Consumer Cognitive Responses towards Types of Nostalgic Appeals in Advertising

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ABSTRACT: This research compares the effects of Personal and Historical Nostalgia on cognitive responses. Using an experimental research design and 806 respondents, the type, ratios, and valence of thoughts occurring when respondents experience a specific nostalgic response are examined. Both nostalgic conditions were successful in stimulating specific types of nostalgic thoughts, showing a clear distinction between the two types of nostalgia. The distinction between these types is commonly overlooked. Findings show Personal Nostalgia stimulates a more positively valenced set of thoughts compared to Historical, but also fewer brand / message and ad execution related thoughts. Comparative implications of using these two appeals are discussed.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, advertising effectiveness, marketing strategy, advertising

This research identifies significant differences in cognitive reactions between respondents experiencing one of two specific forms of nostalgic response; namely Personal and Historical Nostalgia. Beneficial and detrimental cognitive reactions as a result of each nostalgic response type are found. This indicates the need for practitioners and academics alike to ensure they approach a nostalgic appeal as containing distinct response types, rather than the common used view of an appeal simply being nostalgic. The paper begins with a brief background and theoretical underpinnings before moving to hypotheses development. The methods used follow, before analysis / discussion of the results. Finally, limitations and future direction are discussed.

BACKGROUND AND KEY UNDERPINNINGS

Nostalgia is described as an individual's longing for the past, and yearning for yesterday (Holbrook 1993). The commonly taken unified view of nostalgia, which does not take into account specific nostalgic response types, is examined extensively by authors and findings on nostalgia’s influence on responses under this unified view are widely available (e.g. Baker and Kennedy 1994; Belk 1991; Davis 1979; Holbrook and Schindler 1991; Muehling and Sprott 2004). As such, the focus of this background is on the concepts of Personal and Historical Nostalgia, why these two appeals are distinct, and why they should be comparatively examined in terms of their effect on cognition. In very brief terms, Personal Nostalgia occurs when reactions are generated from a personally remembered
past (Personal Nostalgia: ‘the way I was’), while Historical Nostalgia deals with reactions generated from a time in history that the respondent did not experience directly, even a time before they were born (historical / communal nostalgia: ‘the way it was’) (Havlena and Holak 1991; Stern 1992). Due to the nature of the response defined by the definitions, Personal Nostalgia deals with Autobiographical Memory retrieval (e.g. Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993), while Historical Nostalgia, which can deal with a time that one did not experience directly, even before he / she was born (Stern 1992), does not share this trait. Instead Historical Nostalgia draws upon Collective Memory (Halbwachs 1950, 1992). The variation in cognitive retrieval and reaction taking place is expected to have a significant influence on cognitive responses important to practitioners and academics alike. This postulation is further explored in the hypothesis development.

**HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

A common initial response to an advertising appeal is thoughts retrieved / generated by the consumer by means of their cognitive / memory process. While theories of memory and thought retrieval have roots in psychology, marketers have adapted the theories to explain marketing outcomes. Firstly, concerning memory, literature on memory accessibility suggests salient thoughts should be more easily retrieved and produced in greater quantity than less salient thoughts (Bettman 1979; Craik and Lockhart 1972; Wright 1980). Research in this area also shows salient thoughts are often self-referencing (Krugman (1967) discusses personal connections) and thus this response may influence mental-processing activities when attitudes are formed or retrieved (e.g. Greenwald 1968). Havlena and Holak (1991) suggest that by using ad executional elements (music, jingles, visual images etc.) advertisers are capable of explicitly encouraging ‘nostalgic reflection’ (i.e. retrieve memories of past times). While nostalgic thoughts differ from autobiographical memories (Muehling and Sprott 2004), as they generally provide a ‘filtered’ version of the past (Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Stern 1992), nostalgic thoughts are by nature still self-referencing thoughts and some personal connections due to their connection or association with an individual's real or idealized past (Belk 1990; Holak and Havlena 1992). Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993) show that advertising that encourages
autobiographical memories retrieval evokes a higher number of thoughts about those autobiographical experiences and higher levels of net positive affect than ads not encouraging such memory retrieval. These autobiographical memories by definition are self-referencing. According to research by Muehling and Sprott (2004) the most salient thoughts of consumers exposed to a nostalgic evoking print advert were those that made a connection (often a personal connection) to something from the past thus nostalgic cues should be capable of evoking a more salient set of cognitive responses. Therefore, through the original concept of memory retrieval and accessibility, a consumer subjected to a nostalgic cue laden advert should experience nostalgic thoughts that are more easily retrieved and produced at a greater proportion to total thoughts (Muehling and Sprott 2004). In regards to total thoughts when exposed to either a nostalgic or a non-nostalgic print advert, Muehling and Sprott (2004) found participants produce approximately the same number of thoughts. This suggests that nostalgic ads may prompt a certain type of thought production, as opposed to simply prompting more thoughts in general, which is contrary to the hypothesis and literature that proclaims salient thoughts should be produced in greater quantity than less salient thoughts (Bettman 1979; Craik and Lockhart 1972; Wright 1980). While the discussed findings are accurate for expanding knowledge on nostalgia, previous studies test nostalgia as a unified concept, not taking into account the existence of Personal and Historical Nostalgia.

Nostalgia is also associated with emotional (feeling) responses (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Belk 1991; Davis 1979; Holak and Havlena 1998; Holbrook and Schindler 1991), and literature shows that nostalgic thoughts are generally positive (filtering out thoughts that are unpleasant) (Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Stern 1992). Muehling and Sprott (2004) found a more positively valenced set of nostalgic thoughts is produced when exposing respondents to a nostalgic (as compared to non-nostalgic) print advert. Finally, Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993) and Williams and Faber (1999) caution that using adverts that encouraging the retrieval of autobiographical memories may act as a distracter thus evoking fewer thoughts about the advertised product’s features than adverts not encouraging such form of memory retrieval. Therefore, advertisers may inadvertently cause product-related thoughts to be less accessible. The number of brand / message-related thoughts when exposed to nostalgic adverts
was empirically examined by Muehling and Sprott (2004) where they found that the number of brand / message related (product) thoughts generated during ad exposure is not significantly different between treatment groups. Although this is regarding simply the number of brand / message related (product) thoughts, as opposed to the feature recall and brand evaluation tested by Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner (1993) which revealed that when autobiographical memories (self referencing, as per nostalgic thoughts) are encouraged a reduced analysis of, and memory for, product information in consumers resulted. Again, these studies test nostalgia only as a unified type, supporting the view that prior research focus is only on a unified view of nostalgia.

The focus of this research is to begin to fill the significant gap in the literature on the uses / implications of specifically Personal and Historical Nostalgia. As previously stated, it is suggested that salient thoughts should be more easily retrieved and produced in greater quantity than would less salient thoughts (Bettman 1979; Craik and Lockhart 1972; Wright 1980). Havlena and Holak (1991) and Stern (1992) found that nostalgic thoughts may be generated from either a personally remembered past (Personal Nostalgia) or from a time in history before one was born (Historical / communal nostalgia). As Personal Nostalgia is more self-referencing than Historical Nostalgia by definition and thus salient (as in line with the previous discussion on Autobiographical Memory), a marketer may choose to use Personal Nostalgia in place of a Historical Nostalgia appeal due to the self-referencing nature. The prior discussed nature of nostalgic thoughts also indicates that Personal Nostalgia will evoke a more positively valenced set of thoughts. But as Personal Nostalgia by definition is more self-referencing, in reference to the knowledge that this may act as a distracter of brand / message thoughts (Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993; Williams and Faber 1999), marketers may find that Personal Nostalgia reactions will result in even fewer brand / message related thoughts generated at the time of ad exposure, as compared to those experiencing Historic Nostalgia. The remaining thought type category examined in this research (ad-execution) may suffer this same fate, however, based on previous research, there does not seem to be a significant difference suggested as a result of the change in cognitive reaction type. Thus, the hypothesis is formed:
H1: Compared to respondents experiencing a Historical Nostalgic reaction, respondents experiencing a Personal Nostalgic reaction will significantly experience:

- a greater number of personal nostalgic thoughts
- a smaller number of historical nostalgic thoughts
- a greater proportion of personal nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts
- a smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts
- an increase in positively valenced personal nostalgic thoughts
- a decrease in positively valenced historical nostalgic thoughts
- a greater number of total thoughts
- a more positively valenced set of thoughts
- fewer brand / message-related thoughts
- no change in ad-execution related thoughts

METHOD

The study uses an experimental design. Two constructed broadcast style adverts laden with Personal or Historical nostalgic cues were produced. Kodak was the brand used in the advertisements. Kodak was chosen due to an expected level of familiarity with respondents, and the brands successful use in prior nostalgic studies (see Muehling and Sprott 2004). These ads were pre-tested in focus groups with respondents similar to that of the main study to ensure suitability. The cues included in the adverts are drawn from the definition of the constructs and from Stern’s (1992) work which describes Personal Nostalgia as elicited from cues of familiarity, lifelike incidents and ordinary people, while Historical Nostalgia connects to historical incidents, romance, aspirational / idealized characters, and sometimes exaggerated tones. As such, the Personal advert contains children’s birthday parties, school balls, and similar cues, while the historical advert shows icons and incidents from past eras with a focus on black and white and sepia images. The experiment took place in a classroom style setting. Respondents were informed all responses would remain anonymous and were asked to not undertake any discussion during the exercise. They then viewed the advert before completing the survey.
Sample

The total usable number of respondents experiencing Personal Nostalgia is 514. The Historical Nostalgia group has 292 valid responses. Responses are considered valid based on a manipulation check capable of testing the specific type and level of nostalgic reaction. This is subsequently discussed in the measures section of this paper. The mean age of the Personal Nostalgic group is 20.5, and the Historical 20.4. A t-test shows no significant difference in age ($t(804) = 0.89, p = .37$) between the Personal ($M = 20.55, SD = 1.96$) and Historical ($M = 20.42, SD = 1.93$) group. The Personal group has 47.5% males, 52.5% female, and the historical group 49% males, 51% female. Student sampling is used for convenience, because youth are targeted with both nostalgic appeals, and as students are proposed as representative of general consumers (DelVecchio 2000; Yavas 1994).

Measures

A thought elicitation exercise was used to collect the respondent’s cognitive responses. The process followed is as per previous studies, including research on nostalgia (e.g. Muehling and Sprott 2004; Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 1998; Wright 1980; Homer 1990; Baumgartner, Sujan and Bettman 1992; Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner 1993; Calder, Insko, and Yandell 1974). Respondents wrote down their thoughts and self evaluated the valence. Two judges working independently, blind to the treatment conditions, coded the thoughts. Thoughts received one of five codes: Personal Nostalgia related, Historical Nostalgia related, brand / message-related, ad execution-related, or miscellaneous. Total counts, valenced indices, ratios, and mean scores were then produced to test the hypothesis. A manipulation check capable of testing the level of each specific nostalgic response type was undertaken to ensure respondents allocated to each nostalgic group were experiencing the intended form of nostalgia (Marchegiani and Phau 2007a, 2007b). For example, a respondent may experience a higher level of Personal Nostalgia as opposed to Historical Nostalgia when viewing the Historical cue laden advert, perhaps due to some past experience. As the research is designed to examine the difference between respondent’s experiencing either Personal or Historical Nostalgia, this respondent would not belong in the Historical group. Finally, demographic information was collected.
ANALYSIS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A summary of these results, the mean, and standard deviation scores for each measure can be seen at Table 1. Results of analysis are discussed within the context of each part of:

**H1: Compared to respondents experiencing a Historical Nostalgic reaction, respondents experiencing a Personal Nostalgic reaction will significantly experience:**

a) a greater number of personal nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

Respondents experiencing Personal Nostalgia experience a significantly higher number of Personal Nostalgia related thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(735.37) = 17.55, p = .000$). This result is a positive indication of the appropriateness of the adverts and manipulation check used in this study as those indicated as experiencing Personal Nostalgia by the manipulation check have a significantly higher number of Personal Nostalgia related thoughts. This result, in combination with H1b), indicates that respondents experiencing Personal Nostalgia as opposed to Historical Nostalgia have a significant change in the number of thoughts related to the specific type of nostalgia experienced. This supports the key underpinning of the research that suggests different cognitive responses occur when experiencing a specific type of nostalgic response. More specifically, it can be seen that respondents do draw on their own personal connections (see Krugman 1967) and autobiographical memory (e.g. Brewer 1986; Neisser 1988) when experiencing Personal Nostalgia compared to Historical. This result alone signifies that there is a need to distinguish between Personal and Historical Nostalgia not only theoretically but also managerially as such a significant difference in cognitive responses is expected to result in changes to other reactions related to cognition, such as attitudes and intentions. This is a possibility that future studies should examine as this will have major implications for marketers employing nostalgic appeals.

b) a smaller number of historical nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

Respondents experiencing Personal Nostalgia experience a significantly lower number of Historical Nostalgia related thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(345.76) = 13.80, p = .000$). As discussed in similarly in H1a, this result shows that those indicated as experiencing Historical
Nostalgia do in fact have a higher number of Historical Nostalgia related thoughts and less Personal Nostalgia related thoughts. This again empirically establishes a clear distinction in cognitive reaction between the two distinct types of nostalgia. As the cognitive response in this would thus be based more on ‘collective’ memory (Halbwachs 1950; 1992) as opposed to autobiographical, this change in personal connections could have implications on many other consumer responses, such as memory accessibility, distraction, emotions, attitudes, intentions, and more.

c) a greater proportion of personal nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experience a significantly greater proportion of nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(796.64) = 21.23, p = .000$). This result provides an indication of the salience of nostalgic thoughts being produced, in addition to the suitability of the advert and scale used. Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993) also found that adverts that encourage retrieval of autobiographical memories evoke more thoughts about those experiences. Understanding the salience of thoughts in addition to the type of thought under each nostalgic condition provides an indication of the importance of nostalgic thoughts to respondents.

d) a smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experience a significantly smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(370.68) = 16.11, p = .000$). Similar to the result in $H_{1c}$, this shows that the proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thought increases then experiencing Historical Nostalgia, again indicating the power and salience of nostalgic thoughts, regardless of whether they are Personal or Historical Nostalgia related.

e) an increase in positively valenced personal nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experience a significantly more positively valenced set of Personal Nostalgia related thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(701.05) = 16.49, p = .000$). This result indicates that not only are Personal Nostalgia related thoughts more common under the Personal condition ($H_{1a}$), but also that these thoughts are significantly more positive in valence compared to Personal Nostalgia related thoughts occurring in those respondents experiencing
Historical Nostalgia. This supports the literature (e.g. Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Holbrook and Schindler 1991; Muehling and Sprott 2004; Stern 1992) that asserts nostalgic responses as generally being of a positive / pleasant nature. A higher level of net positive affect in ads encouraging autobiographical responses compared to ads not encouraging such memory retrieval was also found by Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993). For practitioners this indicates that an advert eliciting Personal Nostalgia compared to Historical Nostalgia will not only have more Personal Nostalgia related thoughts, but that these thoughts are also more positively valenced.

f) a decrease in positively valenced historical nostalgic thoughts - ACCEPTED

This is better discussed in terms of respondents experiencing Historical Nostalgia as having more positive Historical Nostalgia related thoughts than the Historical Thoughts occurring in those experiencing Personal Nostalgia \( t(349.04) = 11.34, p = .000 \). This, in conjunction to H_{1e}, indicates that the type of nostalgic thought related to the specific type of nostalgia being experienced is generally more positive / pleasant. As such, cognition related to autobiographical memory under the Personal Nostalgia condition (H_{1e}) and collective memory responses under the Historical Nostalgia condition both appear to result in positively valenced responses.

g) a greater number of total thoughts - REJECTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia do not experience a significantly greater number of total thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia \( t(804) = 1.43, p = .15 \). This result indicates that the type of nostalgia being experienced does not significantly affect the number of thoughts in general, but rather the type or nature of the thoughts (as evidenced by H_{1a,b,i,j}). This result is reminiscent of Muehling and Sprott’s (2004) study where those respondents exposed to a nostalgia advertising appeal in comparison to a non-nostalgic appeal did not produce a higher number of thoughts in general, but instead experienced a certain type of thought, as is the case in this study. This may signify that the amount of cognitive attention or elaboration occurring under each condition does not change, thus providing no support for either type of nostalgic appeal being more beneficial or detrimental than the other in this regard.
h) a more positively valenced set of thoughts - ACCEPTED

Respondents experiencing Personal Nostalgia experience a significantly more positively valenced set of thoughts overall than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(804) = 4.90, p = .000$). The previous hypothesis exploring nostalgic thoughts shows that there has been a more positively valenced set of thoughts occurring in-sync with the form of nostalgia being elicited. However, the finding of this hypothesis is of significance as it shows that not only does Personal Nostalgia result in positive Personal Nostalgia related thoughts, but that a Personal Nostalgia reaction changes the valence of the entire cognitive set in respondents, even those not related to nostalgia. This hypothesis makes no distinction between the type of thought (nostalgic, ad-execution, brand / message related or even miscellaneous) and this general positive reaction supports the literature that indicates that those experiencing nostalgia, especially of an autobiographical nature, might transfer these positive nostalgic responses to other non-nostalgic related responses. This transfer affect of positive autobiographical related reactions on to overall cognitive responses may have a transference influence to emotions, attitudes, intentions, and more. Essentially, this result indicates that a more positive valence of respondent's cognitive responses exists when experiencing Personal rather than Historical Nostalgia. This has clear implications for practitioners looking to utilize a nostalgic response in terms of predicting implications / consumer behavior.

i) fewer brand / message-related thoughts - ACCEPTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia experience significantly fewer brand / message-related thoughts than those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(535.77) = 2.90, p = .004$). This supports the literature (e.g. Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993) in showing that those experiencing Personal Nostalgia reactions which are generally more salient and autobiographical in nature than Historical Nostalgia results in a decrease of thoughts about the brand / message. This is likely due to a combination of the Personal Nostalgia related thoughts being more salient and thus occurring as a substitute to other thoughts. As such, they can be seen as somewhat of a distraction from other thoughts. This is a possible problem for brands employing Personal Nostalgia to achieve the personal connection and positive valence affect, but still desire respondents to concentrate on the message.
being divulged. This result is likely to change in importance depending on the level of involvement or type of processing expected to be used by potential customers.

j) no change in ad-execution related thoughts - REJECTED

Those experiencing Personal Nostalgia do experience significantly less ad-execution related thoughts compared to those experiencing Historical Nostalgia ($t(804) = .32, p = .751$). This indicates the type of nostalgia experienced influences not only brand / message thoughts and nostalgic related thoughts as hypothesised, but also ad-execution related thoughts, which was unexpected. This is likely to be similar to the concern of researchers (e.g. Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993) and finding is H1 in that by increasing autobiographical memories consumers will think less about other elements portrayed in the advert. This result could signify less need for using celebrities, special effects and other ad execution related stimulus when using Personal as opposed to Historical Nostalgia is experienced as consumers spend less cognitive processing power on these elements anyway due to their concentration being on the autobiographical memory response occurring. However, where ad-execution thoughts are expected to be beneficial for the brand, Personal Nostalgia may act as an unwanted distraction. As such, practitioners should be aware of this possible detrimental response.

[Insert Table 1 here]

**SUMMARY DISCUSSION OF RESULTS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

As a general overview of the results, it is evident that Personal and Historical Nostalgia are clearly two distinct advertising appeals at least in terms of the cognitive responses taking place, and that future research should treat these appeals as such. This is opposed to the commonly used unified view of nostalgia that does not take into account these differences. This is evidenced in part by the specific nostalgic type of thoughts being elicited ($H_{1a, b, c, d}$), which, as discussed, theory suggests is drawing on different memory types (autobiographic vs. collective). Secondly, it is clear that Personal Nostalgia has some benefits over Historical Nostalgia in producing more positively valenced thoughts in general. However, some possible trade-offs occur as evidenced by the significant drop in brand /
message related thoughts. The significant decrease in ad-execution related thoughts may be beneficial when there is an expense to produce the adverts, but could be counter-productive where execution is hoped to be a focal point for the consumer. Simply put, academics and practitioners need to be aware of the two varying nostalgic response types and their differing influence on respondent’s cognitive reactions.

While student populations are considered representative of general consumers (DelVecchio 2000; Yavas 1994) and are considered suitable for this research, future research should replicate this study under varying age groups to add generalisability and examine any effects of age on the results. Any changes as a result of culture may also be worthwhile to explore. The results should also be examined with varying product categories of differing levels of involvement and processing, as well as brands of varying levels of familiarity. Perhaps the most limiting aspect is this paper exploration of only cognitive reactions in respondents. Similar studies examining other responses that may change as a result of the type of nostalgia experienced, for example emotions, attitudes, and intention, should be conducted.
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Table 1: Summary of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis 1 (Personal vs. Historical)</th>
<th>Accept / Reject</th>
<th>Personal Mean (sd)</th>
<th>Historical Mean (sd)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) a greater number of personal nostalgic thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>3.71* (3.65)</td>
<td>0.60 (1.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) a smaller number of historical nostalgic thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>0.34* (0.87)</td>
<td>2.17 (2.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) a greater proportion of personal nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>0.51* (0.37)</td>
<td>0.09* (0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) a smaller proportion of historical nostalgic thoughts to total thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>0.05* (0.14)</td>
<td>0.33 (0.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) an increase in positively valenced personal nostalgic thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>+2.97* (3.15)</td>
<td>+0.44 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) a decrease in positively valenced historical nostalgic thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>+0.21* (0.68)</td>
<td>+1.36 (1.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g) a greater number of total thoughts</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>6.73 (3.07)</td>
<td>6.42 (2.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h) a more positively valenced set of thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>+4.43* (3.41)</td>
<td>+3.24 (3.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) fewer brand / message-related thoughts</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>0.79* (1.19)</td>
<td>1.01 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j) no change in ad-execution related thoughts</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>1.65* (1.96)</td>
<td>2.23 (2.16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean scores with standard deviations in parenthesis, *indicates significant difference between groups