



GEN Z AND THE POWER OF HISTORICAL NOSTALGIA

Exploring the psychological benefits

December 2024

discover.ai x **HUMAN**
FLOURISHING LAB



An exploration of how historical nostalgia serves Gen Z psychologically



Introduction

One of humanity's most remarkable capabilities is our ability to mentally time travel. While this cognitive gift enables us to envision and plan for the future—a key to our success as a species—we also draw profound psychological sustenance from the past. In today's digitally saturated world, all of us, especially younger generations, face unique challenges as we navigate lives increasingly mediated by technology. Our research at the Human Flourishing Lab reveals that while Americans of all ages embrace new technologies that can improve their lives, they also long for a time before everyone was "plugged in." This finding is particularly illuminating when it comes to Gen Z, as these digital natives express nostalgia for an era that predates them—revealing how nostalgia isn't limited to our own memories but can take on a historical form, a sentimental longing for eras we never personally experienced.

Through our partnership with discover.ai, we've explored how this historical nostalgia serves as a psychological resource for Gen Z, helping young people craft their identities, find creative inspiration, build connections across generations, develop healthier relationships with technology, and look to elements of the past to help solve contemporary challenges and build a better tomorrow. By engaging with the cultural products, trends, hobbies, traditions, and stories of the past, Gen Z is finding novel ways to ground themselves and shape their futures in our rapidly evolving world.

Clay Routledge, PhD

Vice President of Research and Director of the Human Flourishing Lab,
Archbridge Institute



HUMAN
FLOURISHING LAB

The Gen Z perspective

"Anyone else get nostalgic over a time or era that they weren't even alive or old enough to experience?"

"Here's a word for exactly this feeling in the dictionary of obscure sorrows: anemoia (n.): nostalgia for a time you've never known. I think we're all feeling deep anemoia right now"

"Nostalgia for a time you never knew is a fascinating phenomenon"

- Nostalgia is not a new phenomenon—its roots can be traced back to 1688 when the term was first coined to describe the homesickness experienced by soldiers—but culturally it has reached mega-trend status in recent years, as the volatility of the world around us has us reaching into the past to bring about psychological equanimity, inspiration, and joy.
- Historical nostalgia is a fascinating branch of this phenomenon. Gen Z is primed for this; the digital saturation of their daily lives and the unprecedented exposure they have to the past online has given them instant access to a world of new and different ideas, values, and expression.
- The eras that reigned before their time—from the glamor of the 1980s to the grunge of the 1990s—are now touchstones for Gen Z's self-expression. By immersing themselves in the aesthetics, rituals, and traditions of these periods, they feel connected to something larger than themselves, grounding them in a world where stability can seem elusive.
- Through an exploration of online conversation and narratives, we have sought to explore how this very specific form of nostalgia offers psychological benefits for Gen Z; how it offers a reassuring foundation from which to move forward, to explore who they are, what they value, and what can bring them peace.

The big question

What can we learn from online discourse around Gen Z and the phenomenon of historical nostalgia (that is, nostalgia for a time that predates them) that reveals how this form of nostalgia may be serving Gen Z psychologically?



We brought together rich and inspiring language from 114 sources across 12 sourcing areas covering the **USA**:

1. Cultural journalism and discussions of Gen Z and nostalgia, capturing references to different eras and trends (Y2K / '90s / '80s / '70s and before)
2. Cultural journalism and industry press that speaks to the resurgence of more analog technologies and behaviors around music formats (e.g., vinyl, cassettes, CDs), gaming (e.g., classic games and consoles), hobbies, crafts, etc.
3. Cultural journalism and industry press that speaks to nostalgia in the context of food and beverages, fashion, home décor and design, music, tv, and film
4. Content discussing / showcasing / advertising nostalgic brand activations/collabs
5. Content that features events and venues tapping into nostalgic experiences
6. Gen Z-focused entertainment and pop culture blogs, influencer sites, websites, and online publications covering events, art, music, gaming, celebrities, lifestyle, entertainment, culture
7. Future-facing consumer discourse that taps into Gen Z and Pop Culture and Entertainment, including music/festivals, movies/TV, and collectibles
8. Future-facing consumer discourse that taps into Gen Z and Creativity and Self-Expression, including content creation, personal brand, crafting, and fashion
9. Future-facing consumer discourse that taps into Gen Z and Mental Health and Wellbeing
10. Future-facing consumer discourse that taps into Gen Z and feelings/perceptions/behaviors linked to societal or cultural themes or concerns
11. Future-facing consumer discourse that taps into Gen Z and Tech, including social media usage, "dumb-phones," and gaming
12. Social media search based on keywords linked to Gen Z and nostalgia/historical nostalgia and informed by trending terms and hashtags on TikTok, etc. (e.g., nostalgiacore)



Our findings can be grouped under two overarching themes

- **CRAFTING THE SELF**

Historical nostalgia as a lens to explore and define personal identity in a changing world

- **ROOTS and WINGS**

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

CRAFTING THE SELF

Exploring and defining identity in a changing world

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...



AESTHETIC EXPLORATION

Exploration can be about going back as much as going forward. Particularly regarding aesthetics (from product design and imagery to fashion and food), this is about finding creative inspiration in what has gone before—back through the '00s, '90s, '80s, and beyond—to supercharge the style and expressive remit of the present.



CULTURAL TIME TRAVEL and THE JOY OF "PINNACLE ERAS"

There is a joy to "time travel" and an appreciation of the cultural gifts of past eras. Gen Z wants the opportunity to revisit the "best bits" of a time before their own—taking pleasure in the romance, creative, and cultural richness of iconic eras—and exploring ways to incorporate this emotionally and culturally into their lives today.



THE MIXTAPE OF SELF

As Gen Z navigates adolescence and adulthood, they are looking for ways to bolster and affirm their unique and forming identity, testing out the limits, definitions, and markers of their authentic character and style. A return to past eras and cultural figures offers a chance to identify relatable forebears, whose style, humor, life experience, and success can support them from afar in their contemporary authentic spirit.



UNIQUELY YOURS

There is great pleasure derived from the objects of bygone eras, especially the stories, rich history, and tactility that accompany them. This can be captured and enjoyed stylistically through vintage fashion and retro furniture, for example, allowing individuals to express themselves and their creativity with one-off pieces and a story to share.



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.

ROOTS and WINGS

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

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...



SHARED STORIES and STRONG BONDS

Nostalgia that fosters a generational connection within the family and beyond, linking us to the experiences, values, and stories of those before us, creating a shared sense of identity and continuity.



HACKING THE PAST TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

Longing wistfully for past eras, and even romanticizing those times, has several interesting implications. It can serve as a coping mechanism for navigating today's challenges, foster reflection on positive values, and encourage critical thinking through comparisons with contemporary society. Additionally, it can inspire innovation and drive change by reimagining past ideas in new contexts.



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 where conflict and adversity surrounds us, Gen Z is looking for ways to disconnect for the sake of their mood and mental wellbeing.



PLAYFUL 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.

CRAFTING THE SELF

Exploring and defining identity in a changing world



Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

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Context

- Gen Z is eager for creative stimulus and content that can inspire and engage them in all areas of their lives—from downtime after they finish school or a study day, to content curation for work and leisure time.
- Historical nostalgia is a potential source of humor, interest, and artistry, and Gen Z uses this rich resource for inspiration; exploring the style of early '00s and '90s culture to stay part of contemporary trends and test out the sounds and styles that work for them, whilst enjoying the chance to have a positive sustainable impact through upcycling and worn-again fashions.

The Language of Creativity // Exploration // Reimagine

- *Re-glamoured / stylistic nostalgia / vintage / vapourwave*
- *Familiar and fresh / unique aesthetic / reboot and revitalize / re-purpose / resurrect / newstalgia*
- *Creativity / renaissance / pop culture archives*

Cultural Examples

- MUSIC: Beyoncé's Cowboy Carter blends "stylistic nostalgia with genre-bending elements," honoring the past while highlighting the overlooked contributions of Black artists to country music
- FASHION: McDonald's x Crocs Birdie Classic Clog – fun to wear adult Crocs with custom McDonald's® Birdie Jibbitz™ Charms
- FOOD & BEV: Fanta Beetlejuice pack design to celebrate the 2024 film release of this '80s classic, inspiring new audiences

Opportunities for Brands

- Fusing novelty with peak cultural moments from eras that predate Gen Z's lifetime creates an opportunity to help people break out of their daily life and bring inspiration in from diverse places from the world around us.
- Allowing the space for Gen Z's unique cultural markers to interact and play with these historic aesthetic influences will help keep brand activations fresh.





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Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

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REPURPOSING FOR THE FUTURE WORLD

I feel like makeup constantly being re-glamoured is such an "awe" thing to see, it's honestly true nostalgia because you can do what's been done in the beauty world from the past, but repurpose it to the future world

NOSTALGIA x CREATIVITY

The reason why these filter apps are so popular among Gen Z is similar to the resurgence of digital cameras: nostalgia and creativity

BIRTH A MAJOR RENAISSANCE

People will probably look back at this time as the era of nostalgia and this period of reviewing the past will birth a major renaissance like none before

CREATING A FAMILIAR YET FRESH AESTHETIC

This creates a unique aesthetic that feels both familiar and fresh, offering Gen Z consumers a way to connect with an idealized past while remaining firmly in the present

BOBBY JACK NOSTALGIA INSPO FOR TWEEN and TEEN FASHION

The brand taps into 2000s nostalgia, like in the TikTok below that features one of their most nostalgic ensembles: a Bobby Jack tee, brown gauchos, a Blackberry phone and a tiny backpack with a keychain charm

RESURRECTING STYLE TRENDS

Leading the charge as tastemakers of the day, teens and twenty-something fashionistas have mastered the art of resurrecting dead '90s and early 2000s style trends, giving the oldfangled looks new life — and forcing Millennials to rummage through the backs of their closets for once-sacked Y2K finery

POST '90s MANGA OLD STYLE CG RENDER

In this current era of nostalgia for old style CG renders, I think Shirlow's post '90s style has a place for appreciation by zoomers and genx

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR LOOK and FEEL OF DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

Snapchat's Super Bowl ad got me thinking about GenZ obsession with retro like aesthetics... "Anemoia: the psychology behind feeling nostalgic for a time you've never known" So much of this psychological principle is responsible for where the look and feel of digital environments...

PUSHING CREATIVE BOUNDARIES WITH GAME BOY CAMERA

Relive the nostalgia of the Game Boy Camera and its grainy, black and white photos with a new generation of artists using it to capture current events and push its creative boundaries

RUNWAY LOOKS ROOTED IN '70S FREEDOMS

When Vogue's Mark Holgate asked Kamali about the aesthetic's resurgence ahead of her Paris debut, she shared her thoughts: "I think there's this longing for undone-ness and freedom and softness and movement, and when you look at history, it's rooted in the '70s, when people wanted to free themselves from conventions and traditional lifestyles and sexuality."



Photo by [Chris Benson](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

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Context

- Gen Z feel the emotional pull for eras they were not alive in, especially where there is a sense they "missed out" on the IRL experience.
- But this isn't necessarily a negative thing; it offers opportunity for cultural time travel to explore the treasures and benefits of bygone, iconic eras and big cultural moments that can still have a relevance and benefit to Gen Z lives today; to have the emotional experience, spark the imagination and feel inspired by these important frames of reference.
- Musical genres, icons, and era-defining TV/movie content have a particularly strong role to play here, given how viscerally they're stirring younger audiences.

The Language of Icons // Eras // Alive // Inspiration // Sub-culture // Immersion

- *Wish I was born in... / missing something / didn't get to experience*
- *Pivotal / pinnacle / era*

Cultural Examples

- 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

Opportunities for Brands

- Finding ways to immerse and viscerally engage Gen Z consumers through inspiring historical cultural treasure, but in relevant and authentic ways, will create emotional, positive, and memorable experiences.
- Creating interactive brand spaces that allow Gen Z to really get into era-defining moments, fascinating sub-cultures, etc.
- Executions and experiences that allow Gen Z to play with and remix products/experiences from across different decades.





Photo by [Chris Benson](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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FUTURE ANEMOIA FOR TAYLOR SWIFT

there's this word "anemoia," which basically means being nostalgic for a time before you existed and I just know people are going to feel that one day about right now and existing at the same time as Taylor Swift QT @user: We are so lucky to be living in a world with Taylor Swift cause like kids born in 50 years will not be growing up with her

WISH I WAS BORN IN THE '90S

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 🙄

VICARIOUS NOSTALGIA MARKETING

These changes have resulted in a departure from nostalgia marketing based on personal experiences, to vicarious nostalgia marketing

YOU MISSED OUT

If you didn't experience the Teen Wolf, Catfish, Are You The One, Awkward and MTV Scream era in real time I feel so bad for you

FEEL BAD FOR YOU

I feel bad for everyone that did not get to experience the 80s and 90s.

1999 WAS THE PINNACLE OF POP CULTURE

people will pretty much always claim that whatever era they find the most nostalgic was "the pinnacle of pop culture" QT @user: 1999 was the pinnacle of pop culture, it's all been downhill since then

I WOULD HAVE LIVED A LIFE

Nah fr i wish i was born in '81 i would have lived a life QT @user: I would do anything to go back in time to be an adult in the club during this era

WISH I HAD EXPERIENCED THIS FIRST TIME ROUND

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

RETRO CHARM OF DRIVE-INS

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

JOHN LENNON INSPIRES EVERY NEW GENERATION

His light continues to shine (and we all shine on!) and inspires every new generation, not from nostalgia, but from discovering him in their own right



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Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

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Context

- As Gen Z members grow up, they go through the age-old process of "finding yourself"—trying on different styles and identities, exploring different passions, role models, and activities—to uncover and define who they really are.
- This is about emotionally connecting with and interpreting past eras to align with the self.
- They create a "mixtape of self"—a compilation of present and future as well as a nostalgic look back to the past—seeking out personalities, products, styles, and wider cultural influences that they feel resonate with their experience, character, and humor, both in terms of who they are now and who they aspire to be.

The Language of Recreate // Storytelling // Individuality

- *Feels / heart / emotionally immediate / past life / like I was alive then*

Cultural Examples

- BEAUTY & PERSONAL CARE: [Retro style makeup tutorials on TikTok and YouTube](#)
- FASHION / MUSIC: [Charli XCX sparking revival of Y2K Von Dutch fashion brand via Brat album](#)

Opportunities for Brands

- Activations linked to curated product packages and experiences, allowing consumers to build their own bespoke collection (from combining food and drink brands to holiday experiences, editorial content, entertainment, and more).
- Brand language and activations that encourage audiences to share and post "their mix" (across food and beverage, fashion, music, or travel/lifestyle experiences) and what personal stories are attached to them.





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WORK ON MAKING YOUR OWN MARK

No matter how many camcorder filters you use, cosplay as ya parents in the 90's-2000's, all the freaknik parties in the world....you cannot recreate nostalgia, work on making your own mark in history instead or tryna recreate it

RECREATING THE PERIOD BEFORE MY LIVING MEMORY

With the former its the 70s too with the latter the 90s where my childhood life and being is buried QT @user: Something subtle about nostalgia Ive realized is that it's not your childhood culture that you want to recreate but the culture of the period just before your living memory starts

FINDING POTENT STORIES TO TELL

no offense to the younger generations but people born before 98 still have stories left to tell and when they reach in that nostalgia bag for depth it's so much more potent cause we've lived through more change

MUSICAL TASTES: TIMELESS AND EMOTIONALLY IMMEDIATE

"This isn't just a nostalgic throwback to a bygone era of dance floors and glitter; Turek crafts a sonic landscape that feels both timeless and emotionally immediate."

EMOTIONALLY CONNECTING WITH JAZZ BEFORE MY TIME

Born in the 90s and it's something about 80's jazz music that gives me nostalgia

PEAK PARTS OF MY "PAST LIFE"

Idk I feel like the peak parts of my past life happened in the 1970s something about it just brings a sense of nostalgia but I was born 25 years later 🥰 I wanna get a past life reading to see if I'm right lol

NOSTALGIC '90S VIBES (BUT BORN IN '03)

every time i listen to 90s music, it feels nostalgic to me like i was alive during that time but i was born in 2003 🥰 was this a dumb tweet idk

EMBEDS DEEP INTO YOUR PSYCHE

"A layered and authentic portrait of identity and dysphoria, wrapped in '90s nostalgia and surreal imagery that embeds itself deep into your psyche." (Bloody Disgusting) Now Playing

YOUTHFUL NOSTALGIA

I mean 13 is about the age a lot of us started having "nostalgia" for things we weren't even alive to see like the early 90s so this checks out I feel QT @user: shes a child where the hell did she get nostalgia from

ICONS INSPIRING YOUR HALLOWEEN LOOK

From pop-culture costumes and iconic TV and movie characters to your favorite band, there's no shortage of inspiration, so you and your crew can get in on the spooky spirit this fall



Photo by [Malvestida](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

UNIQUELY YOURS

There is great pleasure derived from the objects of bygone eras, especially the stories, rich history, and tactility that accompany them. This can be captured and enjoyed stylistically through vintage fashion and retro furniture, for example, allowing individuals to express themselves and their creativity with one-off pieces and a story to share.

Context

- Gen Z finds comfort in stories, whether through diving into the stylistic glamour and adventures of the stars of past eras or via the tactile craftsmanship, quality, and uniqueness that comes from older objects.
- Inspired by products, brands, and artists that have a positive history and story that they can engage with and share with others, celebrating distinctive quality, limited collaborations, or iconic editions.
- This is especially compelling in an era where most things are mass-produced and instantly accessible to all (from Amazon orders to dupe fragrances to TikTok purchases)—meaning the notion of owning something that is uniquely yours becomes a rare treasure.
- And in an age of mass production and instant access, the chance to engage with one-off pieces often made with greater craft, quality, or care offers a sense of novelty, rarity, and excitement.

The Language of Individuality // Rare Vintage // Last Surviving // Uniqueness

- *Vintage / timeless / retro / aesthetic / thrift*
- *Individuality / craftsmanship / history / tales*

Cultural Examples

- FASHION: Billion-dollar sneaker culture industry, [Supreme Drops](#), resale fashion sites such as [depop](#)
- HOME DESIGN: Rise in popularity of thrifted and resale furniture sites such as [Chairish](#) and [Aptdeco](#)
- LEISURE & TRAVEL: Hospitality or tours focused on vintage/historic experiences such as [Rise NY](#)

Opportunities for Brands

- Re-launching iconic brand items and products for limited edition runs.
- Introducing re-commerce into business model.
- Launching a creative platform for audiences to design their own (from FanDB product/packaging to hospitality accessories) remixing aesthetic styles from past iterations of brand identity and output.





Photo by [Malvestida](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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VINTAGE STYLE CELEBRATES INDIVIDUALITY

From timeless elegance to retro chic, vintage style celebrates individuality, craftsmanship, and a sense of nostalgia for bygone eras of fashion

CLOTHING and ACCESSORIES TELLING TALES OF YESTERYEAR

Oh snap! 📸 Discovered this cool alley today, hiding a vintage shop so groovy it's like stepping back in time! The air was thick with nostalgia and history as I perused racks of clothing and accessories that told tales of yesteryears

VINTAGE EPHEMERA

You all know I love nostalgic/vintage ephemera, so when I discovered a Pyrex subreddit I immediately joined because of all the nostalgic cookware

FINDING HIDDEN GEMS

Just spent the day exploring hidden gems in Tokyo and I'm obsessed with the nostalgia of Shibuya's old love hotels

GEN Z VINTAGE CAR COLLECTORS

But Gen Zers — some of whom are just starting to be able to afford to buy and collect vintage cars — are more attracted to models from the "80s and "90s

DISTINCTIVE, NOT BORING

I'd honestly rather have like a 80s/90s styled and decorated home over modern boring minimalist decor

GRANDMA'S BRASS LOCKET

Just spent the day polishing my grandma's vintage brass locket and I'm reminded of how this metal's warm glow can evoke feelings of nostalgia and strength Love how brass adds a touch of elegance to any room

EXPRESS UNIQUE STYLE

Today's fashion embraces a wide range of influences, from retro nostalgia to futuristic minimalism, allowing individuals to express their unique style i just dont get it why people sit on it

RETRO-FUTURISTIC VINTAGE AESTHETIC

The vintage yet modern aesthetic of her attire and surroundings echoes "Her's" retro-futuristic world, where old-fashioned elegance meets advanced technology

TACTILE and EMOTIONAL TEXTURE OF HUMAN MADE ART

In an era where AI increasingly mimics reality and imagination with professional precision, there's one thing it can't replicate: the tactile and emotional texture of human-made art



Photo by Collabstr on Unsplash

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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.



Context

- References to bygone culture through fashion, music, décor, etc., can be a way of signalling one's cultural literacy, which in turn can speak to status, expertise, confidence, and self-esteem.
- It can be self-affirming, or generate affirmation from others—the latter especially when viewed through the lens of social media activity, likes, subscribes, reposts, etc.
- But at a broader level, because of the cultural magnitude of the nostalgia trend, activity based on nostalgia can be subject to criticism for lacking substance and imagination if the execution doesn't feel authentic.

The Language of Authenticity // Trends // Expertise

- *New generation / 'a knowing celebration of' / aficionado*
- *Attention / cherry-picked / trendy / fake / gate-keep*

Cultural Examples

- 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

Opportunities for Brands

- Revival of iconic products appealing to consumers who value cultural literacy and heritage.
- Playing to heritage branding to highlight brand's history or legacy, strengthening its appeal as culturally significant and authentic.
- Authenticity is key here to avoid the "nostalgia bait" or "jumping on the nostalgia bandwagon" label.





Photo by Collabstr on Unsplash

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CHERRYPICKING NOSTALGIA TO GARNER ATTENTION

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

THEY WEREN'T EVEN BORN

Them AI photos on Facebook got some of my age peers in a chokehold MFs boring in the late 80s, rendering photos of them selves in the early 50s, a time before we had civil rights They got nostalgia for a time, they weren't even born 🤡 It's official, we the Elders

FAKE FUTURISM

i wonder what's next in electronic music trends that fake futurism and are entirely based on nostalgia

A KNOWING CELEBRATION OF NOUGHTIES MAXIMALISM

Balenciaga's recent pink faux fur-clad London store launch is a knowing celebration of noughties maximalism, while fashion brand Coach built a vintage drive-in cinema for a runway show steeped in nostalgia last year

QUESTIONING AUTHENTICITY

I'm nostalgic over the 80s and I was born in '82...if it was after 95 or so id understand this tweet QT @user: How You Nostalgic Over 90s Basketball and You Was Born In 93

YOU CAN'T GATEKEEP A DECADE

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

CULTURAL ZEITGEIST

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

COWBOY CARTER TO WARDROBE STAPLE

Runway collections, pop-cultural juggernauts and efforts from more traditional Western-wear companies have coalesced to achieve something the spaghetti Western never could: transforming traditional cowboy attire from something resembling caricature into a staple of the modern wardrobe

NOSTALGIA AFICIONADO

Let's flip it open and explore: Nostalgia Aficionado: Owning a flip phone suggests you're a bit of a nostalgia buff

GEN Z GRILLZ and CULTURAL ORIGINS

"As a trained dental prosthetist and technician, I'm deeply fascinated by the resurgence of gold teeth and the evolving cultural significance attached to them

ROOTS and WINGS

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



Photo by [Manny Becerra](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

SHARED STORIES and STRONG BONDS

Nostalgia that fosters a generational connection within the family and beyond, linking us to the experiences, values, and stories of those before us, creating a shared sense of identity and continuity.



Context

- The value of historical nostalgia in this context is based on the joy of delving into family history and feeling a strong vicarious sense of the bygone experiences of older family members—an emotional and direct connection to the past.
- Especially pertinent where immigration and cultural heritage is part of the family story; this is a way to create and experience cultural continuity, strengthen family bonds, and add to the identity and backstory of Gen Z individuals today. It helps connect them to their roots, cultural background, or family history, providing a sense of belonging and continuity.
- But this generational connection also shows up as "inherited nostalgia," as parents actively bring their children into their nostalgic experiences to pass on the joy and engender a shared experience.

The Language of Family // Heritage // Connection // Belonging

- *Share the nostalgia / connect across the generations / taught nostalgia*

Cultural Examples

- CULTURE: '80s Goth Mom posts on TikTok, Gen Z inspired by their parents' subculture style
- FASHION: [Posh Peanut x Lisa Frank PJ collab](#) — '90s Lisa Frank brand enjoying a revival thanks to '90s nostalgia trend, with this collaboration bringing '90s fashion to little ones via their parents
- MUSIC: Spotify's curated "throwback" playlists to experience sounds of previous generations

Opportunities for Brands

- A rich space for legacy brands to play; leveraging their cross-generational presence to speak to values of heritage, enduring stories, and bonds—but must be married with contemporary relevance.
- Bridging the old and the new with future-facing brand collaborations that play on history and nostalgia and align with consumer/audience passion points.
- Personalized experiences or products that allow Gen Z and their families to celebrate heritage and belonging, or heirloom collections designed with passing down through the generations in mind.





Photo by [Manny Becerra](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

SHARED STORIES and STRONG BONDS

Nostalgia that fosters a generational connection within the family and beyond, linking us to the experiences, values, and stories of those before us, creating a shared sense of identity and continuity.

RE-LIVING PARENTS' GHANAIAN HIPLIFE

My Saturday afternoon is filled w listening to nostalgic Ghanaian hiplife, the songs and music our parents used to dance to at parties 🥳🥳

MY GRANDMOTHER'S VINTAGE SARI

Just put on my grandmother's vintage sari for my sister's wedding and I'm overcome with nostalgia

GRANDMA'S WIRELESS

I'm thrilled to see the restored 1920s radio machine bringing back nostalgic memories of my grandma's stories about listening to music on the wireless

NOSTALGIA MARKETING TO CONNECT ACROSS GENERATIONS

Their collaboration with Posh Peanut, a family apparel brand, is a great example of using nostalgia marketing to connect across generations

TAUGHT NOSTALGIA

Because there are just as many fans repeating that taught nostalgia than fans that actually old enough to really remember watching it live

LOOKING BACK TO GO FORWARDS

Nostalgia in its healthy form is a look back with joy at things that were lost in order to find how to give those things to the next generation in a healthy way

WHAT THEIR PARENTS GREW UP UP

Anyway, I wanted to hear from other Gen Z'ers about the things their parents or older adults in their life grew up with that they wish they had, so I asked Gen Z'ers in the BuzzFeed Community to share all their thoughts

PASSING ON THE JOY OF NOSTALGIA

Passing on the joy of creativity and nostalgia to the next generation is truly special

EXPLORING PARENTS' NOSTALGIC HAITI

I wish to know the Haiti my parents are nostalgic about, a Haiti I can bring my future family

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY

I wanted to celebrate Black History Month by screening films that inspire joy, nostalgia, and black excellence



Photo by [Shayna Douglas](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

HACKING THE PAST TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

Longing wistfully for past eras, and even romanticizing those times, has several interesting implications. It can serve as a coping mechanism for navigating today's challenges, foster reflection on positive values, and encourage critical thinking through comparisons with contemporary society. Additionally, it can inspire innovation and drive change by reimagining past ideas in new contexts.

Context

- Gen Z has grown up in a highly volatile world, creating a daily need for moments of escape and reprieve—finding moments to put the demands and anxieties of the present on pause, and to return to some tried and tested, cherry-picked parts of the past—whether through TV, music, crafts, etc.
- By focusing on inspirational aspects of history, Gen Z can draw motivation or lessons for present challenges.
- At the same time, reflecting on both the positive and negative aspects of the past also inspires critical thinking about current social or political dynamics, particularly from those commentators who state this tendency to look wistfully to the past, perhaps through rose-tinted lenses, is not a true representation of those times, which may not have been good for all.

The Language of Past and Future // Inspire // Enhance // Reimagine

- *Better times / times have changed / ideation / shape your life / inspired*
- *Propaganda / romanticised / anxieties / paranoias*

Cultural Examples

- **LIFESTYLE:** Cottagecore movement critiques modern consumerism and offers a reimagination of past values for today.
- **MEDIA:** Bridgerton speaks to Regency period romance while subtly critiquing societal norms of those times and offering an alternate history.
- **AUTOMOTIVE:** Volkswagen's ID. Buzz Bus reboots the original, iconic vehicle with electric technology.

Opportunities for Brands

- Balancing familiarity with forward-facing creativity through aesthetics and innovation.
- Brand storytelling that highlights heritage and connects past achievements or milestones to the present and future.
- Celebrating less mainstream historical moments and movements that offer fresh inspiration and tap into the human desire to rediscover and reframe the past.





Photo by [Shayna Douglas](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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BETTER TIMES...EVEN THOUGH I WASN'T BORN

it's just so calm and nostalgic 🥰🥰🥰 just reminds me of better times even tho I wasn't born during those times I be listening to 🎧

WHAT WENT BEFORE INTRIGUES ME

Times have changed so much and everything is just so modernized that I'm intrigued in anything that gives nostalgia vibes

MUSIC INSPIRED BY NOSTALGIA

I feel like music has always been inspired by nostalgia tho we just used to build on it differently

AI GENERATED IMAGES THAT ARE SYNTHETIC IDEAS OF THE PAST

Every one of these is an AI generated image—which is such a perfect metaphor for how these nostalgic return posts are based on synthetic ideas of the past/present/future, generated from anxieties and paranoias that are disconnected from reality

NOSTALGIC FOR A TIME THAT NEVER EXISTED

And I was all, "I'll bet none of you saying this were born less than 30-40 years after that picture was taken, so how do you know?" QT @user: I know I'm not saying anything groundbreaking here, but some of y'all really are nostalgic for a time that never existed

ENCHANTED BY NOSTALGIA

Did Stranger Things get real bad real quick or was it always terrible and I was just enchanted by 80s nostalgia

SHAPING LIFE FOR THE FUTURE

Nostalgia causes ideation of the past and it's a positive thing that people think is negative because all of it leads to how you shape your life for the FUTURE

INSPIRING ART BETTER THAN THE ERAS THAT INSPIRED THEM

This is the thing I find so compelling about nostalgia art created by people who absolutely didn't live through the eras they're inspired by Like, vaporwave isn't really like the 80's/90's/2000's, but that's what makes it better than those eras

A BLEND OF NOSTALGIA and INNOVATION

I hope the audience feels playful, inspired, and curious as they explore this blend of nostalgia and innovation and is more inclined to step into the future and explore new technologies as they learn through play

INSPIRING GEN Z and GEN ALPHA CREATORS

Feels like as 90s and 80s nostalgia is starting to fade we enter the era of 2000s LOLXD Internet nostalgia, which could very likely result in Gen alpha and Late gen Zoomers making more OC's inspired by it



Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

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 where conflict and adversity surrounds us, Gen Z is looking for ways to disconnect for the sake of their mood and mental wellbeing.

Context

- There is a move to seek joy in simplicity, as Gen Z explores the opportunity to find joy amongst the stress that can come with overstimulation and an "always on" world.
- Stepping away from technology provides a greater opportunity to connect more deeply with the world around us. Gen Z is increasingly valuing the benefits of spending time in nature, practicing mindfulness, being present with friends and family, and engaging in activities that foster a sense of grounding and wellbeing—without relying on technology.
- Physical touch and sensorial experiences have taken on greater significance in our digital-first world. Multi-sensory activities have risen in popularity as Gen Z looks to stay mentally rooted through building a more tangible connection to the world around them.

The Language of Digital Detox // Analogue // Lo-Fi // Connection

- *Physical / real connection / grainy / pre-social media*
- *Flip phones / polaroid / retro technology*

Cultural Examples

- 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

Opportunities for Brands

- Rebooting tactile, simpler tech that supports mindful tech use and offline engagement.
- Campaigns or products that encourage slowing down and connecting through meaningful physical, sensory experiences.
- Slow and introspective content; thoughtful, slower-paced content on social media—like meditative visuals or reflective storytelling—to stand out from the noise.
- Brand language around physical connection, moments of engagement, creating "space among the noise" (e.g., the moment in the cafe, the moment in the street).





Andrej Lišakov For Unsplash+

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

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NOSTALGIC INSTAX CAMERAS

Instax cameras, akin to the older Polaroid cameras, play into the nostalgia marketing strategy by reminding people of the old physical photos in an increasingly digital world

REAL CONNECTION

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, but it’s honestly not ideal for the past 3 generations of people that have crafted these spaces and opportunities we wouldn’t have without it QT @user: the future of cool is no social media

LOWER QUALITY PHOTOS

Teens, celebrities, and influencers alike have been snapping up 20-year-old digital cameras to take lower-quality photos with high-quality vibes

FLIP PHONES MAKING A COMEBACK

From Gen Z fashion trends like Y2K and low-rise jeans to point-and-shoot digital cameras and flip phones making an unexpected comeback, it’s safe to say that youth audiences aren’t afraid to pick and choose what their predecessors thought would be left in the past for good

REVIVING EARLY 2000S TECH

Gen Z has an affinity for making old things new again and an enchantment with early 2000s technology — ditching iPhones for flip phones, bringing back digital cameras, using iPod Minis as hair clips and buying out “vintage” iPods from 2007

LO-FI NOSTALGIA

In a world saturated with high-definition perfection, the grainy, lo-fi aesthetic of old iPhones and digital cameras offers a refreshing departure

SWITCHING TO "DUMB PHONES"

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

MY STUDENT'S FLIP PHONE

Taught my final day of class to my students who are truly brilliant and wonderful, and at the close of our class, they wanted a group picture, and so getting ready for it, one of my students passes me something that triggered nostalgia of my childhood: a flip phone to take the pic

MORE ABOUT THE EXPERIENCED MOMENT

Wouldn't it be cool to go back in time, reconnect with our planet, strengthen social skills, and develop a new technology that will be more about the experienced moment and less about screen looking

RETRO TECH-INSPIRED INNOVATION

We may also see a wave of companies using retro technologies as inspiration for new products and styles in a manner similar to what is currently happening with food and fashion



Photo by Igor Omilaeu on [Unsplash](#)

Online conversation about historical nostalgia touches on...

PLAYFUL 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.

Context

- Meta-nostalgia, or engaging with the art or aesthetics that previous generations felt nostalgic about, is perhaps an inevitable consequence of pre-internet content finding its way into the hands of today's tastemakers. Art that achieves "cult status" becomes inextricably linked to its cult—for contemporary observers, it may be impossible to engage with something in isolation of its prior fandom. However, if that fandom existed offline, its influence on the cultural elaboration of an artwork might not be clearly articulated in post-digital forums, just blended into an archival milieu.
- The benefit of this is two-fold; firstly, it demonstrates that there is no "right" way to enjoy art. Any gatekeeping that might have been done by original fans, or even first-gen nostalgic fans, is bypassed. Secondly, it invites playful anachronism, embedding easter-eggs that hold the promise of deeper insights and buried treasure for anyone who ventures further into the analogue rabbit hole.

The Language of Meta-History and Shadows of Past Forms

- *Layers upon layers / a simulacrum / a parody of a tribute*
- *Vaporwave / hauntology / retrofuturism / sampling*

Cultural Examples

- MUSIC: "Googoo Muck" by The Cramps underwent a viral dance revival via Netflix's "Wednesday," notably now 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 (with its own unapologetic and largely uncritical nostalgia of '70s rockband culture), an artistic stance that is at-once both familiar and outdated, and unlikely to be replicated in contemporary cinema.

Opportunities for Brands

- Campaigns that rely on analogue marketing techniques—flyers, zines, billboards, radio spots, magazine mail-ins—for a tactile and transient message that feels like being let in on something extremely special.
- Playing on the "Mandela effect"—exposing inherited memories that may not be accurate, for an impactful update against a core message.





Photo by Igor Omilae on Unsplash

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'80S NOSTALGIA OUTLASTS THE DECADE

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

MAKING LO-FI DIGITAL MEMORIES

my young millennial friends and i are buying 35mm film point-n-shoot cameras for nostalgic vibes, but i just learned gen zs are buying nikon coolpix digital cameras for theirs..

NO BOTTOM LAYER TO NOSTALGIA

there is no bottom to nostalgia, no matter how many sedimentary layers of trash get dug up there's always another deeper layer of garbage that someone somewhere enjoyed when they were 13

NOSTALGIA SIMULACRUM

We're so far into simulacrum of a simulacrum territory because everyone who's making 80s nostalgia projects can't remember the actual 80s, they just remember what Stranger Things tells them the 80s were like

PARODIES BECOMING AUTHENTIC

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

GEN ALPHA VAPORWAVE

coming soon: gen alpha "vaporwave nostalgia", not to be confused with millennial "90s computing nostalgia" AKA vaporwave

NOSTALGIA FOR '90S NOSTALGIA

NgI 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

NOSTALGIC AI GLITCHES

In the future there will be nostalgia for the surrealism and glitches in current day AI

MADE IN THE '90S, SET IN THE '50S

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

NEW-OLD MEMORIES

I had a dream that a well-known band was making an elaborate point about nostalgia by secretly editing the ending to a well-known music video over and over again to create a synthetic Mandela Effect



Inspired?

What to learn more about the power of nostalgia and shifting cultural landscapes?

Get in touch:

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Human Flourishing Lab: crouledge@archbridgeinstitute.org



Appendix

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