostalgia or nostalgia-like experiences may differ: (1) the personal versus collective nature of the experience and (2) the basis of the feeling in direct versus

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indirect experience (Davis, 1979). Personal experiences are based on memories that are specific to the individual and differ significantly across people, while collective experiences are grounded in cultural events or phenomena that members of a group share. Direct experience refers back to events in the individual's own life, while indirect experience results from stories told by friends or family members or from information in books, movies, or other media. These two dimensions led Havlena and Holak (1996a) to propose the following four-way classification of nostalgic experience:

- personal nostalgia (direct individual experience)
- interpersonal nostalgia (indirect individual experience)
- cultural nostalgia (direct collective experience)
- virtual nostalgia (indirect collective experience)

Personal nostalgia refers to the nostalgia based on direct experience that is the subject of most psychological and sociological analysis (Baker and Kennedy, 1994; Davis, 1979). *Interpersonal nostalgia* includes nostalgic experience based on interpersonal communication concerning the memories of others and combines the other person's experiences with the individual's own interaction with that person (Davis, 1979). *Cultural nostalgia* involves direct experience where members of the group share a similar response that helps to create a cultural identity (cf., Holak and Havlena, 1992; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). The fourth class is the nostalgic equivalent of "virtual reality," with the emotion based upon shared indirect experience. Many marketing uses of nostalgia emphasize cultural or virtual nostalgia due to the commonality of response across members of a group or market segment (Havlena and Holak, 1991; Stern, 1992).

2.2. Personality and cross-cultural differences in nostalgic response

While previous research has investigated individual differences in nostalgia proneness and experience (cf., Havlena and Holak, 2000; Holbrook, 1993), differences in nostalgia may also reflect personality traits that are common within one culture but that differ cross-culturally. Havlena and Holak (1996b) explored nostalgic experiences of Japanese respondents in the context of festival and household rituals. Examining nostalgia measurement and cross-cultural aspects of nostalgia, Holak et al. (2006) validated the Index of Nostalgia Proneness among Russian respondents.

3. Nostalgia and Russia

The former Eastern Bloc countries have undergone tumultuous changes over the past century. Boym (2001) noted that nostalgia seems common after revolutions, such as the Russian Revolution of 1917 and more recent Russian political changes. "The revolutionary époque of perestroika and the end of the Soviet Union produces an image of the last Soviet decades as a time of stagnation, or alternatively, as a Soviet golden age of stability, strength, and 'normalcy,' the view prevalent in Russia today" (p. xvi).

3.1. Four categories of nostalgia in Russia

Such transitions may encourage both personal and cultural nostalgia. Many Russians suffer due to personal losses caused by reforms during the early 1990s (Zuckerman and Caryl, 1999). Older citizens, in particular, experience anxiety about the loss of employment and social services guarantees they once had (Ford, 1995). Vladimir Putin's reinstatement of Soviet-era policies can be seen as a response to the public's desire for stability (Caryl and Conant, 2001). While Stalin may be vilified in the west, his popularity appears to be increasing in Russia (Yurkovsky, 2003). Yurkovsky writes, "...Given Russia's reduced international stature and the failure of market reforms to help ordinary Russians, Stalin's name conjures visions of a glorious past." It is paradoxical that the "strong hand" military, order, and power, previously negative associations, are qualities that prompt nostalgia (Kagarlitsky, 2000).

Nagorski (1996) analyzed politicians' use of nostalgic appeals in Russia and other eastern countries, writing, "The rise in nostalgia is most easily understood as a rise in frustration. There's nothing like rampant crime and corruption to make people long for the old police state; there is nothing like going without a paycheck for months or losing a job to make a subsistence wage seem like a security blanket... Even those who have modestly improved their living standard, purchasing new VCRs and better food, often feel poorer because they see how much they are missing out on." (p. 44). In response to this desire for increased security and "normalcy," there have been renewed commemorations of Soviet leaders (including Stalin) and a return to the use of Soviet national symbols, such as the tune of the Soviet national anthem with new lyrics (Kuzio, 2003). Oleg Gazmanov, a pop singer with a large following in Russia, wrote and recorded "Made in the USSR," in which he proudly mentions Lenin and Stalin along with Tchaikovsky, Pushkin, and the Romanovs (Arvedlund, 2005). *The Economist* (1996) chronicled nostalgic references in architectural styles, artistic performances and publishing during the early days following the collapse of Communism in Russia.

The structure of Russian family life may also encourage interpersonal nostalgia. It is not unusual for three generations to reside together in a comparatively small space, and restrictions on geographical mobility may also result in closer contact across generations. While some Russians experience nostalgia for the life in the Soviet Union they remember, they may also feel virtual nostalgia for the even more distant past, as seen through novels, historical writings, and films.

3.2. Russia's craze for nostalgic products

Nostalgia-evoking products and appeals are becoming popular in Russia and the former Eastern Bloc. Production rights for Soviet-era brands that are mediocre at best, including Zhigulyovskoye beer and Prima cigarettes, are sought after (Bershidsky, 1999). Glavproduct, a producer of canned fruits and vegetables, was established in 2001 and adopted a Soviet retro style for its products and labels. By 2003, sales were growing 35% annually. PomidorProm spent significantly less

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