

**Diamonds and Rust:
The Affective Ambivalence of Nostalgia**

Joost M. Leunissen

University of Winchester, UK

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Corresponding author: Joost M. Leunissen, University of Winchester. Sparkford Road,
Winchester, United Kingdom, SO22 4NR. Email: joost.leunissen@winchester.ac.uk **Abstract**

Affective ambivalence is the simultaneous experience of oppositely valenced emotions, such as happiness and sadness. Historic writings on the valence of nostalgia have proposed that nostalgia can best be conceptualized as an ambivalent emotion. A growing body of research provides empirical evidence for this proposal. Here, I review and summarize this evidence that nostalgia is an ambivalent emotion, albeit more positive than negative. I end by discussing implications and future research directions.

Keywords: nostalgia, affect, emotional ambivalence, mixed emotions

How does nostalgia make you feel? Do you feel happy because you remember a positive experience from your past, or sad because this experience can never be revisited and is therefore forever out of reach? It could be both, an experience referred to as affective ambivalence. Affective ambivalence is the simultaneous experience of oppositely valenced affect or emotions [1, 2]. Here, I review evidence that nostalgia has an ambivalent affective signature. I provide historic and contemporary perspectives on nostalgia's ambivalence and discuss findings consistent with the notion that nostalgia is an ambivalent emotion. Finally, I sketch an agenda for future research.

Theoretical Views on Nostalgia's Ambivalence

The conceptualization of nostalgia as an ambivalent emotion can be traced to psychoanalytic writings [3,4]. Werman [5, pp. 392-393] described nostalgia as "... an ambivalently felt, affective-cognitive experience. Its cognitive aspects typically consist of a memory of a particular place at a given time... The affect associated with these memories are characteristically described as bittersweet, indicating a wistful pleasure, a joy tinged with sadness." Psychoanalysts attributed the ambivalent character of nostalgia to its aetiology. Nostalgia, they argued, stems from a sense of separation from the prenatal or pre-oedipal mother. Kaplan [6, p. 466] described nostalgia as: "...an acute yearning for a union with the pre-oedipal mother, a saddening farewell to childhood, a defence against mourning, or a longing for a past forever lost." Similarly, Martin [7, p. 100] characterized nostalgia "...as behavior which expresses an escape from life, a return to the womb, a 'death instinct.'" This strong desire to return to the womb, or prenatal state, is borne out of longing for perfect happiness, only experienced in the womb. Fodor [8, p. 35] explained: "The outstanding motive behind the desire to return into the womb is the attainment of happiness in the only perfect form we have known." Nostalgia signifies the desire to return to a state of perfect happiness given that it stems from unresolved conflicts in oneness and separation [9]. For example, the prenatal and pre-oedipal infant has a relationship with the mother that is characterized by a sense of oneness—a blissful union. When the mother-infant relationship develops into the oedipal stage, the infant is driven away from this perfect state. The infant

experiences relational shortcomings and frustrations, starting to long for the union. In essence, the infant is longing for a return to the womb, a longing that underlies nostalgia [7, 9].

Psychoanalysts, then, defined nostalgia as an internal conflict between the desire to return to a valued object and the realization that this is impossible. Ambivalence ensues, as it entails the simultaneous experience of happiness and sadness. As Werman [5, p. 393] puts it: "Whatever else the sadness indicates, it always acknowledges that the past is in fact irretrievable. It is the subtlety, iridescence, and ambivalence of these feelings that gives nostalgia its inimitable coloration." Psychoanalysts also maintained that the focus on the ambivalent affective signature of nostalgia sets this "condition" apart from other pathologies, such as depression or homesickness. For example, Kaplan [6, p. 467] cautioned against equating nostalgia with depression: "In the literature, it appears that once nostalgia becomes synonymous with longing for a lost or idealized past it becomes classified as a variant of depression, and the pleasurable components are neglected and ignored. The problem with discounting the pleasurable elements is that it can lead to a confusion on the observation of the affect."

The conflict between a positive past and irretrievable loss remains at the core of theorizing on ambivalence in the context nostalgia. For example, when an event elicits conflicting perceptions on gains and losses, it creates ambivalent affect [2]. Most theorizing on the ambivalent signature of nostalgia is aligned with differential appraisals of an event [10,11]. Nostalgic memories are positively appraised but juxtaposed on appraisals of loss. This idea has received empirical support [11]. Nostalgia is positively associated with appraisals of pleasantness, and with appraisals of irretrievable loss, although the association between nostalgia and pleasantness is stronger than the association between nostalgia and irretrievable loss [11]. Hence, nostalgia has an unusual appraisal profile such that the event is both construed positively and to a lesser extent as an irretrievable loss. Nostalgia is also experienced as more similar to other positive self-relevant emotions than negative self-relevant emotions, further supporting the idea that although ambivalent, nostalgia is more positive than negative [12]. Additional evidence for differential appraisals comes from the structure of

nostalgic narratives, which typically follow a redemption structure in which a negative life event progresses into a positive one [13, 14]. Such a structure can cause ambivalence affect due to the differential appraisals of the constellation of memories that is activated, albeit they are likely to cause more positive than negative affect [13].

Empirical Evidence for Nostalgia's Ambivalence

In the following, I review lay conceptions on nostalgia, as well as correlational and experimental evidence consistent with nostalgia's ambivalence.

Lay Conceptions of Nostalgia

Three studies examining the prototypical features of nostalgia suggest that lay people consider ambivalence part of the construct. Hepper and colleagues [15] implicated a prototype analysis to identify central and peripheral feature of nostalgia. Mixed emotions emerged as a peripheral feature. Using the same methodology, ambivalence again emerged as a peripheral feature of nostalgia across 18 cultures [16]. Ambivalence, then, is likely a culturally invariant feature of nostalgia. There were some cross-cultural differences in ambivalence [16].

Participants from Asian countries endorsed peripheral features, like sadness and mixed emotions, more than participants from Western countries. In both studies, happiness was rated as central and sadness as a peripheral feature, further attesting to the notion that nostalgia is an ambivalent but predominantly positive emotion.

Cheung and colleagues [17] studied anticipated nostalgia: expecting to feel nostalgic for upcoming events. Participants listed feelings and emotions they expected to experience when anticipating nostalgia about their graduation. Affective ambivalence emerged as the eighth most expected affective reaction. In addition, the researchers also asked participants to indicate the extent to which anticipated nostalgia gives rise to 17 affective responses. Mixed emotions was the fifth-highest rated expected affective response to anticipated nostalgia and was rated equally likely as happiness. Sadness was rated the 13th most likely affective response to anticipated nostalgia.

Cross-Sectional Evidence

Nostalgia is a common response to music [18]. Barrett and colleagues [19] studied music-evoked nostalgia. After listening to song excerpts, participants reported whether the

song was nostalgic to them, and indicated from a list of 13 positive and 16 negative emotions which they experienced. The authors operationalized affective ambivalence with a dichotomous MIN measure. The MIN is an operationalization of affective ambivalence, defined as the lower score of two oppositely valenced emotions [20]. In this study, ambivalence was present if a participant experienced both positive and negative emotions in response to the song and was absent if a participant experienced solely positive or negative emotions. Ambivalence was positively associated with music- evoked nostalgia. Barrett et al. also tested the emotional profiles of three different types of songs: nostalgic, non-nostalgic autobiographically salient, and neither. Participants reported more affective ambivalence for nostalgic compared to non-nostalgic autobiographically salient and non-nostalgic nonautobiographically salient songs.

Additional correlational evidence for the association between nostalgia and affective ambivalence comes from a study on nostalgic Facebook posts [21]. The authors identified publicly available Facebook posts by searching for 13 key phrases common to nostalgic discourse (e.g., “nostalgic,” “down memory lane,” “those were the days”). They compared 10,000 nostalgic posts (containing the key phrases) to 10,000 non-nostalgic posts (not containing the key phrases). They measured emotionality in the posts using the LIWC software [22], which counts emotion words based on a predefined word library. Of nostalgic posts 30.1% contained both positive and negative emotion words compared to 12.7% of the non-nostalgic posts. Conversely, among posts that contained solely positive or solely negative emotion words, there was no difference between nostalgic and non-nostalgic posts.

Experimental Evidence

In order to test the effect of nostalgia on affective ambivalence, Leunissen and colleagues [10] combined individual-level data from 41 experiments. For each experiment, they included all available emotions measures alongside sex, age, and type of nostalgia induction. The combined dataset contained data from four types of nostalgia inductions: the Event Reflection Task (ERT; [4]), a narrative method; the prototype induction [15], a method based on central prototypical features of nostalgia; song lyrics induction [23], a method based on songs that participants considered nostalgic (versus not); and a music induction [23]. The

combined data included 56 emotions, 30 positive and 26 negative. Leunissen et al. calculated three MIN measures: One for overall positive and negative affect indices, one for the PANAS positive and negative affect indices [26], and one for “happy” and “sad.” They found that nostalgia increased positive affect and ambivalence (for the MIN of overall positive and negative affect, and the MIN of “happy” and “sad”). Hence, nostalgia inductions increase positive and ambivalent affect. These effects were qualified by the nostalgia induction type for happy, sad, and the MIN of happy and sad. Nostalgia (compared to control) increased happiness in the case of the ERT, lyrics and prototype induction, increased sadness in the ERT and music inductions, decreased sadness in the lyrics and prototype inductions, and increased ambivalence (MIN of happy and sad) in the ERT and song inductions. These variations in nostalgia's affective signature are attributable to the different control conditions used. For example, the control condition of the prototype induction elicits high levels of negative affect due to the type of keywords (i.e., peripheral features of nostalgia) participants are asked to retrieve a memory for. In contrast, in ERT inductions, nostalgia compared to control did increase both happiness and sadness. Once again, the effect of nostalgia on positive affect appeared stronger than on negative affect.

Leunissen and colleagues [10] proceeded to test the effects of nostalgia on discrete positive and negative emotions. They found that nostalgia increased most (24 out of the 30) positive emotions but only increased three negative emotions (sad, homesick, and regret). Hence, it appears that the effect of nostalgia on positive affect is general to most positive emotions, whereas the effect of nostalgia on negative affect is highly specific to emotions characterized by sadness and loss. These authors further tested whether sex, age, and culture moderated the effect of nostalgia on affective ambivalence. Only sex moderated the effect of nostalgia on the MIN of happy and sad: Women reported higher affective ambivalence than men in the nostalgia condition. Age and culture distributions were highly skewed towards participants in their 20s and from Western cultures in this dataset though.

Finally, Wildschut et al. [25] carried out an experiment among Syrian refugees who were forcibly displaced and lived in Saudi Arabia. They induced nostalgia with the ERT.

Nostalgia (relative to control) increased ambivalent affect, as assessed by the MIN for positive and negative affect indices (measured as averages of positive and negative emotion scores).

Conclusions and Future Directions

Initial studies furnished some evidence that nostalgia is an ambivalent emotion, although almost none of them had nostalgia's ambivalence as its primary focus. A growing body of research provides evidence that nostalgia is indeed an ambivalent emotion, although more positive than negative. Future research on nostalgia's ambivalence might consider the following three directions.

First, theorizing on nostalgia's affective profile assumes that differential appraisals produce nostalgia's affective ambivalence. However, no empirical work has directly tested this proposition. Hence, a key step in solidifying understanding of the ambivalent nature of nostalgia is to put proposition this to empirical scrutiny

A second direction of research pertains to outcomes of ambivalence. Does ambivalence explain any outcomes associated with nostalgia? Does it matter that nostalgia is an ambivalent emotion? Theorizing on affective ambivalence has pointed toward health benefits [26] and creativity [27] as such outcomes, and nostalgia has been linked with them in prior work. Hence, future research would do well to investigate whether these outcomes, and more, are driven at least in part by affective ambivalence.

A third direction of research pertains to the specific mix in nostalgia's ambivalent signature. Leunissen et al. [10] found that positive affect is dominant in the ambivalent signature of nostalgia. However, the exact makeup of positive and negative affect in nostalgia can differ based on whether it is elicited or experienced in daily life [e.g., 28]. Future research should investigate what predicts the balance in positive and negative affect in nostalgia.

Conclusion

Nostalgia has an unusual affective signature in that it increases positive and negative affect simultaneously. A growing body of research indeed supports that nostalgia can best be described as an ambivalent emotion. Nevertheless, the research also shows that the positive affective component is stronger than the negative affective component. Nostalgia is therefore best described as a joy tinged with sadness.

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