Images of Nostalgia - Effects of Perceived Authenticity and Nostalgia on the Evaluation of Visual Images

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Abstract
Nostalgic images in advertising permeate the market. However, academic research on whether nostalgia can be evoked with visual cues and whether this has an effect on consumer evaluation is, at best, nascent. This article provides exploratory evidence on the effects of authenticity and nostalgia on the evaluation of images. Findings show that images, which are perceived as nostalgic and authentic, significantly influence image evaluation, whereas authenticity alone did not yield a significant effect. However, authentic pictures are still rated more positive than those which are perceived to be neither authentic, nor nostalgic.

Keywords:
Nostalgia, authenticity, advertising, imagery
Nostalgia has gained increasing attention in business publications as a highly effective and persuasive marketing tactic. Recently, there has been a growing interest in nostalgia and consumption experiences in the literature (Stern, 1990; 1992; Goulding, 2001; Schindler and Holbrook, 2003; Holbrook and Schindler, 2004; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, 2003). Despite the increasing popularity of nostalgia in the branding and consumer behavior literature, academic research attention with regard to nostalgic elements in advertising has been scarce. There have been some exploratory contributions that provide some support for the notion that nostalgic-themed ads may produce greater recall and preference for the ad (Neeb, Faier, and Unger, 1989). To the author's knowledge only few recent publications (Pascal, Scott, and Muehling, 2002; Muehling and Sprott, 2004) have directly addressed the question, whether visual or verbal nostalgic cues in advertising would have any effect on provoking nostalgic feelings, and cause a more positive evaluation of the respective advertisement. These studies primarily focus on the effects of personal memories of the past. However, literature has brought forward different conceptualizations of nostalgia, which refer to personal nostalgia on the one hand and collective memory of the past (or historical nostalgia), on the other hand (Davis, 1979; Stern, 1992). In addition to that, we introduce the notion of tradition-related nostalgia. Furthermore, perceived authenticity of visual cues and its relation to nostalgia, so far, remained unexplored. This article intends to shed some light particularly on effects of perceived authenticity and traditional nostalgic cues on the evaluation of advertising images. To this end, we will briefly review literature on nostalgia, authenticity, and imagery research. In the sequel, we will describe the
research design and report our results. At the end of the paper, we will discuss our findings and draw implications for consumer research and marketing.

Nostalgia and authenticity

Nostalgia permeates the marketplace, for instance in the form of retro-branding (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003), but also with new brands that aim to evoke nostalgic feelings. In academic research, nostalgia has been referred to as “an individual’s longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday, or a fondness for possessions and activities associated with days of yore” (Holbrook 1993, p.245; see also: Davis, 1979). Nostalgia refers back to the Greek words nostos and algia (see: Davis, 1979), meaning ‘to return home’ and ‘pain’. According to this view, nostalgia is a bittersweet emotion caused by a longing for returning home, returning to the good old days. Apart from that ‘personal nostalgia’, the concept has also undergone a development towards a broader interpretation. Nostalgia might also focus on things and activities from an older or ancient era, which are recalled via collective memory from a historical era, or on combining old materials into invented traditions that serve the needs of the present. These two interpretations of nostalgia as a human emotion clearly relate the concept to the past, or history. Hence, nostalgia has a temporal dimension. Both views contend that this feeling could be caused by own experience, but also by looking back to the past, which appears as the better option than the now or the future. Hence, nostalgia may be based on personal experience, but also on myth and abstraction of communal history, as described by Davis (1979).

Whereas most definitions and reviews of nostalgia put emphasis on its temporal dimension, we contend that there is a combined spatial-temporal component of nostalgia, too. Brown et al.’s (2003) more nuanced conceptualization of nostalgia, for instance, added arcadia – an idealized place of the past - to an extended view of nostalgia. This concept of an idealized place, which
reflects old values, tradition, and old customs, adds a valuable component to our understanding of nostalgia. Particularly the leisure and tourism industry has frequently opted for this spatial concept of nostalgia as a powerful opportunity to position their service offer. It is different from historical nostalgia in that it does not refer to a past, imagined history, but history is still alive in particular areas, like for instance in Indian villages, or in Alpine regions. However, contrary to consuming history, tradition is prone to becoming detached from its genuine, original context when being offered by an agency thus, cut off from the lived cultural context. Hence, perceived authenticity might play a key role for this form of tradition-related nostalgia. Furthermore, authenticity is often related to traditional rituals, or traditional craftsmanship (Peterson, 2004). Hence, authenticity and tradition seem to be interwoven concepts, at least with regard to particular products and services.

Brown et al.’s contribution on nostalgia and retro-branding (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003) has brought forward another important argument for the meaning of authenticity with respect to nostalgia. The authors contend that ‘retro’ involves searching for authenticity in an inauthentic world. This search for authenticity is addressed by many scholars in the field of consumer behavior (e.g.: Belk and Costa, 1998; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2001; 2002; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). One argument is that brands are increasingly disinterested and detached from their multinational, producing corporations (Holt, 2002). They are detached from their origin, which results in the perception of diminished brand authenticity on the side of the consumer and causes an increased search for authentic, genuine brands (Brown, 2001). In their search for ‘the real thing’ consumers increasingly tend to look back to ‘the good old days’. These developments on the marketplace demonstrate that authenticity is vitally important for brands and thus, brand communication. However, the relationship between authenticity and different forms
of nostalgia has not been researched, so far. This article aims to provide evidence of its interrelationship in visual images.

**Authenticity and nostalgia in images**

Pictures enjoy a superiority effect, meaning that they are cognitively processed much quicker than words, or other abstract concepts (Paivio, 1971; Kroeber-Riel, 1996). They are experiential, richer, more personally relevant, more closely linked to long-term memory, and therefore more effective in advertising (Lutz and Lutz, 1978; Rossiter, 1982; MacInnis and Price, 1987; Burns, Biswas and Babin, 1993). It is not astonishing, therefore, that advertising, has made extensive use of images in communication. Nostalgic elements in advertisements have proven to be particularly powerful in evoking emotional response to ads. Recent research shows that advertisements with personal nostalgic cues generate a greater number, and a more positively valenced set of nostalgic thoughts (Muehling and Sprott, 2004). Hence, visual nostalgic cues are able to evoke nostalgic thoughts. Moreover, advertisements with personal nostalgic cues resulted in significantly more favorable attitudes towards the ad and towards the brand. However, other research has demonstrated that individuals viewing ads in the context of their pasts had less favorable ad evaluations (Krishnamurthi and Sajun, 1999). Stern (1990) concludes that such findings would suggest avoiding the use of personal nostalgia, and prefer strategies evoking historical nostalgia. Research on the effects of historical nostalgia in advertising is basically non-existent. However, we know from the works of Stern (1992) and Goulding (2001) that addressing historical nostalgia in consumption experience and advertising texts could have different and important effects on consumer evaluation. We, therefore, will address this gap and investigate effects of authentic and traditional nostalgic elements in visual images on image evaluation, as compared to non-nostalgic images. With regard to visual images, authenticity refers to iconic authenticity as described by
Grayson and Martinec (2004). This means that an image does (or does not) reflect that which is considered to be ‘the real thing’. We particularly hypothesize that advertising images, which are perceived to be related to genuine tradition, outperform authentic-only images with regard to the overall evaluation of the image. Secondly, we expect images perceived as authentic to outperform images, which are perceived to be neither nostalgic, nor authentic.

When addressing nostalgia in advertising images, we have to take into account that the structure and content of such an image plays a key role in transporting the message elements (Scott, 1994; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). Scott (1994) has argued that we translate objects into pictures by the process of representation using previously made pictorial conventions or conventions of representation. Those conventions reflect the viewing habits of the culture. Scott further argues that pictures can be understood as discursive form, capable of subtle nuances in communication. An image is syntactically and semantically dense thus, putting together pictorial elements with particular meanings will not produce the sum of the meaning of the elements. This, of course, means that we should not break up pictures in parts and put them together in order to test for affective response, but rather make an informed choice according to the overall visual rhetoric of an image.

Method
A family farm vacation offer in an Alpine region served as our empirical playground. In a first step, 86 pictures were chosen which apply a visual rhetoric that relates to the positioning of the farm vacation offer. Those were shown to farmers in order to get an expert assessment of the most typical and authentic pictures. Particular attention was drawn on the perceived congruency or inconsistencies of contextual and core elements, because any inconsistency could lead to irritations on the side of the respondents and cause unwanted biases. For determining the
contextual elements (the background), we followed the concept of life world (‘Lebenswelt’) (Schütz and Luckmann, 1979). Contrary to social worlds, groups and societies, life world comprises the lived experience of the everyday environment of individuals. Hence, pictures had to be selected, which reflect this everyday context of the farmer’s world. In order to ensure an authentic presentation of the life world, 7 farmers were visited, interviewed, and their everyday life was observed. In a second step, 7 members of the farmers association were asked to name the most typical elements of the farmers’ life world in the respective region. Two different life worlds had been outlined by them. First, a life world of farmers, who primarily live uphill in mountainous regions, and make their living from selling milk and meat. The second life world comprises farms, which specialize on making wine, and are situated down in the sunny valleys. These two life worlds are represented in the context of the pictures. We, then, also selected pictures which show authentic contextual elements, however without being typical for the region in question.

The contextual elements, then, had to be combined with core elements (the intended position of the farm vacation offer), which is the encounter of a guest and his host farmer expressing a warm relationship. Additionally, pictures were chosen, which showed a nostalgic encounter, reflected by traditional elements, like for instance the blue apron, the hat, speck, and wine. Those pictures also provoked feelings of remembrance of happy days of coziness (the German ‘Gemütlichkeit’) and feeling at home, measured by free elicitation in a pre-testing and selection phase. These pictures, according to the pretest, also reflect the genuine and authentic. Although the experimental design would have required testing pictures that are perceived as nostalgic, but non-authentic, there was none. Brown et al. (2003), who claimed that retro-branding (or nostalgic branding) involves searching for the authentic, provide one possible explanation. Hence, by definition there are no nostalgic pictures without being authentic at the same time. This is also
our first result with regard to the relationship between those two concepts. Traditional elements in advertisements have been automatically perceived as authentic, meaning that tradition has to be authentic by definition in order to be perceived as traditional, at least with regard to tourist regions. From the pretested pictures, six were selected which reflected nostalgia, authenticity, or non-nostalgia and non-authenticity, the best, while still applying to the visual rhetoric of the family farm vacation.

In the following, a Web-based questionnaire was designed in order to test for main effects of authenticity and nostalgia on image evaluation. A within subject design was used in this study. Potential biases such as familiarity effects, sensitization and carry over (image exposure was separated in time i.e. shown one after the other, but never on the same screen) were controlled for (e.g. Greenwald 1976). A potential ‘small child pattern’ effect was expected thus we showed children in each of the pictures tested. Nostalgia was measured on a seven-point scale statement: ‘this picture reflects tradition and the region’s heritage’, and authenticity with ‘this picture is typical for family farm vacation in the region of XX’.

Respondents were also asked to freely report about pictorial elements that caught their eye, because they consider them to be typical or outstanding. Nostalgia proneness as a psychographic
variable was measured on a 7 item scale, 1 being highly important and 7 not at all. Respondents also evaluated the picture as a whole, again on a seven-point ‘smiley’ scale. Respondents had to evaluate each of the six pictures one after the other in random order. The questionnaire was administered online. An email was sent to all farmers and all current customers of the family farm vacation. In total, 127 guests and 109 farmers answered the questionnaire. Here, we will report only the findings of the guests sample.

**Results**

Respondents (guest sample) were between 16 and 72 years old ($M = 44.65$, $SD = 12.00$). The range of days spent on a holiday trip was between a minimum of 7.54 ($SD = 3.40$) and 16.10 ($SD = 4.88$) days. 38.80% of the respondents had a university degree, 35.00% served an apprenticeship, 20.40% finished high school, and 5.80% had only minimum required education. Nostalgia proneness was rather high in general ($M=2.02$). Respondents also turned out to be rather homogeneous in that respect with a standard deviation of .75.

The manipulation check showed that pictures 2, 3, and 5 had to be excluded from further analysis, because they did not discriminate satisfactorily with regard to the independent variables (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Authentic (M)</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>Nostalgic (M)</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>1.16</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of perceived authenticity and nostalgia for pictures 1 through 6
The following pictures discriminated best and remained in the final analysis:

![Picture 1: authentic and traditional](image1)
![Picture 4: non-authentic, non-traditional](image4)
![Picture 6: authentic, non-traditional](image6)

A cross-check with responses to the open-ended free elicitation question for typical elements additionally supports these findings. Picture 1 was most often associated with traditional, coziness, feeling at home, caring, honesty, genuine, and authentic. Picture 6 was much more associated with having fun, experience new and unfamiliar things, freedom, but also originality and honesty. Picture 4 was strongly associated with nature, naturalness, friendship, and fun, but not with tradition or authenticity. Descriptive statistics (Table 2) show that picture 1, which was perceived as the most authentic and traditional, was liked best, followed by picture 6, which was perceived as authentic, however not traditional. Picture 4, although including a strong ‘small child pattern’ stimulus, was rated worst among the three pictures. However, the difference between the authentic and the non-authentic picture is very small.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Liking (M)</th>
<th>Liking (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.86</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>2.47</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 2: Descriptive statistics of image evaluation
For testing the direct effects of authenticity and nostalgia on the evaluation of the pictures, a one way repeated measures ANOVA was applied. Mauchly’s test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was not met ($\chi^2 (2) = 9.17, p < .05$). Therefore, a Huynh-Feldt correction ($\epsilon$ = .94) was applied (Stevens 1992). The results showed that within subject effects were highly significant ($F (1.90, 238.76) = 43.35, p < .001$). The stepwise comparison of the main effects using a Bonferroni correction, revealed a highly significant result for picture 1 compared to picture 4 ($F (1,126) = 67.17, p < .001$). Hence, perceived tradition-related nostalgia combined with authenticity has a significant effect on the evaluation of an image. Comparing picture 4 and 6 ($F (1,126) = 3.08, p < .089$) yielded no significant result. Authenticity, therefore, is not sufficient to yield a significant impact on the evaluation of an image. Finally, effect sizes for the contrasts were calculated. The effects were .58 for the comparison of picture 1 against picture 4 and .22 for the comparison of picture 6 against picture 4. Hence, our hypothesis that the ideal combination of authentic and traditional pictorial elements would yield the highest effect was supported. We also tested for a possible moderating effect of nostalgia proneness using linear regression. Although close to significance ($p=.14$), our findings could not support former findings of Schindler and Holbrook (2003), at least not for tradition-related nostalgia proneness.

Discussion

This article has introduced the notion of tradition-related nostalgia and examined its relation to authenticity. Furthermore, we have provided evidence of its effects on the evaluation of advertising images. Our research has shown that tradition-related nostalgia plays a significant role in the evaluation of advertising images. Despite of the fact that one could think of nostalgic feelings towards objects and activities, which are not perceived as being authentic, we could not find tradition-related nostalgia without being perceived as authentic at the same time. We must
admit that this does not prove authenticity to be a prerequisite for tradition-related nostalgia. Yet, it is a noteworthy finding and worth being further researched. If so, this would have major implications for brand communication, particularly in the leisure and tourism industry. One of these implications could be that communicating tradition without being authentic would not evoke nostalgic feelings. Moreover, it would be even more important to check whether guests perceive an image to be authentic, before it is used for advertising purposes. However, the relationship between authenticity and nostalgia still leaves much room for further research. Direct effects of authenticity on image evaluation were non-significant. There are, of course, several possible reasons for that. Free elicitation has brought forward a number of associations with the pictures thus evoking a number of emotions, which we did not control for. Therefore, in a next step a more standardized procedure seems appropriate.

Our findings relate to a very specific service offer of a tourist region. Therefore, we are careful not to generalize our findings with regard to other service offers or products. Future research into other product categories is needed. The findings are also limited to individuals who already had a joyful experience with the vacation offer in question. Therefore, the results may well be partly affected by a personal nostalgia effect as well. In reality, the two forms of nostalgia can probably not be separated at all. Yet, our study shows that tradition-related nostalgia seems to be a powerful concept and is worth being further explored.
References


Schütz, Alfred and Thomas Luckmann (1989), Strukturen der Lebenswelt, Darmstadt: Luchterhand.


