

REWRITING THE PAST: HOW NOSTALGIA SHAPES MODERN CULTURE

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Introduction

In recent times, cultural patterns appear to repeat.

Trends from previous decades return frequently, particularly on digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Fashion from the early 2000s, music from earlier periods, and historical aesthetics reappear, reaching people who are too young to remember them.

But this project examines more than the reappearance of styles. It is an investigation into how the feeling of longing for the past is no longer a private emotion. Through digital culture, this feeling is now a collective experience that spreads quickly.

As people use the internet, memories do not stay in the mind instead, they move through public spaces. On those platforms, algorithms and viral media curate content in ways that change how individuals perceive previous eras.

There is a significant question to consider regarding the developments. If individuals use nostalgia in this way, are they forming deep connections to history? Or is this process making the past seem more perfect and less complex than it was in reality?

Purpose of This Project

To begin this project, I intended to examine not just popular trends but also how nostalgia operates in people's lives.

Instead of observing only cycles in fashion or revivals in music, I focused on how individuals across different age groups remember periods before the present.

For comparison, I analyzed those memories against the representations of the past commonly found on the internet today.

By using this method, I combined cultural observation with interviews involving small groups of people from many different generations.

The purpose of the work is to understand if nostalgia is a factual experience that individuals share or if it is a private way of thinking that changes because of feelings and the passage of years.

Cultural Revival in Modern Media

In the present, the revival of culture from the early 2000s shows how people feel connected to the past.

For many people, clothing items like low-rise jeans and small shirts are popular again. It is notable that many individuals who wore those items were neither born nor adults at that time. By looking at social media, individuals learn about the period through new versions of old images rather than through their own memories.

And music follows this same process: to reach new audiences, songs from previous decades appear in short videos and song lists on digital platforms. Those platforms are tools that change how individuals view old media, so the content appears to belong to the present.

As a result, the most visible characteristic of this movement is its speed. In the past, it took many years for styles to become popular again. Still, today, computer programs that organize data make the return of the past happen right away and without interruption.

Due to those factors, people remember the past quickly and in small, separate parts. If a person looks for the past, it is always available, but it is rarely a whole or finished image.

What the Interviews Revealed

Despite the variations, there was one fundamental trend that was constant throughout the interview process that nostalgia is not a static entity but varies with one's age, burdens, and biography.

While all participants spoke about their past, almost every participant tended to recall the high points of emotion more clearly than other aspects of past events. In the long run, they came to develop a less complex memory of their past.

Generational Perspectives

Older Generations

Older participants often talked about the past with a sense of balance. They recognized positive memories, such as family life and connections. However, they were also keenly aware of life's limitations, which people often overlook.

My mom, Ilene Rosen, said, "It wasn't that things were better back then, it was just a different kind of life. You don't realize how much changes until you look back."

Similarly, Angie Peacy stressed that we should not romanticize the past. "The past isn't something to copy, it's something to learn from."

These viewpoints present a more realistic version of nostalgia. They acknowledge both the positive and the challenging aspects of the past.

Younger Adults

Younger participants described nostalgia more emotionally. They often linked it to a time that seemed less stressful or overwhelming.

My best friend Sydney Mitchell explained, “It felt lighter back then, but I think that’s because I didn’t see everything I see now.” Kory Makos shared a similar thought. “I think nostalgia made me forget parts of my past I wasn’t ready to deal with.” He noted how nostalgia can shape our perception of reality: “Nostalgia makes you forget what was actually happening at the time.”

Taken together, these answers reveal that younger viewpoints have more than just sentimental value. They also realize that distance from those events and emotion influence their memories.

What All Interviews Had in Common

Despite age differences, several key patterns appeared across all subjects:

- ★ Nostalgia is driven more by feelings than by facts.
- ★ People often remember emotions more than entire events.
- ★ Over time, the past tends to become clearer or more straightforward.
- ★ Everyone accepts that there is no single version of history.

Kory said by summarizing this idea clearly, “nostalgia makes you forget what was actually happening at the time.”

This suggests that nostalgia is not only a memory tool. It is a filtering process that changes how people understand their own experiences.

Social Media and the Rapid Rise of Nostalgia

Social media is key to how nostalgia works today.

Platforms like TikTok do not just show cultural memory, they create it. By bringing back older music, fashion, and styles, they turn past decades into content that keeps circling.

This process takes nostalgia out of personal reflection and makes it a shared digital experience. As a result, entire eras are recreated in simple, visually appealing forms that prioritize emotional impact over historical truth.

In this way, nostalgia is now active. Algorithms drive it, move quickly, and are constantly changed by online interaction.

Discussion: Nostalgia as Connection and Distortion

The result of this project reveals that nostalgia is working in two ways at once. On the other hand, it builds a connection. Does it enable individuals to feel close to culture, identity, and others' experiences?

It helps people consider their past and the things that have shaped who they are. But in another way, it distorts memories.

It simplifies the past, washes away nuances, and often substitutes feelings for facts, which brings us back to the problem of truth and interpretation. In truth, the nostalgia is genuine, but in fact, it does not necessarily correspond entirely.

More than anything else, there is also a generational element to nostalgia.

People's conception of "the past" is relative to their own frame of reference, so fellow generations seem to have different notions of how life "used to be".

Conclusion

Nostalgia is not just an innocent longing for the past. It is a dynamic thing that influences how culture is interpreted, recreated, and communicated.

Fashion, music, and social media continually revive entire cultural decades for a new generation. Yet the novelties of this nostalgia are often, if paradoxically, a matter of emotional rather than historical reconstruction.

We can see, then, that between history and myth lies nostalgia. Nostalgia is particular, yet shared; individual, yet societal.

Nostalgia exists between times and alters our perception of those times. In conclusion, nostalgia embodies both the positive and negative dimensions and is one of the strongest mediums through which culture can shape our understanding of ourselves, others, our history, and the world.

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