

Extended Abstract | The 1st Research Innovations in Sustainable Marketing: A Global Virtual Symposium

How Can Feelings of Nostalgia Facilitate Sustainable Consumer Choices?

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Extended Abstract: Marketing can play an influential role in promoting sustainable consumer behavior. Considering emotions, existing research shows that positive and negative emotions that are triggered by environment-related stimuli impact sustainable behavior both favorably and unfavorably. To trigger such consumer emotions, external stimuli (e.g., the film “The Day After Tomorrow”; Lowe et al., 2006) have often been used to depict the catastrophic consequences of climate change to persuade consumers to act more sustainably. Such stimuli seem effective in drawing public attention to the detrimental consequences of climate change and subsequently affecting consumers’ attitudes, motivations, and intentions. In the long haul, however, the emotions triggered by such external stimuli may fail to produce a sustained effect due to cooled-off effects of emotions, and unintended outcomes caused by triggering excessively strong emotions. Moreover, emotion research in the sustainability literature has not sufficiently addressed the self-other trade-off—a key barrier to sustainable consumption behavior. This trade-off suggests that in order to act sustainably, consumers may opt to forgo individual benefits for those that effect the broader collective (i.e., positive environmental and social impacts) (Luchs & Kumar, 2017). Motivating consumers to act in a sustainable manner remains relatively challenging as many consumers tend to choose

conventional products that prioritize their needs and wants (e.g., superior functional performance, higher product quality, more aesthetic designs, easier of use, lower cost).

Our research suggests that nostalgia—a self-relevant yet highly social emotion—can act as a novel trigger to motivate sustainable behavior by attenuating the self-other trade-off in decision making. Through three experimentally designed studies, we found that nostalgia bolsters perceived social connectedness, which subsequently fosters sustainable consumer behavior. This finding was robust across different nostalgia manipulations (i.e., cognitive imagery task and old photographs) and varied product categories (i.e., jeans, running shoes, backpack, activewear). Additionally, our fourth study which was a field experiment partnered with a small business (that offers sustainable activewear products) showed that triggering nostalgic feelings in the ad (vs. control ad) posted in social media platforms resulted in higher click-through rates and lower costs. Our post-hoc findings also lend support for the elaboration-likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990) and suggest that an emotion-evoked approach such as nostalgia has more impact on consumers with a low level of environmental consciousness. Textual analysis was utilized to study consumer event narratives to offer more insights and substantiate our findings.

We contribute to the sustainability literature in various ways. Previous research reported that nostalgia promotes socially responsible acts such as helping behavior (Stephan et al., 2014), prosocial behavior (Zhou et al., 2012), and recycling behavior (Zhang et al., 2021). Our research extends these findings to the domain of sustainable consumption choices, showing that nostalgia can foster such choices by subconsciously attenuating the self-other trade-off in decision making through enhanced perception of social connectedness. Also, this research sheds new light on consumer emotions and cognitions studied in the sustainability literature and respond to the call to investigate the effect of emotions directly experienced by consumers (White et al., 2019), paving the way for future work to broaden the applications of nostalgia for addressing societal issues. In terms of managerial implications, marketers and practitioners can strengthen perceptions of social connectedness through nostalgic reverie in public communication and advertising messages to encourage engagement in sustainable consumption behavior. The nostalgia appeal of an ad that focuses on the need to belong with close others can evoke a sense of responsibility and a self-motivation need approach to sustainable consumption behavior.

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INSIGHTS**

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