

## **A taste of nostalgia: links between nostalgia and food consumption**

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## A taste of nostalgia: links between nostalgia and food consumption

Structured Abstract:

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to analyze the links between nostalgia and food consumption.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Based on an exploratory qualitative analysis of 100 respondents, the use of NVivo helps to substantiate and interpret the textual interview data.

**Findings:** This article suggests six themes of food nostalgia and a typology of food nostalgia consumptions.

**Practical implications:** Perspectives are given for the use of nostalgia in an advertising context and as a reinsurance factor.

**Originality/value:** This research integrates marketing and sociological perspectives to better understand links between food consumption and nostalgia.

**Key words:** nostalgia, food consumption, typology, qualitative study.

Article classification: Research paper.

Food consumption is the one area most likely to take people back into their past. It calls on different senses, so it can be a valuable vector for nostalgia. The link between nostalgia and food consumption is almost obvious and yet, very little research work has been conducted so far on their links (Baker *et al.*, 2005). That is why our paper aims at studying the links existing between nostalgia and food consumption. We particularly mean to draw possible parallels between the sociological mechanisms at work in food consumption and in nostalgia and to study how consumers' loss of confidence in modern food can be minimized if the brand, the product or the communication are granted a nostalgic touch.

As part of the research, a first exploratory study was conducted with 300 persons interviewed on the subject of nostalgic consumption. Out of the 300 answers, over a 100 allude to food consumption. Thus, a majority of consumers seem to establish a link between nostalgia and food. We shall see that it goes beyond the «Proust's little madeleine» effect, that is travelling back through a product into one's childhood memories with elation, but also sometimes with regret or with a bittersweet emotional reaction. What are the main features of the nostalgic food experience? Could experiencing nostalgia be a valuable vector to reassure consumers when purchasing? Can we talk about food nostalgia? Our research has many different objectives.

The first part of our paper will be devoted to elucidate the concepts related to food consumption and nostalgia. In the second part, we will bring into perspective the contribution of sociology to food consumption and nostalgia and we will highlight the common features of food behavior and nostalgia. In a third part, we will present the results of the exploratory qualitative study, especially those concerning the characterization and typology of nostalgic food consumption.

## **1. FOOD CONSUMPTION AND NOSTALGIA : ELUCIDATING THE CONCEPTS**

This first part presents and elucidates the concepts used in this research work. Indeed, one must understand to what extent the current food context is troubled and how nostalgia can be

a relevant concept to comfort consumers in their purchasing and consumption activities as well as in their everyday life.

### ***1.1 Food consumption: a troubled context***

In the last thirty years, food crises have often repeated themselves at a national and international level. Food and the ensuing risks are of great concern to consumers. According to a recent survey by the CREDOC – food behaviour and consumption (September 2005) 85% of the respondent households think that their food pattern has an impact on their health as against 79% in 2000 and 75% in 1997. So, the problems linked to food hazards have been of great interest to marketing researchers in the last few years (e.g. Kapferer, 1998; Sirieix, 1999, Miles and Frewer, 2001, 2003). The latest research work consider food hazard as a vital consumption hazard, and as a current trend in our western society (Bergadaà et Urien, 2006).

The list of possible threats is long: BSE, the foot and mouth disease, the link between food patterns and heart diseases... Modern food is a source of deep anxiety; as a result consumers no longer trust what they eat. The fear of choosing the wrong product triggers an anxiety and a strong feeling of guilt (Rozin *et al.*, 1999). This feeling of discomfort, anxiety and the loss of confidence in food products can be accounted for by four main factors (Poulain, 1996): lack of identification of products, food abundance, contradictory statements and the influence of the media.

Some nutrients of the agri-food industry arouse suspicion and doubt in the consumers' minds whereas traditional and artisanal food is considered as safe. The consumers looking for authenticity in the origin, in the symbolic dimension and unicity of a product are presented with a dilemma: convenience and cheap food on the one hand and the fear resulting from the fact that very little is known on this type of food. As a concept of reassurance, nostalgia and its impact on consumer behavior deserve closer scrutiny. In the next paragraph, we will present its main features.

### ***1.2 Nostalgia and food behaviour***

The word “nostalgia” originates from the Greek words *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (ache); it first described the homesickness caused by geographical distance. The concept has

long been part of the history of mankind, since it was already mentioned in Biblical books or in Greek mythology (Homer, the Odyssey).

The first research work about the concept of nostalgia was carried out in the field of medicine by Hofer (1688). His thesis gives a clinical description of the physical and psychological symptoms of nostalgia. Gradually, the meaning of the word changed. Today, nostalgia is no longer considered as a medical disease, but commonly regarded as yearning for yesterday.

This concept has been of interest to marketing researchers for several years (e.g. Holbrook and Schindler, 1991; Holak and Havlena, 1992). Hence, the definition proposed by several marketing and psychology researchers, as shown by the synthesis below (table 1: main definitions of nostalgia). Nostalgia is alternately considered as an emotion, a mood, a preference, in other words as an emotional reaction.

Table 1: Definitions of nostalgia

Nostalgia is necessary to the human being for different reasons, positive or negative functions. According to Sedikides, Wildschut and Baden (2004), nostalgia fulfill existential functions and acts «as a stock of emotions and experiences which people resort to in order to cope with their existential fears ». Exploring the complexity and richness of the concept of nostalgia can provide additional tools to better understand consumers and purchasers' behavior.

Many agri-food businesses resort to products, design, packaging, outlets or communication based on the concept of nostalgia. As for packaging, the Bonne Maman jams with their Vichy patterned lids remind us of home-made jams. Other products recall an “à l’ancienne” design even if the recipe or the product is not at all old. The Paul bakeries gather all the necessary ingredients – furniture, employees' clothing, and smell of freshly baked bread – to evoke nostalgia of times past.

So, if we agree that nostalgia helps to reassure people, the study of its links with food consumption should be promising. Food consumption is largely characterized by risk-taking which is more often subjective than objective. Even if food hazards are objectively less nowadays, the general public has got the feeling that these hazards are more severe (Kapferer, 1998). Nostalgia can thus be a reassuring factor for the consumers.

After presenting the troubled context of food consumption and the relevance of studying nostalgia as a variable affecting consumers' behaviour, the second part of the paper will study the links between nostalgia and food consumption from a sociological point of view.

## **2. A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH OF THE LINKS BETWEEN FOOD CONSUMPTION AND NOSTALGIA**

Many researchers have attempted to understand the psychological and sociological mechanisms at work within consumers confronted all along their life and several times a day to feeding necessities. All this fundamental research work (e.g. Aron, 1975; Barthes, 1961; Bourdieu, 1979; Chiva, 1985; Fischler, 1990) whether in sociology, general anthropology or anthroposociology, have emphasised the complexity of food activities. All these approaches are valuable contributions to marketing and consumers' behaviour research.

Nostalgia can be defined as "a bittersweet emotional reaction, that may be associated to reflection and experienced by an individual when external or internal stimuli take him back to an ideal past moment or event belonging or not to his living experience" (Divard et Robert-Demontrond, 1997). The emotions emerging from an idealised past (features inherent to nostalgia) are focused on inanimate objects, sounds, odours or tastes that have been discovered at the very moment the emotions were experienced (Hirsch, 1992). The object that has been actually discovered or its substitute has the ability to revive emotions. This can be the case for a food product that has been really consumed or for its substitute (the Bonne Maman jams for some consumers whose parents or grandparents used to make jams) or for a product dating back to an idealised past.

One can draw parallels between the sociological functions of food consumption and those of nostalgia. They share in common a social and cultural function, they contribute to strengthening self-identity and they are both ambivalent. Even if these «common points» between nostalgia and food behaviour could also characterise other themes, it is relevant to describe the way they converge.

### ***2.1 A social and cultural act***

Halbwachs (1912) was one of the first sociologists to analyze meals as “a social institution playing a fundamental part in socialising and transmitting the norms and values of social groups”. Similarly, nostalgia regenerates and sustains a whole sense of cultural meanings: this function is fulfilled by identifying and supporting a common cultural worldview (Sedikides *et al.*, 2005). Both nostalgia and food practices tend to increase people’s feeling of belonging to a culture (Baumeister et Leary, 1995). Remembering people who were a meaningful part of our past strengthens our feeling of belonging to a social group and invigorates connectedness within the group.

Nostalgia establishes a symbolic connection with people or events from the past and consumption objects are significant evidence of the past (Belk, 1991), even if the past is experienced indirectly (Stern, 1992). These consumption objects, such as family recipes or specific food products, can stir up nostalgic emotions and memories. Baker *et al.* (2005) have described the nostalgic responses and associations related to various consumers’ favourite recipes. The results show that these recipes are associated with rituals performed on feast days, significant events, birthdays, new seasons or recovering from illnesses. Recipes contribute to structuring families and support the intergenerational transmission of the know-how.

After demonstrating that nostalgia and food practices are social and cultural acts, we are going to explain to what extent these two concepts contribute to the attainment of identity. Nostalgia strengthens and augments selfhood: it reduces sources of uncertainty, increases one’s ability to deal with the present and restores self-worth by resorting, at least momentarily, to an idealised past (Kleiner, 1977; Kaplan, 1987).

## ***2.2 Identity Attainment***

Quite consistently with the part played by nostalgia in the attainment of identity, Baker *et al.* (2005) show that family recipes are packed with many elements of selfhood. Favourite recipes are often related to happy or intense childhood memories, such as birthdays or time spent with people they loved. A food activity or a mere cooking smell stirs up memories and creates nostalgic associations. Just like these dear objects either owned or inherited (Curasi, 1999; Price *et al.*, 2000), recipes are left to the people we love, hoping they will also love them and will be reminded of special moments.

Nostalgic links and memories can be conveyed by food practices, whose symbolic function contributes to shaping families, increasing intergenerational links, strengthening selfhood or transmitting rituals. Food practices help bring back memories and past experiences through nostalgic bonds conveying the memory of people, places or events. Kessous and Roux (2008) point out that food products are particularly likely to stir nostalgic remembrances, especially from one's childhood.

A further feature shared by both nostalgia and food consumption can account for their similarity, that is the ambivalence existing between their positive and negative aspects.

### ***2.3 Ambivalence***

The consumers' complex behaviour concerning food may be characterized by their three ambivalent attitudes when eating, as described by Beardsworth (1995): ambivalent pleasure-displeasure approach, ambivalent health-disease approach, and life-death approach. The ambivalent pleasure-displeasure approach relies on taste-distaste. Indeed, eating can be a source of pleasure and joy, but may also cause distaste to the extent of vomiting. Poulain (2002) considers that "this ambivalence accounts for the fact that food may be both a source of content and intense sensual pleasure but may also cause a range of unpleasant sensations, from mere unpleasantness to revolting disgust responsible for sickness, and even vomiting. So, anxiety has a sensory and hedonistic component".

Similarly, nostalgia is a bitter-sweet emotional reaction which can stir sadness or yearning as well as joy and solace. Hence depending on the occasion, this reaction can be positive or negative or both at the same time. Nostalgia is considered as a bittersweet emotion and as Dickinson and Erben (2006) remind it: "Below the surface of the idealized memory of nostalgia there may be hidden conflicts, a point that may explain some of "the bitter" component of nostalgia".

The second part of our paper has emphasized the common points between food consumption and nostalgia from a theoretical point of view. The following exploratory qualitative study will definitely confirm the part played by nostalgia in food consumption.

## **3. EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NOSTALGIC FOOD CONSUMPTION ACTIVITIES**



A qualitative study of the influence of nostalgia on consumer behavior has been performed. Three hundred interviewees aged 16 to 84, half males, half females have been asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire. The respondents had to answer the following two questions with as many details as possible:

1. *Describe a situation in which you have experienced nostalgia and describe all the emotions you have felt on this occasion*
2. *Describe a nostalgic situation associated with a consumption activity and all the related emotions you have experienced*

We have tried to better understand individual perception, the situations and the emotions related to nostalgia as well as the recurring nostalgic consumption activities. Out of the 224 descriptions of nostalgic consumptions, approximately half of them (46%) deal with food consumption. In the next paragraph, we are going to describe the themes mentioned by the respondents and we are going to illustrate them with verbatim. In order to help analyse the qualitative data, we have used a computer-assisted analysis NVivo 2.0.

### ***3.1 Themes characterizing nostalgic food consumption***

The analysis of the results has pointed to six main themes:

- Food products related to childhood;
- Yearning for products;
- Substitute products;
- Products related to homesickness;
- Products for special occasions;
- Rediscovering products;

Nearly half of these food consumption activities involve food products related to childhood. For instance, Patrice (32 years old) said *«In a supermarket, I came across the Balisto chocolate bars that used to be my snack when in primary school. They are sweet memories of innocence and relying on my parents. »*, or Céline (28 years old) *«Upon seeing marshmallows in a supermarket, I felt a mixture of joy and sadness »*. These memories may also convey time spent in the family, more particularly with the mother or the grandmother. Martine (35 Years old) remembers: *«While I was purchasing a pack of biscuits, I stopped in front of the Lu strawberry cookies, because these were what my mother used to give me for my tea. I felt both joy and yearning»*. Similarly, Claire (22 years old) is aware of her nostalgic purchasing

behaviour: *«Whenever I buy some Benco, it reminds me of my childhood, when my mother would give us, my cousin and I, bread with butter and Benco, that we would eat under the veranda while playing cards. What I feel is a mixture of comfort, happiness, but at the same time of yearning for this time gone past»*. The respondents' accounts clearly show the importance of rituals in nostalgic food consumption. These rituals imply a common place, a precise time and the presence of people around (family or friends).

Next comes the yearning for products which are no longer available or whose production has changed. This feeling is mostly found with people over 60 who think that things were better before: François (67 years old) points out *«You no longer find our childhood sweets, which makes me feel nostalgic, it was better before»*, Maurice (75 years old) says: *«When I buy tomatoes, I really yearn for those you could find 30 years ago. They were juicy fruit that you could eat just like that. I really feel sad, but also angry because today no product is genuine, everything is artificially redesigned»*. All these people are yearning for their past, which corresponds to the bitter dimension of nostalgia. This finding is in line with Davis' view (1979) who considers that elderly people find solace in the past to get comfort from their shrinking prospects.

Other people very well know that the products consumed are just copies of what they used to have; still, they remind them of happy times. These products act as substitutes filling a gap. Sometimes, these substitutes replace products that people can no longer have because the person who used to prepare or cook them has gone away or are deceased. As Frederic reminds (28 years old) *«I always feel nostalgic when I buy some Bonne Maman jam because it reminds me of my mother who used to give us bread with jam and we were always in such a hurry that we couldn't wait to sit down to eat them. Happy because the memory made me smile but also sad because my mother no longer prepares my breakfast»*. Daniel (37 years old) declares: *«Whenever I have some frozen moussaka, it always reminds me of the dish my mother and aunt used to cook, but it has nothing to do with theirs. I sadly miss the people who are no longer there»*. We are dealing here with the nostalgia for family, family recipes and time spend with family rather than for brand products.

Although nostalgia is mainly caused by time elapsing (Divard and Robert-Demontrond, 1997), it may also be due to homesickness. Some respondents who have left their homeland feel nostalgia because they cannot find in their host country the products of their country of

origin. Soraya (20 years old) explains: *«I am from Morocco, I go back to my parents' once a year, but in the meantime in France, I keep buying Garbit couscous, even if it is not very trendy. It comforts me while waiting to go back »*. Yves (49 years old) wrote: *«When I was living in the USA, I would sometimes go to a bakery which sold croissants, which was not very common over there. It reminded me of the good French bakeries and I would always feel both happy and proud. »*. These nostalgic recollections are quite similar to nostalgia as defined by Hofer (1688) who considered it as equivalent to homesickness.

Some products are consumed on special occasions. As an example, the respondents mention the products they have on feast days or on special occasions, just like what René (78 years old): *«The "pain au chocolat" was only bought on one special occasion, which was the annual visit to the eye specialist in Paris with my parents; it was exceptional and that brought intense pleasure »*. These scarce moments are engraved in people's minds and can be idealized in their autobiographic memory but they are always associated with intense and highly emotional occasions, triggering precise recollections such as the date, the name of the persons attending the event or the emotions experienced.

Lastly, some respondents associate the nostalgic experience with a food product that they had not had for long and that they rediscover. Just like Laurent (29 years old): *«Indeed! When, as an adolescent, I discovered that my childhood cookies were no longer sold, I felt so sad! And yet, now they're back into the shops, these Quaddro biscuits that my Dad used to buy me when I was in nursery school. It made me feel both nostalgic and happy as it reminded me of my childhood. I have bought some, I really felt like having some again »*. Rediscovering a product long forgotten makes it easier for the consumers to buy it because they are willing to recreate the emotions experienced in the past and their associated memories. Juliette (27 years old) says *«I was looking for sweets for my nephew when I came across some of the sweets I used to eat as a child and which I had not seen ever since. I thought those Frizzy Panzy lollipops that looked like tongues that you would dip into a bitter kind of powder were no longer for sale. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of well-being, from so far away, I could almost feel the taste. I bought two right away, one for me, one for my nephew »*. These answers definitely support the empirical study by Sierra and McQuitty (2007) who investigate the determinants of nostalgic purchasing acts. Their results show that nostalgic consumption practices are influenced by an attraction for the past and a specific attitude in this respect.

Nostalgic food consumption activities described by the respondents involve branded products (38%) and unbranded products (62%) to a larger extent. People can travel back into the past thanks to unbranded products attached to some period of their childhood, for instance home-made cakes and pies but even pasta that are closely related to personal moments.

The design of the product more than its taste seems to evoke a feeling of nostalgia which once more triggers the will to buy or the purchasing act itself: «*Banania re-marketed in limited numbers the original metal box of my childhood, which stirred up the memory of the chocolate my mother would give me and some yearning for time that flies so quickly, that time, long ago, when I used to live at my parents'*» (Gregory, 30 years old). In some other cases, a long-lasting packaging will trigger the purchasing act much more readily than a revamping of the initial packaging: «*One of my childhood products has kept almost the same packaging, symbols, colours and logos: the Nestlé milky sweets. I sometimes buy some, just to taste back childhood flavours. It's such an enjoyable feeling of being comfortable and safe*» (Fabrice, 25 years old). These two elements, back to original packaging or long-lasting characteristics may well reassure consumers. After defining the themes inherent to food nostalgia, we are going to review the different types of food nostalgia referred to in our research as well as described in literature.

### **3.2 Typology of food nostalgia**

Through the respondents' answers, three different types of food nostalgia, in-keeping with the definition of nostalgia, emerge. All researchers agree on a definition of nostalgia as being an ambivalent emotional reaction (Belleli, 1991; Holbrook et Schindler, 1991; Batcho, 1995 ; Divard et Robert-Demontrond, 1997). Indeed, nostalgia may be defined as a sweet, bitter or bittersweet emotional reaction. Through nostalgia, people may travel back to some specific past time and their feeling of nostalgia may trigger emotions or feelings experienced then. The respondents' answers have been encoded into three categories and defined as:

- *Positive food nostalgia* (sweet): a food product is linked to positive memories and to emotional reactions such as joy, happiness, comfort or peacefulness

- *Negative food nostalgia* (bitter); a food product is linked to negative memories and to emotional reactions such as regret, sadness or even anger.

- *Ambivalent food nostalgia* (bittersweet): a food product is linked to both positive and negative memories, emotional reactions are ambivalent and imply contradictory emotions such as joy and sadness.

Most answers belong to the positive food nostalgia (51%) class. The products mentioned are products that people have not consumed for long, sometimes since childhood and which evoke happy moments. Most of the time, people have bought these products again to travel back into their memories. Sweets, biscuits, cakes, jam are the most often quoted products whatever the age of the respondents. Sweet food is associated to the sweet pleasures of childhood. To a lesser extent, some salted products are quoted, mainly by elderly respondents or in connection with homesickness.

In decreasing order of importance, food consumption linked to ambivalent food nostalgia comes next (33%). Products recall nice memories but are kind of blurred with a feeling of sadness or regret because those times are over.

*«I always feel nostalgic when I buy some Bonne Maman jam because it reminds me of my mother who used to give us bread with jam and we were always in such a hurry that we couldn't wait to sit down to eat them. Happy because the memory made me smile, but also sad because my mother no longer prepares my breakfast »* (Nawel, 27 years old). This ambivalent nostalgia is similar to what Batcho (1995) has reported in her work, that is a lack, something missing vis-à-vis people, feelings or objects. Lack has thus been described as being part of ambivalent nostalgia, for instance *«When I went into a sweetshop, I found those chewing-gum tubes that I hadn't seen for so long. It reminded me of nursery and primary school where you had to share them with all our friends. I was happy and at the same time I missed the simple pleasures of my generation»* (Carole, 30 years old). These answers clearly illustrate the bittersweet feature of ambivalent food nostalgia.

Lastly, negative food nostalgia (16%) when people evoke the yearning for a product or a brand no longer available or produced in a different manner. This feeling is linked to yearning for savors of yore and also to distaste for current products. Reactions can be very strong. *«I am nostalgic of the taste of the old «flan » When I eat one today, I feel disgusted, fed up because it no longer tastes the same »* (Denis, 65 years old). The food products, even if they've been enjoyed in the past, can no longer be seen in a positive light because they are associated to people who are no longer present or a too distant past.

## CONCLUSION

This research highlights the significant part played by the concept of nostalgia in food consumption. This close bond between food and nostalgia can be accounted for by two factors. First of all, food consumption addresses our five senses, and more particularly the

senses of smell and taste which imprint the consumers' mind with strong memories, hence their bond with nostalgia. According to Hirsch (1992), the sense of smell has the deepest imprint. On the other hand, eating is a complex social act and consumers who, today, lack traditional landmarks can be troubled by the great number of food crises. Many researchers stress that nostalgia contributes to people's feeling of safety, as a food product which has already been consumed and is associated with positive memories reduces consumers' risk-taking experience (Hirsch, 1992; Stern, 1992; Baker and Kennedy, 1994; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003).

Concerning theoretical contributions, this first exploratory work characterises nostalgic food consumption through 6 themes: childhood, yearning, substitution, homesickness, special occasions and rediscovery. Besides, three types of food nostalgia consumption emerge: positive, negative and ambivalent nostalgia. Respondents mostly express positive nostalgia. Hence, the food processing industry should definitely rely on this type of nostalgia to promote their products. The typology of food nostalgia supports the theory of emotional transfer according to which the advertising content may influence consumers' behavior concerning the brand, the product and purchasing intention (Bettman, 1979; Stayman and Aaker, 1998; Muehling and Sprott, 2004). A product which has remained the same throughout its life cycle can be an indication of consumers' long-lasting preferences. Childhood memories will most certainly be used for a better understanding of what brands mean to the consumers and the way they relate to them (Braun-LaTour *et al.*, 2007).

Managerial applications concern a variety of fields: communication strategies of food brands, product design and packaging. In the field of communication strategies, one or several themes characterising food nostalgia can be used to promote products. The use of childhood, happy family times and of intergenerational transmission is particularly suitable for the communication strategies of food brands. Communication can support the notion of intergenerational transmission of «good products» by emphasizing the nostalgic touch related to childhood. When it comes to the design of products and packaging, consumers pay a particular attention to products and packaging which last over time and thus act as reassuring landmarks. Therefore, brands should be very careful when it comes to logo or packaging changes.

Yet, this preliminary research work has some limitations which may be due to the fact that the qualitative exploratory study may have failed to identify all the features characterizing food nostalgia despite the diversity and size of our sample. Conducting a larger scale study and checking whether its results substantiate our preliminary comments and conclusions opens new avenues for future qualitative and quantitative research.

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