
Pepsi sells soda with Bob Dylan tunes. Disney urges you to “remember the magic.” Old Navy jogs your memory with 80’s pop. We all know nostalgia sells. But why?

It may be common knowledge, but how these ads impact the public is not commonly understood. Now, a new research project led by UW Tacoma professor Altaf Merchant is helping advertisers understand the complex effects of nostalgia on consumers – and helping them tailor their ads to improve sales.

In March, Merchant’s paper, published in the *Journal of Advertising Research*, earned a Great Mind Award from the Advertising Research Foundation.

“In academic literature, there was no concrete measure or description of what the consumer feels when they see a nostalgic ad,” says Merchant, an associate professor at UW Tacoma’s Milgard School of Business and the lead researcher on the project. “Do they feel happy? Do they feel sad? How does that impact their impression of the advertiser? That’s what we wanted to find out.”

Merchant and his research partners showed recent nostalgic ads to hundreds of test subjects and conducted group discussions and interviews on the feelings these ads evoked. Their findings were more complicated than they anticipated, with test subjects responding cognitively, emotionally and physiologically to nostalgia in ads.

Consumers in their study said some ads triggered memories or images of the past, and caused them to feel both positive and negative emotions. Many subjects also described physical reactions to the ads, including slowed breathing, goose bumps and sweating.

“We are the first researchers to document this physiological reaction to nostalgic advertising,” Merchant says.

Merchant says the results back up advertisers’ long-held belief that nostalgia in advertising is an effective way of driving sales and maintaining brand loyalty. But the study also revealed some new dimensions of the practice. He believes that the positive effects of nostalgic advertising work both ways, improving consumers’ lives by enhancing their perception that they are part of a community.

“People who view these ads often feel better socially connected afterward,” he says. “Lonely people feel less lonely.”

The study warns that negative emotions evoked by some nostalgia can cause consumers to feel bad about the brand or product being advertised. While most nostalgia triggers both good and bad feelings, marketers would be wise to avoid images and situations that bring up too much
sadness and regret for the past, Merchant says. In general, though, advertising that reminds consumers of the past is positive.

“Nostalgia is happy,” he says. “It brings a sense of stability in a rapidly-changing world. It grounds us with something we can go back to.”