

# Nostalgia-based marketing campaigns and sport participation

Marketing  
campaigns and  
sport  
participation

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Framed by nostalgia marketing, this research draws upon lessons from ParticipACTION, a Canadian non-profit health promotion organization, to examine one of their most well-known campaigns, Body Break with ParticipACTION, in order to assess the potential role for nostalgia-based marketing campaigns in sport participation across generational cohorts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Exploratory sequential mixed methods involving two studies were completed on behalf of ParticipACTION, with the authors developing the research instruments and the collection of the data undertaken by research agencies. Study 1 was the secondary analysis of qualitative data from five focus groups with different demographic compositions that followed a common question guide. Study 2 was a secondary data analysis of a pan-Canadian online survey with a sample ( $n = 1,475$ ) representative of the overall adult population that assessed awareness of, and attitudes toward, ParticipACTION, Body Break, physical activity and sport participation. Path analysis tested a proposed

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model that was based on previous research on attitudes, brand and loyalty. Further, multi-group path analyses were conducted to compare younger generations with older ones.

**Findings** – The results provide direction and understanding of the importance of nostalgia in marketing sport participation programs across generational cohorts. For instance, in the four parent-adult focus groups, unaided references as well as frequent and detailed comments regarding Body Break were observed. Similarly, Millennials reported that Body Break was memorable, Canadian and nostalgic, with a mix of positive and negative comments. The importance of nostalgia was supported sequentially via results from the national survey. For example, while 54.1% of the 40–54 age-group associated ParticipACTION positively with Body Break, so did 49.8% of the 25–39-year age group, most of whom were not born when the promotion ran. Further, brand resonance was found to explain 4% more variance in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), the proxy for sport participation, for younger people compared to older people.

**Practical implications** – Results provide direction to brands, properties and agencies around the use of nostalgia in sport marketing campaigns and sponsorship efforts. For brands seeking to sponsor sport properties to alter their image with potential consumers in a new market, associating with a sport property that many view as nostalgic could improve the impact of the campaign. On the sport property side, event managers and marketers should both identify existing assets that members or fans are nostalgic about, as well as consider building nostalgia into current and new properties they develop.

**Originality/value** – This research is valuable to the sport marketing and sponsorship literature through several contributions. First, the use of nostalgia marketing, and nostalgia in general, is novel in the sport marketing and sponsorship literature, with future research in nostalgia and sponsorship recommended. Second, the potential to adopt or adapt Body Break to other sport participation and physical activity properties is empirically supported. Finally, the finding that very effective promotions can have a long-lasting effect, both on those who experienced the campaigns as well as younger populations who only heard about it, is notable.

**Keywords** Body break, ParticipACTION, Physical activity, Nostalgic appeal, Marketing, Campaigns, Storytelling

**Paper type** Research paper

Nostalgia is widely used in marketing to revive the past to influence the decisions people make in a variety of contexts, including consumer–brand relationships (Jun *et al.*, 2022) and sport tourism (Cho, 2021). Empirical studies have found the use of nostalgia in marketing and advertising to be effective (Muehling *et al.*, 2004). The process by which nostalgia works is through evoking thoughts, states, and positive feelings of self-identity which, in turn, can lead to behaviors such as purchase intentions, sport travel choices, and engagement (Ju *et al.*, 2016). This research explores nostalgia in the context of the many existing barriers to physical activity and sport participation. These barriers were heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was linked with significant decreases in outdoor recreation and sport participation along with increases in sedentary behavior, such as watching TV and using electronic devices (Park *et al.*, 2022).

Physical activity is defined by Caspersen *et al.* (1985) as a construct that includes sport participation. Decreased sport participation, as a form of physical activity, is associated with a variety of physical, mental, and emotional consequences, including a higher risk of mortality, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, several cancers, anxiety, depression, dementia, and weight gain, among others (Ross *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the global cost of inaction on physical inactivity, including sport participation, is estimated at \$47.6 billion per year in preventable healthcare costs alone (Santos *et al.*, 2023). With these health and economic consequences, it is in the national interest to get people to participate in sport.

The Canadian Sport Policy (2012) sets the direction for governments, institutions, and organizations to ensure sport has a positive impact on the lives of its citizens. A key focus of the policy is to increase both the number and diversity of Canadians participating in sport, as well as to enhance sport participation outcomes. The Canadian Sport Policy (2012–2022) has five objectives, two of which are relevant to this research: (1) introduction to sport, i.e. equipping individuals with the skills to try out organized and unorganized sports, and (2) recreational sport, i.e. facilitating participation in recreational sport for fun, physical and mental health. The goal is to actively engage Canadians in sport by fostering appreciation,

positive attitude, and participation for healthy human development, emphasizing that sport is not just for high performance athletes. Rather, sport participation entails regular (i.e. at least once per week during the season) participation in an activity requiring specialized neuromuscular skills with two or more people competing under a set of rules (Berger *et al.*, 2008). Throughout the renewal process for the forthcoming Canadian Sport Policy (2023–2033), continued focus is placed on long-term participation in sport rather than on an overly performance-oriented system.

Canadian Sport for Life, a not-for-profit advocate, published *Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity* as a framework for every citizen to optimally participate in sport and physical activity (Sport for Life, 2019). As two of three goals, the framework emphasizes both lifelong participation and physical literacy, where the latter is defined as the “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life” (International Physical Literacy Association, 2014). Within this framework, physical activity (including structured and unstructured sport, recreation, active living, and play) is positioned as a powerful agent contributing to health and well-being. For the remainder of the paper, we refer to “sport participation” as the combination of sport participation and physical activity, while “physical activity” is used for explicit references of that term, understanding that sport participation is a component thereof.

A challenge for governments and nonprofit organizations in today’s media landscape is exposure and messaging to inform people of the benefits of sport participation. Technological innovations have diversified the ways in which individuals consume media, such as the introduction of community-powered platforms (e.g. YouTube, TikTok) and ad-free on-demand services (e.g. Netflix, Spotify). The nature of advertising has also changed, thanks to the development of data-driven targeted ads (Boerman *et al.*, 2017) and affordable advertising fees (Cordero-Gutiérrez and Lahuerta-Otero, 2020). It has been estimated that the average person in a developed country is exposed to 4,000–10,000 ads per day in current times (Simpson, 2017), compared to 500 ads per day in the 1970s (Johnson, 2006). In the 1980 and 1990s, a single well-timed media campaign may have had widespread reach; today, it is difficult for campaigns to achieve high levels of impact, due to the cluttered marketing environment and vast channels for dissemination. Indeed, a major focus of modern marketing has been the development of creative marketing campaigns with the potential for wide-reaching impact through digital and social channels. This advertising landscape may be a particular challenge for health promotion agencies and organizations, who may not have access to the same level of marketing expertise or funding compared to corporate groups. A marketing campaign often links to the interests, passions, or nostalgia of targets, typically where the ability to garner virtual interest and reach specific populations is high. Hewett *et al.* (2016) researched campaign planning, finding that both digital and traditional marketing efforts are essential to success. Thus, campaigns around a theme, such as participation in sport, need to include online marketing, social media, traditional advertising, branding, and other marketing tactics.

To deliver a message that cuts through the clutter, marketing campaigns are increasingly reliant on brand stories, defined by Mills and John (2021) as “a strategic brand narrative comprising critical elements of plot and character with the purpose of representing the brand in a meaningful way to consumers” (p. 2). Effective marketing involves storytelling: stories not only engage consumers but connect with them on an emotional level (Merchant *et al.*, 2010). The linguistic content of stories that captivate and engage audiences is rooted in the emotional content that elicits arousal and uncertainty via language, capturing the viewer’s attention (Berger *et al.*, 2023). The resulting connection primes consumers to respond to a takeaway, such as a call to action that will improve their lives (Mills and John, 2021). Nostalgia is one form of storytelling that positions the self as the youthful hero of one’s own positive,

action-oriented narrative. In any related marketing effort leveraging nostalgia (Cho, 2021), the branding elements of brand affective attitude, brand identification and brand resonance can influence physical activity outcomes (Lithopoulos *et al.*, 2021). The purpose of the current study was to empirically examine the lasting impact of a particular campaign across generational cohorts to demonstrate if nostalgia can be incorporated into future marketing campaigns related to sport participation.

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### Nostalgia and sport participation

Organizations can turn to nostalgia to steer their marketing campaigns through ads that purposefully invoke childhood experiences, vintage/retro sensibilities, and “simpler times.” Nostalgia was first described in a medical dissertation of 1688 by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer. Based on the German *heimweh*, homesickness was triggered in young people sent to foreign lands, resulting in sadness, insomnia, delirium, and even death (Anspach, 1934). Until the 20th century, nostalgia was still regarded as a neurological disease limited to such vulnerable individuals as soldiers, sailors, immigrants, and college students (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2020). Eventually, this paradigm of nostalgia changed from a disease to a mood, ceding to a benign definition as “pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again” (Britannica Dictionary, 2022).

Today, nostalgia has arrived. No longer a psychiatric disorder, nostalgia has been documented in children as young as eight in 18 countries on five continents (Hepper *et al.*, 2014). Approximately 50% of young adults report experiencing nostalgia at least once per week, with frequency increasing with age (Turner and Stanley, 2021). Whether triggered by anxiety, loneliness, boredom, or a life transition, nostalgic tales contain common elements. An analysis of stories published in the periodical *Nostalgia* revealed that the most common subjects are significant social or life events in which the self is the primary actor who overcomes a challenge, resulting in a wave of overall positive emotion (Wildschut *et al.*, 2006). Thus, when people look back, they position themselves as the hero of their own story.

Nostalgia has been studied in the marketing literature for more than 30 years, with more than 150 empirical studies published since 1991 (Srivastava *et al.*, 2023). Consumers in certain settings are known to respond positively towards experiences related to objects that were common at the time of their youth (Holbrook and Schindler, 2003). In the literature, much is written of nostalgia in the sport tourism context (Cho, 2021), e.g. visiting ballparks, but not in relation to sport participation. Sport participation differs by sport type and is determined by a variety of micro- and macro-level factors (Wicker *et al.*, 2012):

- (1) Demographic factors, such as age, gender, and educational attainment.
- (2) Household factors, such as income, caretaking obligations, and availability of transportation.
- (3) Infrastructure, e.g. proximity and availability of ice rinks, sports fields, and swimming pools (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2015).
- (4) Programming, such as the availability of coaches and opportunities to compete.

Due to its generation of positive affect, fond memories, and pleasant recollections of the past, the evocation of nostalgia can be used to stimulate long-term behaviors (Muehling *et al.*, 2014). The extension to sport participation is supported by a meta-analysis from Srivastava *et al.* (2023), whose review found positive effects of nostalgia on “leisure participation” in nine

previous studies, along with positive effects on behaviors that could promote sport participation, such as sensation-seeking.

A positive, action-oriented, and younger view of self connects nostalgia with sport participation (Berger *et al.*, 2008) through its association with optimism (Kersten *et al.*, 2016). A significant predictor of physical health, optimism has been linked with preventative health behaviors and outcomes. A meta-analysis of 84 studies revealed that optimism promotes positive physical outcomes in the context of cancer, heart disease, and, pain (Rasmussen *et al.*, 2009). In an experimental study, Kersten *et al.* (2016) examined whether nostalgia was associated with physical and psychological health, including sport participation (Ross *et al.*, 2020; Berger *et al.*, 2008). Participants were randomly assigned to write about a nostalgic or ordinary event, with the nostalgia group reporting greater health optimism, more positive health attitudes, and increased physical activity. Abeyta *et al.* (2016) observed that nostalgia was associated with feelings of youthfulness: middle-aged adults who were asked to remember a nostalgic memory from high school subsequently reported greater perceived health and confidence regarding their physical activities. While physical activity was not directly assessed, the authors concluded that nostalgia, and its impact on perceived youthfulness, may be beneficial to health.

Nostalgia's true power has been demonstrated in times of great stress. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, people romanticized about their return to daily life. Nostalgia was credited not only with reviving interest in classic movies and board games (Gammon and Ramshaw, 2021) but with elevating happiness to counteract the adverse influence of loneliness (Zhou *et al.*, 2022). As a coping mechanism, nostalgia helped some individuals maintain a healthy optimism that bolstered their resiliency in the face of social isolation, uncertainty, and distress (Cho *et al.*, 2023; Faul and Brigard, 2022).

Rather than a nod to the past, nostalgia exerts a future orientation (Fiorito and Routledge, 2020) as a source of motivation. Nostalgia facilitates generalized motivation, such as the willingness to take risks; localized motivation (e.g. pursuit of goals); and action-oriented motivation (e.g. plans to change behavior) (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2020). Thus, nostalgia evokes a younger view of self with the motivation, and skills to create a healthy and meaningful life. More specifically, nostalgia can improve individual health by (1) fostering a positive attitude, (2) increasing levels of physical activity, including sport participation, (3) increasing consumption of healthier foods, (4) reducing risky behaviors, and (5) reducing physical pain (Kersten and Cox, 2023). According to Kersten and Cox (2023), future research needs to address whether physical benefits elicited by nostalgia can be sustained over time. One project aligned with this goal was a study of 550 adults who participated in Dance for All at sports facilities, cultural centers, and dance studios throughout South Korea prior to the pandemic (Lim *et al.*, 2022). Those emotionally attached to, or nostalgic for, Dance for All reported greater levels of resilience to the effects of the pandemic, demonstrating that nostalgia can generate mental health benefits without the sport participation actually taking place. It could be argued that nostalgia can lead to motivation, which in turn could lead to increased sport participation.

The narrative of nostalgia supports the micro- and macro-level determinants of sport participation at the individual, household, and community level. At the tactical level, one way to incorporate nostalgia into a marketing campaign is to employ a local or well-known athlete who can (1) inspire the initial participation of people who do not practice the sport, and (2) motivate existing participants to practice the sport more frequently (Mutter and Pawlowski, 2014). Whether athletes, role models, or celebrities, well-known personalities are key elements of storytelling as they inspire (Allison and Goethals, 2016) and drive emotional attachment (Klugman and Ricatti, 2012). Stories featuring well-known athletes aligns with the action-oriented narrative of nostalgia (Smith, 1973), increasing relatability to a target audience primed for sport participation.

## ParticipACTION

For 50 years, ParticipACTION has been working to promote health through physical activity, including nostalgia-based content, with initiatives like public health messaging (e.g. the 60-Year-Old Swede featured in ParticipACTION promotions in the early 1970's), ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity (ongoing), UPnGO with ParticipACTION; the Canada 150 Play List (2014–2016), and the ParticipACTION app (2019–2023). Through campaigns at schools, workplaces, and communities, many Canadians have been exposed to ParticipACTION at some point in their life. However, in today's more fractured media landscape, traditional media exposure is declining (Koslow and Stewart, 2022), which in turn impacts national health promotion organizations like ParticipACTION.

The focus of this research, *Body Break with ParticipACTION* ("*Body Break*") was a series of 90-s television spots that aired from 1989 to 1994. Through relatable messaging, hosts Hal Johnson (former first baseman for the Canadian national baseball team) and Joanne McLeod (4-time national hurdle champion of Canada) promoted physical activity through such topics as exercises to perform on airplanes, purchasing downhill ski boots, and bicep curl techniques. Following three pilot episodes in 1988, ParticipACTION funded 65 segments from 1989–1991. With new funding, Johnson and McLeod continued production with 300 additional segments. A video on the [bodybreak.com](http://bodybreak.com) Website tells the story of the campaign [1]. Licensed by manufacturers and service providers, *Body Break* has been broadcast by The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), The Sports Network (TSN), and the Life Network, ensuring widespread exposure. While segments were informative, their style was cheesy: yet the attributes embodied by this dated approach to apparel, music, and editing is precisely what makes them so memorable, an important point to consider viz-a-viz nostalgia. In 2013, the married interracial couple re-emerged in the public eye as contestants on Season 1 of the *Amazing Race Canada* television reality show, reintroducing themselves to a new generation.

While hailed a success, no research has explicitly examined the impact of *Body Break* on sport participation. Thirty years later, curiosity persists regarding Canadians' lasting awareness of this campaign. Can nostalgia be used to promote physical activity? Can it drive people to consider participating in sport? In today's fragmented media landscape, considering *Body Break* through the lens of nostalgia may provide some insight into effective marketing campaigns.

### Study aims

The aim of this paper is twofold:

- (1) To empirically examine the lasting impact of *Body Break* to determine whether nostalgia-based marketing campaigns can promote moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), including sport participation.
- (2) To demonstrate whether nostalgia can be incorporated into an effective and memorable national marketing campaign related to sport participation across generations (i.e. Millennials, Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Z).

These questions are investigated through exploratory sequential mixed-methods involving two studies: Study 1 reports on results from five focus groups in which individuals were asked about their perceptions of the ParticipACTION brand. Organic comments regarding *Body Break* were analyzed for evidence to inform the instrument for Study 2, a retrospectively leveraged a cross-sectional quantitative study that examined associations between *Body Break* awareness and participation in MVPA. Given the nature of nostalgia marketing in past research (FioRito and Routledge, 2020), a retrospective data collection process on the enduring impact of a marketing campaign, even decades later, is appropriate (see [Faul and De Brigard, 2022](#)).

## Method

Research on the effects of nostalgia on individuals requires linkages of current promotions to objects of the target's past, typically from the time of their youth (Srivastava *et al.*, 2023). Thus, *Body Break* provides an ideal context to assess nostalgic appeal since the exploration of nostalgia-based marketing via a campaign from the past is appropriate. The current research is a secondary data analysis of two different sources, where the researchers were involved in the planning, design, and analysis phases of the research. The role of the market research agency was to provide access to a large and representative sample. For both, the instrument was developed by the authors while data collection was conducted by research agencies. Following secondary analysis ethics approval, the authors had access to the raw data from ParticipACTION. Study 1 was a secondary data analysis of five focus groups conducted by an independent research firm (Angus Reid Public Opinion) on behalf of ParticipACTION in early 2019. Study 2 was secondary data analysis of an online survey from a large sample of the Canadian population by an independent market research firm (Maru/Matchbox) on behalf of ParticipACTION. For both Study 1 and Study 2, the authors were involved in the instrument design, sample framing, and data analysis.

### *Participants and recruitment*

Study 1's five focus groups featured millennials (1 group,  $n = 48$ ), mothers of children aged 5–11 years (1 group,  $n = 20$ ), parents of children aged 18 years and younger (2 groups,  $n = 9$  and 17), and general adults (1 group,  $n = 14$ ). Individuals were deemed eligible to participate if they met the following inclusion criteria: (1) age 18 years or older; (2) able to communicate in English; (3) have regular access to a computer with internet access; and (4) currently resided in Canada. For maximum reach, no ineligibility criteria were set.

For Study 1, Maru/Matchbox surveyed its online database of 120,000 Canadian panelists, which mirrors the national census in terms of age, gender, region, income, employment, and language spoken. Data collection occurred online in French and English. The survey, which required ~15 min to complete, was opened on May 15, 2019 for a total of seven days. Participants were sent an email with a one-time link plus a reminder two days before it closed. Once closed, all data were cleaned, de-identified, and tabulated into an SPSS file (version 27, IBM, New York, USA). The final pool was a representative sample of 1,475 adults in Canada ( $M$  age = 49.36 years,  $SD = 16.12$ , range = 18–93; 49.1% female; 62.6% completed a college or university degree; 70.9% employed full-time or retired).

### *Study 1 procedure*

The guide for focus group participants explored perceptions of ParticipACTION (e.g. its mission statement), knowledge and attitudes toward physical activity (e.g. benefits of physical activity), and promotion strategies (e.g. intervention programs, organized sport). Similar guides were used for all five focus groups, with some differences in questions and follow-up prompts depending on participant characteristics (e.g. mothers, millennials) and emergent topics of conversation. Rather than explicitly query participants about *Body Break*, items asked about general perceptions of ParticipACTION and physical activity participation. Thus, any responses regarding *Body Break* were deemed to be unprompted and organic in nature, representing the salience of the campaign in participant memories. Consenting adults were invited to participate in an online focus group conducted over a message forum. Ranging from 9 to 48 individuals, each focus group was guided by a facilitator responsible for posing questions, prompting responses, asking for elaboration, and encouraging group dynamics.

As detailed in the group guide, data consisted of written responses to focus group items, which thanks to a message forum format, allowed for flexible collection across Canada's six

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time zones. This structure generated rich and detailed information about participants' experiences and perceptions of ParticipACTION, which were downloaded and assigned alpha-numeric codes at the respondent level to preserve anonymity.

### *Study 2 procedure*

The online survey was created by ParticipACTION, with input from the authors. Building upon the results of Study 1, the cross-sectional survey was designed to assess awareness of, and attitudes toward, the ParticipACTION brand (affective attitude, identity and resonance), and sport participation. Specifically, the survey questions allowed for an examination of the associations between *Body Break* awareness and sport participation measured via MVPA.

To measure whether ParticipACTION was associated with *Body Break* (coded "no" or "yes"), participants were presented with the following statement: "When I think of ParticipACTION, I think of . . .?" Afterward, participants viewed the following list presented in random order: Hal and Joanne, *Body Break*, Canada Fitness Awards, the pinwheel, The Amazing Race Canada, Making Canadians Fitter, a physical activity app, or none of the above. Participants could also write an association in an open-ended text box.

The construct Brand Affective Attitude was measured using the following item, also used in [Lithopoulos et al. \(2018\)](#): "For each of the organizations you are familiar with, how would you rate your impressions of that organization?" Participants could respond on a scale ranging from 1 ("very negative") to 5 ("very positive"). We suggest that this measure better captures the affective component of attitude because the scale anchors refer to feeling rather than usefulness.

The Brand Identification construct was measured using the following item, described by [Lithopoulos et al. \(2018\)](#): "For each of the organizations you are familiar with, how relevant is the organization to your own and/or your family's health and well-being?" Participants could respond on a scale ranging from 1 ("very irrelevant") to 5 ("very relevant").

The Brand Resonance construct was measured using three items ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ) with scales ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"). The first two items, originally adapted from [Evans et al. \(2005\)](#) and later used in [Lithopoulos et al. \(2018\)](#), were: "I share ParticipACTION's messages with others" and "I'd like to help ParticipACTION get the word out." The final item was: "I'm personally aligned with what ParticipACTION stands for." [Lithopoulos et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated construct validity of this scale through factor analyses.

As the intensity level typically associated with sport participation ([Ainsworth et al., 2011](#)), MVPA is evaluated with questions about physical activity first at the vigorous then moderate level. Consistent with Canadian physical activity guidelines ([www.csep.ca/guidelines](http://www.csep.ca/guidelines)) for adults at the time of data collection, participants were asked to report MVPA bouts that were at least 10 min in duration with the following prompt: "Now we would like to ask you about sports, fitness, and recreational activities (leisure)." Participants answered "yes/no" to the first question: "Do you do any vigorous-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities that cause large increases in breathing or heart rate like running or football for at least 10 min continuously?" Participants who selected "yes" then answered the following: "In a typical week, on how many days do you do vigorous-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities? How much time do you spend doing vigorous-intensity sports, fitness, or recreational activities on a typical day?" The second set of questions, followed a similar format: "Do you do any moderate-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities that cause a small increase in breathing or heart rate such as brisk walking [wheeling, cycling, swimming, volleyball] for at least 10 min continuously?" Again, participants who selected "yes" answered the following: "In a typical week, on how many days do you do moderate-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities? How much time do you spend doing moderate-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities on a typical day?"

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For both vigorous and moderate activity levels, number of days was multiplied by duration. Finally, vigorous and moderate products were summed to create weekly MVPA minutes.

### Analysis

The analysis of the focus group (Study 1) data followed an established protocol for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis was chosen because it aligned with the research questions and allowed for a relatively quick analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). One author immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, coding references to *Body Break*. In addition to themes, the tonal valence of each response was noted, i.e. whether it was overall positive, negative, or neutral/mixed. A critical friend (i.e. another author) was employed in the analysis process (Smith and McGannon, 2018) to provide feedback, prompt reflection, and explore alternative interpretations of the transcripts/codes. Most often, the discussion focused on the interpretation of valence. Coding was completed in Microsoft Excel, where descriptive codes were created next to related quotes to keep the meaning in context. Codes were then grouped thematically. Interpretations were shared and discussed with additional research team members to challenge identified themes and their connections in a form of peer debriefing.

Analysis of the survey results for Study 2 began by preparing the data. See Table 1 for a list of the variables included in the analysis.

Skewness, kurtosis, and outliers were explored using SPSS Version 24. We defined outliers as values more than three times less or greater than the middle 50% (25th to 75th percentiles) of the distribution (Pallant, 2011). MVPA originally had a skewness of 11.78 and kurtosis of 217.95. Seventy-six outliers, about 5.7% of the sample, for this variable were subsequently removed and skewness improved to 1.68 and kurtosis improved to 2.50. No other outliers were discovered for the remaining variables. Next, patterns in missing data were examined in SPSS. Overall, 9.2% of the data were missing. Little's MCAR test revealed that the data were missing completely at random:  $\chi^2 = 3.92$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = 0.789$ . All variables contributing to the hypothesized model had less than 10% missing (range = 5.2–9.9%). Imputation was done in LISREL version 10.20 using the expectation maximization algorithm.

Path analysis using a covariance matrix was conducted in LISREL version 10.20, and robust maximum likelihood estimation was used to test the linear hypothesized model (see Figure 1) and with its interactive/mediating effects (see Figure 2). Several criteria were used to judge model fit: (1) statistical significance (i.e.  $p < 0.05$ ) and direction of relationships between variables, (2) size of standardized residuals between variables (values greater than 3.29 were considered unacceptable), and (3) model fit indices. The following indices (accompanied with acceptable fit guidelines) were used to evaluate model fit:  $\chi^2$  (non-significant value), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) of 0.90 or higher, Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR) of less than 0.05, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.08 or lower, and Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.90 or higher (Schumacker and Lomax, 2010). Also, as per guidelines provided by Cohen (1988), small, medium, and large effect sizes were interpreted when  $R^2$  was greater than or equal to 0.02, 0.13, and 0.26, respectively. To compare Millennials and Generation Z to Generation X, baby boomers and older generations (>age 40 at time of survey), multi-group path analyses were conducted. Path analyses were conducted sequentially to locate differences between the two groups. Poor global fit based on a significant global chi-square value indicates the two groups are different. To investigate the differences, further models are estimated by altering constraints (e.g. allowing regression coefficients to be different; Schumacker and Lomax, 2010).

As noted in the literature review, notably the meta-analysis by Srivastava *et al.* (2023), previous studies indicated that nostalgia was related to emotion, self-brand connection or relevance of the brand to identity, brand equity and possibly other behaviors. Specific to the

Construct	Measurement/Operationalization
Brand association between body break and ParticipACTION	Single yes or no question with a list of options including “Hal and Joanne”, and “ <i>Body Break</i> ” to measure association with ParticipACTION. Participants were presented with the following statement: “When I think of ParticipACTION, I think of.?” Participants could also write an association in an open-ended text box
Brand affective attitude	Five-point Likert Scale from 1 (“very negative”) to 5 (“very positive”) rating question (see <a href="#">Lithopoulos et al., 2018</a> ) that asks: “For each of the organizations you are familiar with, how would you rate your impressions of that organization?”
Brand identification	Five-point Likert Scale from 1 (“very irrelevant”) to 5 (“very relevant”) rating question (see <a href="#">Lithopoulos et al., 2018</a> ) that asks: “For each of the organizations you are familiar with, how relevant is the organization to your own and/or your family’s health and well-being?”
Brand resonance	Three four-point scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 4 (“strongly agree”) questions adapted from <a href="#">Evans et al. (2005)</a> and <a href="#">Lithopoulos et al. (2018)</a> with no mid-point 1 “I share ParticipACTION’s messages with others.” 2 “I’d like to help ParticipACTION get the word out” “I’m personally aligned with what ParticipACTION stands for.”
MVPA	Participants were asked to report sports, fitness, and recreational activities that were at least 10 min in duration per <a href="#">Tremblay et al. (2011)</a> . Participants answered “yes/no” for the first question: “Do you do any vigorous-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities that cause large increases in breathing or heart rate like running or football for at least 10 min continuously?” Participants who selected “yes” then answered the following: “In a typical week, on how many days do you do vigorous-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities? How much time do you spend doing vigorous-intensity sports, fitness, or recreational activities on a typical day?” A similar set of questions followed on moderate-intensity sports, fitness or recreational (leisure) activities. For both vigorous and moderate PA, number of days was multiplied by duration. Finally, the vigorous and moderate products were summed

**Table 1.**  
Variables included in study 2 analysis ( $n = 1475$ )

**Source(s):** [Lithopoulos et al. \(2018\)](#), [Evans et al. \(2005\)](#), [Tremblay et al. \(2011\)](#), [Ainsworth et al. \(2011\)](#)  
Authors’ own creation

**Figure 1.**  
Hypothesized model



**Source(s):** Authors own creation

*Body Break* brand and the celebrity brand of Hal and Joanne, these both contribute, alongside many other variables and influencers, to the brand equity of the program and the potential to drive awareness ([Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2022](#)). The literature also demonstrated that when feeling nostalgic, people tend to express more positive attitudes toward advertising ([Srivastava et al., 2023](#)). This suggests that a nostalgia campaign could have generated positive attitudes about sport participation ([Lithopoulos and Rhodes, 2020](#)), although little is known in terms of the influence of a marketing campaign that may stimulate MVPA

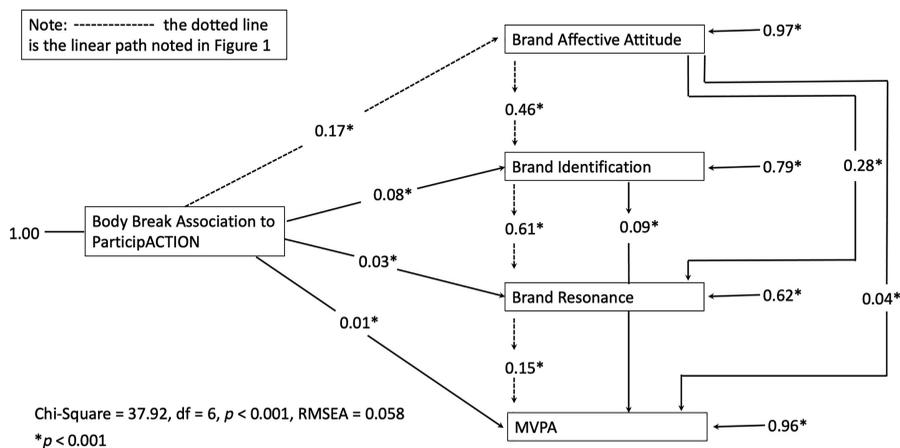


Figure 2. Path model

(Lithopoulos *et al.*, 2021). Notably, in the Lithopoulos *et al.* (2021) work, studies supporting the relationships tested in the current study were validated. Accordingly, we tested whether a *Body Break* association predicts a cascade culminating in MVPA (See Figures 1 and 2).

#### Results: study 1-awareness of ParticipACTION and body break

In four of Study 1's focus groups, references to *Body Break* were expressed less frequently than during the fifth group. Specifically, the mothers' focus group made 13 unaided references across 159 posts. The parents' focus groups made 0 and 4 references in 83 and 179 posts, respectively. The general adults' focus group made 11 references in 153 posts. Overwhelmingly positively valenced, examples include, "Hal and Joanne were kind and enthusiastic about exercise. Never demanding, never judging. It is still relevant", and "I can't forget all those *Body Break* commercials that promoted healthy eating, lifestyle, and activity. All these helped to motivate me with their challenges to become and stay active my entire life."

In contrast to the four parent/adult focus groups, which were largely comprised of Gen X participants, millennials made frequent and detailed comments regarding *Body Break*, with 73 references over 364 posts, most (57, or 72.6%) in direct response to questions concerning the ParticipACTION brand.

#### Millennials' perceptions of body break

In Study 1, Millennials reported familiarity with ParticipACTION, making independent and unprompted reference to *Body Break*, Hal and Joanne, the slogan ("keep fit and have fun"), or "those commercials from the 80 and 90s". Thirteen of 73 comments were negatively valenced. Several participants commented on *Body Break* being dated, such as one respondent who noted that "These folks were the essence of early 90s, and not in a great way." Others reflected that television commercials like *Body Break* are insufficient to motivate physical activity: "I also find that I motivate myself better than two smiling actors can do with a cheesy script and some old-fashioned television techniques." Several participants noted the complexities of their adult lives, including limited time and financial resources – and that these could not be easily remedied by motivational television ads. Another millennial respondent noted,

I think I already have a good attitude towards physical activity, so any change in habits would be related to making physical activity more accessible and easy-for example, if there was a small gym in my building, or if lunchtime yoga classes were offered.

Twenty-eight of 73 comments were of a neutral/mixed valence. Some comments were factual descriptions of the program. For instance, one Millennial respondent summarized *Body Break* as, “the commercials from the 1980s that encouraged people to ‘keep fit and have fun.’” Similarly, another stated, “I remember Hal Johnson and Joanne McLeod from when I was a kid telling us to keep fit and have fun and giving health tips.” Other responses were mixed, highlighting both positive experiences with *Body Break* as well as difficulties. For instance, one described the memorable quality of *Body Break* (including recent reminiscing with a friend), but also acknowledged that the campaign did not greatly impact their behavior:

I also remember these guys and their Body Break commercials. In fact, I was talking about those commercials with a friend of mine just last week and we were trying to remember their names, and I remembered Hal Johnston and Joanne McLeod. Although I remember the commercials, I don’t remember them being particularly effective in inspiring me to exercise more.

The remaining 32 comments from Millennials were positively valenced. Participants referenced positive emotions surrounding *Body Break*, such as one who made the following statement, “As soon as I saw it, I giggled and thought of vibrant tracksuits and the *Body Break* jingle.” Another Millennial, who discussed positive memories about *Body Break*, reported that they had cheered for Hal and Joanne on the *Amazing Race Canada*. Others reflected on how the campaign emphasized accessible physical activity, such as how “a lot of the things they [Hal and Joanne] suggested were easy to do and made you feel that you didn’t need to buy a gym membership to be healthy.”

#### *What makes body break memorable for millennials?*

Millennials’ discussion in the focus group suggests that three characteristics of *Body Break* were distinctive: the 80s and 90s aesthetic; the fact that they were children at the time and associated the program with their childhood experiences; and classic Canadiana (i.e. attributes or images that are viewed to be part of Canadian culture and identity). With regard to aesthetics, participants discussed the fashion, design, and production characteristics of late 1980s/early 1990s television advertising. This included references to “the mustache, the puffed hair,” “the fantastic jogging suits they [Hal and Joanne] always wore,” and “lots of fluorescent colours.” Other participants described the “very catchy” music, “the grainy quality,” and the “cheesy” structure.

Millennials regularly referenced *Body Break* as being part of their childhood. One stated, “I did love the *Body Break* commercials. Remind me of my childhood,” while another reported, “I, too, remember the *Body Break* television segments growing up.” A different participant noted that watching the ads as a child stimulated thoughts about being physically active:

Hmm well I remember lazing around watching cartoons when I was a kid watching this show and thinking I should get up and do something.

Related to this second theme was Canadiana: participants described *Body Break* as being a feature of their Canadian childhood and being “quintessentially Canadian” in its approach to health promotion. The campaign was described as “wholesome, friendly and cheesy.” One participant explicitly contrasted it against more graphic ads of the late 1980s/early 1990s, and reported, “I would describe it as friendly, wholesome and upbeat-basically the apotheosis of Canadian public service ads that \*don’t\* feature horrifying dismemberment.”

**Results: study 2-path analysis with full sample**

For the full survey (Study 2) sample ( $n = 1,329$ ), just under half (46.9%) associated ParticipACTION positively with *Body Break*; however, this varied considerably by age, with the youngest respondents (18–24 years) being the least likely (19.6%) to associate and the 40–54 age group being the most likely to associate (54.1%). Interestingly, the 25–39-year age group (millennials) had a high level of association (49.8%) despite *Body Break* running before most were even born. The older age groups were 43.4% (55–75 years) and 29.8% (76+ years). These results are provided in [Table 2](#).

In terms of the hypothesized model with its moderating effects ([Figure 2](#)), the fit indices are as follows:  $\chi^2 = 37.92$  ( $df = 6$ ),  $p < 0.001$ , GFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.06, and NFI = 0.97 (see [Figure 2](#) for the resulting path model).

There were no large, standardized residuals; the model fit indices were good (except the chi-square which is typical in large samples); and all of the relationships between variables were also significant and in the positive direction. Therefore, the available information suggests that this model fits the data well.

Regarding model relationships, *Body Break* association had a small-sized association with brand affective attitude ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.03$ ), brand affective attitude had a medium-sized association with brand identification ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.21$ ), brand identification had a large-sized association with brand resonance ( $\beta = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.37$ ), and brand resonance had a small-sized association with MVPA ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.02$ ).

Results presented in [Figure 2](#), including the mediating effects, provide evidence that nostalgia potentially influences sport participation (MVPA). Of note the hypothesized model ([Figure 1](#)) is included within [Figure 2](#). The fact that all interactions are significant at the  $p < 0.001$  suggests that the conceptual argument of *Body Break* to affective attitude to MVPA supports this notion. The specific association between affective attitude and MVPA is significant ( $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, we can predict that nostalgia is the influencer of MVPA.

*Comparing millennials and generation Z to older generations*

In Study 2, Millennial and Gen Z samples contained 475 participants while the Gen X and boomer set numbered 1,000. The first analysis (with no specified differences between the two groups) revealed that the younger group was contributing more to the  $\chi^2$  statistic (76.95%). There was also poor global fit ( $\chi^2 = 383.72$  [ $df = 20$ ],  $p < 0.001$ ), providing further evidence that the groups were different.

In investigating the difference, several factors between the two groups were permitted to be different. Ultimately, it was determined that brand resonance explained more variance in MVPA for younger people compared to older people (improvement in global fit:  $\chi^2 = 71.90$  [ $df = 19$ ],  $p < 0.001$ ). Specifically, for younger people, the brand resonance to MVPA relationship had an  $R^2 = 0.05$  and a  $\beta = 0.23$ . However, for older people, the brand resonance to MVPA relationship had an  $R^2 = 0.01$  and a  $\beta = 0.11$ . Both  $R^2$  values were in the small range but brand resonance did explain 4% more variance in MVPA for younger people compared to older people.

	18–24	25–39	40–54	55–75	76+	Total
No association	37	166	191	271	40	705
Association	9	165	225	208	17	624
Percent association	19.57	49.85	54.09	43.42	29.82	46.95

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

**Table 2.**  
Frequency counts for association with body break by age cohort (in years)

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to (1) empirically examine the lasting impact of *Body Break*, a popular Canadian health campaign that ran from 1989–1994, and (2) articulate lessons learned to demonstrate if nostalgia can be incorporated into future marketing campaigns related to sport participation. A two-phase sequential method provided focus group and survey data from a representative sample of the Canadian population to assess the long-term impacts, through a nostalgia lens, of a marketing campaign implemented 30 years ago. The results of the two studies validate the lasting impact of *Body Break* in supporting the potential for nostalgia in future sport participation marketing campaigns across generations.

The results support the work of both [Lithopoulos et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Srivastava et al. \(2023\)](#) in linking brand meaning and nostalgia to brand affective attitude. As noted in the path model ([Figure 2](#)), the linkages to MVPA, as a proxy for sport participation, are supported via the initial association (nostalgia) between *Body Break* and ParticipACTION, leading to significant associations to brand affective attitude, brand identification, brand resonance, and then MVPA. Thus, we observe that nostalgia in the marketing of sport participation has the ability to influence the actions of people, akin to other behaviors. Indeed, these results build upon previous literature that demonstrates the effective use of nostalgia in marketing ([Muehling et al., 2004](#)), promoting its lasting influence through self-identity ([Ju et al., 2016](#)) that could therefore impact consumer–brand relationships ([Jun et al., 2022](#)) and sport tourism decisions ([Cho, 2021](#)). Specifically, the finding presented is that a classic campaign can still resonate with people, generating associations for them even 3 decades after it was launched.

### *Focus group outcomes*

For Study 1, participants in four of five focus groups organically discussed *Body Break* without prompting, indicating that even 30 years later the campaign remains salient. Comments were overwhelmingly positive, with participants referencing Hal and Joanne’s friendly, relatable, and accessible approach to physical activity. For practitioners developing marketing campaigns with sport participation outcomes, the use of nostalgia and memorable characters, such as Hal and Joanne, within their content is recommended.

Considerable discussion was observed in the millennial focus group, suggestive of a cohort effect. Indeed, many millennials discussed *Body Break* as being analogous to ParticipACTION, unaware that the organization had conducted other campaigns, and that *Body Break* was predominantly not a ParticipACTION product. Millennials provided greater depth of discussion relative to the other four focus groups, with participants reflecting on both the positive and negative aspects of the *Body Break* campaign. Regarding negative connotations, participants looked back and reflected that, as children, *Body Break* did not stimulate their interest in physical activity including sport participation—nor did they attribute their adult physical activity to *Body Break*. Rather, participants commented that their motivation and capacity to be physically active was complex, and that low motivation/capacity could not be remedied by a television advertisement. Other participants described the advertisements as being dated “not in a good way.” Ironically, many participants later discussed the need for education centered on (1) “putting fun into physical activity”, (2) evidence-based information, and (3) tips/tricks to support activity—content very similar to that featured in *Body Break*.

For millennials, most comments about *Body Break* were neutral or positive. Their responses suggested that three aspects of *Body Break* were distinctive: the 1980s/1990s aesthetics, the campaign’s memorableness as part of their childhood, and the campaign’s prominence in Canadian cultural history. Overall results suggest that millennials do perceive *Body Break* through a nostalgic lens from when they were children. For most participants, the 1980s/1990s aesthetic was the most memorable and salient feature of the *Body Break*

campaign. As expected, multiple participants referenced the “cheesy” production, distinctive music, and Hal and Joanne’s “(sometimes unfortunate) workout clothes.” To this end, participants described *Body Break* as something that “stands out” from their childhood and as something that they would remember, reflect on, and reminisce over with friends. Many participants elaborated on this theme (childhood in Canada), identifying *Body Break* with Canadian culture not only because they grew up watching these segments but because the ads captured the Canadian persona. Namely, *Body Break* was described as friendly, wholesome, and positive.

If we compare the results to nostalgia-linked literature, they point to the importance of building affective attitudes and Canadiana-linked content to drive identification (Allison and Goethals, 2016; Klugman and Ricatti, 2012). Hal and Joanne were found to be approachable and trustworthy by focus group participants. The results provide support for the use of nostalgia in sport management, notably the recurring theme of “cheesy” from the time of *Body Break* is supportive of the effectiveness of nostalgia in marketing efforts (Muehling *et al.*, 2004) and, specifically, the link to self-identity via childhood memories (Ju *et al.*, 2016). By extension, future practice could link to other “cheesy” memories, such as popular movies, celebrities, sport personalities, and books from the past. For example, in our uncertain post-pandemic environment, a future campaign could include a nostalgia focus back to “better days”. For sport marketing practitioners, the lesson is that, if selected as a strategy, nostalgia needs to be included within the context of the drivers, issues, and barriers to sport participation and, importantly, that any legacy content used, such as *Body Break*, needs to be communicated in a distinctive and appealing manner.

#### *Cross-sectional survey outcomes*

For Study 2, the only significant difference observed between the groups was in the relationship between brand resonance and MVPA, where the association was larger for millennials than other cohorts. The results related to nostalgia replicate those from the commercial domain (Lithopoulous *et al.*, 2021), allowing us to extend results from ParticipACTION to other organizations with mandates to promote participation in sport. Not much is known about relationships between sport participation brand constructs (Lithopoulos and Rhodes, 2020). Prior to this study, no research related to the role of brand nostalgia in sport participation was identified. Thus, one contribution of this research is as the first piece of evidence in the area, albeit assumptions are made regarding the role of MVPA leading to sport participation. Notably, building on the inclusion of sport participation within physical activity (Caspersen *et al.*, 1985), results point to the ability of nostalgia to promote health outcomes and overall well-being. This builds on the findings of Kersten and Cox (2023) and Kersen *et al.* (2016), and extends the work of Ross *et al.* (2020) regarding the holistic benefits of physical activity, which includes sport participation and its many ways of engaging participants (Wicker *et al.*, 2012), including youth (Berger *et al.*, 2008). Specific to this point and extending the work of Berger *et al.* (2008) on urban youth sport participation, the results of Study 2 are somewhat consistent with Study 1 since the brand resonance to MVPA relationship was stronger for younger people. Thus, we can infer that ParticipACTION brand loyalty is stronger for younger people, particularly the Millennial cohort. By extension, future campaigns targeting sport participation in young people should link nostalgia with childhood memories in both testing and future research.

#### **Conclusion**

This paper reviewed one of ParticipACTION’s well-known campaigns, *Body Break with ParticipACTION*, to examine the potential role of nostalgia-based marketing campaigns in

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promoting physical activity, with a particular focus on sport participation. In doing so, this study extends the literature on nostalgia marketing by demonstrating the effectiveness of including nostalgic memories, even those with quirky characteristics. The finding that this resonates with Millennials is a further contribution. Additionally, the use of nostalgic heroes was found to be an element worth incorporating into future campaigns. This campaign used two Canadians as role models – not to champion the sports they represented at the international level, but to promote the physical activity and sport participation of Canadian citizens. By positioning Hal and Joanne in this manner, they became relatable everyday people – what [Smith \(1973\)](#) might characterize as honorable, steady players, or even underdogs. Moreover, Hal and Joanne not only featured a range of activities from country line dancing to downhill skiing but embraced Canadians of all sizes and ages as background players, representing the social network so essential to nostalgia. With a specific call to action in each segment, they also invited “you”, the ordinary person to become the heroes of their own stories.

The current research raises interesting questions regarding the role of nostalgia in the promotion of sport participation and physical activity. To date, little research has examined the theoretical/conceptual aspects of nostalgia in these contexts, with no studies found specific to sport participation. Given the novelty of this research area, we recommend two avenues for future research. First, future work would benefit from examining principles and exploring how nostalgia manifests in physical activity and sport participation. Second, it would be useful to explicitly examine associations between nostalgia and engagement in physical activity and sport participation. For example, by examining whether classic physical activity or sport participation campaigns (or, alternatively, modern campaigns stylized to promote nostalgia) are effective at improving cognitions and affect for participation, and through these positive psychological processes, increase actual behavior.

For practitioners working to increase levels of MVPA, the results of this research provide important insights. First, for marketers seeking to build campaigns related to sport participation or related behaviors, the understanding that a powerful campaign linked to unique memories and relatable heroes can, if implemented well, build long-term brand value, which, in turn, can support efforts related to sponsorship, communications, brand building, and behavior change. Furthermore, brands, governments, and foundations should consider prioritizing investment in partners whose campaigns incorporate nostalgia as a way of seeking to increase sport participation. For agencies and other third-parties supporting partnerships, encouraging nostalgia outcomes is suggested.

The current article has several noteworthy strengths. First, this article contributes to the growing literature on nostalgia and health behavior. Compared to previous studies that have examined how the attributes of nostalgia could lead to healthy behaviors, the current study specifically examined nostalgia associated with physical activity that may include sport participation. Similarly, this research is unique as it specifically examined perceptions of a popular advertising campaign, rather than examining the effect of experimental nostalgia induction. The study has several limitations. First, the resulting model outlines the potential for nostalgia in the marketing of sport participation, but it does not address nor consider the myriad of factors that influence and affect sport participation. Future research should consider nostalgia within research on the drivers of sport participation. A second limitation of this research is that it involved secondary analysis of data. While this allowed for the use of high-quality data and the examination of nostalgia as it may organically emerge in conversation, available data did not allow for in-depth examination of nostalgia theories and constructs. Future research can address this limitation since the *Body Break* campaign is still recalled by many people living in Canada more than 30 years after its launch. Thus, further exploration regarding what it is about *Body Break* that was so memorable, and considering how we might harness those features in future health promotion campaigns, is required.

## Notes

1. <https://bodybreak.com/video/30-60-90-sec/30-sec-program/>

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