

An exploration into users' engagement with nostalgia content on Instagram

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For embedded videos, refer to separate files provided alongside these notes.

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Image and video-based platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok have had a significant impact on fashion, style and visual culture. Over the past couple of years, there's been a rise of trends from the 90s and 00s, where Millennial and Gen Z, who are widely acknowledged to be the biggest users of these platforms, are seeing styles from their own lived past coming back to the fore for the first time.

The resurgence of these trends coincides and has perhaps even influenced the emergence of nostalgia accounts as a new genre of content creation on these platforms. Some of these accounts have gained hundreds of thousands of followers in what would appear to be a short space of time.

This research explores very openly Instagram users' engagement with nostalgia content and in doing so seeks to make a broader contribution to our understanding of nostalgia in terms of how this is conveyed and experienced online.

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Traditionally, nostalgia was considered a medical disease and a psychiatric disorder, and early research centred around those who suffered because of relocation or isolation from social circles

Our understanding of nostalgia has evolved to categorise widely different types of nostalgia and how it can evoke a wide variety of effects. In addition to the negative impacts of nostalgia, there is also now a growing consideration for the cathartic nature of healthy nostalgia as “positive” “restorative” and “reflective”

Boren refers to nostalgia as...a reminder of the linearity of time that cannot be recaptured, that it represents transition, and something that is familiar and safe

Advances in social media search technology has created a way for users to catalogue a huge volume of openly searchable data. This participatory movement exemplifies Villa-Nicholas stance that social media has now led to a “renaissance” in digital cultural memory.

At the moment there’s limited academic research on the effects of this medium of nostalgia. Some research has suggested that Instagram content can be a digital vehicle in which to creatively process the past for the future. It can also be used to collectively reframe or take control of a narrative of a particular time period. Looking forward, it can be used to document memories to fuel future nostalgic experiences and create connections.

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Our research follows an exploratory grounded theory approach. We were pragmatic in our use of a qualitative survey tool, which we designed and piloted in spring and implemented over summer this year. The survey consisted mainly of open, qualitative questions and was aimed at people who engage with or have experienced nostalgia on Instagram. We were interested in finding out how people interact with this type of content – what motivates them and how it makes them feel.

We reached out to nostalgia accounts and asked them to share the link to our survey. We found some weird and wonderful accounts – some of which were very niche and this process actually could have constituted a research project in its own right. Mostly thanks to Knee Deep in the 90s and Luxury Shopping Malls we collected 429 responses and over 79 thousand words of qualitative data. There’s further work to be done but the presentation aims to give a broad overview of the key themes and ideas we’ve uncovered so far.

There was a lot of enthusiasm and detail in the responses. Several respondents left their email addresses and indicated they’d like to see the results and so we’re hoping to create a series of outputs that will help us to do that. Due to the sampling procedure, our respondents might have been disproportionately positive in

their enthusiasm around nostalgia and so it's worth noting this and that the findings don't seek to represent wider audiences.

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Background on participants:

- Although participants weren't asked about their country of residence, it was clear from the experiences that were shared that respondents were mostly UK/US based - likely influenced by the accounts that shared the survey
- 77% were millennials, 17% were Gen X, 4% were Gen Z and just 2% were Baby Boomers
- From 429 responses 70% made explicit reference to childhood, teenage years, and/or school years as the period they felt most attached to, so there was a particularly strong attachment to the 90s/00s from the large millennial group

Technology

- Often nostalgic experiences described were emphasized by contrasting the way things used to be done, with how they are done today. And this involved innovation and significant advances in technology. Often this contrast seemed to enhance the nostalgia. For example, using a cassette tape to record songs from the radio, selecting physical video tapes to rent films from Blockbuster, and using an ironing board to straighten hair.
- Respondents were generally negative about technology when referencing their own past and felt that this was part of their nostalgia where they longed for a "simpler" and "pure" time without the pressures of technology today.
- A number of millennials expressed a happiness to have grown up alongside evolving technology but before it took hold - one participant described this as 'wholesome'. But some did express positivity when it came to having the ability to enjoy technology when it came to consuming nostalgia content on Instagram

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Respondents tended to reflect on very specific items from their past that had great power to elicit a memory or a mood of that time. This was reflected in the types of nostalgia content they enjoyed the most, which tended to be light hearted and included things like clothing, the introduction to TV programmes and toys. They spoke of its power to “unlock memories” where, for example, a discontinued high street beauty product has the power to elicit the memory of buying that item, who was there, its smell and how they felt that day. One respondent referred to this as “a very, very deep sensory and emotional experience”, which was “hard to describe in words”.

Experiencing nostalgia on Instagram usually connoted feelings of comfort, familiarity and belonging to respondents. The past was described as a safe place where there was “less pressure” and where they were free of “responsibility and commitments”. Nostalgia content connected many to a time when they were beginning to “explore themselves as independent people”, they spoke of finding their likes and dislikes, “all the firsts” and experiencing their “first taste of freedom”.

Although generally positive in their responses, participants sometimes used language that was more problematic – for example nostalgia content was described by some as “triggering”, one referred to “a hard nostalgia hit”, another described this as “a type of dopamine” and several described nostalgia content as “addictive”. It’s worth noting that most of the respondents actively followed and interacted with nostalgia content and therefore perhaps are less likely to be affected negatively than others who might happen upon nostalgia content and experience more negative feelings.

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Nostalgia content made respondents feel connected on a number of levels – to people, places and a period in time. Respondents spoke of connecting with their own inner child, connecting or reconnecting with old friends and family, remembering loved ones, making new connections online and building connections for future generations - for example connecting with their own children or younger generations by sharing their experiences of the past. Nostalgia content on Instagram gave respondents a way of doing this. Many of them had not kept items from their own past and so they seemed to take real pleasure in seeing these again and sharing them with others.

One of the main reasons respondents appeared to feel so positively about nostalgia content was due to the experience of engaging with this participatively. Respondents interacted with content in a variety of ways – some were active producers of this, others shared this in online and offline settings with friends and family. Their preference for lighthearted, aesthetic and humorous content and their tendency to engage with others through this content was described as “fun” and appeared to spark happy memories for most. This was in contrast to how some respondents spoke of experiencing nostalgia alone, which was described as “pensive”, “melancholy” and “bitterweet”. Respondents’ tendency to feel positively about experiencing nostalgia online was perhaps influenced by the nature of content that is typically produced - much of which pokes fun at past behaviour and styles rather than romanticizing these.

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Contributing towards digital memory was important to participants and 36% listed memory preservation as one of their motivations for using Instagram. It was important to many respondents that they were contributing to that – e.g. a number of respondents referred to digital flashmob initiatives from nostalgia accounts like Knee Deep in the 90’s, where respondents are encouraged to share themed items from their past, for example, ‘back to school’. This initiated “memory marathons” that could be enjoyed in the moment but would also be archived for the future.

A notable finding involved participants placing nostalgia content within the current social/generational context. In this way the content was uniting the people of that original era within a new ‘club in the current day’. For example, one participant mentioned content that leads with ‘2000s kids will remember this’. In this way, the content is serving to support the development of generational identity over time.

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Although the term fashion is linked most closely to clothing, broader definitions of this extend to aesthetic features, characteristics and human behaviour. In this sense, fashion is recognised as a form of communication and a key signifier of a particular period in time.

Respondents tended to draw on fashion and styles from the past in their reflections and many appeared to enjoy engaging with fashion and beauty-related nostalgia content. Most respondents appeared to take pleasure in seeing these styles revived and reproduced but many also professed ownership over these and felt that newer versions were inauthentic and that the originals were superior in some way. For some respondents seeing the styles again made them feel old before their time.

Most respondents expressed a reluctance to participate in trends a second time around for a variety of reasons – many felt this would devalue the memory of that style.

There was a sense amongst respondents that they'd contributed to a shared history through their past style choices and many felt that this contributed to the development of their own identity and the person they are today.

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The findings so far show that the idea of connection and feeling part of something are key motivators for and consequences of consuming and sharing nostalgia content on Instagram

Many participants highlighted that experiencing the content with others enhanced the nostalgia feelings. One participant said: "My grandma said to me she was most sad about being the last of her friends and family of her generation to die, because memories are diluted and less meaningful when they can't be shared with someone".

The participatory culture around the visual content is particularly active in millennials, who transitioned through a period of accelerated technological advances, and the content around this forms part of their collective identity

Arguments have been made around the speed of the development of technology, media, particularly social media and how this serves to disconnect humans from each other, and sometimes from reality

There are risks associated with all types of media consumption, and when it comes to content on Instagram our findings suggest that there can also be benefits to the kind of mindful versus mindless scrolling for millennials when it comes to healthy nostalgia. They seek visual media to specifically elicit sensory memories and emotions for therapeutic and cathartic benefits – to be "seen, heard, part of something" and also to feel "safe", "validated", "accepted", "grounded", "magical"

In recognition of these effects, they are also already documenting and archiving content from the present day so that it can be experienced through a different lens in later years, in an effort to enable and ensure that they can elicit the same "magical" feelings for their connected futures

We'll leave you with a quote from one participant who sums up the enthusiasm for this type of content and also implies the perceived longevity of the value of nostalgia content into the future: "How insufferable are we millennials going to be with all this nostalgia content in our 80s?"

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