Insights on How Museum Objects Mediate Recall of Nostalgic Life Episodes at a Showa Era Museum in Japan

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Abstract
Understanding visitors’ nostalgic experiences in museums as they make connections between museum objects and their life histories is of considerable interest to the museum field. This study employed a qualitative multiple-case narrative approach to understand the common characteristic themes about the nature of visitors’ nostalgic recall, mediated though exhibits at a Showa era social history museum in Aichi Prefecture, Japan. Five sustaining characteristic themes about visitors’ nostalgic recall are exemplified through five visitor cases in this study, including, a) Objects tied to collective identity and values perceived to be lost; b) Objects used or consumed as part of visitors’ life-scripts; c) Objects associated with individuals dear to the visitor; d) Objects associated with childhood; and e) Objects that invoke vicarious nostalgia. The outcomes of this study contribute to the broader understandings of the power of museum objects to incite strong nostalgic recollections and more broadly to our understanding of visitors’ long-term memories through their encounters with museum objects.

LITERATURE AND BACKGROUND

In modern society, social-history museums serve a vitally important role as the preservers and interpreters of our collective pasts—both ancient and contemporary. In many ways, museums tell the stories and hold the “memories” of our identities and the origins of who we are within the societies in which we live (cf. Crane, 2000; Levin, 2007). Moreover, the educational mission of most social history museums is to enhance visitors’ understandings of, appreciations for, and connections with the content they portray through visitors’ museum experiences. Of particular interest to social-history museums is the understanding of how visitors’ nostalgic experiences manifest in the museum as they make connections between objects and their life histories. However, in the context of visitors’ museum experiences, nostalgia, as a type of emotional affect, has garnered limited attention in the literature (Shimizu, Yuasa, and Anderson, 2014). This is a surprising gap, particularly because our nostalgic memories are often the most vivid, and social history museums are rich in the kind of content that could incite or catalyze nostalgic responses in visitors. As such, this study contributes to the understanding of visitors’ long-term memories through their nostalgic responses to museum experiences and museum objects.
Nostalgia and Memories from a Socio-Cultural Perspective

Nostalgia has been defined in a variety of ways by different scholars. A recent study by Hepper et al. (2012) investigated popular understandings of nostalgia, concluding that nostalgia is a predominantly positive, social, and past-oriented emotion. They assert that through the psychological action of nostalgic recall, one brings to mind fond and personally meaningful events typically involving one’s childhood or early life states, or one’s close relationships. These memories often have the quality of the event being seen through “rose-colored glasses;” even negatively toned events of the past can be reconstructed in the present with more-positive tones. Nostalgic memories are often characterized as a longing to return to that past (Sedikides et al. 2015, 2008). Moreover, nostalgia has been seen as an important vehicle for maintaining or restoring a sense of self-identity by weaving together the experiences of one’s life history (Cavanaugh 1989; Mills and Coleman 1994) and the formulation of what is presently remembered. In keeping with this view, McAdams (2001) asserts that people give unity to their lives by building thematically integrated narratives of experience within the context of their life histories. Hence, nostalgia plays an important role in the retrieval of life episodes—memories—vital to self-identity. In keeping with these views, this study defines nostalgia as:

a variety of positively- or negatively-toned human emotion that evokes retrieval of past personal memories which connect components of the self over time (life history) with the present.

This view is consistent with contemporary perspectives (e.g. Wildschut et al. 2006).

The Triggers of Nostalgia

The experiences which trigger nostalgia have received some attention in the literature. For example, Batcho (1995, 1998) developed an inventory of experiential life episodes that trigger nostalgia. A factor analysis of twenty sources of nostalgia revealed five related thematic aspects:

1. **cognitive-emotional aspects** (e.g., the way people were, not having to worry the way society was);
2. **socio-cultural context** (e.g., TV shows/movies, comic books, heroes/heroines, music, places);
3. **concrete aspects associated with childhood** (e.g., individual experience, pets, toys, holidays);
4. **immediate social circle** (loved-ones, family, house and home);
5. **broader social elements of life** (e.g., friends, school, church).

Wildschut et al. (2006) also studied the triggers of nostalgic feelings and identified nine categories. The most significant of these were:

- **negative or positive affect** (sadness, deep introspection, happiness),
- **social interactions** (shared experience, discussing, laughing, crying),
- **sensory inputs** (smells, music, images),
- **tangibles** (objects of significance to one’s life history), and
- **settings** (home town).

Museums (particularly social history museums) mediate experiences through exhibits,
objects, artifacts, and photographs that are both representations and preservations of human culture (Hein, 1998). Museums often mediate the stories of our pasts and our own identities, connecting us to our own life stories. Moreover, in consideration of the aforementioned thematic aspects of nostalgia, museums superbly afford many opportunities to trigger significant memories of our past critical to subsequent long-term memories. In particular, given the aforementioned categorizations of nostalgia, museum experiences have the capacity to provide encounters with culturally significant tangibles, and to mediate the socio-cultural context held to be important to society.

Social history museums have the capacity to connect with visitors’ identities and pasts, stimulating memories that generate significant feelings of nostalgia. In particular, encounters with objects have the power to vividly connect (or remember) one’s past with one’s present. Despite the deep connections between museum objects, memory, and nostalgia, only a few empirical studies have investigated the links between socio-cultural identity and memory as they are strengthened through visitors’ experiences in the rich, evocative context of social history museums. Anderson and Shimizu (2009, 2012) examined relationships between visitors’ community identity—to which visitors self-identify and hold as a part of their own socio-cultural identity—and the vividness of their long-term memories of the events. They found that the community-identity of the participants, and the extent to which they rehearsed their memories were critical to the extent to which long-term memories formed. The link between socio-cultural identity and the formation of memories, that are sustained vividly years later, was also identified by Anderson and Gosselin’s (2008) study of personal and private memories of visitors’ experiences of Expo 67 (the 1967 International and Universal Exposition in Montreal). The study demonstrated distinct differences in what was remembered, and the vividness of those memories, by participants in the Expo. These were explained in terms of distinctions in the socio-cultural identities (i.e., self-perception, personal and community identity) of the Anglophone and Francophone participants. Anderson and Shimizu (2015, 2007a, 2007b) also investigated the long-term memories of Japanese visitors’ recall of two Japanese World Expositions: the 1970 Japan World Exposition, Osaka and Expo 2005 held in in Aichi Prefecture. These provided compelling evidence of the vividness of the recall of visitors’ nostalgic memories from that period.

This study extends this line of research by focusing on Japanese visitors’ nostalgic recall of their society, and particularly, their memories of the latter part of the 1950s and the 1960s through a visit to a social history museum on this historic period. The years between 1955 and 1970 (known as Shōwa 30 to 45) now represent a period of optimism, progress and unprecedented world stature that has been widely regarded as Japan’s “Golden Age” (Brinckmann, 2008). This era is marked by significant iconic events like the construction of the Tokaido Shinkansen, the staging of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, and the mounting of the 1970 Japan World Exposition. For many Japanese people, this post-war Shōwa era has become an “object” of nostalgia which engenders wide admiration and respect as a time

THEY TEND TO RECONSTRUCT THIS PAST NOSTALGICALLY IN OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE EMOTIONAL TONES

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when Japan was at its best. Older people nostalgically recall this period with great affection for its associations with simple pleasures, a strong sense of affinity and belonging with the local community, deep family cohesion, and optimistic feelings about the future (Ivy 1995; Robertson 1994). Furthermore, it has come to be considered an egalitarian period of progress gained through hard work, and associated with the acquisition of consumer goods such as modern electrical appliances, a family car, and a family house (Creighton, 1998; Ivy, 1995). The Shōwa era visibly and significantly altered the people, communities, cities, and ultimately, the identity of Japanese society (Edgington, 2003). Despite the negative and problematic issues facing Japan during this period, such as environmental pollution, most Japanese people optimistically believed in the power of economic development. Now, they tend to reconstruct this past nostalgically in overwhelmingly positive emotional tones. In Japan today, there appears to be a strong and growing interest, fascination, and even a longing to return to the values of this period (Brinckmann, 2008).

This study contributes to understanding the nature of the links between socio-cultural identity and nostalgic memory within the context of a Japanese social history museum. Although this is a specific social and cultural context, a recent study by Hepper, Wildschut, et al. (2014), convincingly demonstrated cross-cultural agreement regarding conceptions of nostalgia, and that nostalgia is a pan-cultural emotion shared by all humans regardless of nation or culture. Through a focus on episodic museum experiences, we explored visitors’ nostalgic responses associated with the museum experiences and more distant nostalgic life events, their identity and life stories. Accordingly, this study asks:

1. Which museum Shōwa era objects typically evoke Japanese visitors’ nostalgic responses in a Japanese social history museum? and

2. What are the common characteristic themes that can be identified about the nature of their nostalgic recall, incited and mediated through the museum exhibits?

**METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES**

This study employed a Multiple Case Narrative (Shkedi, 2005) approach to investigate the characteristics of visitors’ nostalgic recall triggered by museum experience through a socio-cultural framework. A total of thirty-five participants, each of whom were casual museum visitors and Japanese nationals, were recruited for the present study. They were recruited as they exited from their visit to the Shōwa Era Life Style Museum, located in Kitanagoya, Japan (Figure 1). This museum is focused on museum experiences that trigger nostalgic memories of the latter part of the Shōwa Era of post WWII Japan, from 1950 to 1970. The museum presents many folklore exhibits of homes and daily necessaries in the Shōwa era of Japan, and in particular, the pre-war and wartime period of Japanese society previously described. Accordingly, the museum and its object-based collections had strong potential to stimulate nostalgic responses among the study’s Japanese participants, as attested to by one of the study’s participants: “I feel nostalgic about this time when it was filled with objects, especially ones from the Shōwa ‘30s and ‘40s (1955-1975). Shōwa was an era filled with objects. (物主体の時代ですからね!).” Each of the study’s participants encountered exhibits during their museum visit which triggered
nostalgic memories which were subsequently interrogated by the researchers. The average age of participants was 50.35 (SD=13.13), ranging from 25 to 79 years of age with a total of eighteen females and seventeen males.

**Method and Data Analysis**

Museum visitors who agreed to take part in the study were interviewed face-to-face and on-site immediately after their visit, in their native language (Japanese). The purpose of this first interview was to explore visitors’ nostalgic memories by asking them to nominate at least three exhibit experiences related to the objects or displays that triggered recall of distant past memories of life episodes they deemed to be nostalgic in character. The interviews were transcribed, and then read carefully in order to identify specific memory episodes that related to the museum exhibits. The meanings of the nostalgic memory episodes were coded inductively, meaning that identifying labels were crafted in order to bring into relief the meanings that the nostalgic memory held for the participant. The initial codes were printed out with illustrative quotes, cut up, and then arranged into categories comprising codes of similar meaning. So categorizing the meanings that nostalgic memories held for participants allowed them to be sorted and grouped.
into underlying thematic aspects, providing a more parsimonious account of the meanings the nostalgic memory episodes held for the participants. Coding and categorizing the nostalgic memory episodes involved an iterative process of moving back and forth between visitors’ narratives and the codes multiple times, which enabled initial codes to be revised until there was a level of confidence in the match across all 35 cases in the data set. Categories were judged to be stable when there was a minimum of eight instances of nostalgic memory episodes with the same category name. Twenty-three nostalgic memory episodes from the interviews remained relatively underdeveloped or were not easily classified into stable categories and so were eliminated from the results presented in this study.

RESULTS

Five sustainable themes in the nostalgic memory episodes were revealed through the inductive data analysis described in the previous section, including:

1. Objects tied to collective identity and values perceived to be lost.
2. Objects used or consumed as part of visitors’ life scripts.
3. Objects associated with individuals dear to the visitor.
4. Objects associated with childhood.
5. Objects that invoked vicarious nostalgia.

In this results section, each of these five themes is exemplified by a number of museum visitors’ narrative accounts of nostalgic memories triggered by specific objects or displays in the museum. Although each theme is evident across multiple cases, we chose to exemplify each with the nostalgic memory episodes from a few cases. This was done in the form of pictures, descriptions, and illustrative quotes and stories, because they provide rich, insightful, and enjoyable portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) of the meanings museum objects and displays hold for these visitors. In so exemplifying the themes with a few cases, we also recognize that multiple themes may be contained in the nostalgic experiences of a particular case. As such, in the discussion section following the results, themes that manifest across cases are synthesized and discussed for what they tell us about the nature of nostalgic memories of museum visitors through the story of five exemplar case narratives.

The case of Mr. Sugiura: Memories of killing insects with pump-action aerosol DDT spray cans and remembering the flower-pattern thermos

The case of Mr. Sugiura, aged 51, exemplifies the power of objects tied to collective identity and values perceived to be lost (theme #1) and objects associated with individuals dear to the visitor (theme #3). Mr. Sugiura was born exactly in the middle of the Showa era (1926–1989), the latter half of which saw the “Japanese miracle” in which the country rose from the destruction of World War II to become the world’s second-largest economic power. Mr. Sugiura identified several items from the museum displays that made him feel nostalgic: aerosol insecticide (DDT) spray cans (Figure 2), a floral-patterned thermos (Figure 3), and a gravity-fed hand-washing vessel commonly found in toilet rooms mid-Showa. When asked about the aerosol spray cans and why they were particularly nostalgic museum objects, he described with great...
excitement what he used to do with them in his childhood.

Children can be cruel, you know? For example, when we found a snake on the way home from school, we threw rocks at it. It didn’t do anything wrong. And flies or mosquitoes, you know, chasing after flies, like those days, it would be easier if we had insecticide. You chase after them in a room with this spray can in your hand. Doing that was fun. I had forgotten about it and today, for the first time, when I came here and saw the old aerosol spray cans, everything came back to me—you know—all detailed memories.

For Mr. Sugiura, seeing the old spray cans evoked memories he had not recalled for decades. Upon the telling, they sparked other related autobiographical memories of seeing people from the local neighbourhood association, in rural Aichi prefecture.

Figure 2. Insecticide spray, powder and liquid (sacchuuzai-funmuki 正解の噴霧器). Photo courtesy of the authors.

Figure 3. Flower-pattern thermos (ho-on potto 花の保溫ポット). Photo courtesy of the authors.
where he grew up, going around with larger machines to spray DDT insecticide. He communicated his experiences with a strong, excited voice, frequent use of gestures and a direct gaze such that his stories came off as upbeat and authoritative, yet friendly. He was very excited and eager to recall and tell his story in the moment.

It sits on a kind of wheelbarrow, you control it, and the nozzle moves and so much white insecticide sprays out. As a child, I actually liked the smell of it. People from the neighborhood association—three, four, or maybe two adults—used to spray. They would say: “We are going to kill insects here now”. We didn’t have any covers on the street gutters right? They were just covered with boards. Usually it is a breeding place for the mosquitoes. To kill them, those adults used to go there, turn the engine on, and pull the lever (“bu-bu-bu-bu”). It sprayed insecticide about 10 meters (“bwaaaa”). So whenever they came around, I used to follow them. I really liked the smell of it. The insecticide was in a square eighteen-liter can. They would turn the engine on and go around announcing “Neighbourhood association. Insecticide. We are going around.”

Immediately after this story, Mr. Sugiura was asked whether he had had a happy childhood at that time or not. What followed goes some way towards explaining the importance these memories held for him. Although he reported having a stable family life and being materially well off, he expressed dissatisfaction with his life now compared to his life as a child and a strong desire to go back to those times. I was actually talking about this today, in the museum, too. You know, in the 1960s and 1970s, people were poor but they were happy in Japan. We could say it was like Always Sunset on Third Street right? We didn’t have many things, but we more or less had a happy life. People had good morals, the social climate was very positive (モラル、道徳、社会風潮: moraru, dotokku, shakai fuuchou)—there was a sense that people took a stand against things in the community that were unjust or lacked heart—people had a sense of humane feeling and duty (義理人情があった: giri-ninjou ga atta). It was a good time. It wasn’t easy though, right? But as a human being, I think it was a good time—we were connected with other people, you know? People are more materialistic nowadays.

Interestingly, he later had further recollections of his mother keeping aerosol cans by the door and also covering the dishes when the neighbourhood association went around to spray:

My mother used to protect the house, I mean, she had to cover all the kitchenware and everything when they were using this insecticide. It was the smell, the smell of this insecticide, the whole house smelled like this insecticide. But, the home and the community had to be protected and kept safe.

For Mr. Sugiura, other objects in the museum were associated with his daily activities as a child and with his mother, particularly the flower-patterned thermos exhibit (Figure 3),
which was the exact one that he used to have. For the first time in decades, he remembered the manufacturer’s name, the colour, the flower pattern, and how it was “just a part of the scene” in his childhood home. He recounted how he used it to make hot drinks after school:

    Well, you know, I was just a child. I was not allowed to use the gas stove. But when I made cocoa I did it by myself. My parents were working and I was the only child. When I came back home and nobody was at home, I made my own snack: cocoa. My parents poured hot water into the thermos in the morning.

To Mr. Sugiura, the thermos was intimately tied to his mother and the museum visit helped him retrieve these memories. When he was an elementary school student, she was working hard, would return home, and he would enjoy their short time together every day, helping her with household chores and cooking:

    Because I lost my mother about four or five years ago—she died—as a child, my mother, you know, the images of that flower-patterned thermos and my mother merge. When I see the flower-patterned thermos, I remember my mother. When I try to remember my mother, this flower pattern comes and I can’t clearly remember my mother when I was a kindergarten kid or something, the flower-patterned thermos always comes as some kind of set at the same time. . . After I lost my mother, I was feeling so sad, I was feeling very sad. And then, when I saw the flower-patterned thermos, my memory came back. My vague memory came back to me so vividly. I’m in my 50s now, but my memories of being a small boy have come back to me, sort of over-written, this is kind of how I feel. My vague memory of when I was an elementary school kid—everything came back to me so vividly. I feel as if I sobered up by recalling the scene.

    Such is the evocative power of simple everyday objects from the Shōwa period observed in this study—like old friends, they usher in a suite of nostalgic and heartfelt memories of times, values, and loved ones now lost, and engender a deep yearning to return in some way. Mr. Sugiura reported he was thinking of “moving” into a rural area. To him, returning to an ideal, bucolic rural Japan was a way of recapturing part of his past, and hence a sense of collective, authentic values and identity. There is substantial evidence that objects such as the spray can and the flower-pattern thermos in the museum played a role in his desire to recapture lost things. It is also plausible that cultural themes in the collective unconscious, and ubiquitous in popular culture, influenced the rich, nostalgic memories that the objects in the museum evoked in him. Mr. Sugiura’s story sits at the confluence of societal, historical, personal, and psychological factors incited by museum objects.

The case of Mrs. Katori: Memories of the Peace tobacco can (kanpi) secret money stash and the well-water hand pump

    The case of Mrs. Katori, aged 71, exemplifies the power of objects used or consumed as part of visitors’ life scripts (theme #2), objects associated with individuals dear to the visitor (theme #3), and objects associated with childhood (theme #4). Mrs. Katori was born at the beginning of the Shōwa era in 1942 during World War II, and so was evacuated from the city when she was three to live with a farming family in the small town of Watari in Mie Prefecture. As she grew up, she worked there planting and harvesting rice, and doing household chores in a farmhouse very
similar to the one exhibited in the museum. She identified several museum items that were nostalgic for her because they related to her daily work and home life: cans of loose pipe tobacco produced by the Peace Tobacco company (Figure 4); a well-water hand pump (Figure 5); the scene, layout, and appliances (e.g., rice thresher, stove) in the farmhouse exhibit; and a three-wheeled vehicle they used for agricultural work.

In Japanese, longer words from foreign languages are often shortened and combined, and so the second nostalgic item—“canned Peace tobacco” in English—was shortened at the time to kanpi (カンピ). Mrs. Katori remembered an experience with kanpi that she had in her 20s or 30s after she was married. Mrs. Katori’s husband used to smoke tobacco in a long pipe called a kiseru (煙管), made of a metal mouthpiece and bowl joined by a long bamboo shaft. She recalled how people then used to sit on the floor and smoke beside a coal-fed heating brazier called a hibachi (火鉢). As Mrs. Katori demonstrated, people would empty the ashes from the pipe by hitting it on the edge of the brazier, which made a memorable “pon” sound. Her husband loved smoking, and the Kanpi cans themselves:

As for kanpi, my husband used to smoke and line the empty cans up in long rows on the shelves (ずずっと). He used to line them up—and I did too. I actually had a secret stash of money in one. But one time, for some reason, the cans fell down and the lid of the can my hidden stash was in opened up and made the sound karan-karan. He was there when it spilled money everywhere in full view. So, I was kind of caught out. (laughs, covering her mouth with her hand) At the time, I hadn’t even remembered that I had hidden money in the kanpi. The cans fell and rolled, it opened, and the money came out, and I thought “Damn, I had secret money in there!” I had completely forgotten about that! When I saw it in the museum, that memory came back to me. I feel nostalgic and I think “Oh, yeah! Things like that happened!”

The story of her getting caught by her husband when the kanpi can fell on the floor sparked laughter around the table during the interview: Mrs. Katori and her daughter sat beside each other, looked at everyone and laughing, hands covering their mouths in feigned embarrassment and pure enjoyment. It is a common tendency in Japan in traditional households, where men go away to work and earn money, for women working at home or locally to secretly and regularly stash money for their own use, or for use in emergencies. Getting caught for having a secret stash of money is funny because everyone knows that in traditional Japanese family culture, not everything is explicitly communicated to everyone—in fact, not knowing things is often deemed key for preserving social relations and harmony in the family. These memories are illustrative of themes #2 and #3.

This experience is one among many colorful, humorous memories around objects displayed in the museum that Mrs. Katori described from her daily life in the past. A further example included nostalgic recall of objects associated with childhood (theme #4), and also a childhood incident triggered by viewing an old hand pump (Figure 5). When she was ten, her regular household job was to fill up an old wood-fired bath. The task involved laboriously carrying buckets of water back and forth between the well and the bathhouse. In addition, Mrs. Katori recalled an incident when she took the rain gutter off the roof of the house and connected it from the well pump outlet to the bath. Then she pumped the well until the bath was full. The ingenious plan ended badly: “When the rain came, because there was no rain gutter there, the rain would come down so hard...
Figure 4. “Kanpi” (カンピ) Canned Peace tobacco in the shop front exhibit. The cylindrical cans are on the middle shelf of the shop front. *Photo courtesy of the authors.*

Figure 5. Well-water hand pump (idomizu-kumioge-you teoshi-ponpu井戸水汲み上げ用手押しポンプ). *Photo courtesy of the authors.*
and so I remember thinking: “Oh, no! I’m going to get a serious scolding!” When I saw the pump for the well, I remember that particular event." For Mrs. Katori, this pump made her childhood memories, locked up decades ago come flooding back.

The case of Ms. Saida: The three-wheeled Midget car, the rice cooker, and the knitted shopping basket

The case of Ms. Saida, aged 59, exemplifies the power of objects associated with individuals dear to the visitor (theme #3) and objects associated with childhood (theme #4). Ms. Saida was born in the mid-1950s, and recalled the period of the 1960s when the fruits of Japan’s economic growth began to be felt in homes as families begun to have the wealth to buy vehicles, appliances, and objects to make life more convenient and enjoyable. Immediately after her visit to this museum, she sat with her husband in the interview and identified four objects in the museum that were nostalgic to her: a Daihatsu car called a Midget (Figure 6), a gas and electric rice cooker (Figure 7), a knitted basket (Figure 8), and a compact Shiseido cosmetics case.

The Midget car was a small single or double seated truck with three wheels and a semi-enclosed cab designed, produced, and modified in Japan from the late 1950s to the 1970s. On seeing the car in the museum, Ms. Saida noted that her memory of the car had been vague before she saw it in the museum:

The car wasn’t something that I remembered often, but when I saw it here, I knew it was the one my father used to drive when he was still alive. You know, it triggers the memory of my father, so I felt nostalgic. My father took me out sometimes. It was like this car [points to car behind her]. It was for work. It was not a family car. So, the number on the odometer went high quite often—I remember him changing it to a newer one frequently. I don’t remember each vehicle that he owned though because there are so many, but I have a memory of my father driving the three-wheeled vehicles.

For Ms. Saida other objects in the museum triggered rich memories of her father as well. At the time of which she speaks, affordable appliances were increasingly available to working people and were indicators of Japan’s—and a family’s—success and hopes for a better future. She remembers her father’s enthusiasm for appliances with only one exception:

My father loved appliances. Whenever they produced a new one, he bought it. The only thing my father didn’t buy was the electric rice cooker. He insisted on using the gas because it cooks and tastes better. He didn’t want the electric rice cooker... he didn’t compromise on the rice cooker until the end. That’s the only appliance he stubbornly refused to buy.

The reference to the gas and electric rice cookers (Figure 7) in the museum is significant. The short, sticky type of rice used in Japan has been revered as sacred by the Japanese since ancient times, and is ubiquitous in Japanese cooking. Rice is almost a religion in Japan, and as such, traditionally minded people tend to be very particular about their rice. While the post-war economic boom in Japan was widely
embraced, it was not a surprise that its effects could not convince someone who had grown up before World War II to give up how they cooked rice. Her memories of the museum objects reminded her of her love for her father: “I might have had a father complex, I loved him so much.”

Another object in the museum that held significance for Ms. Saida was a knitted basket (Figure 8), which, to her great surprise and delight, was identical to the one she had half a century ago when she was a child:

You know, the minute I saw it, I remembered it—I remembered my fond memories of my childhood. I remember being very happy playing with that basket. It was meant for adults and so as a child, I felt very grown up at the time when I was given the basket. So, you know, the scenes of my childhood memories came back to...
me—my visual memories. I wasn’t really attached to it until now. I had completely forgotten about it, but when I saw it a few minutes ago, I just said “Wow, I had this, right?” All those related childhood memories came flooding back to me—seeing the basket linked to Yuko-chan, my childhood friend, in my memory all of a sudden. Yuko-chan would come over to our house and I maybe I would show some of my toys that I kept in the basket. I haven’t seen her for many years but she was a very good friend and our families knew each other. So you know, those scenes and visual pictures of playing with Yuko-chan came back to my mind. I wasn’t really attached to it until now. I had completely forgotten about it.

Such is the evocative power of simple everyday objects from peoples’ childhoods. Like old friends, they usher in a suite of nostalgic and heartfelt memories of loved ones, and of times and lives, long gone.

The case of Mr. Arai: Vintage Japanese cars and Showa appliances and toys

The case of Mr. Arai, aged 41 years, exemplifies the power of objects that invoke vicarious nostalgia (theme #5). Not all visitors were even alive or had their formative years during Shōwa’s heyday. Mr. Arai was born in 1971, just 11 years before the end of the Shōwa era and so had only six years of living memory of that time period—after Japan had arrived as a world economic power. He was, nonetheless, fascinated by the museum exhibits and touched deeply by a sense of vicarious nos-
nostalgia for the age. Several scenes and objects felt nostalgic for Mr. Arai: the candy shop, which reminded him of being scolded by an old man for roughing up merchandise; appliances (a toaster, TV, and fridge); and the vintage Midget three-wheeled car on display.

Like Ms. Saida, Mr. Arai identified the Midget car as one of his nostalgic items, but for different reasons: he has an affinity for collecting old things. He likes driving and fixing up vintage domestic Japanese cars, and owns a Shōwa 51 (1976) Mitsubishi Minica and a Shōwa 57 (1982) Toyota Corolla. In Japan, it is generally considered preferable to own and drive relatively new cars, and then sell them after a few years. This is evident from the tendency of many buyers of new cars to select white cars because they are easier to resell after. Under Japan’s insurance system, older cars are costly to insure and so they tend to be shipped overseas for sale. As such, there are very few cars on Japan’s streets past their 10th year. As his discussion of the Midget and other vintage cars indicated, Mr. Arai is unusual in this sense:

I still drive them. Actually, I drove the ‘82 Corolla here to the museum. I maintain them myself—I work for a car company as a mechanic in the repair shop. You know, I drive strange cars such as these, and people kind of see it as a bit unusual. I am kind of a weird person.

Mr. Arai’s company also sells new and old cars. They have an old Rabbit—essentially a scooter with a semi-enclosed cab. Mr. Arai liked it, so bought one of his own, and got a license to drive it. Like any society, certain behaviours and preferences, if out of the ordinary, can raise eyebrows or even be frowned upon. Traditionally, social pressure in Japan encourages having new things, which explains why Mr. Arai identified himself as a weird person because he likes to drive vintage cars. His tendency to go against the norm by driving vintage cars indicates a strong affinity for old things, either despite or due to the fact that he had never lived as an adult in Shōwa.

Mr. Arai also appreciated the old scenes of the exhibits and the old appliances, although he noted they were from a generation before his childhood memories of very late Shōwa. Yet, after searching his memory, he had a detailed knowledge of how their features differed. For example, he noted that the appliances displayed in the museum pre-dated the ones he remembered from his childhood and talked at length about how they were different:

The TVs (Figure 9) here are very old. We had a newer TV with channels but unless you changed the channel right, the picture didn’t come on and it would make a lot of noise—we had to adjust it each time. After that it changed to buttons types.

His affinity for collecting old things and attending to fine detail is also apparent in his discussions of the toys he saw in the museum exhibit. When he was a child, he spent a lot of time and effort saving up money and buying old toys “one by one” that his local toy shop kept in storage rather than on display. He lamented that he never kept his collection:

I used to collect toys like chogokin (plastic figurines and models) that were popular up until around Shōwa 51 or 52 (1976/77) but as I became older, I started to feel embarrassed about doing it, so I sold them all. If I had them now, I would probably be able to sell them on Internet auction sites for a good price. In those days, you would sell them at throwaway prices.
Interestingly, Mr. Arai went to discuss how the museum experience affected and motivated his plans to fill his new apartment with Shōwa objects:

Recently, I moved and began thinking how I could decorate my room. I had discarded my old things and then I recalled Shōwa and thought I wanted to create something with Shōwa objects. We have just moved in so the room is still a mess, but I have a plan to fill my room with Shōwa things. I want to make a Shōwa room and

WE USED TO FIGHT OVER WHICH ONE WOULD USE THE SPOON TODAY

I have a plan, so I’m still collecting some good, old things: the radio, the old music player, and also the interior lights—I’m going to get some old Shōwa ones. If I am going to make this Shōwa room, I have to think and take cues from the exhibit.

Shōwa has a retrospective power to inspire connections with people - even those who had never actually lived through most of it.

The case of Mr. Kanamori: The curry spoon

The case of Mr. Kanamori, aged 44, exemplifies the power of objects used or consumed as part of visitors’ life scripts (theme #2) and objects associated with childhood (themes #4). Mr. Kanamori visited the museum with his wife, aged 43, and his daughter, aged 8. Immediately after their only visit, he identified three objects that made him feel
nostalgic: the Oriental Curry spoons (Figure 10), the overall scene at the candy shop and its merchandise, and an old black telephone.

“Oriental Curry” was a brand of curry popularized in Japan during the Shōwa period, and is still eaten as a cheap and tasty meal in Japan today. Before the Oriental Curry company in Aichi prefecture launched their product in 1945, only a few Japanese people knew Indian curry recipes and could make them from scratch. The Oriental Curry company was the first to produce a brand of instant curry that came in blocks. These blocks were mixed with water, vegetables, and meat, and poured liberally over Japanese rice. The launch of this product introduced Indian curry to ordinary Japanese people. That said, it had a distinct taste that suited the Japanese palate, but would be unrecognizable in India. In the 1970s, the company ran product promotions, including an Oriental Curry Rice Spoon that could only be acquired by collecting and mailing in coupons contained within each Oriental Curry pack. Mr. Kanamori’s family lived in Aichi and were happy to get a curry spoon during one of the promotions. Eventually, almost every family in Japan had one. They were so popular even years later that the company kept running promotions with retro reproductions of the original design. Mr. Kanamori fondly remembers the original spoon his family had:

You know, as a child, I thought that spoon was to eat curry. I preferred to use the oriental curry spoon rather than using a regular one. I had it since I was little and we only had one in the house. I have a brother who was two years older than me and we used to fight over which one would use the spoon today. Of course, we didn’t seriously fight over it, but it is a very fond memory of mine.

The spoon, which was once quite valuable to him as a child, however, is long gone. It had stayed with them for years until Mr. Kanamori had grown up. When he was about twenty, he asked his mother where the spoon went:

My mother threw it away. She got rid of it! She probably must have kept it, but when she had the opportunity, she just threw it away. I remember my father said “Your mother doesn’t know the value of things.” Well, I wish I had the spoon. I want to use it, if had it now.

**DISCUSSION**

From these five cases it is evident that the museum exhibits and experiences of the Shōwa Era Life Style Museum evoked and mediated many vivid and deeply nostalgic memories. From these analyses, we have identified five sustainable themes which parallel both the thematic forms and triggers of nostalgia, which
we abstract from the cases reported in the results.

Objects tied to collective identity and values perceived to be lost

The narratives of visitors’ nostalgic memories revealed the power of objects tied to collective identity and values perceived to be lost. This is exemplified by the case of Mr. Sugiura and his encounters with the aerosol spray cans which sparked other related autobiographical memories of people from the local neighborhood association in his childhood rural community where he grew up. His vivid nostalgic memories triggered memories of the community-mindset of his childhood and the values of helping one another. He recalls the collective identity of the community and the values they held, i.e., “people took a stand against things in the community that were unjust or lacked heart” and “we were connected with other people”. To Mr. Sugiura, such collective values, which comprised the identities of the communities of his childhood, seem lost. This attests to the variety of nostalgic responses which connect the individual to their broader collective pasts, and to the associated values held by those people. We note a nostalgic trickle-down effect, in that the objects connect with other objects in the memory, and with people and the values they espoused. These values are often regarded as alien to present day society. It is these collective identities and values which are at the core of the nostalgic emotions for Mr. Sugiura.

Objects used or consumed as part of visitors’ life scripts

Numerous examples of objects which were regularly used or consumed as a part of visitors’ life scripts in the distant past emerged in the narratives, and are exemplified by the cases of Mr. Kannamori and Mrs. Katori. Very often these included tools or products that were used in daily life, but have been absent from their experience, or not in use, for many years. Mr. Kannamori nostalgically recalled his love of a valuable (at least, to him) Oriental Curry rice spoon he recalled using as a child. The object was like a long lost friend, valued, loved and used regularly in daily life. Yet, connections with the object had been lost for many years, even forgotten until the point of reunification during the museum visit. For Mrs. Katori, the kanpi was a regular household item (in the form of the tobacco her husband smoked), but also as practical storage container that she used for hiding money in her early married life. Likewise, the old water well pump was a regular part of a daily life script, but one that has not been practiced or remembered for many years. The reunion of the person to the object is like a celebration of a long-lost common experience, and associated memories of that time connected with the familiar regular past use of the object itself.

Objects associated with individuals dear to the visitor

Many museum objects triggered rich and vivid nostalgic associations with individuals dear to the visitors as exemplified by the cases of Ms. Saida and Mr. Sugiura. The case of Ms. Saida exemplifies this theme through her fond recollections of her father and the Midget car he drove when he was still alive. In addition, exhibitions of old gas and electric rice cookers trigger nostalgic memories of her father’s stubborn traits, and deeply ingrained suspicions when refusing to entertain the purchase of the then-novel innovation. Ms. Saida also described in detail how the knitted
shopping basket linked to her childhood memories of her dear friend Yuko-chan, and the visits to her house. Similarly for Mr. Sugiura, encounters with the flower-patterned thermos evoked powerful memories that were so intimately tied to his mother that the images of that thermos and his mother merged. For Mrs. Katori, the kanpi was associated with the tobacco smoked by her late husband. Like old friends, museum exhibits hold the capacity to usher in a suite of nostalgic and heartfelt memories of loved ones and times of lives long gone.

**Objects associated with childhood**

The narratives of visitors’ nostalgic memories revealed the power of *objects associated with childhood*. Ms. Saida’s encounter with the knitted basket in the museum held significance because it was also linked to memories of a childhood friend. The basket triggered the recall of mental scenes completely forgotten until the museum visit. Likewise, Mr. Kanamori’s recollections of the Oriental Curry rice spoon are a form of nostalgic recall of objects associated with childhood, as are Mrs. Katori’s memories of the old water pump.

**Objects that invoke vicarious nostalgia**

The narratives of visitors’ nostalgic memories revealed the power of *objects that invoke vicarious nostalgia*. The Shōwa era bears a retrospective power to inspire emotions within people—even those who never actually lived through most of it. We call this: “vicarious nostalgia”—a sense of nostalgia for a time or place never personally experienced by the individual. The case of Mr. Arai, who was born in Shōwa 46 (1971), aptly depicts this kind of nostalgia. He nostalgically appreciated the old scenes within the exhibits, the old Midget car, and the old appliances although they were made a generation before his childhood. His passion for collecting objects, and his appreciation of old, “retro,” things, undoubtedly influenced his nostalgic responses to the museum exhibitions. It also speaks the capacities of museums to evoke nostalgic responses even from those who have never personally experienced the era from which those objects originate.

**CONCLUSION**

Our data clearly illustrates the power of museum objects to provide experiences that can generate significant feelings of nostalgia, which connect with visitors’ identities and pasts. Indeed, nostalgic responses in this social museum act as triggers that vividly connect (or re-member) the visitor’s past and present through encounters with objects. There are numerous common traits that trigger and mediate nostalgic recall through the museum exhibits. From this study we identified five of these: 1) *Objects tied to collective identity and values perceived to be lost*; 2) *Objects used or consumed as part of visitors’ life scripts*; 3) *Objects associated with individuals dear to the visitor*; 4) *Objects associated with childhood*; 5) *Objects that invoke vicarious nostalgia*. It is important to recognise that these common characteristic traits are not mutually exclusive, nor are they discrete. Rather, multiple characteristics that are responsible for mediating nostalgic recall have the capacity to manifest simultaneously. These identified themes have similar aspects to those previously identified by

David Anderson, Hiroyuki Shimizu, and Chris Campbell
Batcho (1995, 1998). In addition, some of the triggers of nostalgia described by Wildschut et al. (2006) are manifested in our findings. However, we see nuances not typically discussed in the psychological literature on nostalgia. In particular we identify the power of museum objects to evoke vicarious nostalgia, the reunification with otherwise-mundane objects that once had everyday use, and nostalgic trickle-down effects. For museums, the outcomes of this study speak to the power of personal museum experiences, when objects match or connect with the visitors’ distant life experiences. Moreover, it demonstrates the considerable power of Showa era objects to evoke Japanese visitors’ nostalgic responses, and the common characteristic themes that incite and mediate these nostalgic memories though the objects.

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NOTES

1. Multiple Case Narrative is an ideal research methodology for this kind of study for several reasons. First, the data for the study were derived from the personal stories of visitors as they expressed memories of their own museum experiences, their nostalgic responses, and their personal life stories mediated by their own identity (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; 1994; Connelly and Clandinin 2006). Second, Multiple Case Narrative data is constructive-narrative by its nature (Bruner 1994; 1996), and is most easily captured as stories of rich phenomena of life and experience that are context and identity-sensitive (Carter 1993; Lieblich et al. 1998). Third, data were collected from multiple visitors, which permits the identification of broad patterns, and the capacity to make generalizations within the bounds of the case contexts (Shkedi 2005) about the common characteristic traits that can be identified about the nature their nostalgic recall mediated though the museum exhibits.

2. Shōwa is the period of Japanese history corresponding to the reign of the Shōwa Emperor, Hirohito, from December 25, 1926 through January 7, 1989.

3. The intention was to (i) capture a set of museum experiences that triggered nostalgic responses; (ii) probe the reasons why visitors considered these experiences nostalgic; (iii) determine if and how visitors’ personal lives, life stories, and self-reported identities at the time of the visit were linked and to past experiences that were triggered by nostalgia (Feinberg and Leinhardt 2002); and (iv) describe in detail distant nostalgic memories triggered by the museum exhibits. Each interview lasted about twenty to twenty-five minutes in duration and was audio and video recorded for later analysis.

4. A popular 2005 Japanese film series (Always san’chome no yuhi: ALWAYS 三丁目の夕日) set in a small post-war Tokyo community in the Showa period of the late 1950s. The plot follows the relationships and financial difficulties of two families over a year as Tokyo Tower is being built. Despite the difficulties in their lives, the film has many light-hearted and sentimental moments. The plot and period sets capture the sentimental nostalgia of the post-war Japanese “good old days”.

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