That's Classic: The Impact of Nostalgic Media on Sports Consumers

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In spring 2020, North American sports fans were abuzz over events surrounding the National Basketball Association (NBA). Unlike other years, however, the buzz was not due to the NBA playoffs, instead a result of the docuseries “The Last Dance,” which chronicled Michael Jordan’s era with the Chicago Bulls (NBA, 2020). The television series was the highlight of a spring and summer featuring many documentaries and replays of classic games that television networks and other media were forced to turn to following the suspension of live sports due to COVID-19.

Across television, viewers were met with classic games including NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament games on CBS Sports (Steinberg, 2020) and World Series games on Fox Sports (Gleeson, 2020). At the core of this programming following the onset of COVID-19 was one central theme: nostalgia. Nostalgia is defined as a cognitive-affective experience in which exposure to a stimulus, in this case a classic game or documentary, evokes a thought and consequent emotion (Holbrook & Schindler, 1991). The emotion often then produces a behavioral response, including increased consumption of products and services (Loveland, Smeesters, & Mandel, 2010).

With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine the presence of nostalgia in media consumption in the months following the onset of COVID-19. A period of discontinuity, this time period served as an opportune time to examine the potential for media – and specifically, sport media – to provide positive social and psychological benefits to individuals in a time of need. Namely, the study sought to examine the presence of and impact of nostalgia in media, with the ultimate goal of learning how it affects social, emotional, and behavioral responses.

Data were collected via an online survey using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to access participants. The survey employed measures utilized to assess the impact of personal, collective, and historical nostalgia on participants’ social well-being, pleasure, and behavioral intentions. Multiple statistical analyses were employed to test the study’s research questions. Examination of the impact of types of nostalgia on the outcome variables revealed historical and collective nostalgia each exhibiting a positive relationship with a respondent’s social well-being and consequent behavioral intentions. Moreover, MANOVA indicated that mean scores for nostalgia were significantly greater when viewing documentaries, as well as replays of highlights, in comparison to viewing discussion or analysis of a game and/or sport story.

The results yield both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the results exhibit the impact of nostalgic media content on consumers, a unique contribution to literature. Further, the role of each type of nostalgia’s impact on affective responses and behavioral intentions also serves as a novel contribution to research. Practically, the study revealed the types of content that engendered the most nostalgia and positive outcomes, of great interest for media. Ultimately, the results support sport media’s ability to deliver content that engenders positive hedonics and increases consumer intentions that are meaningful for organizations.