

EXPLAINER

THE PROUST EFFECT

How sensory experiences can transport us back in time

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Some of us cling to nostalgia like it's the only thread connecting the past to our current selves. Others keep memories at an arms-length distance, partly as a defence to lessen the emotional weight. Yet, the "Proust effect" suggests that memory is not always something we consciously choose to revisit. Sometimes all it takes is a whiff of your old perfume to transport you to a memorable summer; the tartness of mango dusted with salt and chilli that takes you back to your school days; the smell of rain on dry soil to bring you back to your childhood playground, as a kid with scraped knees and relentless energy. These involuntary recollections are known as "madeleine moments", which are only triggered by sensory experiences such as taste or smell.

The term "madeleine moment" came from an account of the French novelist Marcel Proust in his novel, *Swann's Way*. In the book, Proust's narrator dips a madeleine cake into tea and upon tasting it, he enters a neurological voyage. The taste triggers a vivid memory of his childhood. What's more interesting is that he doesn't try to remember, the memory arrives fully formed, with emotions, details, and sensations. Proust wasn't necessarily writing psychology, but he described memory with such precision that science eventually caught up to him. As such, the phenomenon came to be known as the Proust effect.

Research confirms Proust's insight. Smell and taste have direct neural links to the hippocampus, which processes memory, and the amygdala, which processes emotions. This is why odour or taste-evoked memories are often more

authentic, emotional, and detailed than memories triggered by visual or verbal cues.

In another study, participants exposed to odours that are personally nostalgic consistently reported a strong sense of "being transported back in time" to their original experiences. It demonstrated that sensory cues can involuntarily trigger autobiographical memory. These memories are unlikely to be altered with time by the brain, and retain their emotional intensity and vividness. In other words, the scientific community has validated what Proust first observed with his madeleine and teacup: a simple taste or smell can unlock a fully formed, emotionally rich memory from the past.

This is also depicted in the movie *Lion* (2016), based on the true story of Saroo Brierley. Saroo is adopted at the age of five from an orphanage in India by an Australian couple, which changes the trajectory of his life. Growing up in a Western environment, he retains almost no recollection of his early childhood in the villages of India. Decades later, the taste of an Indian sweet at a friend's house unexpectedly triggers vivid fragments of his childhood. This sensory experience sparks a determined and emotional journey to locate his biological family. Although dramatised, the movie illustrates how involuntary memories can unlock powerful autobiographical recollections.

The Proust effect goes far beyond literature and psychology, it's also widely taken advantage of in marketing and branding. The use of scents, flavours, textures and even sounds play a strategic role in attracting you as a consumer. For example, cafes and bakeries often use the smell of baked goods to stimulate a sense of comfort and

warmth. Vendors and markets, knowingly or unknowingly, harness the Proust effect. Sensory cues like aroma and flavour transport individuals back to formative moments, enhancing their enjoyment and encouraging spending. Supermarkets and food brands often capitalise on nostalgia by recreating flavours and packaging of traditional snacks.

The science behind how our subconscious might carry memories that only sensory experiences help us recall gives us a fascinating notion: the body betraying the mind. The brain can often block memories as a way of protection, but the body has the ability to remember. This goes far beyond the sentiments of nostalgia and brings the idea of time travelling back into our memories. The Proust effect is a reminder that memory is not only stored in the mind; it is embedded into our senses, our bodies, and our experiences, making the past an ever-present part of who we are.

References:

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