ONE OF THE ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCES OF OPINION AMONG RESEARCHERS of collective memory regards the question of construction versus selection in the process of shaping social recollections. One approach can be traced back to the writings of the field’s founder, Maurice Halbwachs, who contended that the process of creating collective memories is an absolute one: the need to reconstruct the past and the social group’s ability to utilize it are so great that the actual origins of past events are of secondary importance. That is, the factual past has only limited significance in the process of shaping collective memories so that they will suit current needs (46–51). In contrast, according to Barry Schwartz (395–96), the main activity conducted in the process of creating collective memories is not construction, but rather selection. The past is not flexible in a way that enables us to create, or even invent, historic facts, and thus social memories change mainly via the process by which some events are emphasized and others are concealed. We choose factual elements that fit our larger master-narratives, and ignore or minimize the importance of others.

A valuable insight on the construction-selection debate can be found in a study published in Psychology & Marketing (Braun, Ellis & Loftus). During a multiphase experiment, students were first shown fake Disney ads containing a first-person nostalgic recollection of a childhood visit to Disney World during which the excited writer (then a
child) shook hands with a Mickey Mouse character. The next week, the students who were exposed to the ad showed a significant increase in their tendency to report a past visit to Disney World in which they shook hands with a Mickey Mouse character (in contrast to students from the control group). In a consecutive experiment, students were exposed to fake Disney ads detailing a first-person nostalgic recollection of a childhood visit to Disney World during which the writer shook hands with two characters that could not have been there when the students were growing up—Bugs Bunny, who is a Warner Bros. character and Ariel, from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, which was not yet filmed at that time. A week later, students from the experiment group were more likely to recollect their impossible meetings with Bugs Bunny and Ariel than those who were not exposed to the ads (with a statistically significant difference in the Bugs Bunny case).

The above-mentioned study does not, of course, definitely resolve the construction-selection debate by suggesting that false nostalgic recollections could simply be planted into people's reservoir of memories. Still, it stresses the notion that collective memory research could benefit from the fruits of studies conducted by researchers from a variety of disciplines and approaches. Moreover, it points to the argument that stands at the core of this article: the exploration of how advertisements representing the past could inform and advance the general field of collective memory research. An analytical focus on the means by which advertisements present commercial goods as purchasable “realms of memory” is a worthwhile endeavor for several reasons. First, the sheer size and impact of the advertising industry makes it almost impossible to ignore its contribution to processes of collective recollecting. A content analysis of US television commercials suggested that ten percent of all commercials contained nostalgic elements such as references to “olden days,” period-oriented music, etc. (Unger, McConocha & Faier). A similar nostalgia study of Israeli advertising yielded similar results (Hetsroni). Considering the magnitude of advertising, this output of nostalgic references offers a significant realm of research for scholars of collective memory.

Second, the advertising industry offers a unique perspective on the study of collective memory due to some of the ways in which advertising has been conceptualized and studied through the years. The field of collective memory research has grown rapidly in the last two decades, during which most collective memory studies have focused on
the processes by which various, mostly powerful agencies (national movements, the educational system, the media) produce interpretations of the past. A smaller number of studies have been dedicated to the consumers' side— that is, to a systematic evaluation of the ways in which the general public actually conceptualizes the past and the degree to which it embraces preferred institutional readings of that past (Schuman & Scott). In contrast, the study of advertising routinely looks at the ways in which the public assesses the messages that are produced by marketers and advertisers. Thus, several advertising researchers have explored the ways in which consumers grasp the term *nostalgia*, the gratifications they gain from nostalgic contents and the commodities which consumers value as nostalgia-laden (Holak & Havlena 1991; Holak & Havlena 1992; Holbrook 1993; Holbrook 1995; Holbrook & Schindler; Stern).

Third, some of the most significant features of collective recollecting could be illuminated through the study of the representation of the past via advertising due to the extreme, or rather “pure” circumstances of such commercially motivated communication. Among other characterizations, collective memories have been defined through their functional utilization (by interested agents), dynamic nature, inherent conflict with academic-analytical representations of the past, and the fact that in order to become truly “collective” they have to be manifested through concrete measures such as rituals, monuments, and popular culture artifacts (Gillis; Olick & Robbins; Zelizer). Within this context, the realm of advertising provides an extreme realization of all of these characterizations: in commercial advertising, it is always clear who is the agent that sponsors the specific marketed version of the past. Or at least the motives are clear, because there is nothing ambiguous about the profit-driven final goals of advertising. At the same time, advertising is also a cultural site that highlights the abstract-concrete paradox, which is embedded within the process of collective recollecting: as discussed in the article, advertising seems to demonstrate in an illuminating manner the process by which abstract, or even spiritual meanings are bestowed upon concrete artifacts. Advertising also offers a uniquely condensed (and thus internally comparable) case study for the exploration of collective memories, because the vast majority of advertisements that turn to the past do so through the implementation of a similar approach, or genre, based on nostalgic appeals; because advertisers do not for the most part want to question or challenge
consumers' perceptions of the past, they tend to present an almost uniform rosy picture of the way things were. Furthermore, as a consequence of these nostalgic tendencies, the logic of advertising offers one of the most ahistorical conceptualizations of the past, which amplifies the tension between analytical and popular interpretations of history.

Finally, because the advertising industry is such a powerful entity and because it presents such an extreme (utilitarian, commercial, anchored within the concrete, noncommitted to factual accuracy) perception of how the past ought to be narrated, it might be viewed as a collective memory “seismograph” or frontier. Hence, for instance, advertising’s ongoing presentation of fragmented and targeted pasts, discussed in the final section of the article, might be pointing at key developments which are relevant for other realms in the field of collective memory research.

The article is composed of six sections. The first section defines the role of advertising as a symbolic system. The second section discusses the way in which advertising positions commodities as nostalgic realms of memory. The third, fourth, and fifth sections explore the construction of such commercial realms of memory through an exploration of three salient advertising campaigns that have implemented nostalgic appeals. The final section discusses the article’s findings and discusses their future implications.

Advertising Nostalgia

The essence of advertising as a cultural-economic practice is embedded within several interrelated paradoxes: advertising pretends to address consumers as individuals while in fact it perceives them through marketing categories, and it is unable to forecast their differentiated comprehension of marketed messages (Alperstein). Thus, the reality which is presented in ads is not real or fictional, but rather an imitation of “typical reality.” “Advertising,” argues Michael Schudson “does not claim to present reality as it is but as it should be—life and lives worth emulating. It is always photography or drama or discourse with a message—rarely picturing individuals, it shows people only as incarnations of larger social categories” (215). Similarly, advertising claims to promote freedom of choice while in fact, it only promotes the
freedom to make consuming-related choices: the pluralism and democracy offered by advertising and consumerism are limited “by disguising the freedom to consume as genuine autonomy” (Lasch 74).

Following a similar line, the production of advertising messages is embedded within a fundamental paradox: advertising markets material products through the promise of nonmaterial gains. Because in many cases there is no essential difference between similar products, they are marketed through the promise that their consumption can bestow upon the consumer prestige, friendship, sex appeal, and so on (Fowles 13). Hence, advertising does not deal primarily with products, but rather with symbols: “ads arrange, organize and steer meanings into signs that can be inscribed on products—always geared to transferring the value of one meaning system to another” (Goldman 5). The coupling of goods and symbolic values is an ancient phenomenon, which is of course not exclusive to current capitalist societies. In this sense, the advertising industry is the successor of previous religious and traditional systems that sanctified specific goods and charged them with meaning (Lears). Advertising promises consumers that purchasing products will enable them to fulfill needs that cannot be purchased, and so as Raymond Williams pointedly put it: “The short description of the pattern we have here is magic: a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with highly developed scientific technology” (27).

The conjunction between material consumption and nonmaterial, or even spiritual, goals is a helpful launching point for the more specific discussion of how advertising constructs the past and the ways in which this construction figures within the larger spectrum of collective memory representations. If advertising, as Schudson offers, does not present reality as it is “but as it should be,” then advertising’s portrayal of the past features the past as it should have been. Advertising describes the past in a way that enables it to relate this description to needs that can be fulfilled through consumption. Such a need can be identified in the nostalgic yearning to relate one’s self to her past, so she can relive pleasant memories. But because advertising cannot really address individual needs and yearnings, it needs to either appropriate common nostalgic themes or construct them.

When the term nostalgia (from Greek: nosos—return to native land, algos—suffering or grief) was first coined by the physician Johannes
Hofer in 1688, it defined a medical diagnosis. Hofer found that some Swiss mercenaries who were fighting far away from their native land felt extremely homesick to the extent that they became melancholic, apathetic, and even suicidal (Davis 1–4). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the meaning of the term changed, and *nostalgia* is no longer understood in terms of space, but rather in terms of time. Today, *nostalgia* is defined as a longing for the past, which was better, simpler, or full of hope: “Nostalgia is memory with the pain removed. The pain is today” (Lowenthal 8). Nostalgia is also no longer understood as an illness, but rather as a personal and cultural practice. Davis’ sociology of nostalgia conceptualizes the need for nostalgia as a defense mechanism that characterizes people who are going through transitions related to their age, residence, or occupation. Clinging to pleasant memories of the past enables individuals who face major life-cycle discontinuities to maintain their identity in the face of transitions. Thus, the tendency to engage in nostalgic feelings varies over the course of the individual’s life: “nostalgia-proneness” has been hypothesized to peak as individuals move into middle age and during their retirement years. Because nostalgia is used as a defense mechanism to reinforce a person’s self-value, the nostalgic perception of the past portrays it as a happy and meaningful experience. The past is always better than the present, even when objective conditions suggest otherwise. Hence, in several studies interviewees expressed their nostalgia for events such as the Great Depression or the Blitz of London (Lowenthal).

Davis explains the role of nostalgia within the social realm through a similar functional impulse: the public tendency to go back to the “good old days” intensifies in eras of social turmoil and radical change. Thus, Davis conceptualized the nostalgia wave observed through the 1970s as an adaptation, or balancing mechanism to the earlier, radical social changes of the 1960s. Other assessments of the social impact of nostalgia are far more critical, pointing to its conservative and reactionary influences (Combs; DaSilva & Faught; Doane & Hodges). At the same time, there are those who believe that nostalgic yearnings might actually encourage subversive and radical readings of the present: looking at a better past might actually aid us in understanding the nature of current oppressive social mechanisms (Talmon 29–30; Tannock).

While nostalgia is supposed to connect a person to his own past, studies show that nostalgic recollections tend to blend the private with
the public. Furthermore, people can feel nostalgic not only about historical events in which they personally did not take part, but also about times in which they did not live—the “Roaring ’20s,” the late nineteenth century (Holak & Havlena 1991; Holak & Havlena 1992). All of these traits of modern nostalgia have made it a useful source of reference for advertisers. The fact that people are increasingly drawn to nostalgic themes and that nostalgia is used to strengthen people’s self-identity suggests that nostalgia-charged advertising campaigns have a good chance of being positively received by consumers. Because people tend to relate their nostalgic feelings to major historical and generational occurrences, nostalgia can be used as means of reaching mass audiences. Furthermore, because people can relate to nostalgic feelings through objects, advertisers can channel nostalgic messages via material goods. All of this makes the use of nostalgia extremely advantageous for the advertising industry, or as one columnist commented: “People are studying nostalgia today the way they studied sex in advertising three years ago” (Holbrook & Schindler 330).

Advertised Products as Constructed Realms of Memory

Various sources qualify the notion that nostalgic themes are, indeed, abundant in consumer society (Kitch 2002; Kitch 2004; Lowenthal; Naughton & Vlasic), and that it is especially salient in advertising (Darling; Ebenkamp; Stern; Thompson). This phenomenon could be explained by the aforementioned effectiveness of marketing that utilizes nostalgic themes, as well as by the fact that the baby boomers are moving into their 60s. Because nostalgic tendencies peak during retirement years, it is likely that baby boomers would be most responsive to ads that incorporate nostalgic themes. Moreover, because nostalgia is perceived as an escapist outlet from real-life social and economic distress, current events such as the 9/11 attacks and other recent terrorist activity and threats might be keeping the nostalgia on demand. Still, the continuous popularity of nostalgia through the last few decades begs a more theoretical conceptualization that would position the successful commercial use of nostalgia within the larger field of collective memory research. Such a guiding concept can be found in Pierre Nora’s work on the “realms of memory.”
In their monumental study, Nora and his colleagues aimed to codify and analyze the corpus of geographical locations, historical figures, monuments, buildings, literary works, and artistic objects that constitute and symbolize French national identity. Their fundamental argument was that these realms of memory enabled the French throughout the years to imagine their shared belonging to a tightly knit national community. At the same time, these realms of memory remain flexible in their meaning, in a way that fosters the existence of challenging readings by various interpreters of France’s past and present. Hence for instance, the image of Joan of Arc has been appropriated through the years by the political left and the right (Winock). However, these realms of memory do not only bring together political rivals, but also bridge between memory and history. According to Nora, these are two distinct dichotomies: memory is the significant product of a traditional society in which people lived “inside” the past through long-existing traditions and shared values. In contrast, a historical perception of the past is a significant product of a secular, analytical, and critical society, in which the past is viewed from the “outside,” and without any real ability to share it with previous generations. The only points in which history and memory meet are realms of memory that contain both symbolic and functional meanings (Nora 14–15). These realms of memory—an old history schoolbook, a yearly meeting of veteran war comrades, or the Eiffel Tower—are historical because they provide sites for empirical explorations of the French past. But at the same time, they are also spaces of memory that enable the French to communally relive this past, and to feel—at least partially—an integral part of it. Or as Lawrence Kritzman aptly described the current status of French realms of memory, “what remains of the idea of nationhood is engendered by a nostalgic reflection, articulated through the disjunctive remembrance of things past” (xii).

Building upon this theoretical framework, I suggest to conceptualize advertisements’ nostalgic look at the past as a process in which commercial goods are constructed as “realms of memory”: ads relate commodities to an assumed shared past, and promise consumers that the purchase of the advertised products will enable them to relive a better and happier era. The products are symbols of the past, but at the same time they are also materializations of this past within the present. The nostalgic appeal of advertising campaigns promises consumers an emotional connection to the past that downplays a more analytical and skeptical historical view.
An exploration of the ways in which advertising constructs products as realms of memory could assist us in mapping the unique position of advertising within the wider spectrum of current representations of the past. If the inevitable gap between memory and history is a predominant feature of modern collective recollecting, then the commercial construction of products as realms of memory (that could possibly bridge this divide) provides an extreme development of that original concept. For while some advertisements present “traditional” realms of memory through the promotion of products that are inherently connected to some “real history,” other advisements use the relative freedom (from historical accuracy) of commercial representations of the past in order to produce ultimately constructed (if not invented) “hyper-realms of memory.” Furthermore, the discussion of advertised products as realms of memory offers a new perceptive on how such realms of memory influence social associations and collective action. The original realm of memory concept addressed the construction of national identity, which is manifested mainly through collective and uniform action such as participation in state rituals. In contrast, the exploration of how advertising constructs the past challenges us with a new situation: while the sentiments aroused by positioning products as realms of memory might still be related to “old” forms of social association, and especially the nation, the final goal of such advertising is almost always individual consumption.

What follows is an initial exploration of the ways in which advertised products are constructed as realms of memory. The three campaigns discussed here were chosen because they illustrate the positioning of the specific case of the use of nostalgic appeals in advertising within the larger spectrum of collective memory studies. Therefore, the three campaigns offer paradigmatic examples of the ways in which advertising constructs products as nostalgic realms of memory, while at the same time they vary in ways that stress significant problematics in the presentation of the past. In March 1998, Volkswagen started marketing the New Beetle, an improved and updated version of the original Beetle. The New Beetle’s advertising campaign, which was designed and produced by the Arnold Communications advertising agency, gained massive media coverage and was professionally acknowledged when it won first prize at the international Advertising Festival in Cannes, France (Wells). The same year, the Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency produced five television
commercials for Maxwell House Coffee that contained salient nostalgic themes. Similarly, in 1994 Thomasville Furniture introduced its new Country Inns & Back Roads line, which was advertised by Pascale & Associates agency through an emphasis on nostalgic appeals.

Commodities and their Assigned Symbolic Values

As mentioned, the concept of advertising as a symbolic system is embedded within a fundamental paradox: advertising markets material products through the promise of nonmaterial gains. In the case of the three campaigns mentioned above, the construction of the advertised products as realms of memory was meant to position the three products as means through which consumers could relate to a better past. At the same time, the three campaigns differed in their methods of incorporating these nostalgic themes within the ads. One of the print ads that accompanied the New Beetle campaign declared that the Beetle was “back by popular demand” and elaborated:

When's the last time you questioned society? The dark suits. The black pumps. The leather briefcases. The suburban two-stories. The tan sedans. Get real. Life isn't about conforming. It's about being yourself. It's about expressing your individuality. It's about dressing the way you want, living where you want, and driving what you want.

Now Volkswagen offers a car that helps you break the tyranny of sameness: the New Beetle. Whether you're a 9-to-5 “suit” or the occasional paycheck catcher, this car urges you to be yourself.

Virtually everything about the New Beetle says something about you, the driver. From the retro-influenced, rounded exterior to the technologically advanced engine and safety features, this car sets you apart from the timid majority.

The segment clearly illuminates the inherent contradictions and hegemonic nature of advertising messages. The ad is constantly addressing the reader in a personal manner, as seen when it demands to know when was the last time he “questioned society,” or when it offers him the New Beetle as means of breaking loose from “the tyranny of sameness.” This kind of formulation reveals the need of advertising to keep a delicate balance between its appeal to the individual and its wish to reach mass audiences. Hence, the assumption that the huge number of readers exposed to this advertisement will identify with its “individual”
reading of reality undermines the supposed individuality of the message. Following the same line, the mere assumption that the readers who will be deeply influenced by the advertised message will materialize their protest through the purchase of a new car mocks the notion of social protest. Finally, the segment emphasizes the fact that most advertising campaigns aspire to promote a seemingly self-contradictory cause: the purchase of the New Beetle is supposed to bestow nonmaterialistic gains upon the consumer, that is, she will substitute spirit for matter.

Throughout the campaign the new, or rather renewed, car was positioned as a realm of memory that could connect the buyers to a happier past, located in the 1960s: the television commercial titled “Heart” claimed that “the engine’s in the front, but its heart’s in the same place”; the commercial titled “Soul” promised that “If you sold your soul in the 80s, here’s your chance to buy it back”; and the commercial titled “Flower” simply declared “Less flower, more power.” Finally, the commercial titled “Dream” showed a New Beetle changing its colors rapidly, while in the background a man asked: “What were the skies like when you were young?” to which a woman replied: “There were a lot of stars . . . The most beautiful skies. The sunsets were purple and red, and green, and . . . you don’t see that today.” The closing caption asked “What color do you dream in?”

All of the commercials addressed nostalgic themes that are related to the legacy of the 1960s. The commercials did so through the use of buzz words such as the coupling of “flower” with “power,” and by contrasting “our” materialistic era with a previous one that was permeated by ideals and dreams. Similarly, the 1960s were addressed through a humorous reference to colorful drug-related hallucinations. But all of those references were rather subtle. The commercials did not mention the 1960s or their legacy explicitly, or claim that the Beetle is a 1960s icon, perhaps because this was taken for granted as a widely accepted cultural concept. Moreover, the reference to the nostalgic value of the car was ironic and self-reflexive, a notion which was intensified through the very up-to-date design of the commercials and the accompanying music, which was mostly recent.

The construction of the New Beetle as a realm of memory that enables consumers to emotionally connect with a better past was furthered by the journalistic discourse that accompanied the campaign. Writers argued that the New Beetle has a “sense of humor and humanity” and that
it contains “a tremendous heritage for the baby boomers” (Elliott 6D). Elsewhere, it was explained that “everybody is smiling at it,” (Johnson 36) that it is a “rejuvenating tool,” and that the targeted market for the commercials was composed mostly of “believers” (Farrell 36). Furthermore, the depiction of the New Beetle as a human car and as a product through which people can express emotions was reinforced by the subordination of seemingly unrelated details to the general narrative. A report about a visit to the Mexican factory in which local workers build the New Beetle cars under the supervision of Germans engineers described the Beetle-related fraternity in the following way:

We also found [in the factory] a compelling cultural triumph . . . the operation is run by Germans and yet still manages to be a very Mexican company at heart. One visible example was set high on the front wall of the factory where hundreds of finished Beetles roll off the assembly line each day—a statue of the Virgin Mary encased in glass and surrounded with bouquets of flowers.

(Johnson 36)

While the New Beetle campaign positioned the car as a realm of memory that could relate buyers to their free-spirited or even rebellious side, the Maxwell House Coffee nostalgic campaign utilized more old-fashioned images and values. The main themes addressed by all five television commercials—through visual images as well as texts—were tradition and continuity: all five commercials integrated new and old footage, mainly of old Maxwell House Coffee commercials. Other visual references to tradition and continuity were the coupling of old and new baseball footage, old and new footage of GIs, and more. The ongoing references to tradition and continuity were not limited to separate sequences but were also addressed throughout the commercials’ narratives: a father was shown dancing with his daughter, first as a young girl and then as a bride; another father was shown teaching his son to fish; a street corner that appeared in an old Maxwell House Coffee commercial reappeared in the current commercial with the same company logo on its wall, and so forth. In general, the message of all five commercials seemed to echo a Noraian perception of communal memory as the cornerstone of traditional society, in which the past is lived within the present. This notion was reflected through the integration of various brief visual sequences in which the past and the
present were intertwined. And so the campaign offered Maxwell House Coffee as a realm of memory that could link the consumers to a yearned-for place in time, where nothing is fragmented or rapidly changing, because lives are made meaningful through common traditions and values. This nostalgic approach was not unique to this specific campaign: Maxwell House Coffee has already stressed in earlier campaigns its firm connection to past traditions and values through a focus on its own history, including the fact that it has been producing coffee since 1892; through reproductions of its original coffee packages; and by citing President Theodore Roosevelt's famous 1907 statement that the Maxwell House Coffee was “Good to the Last Drop” (McCarthy 58).

In contrast to the two previous cases, the Country Inns & Back Roads furniture line was a new product, thus its nostalgic appeal had to be, literally, manufactured. Furthermore, the specific targeting strategy of the Country Inns & Back Roads campaign differentiated it from the two other cases in which mass audiences were approached. The Country Inns & Back Roads campaign’s goal was to reach “upscale women between the ages of 31 and 59 whose interests include antiques, visiting museums, cooking and gardening” (Gattuso 20). This specific group of women was reached through a combination of mass marketing and pinpoint targeting. The campaign’s objective, as defined by the advertising agency, was to “attract the consumers in a nostalgic way by evoking emotions and reinforcing [the feeling that] the furniture and accessories were inspired by real North American country inns” (Gattuso 20). This notion of “real” antiquity was addressed through several means. First, the pieces of furniture were, naturally, designed in a manner that resembled the assumed look of old inn furnishings. Second, the advertising agency created a campaign whose slogan was “Discover the Road Less Traveled.” The television commercials emphasized nostalgic notions through “warm comfortable images and friendly voices harkening back to simpler times,” and the new line’s catalogue invited its readers to “join us for a stroll through the enchanting rooms of our unspoiled past.”

Thus, the Country Inns & Back Roads campaign is a case study in which a targeted audience—defined through age, gender and income—was reached through a purely constructed realm of memory. While the Maxwell House Coffee and the New Beetle campaigns related their messages to the past by emphasizing the fact that the advertised products (or their earlier versions) existed in the past, the Country Inns
\& Back Roads line related itself to the past through the assumed legacy of previous furnishing and via general references. Like all realms of memory, the new furniture line offered consumers a mean of emotionally connecting themselves to a common history. However, the difference between this new furniture line and original realms of memory of the Noraian kind was that this realm did not actually exist in the past, and that the group which is supposed to share its symbolic meaning was created according to marketing considerations.

Between History and Memory

Realms of memory reflect and materialize the tensions between history and memory; they exist in a liminal space between the analytical inquiry of the past and the emotional recollection of the past as a resource for reinforcing communal identification. The construction of advertised commodities as realms of memory is made possible by means of the interplay between three elements: the actual, historical past which is interpreted via the advertisement; the past of the specific product and its former advertising campaigns; and the current product, which is offered to the consumers as a realm of memory that could connect them with the two previous components.

The New Beetle was advertised as a realm of memory that provides an emotional connection to the assumed spirit of the 1960s, as well as a connection to the memory of the original product itself. Thus, segments of the new campaign addressed the legacy of the Beetle’s original advertising campaign. The Doyle Dane Bernbach advertising agency was the creator of the Beetle’s first campaign in the 1950s and 1960s, which is regarded as one of the most brilliant campaigns ever designed for a car. The DDB ads positioned the Beetle through a witty reference to its small size and alternative shape. The famed ads claimed that consumers should “Think small” and that “Ugly is only skin-deep.” The car’s image as constructed by the agency suggested the Beetle as an alternative to “the vulgarity of Detroit cars” (Vanden 98). The 1998 advertising campaign for the New Beetle referred to the previous campaign through its minimal and clean styling, its use of humor, and via the print ad that featured a New Beetle accompanied by the caption “Lime,” which was a reference to the famous original Beetle ad bearing the caption “Lemon.”

Within this context, it is important to note that the construction of both the original Beetle and the New Beetle as realms of memory were
achieved through constant concealment. The presentation of the original and new cars as emblems of the 1960s free spirit became possible through a disregard of Volkswagen’s Nazi past. Or, as Eve M. Kahn put it: DDB’s greatest accomplishment was that their advertisement campaign managed to market “a Nazi car that looked like an insect” (34). Kahn also explained that the slow increase in the Beetle’s sales in the United States during the late 1950s kept the car relatively unknown, helped to shed its Nazi legacy, and enabled it to resurface as a symbol of the 1960s generation. When the New Beetle was first marketed in 1998, the Volkswagen “on-line museum” upheld the company’s original policy of dimming the connection between Volkswagen, the car, and the Nazi regime: it briefly stated that in 1944 “12,000 people, among them 4,000 Germans, were employed in the factory.” No references were made in regard to the circumstances under which those non-German workers were employed at the factory. Current Volkswagen publications are more forthright in regard to the company’s culpability for committing war crimes, especially since the late 1990s when Volkswagen started compensating its former forced laborers. Finally, it is important to indicate that the Beetle alongside other German-made products has been addressed through the years that passed since the end of the Second World War as a realm of memory of a radically different sort. Across the world, various people, mostly Holocaust survivors and their family members, have felt that they could express their connection to the past via their attitude toward the car. In this case, the Beetle was read as a realm of memory that is an emblem of the Nazi atrocities, and thus the car was boycotted by those consumers (Novick 96–98).

The positioning of Maxwell House Coffee as an advertised realm of memory was similarly achieved through the weaving of a web of references that connected a selective historical past, the history of the product and its previous advertising campaigns, and of course, the image of the current product. The past that was molded by Maxwell House Coffee advertisers was an old-fashioned, wholesome past created through a blend of documentary and fictional images. The commercials addressed traditional American values and appropriated them as integral qualities of the marketed product: for instance, one of the commercials featured footage from a 1960s civil rights rally and declared that “As long as liberty is alive . . . Maxwell House Coffee will always be good to the last drop.” Similarly, other commercials incorporated
images that reflected patriotism (American flags and American soldiers), the American ethos of advancement and progress (images of highways and Route 66 signposts), and the ethos of American society as a melting pot. In this last case, the commercial combined familiar black-and-white footage of new immigrants waving the American flag and current images of an ethnically diverse neighborhood.

The five commercials presented a clear vision of desirable patterns of social association and charted the appropriate connections between those involved in them. In the center stands the family, or rather the home, which is the most essential realm of memory and also, of course, the place where the coffeepot is always boiling with hot coffee. The second level of belonging is the immediate community, and so the commercials’ texts claimed that all traditional values will endure “as long as home extends way beyond your doorstep.” The third level of belonging is the nation, and it will endure “as long as we always remember who we are and where we came from.” All five commercials acted as tools of collective national memory because they defined the national collective in terms of time and space, and set the nation’s boundaries: The geographic boundaries were addressed in the commercials’ titles and footage that featured the West Coast (San Francisco), the East Coast (Boston), and the Heartland (Chicago and the rural areas). The time frame featured in the commercials is a cyclic family—community—national time, which is integrated into one entity. According to the advertised messages, this continuity will go on endowing the lives of Americans with appropriate meaning as long as they will want to be “just like their fathers,” which means—at least according to this specific reading of the American past—that they will agree to fight for their country, just as their fathers did (as shown in the commercials, through current and old footage), and as long as they “remember,” that is, accept the fact that they are only one part of a greater chain of being. The national collective is therefore defined in the commercials through the manifestation of the aforementioned conditions: suitable members of the national community are those who fulfill their obligations toward their own family and toward their extended family, that is, the nation.

This form of nostalgic construction that ties the past and the present through assumed core “American” images and values is shaped, like all other collective recollections, via a process of selection. A columnist addressing a previous 1991 Maxwell House Coffee advertising cam-
campaign that implemented similar nostalgic themes criticized the selective nature of this process and its possible outcomes:

A boring ol’ parade may seem the perfect antidote for modern decadence, but really it’s just a metaphor for a myth. To escape recession, AIDS, urban violence and the disintegrating family, we are harkening to the “good old days” that never were. In 1947, polio was epidemic, Jim Crow was thriving, Europe was rubble and Hiroshima was a scorch mark on the map . . . The revisionist nostalgia of this ad may press all the right buttons to sell coffee, but (inadvertently, one hopes) it presses the wrong buttons as well—such as the ugliest impulses of the shrinking and increasingly put-upon American majority. Ah, the way things used to be! When colored people knew their place and coffee was served up by white ladies in ripple-sole shoes instead of Pakistanis in ugly 7-Eleven smocks. (Garfield 50)

The construction of the Country Inns & Back Roads furniture line as a nostalgic realm of memory was challenged by the fact that the product did not actually exist in the past. This became evident through a comparison between the Country Inns & Back Roads and the Maxwell House Coffee campaigns in terms of the way they anchored their messages through historical evidence: the Maxwell House Coffee commercials supported the authenticity of its nostalgic message through the incorporation of original black-and-white Maxwell House Coffee commercials accompanied by ongoing references to mythological American towns or neighborhoods which are concrete yet abstract images. In contrast, the Country Inns & Back Roads commercials addressed the past, but showed the present, mainly because the product did not exist before the campaign. Interestingly, the fact that the Country Inns & Back Roads campaign advertised realm of memory was not anchored within a concrete history might have contributed to its commercial failure and cancellation by Thomasville Furniture. Furthermore, the next line of furniture introduced by Thomasville Furniture, which also utilized nostalgic appeals, was centered on the image of a real-life cultural icon: Thomasville’s Ernest Hemingway line is one of the company’s glowing marketing successes (Craver).

Toward a Targeted Past

The final question I would like to pose regards the social groups that are targeted, or even shaped, through the creation of commercial realms
of memory. The targeting strategies of the three campaigns featured unique perceptions of the past, in order to reach different audiences. By doing so, the three campaigns contributed to the large-scale process of shaping the social recollection of the American past. The core messages of the Maxwell House Coffee campaign stressed the centrality of the nation in the lives of individual Americans. The constant implementation of national imagery and the ongoing references to enduring themes such as patriotism offered an image of the nation as a unified community moving through time. The New Beetle commercials and print ads were aired on television all across the United States and published in numerous magazines. The fact that the campaign did not address the 1960s and their legacy directly, but rather through "cultural winks" of sorts suggests that the campaign was aimed at a specific audience that could grasp the messages, even though they were not always explicitly expressed. The Beetle is a realm of memory through which a certain age group can relive its past, and so the campaign's nostalgic appeal was aimed to win over baby boomers. Moreover, even if the commercials appealed to other consumers who are not members of this specific age (and memory) group, it was done through the channeling of this appeal through the well-known symbolic value of the Beetle as an emblem of the 1960s. Hence, the commercials and ads acted in a complementary manner: they utilized the cultural value of the symbol while reinforcing its status.

The nostalgic themes of the Country Inns & Back Roads campaign were tailored to fit highly specific demographic needs. The targeted group in this case was defined through parameters of age, gender, and income, and then a conscious effort was made to appeal to, or even construct, this group's collective past. Consequently, this effort was reinforced through the use of segmenting techniques such as direct mailing to chosen groups. In *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World*, Joseph Turow analyzes the ways in which the media and the advertising industry target affluent segments of society (and try to break them into smaller segments) while virtually ignoring its poorer sections. The targeting of specific markets, Turow explains, is not a new phenomenon, and in previous decades advertisers and marketers already combined mass marketing with targeting. But today, the balance between mass marketing and targeting has been upset by two complementary processes: first, the advertising industry has the technological abilities to break up the society (i.e., its more well-to-do
sections) into small segments which are defined according to their “lifestyles.” And second, the developments of new media fragmented the consumers’ market through hundreds of television cable channels, the Internet, and so on. Because in the current era it is highly profitable to target segmented lifestyle niches, the media and the advertising industry have a combined vested interest in the segmentation of American society, just as they have an economic vested interest in deepening the differences between these social segments. The outcome of this process is the creation of new, segmented “media tribes” who share—among themselves—communal consumer preferences and communal images of the “outside world.”

This analysis is highly relevant for the discussion about the creation of advertised realms of memory. Collective memory researchers stress that the right to be remembered and to interpret the past are not equally distributed across society (Gillis). Some sections are more influential as interpretive communities and thus their version of the past is the one that is mostly heard in the public sphere. If we consider the fact that in our era, the advertising industry is among the most influential producers of cultural messages, its segmented portrayal of society might have a significant influence on the social perception of the past. Thus we can assume that the current use of nostalgia in advertising will lead to the construction of a past which appeals to well-defined segments of society—mainly affluent baby boomers—while ignoring other “pasts.” The construction of a segmented past that addresses “upscale women between the ages 31 and 59 whose interests include antiques, visiting museums, cooking, and gardening” is an example that might be duplicated in various forms and contexts. It does not seem likely that any kind of current advertising campaign will try to commemorate themes from the collective past of middle-aged nonwhite men or women who receive welfare payments, because those clusters of society do not interest advertisers and marketers. And so the segmented past that is created and remembered through advertising might play a role in the broader process of segmenting American society.

Conclusion

This article explored the use of nostalgia in advertising as a practice that shapes perceptions of the collective past. It offered the idea of the
“realm of memory” as a means of conceptualizing the way in which advertising represents the past. The positioning of products as constructed realms of memory offers consumers an emotional and immediate connection to an assumed better past. While doing so, advertising also influences the way consumers perceive “real” history, “as it was,” through all the means that were formerly investigated through collective memory studies: selection, personification, construction through the use of various narrative patterns, and more.

The aforementioned extreme nature of the advertising-as-memory-agent case study might contribute to the general field of collective memory research by pointing at possible future developments. As commercial entities assume an ever-growing dominance in the public sphere, the major themes discussed in this article might become more relevant for current scholars of collective recollections. While questions of construction versus selection, memory versus history, and the struggle over the right to interpret the past have been addressed throughout the field in various contexts, the meeting point between such issues and the considerations of commercial advertising adds new problematics to these themes.

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Works Cited


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