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The lasting effect of childhood circus memories: nostalgia and guilt

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Big Top Circus has experienced a decline in popularity due to changing attitudes to its former elements and to the competition from other accessible forms of entertainment. Our study explores how childhood memories of circus experiences are retold and how these are revisited in the light of changing social values and life experiences. Data was generated through sixteen discussion groups with a total of eighty people over the age of 65 who had experienced circus in their childhood. Thematic analysis found that the circus experience still creates vivid memories decades later. These memories are based around emotions engendered by the sights, sounds and smells of the circus but also the fear of danger and the unknown. Our participants fondly remembered who they were with, highlighting the importance of the relational and social aspects in such leisure experiences. These factors induced a strong sense of nostalgia, but this was tainted by the recognition that what was enjoyed then may no longer be socially acceptable. We conclude that for traditional circus to remain relevant, it needs to harness the strength of nostalgia but separate this from guilt at what circus once included. In a highly competitive live experience, environment circus needs to create heightened sensory experiences (including fear), alongside family togetherness appealing to multiple generations with potentially different values.

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Introduction

This research explores audiences' revisited memories of childhood experiences of traditional circus. Current memories of the spectacle of their visit to the Big Top, recalled decades later, affect attitudes to the circus now (Braun-LaTour et al., 2010). We therefore seek to understand how subsequent experiences, changing social norms and evolving circus representations might influence how circus is now remembered and the impact of these reformed memories on current attitudes to circus experiences.

We investigate these memories of circus through a consumer culture theory (CCT) lens. This perspective takes account of 'personal and collective identities; the lived worlds of consumers; underlying experiences; and the dynamics of the sociological categories through which these are enacted' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 870). This approach is particularly appropriate within a circus audience context as it acknowledges the collective experience, the cultural settings and the effect of such consumption experiences on self and group identity (E. Arnould et al., 2019).

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This paper therefore uses a novel exploration of memories to understand the role that memories of distant experiences play in current attitudes. Taking our participants back to ‘a trip to the circus big top in early childhood’, we prompt memories of distant experiences to expose the essences of the ‘emotion-rich experience’ (Cowley, 2007; Wood, 2020). We seek to identify how memories of the experience have been adapted to the present, and how this may inform future event design. Hence, drawing on the past, we learn lessons for the future, gaining knowledge of what makes for memorable event experiences and importantly what impact this may have on future attitudes.

The big top circus experience

The experience of U.K. traditional circus, since its inception in 1768 by Philip Astley in London, has a distinctive aesthetic that continues to permeate cultural events and experiences from traditional big top shows to street arts, festivals, film, dance, opera, theatre, television and civic events (Aguiar et al., 2016; Bouissac, 2016; Pavliv et al., 2024). Circus has been romanticised in folklore and mythology symbolising a world of ‘the other’ from spectacular feats of danger incorporating endangered species (until the use of wild animals in circuses was banned under the Wild Animals in Circuses Act 2019) to the fanfare and cacophony of circus acrobatics (Bouissac, 2014; Loring, 2007). The travelling circus was defined by its constant movement and temporary nature, which made it be seen as ‘inherently subversive’ (McLaughlin & Smith, 2024, p. 61). By moving from place to place, setting up tents overnight, and leaving as quickly as they arrived, traditional travelling circuses present a captivating contrast to the usual, venue-based experiences. The circus, as a dynamic, mobile entity, offers a glimpse into a markedly different system of socialisation and a distinct alternative lifestyle (McLaughlin & Smith, 2024).

Originally a provider of news, extravagant colour, and community gatherings, by the 1970s the circus format of act-clown-act failed to compete with other entertainment industries such as cinema and television (Carmeli, 1987, 2001; Iftime, 2017; Kruger & Saayman, 2015). Similarly, innovative circus emerging from France with influences from Moscow Circus (Burt & Lavers, 2017), and the rise of social activism such as animal rights, resulted in a diminishing travelling traditional circus. By the 1980s an urban city scape of alternative yet recognisable derivations of circus evolved (Burt & Lavers, 2017; Little, 1995). Furthermore, with the advent of circus schools originating in Paris in the 1970s, the ‘contemporary’ circus emerged and is now epitomised by companies such as ‘Cirque du Soleil’. This new form focused on cohesive concepts rather than isolated acts (Leroux, 2014). It often integrated specific artistic disciplines, blending dance and dramaturgical theatre techniques. By moving away from traditional tents, the performances reduced financial pressures and allowed for more narrative-driven events that could be staged in various venues (Purovaara, 2016).

Traditional circus still exists without the animal-centric spectacle, encompassing a full spectrum of acrobatics and feats of danger and surprise. Its legacy remains evident in elements such as the freak show, raked seating, temporary canvas arenas and staged exposed pulleys and winches. This continuity is exemplified by companies such as NoFit State and Circus of Horrors (Calver, 2020; Maleval 2016). The interplay between tradition and modernity in circus highlights the significance of imagery as a central element of the experience. In contemporary circus, visual perception, symbolism, fantasy, and imagination merge.

Whilst this research is not a critique nor a history of circus per se nor claims to explore its evolution and typologies, there is a need to understand its past and present iterations which continue to be based on ‘exotic otherness’ (McLaughlin & Smith, 2024, p. 75). This uniqueness lends itself to memorable experiences that, due to their potential controversy, may be revisited long after the event and are likely to have lasting impacts on attitudes and behavioural intentions.

We would argue that for the original Big Top audiences, the circus visit, marked by acrobatic and death-defying stunts and the unprecedented sight of wild animals, would stand out in their lives, especially when experienced as a child. By investigating how early memories of circus experiences are described and reflected upon through nostalgic discourse, we adopt a novel approach to

understanding both the personal impacts of such events and the significance of these cultural artefacts in shared lived experiences. Furthermore, we emphasise that early emotive memories may now bump against current social attitudes and be reformed to take these into account. This has important implications for experience design within circus and other live performance sectors.

Early experiences, nostalgia and attitude

The theories behind childhood consumption relationships (CCR) and post-experience attitudes suggest a need to study experience beyond the immediate or short term and to consider the longer lasting effects of memorable experiences (Cowley, 2007). Although there has been a growing body of work in leisure and tourism on memorable experience (see Hosany et al., 2022; Hosseini et al., 2023 for reviews of this work) and a few studies on lasting memories in events (e.g. Kim et al., 2022; Wood, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021) the focus tends to be on what makes an experience memorable rather than the effects of those memories on future attitudes and behavioural intention. There are few studies that explore memories and their effects, decades after the leisure experience despite recognition of the importance of this in the wider consumer psychology literature (Connell & Schau, 2012).

Also, under researched within the field, and therefore not well understood, are which elements of experience, when remembered, enable the consumer to reflect on wider social phenomena and influence their own and others' attitudes. This entails a consideration not of recent memories but of early memories. Childhood memories have had many years to be reflected upon, modified, or forgotten and are undoubtedly influenced by later experiences, as well as personal and societal changes (Cowley, 2007).

Braun-LaTour et al. (2010) have provided one of the few empirical studies exploring the link between childhood memories and consumption. As they state, this link has long been understood within psychology and has also been successfully applied by marketing consultants (e.g. Rapaille, 2004). Braun LaTour et al. (2007) also find that early memories may create myths that last and thus, 'gaining attention from customers at an early age is important', and that 'childhood memory elicitation is one way in which to uncover these deeply held associations' (Braun LaTour et al., 2007, p. 269).

For circus, a product that potentially has more impact and meaning in childhood, we would expect to see attitudes being passed on through each generation, e.g. 'my parents took me, so I'll take my children (even if I don't like it myself)', 'I'll take my grandchildren and enjoy the nostalgia'; 'I'll take my children and let them experience the wonder I felt'; or 'I didn't like it so I'm not encouraging my children to go'. Attitudes of the original attender may therefore have changed to a negative, but the attitudes passed on to others can still be positive and vice versa.

This intergenerational attitudinal influence resonates with the work of Fournier (1998) who found that brand relationships that formed early in life that were introduced by significant others, and held great emotional significance generally held the strongest bond between consumer and brand. While noteworthy, Fournier's (1998) research did not specifically focus on childhood memories.

Connell and Schau (2012) build upon Fournier's (1998, p. 369) idea of brand relationships being akin to childhood friendships and expand this to 'the constellation of consumption objects and activities that are remembered from childhood' referring to these as Childhood Consumption Relationships (CCRs). They propose that these memories of childhood consumption (our own and our observations of those around us) create long-lasting affective reactions which lead to long-term attitudes, or at least nostalgia, for the brand.

There is considerable evidence that remembered affective reaction is more important in attitude formation and change than the actual experience (Cowley, 2007), and that such memories have greater influence on us and others when shared (Wood, 2020; Wood & Kenyon, 2018). One of the reasons for distant memories having a marked effect on current attitudes is a lack of recognition of

how our memory has altered over time. For example, Lakshmanan and Krishnan's (2009) study shows how consumers are unaware of memory being changed by post-experience imagery, information, and newer experiences and that the memory, therefore, has greater influence than the original experience. The memories, or a version of them, are retained to create what Keinan and Kivetz (2011, p. 947) term, an 'experiential CV'. They discuss the 'consumption of collectable experiences' implying that to be collectable, memories must be lasting and perhaps shared. The link between memories and identity has also been explored in terms of 'loved' possessions (or, in the case of circus, experiences). These are used to create consumer identity narratives and resolve identity conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005).

As memories become more distant and coalesce through sharing and reshaping into mythic archetypes (Novick, 2000) then the power of nostalgia often comes to the fore. Nostalgia is created in the present, linking feelings about life now to an imagined version of a better past (Kessous et al., 2008). This is where the love of a childhood brand is built and is often linked to a dissatisfaction with some aspect of the present, with the brands available now, or in the case of circus, the type of entertainment on offer now (Cho, 2020).

There appears to be agreement in the psychology literature that nostalgia is induced by negative experiences of the present or negative perceptions of the individual's life situation (Goulding, 2001). This results in the past being re-examined through 'rose-tinted spectacles', which in turn only serves to increase discontentment when this 'imagined' past is contrasted with the present. This form of nostalgia can create potent attitudinal change, both positive and negative, especially when shared and validated by others (Sotelo-Duarte & 2022). This is certainly true of culturally embedded phenomena such as traditional circus. As Parker (2011, p. 566) states '...the circus is constituted by a certain nostalgia. Like eggs and community, it was better in the old days'.

In the consumer behaviour literature, nostalgia is seen more positively as 'a preference ... towards objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)' (Holbrook, 1993, p. 104). The inclusion of 'before birth' recognises the fact that nostalgia can create a particularly strong affective reaction, even when the original was never experienced by the consumer. Thus, the past can move us in a way that the present cannot. There are many reasons for this, longing for happier, simpler times (and perceiving the past as this), escape from the present, sadness for things lost or gone, or awe at how things were (Zhang et al., 2021).

Research on nostalgia within sport highlights nostalgia for the social experience and recognises that the 'object' helps trigger a nostalgic memory (Fairley & Gammon, 2005). In circus, memories may be triggered from other senses, the smells or music, for example. As we are considering early childhood memories what is remembered differs significantly from adult memories of sport, for example. Memories often coalesce to emotional responses that can centre around nostalgia. Nostalgia is an emotion that forms long after the experience and is adapted to other knowledge not necessarily relating to that experience. We distinguish, therefore, between what is remembered and the feelings about those memories now which include nostalgia.

Applying Fairley and Gammon's (2005) nostalgic objects' concept to childhood memories of circus it may be, for example, that children remember animals (objects) more than the social experience. They may know that they went with a family member but as that is the norm it is the extraordinary that tends to be recalled. This, we could argue, suggests that early childhood memories are for emotions rather than objects, although these are emotional reactions to objects.

The literature discussed above provides some theoretical perspective on the continuing effect of circus memories, the important role of nostalgia, the affective nature of early childhood memories, and the influence of this on current attitudes. In order to explore the lasting effects of early circus experiences, we sought a well-accepted framework for understanding the different aspects of extraordinary experiences. We identified Gentile et al. (2007) components of experience as an initial framework for the analysis of 'remembered circus' (see Table 1). This framework is designed to explore the different elements of experience and here we adapt its use to the memories of

Table 1. Components of experience (Adapted from Gentile et al., 2007, p. 39).

Sensorial	sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell to arouse aesthetical pleasure, excitement, satisfaction, sense of beauty
Emotional	involves the affective system through the generation of moods, feelings, emotions
Cognitive	thinking or conscious mental processes, gaining of knowledge
Pragmatic	the practical act of doing something, includes the concept of usability
Lifestyle	affirmation of the system of values and the beliefs often through the adoption of a lifestyle and behaviours
Relational	the person and beyond, social context, relationship with other people, relationship with their ideal self.

experience. The components capture the comprehensive multisensory experience of circus and can be adapted and applied to the memories shared by our participants.

We use the framework to both assess what makes circus experiences memorable and, how memory creates a desire (or not) for similar experiences, to give others similar experiences (take younger family members), or to seek out comparable experiences elsewhere. This might be a visit to an animal park, a festival, or a pantomime – alternatives that may provide some of the same elements identified above. From the literature review, it appears that the fuzziness of reflection and life experience will change childhood memories and that this revised memory will have a greater impact on current attitudes and behaviours because of this reflection.

Methods

Our approach is qualitative and abductive, using consumer culture theory (CCT) as its epistemology (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). CCT usefully emphasises the ‘context of context’, i.e the cultural and social context of the context of circus.

As traditional circus was more prevalent decades ago (Carmeli, 1987, 2001; Tait, 2012) and, as the changing nature of circus has been largely due to changing and competing leisure preferences as well as social attitudes (Kruger & Saayman, 2015, childhood consumption relationships seem a useful approach to understanding current attitudes in older adults (Braun LaTour et al., 2007). Older adults have also had the opportunity to influence other generations and experience the changes that have occurred in circus, the wider entertainment industry and in social values. Therefore, our study gathers the memories of people over 65 years old who attended a traditional circus at least once in childhood. Participants were recruited through community centres (posters and flyers) and through email distribution to those attending night classes at a university. To reflect the collective and social context of the subject of our research (circus) we chose discussion groups of between 2 and 9 people as the data generation method. The discussion groups took place in the UK over a five-month period in 2019.

Ethical approval was gained through the researchers’ academic institution’s research ethics approval process and all participants gave their informed consent for participation and use of data.

In order to stimulate the discussion of childhood memories, we set the scene at the start of each discussion group simply by introducing the topic of childhood experiences of circus. The researchers then had minimal influence on the flow of discussion, only speaking to ensure that all voices were heard and that the topic remained related to circus. As the conversation flowed, the comments of others further stimulated memories and debate. It was important to allow the memories to be discussed without influence as we were not interested in the veracity or accuracy of these but in how they now remembered and reflected on those experiences (Cowley, 2007; Wood, 2020).

The discussion groups took place in a variety of settings within the UK. Eight were held in community centres, and a further eight were held on a university campus. Those held on the university campus were facilitated by both researchers as a way of ensuring consistency in approach when conducting the other focus group discussions alone.

In total, 80 people took part in 16 focus group discussions each lasting approximately one hour. These were recorded and transcribed with participants receiving a GBP10 shopping voucher to thank them for their time. Participants ranged between 65 and 94 years old

Table 2. Summary of focus group data generation.

Focus Group	Date	Location	No. of participants	Age range	Group
Gp A	7/19/2019	Bradford	9	76-94	Sheltered housing
Gp B	7/19/2019	Bradford	6	78-83	Sheltered housing
Gp C	7/24/2019	Leeds	4	65-74	Languages Group
Gp D	7/31/2019	Bradford	5	67-78	Sheltered housing
Gp E	10/17/2019	Leeds	4	65-74	University of Third Age
Gp F	10/17/2019	Leeds	3	65-74	University of Third Age
Gp G	11/4/2019	Leeds	6	70-87	University of Third Age
Gp H	11/4/2019	Leeds	6	72-80	University of Third Age
Gp I	11/7/2019	Leeds	3	68-69	Languages Group
Gp J	11/11/2019	South Oxhey	5	78-90	Community Centre
Gp K	11/11/2019	South Oxhey	6	75-88	Community Centre
Gp L	11/11/2019	South Oxhey	6	80-94	Community Centre
Gp M	11/11/2019	South Oxhey	4	75-89	Community Centre
Gp N	12/4/2019	Leeds	2	65-72	Languages Group
Gp O	12/4/2019	Leeds	6	65-74	Languages Group
Gp P	12/13/2019	Silsden	5	70-93	Community Centre
16 Groups	Over 5 months	7 locations	80	65-94	5 sectors

and were from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. All participant names are replaced by pseudonyms ensuring anonymity. See Table 2 for an overview of the data generation.

The age demographic was chosen to explore the longevity of the influence related to memories of circus experience and to capture a range of experiences over time. Many had attended as children, had taken their own children, and more recently attended with their grandchildren. This potential span of experience added a richness to the data which would not have been achievable from younger participants.

The memory narratives were recorded with consent and analysed using a meso-discourse approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Themes were initially coded using a structured thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012) based upon Gentile et al. (2007) components and being open to emerging areas. These were cross reviewed by the research team, identifying further emerging themes and counter-reviewed against the literature, adopting an abductive methodological approach (Fischer & Guzel, 2023).

The analysis process involved three steps beginning with the detail of the past, the broader influences then and since, and ending with the outcomes of this:

- Step 1. Mapping the memories shared against the components of experience (Gentile et al., 2007)
- Step 2. Identifying wider themes, e.g. nostalgia and social values (Kessous et al., 2008)
- Step 3. Consideration of how the specifics of the past experience, filtered through life experience, affect current attitudes and behavioural intentions (Connell & Schau, 2012)

The methodological approach enabled conversations to flow generating vivid images and experiences that evolved over the length of the discussion, without intervention from the researchers. These rich conversations provided the researchers not only with memories of past circus experiences but also privileged insights into their life experience and their changing and often conflicted attitudes.

Findings

Following the analysis stages described above, four key themes emerged and are presented and discussed. These have been named using the participants' own words to reflect both the methodological approach and the content. These are, Theme 1: '*Total Mayhem and Slapstick*' –the sensorial cacophony of the circus experience, Theme 2: '*The Thrill of the Circus Danger*' –the contradictory fear and excitement of the circus' Theme 3: '*Our Window on the World*', –the profound perspective

circus gave the participant, and Theme 4: *'It was just very Different'* –the contrast of circus with the participants' lived experiences.

Each focus group generated responses spanning all six of Gentile et al. (2007) components, (see Table 1) and all the focus groups spanned experiences ranging from very early childhood memories to recent trips with grandchildren. Each participant revealed how old they were when they first went to the circus, ranging between 5 and 9 years old, and everyone had a memory of who accompanied them and the location.

As the discussion progressed, the vividness of the emerging memories increased with profound reflections on sensorial and emotional experiences (Gentile et al., 2007). These included smells such as the 'sawdust', the 'damp marquee', as well as the sounds of 'the clattering', and the 'band', often leading to a spontaneous outburst of circus fanfare in the group. These discussions generated powerful responses ranging from fear, joy, horror and surprise, based on recollections not expressed by some, for over seventy years. All discussions flickered quickly into the present, connecting seamlessly with current issues to reflect social values and attitudes (Cowley, 2007).

Theme 1: total mayhem and slapstick

Experiencing events through the senses has been explored thoroughly within the events and consumer behaviour literature, and thus forms important components within event design (Berridge, 2012; Crowther & Orefice, 2014; Getz & Page, 2016; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). Each focus group throughout the research recalled vivid recollections relating to the senses. These were not always referred to positively, yet in the re-telling of the experience there was still the propensity to conjure an impactful memory. For example, Paul (Gp A) describes the experience of greeting and then fighting a grizzly bear as part of the procession of parading bears in the streets prior to the circus show, *'I still remember the smell of him you know, grrrrrrrrrrr'* (sounds like a bear)' and Gillian (Gp B), in recounting the Big Top design, conjured elements of smell, excitement followed by an awareness of danger, as if experiencing it live for the first time,

There was a canvas corridor to go through with coloured awnings and things, and I remember the smell, the sawdust smell, always a bit moist because marquees are, aren't they? But the smells, the colours, bareback horse riders, yes, the trapeze, did they have safety nets?

Each participant recalled multiple aesthetic triggers as the discussion evolved, escalating the sensory soundscapes, sights, and smells, both beautiful and repulsive.

And the smells – the smells of the animals yes - and thinking about it now, it can't be that nice, but it was just exciting. (Pat, Group F)

There were physical displays of revulsion, facial distortions and group outbursts of spontaneous song, mimicking the music and drum rolls, despite the distance of these memories recalled. This display has been captured by Carmeli's (2001) research, based on 15 months of fieldwork, in a UK circus between 1975 and 1979. He found that when people talk about their circus experience, 'people not only invoke circus images, but also laugh and perform laughter, uttering nonsensical syllables, imitating, gesticulating, and behaving as if themselves played and captured by the circus' (Carmeli, 2001, p. 162). The detail of the memories when recounting such sensory experiences exemplifies the powerful impact of shared memory experiences (Wood, 2020; Wood & Kenyon, 2018).

It was a world we knew nothing about, it let you into this world of animals, an exoticism. (Jane GpC)

Theme 2: the thrill of the circus danger

Many of the groups enjoyed sharing the cacophony of slapstick, the glimmers and recollections of sights and smells. However, as recollections revealed senses of 'fear and excitement', recounting memories evoked new intense emotional experiences. During the retelling process, individuals

engaged in more reflective and profound reflections (Wood & Kenyon, 2018). The act of sharing memories led to increasingly vivid accounts, recalling conversations from over 50 years ago. It was observed that in all focus group discussions, ‘fear’ emerged prominently.

I was worried about the lion in the cage, I remember pestering my Dad, what if it gets out and I was more worried about my safety and I was looking about for where the doors were and would I be able to get over the steps or do I go under the steps, I was just worried about my safety. (Teresa GpO)

Fear is not limited to encounters with animals, it also extends to trapeze acts. Participants recall worrying about their safety and being anxious about potential mishaps. The circus invokes a sense of anticipated danger, bridging the line between life and death to create both astonishment and awe among the audience (Tait, 2012). Sharing live moments of near-death situations recreates what appears to be a collective emotional experience, despite each person experiencing these moments independently (Krueger & Szanto, 2016). Not all shared memories, however, were expressed as excitement, others identified feeling fearful when confronted with potential danger, for example,

My clearest memory was that I used to close my eyes whenever there was anything aerial, and people might fall, I hated it if there was any danger. (Irene GpE),

Recalling fear-related memories, triggered by visual, olfactory, and auditory cues associated with large animals and acrobatic stunts, often led to the emergence of more vivid and detailed stories within the focus groups. Once reflections were revealed, further examination by other group members developed, highlighting both the opportunity provided by the methodological approach as well as the impactful lasting memory of the circus experience,

Well isn't this part of it? The danger, thinking about the other acts like the knife thrower, the acrobats, the trapezey things. (Helen GpO)

As Irene (GpE) again recalls with enthusiastic pleasure,

I was terrified as I thought they would fall and kill themselves – it made me feel sick.

Fokkinga and Desmet (2012) discuss how enjoyment can be increased through designing in ‘negative’ emotions. Similarly, our participants remembered pleasure and excitement in fear-related thrills,

it was tremendously exciting, I couldn't get down there fast enough. (Ann GpO).

The more vivid the memories, the greater the ‘emotional contagion’ within the discussion (Scherer & Coutinho, 2013), stirring deeper emotional triggers unearthing untouched memories (Braun LaTour et al., 2007; Scherer & Coutinho, 2013; Wood et al., 2023). Comments and observations from participants on how they had not thought about the circus for decades further revealed the depth of dormancy of childhood memories.

Theme 3: our window on the world

Accounts merged memories as if experiencing them live as young children, with present day ‘grown-up’ reflection, linking these remembered moments to values and positions of morality, social behaviours and nostalgic desires (Ahuvia, 2005; Lakshmanan & Krishnan, 2009; Sotelo-Duarte & 2022). The participants frequently cross-checked their observations and experiences with others, as well as with their own memories illustrating how memories are reformed through negotiation (Wood et al., 2023). These observations were often followed by commentaries and reflections that collectively shaped their memories of the circus. For instance, one participant, Pat (GpE), expressed her fascination with the animals in the circus, particularly the elephants, lions, and tigers, recalling the impact of when the metal frames were erected around the arena.

I was mesmerised by them, but also I got this feeling that they weren't happy, there was this slightly tacky, even at that age, I could tell that there was something that wasn't right. (Pat GpE)

Similarly, Betty (Gp K), for example, mentioned that aside from the animals and clowns, the immersive atmosphere of the circus left a lasting impression. However, Betty also acknowledged that as children, they were unaware of the societal changes in views towards animals, '*You don't realise what they're putting the animals through*' (Betty, GpK). This was not the same for other participants, who, reflected on feeling ill-at-ease at the time.

The discussions covered a broad spectrum of themes, including the representation of circus in popular culture, particularly in film and television, as well as media reports on animal cruelty and evolving attitudes towards animals in performances. For instance, Martin (GpD) reminisced about his childhood, stating, '*It was this animal thing; people didn't like seeing the lions with a bloke in there with a whip. I'm not saying he used it on them. . .*'. As noted by Cowley (2007) and Lakshmanan and Krishnan (2009), the editing and reframing of memories often occur unconsciously as narratives develop within discussions.

Although animals were recognised as the primary spectacle of the circus and constituted the participants' first real-life encounters with such creatures, there were deliberations on the ethical implications of featuring endangered species in performances. Irene (GpB) commented, '*And it's only now you realize and think differently about the animals*'. (Irene, GpB)

Several reflections emerged that generated broader cultural commentary, specifically the arrival of the circus 'coming to town'. The circus being a break from the dull routine and the ordinary, yet as an annual event, a ritual point of cultural celebration. Anne (GpK) described the circus as akin to Christmas, evoking a sense of anticipation and specialness, which became part of the pattern of life.

Every year it was Bertram Mills Circus and after you would go round the stables and stroke the horses and see the animals . . . and the atmosphere, you felt it, can't describe it, quite different from anything else. (Anne GpK)

The circus described as a key family occasion, with participants recalling they would go every year, accompanied by parents, siblings and family members. Equally missing family members were noted, as Valerie (GpM) recounts,

Me and my family went and sat on this wood bench in a line and this big man came and sat on the end and bent the wood and hurt my aunts back and spoilt the show. My dad wasn't there but he was the second time. (Valerie GpM)

This generated numerous reflections on the impact of the circus in fostering family connectivity (Gentile et al., 2007). Focus group members were able to identify who had accompanied them to the circus and their ages at the time, highlighting Gentile et al. (2007) relational component and the significance of the circus as a deep-rooted memory that influenced their recollections. It also resonates with Fournier's (1998) findings of how brand (or experiences) introduced by a significant other have a lasting effect on attitudes. Ethel (GpA) shared an anecdote about her aunt's surprise encounter with unexpected family members at the same circus show,

Aunt Eliza was taken to circus at convalescence stage and she saw the people coming in (the Big Top) and as she looked round there were a few people she never expected to see, one was her granddaughter, her own daughter, and she had a right shock. (Ethel GpA)

For some participants, the circus prompted long dormant yet highly evocative memories. Roger (GpJ) recounted how during his time in Blackpool he would witness the animals being taken down to the beach every morning for a parade, and how this scene created a sense of awe and wonder for his grandfather and himself,

I was with my grandad and he would start to cry, I mean we would both start crying. (Roger, Gp J)

Similarly, Mauve (GpC) remarked on how the circus readily resurfaced in her memory despite significant gaps in her childhood recollections,

It's interesting the imprint it makes on you, I mean there are huge gaps from my childhood that I never think about ever, but it was easy to resurrect Circus, just as when the hydrogen bombs dropped on Japan – that I can remember where I was, but the rest is just routine. (Mauve, GpC)

The discussions also delved into the romanticised nostalgia associated with the circus, which was often considered as something 'other' than their own lived experiences. The nomadic lifestyle of circus performers, theorised as 'strangerhood' (Calver, 2020; Carmeli, 1987; Sway, 1980), intrigued the participants. They expressed curiosity and a sense of romanticism towards the notion of running away to join the circus and the distinctiveness of circus families, perceived as both close-knit and separate from mainstream society,

I always got the impression that circus families were very close . . . and sort of apart from the rest of us. (Jan, GpN)

And

They were families, weren't they? Run away to the circus – and you're wondering what they're really like? (Katherine GpM)

Participants discussed how the circus offered an alternative perspective on the world, distinct from their everyday experiences and extending beyond the performance itself. This included the transient nature of the circus, the presence of animals, and the sense of displacement within the Big Top, all occurring within their familiar surroundings. For most participants, however, their recollections were deeply rooted in the nostalgia leading to the next theme of the discussion.

Theme 4: it was just very different

Discussions became an amalgamation of nostalgia for the past as well as a disassociation with it due to changes in cultural and social values. This exploration exposed a shift in societal acceptance of traditional circus with animals, impacting on nostalgic reflections of such experiences. It was evident that social desirability bias and peer pressure played a significant role in shaping participants' responses and attitudes towards animals. Consensus swiftly aligned stating that circuses were places of animal cruelty, as expressed by Ethel (GpA), who remarked, '*it was cruel in a way to have lions*', and Eve (GpE) who states,

I have all the memories of the animals the elephants, trapeze artists, clowns, well we enjoyed it as children but as you get older you realise what the animals have to go through to be trained, so it's not quite the same. But as a child it is magic you just accept it. Because you don't understand it.

While participants discussed revisiting circus shows with their grandchildren and transferring nostalgic experiences to younger generations, the overall impression was underwhelming. Irene (Gp C) highlighted the rapid change in attitudes towards circuses, particularly among her children. She noted,

My children, born in the 60s, wouldn't go, wouldn't want to go as they saw it demeaning to the animals, and they are in their 40s-50s now, so they wouldn't take their kids. So it changed very quickly for me in the 40s and 50s to now. So in 20 years, people have moved on.

The conflicting emotions evoked by nostalgia may result in disappointment or guilt when individuals recognise that their recollections of past experiences do not align with the group consensus or broader social norms. This divergence prompted discussions on the relevance

of traditional circus in contemporary society. Nevertheless, reminiscences about the sensory richness of past circus experiences did not diminish the appeal of contemporary forms of entertainment. As Pat (GpC) stated,

Well, if you think of the TV then and the TV now, they have everything, so going out to something like that, it was an experience of all the senses really - the excitement, the colour, the music. I mean we had a black and white TV for years.

The articulation of changes in attitudes within focus groups and the navigation of nostalgia and fondly held memories of past experiences collided with contemporary values as they disclosed their experiences (Schau et al., 2009). Then, there was the re-shaping and reaffirming of current attitudes and behavioural intentions as a distinct part of their current life, a disassociation with their younger selves yet informed by the circus experience.

Discussion – the complex effect of nostalgia

Sharing memories with peers evokes nostalgia, and through this, shapes present attitudes towards the experience and the circus as a product. In this study, participants reported that their nostalgia was connected to memories of family, initial encounters with the circus, distinctive smells, sounds, and the innocence of childhood. The positive affect associated with these memories may be attributed to the experiential components of the circus, the familial circumstances or the opportunity afforded via the methodology of the research.

Nostalgia is for an imagined past that is often regardless of experience. Our participants felt nostalgic for childhood, for excitement and difference, this often manifested in the memories of the animals but also for the simplicity of entertainment in those days, for tech-free times, and a worry-free life. This finding is in contrast to Fairley and Gammon (2005) work on sports nostalgia, as we find less focus on the objects or even on the social experience and more on the emotions felt. The power of childhood memories is evident in the voices of our participants and in their present-day reflections on how these have affected them (LaTour et al., 2007). Nostalgia for past times plays a key role but is tainted by a sense of shame in enjoying memories of an experience which is no longer socially acceptable. Nostalgia also leads to disappointment when attempting to relive the experience with significant others. The circus was found to be not as raw, not include animals, has lost its ‘magic’, and children and grandchildren find it outdated. This guilt-edged element of nostalgia is overlooked in the consumer behaviour literature.

We summarised this nostalgia/guilt effect in [Figure 1](#). This depicts how life experience, including changing social norms and values, directly affects current attitudes (the three ringed circus). However, it also shows how the emotions generated by nostalgia can turn to guilt when viewed within current social norms. This leads to readjustment or reinforcement of current attitudes and therefore behavioural intentions. Although we find that Fournier’s (1998) and Connell and Schau (2012) ‘childhood consumption relationships’ hold true for circus memories, we also find, as did Cowley (2007), that the filter of lived experience and changing social values mediates this, leading to often conflicted current views about the circus.

The juxtaposition of early childhood memories with current attitudes creates a bipolar antithesis to trying new experiences. Consequently, for our participants, traditional circuses face challenges in re-attracting them, bringing along younger family members to generate fresh memories. Ahuvia’s (2005) work considers how loved possessions (in our study precious memories) are used to resolve identity conflicts. The conflicts caused by circus nostalgia may therefore be mitigated by pursuing other ‘acceptable’ forms of similar entertainment, such as contemporary or new circus.

By identifying the linkages between early childhood memories and current attitudes towards the circus, it becomes possible to establish connections between the past, present, and future. Brian’s (GpD) remark, ‘*Well, all the old circuses had animals and that’s what put me off*’, and

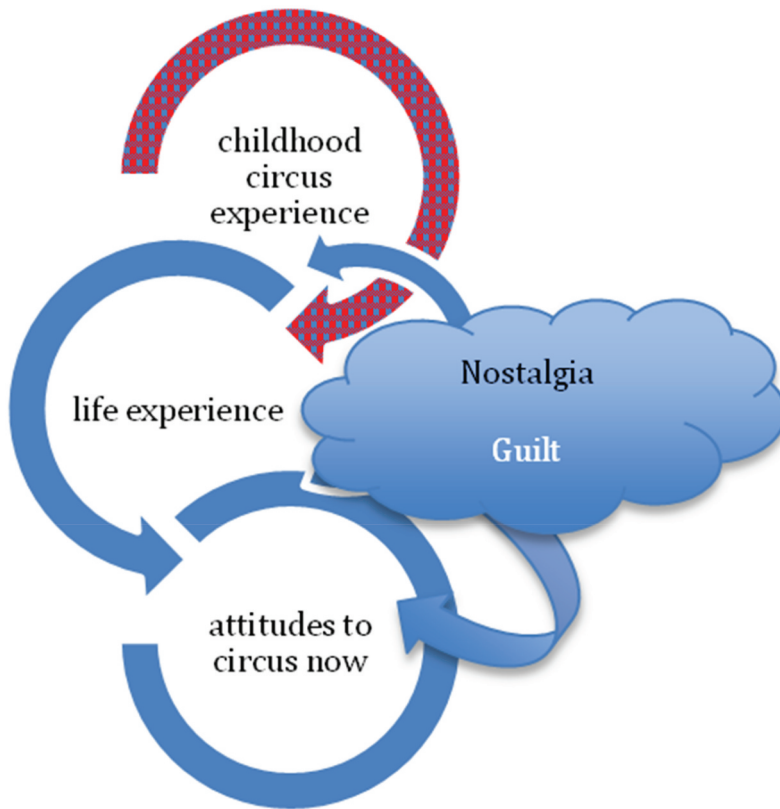


Figure 1. The role of nostalgia in forging links with past and present.

Anne's (GpE) observation, "I don't think children now want to go to the circus – they are more aware of the animals. But I don't think it could be a circus without animals", exemplify how past experiences, filtered through life experiences, influence current attitudes and behavioural intentions.

Conclusion

This study explores the memories of past experiences, focusing on the influence of nostalgia, the affective nature of early childhood memories, and their impact on current attitudes. The research findings have provided valuable insights into the factors that contribute to lasting memories and their personal and social impacts.

One key contribution of this study is the application of Gentile et al. (2007) framework to examine memories of experience rather than the experience as it happens. This led to the creation of four key themes of analysis. This approach has enhanced our understanding of the underlying factors that shape lasting memories. Moreover, it emphasises the importance of memories and memorable experiences in various domains. However, it is important to note that positive experiences and memories alone do not guarantee loyalty, as evidenced by Yang et al. (2021) research, which identifies the strong influence of emotional arousal on lasting memories.

Perhaps of most note is our finding relating to nostalgia and the associated guilt at feeling nostalgic for something that is no longer socially acceptable. The consumer behaviour literature tends to view nostalgia as a positive emotion in terms of marketing effectiveness and brand relationships (Holbrook, 1993; Zhang et al., 2021). In our study, encouraging nostalgic reflection

quickly turned to critical reflection on past behaviours and current attitudes. Guilt at enjoying the experience might lead to the memory being 'deleted' from what Keinan and Kivetz (2011) term 'the experiential CV', i.e the memory is no longer shared in a positive way with others.

This 'guilty nostalgia' is also likely to apply to other past leisure experiences which, in the current social climate, may be reflected upon with guilt. For example, holidays where we swam with dolphins, climbed Uluru, rode an elephant, may still be a fond reminiscence but will now be tinged with the guilt at knowing those activities are no longer acceptable. In the future, it is likely that cruises or all-inclusive holidays may be reflected upon in a similarly guilty way knowing their effect on the environment and on local communities. Sporting memories may also hold aspects of guilt at behaviour that was acceptable then but is now known to be dangerous (e.g. concussions in rugby and football). Other forms of entertainment that were enjoyed in childhood may also now be judged differently (for example, racist or sexist comedy acts). These other leisure contexts would be interesting to research further.

The methodology employed in this study involved a novel approach that has been used in other fields but not extensively in tourism, leisure or events. By conducting free-flowing discussion groups focused on the distant past, we were able to gain valuable insights into the nostalgic experiences associated with the circus. This methodology can potentially be adapted and applied in other contexts within the sector, such as cultural events, where social values may change and thus gain insights into experiential encounters and events.

Practical implications

The possible implications for policy and practice in the circus industry may be worthy of consideration. The outcomes indicate the potency inherent in the strength of the immersive experience, the death defying stunts and intergenerational focus. Cities have been transformed by giant animated puppets, such as the work developed by Royale de Luxe. This provides opportunities for the dissemination of narratives and oral tradition, which serve as a conduit for intergenerational storytelling, facilitating an engagement with heritage practices (Fournier, 1998; Schau et al., 2009). Such dynamics hold the capacity to engender a heightened sense of occasion and collective memory that could be celebrated in circus publicity. The significance of the pre-event parades and transformation of space within place-making literature also points to the potential for investment as experiential marketing tools. That is, maintaining those elements thus remarked upon as being particularly thrilling by the participants, highlighting the potential role of circus as facilitators of 'memory transmitters' or contributors to the development of an 'experiential CV' (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). What is particularly evident in this research is the commemorating of familial bonds and fostering a sense of intergenerational stories.

Traditional circuses may, and in some instances, do leverage these insights to create memorable and nostalgic experiences for attendees by creating something entirely new, distinct (and socially acceptable) within the art form of traditional circuses. This, of course, is evident in new and contemporary circuses, but the challenge remains in trying to reinvent new memories and ambiguous nostalgia for many of the current traditional circuses. International circus performers continue to journey to Great Yarmouth to showcase their talents at the Hippodrome, contributing to the town's circus culture in diverse ways. The town also hosts *Out There Arts*, an organisation dedicated to circus and outdoor arts, which organises community events and festivals. Their mission is to establish Great Yarmouth as an International Centre of Excellence for the creation, training, and delivery of circus and street arts. Consequently, there are significant contemporary connections to be made with the overlooked heritage of circuses like the Hippodrome. These circuses, according to McLaughlin and Smith (2024), adopted innovative approaches to evolving popular entertainment along the British coastline, to generate a distinctive seaside circus culture. Retaining the sensory pleasure, the experience of 'safe' fear (Fokkinga & Desmet, 2012), of nostalgia (Cho, 2020), and the closeness with family and friends (Gentile et al., 2007) appears key to making the experience enjoyable and memorable. Traditional circus faces the challenge of remaining competitive with other family leisure pursuits whilst also grappling with potential nostalgic reticence.

Limitations and further research

We recognise the limitations of our study in that our participants were from an older demographic (to explore distant memories). It would be useful to explore the attitudes of other generations such as parents, children, grandchildren. Our methodology could thus be adapted to include intergenerational focus groups with family members. As our participants had no or limited experience of contemporary and new circuses, we would also recommend attitudinal studies that gather opinions before and after experiencing a show. This research may retain a longitudinal approach to explore how the memory of the experience changes with time and whilst recognising the importance of the wider social and cultural context (E. J. Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Finally, further research is recommended to explore the link between childhood identity, reminiscence, nostalgia, and how changing social values impact individual and collective identities (Schau et al., 2009). By gaining a better understanding of these dynamics, research may continue to contribute to the evolving field of memory studies and inform the development of strategies that enhance visitor experiences in the traditional circus industry and more widely in the events and leisure sector.

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