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The effects of nostalgia cues in sexual health advertising

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ABSTRACT

An experimental design was conducted to investigate message effectiveness between reminiscence-bump format (RBF)/nostalgia message formats with traditional message formats in the context of health communication ads about sexual health. Reminiscence bumps, defined as a point in one's life where people can recall their life events, are proposed as a means for improving nostalgic advertising message effectiveness measure in the research. The dependent variables were emotional response, response efficacy (i.e. intent to adopt the behavior), attitude toward the message, and attitude toward the ad. Boomer-aged women completed an online survey. The research found evidence in support of the idea that nostalgic cues in health communication ads improved emotional response to the advertisement, which, in turn, improved their interest to act on health message recommendations.

KEYWORDS

Emotions; health; nostalgia; reminiscence

Introduction

Health campaigns have the intent to “sell” behavior change in the present for a promise of benefit at a future point in time. Ideally, message strategies are devised so that important information is delivered to supplement an audience's knowledge about health threat prevention, as well as awareness about ways to maintain, if not manage, positive health outcomes. Quite often in health communication campaigns give more attention to *what* a message says rather than to the context surrounding its presentation, the latter of which could improve its overall effectiveness. When this happens, the chance to connect deeply with groups that would benefit from it is lost.

Public health campaigns tend to conform to a direct-and-factual, straight sell format. First, the health issue or problem is presented; then, persuasive arguments for resolving the problem through a change in beliefs are actions are offered for consideration. Often, the audience's propensity to process

the message receives lower priority. However, “specific cues in ads are capable of making consumers feel ‘nostalgic’... which subsequently benefits an advertised brand largely through an affect-transferring mechanism” (Muehling et al., 2004). Positive emotions associated with an ad have the potential to translate to positive effects on the message sponsor, if not the message itself. This idea supports the need to explore alternative formats to inspire greater campaign engagement and intent to change attitudes or behaviors.

Reminiscence bumps are defined in autobiographical memory literature as a point in one’s life where people can recall their life events (Glück & Bluck, 2007). When reminiscence-bump memories converge with nostalgic advertising presentations, the results could prove to be a useful tool for adopting positive health behaviors. Ju et al. (2016) research found evidence to suggest that a consumer’s intent to purchase a product increased in the presence of a reminiscence bump cue compared to when there was no such cue.

Since nostalgic advertising research outside the realm of product marketing is limited (Muehling & Pascal, 2011), this study contributes to understanding the opportunity that transference nostalgia-based messaging strategies have in a different communication context.

The research builds on Morton and Kim (2015) sexual health communication research that identified opportunities to improve health campaign strategies for ads directed at Boomer-aged women, 50–64. Their study stressed the importance of improving communication’s effectiveness through target-relevant messages which addressed the constants of (1) threat, (2) efficacy, (3) cues, and (4) audience profile, as proposed in Witte’s (1995) Persuasive Health Message framework. This study investigates nostalgia-based cues in the context of sexual health advertisements to explore opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the creative and copy presentation. Specifically, can reminiscence-bump focused (RBF) advertising be an effective approach for presenting message strategies to Boomer-aged women? And, is there any difference in an audience’s intent to adopt the message’s recommendations between RBF and non-RBF advertising?

Nostalgia, reminiscence, and advertising

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines nostalgia as “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for a return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2017). For nostalgic references to be effective, a minimum of three criteria must be present: memory of one’s cultural life script (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Thomsen et al., 2011), a message memory cue, and an emotional response to the

message stimulus, which the individual assigns to the nostalgia reference post-exposure. Research supports the fact that recall for life story events is most prevalent during the second and third decades of life, or between ages 15 and 30 years (Glück & Bluck, 2007; Rubin et al., 1998; Thomsen et al., 2011). This period represents reminiscence bumps when autobiographical memories are most vivid and accessible (Bernsten & Rubin, 2004). Autobiographical scripts recalled during the reminiscence bumps skew toward happy events than sad (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003). Cultural life script events grounded in “culturally transmitted knowledge about the life course” are among the strategies applied to retrieve specific memories (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004, p. 427). Generally, when asked to remember specific events in one’s life, individuals will first consider major life stage chapters, such as college, marriage, children, and retirement.

Nostalgic approaches in advertising are characterized in terms of positive affects triggered when remembering with the past (Merchant & Rose, 2013; Meyers, 2009; Zhao et al., 2014). Advertising cues used in this genre often idealize typical cultural life script events in the creative presentation to build cohesiveness among the target audience. Studies about the effects of stimuli on audience response outcomes have found that messages can “trigger” an emotional response through a variety of subtle and overt cues integrated into its presentation. These, in turn, can influence audience decisions that account for persuasion effectiveness (Howard & Gengler, 2001; Keltner et al., 1993; Nabi, 2003).

Memory cues that facilitate access to these events can be activated by any number of mnemonics, including visual, aural, olfactory, or tactile stimuli. Among the forms of stimuli tested in research are visual prompts, and music jingles (Chou & Singhal, 2017; Pascal et al., 2002; Yalch, 1991). While the effect of these approaches may vary based on characteristics of the audience—age, gender, life satisfaction, and self-construal, for example (Holak & Havlena, 1998; Holbrook & Schindler, 1996; Ju et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 1998)—cues that activate specific memories at critical points of life have also been found to heighten the potential for meaning as a precursor to marketing persuasion. Orth and Gal (2014) found that nostalgia cues in brand packaging positively influenced consumer’s judgments of authenticity, improved behavioral intent, and activated positive emotions toward the brand (Levine et al., 2009). Yalch (1991) tested audience recall of message content in jingle versus non-jingle advertising and found the former to be a learning and recall mnemonic for information presented in advertising. Chou and Singhal (2017) tested the use of old songs in Indian television ads and found traditional nostalgia songs evoked better attitudes toward the ads than songs with personal nostalgia reference.

The research linking emotions to message effectiveness outcomes (e.g. recall, attitude, or preference) is essential to understanding the persuasion opportunity. Zhao et al. (2014) primed individuals' affective state before nostalgic advertising exposure to explore the relationship between evoked memories and the advertised brand. In other words, does emotional state "spillover" to brands featured in nostalgic advertising? They found evidence to support the proposition that a positive affective state generated from positive memories was a moderator to nostalgic advertising effects on consumers. The research concluded that the past did indeed create more favorable brand responses to nostalgic ads than ads with no nostalgia cues.

Ju et al. (2016) were the first researchers to look at the effect of cues customized to an audience's reminiscence bump period on its response to nostalgic advertising. Using age/birth year as a filter, RBF the research tested nostalgic advertisements that featured a headline and copy intended to trigger subjects' memories of salient years in their cultural life scripts. An experimental design used popular music and movie titles in the message content to promote a fictitious camera brand. The study tested three conditions: RBF past ads vs. non-RBF past ads vs. present ads. Their findings showed that audiences perceived higher relevance and higher intent to purchase the product under conditions of RBF nostalgic ads.

Persuasive health communication and RBF Ad messages

Witte's (1995) Persuasive Health Message Framework (PHM) suggests that perceived relevance and appropriateness of a message increase if the message reflects the target group's cultural beliefs, values, demographic and psychographic characteristics. In this way, importance not only should be placed on the goals of the message (e.g. what to say and how), but also to characteristics unique to an audience (e.g. values, beliefs, and attitudes about the severity of the health threat) and their stage of readiness for change (e.g. self-efficacy, response efficacy, and perception of threat susceptibility). When people view the message as personally relevant, they are motivated to process the message actively and analyze its central merits carefully (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Morton et al. (2011) and Morton and Kim (2015) explored mature-aged women reported self-efficacy in initiating sexual health conversations with sex partners, as well as their propensity to respond to messages aimed at their age group about how to do so. The studies concluded that women (1) needed scripts for talking to their doctors about sexual health issues and personal health strategies; (2) were uncertain about what strategies/scripts to apply when negotiating sexual health practices with partners, and (3) were generally uncomfortable advocating for their sexual health.

Hong's (2011) research found that women demonstrate greater health consciousness effects when exposed to health information communication and reinforce the need to prioritize campaigns directed to this specific audience. The literature to date offers conclusive evidence that tactics found to produce optimal outcomes in consumer product advertising are all but absent in health communication.

The purpose of this research is to explore the utility of RBF/nostalgia in the context of health communication messages. Two research questions guide the investigation:

RQ1: Are sexual health advertising messages with an RBF/nostalgia cue more effective than traditional sexual health messages?

RQ2: What emotions are prominent in RBF/nostalgia sexual health ad messages?

Based on the literature grounding in nostalgia, memory, and reminiscence-bump focused advertising, the RBF message is expected to result in a more positive emotional response, higher response efficacy to the message's recommendation ("talk to your partner"), and a more positive attitude toward the ad and ad message relative to non-RBF ads message promoting women's sexual health. Therefore, the following hypotheses are appropriate to guide research testing:

H1: Emotional response (i.e. appeal; engagement; and empowerment) to the RBF/nostalgia advertisement will be higher than participants' emotional response to the control ad.

H2: Response efficacy will be higher in the RBF/nostalgia sexual health message condition than in the control condition.

H3: There will be a difference between groups on attitude toward the ad stimuli.

H3A: Attitude toward the message will be higher for the RBF/nostalgia condition.

H3B: Attitude toward the ad will be higher for the RBF/nostalgia condition.

Method

An experimental design was applied to compare message effectiveness between RBF/nostalgia (test) and non-RBF (control) sexual health ads. The dependent variables were emotional response, attitudes toward the message and ad, and intent to adopt the behavior (response efficacy). The sample was recruited to recruited via Qualtrics panel. Participants were invited to complete a self-administered online survey that was intended to get their feedback to advertising messages that promote sexual health and wellness in women their age. The experiment took less than 15 minutes to complete. The following sections provide additional details about the measurement instrument, stimulus development, and the participant pool.

Measurement instrument

Participants completed the experiment in three parts. The first section gauged their emotions pre- and post-exposure to the ad stimulus. An RBF/nostalgia scale followed to assess the relevance of the stimulus concerning the participant's past and present. The last section presented items to measure participants' attitude toward the ad and intent to adopt the behavior recommended in the ad (i.e. response efficacy).

Emotional response was measured using AdSAM[®] (Morris, 1995), short for attitude self-assessment manikin. The AdSAM[®] measure (see Exhibit 1) includes three rows of graphic characters, each on a nine-point scale: is based on the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM; Lang, 1985;) and was developed to measure emotional response to advertising and marketing communications stimuli AdSAM[®] captures the three dimensions of emotional response respectively and now called—Appeal, Engagement, and Empowerment (Jang et al., 2014; Morris, 1995). The primary benefit of AdSAM[®] lies in its ability to avoid engaging participants in cognitive thinking about their feelings, which allows them to generate more robust and genuine emotional responses.

Appeal is the measure of positive or negative reaction such as extreme happiness to extreme unhappiness. Engagement determines the level of stimulation and involvement, which ranges on a physiological continuum indicating some level of physical activity, mental alertness, or frenzied excitement at one end of the continuum, with inactivity, dullness, or nearly asleep at the other end. Empowerment is a sense of control after being exposed to a stimulus, and it refers to the feeling of control or influence over one's experiences versus the feeling of a lack of control or being unable to influence a situation (Mehrabian & de Wetter, 1987; Morris et al., 2002). AdSAM[®] and the three-dimensional theory of emotion has been shown to be highly predictive of intended behavior (Kim & Morris, 2007; Morris et al., 2002).

A six-item adapted from Ju et al. (2016) was used to measure reminiscence bump effectiveness of the ad stimulus. Participants were asked the extent to which the ad (1) conjures pleasant memories from their youth; (2) makes them feel good about a past time; (3) reminds them of the past; (4) reminds them of a good time in the past; (5) appealed to them; or (6) believed people like them would feel favorable toward the ad. They recorded their responses on a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

Three bipolar anchor items adopted from Lutz et al. (1983) were used to measure attitude toward the ad. Participants were asked to indicate their overall attitude based on perceptions of favorable/unfavorable, good/bad, and pleasant/unpleasant. Five items were adapted from the SHPSES scale (Koch et al.,

*You're pickin' up good vibrations,
He's giving you excitations*

-- The Beach Boys

In 1966, the Beach Boys sang about the excitement of new relationships. Now, keeping good vibrations between you and your partner includes having a talk about safe sex.

Anyone who is sexually active can get an STD infection. Women who no longer worry about becoming pregnant still need to use a condom and to practice safe sex since age-related thinning and dryness of vaginal tissue may increase older women's risk for STDs, including HIV infection.

So, protect yourself. Ask your partner if he has been tested for STDs and use a condom every time you have sex.

If your partner does not have a condom, make sure you do.



Learn more at [havethetalk/CDC.gov](https://www.cdc.gov/havethetalk/)

Exhibit 1. RBF/Nostalgia Ad.

2009) to measure how likely or unlikely the participant would be to carry out the recommendations in the ad's message (e.g. talk to a sex partner, talk to a doctor, visit websites for more information). In the context of the PHM framework, these items would classify as response efficacy measures. A final set of questions was dedicated to classification questions to capture sample profile.

Stimulus development

Two print ad stimulus versions were created for this study: a control version and a test version. Both the test and control ads are identical visually, the copy is the only difference, eliminating the possibility of participants choosing ads based on factors other than a feeling of nostalgia. The visual showed a mature-aged man and woman walking on the beach holding hands and walking away from the viewer. The lighthearted tone of the message copy and visual lends balance to the seriousness of the message's central theme (Niederdeppe et al., 2008).

Two versions of the ad—a test and a control version—were developed to test reminiscence bump cues added to the ad's headline and copy message. Popular music titles and lyrics were selected as the reminiscence bump cue in the ads. The baby-boomer cohort is the predominant generation to characterize the target audience for the study. Boomers were born between 1945 and 1965 (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2017), so the bump period for song selection was defined as 1965 through 1985 when the cohort would be in the formative adult years. The researchers pretested alternative versions of headlines and copy on an expert panel of women in the target age group. The song *Good Vibrations* (Billboard, 2013), by The Beach Boys, was selected for the test ad. The control ad version had no RBF/nostalgia cues, but emphasized points in the headline and copy similar to the test ad. Last, a Centers for Disease Control logo was added to layout to reinforce message credibility (Arora et al., 2006; Lindsey et al., 2009). [Exhibit 1](#) shows an example of the RBF test ad.

Participant recruitment

Heterosexual women, aged 50–69, were recruited via Qualtrics panel for participation in the study. The sample was recruited nationally and screened based on three specific criteria: (1) single, not married/divorced/widowed, (2) they report to have dated in the most recent six months, and (3) they confirmed being sexually active in the last three months. On recruitment, the women were provided a disclosure about the general purpose of the research. They were told that the purpose of the study was to gain women's feedback to advertising messages that promote sexual health and wellness in women aged 50 and older. They were also informed about what they would do as a participant, provided a disclosure of the participant's rights, and the amount of time participation was projected to take.

Those who agreed to participate accessed the study through an online link. The data was collected electronically through a protected Qualtrics site. Qualtrics Panels compensated participants for their participation. The findings are discussed in the following section.

Findings

Sample characteristics

A total of 410 women aged 50–71 participated in the study. The majority ($n = 348$) of participants were aged 50–60 years. Seventy-nine percent of the sample was White, non-Hispanic/Latino ($n = 322$), and 17% ($n = 68$) was Black/African American. Over half of the sample ($n = 142$, 61%) has a college education, and one-third ($n = 158$, 38%) of the sample was employed full-time or self-employed. Twenty-five percent ($n = 102$) of the sample reported their employment status as retired. Less than half of the women in the sample lived with someone else ($n = 173$, 42%), whether family (i.e. adult- or minor-aged children) or another non-relative adult; 39% ($n = 161$) of the sample lived alone. More than 70% ($n = 293$) of the sample reported being in a relationship with their most recent partner for over one year.

Emotional response

Sample subjects were randomly assigned to one of two test cells—RBF/nostalgia ($n = 204$) or control ($n = 206$)—and asked to record their feelings on the AdSAM[®] scale before and after exposure to the ad stimulus. Specifically, they were asked, “how do you normally feel,” before ad exposure condition and “how does the ad make you feel” after ad exposure. Pairwise comparisons of group pre- versus post-exposure means are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

The research found statistical significance on all three dimensions at a probability of $p \geq .05$ ($p_{\text{Appeal}} = .02$; $p_{\text{Engage}} = .03$; $p_{\text{Empower}} = .00$) in the RBF/nostalgia condition. Post-test means for the appeal ($M_{\text{pre}} = 6.36$

Table 1. Paired comparisons for emotional response.

	Mean	Var.	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -Value
Appeal					
Pre	6.36				
	(SD = 2.18)	−0.363	2.353	−2.301	.022*
Post	6.72				
	(SD = 1.86)				
Engagement					
Pre	4.49				
	(SD = 2.22)	0.338	2.212	2.184	.030*
Post	4.15				
	(SD = 2.26)				
Empowerment					
Pre	5.25				
	(SD = 2.07)	−0.505	1.890	−3.816	.000*
Post	5.75				
	(SD = 2.15)				

Pre- v. Post-feelings: RBF/nostalgia group ($n = 204$).

Table 2. Paired comparisons for emotional response.

	Mean	Var.	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -Value
Appeal					
Pre	6.25 (SD = 2.15)				
Post	6.64 (SD = 1.90)	−0.388	2.494	−2.235	.026*
Engagement					
Pre	4.36 (SD = 2.22)				
Post	4.17 (SD = 2.26)	0.189	2.314	1.174	.242 (n.s.)
Empowerment					
Pre	5.24 (SD = 1.99)				
Post	5.36 (SD = 2.10)	−0.126	2.240	−0.809	.420 (n.s.)

Pre- v. Post-feelings: control group ($n=206$).

vs. $M_{\text{post}} = 6.72$) and empowerment ($M_{\text{pre}} = 5.25$ vs. $M_{\text{post}} = 5.75$) dimensions increased, while means for engagement declined ($M_{\text{pre}} = 4.49$ vs. $M_{\text{post}} = 4.15$). In contrast, statistical significance was only found on the appeal dimension ($M_{\text{pre}} = 6.25$ vs. $M_{\text{post}} = 6.64$) for the control condition, which also found a mean increase from pre- to post- measure. H1 predicts that emotional response (i.e. appeal; engagement; and empowerment) to a RBF/nostalgia sexual health ad will be greater than participants' emotional response to a sexual health control ad. Mean comparisons of post-exposure scores by dimension found statistical significance between groups on the dimensions of appeal ($M = 4.17$ v. 4.15 , $p \geq .05$) and empowerment ($M = 4.17$ v. 4.15 , $p \geq .05$), but not engagement ($M = 4.17$ v. 4.15 , n.s.). Based on the findings H1 is partially supported by the findings.

Reminiscence bump manipulation

A composite RBF/nostalgia mean was calculated for each group from the six items that measured reminiscence bump effectiveness. An ANOVA between-groups comparison of means ($M_{\text{RBF}} = 4.96$ v. $M_{\text{control}} = 4.91$) was run to determine if the reminiscence bump manipulation was effective. ANOVA results found no statistical difference between groups ($F = 0.087$, $df = 1$, $p = .77$), which suggest that cues integrated into the ad may not have been evocative enough for participants to connect with memories that defined their youth. Because the reminiscence bump manipulation was not effective, hypotheses analyses going forward would consider nostalgia to be the test condition assessed relative to the control (i.e. non-nostalgia condition).

Response efficacy

H2 predicted that differences would exist between nostalgia and control groups on response efficacy (behavioral intent) after exposure to the ad messages. A composite mean was calculated for response efficacy using five scale items that measured responses to the message's call-to-action recommendations for seeking sexual health information resources. An ANOVA test found no difference in means between groups on response efficacy. Therefore, H2 is not supported.

H3 predicted that audience attitudes toward the message (H3A) and ad (H3B) would differ between the nostalgia and control groups. ANOVA analysis between group found no statistical difference between groups on Message_{Att} or Ad_{Att}. Neither H3A nor H3B is supported.

Discussion

Research has established that the use of nostalgic cues in advertising can improve attention, recall, and overall message effectiveness. Yet, until now no study has investigated its utility in the realm of health communication. The purpose of this research was to examine nostalgic advertising and reminiscence bump cues in the context of sexual health ads targeted to mature-aged, dating women who may be at risk of sexually transmitted infections. Morton et al. (2011), Morton and Kim (2015) concluded this group was uncomfortable advocating for their own sexual health with intimate partners and with their doctors. Health messages framed in nostalgia present an opportunity not only to improve the message's appeal but also to optimize engagement and empowerment for the message target.

In this study, participants were exposed to an advertisement using a nostalgic reminiscence bump introduction focused on cues that defined an critical time in their lives, and the enhancement worked to create a feeling of inclusion in the message. Although the researchers found no difference between groups on RBF, attitude toward the message, or attitude toward the ad in this research, the results showed that the ad messages were significantly different on the AdSAM[®] dimensions of Appeal and Empowerment. The evidence supports the idea that nostalgic cues in health communication ads improve the audience's emotional response to the ad itself; in this study, the nostalgic ad's appeal and sense of empowerment the audience gleaned from the ad contributed to its effectiveness. Relative to a traditional ad approach, the nostalgia ad's higher mean for Appeal indicates that the women are more accepting of the message, regardless of its warnings about the sexual health risk in dating. The Empowerment mean for the nostalgia ad message support the idea that the women did indeed feel more control over the situation after exposure to the message.

Previous research has shown that higher emotional response scores lead to higher intent and interest (Morris et al., 2002), and the potential for exploring the three dimensions of emotion in more depth in health communication context may be better predictors of the behavioral intended outcome than believability and recall of the message. The finding of this study opens the door to exploring other aspects of nostalgia in health communication campaigns.

Though the reminiscence bump was not found to be distinct enough to distinguish its message effectiveness from a traditional (non-RBF) ad, future research is recommended to continue tweaking aspects of the message to understand its potential. This study supports the opportunity to explore health communication effectiveness from the perspective of emotional response, mainly based on dimensions of Appeal and Empowerment. Further research is recommended to investigate the effects in greater depth toward a richer understanding of the audience's evaluation of ads that activate these realms of health persuasion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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