**Nostalgia as Motivation**

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**Abstract**

Nostalgia, an approach-oriented emotion, has motivational consequences. In particular, nostalgia raises optimism and inspiration, strengthens the pursuit of one’s important goals, appears to encourage financial risk-taking (which can pay off in some contexts), activates the intrinsic or authentic self, and galvanizes the desire to change one’s addictive behavior. Nostalgia, a past-oriented emotion, has strong implications for the future. We discuss boundaries of these effects, highlight lacunae in the literature, and point to promising research directions.

*Keywords*: nostalgia; approach motivation; optimism; inspiration; goal-pursuit

**Introduction**

Nostalgia, “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998, p. 1266), has motivational potency. As an approach-oriented emotion, nostalgia exerts a variety of motivational influence on human functioning. We review those influences, and consider implications and future research directions.

**Nostalgia and Approach Motivation**

Nostalgia is related to, and instigates, approach motivation, “the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior toward, positive stimuli (objects, events, possibilities)” (Elliot, 2006, p. 111). Nostalgia is depicted as an approach-oriented, rather than an avoidance-oriented, emotion in multidimensional space occupying 10 other emotions (Van Tilburg, Wildshut, & Sedikides, 2018). Further, nostalgia is positively associated with approach motivation (Stephan et al., 2014), operationalized in terms of the Behavioral Activation System (e.g., “I will often do things for no other reason than that they might be fun”, “I go out of my way to get things I want”; Carver & White, 1994), and with positive political attitudes and behavioral intentions (Fetterman et al., 2021). Moreover, experimentally induced nostalgia strengthens approach motivation (Stephan et al., 2014) and facilitates the early detection of threat (i.e., death-related) words (Yang et al., 2021). The approach motivation property of nostalgia forms the basis for the influence of nostalgia on many psychological domains that we discuss next.

**Nostalgia and Optimism**

 Optimism is “an inclination to put the most favorable construction upon actions and events or to anticipate the best possible outcomes” (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1988, p. 829). Nostalgic narratives contain more expressions of optimism than control narratives; Cheung et al., 2013), and nostalgia precipitated by social isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic was linked to higher optimism (Faul & De Brigard, 2022). Savoring an experience predicts nostalgia for it, and nostalgia in turn is associated with more optimism (Biskas et al., 2019). Additionally, experimental inductions of nostalgia increase optimism (Cheung et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2015; Van Tilburg, Sedikides, & Wildshut, 2018), including optimism about one’s physical health (Abeyta & Routledge, 2016; Kersten et al., 2016). These nostalgia-instigated rises in optimism are independent of prior levels of neuroticism (Frankenbach et al., 2021) and are observed among individuals living with Alzheimer’s disease (Ismail et al., 2020). Further, induction of romantic nostalgia (referring to past experiences shared with one’s current romantic partner) augments optimism about the relationship (Evans et al., 2022). Lastly, in a 2-week four-time intervention that occurred during the pandemic, nostalgia (vs. control) predicted higher optimism (Dennis & Ogden, 2021).

 How does nostalgia give rise to optimism? The literature has identified two pathways. First, experimentally-induced nostalgia fosters social connectedness, a sense of acceptance and belongingness; in turn, social connectedness is associated with higher self-esteem, which is positively related to optimism (Cheung et al., 2013). This mediational sequence is stronger among individuals who are high than low on trait nostalgia (Cheung et al., 2016). Second, experimentally-induced nostalgia fosters authenticity, a sense of alignment with one’s true self; which in turn is positively linked to optimism (Kelley et al., 2022).

 Yet, there are boundary conditions of nostalgia’s influence upon optimism, as an experiment among civil-war refugees who had been forcibly separated from their past life revealed (Wildschut et al., 2019). These were Syrian refugees who had resettled in Saudi Arabia. Overall, nostalgia (vs. control) decreased optimism. However, this effect was moderated by resilience. Although nostalgia decreased optimism for refugees low on resilience, it did not decrease optimism for refugees high on resilience.

**Nostalgia and Inspiration**

Inspiration is “the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions” (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1988, p. 626). Nostalgic narratives entail inspirational content (Allison & Green, 2020; Fairley et al., 2021), and nostalgia is positively associated with inspiration (Stephan et al., 2015). Experimentally induced nostalgia (vs. control) amplifies both general inspiration (e.g., “I feel inspired”) and specific inspiration (e.g., “inspired to ... “go to a modern art museum,” “try skydiving or some other adventurous activity”; Hinsch et al., 2020; Stephan et al., 2015). Nostalgia boosts inspiration independently of levels of neuroticism (Frankenbach et al., 2021). Further, the literature has established a pathway through which nostalgia inspires. It is through social connectedness. In particular, nostalgia nurtures social connectedness, which is subsequently related to higher inspiration (Stephan et al., 2015).

The experiment on Syrian refugees described above (Wildschut et al., 2019) has also identified a boundary condition of nostalgia’s influence on inspiration. Although nostalgia reduced inspiration for refugees low on resilience, it had no effect on inspiration for refugees high on resilience. The overall effect of nostalgia on inspiration was not significant.

**Nostalgia and Risk-Taking**

In some cases, especially in the financial industry, taking risks pays off. Does nostalgia increase financial risk-taking? A series of studies addressed this issue (Zou et al., 2018). To begin, trait nostalgia was positively associated with the propensity for risk taking (e.g., “What is your preferred way of running your business?”) among business owners. Also, experimentally-induced nostalgia increased risk-taking, measured with the Automatic Balloon Analogue Risk Task (Pleskac et al., 2008). Here, risk is defined in terms of the number of pumps that participant choose for each of 30 virtual balloons while being uncertain of the exact time when each balloon will pop. Participants are monetarily rewarded for each pump but lose all their earnings if the balloon pops. Nostalgic (vs. control) participants chose a higher number of pumps; that is, they were riskier. This effect was replicated in two additional experiments with a different assessment of risk-taking (i.e., a stock market investment task).

Why does nostalgia increase risk-taking? Perceptions of family support (e.g., “I get the emotional help and support I need from my family”) emerged as a plausible mediator. Nostalgia triggers fond memories of one’s valued times with their family and so highlights the importance of the family, including its financial muscle. Simply put, family can catch one’s fall.

A recent article (Lilleholt & Zettler, 2022) registered a failure to replicate one of the above experiments (Zou et al., 2019, Experiment 5). A reason may be that the two experiments relied on participants from different countries. The Lilleholt and Zettler experiment relied on UK participants; fewer people in that country invest in the stock market (<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-trading-the-most-stocks.html>), and more rely on social safety nets (rather than family) as a buffer to downside risk. The Zhou et al. experiment, on the other hand, relied on US participants; more people in that country depend on stock market investments (<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-trading-the-most-stocks.html>), and fewer rely on social safety nets to ward off risk. In addition, Lilleholt and Zettler did not a assess directly the hypothesized mediator (i.e., family support) and included in their measure of risk taking items related to gambling whereas Zhou et al. only used items related to stock market investing. These possibilities are worth addressing in follow-up replicational attempts.

**Nostalgia and Goal-Pursuit**

Goal-pursuit refers to one’s determination to attain the goals they set for themselves. Some research has focused on the pursuit of social or relational goals (Abeyta et al., 2015). Nostalgia (vs. control) elevated the importance of these goals and buttressed intentions to re-kindle relationships with friends.

Other research examined personal goals (Sedikides et al., 2018). In one experiment, participants listed five such goals, identified the most important one, and indicated their determination to attain it (e.g., “I want to put more time and effort into pursuing this goal”). Nostalgic (vs. control) participants exhibited stronger goal-pursuit. In another experiment, participants listed six personal goals, identified their most important and least important one, and indicated their determination to attain it. Nostalgic (vs. control) participants manifested stronger determination to pursue their most important rather than least important goal. This effect generalized over social, agentic (e.g., graduating from university), and hedonic (e.g., enjoying life) goals. Moreover, in both experiments, the effects of nostalgia on goal-pursuit were mediated by meaning in life (Abeyta, current issue).

Inspiration also qualifies as a mediator. In both a cross-sectional study and an experiment, inspiration transmitted the influence of nostalgia on general personal goals (e.g., “I feel energized to pursue my goal”). However, more distal mediators, such as heroic perceptions (i.e., ratings of the key character in participants’ narratives as heroes) and social connectedness (Kneuer et al., 2022), were also at work.

More generally, nostalgia safeguards intrinsic motivation (Van Dijke, this issue), which refers to activities that people consider inherently interesting and enjoyable (Deci et al., 1989). A longitudinal study tested this idea in an educational setting. Students might appraise such settings as threatening, with threat being associated with weaker intrinsic motivation (Kavussanu et al., 2014). According to the regulatory model (Wildschut & Sedikides, 2022), nostalgia counteracts (i.e., attenuates) the negative association between threat appraisals and intrinsic motivation. This is indeed what a longitudinal study found (Bialobrzeska et al., 2019).

**Nostalgia and the Intrinsic or Authentic Self**

 Not only does nostalgia shield intrinsic motivation, it also promotes the intrinsic or authentic self, conceptualized as the expression of one’s true or core attributes (Baldwin et al., 2015). At the trait level, nostalgia was positively correlated with the intrinsic (e.g., “I feel like I can pretty much be myself in my daily situations”) or authentic (e.g., “For better or for worse I am aware of who I truly am”) self. At the state (i.e., experimental) level, nostalgic (vs. control) participants evinced higher accessibility of the intrinsic self and rated themselves as more authentic. Follow-up research (Kelley et al., 2022) replicated the finding that nostalgia increases authenticity and additionally demonstrated that, through authenticity, nostalgia improves psychological well-being.

To a great degree, authenticity reflects self-positivity (Sedikides et al., 2019; Zhang & Alicke, 2021). That is, the authentic self is a positive or desired self. Research has shown that people desire youthfulness, and feeling younger is positively associated with psychological (Infurna et al., 2010) and physical (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn et al., 2008) health while facilitating task performance (Hughes et al., 2003). By implication, if nostalgia boosts authenticity, it should also boost youthfulness. Consistent with this hypothesis, nostalgic (vs. control) participants reported a younger subjective than chronological age as well as feeling subjectively younger; these feelings, in turn, transmitted the effect of nostalgia on perceived health, confidence in one’s physical abilities, and health-related optimism (Abeyta & Routledge, 2016).

**Nostalgia and Change of Addictive Behavior**

Nostalgic can also strengthen the desire or readiness for change among individuals living with an addiction (e.g., gambling, drinking). Nostalgia was induced by highlighting the discontinuity (vs. not) between the present addicted self and the prior healthy self. In the discontinuity condition, participants felt nostalgic for their pre-addicted self, and so stated a stronger desire for change. These experimental results were conceptually replicated with a cross-sectional study, where discontinuity (e.g., “Gambling has changed who I am,” “The person I was before I started gambling is different from the person I am now”), nostalgia, and readiness for change were measured (Kim & Wohl 2015). Moreover, these results were replicated and extended by a study where informants (e.g., friend, relatives) assured that participants in the discontinuity (but not control) conditions had engaged in behavioral change to overcome their drinking addiction (Wohl et al., 2018).

**Implications and Future Research Directions**

 This article has illustrated the motivational potency of nostalgia across several psychological domains. Future investigations could paint a more complete picture by addressing missing links in the process. Given that optimism (Segerstrom et al., 2017), inspiration ([Milyavskaya](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S019188691100417X#!) et al., 2012), and authenticity ([Milyavskaya](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191886914007569#!) et al., 2015) facilitate goal-pursuit, research would test whether these three variables mediate the effect of nostalgia on goal-pursuit. Also, research might examine more systematically the downstream consequences of nostalgia (through optimism, inspiration, and authenticity) on psychological well-being, decision-making, and behavior. Lastly, studies could address whether the link between nostalgia and motivation is genetically influenced (Luo et al., 2016).

 We discussed two variables that moderated the influence of nostalgia on motivation. These were trait nostalgia (Cheung et al., 2016) and resilience (Wildschut et al., 2019). Another promising moderator is attachment orientation. The effects of nostalgia on motivation might be stronger for securely attached than avoidant participants (Abeyta et al., 2019). Lastly, follow-up work could focus on additional methodologies, besides cross-sectional and experimental studies (e.g., longitudinal or experience sampling methodology design), implicate interventions of longer duration, and explore varying cultural contexts.

**Coda**

Nostalgia refers to the past, but is relevant to the future (FioRito & Routledge, 2020; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2020). The emotion can help individuals gauge and clarify the personal significance of their past, and then use it to inform a distant and often murky tomorrow. Relying on a meaningful past, nostalgia can draw a map of what will be valued in times ahead.

**Conflict of interest statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest on relation to contents of this article.

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