



Historical Nostalgia

The psychological benefits that Gen Z gain from engaging with past culture

discover.ai x

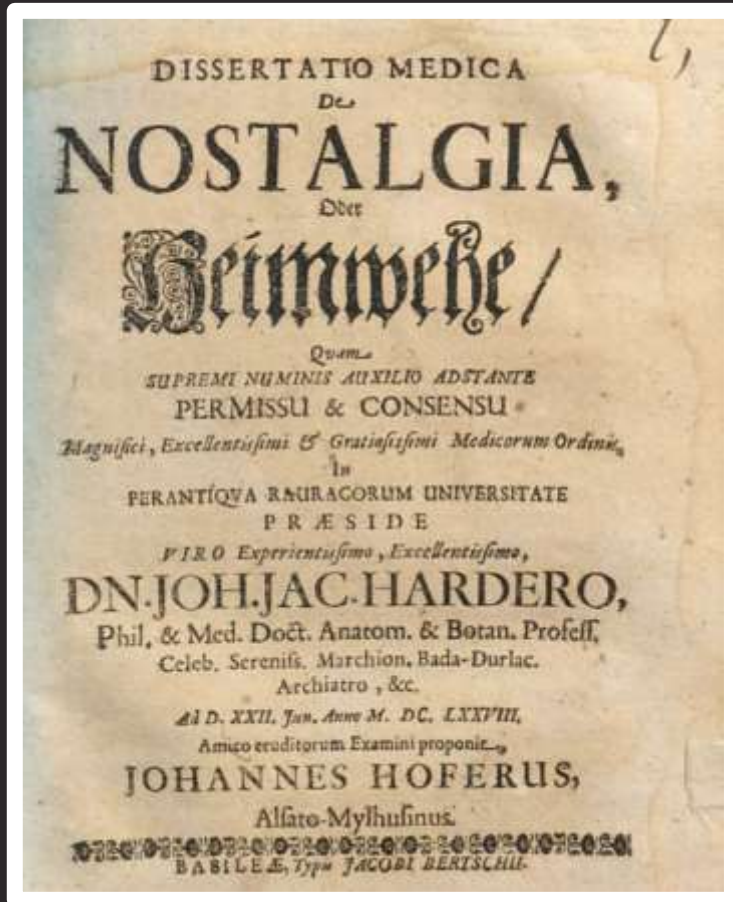
HUMAN
FLOURISHING LAB



An exploration of how historical nostalgia serves Gen Z psychologically



Nostalgia isn't a new phenomenon



The word nostalgia comes from the Greek words *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain)

It's a vital psychological resource



- Increased positive mood
- Stronger feelings of social connectedness
- Deeper sense of meaning in life
- Motivational catalyst
- Optimistic outlook
- Energized to pursue goals

Historical nostalgia: a
fascinating side-shoot



Anemoia [ænə'mɔɪə]

(noun) A sense of nostalgia for a time you
never experienced

John Koenig, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* (2012)

Our findings illuminate two fundamental ways in which young people engage with historical nostalgia

SHAPE IDENTITY

Historical nostalgia as a tool for exploring and shaping identity in a changing world

NURTURE & GROW

Historical nostalgia as a tool for nurturing the self through connection, growth, wellness, and playfulness





A flavour of what we've
learned and
four stretchy spaces



SHAPE IDENTITY

Exploring and defining identity in a changing world

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...



AESTHETIC EXPLORATION



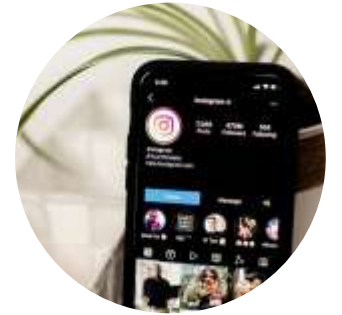
CULTURAL TIME TRAVEL and THE JOY OF "PINNACLE ERAS"



THE MIXTAPE OF SELF



UNIQUELY YOURS



CULTURAL LITERACY and CONFIDENCE

NURTURE AND GROW

Nurturing the self through connection, growth, wellness, and playfulness

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...



SHARED STORIES and
STRONG BONDS



HACKING THE PAST TO
SHAPE THE FUTURE



DIALLING DOWN DIGITAL



PLAYFUL META-
NOSTALGIA

SHAPING IDENTITY

CULTURAL TIME TRAVEL AND THE JOY OF "PINNACLE ERAS"

Joyful "time travel" and an appreciation of the cultural gifts of past eras.

Gen Z is grateful for the opportunity to revisit the "best bits" of a time before their own.

Taking pleasure in the romance, creativity, and cultural richness of iconic eras—and exploring ways to incorporate this emotionally and culturally into their lives today. A form of self-expression.

Cultural Manifestations:

- MUSIC: Dolly Parton merch and popularity of 'What would Dolly do?' slogan
- FOOD & BEV: Retro diners like Rosebud Bar and Kitchen in MA
- TV / MOVIE: Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse – the coming together of different versions of Spider-Man via the multiverse, bringing the "best bits" of the past and integrating them into contemporary culture



"Ik I wasn't born in the 90s but was going through my old s*** and found so much nostalgia from the 90s and early 2000s and f*** I wish I was born in the 90s"



"1999 was the pinnacle of pop culture, it's all been downhill since then"



"sooo wish i was alive to experience this when it came out 🥺🥺🥺 QT @user: the vibe that this song radiates is so good"



"**Retro-Futurism Drive-In Event**": A unique digital art event combining the retro charm of drive-ins with futuristic digital art displays"

SHAPING IDENTITY

CULTURAL LITERACY AND CONFIDENCE

Individuals' overt references to forms of historical nostalgia can be used for showcasing cultural literacy and "cool," conferring status and confidence.

References to bygone culture through fashion, music, décor, etc., can be a way of signalling one's cultural literacy – a different psychological need to self-expression, but a projection of an image.

Watchouts: lacking authenticity, 'nostalgia-bait'

Cultural Manifestations:

- FASHION: Sub-cultural Gen Z merch from earlier eras (e.g., Nirvana tees)
- FASHION: Resurgence of Grillz that speaks to hip hop culture's golden age, and ancient cultural traditions, layered with modern luxury
- MUSIC: A\$AP Rocky – the rapper and fashion icon has built his persona and career on a deep understanding of cultural history showcased across his sound, lyrics, and aesthetic



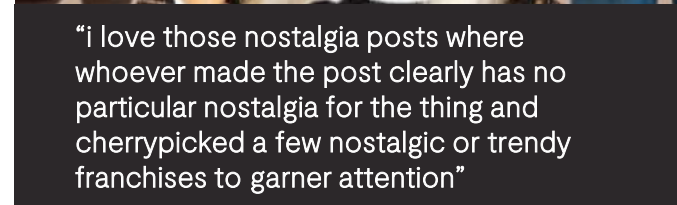
"It's a virtual time capsule, accumulating and preserving moments within the cultural zeitgeist through content like memes and internet lore"



"Nostalgia Aficionado: Owning a flip phone suggests you're a bit of a nostalgia buff"



"as if they weren't alive during the original era like let the girls get into this nostalgia... how u trying to gate keep a decade lmao"



"i love those nostalgia posts where whoever made the post clearly has no particular nostalgia for the thing and cherrypicked a few nostalgic or trendy franchises to garner attention"

NURTURE & GROW

DIALLING DOWN DIGITAL

Jaded and saturated by digital overwhelm, engaging with old-school tech is reconnecting Gen Z with more tangible experiences, fostering mindfulness and reminding them of the value of slower, offline living.

In a world that is always 'on' and where conflict and adversity surrounds us, Gen Z is looking for ways to disconnect for the sake of their mood and mental wellbeing.

Physical touch and sensorial experiences have taken on greater significance in our digital-first world.

Cultural Manifestations:

- **MUSIC:** Surge in vinyl sales, with contemporary music icons like Charli XCX releasing albums to vinyl
- **TECHNOLOGY:** Polaroid's reinvention has brought its iconic instant camera back to the mainstream with updated features for the digital era
- **TECHNOLOGY:** Rise of so-called "Dumbphones" for digital detoxing.



"More and more digital natives are swapping their smartphones out for "dumb phones" — like flip phones and Nokias — to reclaim their time and their mental health"



"In recent years, vinyl records have become the biggest selling format of physical media, and Gen Z has been a force in boosting their popularity"



"I think ppl want this in theory to get back the feeling of a "real" connection and sense of nostalgia that pre-social media encapsulated"



"...one of my students passes me something that triggered nostalgia of my childhood: a flip phone to take the pic"

NURTURE & GROW

META-NOSTALGIA

A joyful treasure-hunt through past perspectives via an analogue-digital dialogue between first, second, and third generation fans.

Gen Z is discovering new-to-them artwork, pulling it from the archives to make it relevant again.

They also have the opportunity to learn and reflect on how these works were enjoyed in different times and gain exposure to the vibrant fan communities that existed pre-internet.

Cultural Manifestations:

- **MUSIC:** "Googoo Muck" by The Cramps underwent a viral dance revival via Netflix's "Wednesday," paired with an aesthetic that evoked the early '00s youth subculture that last venerated '80s "gothabilly" (which was in itself a punk pastiche of blues and rockabilly from the '50s and '60s).
- **MOVIES:** The film "Almost Famous" now enjoys frequent aesthetic edits on TikTok, with newfound fans nostalgically enjoying the warmth and optimism of the rose-tinted zenith of pre-'00s film-making
- **FASHION:** Miu Miu pleated skirts reminiscent of 90s Britney, and a more extreme version of 60s minis



"I like how vaporwave is so old now that the very nostalgia it was meant to parody now authentically applies to the genre"

The
Fake
Lost Media
WIKI!

"Can anyone recommend a movie made in the 90s but is a nostalgia film ie set in the 50/60/70s"



"at this point, the franchise has completely missed the '80s nostalgia window that seemingly lasted longer than the '80s itself"

"Ngl seeing a generation be nostalgic for the era I was kid in just like how we were nostalgic for the 80s/90s is f***** me up"





Takeaways for brands





The phenomenon of historical nostalgia among Gen Z reveals something profound about human psychology in the digital age

Not just a marketing opportunity...

but a chance to contribute meaningfully to the psychological well-being of a generation navigating technological and social change

IT'S CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTAND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DEPTH OF HISTORICAL NOSTALGIA

1. BE AUTHENTIC - AVOID SUPERFICIAL NOSTALGIA BAIT
2. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVE REINTERPRETATIONS, NOT SIMPLE REPROS
3. CONNECT TO CULTURAL HISTORY IN A WAY THAT RESPECTS ITS COMPLEXITY
4. THINK ABOUT WAYS TO OFFER THE TACTILE AND PHYSICAL THAT COMPLEMENT DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT





Thank You

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