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Archived Post or Archived Past?

A Qualitative Study on How Gen Z Interprets and Reconstructs Digitally
Mediated Pasts

by

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Abstract

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Research Question: How do Gen Z consumers interpret and construct digitally mediated nostalgia for past eras they have not experienced?

Purpose: This study explores how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgia for past eras they have not personally experienced, with particular attention to the role of digital platforms in shaping this process.

Methodology: A qualitative, interpretive research design was employed, combining netnographic observations with semi-structured interviews. The netnographic dataset consisted of 108 posts collected from TikTok and Instagram between the second and last week of April 2025. Interview data was analyzed through thematic analysis to understand how Gen Z consumers make sense of digitally mediated nostalgic representations.

Key Findings: The study reveals that Gen Z consumers construct nostalgia for unlived eras through four interconnected processes: platform and algorithmic exposure, aesthetic simplification, collective validation, and identity reconstruction. Nostalgic content becomes meaningful when platforms make selected versions of the past visible, when aesthetic cues such as music, filters, fashion, and visual styles make the past emotionally recognizable, and when user interactions collectively validate nostalgic feelings. The findings further show that Gen Z uses idealized representations of the past to critique contemporary digital life, particularly feelings of overstimulation, performativity, and digital fatigue.

Implications: The study contributes theoretically by conceptualizing digitally mediated nostalgia as a present-oriented and socially constructed process, rather than solely an individual emotional response to memory. Practically, it suggests that brands targeting Gen Z should focus on nostalgic cues that are visually recognizable, emotionally resonant, and adaptable within platform cultures, while remaining attentive to consumers' desire for authenticity, connection, and relief from digital saturation.

Keywords: *Digitally Mediated Nostalgia, Gen Z, Nostalgia Without Lived Memory, Algorithmic Curation, Aesthetic Mediation, Collective Validation, Consumer Culture.*

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1 Introduction

People often assume that social media influencers are the puppet masters behind Generation Z's tastes and habits. In reality, most consumers remain unaware of just how much power the platforms themselves hold in grabbing attention. Within contemporary consumer culture, this platform power can be seen in the revival and commercialization of the past. Across digital platforms, fashion, music, entertainment and branding, past-themed references are continuously revived, reworked, and made meaningful in the present. This ongoing resurgence indicates a wider consumer interest in retro, vintage, heritage, and nostalgic consumption, where past styles, symbols, and aesthetics are used to create emotional resonance and relevance (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2023; Dam *et al.*, 2024).

This phenomenon is particularly relevant among Gen Z consumers, whose engagement with the past often goes beyond personal memory. Many Gen Z consumers engage with aesthetics associated with periods they have not personally experienced, raising questions about how nostalgia can emerge in the absence of lived memory. While nostalgia has traditionally been understood as “*a longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday, or a fondness for possessions and activities associated with days of yore*” (Holbrook, 1993, p.245), research also suggests that nostalgia can be formed through mediated memories, cultural narratives and emotional connections (Goulding, 2001; Merchant & Rose, 2013).

At the same time, contemporary engagements with the past are increasingly shaped by digital platforms. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have become spaces where past-themed content is produced, circulated and interpreted. Through feeds, hashtags, short-form videos, filters and user interactions, the past becomes increasingly visible in fragmented and recognizable forms (Van Dijck, 2007; Beer, 2017).

This thesis explores how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct digitally mediated nostalgia for eras they have not directly experienced. Rather than treating nostalgia as an individual emotion, the study approaches it as a process of meaning-making produced by mediated representations, digital platforms and consumer interactions. By combining netnographic observations with semi-structured interviews, the research examines both the digital contexts in which nostalgic representations circulate and intertwine with the ways Gen Z consumers interpret them.

The study finds that Gen Z consumers construct nostalgia for unexperienced eras through the interaction of three key processes: *platform and algorithmic exposure*, *aesthetic mediation*, and *collective validation*. Nostalgic meaning emerges when digital platforms make past-themed content visible, when aesthetic fragments such as music, filters, fashion, images and visual styles make the past emotionally recognizable, and when user interactions validate these interpretations collectively. Importantly, the thesis finds that this nostalgia is not only past-oriented but also present-oriented, meaning that Gen Z consumers use idealized representations of the past to reflect on, compare, and sometimes critique contemporary digital life. Thus, nostalgia becomes a way of imagining alternative forms of authenticity, social connection, and self-expression within the conditions of the present.

1.1 Background

While nostalgia has been linked to personal memory and lived experience, contemporary consumer culture shows that attachments to the past can also emerge through mediated and imagined forms of experience. Consumers may feel connected to periods they did not directly experience by engaging with images, stories, music, media representations, and cultural narratives that make those periods emotionally accessible (Goulding, 2001; Merchant & Rose, 2013; Neave *et al.*, 2026). In this sense, nostalgia is not only a return to what has been personally experienced, but also a way of imagining and making sense of pasts that are culturally available in the present.

At the same time, the past has become a recurring cultural and market resource. Retro, vintage, heritage and nostalgic references are increasingly used across consumer culture to create emotional, symbolic and aesthetic value (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2023; Dam *et al.*, 2024). These references do not simply reproduce history, but reinterpret and aestheticize it in ways that fit present-day tastes, trends and consumption practices. The past has become something that can be selected, styled, circulated and made meaningful in the present.

Digital environments, on the other hand, intensify this process. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram make past-themed content continuously visible through short-form videos, filters, sounds, hashtags, archive accounts and user interactions. Research on mediated memory shows that digital media shape how the past is stored, accessed and recontextualized in everyday life (Van Dijck, 2007; Hoskins, 2011). Furthermore, algorithmic systems influence which representations become visible and repeated, thereby organizing user experience through recommendation systems, engagement metrics, and platform-specific content to increase visibility (Beer, 2017; Cotter, 2019; Airolti & Rokka, 2022).

This creates an important ground for studying Gen Z nostalgia. Many nostalgic trends circulating online refer to eras that Gen Z consumers have not personally experienced, yet these representations can still be interpreted as familiar, desirable and meaningful. This study approaches nostalgia as a digitally mediated and socially constructed process. The focus is not on whether these nostalgic attachments are historically accurate, but more on how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct them within digital consumer culture.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore how Gen Z consumers engage with and interpret nostalgic representations of past eras within contemporary consumer culture, with particular attention to the role of digital environments in shaping this process.

To achieve this, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To examine how digitally mediated environments influence exposure to and engagement with past-themed content
- To explore how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgic meanings in the absence of lived experience
- To analyze how these processes contribute to collective identity formation and perceptions of authenticity

- To investigate how platform dynamics, algorithmic curation and participatory practices shape the construction of nostalgic representations

1.3 Research Purpose

Despite increasing recognition of historical and imagined forms of nostalgia, existing research continues to conceptualize nostalgia primarily as an internally experienced emotional response to the past. While this perspective acknowledges that nostalgia can extend beyond lived experience, it tends to underemphasize the role of contemporary digital environments in shaping how nostalgic engagement emerges and evolves.

In current consumer contexts, the past is not simply recalled or imagined; it is actively produced, curated, and circulated through interconnected market and media systems (Brunk *et al.*, 2018; Dam *et al.*, 2023). Social media platforms do not merely expose users to nostalgic content; they also play a central role in structuring how the past is selected, aestheticized, and collectively interpreted (Dam *et al.*, 2024). Through repeated exposure to mediated representations, consumers engage with selective and often idealized versions of past eras, regardless of lived experience (Goulding, 2001).

However, limited attention has been given to how these nostalgic meanings are actively constructed within digital environments, particularly through user participation and interaction (Neave *et al.*, 2026). This gap is especially relevant for Gen Z consumers, whose engagement with the past is deeply embedded in digital platforms characterized by algorithmic curation, aesthetic simplification, and participatory remixing.

Against this background, this study reconceptualizes nostalgia as a digitally mediated process of meaning-making, rather than solely an emotional response. It seeks to understand how consumers actively engage with, interpret, and construct representations of the past within contemporary platform ecosystems.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question:

How do Gen Z consumers interpret and construct digitally mediated nostalgia for past eras they have not experienced?

1.4 Delimitations

This study focuses specifically on Gen Z consumers as a generation whose engagement with the past is predominantly mediated through digital platforms. The research is situated within contemporary digital environments, with particular attention to social media contexts where nostalgic content is most actively produced, circulated, and consumed.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in a constructionist epistemology. As such, it prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability and focuses on how individuals construct meaning rather than on measuring behavioral outcomes or establishing causal relationships. In this light,

while the study acknowledges that algorithmic curation fundamentally shapes the nostalgic content presented to users, the attention remains on consumers' subjective responses to that curated reality rather than on the curation itself. Additionally, while nostalgia is examined as a broader cultural phenomenon, the study does not aim to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of past eras themselves, but rather to explore how these eras are represented and interpreted in the present.

2 Literature Review

This section reviews literature on past-themed consumption, paying particular attention to how the past is interpreted and made meaningful in contemporary digital contexts. The resurgence of past aesthetics has become a defining feature of contemporary consumer culture, as consumers and marketers increasingly engage with the past through symbols, aesthetics, and cultural practices (Dam *et al.*, 2024). While earlier research has examined nostalgia and its use within specific industries like fashion, the growing prominence of digital environments suggests that engagement with the past extends beyond industry and instead represents a broader cultural process.

By integrating insights from consumer research, digital cultures, and algorithmic studies, this section established a conceptual basis for understanding nostalgia not merely as an emotional response to the past but as a socially constructed and technologically mediated concept. In doing so, it provided a theoretical base for examining *how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgia within contemporary digital environments*.

2.1 Past-Themed Consumption: Distinguishing Retro, Nostalgia, Heritage and Vintage

The resurgence of past-themed consumption has become a prominent feature of contemporary consumer culture, in which references to earlier periods are increasingly mobilized through products, brands, media, and everyday practices. Past-themed consumption can be understood as a broad consumer-cultural phenomenon, in which references to the past are aestheticized, collectively valued, and made meaningful through consumption practices (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020). This perspective is useful for the present study because Gen Z's engagement with the past is not limited to a single product category but extends across industries, including entertainment, technology, film, music, food, fashion, and tourism (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2024).

Within this phenomenon, several related terms are frequently used, including retro, nostalgia, heritage, and vintage. Although often used interchangeably in both academic and managerial discourse, these concepts refer to distinct yet interconnected ways in which the past is engaged within consumption practices (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Dam *et al.*, 2024). Making this distinction is important for this study, as Gen Z consumers may engage with past-themed content in ways not necessarily tied to direct memory or historical accuracy, but rather to the meanings and aesthetics circulating within contemporary digital culture. Additionally, digitally mediated nostalgia often blurs these categories in practice. For example, social media content may draw on retro aesthetics, vintage-looking visual cues, and nostalgic language, yet remain detached from direct memory or historical experience. This is consistent with research

showing that Instagram mobilizes retro and analog aesthetics, that vicarious nostalgia can involve longing for periods not personally lived, and that platform cultures recirculate images of the past through algorithmic systems (Nguyen, 2017; Merchant & Rose, 2013; Brown *et al.*, 2024).

Retro typically refers to the intentional revival or reinterpretation of styles, symbols, or aesthetics from previous eras within a contemporary context (Brown, 1999; Brown *et al.*, 2003). Rather than reproducing the past authentically or historically accurately, retro often involves a stylized reworking of historical elements, reframing the past to fit present-day cultural and market conditions. In this sense, retro can be understood as a form of cultural recombination, in which historical references are detached from their original contexts and reintroduced in contemporary contexts. This is consistent with Dagalp *et al.*'s (2020) view of the past and present, where older aesthetic references are reworked through contemporary market narratives. This is relevant for the present study because many nostalgia trends rely on recognizable “past-looking” styles rather than accurate representations of the past. Examples include Y2K visuals and early internet aesthetics, such as #y2kcore and #webcore references to 1990s and 2000s digital and consumer cultures, as well as vintage filters that imitate older analog media styles (Nguyen, 2017; Brown *et al.*, 2024).

In contrast, nostalgia is primarily conceptualized as an emotional or affective response characterized by a sentimental longing or yearning for the past (Davis, 1979; Sedikides *et al.*, 2008). While early research has emphasized nostalgia as rooted in personal memory and lived experience, recent work has expanded this view to include forms of collective and vicarious nostalgia, where individuals develop emotional connections to periods they have not directly experienced (Goulding, 2001; Merchant & Rose, 2013). It is important to make this distinction, and it is particularly relevant in contemporary consumption contexts, where exposure to mediated representations of the past enables consumers to engage nostalgically without direct experiential grounding. Since this thesis focuses specifically on nostalgia for past eras that Gen Z consumers have not directly experienced, this idea is developed further in the following section.

Heritage differs from both retro and nostalgia because it emphasizes continuity, authenticity, and the preservation of historical identity over time. Heritage consumption is often associated with notions of legacy, tradition, and provenance, where value is derived from perceived historical rootedness and cultural legitimacy (Urde *et al.*, 2007). Unlike retro, which frequently involves reinterpretation, heritage relies on maintaining a connection to an established past, often positioning brands, products, or practices as enduring and timeless. This differs from the digitally mediated nostalgia examined in this study, where past references are often more fluid, remixed, and detached from stable historical continuity.

Vintage, meanwhile, usually refers to objects, styles, or artifacts originating from a specific historical period and valued for their age, rarity, and perceived authenticity (Goulding, 2001). Compared with reproductions, vintage items are typically perceived as original or minimally altered artifacts from the past. Their value is often linked not only to their material characteristics but also to the cultural meanings and narratives attached to their historical origins. Furthermore, Dagalp *et al.* (2020) suggest that the value of past-themed objects and practices does not reside solely in their historical origins but also in how consumers aestheticize and value them in the present. However, in digital environments, “vintage” can also be seen as an aesthetic label rather than a guarantee of material originality. Digital filters and platform aesthetics may imitate analog or older media styles, creating “faux-vintage” effects that evoke

nostalgia and authenticity despite being digitally produced (Nguyen, 2017; Renaningtyas *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, nostalgic platform cultures on Instagram and TikTok often involve the remixing and recirculation of images and videos from the 1990s and 2000s consumer cultures, further showing how “vintage” can function as a visual style rather than as an original material object (Brown *et al.*, 2024).

Taken together, these concepts illustrate that engagement with the past in consumption is multifaceted. The past may be used to create emotional attachment, stylistic reinterpretation, claims to authenticity, or aesthetic distinction. For this reason, the present study treats past-themed consumption as the broader context in which digitally mediated nostalgia emerges. Retro, heritage, and vintage references may appear within nostalgic content, but the central concern is how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgic meaning through circulating aesthetics, platform trends, and shared cultural references rather than through direct historical experience.

2.2 Nostalgia Beyond Lived Memory

Traditionally, nostalgia has been conceptualized as a response rooted in personal memory, often described as a sentimental longing for the past associated with personal experiences and emotionally significant periods in one's life (Davis, 1979; Sedikides *et al.*, 2008). In consumer research, Holbrook (1993, p.245) defines nostalgia as “a longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday, or a fondness for possessions and activities associated with days of yore.” This definition is particularly useful because it connects nostalgia not only to an emotion, but also to consumption preferences and cultural taste. From this perspective, nostalgic consumption can be understood as a process of reconnection with one's past experiences, achieved through products, symbols, aesthetics, or experiences (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). Early consumer research often linked nostalgia to personal memory, suggesting that consumers develop stronger preferences for products and cultural symbols associated with periods when they formed early personal memories (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). This perspective positions nostalgia as a form of reconnection with one's past, where consumption provides access to emotionally meaningful experiences (Davis, 1979; Sedikides *et al.*, 2008).

However, while this understanding is important, it does not fully explain why consumers may feel nostalgic for periods they did not directly experience. More recent research suggests that nostalgia is not limited to direct personal lived experiences, but can also be constructed through indirect, mediated, and socially shared representations of the past (Goulding, 2001; Merchant & Rose, 2013). This form is often referred to as vicarious or historical nostalgia. This is particularly relevant to young consumers, as Neave *et al.* (2026, p.1) examine historical nostalgia as “a longing for non-personal or pre-lived experiences”, showing that nostalgia can shape consumption even when consumers lack direct experience of the period being referenced. In this sense, the past becomes meaningful not because it is personally remembered, but because it is imagined, represented, and culturally circulated. Vicarious nostalgia, therefore, distinguishes nostalgia from an autobiographical recall and demonstrates that individuals can form emotional connections to historical periods through mediated exposure and shared cultural narratives. This distinction is central to the present study, as Gen Z consumers often engage with past-oriented aesthetics from before their lifetimes.

In contemporary consumer culture, access to the past is increasingly shaped by media and digital platforms. Through music, film, television, digital archives, social media platforms, and visual aesthetics, consumers are continuously exposed to fragments of earlier periods that can generate nostalgic attachment without direct experience (Goulding, 2001; Merchant & Rose, 2013). This perspective also positions nostalgia as something constructed rather than simply retrieved. Brunk *et al.* (2018) argue that the past can be actively reworked and transformed into a meaningful cultural resource in the present. Rather than treating this as a weaker form of personal nostalgia, this thesis understands nostalgia as a distinct process, beyond lived memory, through which the past is imaginatively reconstructed and made meaningful in the present.

It is important to mention that engaging with the past that has not been lived does not necessarily imply passive consumption. As explained by Hemetsberger *et al.* (2011), from a consumer perspective, meanings associated with the past are not inherent or fixed, but rather emerge through processes of interpretation, negotiation, and use. Consumers actively make sense of past-oriented symbols by connecting them to contemporary values, identities, and cultural practices. This means that nostalgia is not simply triggered by exposure to past-related content, but constructed through processes of interpretation and meaning-making. For younger generations like Gen Z, this shift is especially pronounced. This generation grew up in highly digitalized environments; Gen Z consumers frequently engage with past-themed aesthetics, symbols, and narratives that occurred before their own lifetimes. Their nostalgic attachments are therefore less likely to stem from autobiographical memory, and more likely to emerge through exposure to mediated cultural content and shared online practices (Cho *et al.*, 2015; Han, 2025). Therefore, nostalgia is reconstructed through available cultural resources and collectively negotiated within contemporary cultural environments.

Understanding nostalgia beyond lived memory, therefore, requires moving beyond a purely psychological framing toward a sociocultural perspective. Rather than merely an internal emotional response, nostalgia can be understood as an ongoing process of meaning-making in which the past is reintroduced, interpreted, and legitimized through social and cultural practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Hemetsberger *et al.*, 2011). This perspective is useful for examining digitally mediated nostalgia because it positions Gen Z consumers not simply as recipients of nostalgic content, but as active participants in constructing what the past means in the present.

2.3 Digital Mediation of the Past: Platforms, Memory and Visibility

The increasing prominence of past-themed content cannot be fully understood without accounting for the role of digital environments. While past research defines nostalgia as emerging from memory, contemporary consumption contexts are characterized by the continuous availability, circulation, and reinterpretation of the past through digital platforms (Van Dijck, 2007; Hoskins, 2011). In this study, digital mediation refers to how platforms, formats, interfaces, and user practices shape how the past becomes visible, accessible, and meaningful in the present. This section establishes the broader digital conditions through which the past becomes accessible in everyday consumer culture, before turning to the more specific role of algorithmic curation in shaping visibility.

Digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest play a central role in shaping how the past is encountered and engaged with. These platforms not only serve as hosts for content but also as active networks that organize the circulation and visibility of cultural material. Through features such as feeds, hashtags, and short-form video formats, past-themed content is continuously recirculated and reconstructed, often detached from its original historical context (Van Dijck, 2007). This is important because users may encounter the past less through direct memory and more through platform-circulated images, sounds, trends, and narratives. Van Dijck (2007) argues that personal and cultural memory increasingly become objects of mediation, while Hoskins (2011) describes this as the “connective turn” in which media technologies transform how the past is accessed, stored, and experienced.

As past-themed content circulates, it is often presented in simplified and recognizable aesthetic forms. Complex historical periods are reduced to specific visual cues, styles, and symbols that users can easily identify and reproduce. Dagalp *et al.* (2020) argue that past-themed consumption involves processes of aestheticization, in which the past is not inherently aesthetic but is rather collectively rendered meaningful and desirable through consumption practices. In digital settings, this aestheticization often appears through platform-native labels and styles such as #y2kcore, #webcore, vintage filters, and other nostalgic visual trends, as introduced in the previous section. These examples are not treated as historically accurate categories, but as circulating aesthetic codes through which users recognize and engage with the past. Brown *et al.* (2024, p.1) explicitly describe #nostalgiacores as “interrelated hashtags on Instagram and TikTok where users recirculate content from the digital and consumer cultures of the 1990s and 2000s.”

The term “platform-compatible expressions” refers to forms of nostalgic content that fit the dominant logics of social media platforms: they are visual, brief, recognizable, emotionally resonant, and easy to replicate. This understanding builds on research showing that social media platforms organize visibility through platform features, algorithmic systems, and user practices, rather than simply hosting content in a neutral manner (Beer, 2017; Cotter, 2019). Therefore, past-themed content is often condensed into “vibes”, filters, color palettes, captions, or short videos, making it easier to recognize, circulate, and rework within social media platforms (Brown, *et al.*, 2024; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). This does not mean that such content lacks meaning; rather, its meaning is produced through recognizability, repetition, remixing, and social circulation (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Brown *et al.*, 2024).

This process allows users to engage with the past without requiring first-hand historical experience. However, it also produces selective and partial representations of history, as some symbols, styles or narratives are amplified while others are omitted (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the past is recontextualized into culturally legible and platform-compatible expressions that prioritize recognizability and shareability over historical complexity (Abidin, 2021). This is particularly important for this study because Gen Z consumers may construct nostalgic meanings through these digitally aestheticized fragments rather than through direct recollection.

Digital environments also contribute to a reconfiguration of temporal experience, where the distinctions between the past and present become increasingly fluid. Through constant exposure to recirculated content, different historical periods coexist within the same digital space, enabling users to engage with multiple temporal references simultaneously. This is explained by Hoskins (2011), who suggests that digital media transforms memory by making the past more continuously accessible and connected to

present experience. Therefore, nostalgia becomes embedded in everyday digital practices, as the past appears not as instant or unreachable, but as something that can be easily accessed, reworked, and integrated into contemporary consumption.

This perspective reinforces the idea that engagement with nostalgia is shaped not only by individual emotions but also by the broader sociological environments in which cultural contexts are produced and circulated (Dam *et al.*, 2024). Digital mediation helps explain how the past becomes constantly available as a cultural practice. Platforms enable nostalgic content to circulate across users, while aestheticization makes past-themed references recognizable, relatable and usable in everyday digital culture. This sets the foundation for the next section, which examines the role of algorithmic curation in the construction of digitally mediated nostalgia.

2.4 Algorithmic Curation and the Circulation of Nostalgic Aesthetics

Historically, nostalgia was viewed as a personal, psychological resource used to cope with strong life experiences or emotions (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2008). However, in the context of contemporary digital culture, nostalgia has undergone “datafication.” As explained by Airoidi & Rokka (2022), algorithmic consumer culture refers to a context in which consumption experiences are shaped through interactions among users, data, platforms, and algorithmic systems. This shift implies that the act of remembrance is no longer private; it can also be captured, measured and transformed into computable data points that feed back into platform recommendations (Van Dijck, 2013; Airoidi & Rokka, 2022). Digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok use these memories as a tool for algorithmic stakeholder governance (Möhlmann *et al.*, 2025). In this framework, algorithms are not neutral observers; they act as invisible managers of consumer engagement, balancing consumer needs with monetization and retention. In this sense, algorithms can be understood as partly structuring consumer engagement by organizing visibility, repetition, and access to nostalgic content.

Building on this, the logic of algorithmic nostalgia describes how Instagram and TikTok guide the curation, distribution and production of personal and public archives (Brown *et al.*, 2024). These complex systems do not just pull in past-oriented content; they actively filter which memories are worthy of being promoted through machine-learned personalization (Alpaslan & Delibalta, 2025). In this environment, nostalgia is not only a spontaneous moment of remembering, but is also shaped by the repeated visibility of past-themed images, sounds, and aesthetics. Platforms do not determine what users remember or feel, but they influence which versions of the past become more visible, familiar, and emotionally available. By systematically promoting nostalgia-themed content, like a #TBT (Throwback Thursday), platforms create tighter engagement loops designed to boost emotional retention and extend time spent on the platform. What looks like organic reminiscing is more likely structured by layers of code and algorithmic logics.

A platform’s influence extends to the visual groupings of subcultures, such as #nostalgiacore. Rather than interpreting the cultural context of an image, platforms use machine vision to recognize and reproduce the “vibes” of an era (Brown *et al.*, 2024). This can accelerate trend cycles, as Gen Z consumers are repeatedly shown aestheticized versions of past eras, often without lived memory to compare against. This governance allows platforms to better organize users’ attention by matching each user to visual

groupings they regularly interact with. When the system identifies grouping qualities, it can match interested users, effectively defining the visual reality of the trend. This suggests that digital nostalgia is not a distant past that is longed for, but a curated and filtered experience reshaped to satisfy a platform's need for retention and interaction.

2.5 Instagram and TikTok

Selecting appropriate digital data collection sites is paramount in netnographic research, especially when examining phenomena shaped by platform-specific nuances (Kozinets, 2010; 2020). Instagram and TikTok operate as highly visual, algorithm-driven environments where cultural meaning is constantly produced, circulated and reinterpreted through dopamine-driven feedback loops (European Commission, 2026). These platforms provide the main stage for studying algorithmic curation of nostalgia among Gen Z, serving as the “third places” of their digital lives where identity construction is performed through cyclical consumption and production (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). This aligns with Kozinets' (2010) explanation that netnographic sites should be selected based on their cultural relevance and the extent to which meaningful social interactions occur within them. On these platforms, nostalgia is not only expressed by individuals but also collectively negotiated through trends, aesthetics, and shared references. When a collective of users interacts to create and exchange meaning, they participate in a networked public, demonstrating how platforms serve as a nonphysical space for people to collaborate (Boyd, 2010). This idea of shared history and digital closeness for Gen Z consumers makes it attractive for research focused on qualitative construction and negotiation.

Second, Instagram and TikTok are suitable for their distinct modes of algorithmic governance, which together dictate how Gen Z encounters the past. TikTok's “For You Page” uses a test-and-expand loop that prioritizes delight and discovery over one's existing social connections (Zhang & Liu, 2021). TikTok's structure is unique and powerful for studying vicarious nostalgia, as its recommendation system can turn a niche subculture into a global trend quickly. This ability to control the resonance of certain topics and their short-form content pushes users into autopilot consumption (European Commission, 2026). On the other hand, Instagram remains the social media leader in aesthetic narratives and personal branding, with a focus on the archival nature of memory. Through features like “Story Highlights” and “On This Day” prompts, Instagram encourages a recurring, performance-based engagement with one's own content. In recent years, however, Instagram has attempted to combat and compete with TikTok's fast pace by introducing its own short-form video format, “Reels” (Instagram, 2020). Even so, TikTok serves as the engine behind virality for many trends, and Instagram helps reiterate and integrate these trends into a user's digital identity.

When used together, Instagram and TikTok are well-suited to a non-participatory, observational netnography. Both platforms provide researchers with access to large amounts of publicly available data, such as videos, captions, hashtags, comments, and backing music. This naturally occurring collection site allows researchers to examine how users engage with nostalgic content in context without intervention (Kozinets, 2020). Therefore, these platforms are understood as rich distribution channels that also actively mediate cultural memory.

2.6 Collective Meaning-Making: Remix, Co-creation and Construction of Nostalgia

While digital platforms and algorithmic systems shape the visibility of past-themed content, nostalgic meaning is not produced solely by exposure. Consumers actively participate in interpreting, transforming, and legitimizing representations of the past through everyday digital practices. From a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective, meanings attached to brands, symbols, and cultural artifacts are not fixed, but are continuously produced and reproduced through consumer practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This is particularly relevant to past-themed consumption, where the value of the past does not simply reside in its historical origin but in how consumers make it meaningful in the present (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2024). In the context of digitally mediated nostalgia, this means that the past becomes meaningful not only because platforms show it, but also because users interpret, repeat, remix, and validate particular versions of it.

Dagalp *et al.* (2020) argue that past-themed consumption involves processes of aestheticization, where objects, symbols, styles, and practices are not inherently aesthetic but are collectively rendered aesthetic through consumption. Their concept of consumers as “aesthetic agents” is particularly useful for this study, as it shows how consumers participate in shaping what past-themed aesthetics come to signify. In digital environments, this can be seen when users select, edit, caption, share, and reinterpret past-themed symbols, turning fragments of earlier eras into recognizable and culturally meaningful aesthetic forms in the present. This also helps explain why nostalgic content does not need to be historically complete to become meaningful; it can become meaningful when users collectively recognize it as expressing the “vibe” or emotional atmosphere of a past era.

Co-creation is relevant, but only in a focused sense. Rather than using co-creation as a broad managerial concept, this study understands that it is the participatory production of nostalgic meaning through user practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Digital platforms allow consumers to modify and circulate cultural material, allowing nostalgic aesthetics to be continuously adapted through memes, short-form videos, curated feeds, comments, and visual trends (Kozinets, 2015; Jenkins, 2006). Consumers do not merely consume representations of the past; they help transform them into shared cultural references that can be recognized, repeated, and socially validated. This is especially relevant for historical nostalgia, as Neave *et al.* (2026) show that young consumers’ nostalgic attachments can be shaped through media representations, visual elements, romanticization, and emotional responses to past eras they did not personally experience.

Remix culture is one important expression of this process. Remixing involves taking existing cultural elements and recombining them into new contexts, allowing users to reinterpret older music, images, styles, brands, or symbols through contemporary formats (Lessig, 2008). Relating it to nostalgia, remixing allows the past to be detached from its original historical context and reworked into present-day aesthetic expressions. This is especially visible in digital environments, where past-themed references are often condensed into short, recognizable fragments that can be easily replicated and adapted by other users. Through these practices, the past becomes less something to preserve exactly and more something to reassemble creatively. This is important for the present study because Gen Z’s nostalgic engagement often

manifests as fragments, edits, sounds, captions, filters, and comments rather than as complete historical narratives.

However, these practices should not necessarily be understood as formal subcultures. Rather, nostalgic meaning often emerges through loose consumer cultures or taste communities, where users share aesthetic preferences, recognize visual codes, and validate particular interpretations of the past. As explained by Arsel and Bean (2013), taste is organized through shared practices and normative understandings, which guide how consumers evaluate and perform aesthetic competence. Applied to digitally mediated nostalgia, this suggests that users learn how to recognize what counts as a convincing, desirable, relatable or “authentic” past-themed aesthetic through participation in digital cultures of taste. This also introduces the possibility of authenticity negotiation, where users collectively assess whether a nostalgic representation feels accurate, believable, or emotionally convincing.

This is where Hemetsberger *et al.* (2011) become especially useful. Their study shows that young consumers may value retro objects even without direct experience of the original versions, because these objects help negotiate identity, belonging, autonomy, and social acceptance. Furthermore, past-themed consumption is not only about longing for another time, but also about positioning oneself within contemporary social and cultural contexts. For this study, this supports the argument that Gen Z consumers may engage with nostalgic aesthetics as symbolic resources through which they express taste, identity, and belonging, even when the referenced past has not been personally lived (Hemetsberger *et al.*, 2011). This provides an important bridge to the analysis, where nostalgic engagement can be examined not only as emotional attachment, but also as a way of performing taste, identity, and social belonging.

Collective validation further shapes which interpretations of the past become meaningful. As users repeat, adapt, and circulate similar aesthetic forms, shared understandings of past eras emerge. Social cues such as likes, comments, shares, saves, and reposts contribute to this process by indicating which representations resonate within a given digital context (Abidin, 2021). These signals do not only mean popularity; they also help reinforce particular versions of the past as culturally recognizable and socially valuable. In this way, nostalgic meanings are collectively negotiated through interaction, repetition, and social approval.

Collective meaning-making and aesthetic participation explain how digitally mediated nostalgia becomes socially constructed. The past is not only made visible by platforms or selected by algorithms; it is also actively interpreted, remixed, and validated by users. This section helps position consumers as participants in constructing nostalgic meaning while avoiding an overly broad treatment of co-creation. For this study, co-creation, remix, and loose consumer cultures are relevant so far as they show how Gen Z consumers collectively make past-themed aesthetics meaningful in the present. For this thesis, co-creation, remix, taste communities, and collective validation are relevant because they explain how Gen Z consumers collectively make past-themed aesthetics feel recognizable, authentic, and emotionally meaningful in the present.

2.7 Chapter Summary and Conceptual Framework

This literature review has established that nostalgia in contemporary consumer culture cannot be understood only as an emotional response to personally lived experiences. While traditional nostalgia

research often links nostalgic attachment to lived memory, more recent literature shows that consumers can also develop nostalgic connections to periods they have not directly experienced. This is particularly relevant for Gen Z consumers, whose engagement with past eras often occurs through digitally mediated content and shared cultural references rather than personal memory (Neave *et al.*, 2026; Brown *et al.*, 2024).

Building upon this, the chapter has positioned digitally mediated nostalgia as a socially and technologically shaped process of meaning-making. The past is not simply recalled, but made visible, aestheticized, circulated, interpreted, and validated through digital environments (Hoskins, 2011; Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2024). Based on the collected literature review, we developed a conceptual framework comprising three interconnected dimensions: platform and algorithmic exposure; aesthetic simplification and mediation; and collective interpretation, remix and validation. These dimensions do not function as separate stages in a linear process. Still, as overlapping dimensions that shape how Gen Z encounters, interprets, and constructs nostalgia for past eras they have not experienced.

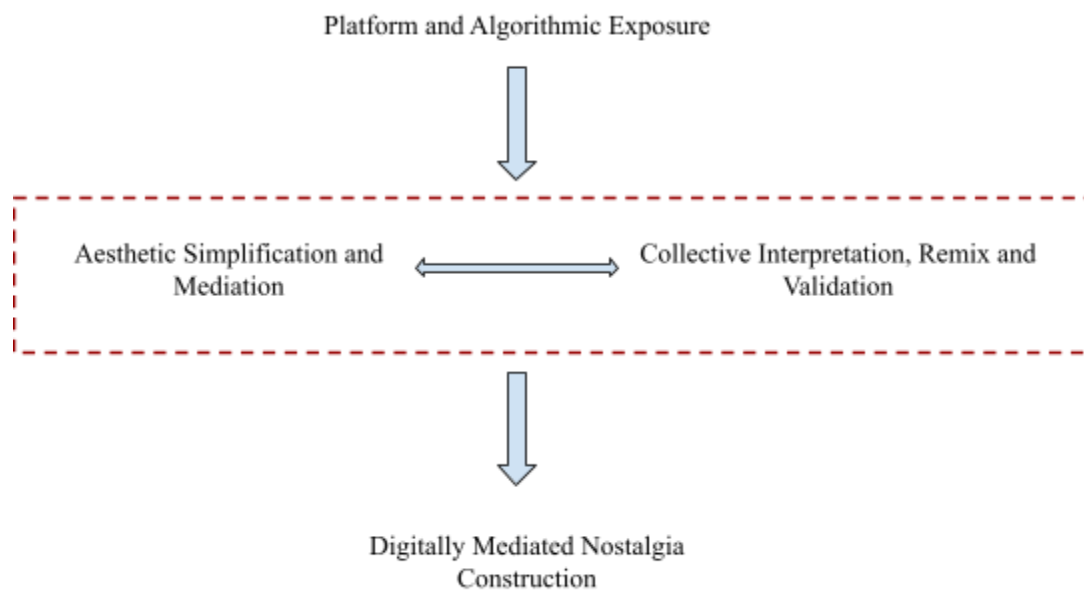
The first dimension is **platform and algorithmic exposure**. This dimension builds on literature showing that digital platforms do not merely host nostalgic content but shape how past-themed representations become visible, repeated, and culturally relevant. Research suggests that mediated memories are increasingly stored, circulated, and recontextualized through digital media (Van Dijck, 2007; Hoskins, 2011). Building on this, research on algorithmic consumer culture shows that digital platforms do not simply make content available; they also organize consumption experiences through datafication, recommendation systems, engagement metrics, and platform-specific visibility mechanisms (Beer, 2017; Cotter, 2019; Airolti & Rokka, 2022). For this study, this dimension captures how Gen Z consumers encounter nostalgic content through feeds, hashtags, recommendation systems, and repeated exposure.

The second dimension is **aesthetic simplification and mediation**. This dimension groups literature on past-themed consumption and the aestheticization of the past. Past-themed consumption research shows that retro, vintage, heritage, and nostalgic references are not simply historical reproductions, but ways of making the past meaningful in the present (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Dam *et al.*, 2024). Dagalp *et al.* (2020) further argue that the past is not inherently aesthetic, but is collectively rendered aesthetic through consumption practices. In digital environments, this process is intensified because past eras are often condensed into platform-compatible formats such as “vibes,” filters, color palettes, sounds, captions, objects, and nostalgic “cores” (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Brown *et al.*, 2024). For this study, this dimension captures how Gen Z consumers recognize and emotionally respond to past eras through aesthetic fragments rather than through lived experience. It is relevant because digitally mediated nostalgia often depends on simplified cues that make the past feel familiar, desirable, or emotionally accessible.

The third identified dimension is **collective interpretation, remix, and validation**. This builds on CCT and participatory culture literature, which understand meaning as something produced through consumer practices rather than fixed within objects or symbols (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In digital environments, users actively participate in the meaning-making process by liking, commenting, saving, sharing, remixing, editing, imitating, and validating nostalgic content (Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2008; Kozinets, 2015). Hemetsberger *et al.* (2011) further show that young consumers may attach meaning to retro objects despite lacking direct experience with them, using them to negotiate identity, belonging,

autonomy, and social acceptance. For this study, this dimension captures how Gen Z consumers and online users collectively negotiate what the past means and why nostalgia for an unexperienced era becomes socially legitimate and attractive.

Based on the identified dimensions, the study presents the following theoretical framework, which shows that digitally mediated nostalgia results from an interaction among what platforms make visible, how the past is aesthetically mediated, and how users collectively interpret and validate nostalgic meanings. The framework is not a separate model added after the literature review, but a synthesis and unification of the main theoretical arguments developed throughout the chapter.



Together, these dimensions provide the theoretical lens for empirical analysis. While previous literature has examined aspects of nostalgia without memory, digital mediation, aestheticization, algorithmic visibility, and participatory meaning-making separately, this thesis brings these perspectives together into a conceptual framework for understanding digitally mediated nostalgia among Gen Z consumers.

The framework does not present digitally mediated nostalgia as a linear sequence, but as an interconnected process through which platform exposure, aesthetic mediation, and collective meaning-making overlap. Platform and algorithmic exposure help examine how participants encounter nostalgic content and how they understand platforms' role in shaping what becomes visible and repeated. Aesthetic simplification and mediation, and collective interpretation, remix, and validation are treated as interdependent dimensions within the collective-formation aspect of nostalgia. Aesthetic cues make the past recognizable and shareable, while collective interaction gives those cues social meaning. Hence, the framework contributes to the study by showing how digitally mediated nostalgia is constructed through the interaction of platform visibility, aesthetic simplification, and collective validation, rather than through memory, media exposure, or participation alone.

In this thesis, “nostalgia without lived memory” refers to the broader phenomenon of longing for eras not personally experienced. “Historical” and “vicarious nostalgia” describe forms of this phenomenon identified in prior literature. “Digitally mediated nostalgia” refers to the specific process examined in this study, where such nostalgia is constructed through platform exposure, aesthetic mediation, and collective validation.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgia for past eras they have not experienced. It presents the research design, netnographic and interview methods, sampling strategy, data analysis process, and ethical considerations guiding this study.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in a constructionist epistemological paradigm. The study aims to explore how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgia for past eras; without experience, which informs the qualitative and interpretive research approach. Constructionism enables the researcher to examine how meanings are actively produced, negotiated, and shared within contemporary consumer culture (Kozinets, 2010). Rather than treating nostalgia as an internally experienced emotion, the study conceptualizes it as an ongoing, socially and digitally mediated process of meaning-making.

To capture this process, the research follows an iterative design that combines semi-structured interviews with elements of digital ethnography, specifically netnography. This design allows individual interpretations to be examined alongside the broader digital environments in which nostalgia representations are produced, circulated, and engaged with.

Given the interpretative nature of the research question and the subsequent interview responses, a relativist ontological approach is appropriate. This perspective assumes nostalgia and past meanings are not fixed or inherent, but are actively socially constructed through individual and collective interpretation (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019, pp. 72-73).

3.2 Netnography and Digital Ethnography

The digital nature of this meaning construction necessitates a netnography, a qualitative method developed from ethnography to specifically study online cultures and practices (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, 2015). Given that Gen Z’s interactions with the past are largely shaped through digital platforms, netnography is a relevant approach for examining how nostalgic representations and aesthetics are curated and collectively interpreted in this online environment. The adaptation of ethnographic methods to digital spaces is necessary, as online environments fundamentally reshape how modern social interactions occur, combining real-time with searchable archives of cultural expression (Kozinets, 2010).

Netnographic observation is conducted before the interviews, focusing on TikTok and Instagram, where past-oriented aesthetics and storylines are regularly circulated. These environments are not just for communication, but also host social spaces where interactions, representations, and cultural meanings are continuously made, stored, and reinterpreted across different contexts (Kozinets, 2010). Additionally, online social interactions are not fixed or bounded but are constantly formed through ongoing participation and exchange (Kozinets, 2015). Through observation of publicly available content, such as trends, visual styling, and user interactions, the study identifies patterns in how the past is shaped into an easily consumable cultural resource. Particular attention is given to how certain eras are selectively represented and stylized, reflecting the idyllic, mediated nature of nostalgia as highlighted in the introduction.

Important to note, the netnographic data serves as an exploration and context to inform the study, rather than a standalone dataset. Insights generated during this phase inform both the development of the interview guide and the selection of visual stimuli for the interviews. This enables participants to reflect on and interpret representations of the past in real time, leading to richer, more grounded accounts of meaning-making. Kozinets (2010) emphasizes the importance of immersion in online communities to develop contextual understanding; conducting netnography prior to the interviews creates more relevant and grounded conversations.

At the same time, the selected material for the interviews is used as open-ended prompts rather than predefined representations of nostalgia, allowing participants to construct their own meaning without imposing the researchers' interpretations. Participants are also encouraged to reflect on their own experiences and examples, ensuring their interpretations extend beyond the curated visuals alone.

This netnographic approach is non-participatory and observational, relying exclusively on publicly accessible content. A non-participatory method allows researchers to minimize bias and interaction within the online communities accessed, creating distance between the actual creators and the researchers (Costello *et al.*, 2017). Further, by not participating, the study preserves the most realistic and natural context of user-generated content. Remaining purely observational allows the researchers to “lurk” in these social media niches, where they would otherwise be unable to authentically interact and co-create (Kozinets, 2010). The researchers addressed ethical considerations by anonymizing all collected material and excluding any identifying information (Kozinets, 2015). While not intended to create generalizable findings on its own, this component enhances the analysis by filtering individual interpretations through the broader digital contexts through which nostalgia is produced and circulated. Additionally, this approach acknowledges the blurred boundaries between offline and online experiences, where digital interactions are ingrained in everyday social interactions rather than existing entirely separate.

The study incorporates visual material from the social media platforms TikTok and Instagram, where past-oriented aesthetics and nostalgic representations are actively produced and shared. This material includes a mix of branded and user-generated content, as well as user interactions such as comments. A broader selection reflects the diverse and participatory nature of digital environments. Presenting these cases during interviews allows participants to engage with relevant examples of past-oriented content, facilitating a more nuanced conversation about how nostalgia is interpreted and constructed, rather than relying on abstract terms (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019, pg. 75).

TikTok and Instagram were selected due to their emphasis on algorithmically curated, short-form content. In this context, these platforms enable the rapid circulation and repetition of nostalgic aesthetics. Other social media platforms, such as Facebook or YouTube, can rely more heavily on social networks or long-form content, making them ill-suited for this study. The selected platforms are structured around discovery-based feeds (e.g., the “For You Page” on TikTok and the “Explore” page on Instagram), making them relevant for examining how users are passively exposed to and encounter nostalgic content.

3.2.1 Netnography Process

The netnographic process began with targeted browsing using the researchers’ personal accounts on Instagram and TikTok, as well as a newly created, anonymous account on both platforms. This browsing was used to observe how nostalgic content surfaced when prompted, as the researchers had not previously searched for or intentionally engaged with nostalgia content prior to the study. The newly created anonymous account also allowed for comparison between the researchers’ existing feeds and a feed with no prior engagement history. Initial exposure occurred through a combination of hashtags and keyword searches as follows: **#nostalgia**, **#retroaesthetic**, **“This is what a day in the 2000s feels like”**, and **“2026 is the new 2016”**. These entry points were selected for their prevalence in emerging trends and their relevance to Gen Z users. As opposed to organic, exploratory browsing, the researchers focused specifically on the top five results of every search. This approach captures the most relevant, visible, and engaged content for each account, reflecting the platforms’ algorithms at the given time.

Furthermore, limiting the data collection to the default landing page’s top five results served as an intentional boundary for cross-account comparison. Empirical insights from the accompanying semi-structured interviews indicated that Gen Z consumers rarely use searches to find trending nostalgic posts, as their consumption is primarily passive and algorithmically driven. Therefore, targeting only these top results isolated the content with the strongest “algorithmic push”; the content that the platform actively prioritizes and intends for users to see upon landing. And while one might argue for the use of Pinterest and its tailored home pages, Pinterest lacks the strong community aspect needed to create dialogue and interplay between creators and users.

Methodologically, initial comparison showed that these top five results pulled concentrated thematic data, where data collection beyond this boundary would not create new insights. By capturing these specific results, the data set created a snapshot of how the platforms’ algorithms balance homogenized, widespread trends against highly curated content for users with seemingly identical demographic backgrounds.

The final netnographic dataset consisted of 108 posts, collected between the second and last week of April 2026. Of these, 54 posts were collected from TikTok and 54 from Instagram. In addition, 36 posts came from the anonymous accounts, which were used to compare how nostalgic content appeared in feeds without prior engagement history. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, meaning that additional posts no longer generated substantially new patterns or themes.

For each selected post, the top-ranked comment was recorded because it represented the most visibly prioritized user reaction within the platform. In addition, the researchers reviewed and coded the broader

comment section of each selected post to identify recurring patterns of collective interpretation, validation, longing, humor, critique, and emotional resonance. This allowed the netnographic analysis to capture not only the content of nostalgic posts, but also how users collectively responded to and negotiated their meanings.

3.2.2 Researcher Positionality and Algorithmic Exposure

To better understand how platform algorithms shape exposure, the researchers created an additional anonymous account to function as a neutral observer. Using a brand-new email and no identifying factors during account creation, the anonymous accounts on TikTok and Instagram followed the same netnographic steps as discussed in the previous subsection. However, despite efforts to limit bias or interaction, the platforms served similar, and in some cases, identical top results compared to those observed on one researcher's account. Rather than deleting this data and attempting again on a new account, this anomaly was noted as a significant result in the context of netnography.

In addition, the researchers remained reflexive regarding their positionality. As members of Gen Z and active users of both TikTok and Instagram, the researchers' familiarity with digital environments and nostalgic trends may influence data collection and interpretation. This influence was acknowledged as part of the research process and considered during analysis.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The study uses a criteria-based sampling strategy to recruit relevant participants. This is a form of purposive sampling in which all participants are selected based on predefined criteria relevant to the research question (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019, pg. 118). This approach ensures that each individual is actively engaged with digitally mediated cultural moments and is well-suited to reflect on nostalgic examples.

Rather than aiming for statistical representation, the sampling strategy prioritizes relevance and depth by selecting only participants who actively post, comment on, and like nostalgic content in digital environments. While participants are initially recruited through the researchers' networks, inclusion in the study is determined strictly by whether they meet the established criteria.

Participants come from a variety of countries, leading to more diverse responses. Due to geographic variance, a combination of in-person and online interviews are recorded. Online interviews are conducted via Zoom to simulate a face-to-face interview most closely.

This study recruited and interviewed participants who:

1. Belong to Gen Z (born approximately between 1997-2012)
2. Are active users of digital platforms where cultural trends circulate (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, X, and/or Pinterest)
3. Regularly engage with nostalgic/past-oriented content in digital environments
 - a. To be engaged, participants should create, repost, save, comment, or like past-oriented content as part of their social media routine

More specifically, eligible participants report behaviors like:

- Interacting with “throwback” or retro-themed content (e.g., liking, saving, or sharing posts referencing early 2000s fashion, 90s aesthetics, or past cultural eras)
- Consuming algorithmically curated nostalgia trends (e.g., “2026 is the new 2016,” vintage-style filters, or reposted media clips)
- Following accounts or hashtags surrounding nostalgic content (e.g., retro fashion pages, archive accounts, or themed mood boards on Pinterest)
- Expressing connection to past eras they did not directly experience

The selection is not necessarily intended to be statistically representative, but rather to provide insights into how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgia in digitally mediated spaces.

3.3.1 Gen Z Participants

This study focuses on Gen Z participants, who represent the first “true digital natives” whose socialization and identity construction are interwoven with social media environments (Serbanescu, 2022; Katz *et al.*, 2021). This group’s unique fluency in digital communication enables rich analysis of how nostalgia is performed and negotiated in real time, including both lived experience and curated aesthetics. This is unlike Millennials, the generational group above Gen Z, who were exposed to social media and technology later in life. Even the youngest Millennial would have experienced Instagram’s launch in 2010 at 14 years old, disallowing the idea of a Millennial digital native. This distinction is important, as it positions Gen Z as both consumers of nostalgic content and active participants in meaning-making. And while Generation Alpha represents the next wave of digital natives, they are excluded from this study to focus on a group with the appropriate level of developmental maturity, autonomy and independent consumer behaviors (Kirk, 2007).

Furthermore, by focusing on Gen Z, this study leverages their high level of digital output, such as “photo dumps” and viral trends, to examine how nostalgia serves as a socializing tool and a strategic resource for identity within digital contexts (Serbanescu, 2022).

Table 1: List of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender
Hannah	25	Female
Taylor	25	Female
Sabrina	23	Female
Harry	18	Male
Justin	25	Nonbinary
Hailey	21	Female
Zara	26	Female

3.4 Data Collection

Data was collected through seven semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45-65 minutes. This interview format allowed for flexibility in conversation while staying within the bounds of the research question.

The interview guide explored:

1. Participants' interpretations of past-oriented aesthetics and representations encountered in digital environments
2. How participants make sense of and engage with past eras they have not personally experienced
3. The role of digital platforms in shaping exposure to, and perceptions of, the past
4. Associations with authenticity, personal identity, and cultural meaning for nostalgic content
5. The idea of nostalgia being experienced as personal, collective, or constructed through media engagement

To stimulate discussion during the interviews, one visual stimulus was incorporated into each interview. The stimulus was selected from the netnographic material and reflected recurring nostalgic patterns identified during the observation phase, such as retro aesthetics, older media formats, nostalgic fashion, music, or idealized representations of social life before digital saturation. While each interview followed the same overall logic, the specific example varied slightly depending on the participant's platform use, interests, and familiarity with particular nostalgic references. The stimulus was used as an open-ended prompt rather than as a fixed definition of nostalgia, allowing participants to construct their own interpretations and connect the example to their personal experiences, memories, and digital practices.

The audio from the interviews was recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. In accordance with the course recommendations, Whisper AI was used to support the transcription process. All transcripts were subsequently reviewed and checked by the researchers to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' intended meanings. All information gathered from the interviews was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

To provide a clearer overview of the empirical material used in our study, Table 2 summarizes the different data sources, their scope, collection period, selection logic, and role in the analysis. This overview helps clarify how the netnographic material, user comments, interviews, and visual stimuli contributed to the study's broader understanding of digitally mediated nostalgia.

Table 2: Overview of Empirical Data Collection

Data Source	Scope	Collection Period	Selection Logic	Role in the study
TikTok posts	54 posts	Second to last week of April 2026	Nostalgia-related searches and top visible results	Identified platform patterns, nostalgia aesthetics and user interactions
Instagram posts	54 posts	Second to last week of April 2026	Nostalgia-related searches and top visible results	Identified visual patterns, aesthetic cues and collective

				responses
Anonymous account material	36 posts	Second to last week of April 2026	New anonymous accounts were used for comparison with the researchers' personal feeds	Compared algorithmic exposure across accounts
User comments	Top-liked comments	Second to last week of April 2026	Comments under selected posts	Examined collective shared longing, humor and emotional resonance
Interviews	7 participants	Last week of April 2025	Gen Z consumers who actively engage with nostalgic or past-themed content	Explored individual interpretations, meaning-making, identity work and perceptions of digital nostalgia
Visual stimuli	1 stimulus per interview	During interviews	Selected from the netnographic material and adapted slightly to the participant's profile	Opened the discussion of nostalgic interpretation and the meaning-making process

3.5 Data Analysis

The study applies a qualitative thematic analysis to categorize, interpret, and make sense of the collected data. The following method involves identifying recurring patterns, meanings, and concepts within the empirical material, referred to as “themes” (Bell *et al.*, 2022). Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for this study, as its flexible and exploratory nature for an in-depth understanding of how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct nostalgia within digitally mediated environments.

The analysis follows the three stages outlined by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018): sorting, reducing, and arguing, adapted to fit the study's multi-method design. The empirical material consists of two interconnected datasets: netnographic observations of digital content and seven semi-structured interview transcripts. Together, these sources provide insight into both the production and interpretation of nostalgic representations.

The analysis began with an initial sorting phase, in which the material was organized and familiarized. Netnographic data were first reviewed to identify recurring patterns in the presentation and circulation of past-themed aesthetics and narratives across digital platforms. This included observing visual styles, recurring themes, and user interactions. The interview data was then transcribed and read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of how participants describe, interpret, and engage with nostalgic representations.

Following this, an inductive coding process was conducted, in which meaningful segments of data were identified and labeled. Codes captured participants' expressions, interpretations, and reflections on nostalgic content, as well as patterns observed during the netnographic phase. This initial coding led to a broad set of themes related to digital exposure, aesthetic interpretation, emotional engagement, and perceptions of authenticity.

As the analysis progressed, a reduction phase was applied to refine the emerging themes. Some initial codes and themes were found to be too broad, overlapping, or not directly relevant to the research question. These were either merged, redefined, or omitted. This process ensured that the analysis remained focused on the study's central aim: understanding how nostalgia is constructed and interpreted within digitally mediated environments.

The integration of the two datasets occurred during the reduction and argumentation stages of the analysis. First, the netnographic observations were used to identify recurring digital patterns, including aesthetic simplification, algorithmic repetition, nostalgic visual cues, comment-based validation, and idealized representations of past eras. These patterns informed the interview guide and the selection of the visual stimulus used during interviews. Second, the interview transcripts were coded inductively to examine how participants interpreted similar nostalgic representations and connected them to identity, authenticity, digital fatigue, and longing for unlived eras. Finally, patterns from both datasets were compared to identify where platform-level observations and participant interpretations overlapped, contradicted, or expanded one another.

Through this iterative process, the material was organized into a smaller number of analytically relevant themes, including digitally mediated nostalgia construction, collective meaning, and authenticity negotiation. Sub-themes were developed within each category to provide greater nuance and clarity, allowing the analysis to capture both shared patterns and variations across participants.

The final stage involved arguing, where the most relevant and insightful findings were interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework. This stage moved beyond description, focusing on how participants' interpretations reflect broader processes of meaning-making shaped by digital environments. Specifically, the synthesis of the two datasets involved a constant comparative analysis; netnographic patterns were cross-referenced with interview patterns to ensure that the final themes were representative of both the digital environment and the internal consumer experience. The integration of netnographic insights and interview data enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how nostalgic representations are both produced and interpreted within contemporary consumer culture.

In addition to thematic analysis, the study adopts elements of interpretive textual analysis, focusing on how participants articulate and construct meaning through language. This involves examining not only what participants say, but how they express their interpretations, emotions, and evaluations. In line with CCT, participants are understood as both consumers of digital content and producers of meaning, whose interpretations contribute to the ongoing construction of nostalgic representations (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kozinets, 2020). Although the study follows an inductive and interpretive approach, the literature review provided a sensitizing conceptual lens rather than a fixed theoretical model. The dimensions of *platform exposure*, *aesthetic mediation* and *collective validation* were not used to test predetermined

hypotheses but to contextualize and interpret the patterns that emerged from the collected empirical material.

3.6 Quality and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the research, this study adopts several strategies aligned with qualitative research principles. Rather than aiming for statistical reliability, the focus is placed on credibility, transparency, and interpretive thinking (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019).

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, both researchers independently coded, then compared and discussed their interpretations. This process helped reduce individual bias and strengthen the consistency of the thematic analysis. In addition, the study incorporates methodological triangulation by combining netnographic observations with interview data. This allows findings to be interpreted across both the production and the interpretations of nostalgic queues, which strengthens the robustness of the analysis.

Given the interpretive and constructionist nature of this study, reflexive thinking was maintained throughout the research process. As researchers belonging to the same generational cohort as the participants, it was important to critically reflect on how personal experiences, assumptions, and familiarity with digital platforms could influence both data collection and interpretation (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019, p. 82). Continuous reflection and collaborative discussion were used to mitigate potential biases.

Ethical considerations were addressed across both data collection methods. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and the participants had the right to withdraw at any time. Additionally, interviews with Spanish-speaking participants were conducted in their native language to ensure participant comfort and were later translated into English by the researchers, with a priority on preserving participants' authentic voices. Data was securely stored in accordance with Lund University's guidelines and the GDPR, and was used only for academic research purposes. Furthermore, by anonymizing the personal responses in the interview transcripts, the researchers mitigated bias during the thematic analysis as much as possible.

For the netnographic component, the study relied on publicly accessible digital content, in line with established ethical guidelines for online research (Kozinets, 2020). No private or restricted content was accessed, and all observed material was anonymized to prevent the identification of individuals. These measures helped maintain ethical integrity and ensure the trustworthiness of the research process.

3.7 Limitations

This study is a qualitative, interpretive exploration of how Gen Z consumers construct nostalgia in digitally mediated environments. As such, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, but rather to provide in-depth insights into meaning-making processes within nostalgia marketing (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2019). While this approach allows for a rich, nuanced understanding, it also means that the results were interpreted as context-dependent rather than universally representative.

A key limitation relates to the sampling strategy. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, which may lead to selection bias and limited diversity of perspectives. Although the study includes participants from various backgrounds, the sample of seven interviews remains small and may not capture the full range of interpretations within the broader Gen Z population.

Additionally, the study focuses specifically on digitally active Gen Z consumers which may exclude perspectives from individuals who engage less frequently with social media platforms. Therefore, the findings are more reflective of highly digitally embedded users, potentially amplifying the role of digital environments in shaping the nostalgia meaning-making process.

The netnographic component also introduces specific limitations. The analysis relies on publicly visible and highly circulated content, which is inherently shaped by platform algorithms. Consequently, the data reflects what is made visible and prominent within platform ecosystems, rather than a comprehensive representation of all nostalgic content available online. This may bias the analysis toward aestheticized or trend-driven representations of the past.

Another limitation relates to the use of visual cues in interviews. While these materials enhance the richness of participants' responses by leading discussions in concrete examples, they may also influence how participants interpret nostalgia by directing certain attention toward specific types of representations. Although participants were encouraged to draw on their own experiences, their responses may still have been shaped by the selected stimuli.

Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms presents a temporal limitation. The ways in which nostalgia is constructed, circulated, and interpreted online are continuously changing, meaning that the findings capture a specific moment in time.

4 Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study and analyzes how *Gen Z consumers interpret and construct digitally mediated nostalgia for past eras they have not personally experienced*. Drawing on both the netnographic observations and semi-structured interviews, the section explores how nostalgic meanings emerge through the interaction of platform visibility, aesthetic mediation, collective validation, and identity reconstruction. The chapter shows how participants actively make sense of mediated pasts through images, sounds, comments, platform trends, and personal interpretations. The findings are organized into four interconnected themes that reflect the process through which nostalgic content is encountered, felt, socially negotiated, and reconstructed as meaningful in the present.

4.1 Curating the Past: Algorithmic Exposure and Platform Visibility

This section mirrors the first step of the theoretical framework, algorithmic exposure and platform visibility. The empirical analysis begins at the point of digital encounter. For Gen Z consumers, nostalgia for unlived eras does not spontaneously emerge, but is initiated by the mere structure of the digital platforms. Social media platforms act as active curators that systematically select and push particular

historical aesthetics into the users' daily feeds. As established in the literature, digital connectivity ensures that pieces of the past are continuously available and easily accessible (Hoskins, 2011). However, this availability is actively governed by platform visibility and algorithmic power (Beer, 2017; Cotter, 2019), transforming the past into a managed commodity within algorithmic consumer culture (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022).

4.1.1 Social Media as a Source of the Past

Because Gen Z lacks biographical memory of the eras they consume, their imagination of history is entirely dependent on what digital platforms make visible. Social media operates as the primary epistemological lens through which previous times are learned and then aestheticized. The past is seen as a highly polished, curated simulation designed to drive engagement. Taylor highlights this reliance on social media as her sole source of historical knowledge:

"I only know it from images and from videos... I feel that the way they showed it also makes you feel more nostalgic for not having been in that time. And obviously, social media are the ones that show this kind of content." - Taylor

Taylor's reflection illustrates how digital media actively reshape the ways in which the past is accessed and remembered (Van Dijck, 2007). The platform does not merely push historical images; it teaches consumers how to feel about them by selectively filtering out the era's negative historical realities and emphasizing an idealized visual aesthetic. As a result, Gen Z consumers may become more familiar with polished and idealized versions of past eras than with their broader historical complexity. Consequently, the primary objective of Gen Z's longing is not the historical past itself, but the polished digital representation curated by the platform. This leads to the question of whether this digital representation is truly shaping a consumer's perspective or acting in isolation. Next, the platforms' recommendation systems are explored, expanding into how this regular exposure and participants' knowledge of it inform their experience and sentiments regarding algorithmic curation.

4.1.2 Algorithmic Push and Repeated Exposure

While users voluntarily interact with these representations, the how and why of these encounters are governed by automated logic. Through recommendation mechanisms embedded within the platform, such as TikTok's For You Page feed, platforms track user engagement to deliver hyper-personalized, cyclical loops of historical content (Zhang & Liu, 2021). This automated curation creates a form of algorithmic exposure where nostalgic eras are actively "pushed" to consumers without their explicit action, shaping their cultural taste through repetition. Participants showed reflexivity regarding the idea of this invisible curator of the algorithm. Hannah observed:

"I feel like the algorithm... pushes this kind of content to people similar to me... the platform knows you like that kind of content." - Hannah

This algorithmic prediction of consumer desire may create repeated exposure to similar historical aesthetics, reinforcing particular visual codes and making them feel increasingly familiar. Taylor echoed this sentiment, noting the algorithms' tracking of trends:

“Sometimes, my algorithm kind of changes a lot depending on what I like... it knows what we think, they know what we want to see.” - Taylor

These quotes demonstrate that Gen Z consumers are highly aware that their impulses to feel nostalgic are mediated by automated computer systems. The algorithm systematically organizes visibility, deciding which cultural fragments are surfaced and which remain hidden (Striphas, 2015; Kitchin, 2016). As Hannah noted, this continuous loop ultimately “influences the point of view [they] have on certain topics.” Therefore, platform curation functions as a collaborative feedback loop: the user’s routine behaviors feed into the system, and the platform responds by normalizing and pushing specific nostalgic trends. This continuous loop establishes the visual baseline users need to recognize and emotionally connect with these eras. Yet, the impact of these algorithmic loops extends beyond the personalized feed of one individual. To better understand how the platforms standardize taste and trends across age groups, the analysis shifts from the individual to the collective nature of virality and trend cycles.

4.1.3 Virality and Platform Trend Cycles

The final dimension of platform curation centers on how social media platforms get large groups of people to look at, feel, and want the same historical era simultaneously. While algorithms target users with hyper-personalized feeds, the platform’s architecture is designed to turn these individual encounters with nostalgic posts into massive, synchronized group trends. In digital spaces, nostalgia does not move slowly from generation to generation. Instead, it is accelerated through quick online trend cycles that bring the past back to life (Abidin, 2018). This virality acts as a great cultural equalizer. It prompts Gen Z consumers worldwide to desire and consume the exact same historical aesthetics at the exact same moment.

Participants frequently described their encounters with the past as consistent waves of viral content that demand attention, rather than isolated discoveries or active searches. Harry reflected on how the viral circulation of specific retro artifacts triggers an immediate longing for an unlived era:

“On social media, I would come across videos of old soccer shoes and stuff... it makes me feel like wanting to experience that... wishing I could have lived in that era, wishing I had experienced it.” - Harry

Harry’s encounter demonstrates how platform virality takes a niche, seemingly localized fragment of the past, like archival sports footage or vintage apparel, and elevates it into a highly visible, collective consumer desire. This rapid scaling of exposure relies entirely on the platforms’ logic, where specific nostalgic markers are turned into viral formats that users are encouraged to replicate. Gen Z displays an awareness that these viral revivals are intertwined with existing platform structures and the ever-accelerating digital cycle. Justin observed how the speed of digital media has changed the lifecycle of trends:

“Nostalgia marketing... the desire to be drawn back to all of these things was in a way taught to us... it is gonna come back and it is gonna be out there... the trend cycles are sort of eating themselves.” - Justin

Justin's critique that "trend cycles are sort of eating themselves" perfectly captures the nature of platform-mediated culture. In digital spaces, the boundaries between the past and the present are no longer there. These eras are revived, reposted, and discarded within weeks rather than decades. This acceleration means that nostalgia is no longer just a passive longing for history, but a performative, fast-paced trend participation where consumers feel a distinct pressure to join the viral moment before it disappears.

Consequently, platform virality ensures that the past is constantly looping into the present, forcing users to actively navigate an environment where history is performed as a series of cyclical digital trends. However, platform visibility and rapid trend acceleration are only the first steps in this process. For these viral historical loops to resonate more closely with Gen Z consumers, they must be made into more accessible cues and visual styles. This process of aesthetic mediation is explored in the next section.

4.2 Mediating the Past: Aesthetic Fragments and Emotional Recognition

While the previous section showed how nostalgic content becomes visible through platform curation and algorithmic exposure, this section focuses on what happens once the past appears in front of Gen Z consumers. Across the interviews, the past was rarely interpreted as a complete historical period. Instead, participants engaged with it through fragments like: filters, songs, outfits, a camera texture, a color palette, a childhood memory, or the perceived atmosphere of an era. These fragments made the past recognizable and emotionally accessible, even when participants had not directly experienced the time being referenced. Therefore, nostalgia was not only triggered by memory, but mediated through aesthetic cues that allowed participants to feel close to a reconstructed version of the past.

This is where aesthetic mediation becomes central to the construction of digitally mediated nostalgia. In the literature review, aesthetic simplification and mediation were defined as the process through which past eras are condensed into platform-compatible expressions such as "vibes", filters, color palettes, sounds, captions, objects and nostalgic "cores" (Brown *et al.*, 2024; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). These cues allow Gen Z consumers to recognize and emotionally respond to the past through fragments rather than historical completeness or lived experiences. The empirical material shows that this happens in practice. The past becomes meaningful not because participants fully know it, but because they can see it, hear it, and imagine themselves close to it.

4.2.1 The Past as a Visual and Sensory "Vibe"

A recurring feature among participants was that the past was often understood selectively. It was not necessarily the historical reality of the 80s, 90s, or early 2000s that attracted them, but more the way these periods appeared through visual and sensory signs. The past had a look, a sound and a texture. It could be recognized through old camera effects, a specific type of clothing, a song, or the perceived naturalness of people in the image.

This was especially visible when Taylor described nostalgic content through the combination of an old camera look, music and ordinary-looking people:

"The filter... like a very old Digicam... and the song... people look natural, like normal people, not like influencers." -Taylor

What matters in this quote is not only that the content looks “old”. It is that the “old” look changes how people in the content are interpreted. The digicam filter makes them appear more *natural*, *less polished* and *less performative*. In Taylor’s case, the aesthetic does not simply signal a past era; it produces a feeling of authenticity. The past feels attractive because it appears visually distant from contemporary digital culture, where images are often associated with perfection, self-presentation and visibility.

This supports the literature on aestheticization, in which past-themed consumption is not understood as a simple reproduction of history but as a process through which the past is made meaningful in the present (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2024). However, the interviews add an important distinction: aesthetic cues do not only make the past recognizable; they make it emotionally convincing. The “vintage” or “retro” look becomes powerful because it feels less “manufactured”, even when it is produced through a digital filter.

Hannah described a similar process when reflecting on old photography:

“I liked the tones of the photographs... that filter adds to, contributes to a feeling of nostalgia.” - Hannah

This quote is useful because Hannah does not treat nostalgia as something naturally contained in the image. Instead, the filter is what “adds” to the feeling. Nostalgia is produced through mediation. Warm tones, grain, blur, and low resolution work as more than stylistic details; they shape how the image is read emotionally. The filter, in this sense, becomes part of the nostalgic meaning-making process. This connects directly to what Brown *et al.* (2024) and Highfield & Leaver (2016) mention about platform-compatible nostalgia, where digital environments intensify aesthetic simplification because the past is often condensed into cues that are easy to recognize and to circulate like: colors, sounds, filters, captions and visual styles. In the empirical material, these cues worked as shortcuts; they allowed participants to feel that they “understood” an era, even when their knowledge of it was limited or mediated.

The netnographic material reinforced this point where it was useful to show the broader digital context. In the collected posts, users often responded first to the aesthetic surface of nostalgic content. Comments like “*We love the aesthetic*”, “*Outfit on point*” or “*What camera is this?*” suggest that online users were not always engaging with the historical meaning of a period, but more with the more distinctive style through which that period was being represented. The nostalgic part of the post was attached to its look and feel.

Similarly, fashion appeared when Hailey described her attraction to the 90s fashion, she framed the decade through style: “*I love the fashion... very elegant, very minimalist and very specific for the 90s* (Hailey). Where, for her, the 90s become meaningful through the use of aesthetic vocabulary: elegance, minimalism and specificity. The decade is not approached as a full historical period, but as a style that can be recognized and admired. This shows how retro and vintage references often function within consumer culture as reinterpretations that make the past usable in the present, not as a historically accurate representation (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Dam *et al.*, 2024).

What is important to note is that the past becomes accessible through aesthetic bits. Participants did not need to have lived through a period to feel connected to it. They could recognize it through specific signs that made the past feel coherent and relatable.

4.2.2 Feeling the Past through Music, Images, Objects and Filters

Once the past becomes recognizable through aesthetic fragments, it also becomes emotionally felt. Participants described nostalgia not only as a preference for old styles but also as something triggered by a song, image, or object. This connects to traditional nostalgia literature, where nostalgia is understood as an affective response to the past (Davis, 1979; Holbrook, 1993). However, the interviews show that this affective response is not always produced through direct memory alone. In line with Goulding (2001) and Merchant and Rose (2013), where nostalgia can also be mediated through cultural material, images, music and shared representations. In this study, these sensory cues became the bridge between seeing the past and feeling it. Taylor's music account illustrates this pattern from recognition to emotional recall. Reflecting on a conversation with a friend about an old YouTube cover, she explained:

“It brought back so many memories. I felt so nostalgic at that moment because I told her... my friend is from Sweden and I'm from Peru. So the fact that this kind of music is so globally known... reminded me of when I was a teenager and I saved, I downloaded that cover onto a CD, I copied it and gave it to my friends.” -Taylor

The song does not simply represent memories from the past; it reactivates a whole social world around that time. Taylor remembers not only the music, but the practices attached to it: downloading, copying, sharing, and talking about it with friends. This matters because it shows nostalgia as materially and socially mediated. This helps extend the concept of nostalgia because it shows that when mediated, it is not only visual or representational but also affective. Songs, objects, and media formats do not merely point to the past; they help participants emotionally re-enter it. If emotion can be activated through cultural cues, then direct memory is not the only route into nostalgic attachment.

Justin's reflection on smell shows the same mechanism in a more explicit and immediate way: *“There are tons of different times where I've been like, this smells like something I knew when I was 6.”* (Justin). Here, nostalgia appears before it is fully narrated. The smell does not require deliberate interpretation; it produces a sudden recognition of childhood. This supports the idea that nostalgia is not only cognitive, but sensory and embodied. While digital platforms cannot reproduce smell directly, they can circulate other sensory substitutes: sounds, visual textures, retro objects, filters and familiar media references. One TikTok user notes that it *“[feels] like modern cameras record moments, the old [cameras] record feelings,”* where the visual and technical components of the camera and its film can capture abstract emotions and not mere moments.

Additionally, the emotional response to nostalgia was rarely simple. Sabrina, for instance, described nostalgia as a feeling that cannot be reduced to either happiness or sadness:

“For me it's a feeling that I don't want to pigeonhole as something good or bad. I feel that nostalgia can bring you certain kinds of memories of eras, moments that you've lived through, but they can be sad moments or happy moments.” - Sabrina

This emotional ambiguity is important because it shows why nostalgic content becomes affectively rich. The past is comforting because it feels familiar, but at the same time painful because it is unreachable. Confirming Sedikides *et al.*, (2008) argument that nostalgia is emotionally complex rather than simply positive. Yet, the empirical evidence adds that digital mediation can intensify this tension while reminding participants that it cannot be relieved.

This subsection moves the analysis beyond nostalgia as a general love of the past and shows how nostalgic feeling is constructed through specific cues. In digital environments, where sounds, images and visual textures circulate repeatedly, these cues become the affective infrastructure through which Gen Z learns to feel the past.

4.2.3 Idealization through Aesthetic Simplification

Because the past is encountered through selected fragments, it also becomes easier to idealize. Participants were often aware that nostalgic representations were incomplete, but this did not remove their attractiveness. In fact, the selectivity seemed to be part of what made the past appealing. Interestingly, the past appeared warmer, simpler, more original or more authentic because it was filtered through the aesthetic cues that made it desirable.

This connects to Brunk *et al.* (2018), who argue that the past is not merely remembered but actively constructed and transformed into a cultural resource, and to Dam *et al.* (2023, 2024), who position contemporary nostalgia as shaped by consumer culture and digital mediation. The interviews support this view by showing that participants did not encounter the past as neutral history. They encountered it as a curated and idealized representation. Taylor recognized this selectivity when reflecting on her appeal to the 70s and 80s:

“In the ’70s, in the ’80s, in all those eras there were many crises, both political and economic, but nobody focuses on that because precisely I think they want to make us believe that everything was perfect.”
- Taylor

This quote is important because Taylor is not passively accepting the nostalgic image of the past. She recognizes that something is being left out. Political and economic crises are pushed into the background, while aesthetics are embraced. This suggests that idealization does not require a full notion of the past as perfect. Rather, it works through selective attention. The desirable fragments become visible, while the difficult parts become less prominent.

Justin described this process through what he called the “rose-tinted glasses”:

“A view of the past with those sort of rose-tinted glasses. Like it’s a little bit warmer, it’s a little bit more idealized. The idea of sort of like bringing you back to a better time.” - Justin

With “rose-tinted”, he intended to capture both the emotional and visual logic of nostalgia. It echoes nostalgia literature’s emphasis on warmth and longing (Goulding, 2001), but the data also show that this warmth is mediated. In digital environments, the rose tint can be seen through filters, grain, color grading

and retro camera effects, but also symbolically, through captions, music, editing and platform narratives. As explained by Van Dijck (2007) and Hoskins (2011), memory is increasingly shaped through media technologies, while Highfield and Leaver (2016) help explain why digital platforms favor recognizable and visually compressed forms.

The idealization factor became meaningful when participants contrasted the past with the present (Dam *et al.*, 2023; Neave *et al.*, 2026). Here, Hannah explained that *“at least from what was seen in the videos, it looked a bit more unique. I feel that nowadays everything is driven by trends”* (Hannah). The phrase *“from what was seen in the videos”* refers to Hannah’s integration of the past based on media visibility. She is not comparing the present with a lived past, but rather with a digitally constructed past. This provides an important lens, showing that nostalgia is not only longing for the past (Davis, 1979) but also a way of evaluating the present. The past appears more unique because the present is experienced as repetitive, trend-driven and overly mediated.

At a collective level, idealization appeared in comments like: *“Back in the day camera quality was low but life quality was high”* or *“life was better”* turned complex historical comparison into short affective claims. These comments do not explain the past historically; they make the past feel better. Additionally, with the use of comments such as *“modern cameras record moments, the old records feelings”* shows how retro technologies intensified the idealization of the past. Old cameras, camcorders, CDs, and analog textures were often perceived as more emotionally authentic than digital technologies, turning technological imperfection into emotional depth. This connects to Hemetsberger *et al.* (2011), who show that young consumers can attach meaning to retro objects even without direct experience of their original use. Though the important difference is that these objects were often encountered through digital platforms.

Taken together, this section shows that aesthetic mediation is not a secondary layer of digitally mediated nostalgia. It is one of the main mechanisms through which nostalgia is constructed. Gen Z participants recognized the past through visual and sensory fragments, felt it through emotional and embodied cues, and idealized it through selective aesthetic simplification. The past becomes familiar, beautiful, authentic or desirable because mediated fragments make it feel that way. The following section turns to the collective dimension of digitally mediated nostalgia, examining how comments, sharing, remixing and peer validation transform aesthetic recognition into shared nostalgic meaning.

4.3 Circulating and Negotiating Nostalgia: Community, Remix and Validation

Once previous eras have been translated into visual vibes, sensory fragments and filters, these aesthetic representations move from the individual’s screen into a broader social landscape. Gen Z consumers do not experience and understand these nostalgic media cues in a vacuum. Instead, they find communal spaces online, such as comment sections and direct messages, to cross-reference and validate their feelings with peers. From a CCT perspective, meanings attached to brands, symbols, and cultural artifacts are not fixed, but are continuously produced and reproduced through consumer practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This is particularly relevant to past-themed consumption, where the value of history lies not only because it is “old” but also in how consumers make it meaningful in the present (Arnould &

Thompson, 2005; Dagalp *et al.*, 2020). Through this participation, abstract historical aesthetics are negotiated, reinterpreted, and collectively understood as a legitimate, shared reality.

4.3.1 Comment Sections as Spaces of Collective Validation

The comment sections of digital platforms serve as a sounding board where users check whether their individual emotional responses resonate with the wider community. For Gen Z, experiencing an intense longing for unlived eras can lead to psychological confusion or discomfort. They often feel irrational or “crazy” for missing a past they never experienced firsthand.

The public nature of the comment section resolves this tension by providing almost instantaneous peer feedback. Online spaces function as an active network for users to collectively negotiate what the past means and why nostalgia for an unexperienced era becomes socially acceptable, and ultimately, attractive. Taylor describes how sharing content and reading comments functions as an anchor for reassurance:

“With my friends I sometimes share...all of us are like, yeah, how lovely... when my friends validate that feeling, it makes me feel better. So I say: well, I wasn’t the only crazy one.” - Taylor

This concept of “not being the only crazy one” highlights a central idea of the collective circulation. The individual’s internal sense of feeling out of place is transformed into a socially acceptable, shared reality through group validation. The public nature of social media platforms and the speed in which they push customized content accelerates this process, as users receive immediate emotional feedback from interactions in the comments. Comment sections are observed to function as emotional touchpoints. Furthermore, these digital conversations actively reshape existing viewpoints. Rather than merely accepting a video’s message, users treat public comment threads as an opportunity to interpret and construct meaning together. Taylor highlights this interactive interpretation process:

“What I like to do most is not be guided by the video, but I read the comments. Then when I read the comments I say, mmm, this person has a really good point, and my idea of what I thought before starts changing.” - Taylor

As Taylor describes, the nostalgic content itself is just a starting point for conversation. The real construction of nostalgic meaning occurs through the dialogue that comes after. By reading through and adjusting oneself to peer opinions, young consumers actively align their views, building a “taste community” where taste is organized through shared practices and normative understandings (Arsel & Bean, 2013). This consensus allows the community to evaluate and decide how a specific past era should be remembered.

4.3.2 Collective FOMO and Shared Longing for Unlived Eras

This reliance on public feedback highlights a deeper motivation within platform culture: users explicitly open and interact with comment sections hoping to share their ideas and desire and receive real-time feedback. Social cues such as likes, comments, shares, saves, and reposts do not just signal popularity, they serve as digital forms of social visibility and peer validation that help reinforce particular versions of

the past as culturally valuable (Abidin, 2021). Modern vicarious nostalgia thrives on this public relationship. Sabrina highlights this dynamic when observing consumer behavior on TikTok:

"I saw a comment... on TikTok that said something like, 'there was no pressure, no phones, no social anxiety,' it's just like people, many people can identify... to express what they feel... in the hope that [someone] would reply or like it back." - Sabrina

As Sabrina points out, users are not merely shouting their emotional longing into a digital void. They are posting specifically to hear someone echo back. Justin shares this sentiment, saying *"The only reason people are shouting into the void is to ideally hear some shouts back... I think that like sense of community and wanting to belong."* This "wanting to belong" pulls users into the comment section specifically to hear the echo, using comments and likes to establish proof for their collective fear of missing out (FOMO). The netnographic data also directly supports this behavior. Across viral nostalgic videos, comment sections are frequented by youth expressing a shared sense of temporal jealousy, which stems from the longing for non-personal or pre-lived experiences (Neave *et al.*, 2026). Young consumers frequently use these retro representations to collectively negotiate belonging, identity, and shared social longings (Hemetsberger *et al.*, 2011). Justin describes this phenomenon as an intentional effort to find group consensus and seek reassurance when navigating the platforms: *"I think that type of content is generated precisely... to seek that kind of group support... somehow the ideas are created in you."* This collective longing is reinforced by comments like this one from a TikTok user: *"I mentally cannot handle the fact that I will never experience this."* This public performance of longing in comment sections serves as a space for Gen Z to cope. By mourning an idealized past of intimate, tech-free human connections together, Gen Z uses these digital community spaces to aestheticize the past. They transform social media clips into a shared emotional resource (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020).

4.3.3 Remix, Repetition and Nostalgic Trend Participation

Meaning negotiation is performed through active participation in digital "remix culture," where users modify and recreate existing media fragments (Lessig, 2008). Remixing involves taking existing cultural elements and recombining them into new contexts, allowing users to reinterpret older music, images, styles, brands or symbols through a contemporary lens (Lessig, 2008). When users share and replicate aesthetic formats, like layering sepia filters over recent photos or editing compilations of ABBA, they are participating in "participatory culture" where the lines between being a producer and a consumer blur (Jenkins, 2006). This process relies heavily on platform trend standardization, in which identical background music (such as Tears for Fears or Phoebe Bridgers, as mentioned by participants) and specific editing styles are repeated to instantly signal nostalgia to the consumer. Zara notes this cyclical nature when discussing the visual replication of historical eras:

"Sabrina Carpenter is a very current singer... and yet her entire visual music aesthetic is very inspired by this era, this disco era... So it's something I feel we are all imitating in the end." - Zara

Zara's observation that "we are all imitating in the end" illustrates how platform visibility increases an individual's aesthetic preferences into standardized cultural movements. When a young consumer reposts a video or shares a clip of a 90s film with a friend, they are doing more than passing along a message. They are validating that specific version of history as worthy of remembering and discussing, so they can

express their own taste and identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Hemetsberger *et al.*, 2011). This continuous sharing and remixing creates an active interpretive loop. By replicating historical aesthetics, peer groups establish shared meanings associated with past eras. They collectively agree on what the 70s, 80s, or 90s "felt" like, confirming and reaffirming a standardized visual baseline.

Once these nostalgic meanings are thoroughly circulated and socially validated across the broader network, they are no longer just images on a screen or topics in a comment section. Instead, they become shared cultural resources (Arnould & Thomson, 2005; Dagalp *et al.*, 2020). As users reach peer alignment regarding these idealized eras, they graduate from discussing the past to recreating it (Hemetsberger *et al.*, 2011). In the final section, Gen Z's reconstruction of digital content into personal identities, tools for escapism and everyday performance is discussed.

4.4 Reconstructing the Past: Nostalgia Without Memory, Escape and Performance

Previous sections showed how digitally mediated nostalgia is shaped by platform curation, made emotionally accessible, and socially reinforced through collective validation. This final section turns to what Gen Z consumers do with these nostalgic representations once they have been encountered, felt and validated. The analysis suggests that participants did not simply consume nostalgic content as entertainment, but rather used it to reconstruct the past into something meaningful for the present: an imagined experience, an alternative lifestyle, a critique of contemporary digital culture, and a symbolic resource for identity work.

This is important to the research question because the participants' nostalgia was not based on direct memory. Instead, the past was assembled from images, videos, films, comments, and curated content in general. This reflects the concepts of vicarious and historical nostalgia presented by Goulding (2001) and Neave *et al.* (2026), in which nostalgic attachment can emerge through mediated representations rather than life experience. However, the empirical material also goes further: it shows that Gen Z not only feels nostalgia for unlived eras but also actively reconstructs them into usable meanings.

4.4.1 Imagining Eras Not Personally Experienced

A central point of the interviews was the ease with which participants placed themselves inside past eras they had not lived through. The past was not approached to us as distant history but more as a possible experience: a time one could have belonged to or emotionally inhabited. Taylor expressed this clearly when reflecting on her attraction to the 90s and the 70s: *"It kind of gives you a feeling of nostalgia, of wanting to go back to that past time, even though I didn't live it, I only know it from images and from videos"*. This quote captures the central tension of nostalgia without memory. Taylor recognizes that her connection to the past is mediated, as she knows it only through images and videos. Yet this does not make the feeling less real. This mediated image is enough to create longing. Furthermore, nostalgia is not dependent on direct recollection but more on imaginative access. This supports Goulding's (2001) argument that consumers can develop nostalgic attachments to periods they have not personally experienced. It also aligns with Merchant and Rose's (2013) discussion of vicarious nostalgia, where consumers can feel attached to pasts that are culturally transmitted rather than autobiographically

remembered. What is important to note here is that participants did not describe this as abstract historical interest; they described it as a desire to experience it. Taylor's phrasing of *"wanting to go back"* suggests movement into an imagined past, even when that past was never personally occupied. This also appeared in Harry's account of older football culture, where nostalgia was attached to World Cups and players he had not seen live. For him, old match clips, music and social media narratives made earlier football feel more exciting and meaningful than the present. The appeal was not only about factual knowledge of the sport, but also about the possibility of imagining himself within a more authentic football culture.

Justin, on the other hand, offers a more reflexive explanation of this kind of nostalgia with the following: *"Because I was not there and do not remember it... I can view all the good without remembering the bad."* Explaining why nostalgia without memory is about idealizing. Not having lived through an era removes the burden of remembering the bad parts. The past can be reconstructed through its most attractive features such as music, fashion, youth, romance, freedom, community, creativity or authenticity. This connects to the argument of Brunk *et al.* (2018) that the past is actively constructed and transformed into a cultural resource, rather than simply recovered as historical reality. In this study, Gen Z participants used mediated fragments to construct past eras as emotionally available spaces, even when they were aware that these spaces were partial and selective.

This is where the netnographic material became useful as a contextual layer. Comments such as *"I was born in the wrong timeline"*, *"I'm too young to be this nostalgic"*, or *"the 2020s are not and will never be my home"* showed that this longing for unlived eras is also repeated online. These comments do not simply state admiration for the past. They construct a displaced generational identity: users position themselves as emotionally belonging to a time they have never experienced. The repeated nature of these comments suggests that nostalgia without memory becomes more legitimate when it is collectively articulated and recognized by others. Digitally mediated nostalgia is not simply found in the past. It is produced through the interaction between mediated visibility, aesthetic recognition and collective interpretation.

4.4.2 The Organic Past Versus the Staged Present

As participants reconstructed past eras, one of the strongest patterns they made was associating the past as "organic" and a "staged" present. The past was often imagined as a time when people lived more naturally, had a lot more social interaction and experienced moments before thinking about how they would be displayed. The present, by contrast, was associated with posing, posting, curating and performing everyday life in social media.

Hannah described this contrast by stating: *"Because there wasn't social media, it also made you live more in the moment... experience everything in a much more natural way, without thinking about other stuff."* Hannah does not only describe the past as technologically different. She describes it as emotionally and socially different. The absence of social media is associated with presence, spontaneity and naturalness. The past is reconstructed as a mode of living where experiences came before representation. This connects to Van Dijck's (2007) and Hoskins' (2011) arguments that media technologies shape how memory and experience are organized.

Taylor made a similar point when reacting to nostalgic content showing friends spending time together without phones:

“That life was, well, calmer... the connections were more real, more intimate... back then they didn’t have cell phones and didn’t have all this pressure to be perfect all the time. So they simply enjoyed their present.” -Taylor

Here, the past is not just “before technology” but before the pressure of perfection. The nostalgic appeal lies in the idea that people could simply be together without constantly documenting themselves. A similar sentiment was echoed in a TikTok comment section saying things like “Life before [the] phone addiction got so bad”, with another user commenting “what life feels like when you stay off social media for the whole day.” This reveals how nostalgia becomes a critique of contemporary digital culture. Participants were not only longing for old aesthetics; they were longing for a version of social life that seemed less mediated by self-presentation and posting. This finding connects to the literature on CCT because the past becomes a symbolic resource through which participants evaluate the present (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The organic past is not historically accurate, but it is meaningful because it gives language to dissatisfaction with contemporary digital life. Participants used the past to express a desire for authenticity, intimacy and presence. In this sense, the past became a way to articulate what the present feels like it has lost.

4.4.3 Escaping the Present through Nostalgic Alternatives

Longing for the past also worked as a form of escape. Participants repeatedly described present life as fast, saturated, repetitive, technologically dependent or emotionally exhausting. Against this, the past became attractive because it offered an imagined alternative: slower routines, deeper relationships, more originality, less pressure and fewer digital demands. Hannah explicitly connected this to her use of social media:

“Social networks make us young people feel more like that because we see content that makes us feel that way, and that makes us think like ‘oh, what would this or that have been like?’” - Hannah

This quote shows that nostalgic longing is stimulated by exposure and not a spontaneous response. Social media does not only show the past; it invites users to compare it with the present and imagine alternatives. This supports the literature on digital mediation, which argues that platforms shape how the past becomes accessible and meaningful (Van Dijck, 2007; Hoskins, 2011), while also demonstrating the algorithmic literature on how platforms structure visibility and repeated exposure (Beer, 2017; Cotter, 2019; Airolidi & Rokka, 2022). The empirical material shows that the past becomes a place to mentally escape from reality because platforms continually present it as visible, attractive and emotionally available.

Taylor’s interview further shows that this escape is tied to digital fatigue. When asked, she mentioned:

“There were like places with lots of computers, so you could rent a computer and you’d only rent it for an hour and in that hour I’d have the best time in the world. I’d watch videos, chat with my friends, and then I’d go home and there would be no more technology. I mean, I’d just lie down on my bed, read a book or

play cards or board games with my parents, and I didn't have this constant distraction of wanting to know what other people are doing.” - Taylor

The important thing to note is that participants reconstructed the past as calmer in response to present conditions. Nostalgia gave them a vocabulary for expressing discomfort with constant connectivity. This connects to the work of Dam *et al.* (2023, 2024) on contemporary past-themed culture, in which the past is mobilized in the present as a resource for meaning-making. In this study, that meaning-making process was often compensatory: the past offered a way to imagine relief from the saturation and performativity of digital life.

Similarly, Sabrina described nostalgia for time without constant phone use as a longing for more social interaction: *“The interaction that existed before... was a bit more personal”*. This quote shows that nostalgia was not only about objects but also about social interactions. This form of nostalgia was therefore not a rejection of technology and would not choose to give it up entirely. Instead, nostalgia allowed them to imagine a better balance; a life less technologically dependent, less pressure and more meaningful interactions.

Escape, in this sense, should not be interpreted as fantasy, but understood as a critical reconstruction of the present. By imagining the past as slower and more authentic, participants identified what they felt nostalgic for was lacking in their own lives. Nostalgia became a way of expressing desire, not necessarily to return fully to the past, but to recover certain factors associated with it.

4.4.4 Performing the Past as Lifestyle, Taste and Identity

The past was not only reconstructed as something participants imagined or longed for emotionally; it also became something they could partially perform. Participants engaged with past aesthetics through fashion, music, objects, reposts, shared videos, retro technologies and everyday style references. In this sense, nostalgia became part of identity work, a way of expressing taste, belonging and distinction through selected fragments of the past.

This connects to the CCT presented by Arnould & Thompson (2005), in which consumption practices are understood as symbolic resources through which individuals construct and communicate identity. It also relates to Hemetsberger *et al.*'s (2011) work on retro objects, which shows that young consumers can attach meaning to vintage objects and styles without experiencing them directly. In this study, however, this identity work was digitally mediated.

Taylor's reflections on disco aesthetics illustrate this clearly. When discussing a 1970s-inspired video, she connected its visual codes to contemporary pop culture:

“I literally feel that Sabrina Carpenter is a very current singer. I think she was even born in the 2000s and yet her entire visual music aesthetic is very inspired by this era, this disco era, and she uses a lot of sparkles and her hair has full waves and a lot of volume. So it's something I feel we are all imitating in the end.” - Taylor

Taylor's phrase "*we are all imitating*" shows that nostalgic engagement does not remain as an aspiration. The past becomes performable through hair, clothing, sparkle, music, a celebrity's styling and visual references. Yet what is performed is not the historical 1970s as such, but a selective aesthetic version of it. This supports the literature on retro- and past-themed consumption, in which the past is not simply reproduced but reworked within contemporary cultural and market conditions (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2024).

Yet, the findings reveal a paradox. Participants often expressed a strong longing for the past, but this longing rarely translated into a full revival of past lifestyles. Taylor, for example, imagined how appealing it would be to experience disco culture, Victorian romance or older social ideals, but also admitted that she would not travel to the past: "*If I were offered the opportunity to travel to the past, honestly, I wouldn't do it. I love the era I'm living in. But even so, it looks nice, it looks like a time when things were going well and everyone was happy.*" This quote captures the selectivity of digitally mediated nostalgia. Taylor desires the aesthetic and romanticized version of the past, but not necessarily its full reality. Justin's reflections build on this altered reality, describing how nostalgic attachment adapts to adult life, rather than restoring the past itself:

"It brought me back to something I enjoyed as a kid within a context that is more adult, more mature... they will sort of recreate like again, they recreated that Euphoria scene... dressing up actual Bratz dolls... I think I literally saw someone like post about their emotional support Bratz doll that like as an adult they carry around." - Justin

Justin's example of Bratz dolls, an American children's fashion doll popular during the early 2000s, shows a similar process. He explained that the brand's recent nostalgic content brings back something he enjoyed as a kid, but "*within a context that is more adult, more mature.*" Here, the past is not revived unchanged; it is updated to fit today's consumer identity. Childhood media becomes a playful adult reference, showing how nostalgic objects can evolve with their audience. Additionally, the reference to the TV drama, Euphoria, complements this identity reconstruction. Euphoria is known for its graphic depictions of drug use and sexual themes, and with Bratz capitalizing on this edginess, the childhood-favorite toy brand reentered Gen Z's zeitgeist by jumping on Euphoria's popularity.

In a similar vein, Hailey's attraction to 90s-in-New-York fashion and Carolyn Bessette's style was tied to a desire to "*be like that.*" Here, nostalgia operates as an imagined self: more effortless, stylish, local and authentic. Yet, this desire was mostly enacted when reposting, liking, saving, and admiring rather than fully recreating it.

This is where the paradox is important, Gen Z participants longed for past eras as alternatives to the present, yet their engagement was often partial, and platform-based. They were yearning for slower routines, more authentic connections, and less digital pressure, but they still accessed and expressed this longing through social media interactions. The past, therefore, was not revived outside of digital culture, it was performed in it.

The netnographic material supported this interpretation. Users frequently commented on wanting to "*live in another era*", asked "*where can I find these clothes*", and even "*celebrated the return of Y2K, and 90s*

aesthetics.” However this participation remained within online practices. Overall, performing the past was less about returning to history and more about using it as a symbolic resource than performing it. This performance remained paradoxical in that Gen Z longs for the past, but usually through platforms and cultural logics of the present.

4.5 Summary of Findings

Overall, the analysis shows that Gen Z’s nostalgia for eras they have not personally experienced is not formed through personal memory alone, but also through a digitally mediated process of *exposure, recognition, validation, and reconstruction*. First, nostalgic engagement often begins through platform exposure, as social media and algorithmic recommendation systems repeatedly show users selected representations of the past. Second, these representations become emotionally meaningful through aesthetic and sensory fragments, including music, filters, fashion, objects, images, and visual styles that make past eras feel recognizable and desirable. Third, nostalgic meanings are collectively reinforced through comments, sharing, remixing, and community validation, which help legitimize longing for unlived eras as a shared cultural practice. Finally, participants use nostalgic representations to imagine alternatives to the present, critique contemporary digital life, and perform aspects of identity, taste, and lifestyle.

Taken together, these findings suggest that digitally mediated nostalgia among Gen Z is not simply a longing for history, but an active reconstruction of the past through the cultural and technological practices of the present. The past becomes meaningful not because it is accurately remembered or represented, but because it is made visible by platforms, simplified through aesthetics, validated by others, and used by consumers to make sense of their current identities and experiences. This creates a central paradox: while participants often long for a past imagined as more organic, authentic, and less digitally mediated, this longing is itself accessed and performed through digital platforms. The following discussion section develops these findings further by expanding the literature and outlining their theoretical and managerial implications.

5 Discussion

In response to the research question, this study shows that Gen Z consumers interpret and construct digitally mediated nostalgia for past eras they have not experienced by transforming selected representations of the past into emotionally meaningful resources for the present. It is not just about engaging with nostalgia by longing for what has been personally remembered; Gen Z consumers construct nostalgia through algorithmic exposure, aesthetic mediation, collective validation, and identity work. The past appears less as a complete historical reality and more as a selective, emotionally charged, and socially meaningful representation made visible through digital platforms and interpreted through the cultural practices of the present.

The central contribution of this study is conceptualizing Gen Z’s nostalgia for unlived eras as a present-oriented, platform-shaped, and collectively validated process. Existing literature on vicarious and historical nostalgia shows that consumers can develop attachments to periods they did not directly

experience (Goulding, 2001; Hemetsberger *et al.*, 2011; Merchant & Rose, 2013; Neave *et al.*, 2026). This study extends that understanding by showing how such attachments are constructed in contemporary digital culture: algorithms make selected pasts visible and repeated, aesthetics make them emotionally accessible, and collective interaction makes them socially legitimate. In doing so, this thesis moves beyond asking whether Gen Z can feel nostalgia for unlived eras and instead explains how this nostalgia is produced, intensified, and used within digital consumer culture.

The empirical findings also refine the conceptual framework developed in the literature review. The framework initially synthesized three interconnected dimensions: *platform and algorithmic exposure*; *aesthetic simplification and mediation*; and *collective interpretation, remix, and validation*. The analysis showed that these dimensions not only explain how nostalgic content was encountered but also how it was validated. Together, they also enabled a fourth outcome: the reconstruction of the *past as a present-oriented resource for identity, taste, belonging, escape, and critique*. In this sense, the study contributes by developing the framework from a literature-based analytical lens into an empirically grounded explanation of how digitally mediated nostalgia is constructed among Gen Z consumers.

The following discussion section interprets the presented findings in Chapter 4 in relation to the literature review's conceptual synthesis, rather than through a fixed theoretical model. In line with the study's inductive and interpretive approach, the dimensions of platform exposure, aesthetic mediation, and collective meaning-making serve as analytical lenses for discussing the findings on nostalgia, digital consumer culture, and Gen Z's relationship with the unlived past. The discussion moves from summarizing what was found to explaining how these findings refine existing understandings. A central argument developed in this discussion is that digitally mediated nostalgia allows Gen Z consumers to imagine, critique, and perform alternatives to the present, while remaining embedded in digital platforms that make this longing possible.

5.1 Digitally Mediated Nostalgia as a Present-Oriented Construction

Nostalgia is often associated with a “desire to return to something that has been personally experienced, remembered, and lost” (Holbrook, 1993, *p.* 245). Though for this study, nostalgia operates from a different starting point. The thesis extends existing literature on vicarious and historical nostalgia by reframing nostalgia without lived memory as a productive condition, rather than a limitation. Research by Goulding (2001) and Neave *et al.* (2026) has shown that consumers can feel nostalgia for periods they did not directly experience. This study shows Gen Z participants were not primarily longing for past eras they had lived through, but for eras they had encountered through digitally mediated representations. The contribution here is to show that the absence of lived memory does not diminish the emotional significance of nostalgia, since this type of nostalgia makes the past more open to selective reconstruction.

Importantly, these mediated representations are not encountered in a neutral way. In digital contexts, the past becomes available through algorithms that organize visibility, repetition, and relevance. Digital media reshapes how the past is accessed and recontextualized (Van Dijck, 2007; Hoskins, 2011), while algorithmic consumer culture shows that platforms structure visibility through data, engagement metrics, and recommendation systems (Beer, 2017; Cotter, 2019; Airolidi & Rokka, 2022). Our study extends these perspectives by showing that digital and algorithmic mediation is not only a tool to organize access to the

past, it also shapes which aspects of the pasts become available to Gen Z. Consequently, the nostalgia examined in this study is not only culturally mediated, but algorithmically mediated, meaning that certain versions of the past become more visible, more repeated, and then more familiar and desirable to Gen Z consumers. This reframes algorithmic visibility as part of the nostalgia-making process and not just a tool for content circulation. Digital representations allow the past to appear as authentic, intimate, original and emotionally rich compared to the present. Showing that digitally mediated nostalgia for unlived experiences is not simply about a lack of memories, but also about having the imaginative space to selectively reconstruct the past. This enables Gen Z consumers to reshape their understanding of the past in relation to contemporary desires, tensions, and imagined alternatives.

Participants often recognized that the past shown online was idealized, partial, or aesthetically filtered, yet this awareness did not necessarily weaken their nostalgic attachment. It shows that the value of nostalgia does not depend only on historical accuracy. Literature on past-themed consumption similarly suggests that the past is not merely reproduced, but reworked and made valuable through contemporary cultural practices (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2024). In this way, our study extends that view by showing how this “reworking” occurs within digital environments. Accordingly, the past is condensed into aesthetic fragments that allow Gen Z to feel attached to eras they have not experienced. Allowing the past to become meaningful offers an emotional contrast to the present. The past is aspirational, but not a complete picture. It gives Gen Z consumers a way to imagine forms of connection, individuality, simplicity, and authenticity associated with past eras. Because digitally mediated nostalgia is deeply present-oriented, the significance of vicarious nostalgia lies in what it helps participants articulate about contemporary life.

Moreover, the longing for unlived memories reveals a fascination with previous eras but also dissatisfaction with aspects of the present, including digital fatigue, social pressure, trend repetition, and a performative life. This aligns with and extends the CCT perspective that meaning is constantly produced through interpretations and use, rather than originating from objects, images or symbols (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Our study shows that nostalgic meaning is produced through digitally mediated practices such as the revival of retro images, songs, outfits, or camera filters. This suggests that the past is not meaningful only because it is “old,” but because it provides a language for present concerns or lacking qualities: authenticity, belonging, emotional depth, individuality, and relief from digital pressure. This also explains why nostalgia without memory can still feel powerful. Accordingly, longing for unlived eras is not only about wanting to experience another time, but also about using that time to reflect on what feels excessive, absent, or unsatisfying in the present.

Digitally mediated nostalgia should not be understood only as a return to history, but as a construction of the past in response to present concerns. Gen Z’s nostalgia for unlived eras becomes meaningful because it allows the past to be edited, idealized, and adapted to contemporary desires for authenticity, belonging, individuality, and relief from digital pressure. In this sense, the study moves beyond asking whether Gen Z can feel nostalgia for eras they did not experience and instead explains how such nostalgia is constructed, intensified, and made meaningful through digital culture

The following section develops this present-oriented argument by showing how the idealized past becomes a way for Gen Z consumers to critique contemporary digital life.

5.2 The Idealized Past as a Form of Critique of the Present

Building on the idea that digitally mediated nostalgia is constructed in response to the needs of the present, this section more specifically considers what kind of present Gen Z consumers are responding to. The analysis suggests that participants did not only idealize past eras because they appeared aesthetically appealing, but also because these eras offered an imagined contrast to contemporary digital life. The past was often associated with authenticity, originality, intimacy, and stronger social connections, while the present was linked to overstimulation, performative self-presentation, digital fatigue, and accelerated lifestyles. This thesis finds that nostalgia for unlived eras is meaningful because the past is desirable, but also because it gives Gen Z consumers a language for what they perceive as lacking in contemporary digital culture.

Neave *et al.*'s (2026) understanding of historical nostalgia is particularly relevant. If historical nostalgia refers to a longing for non-personal or pre-lived experiences, then Gen Z's attraction to past eras can be understood as more than mere curiosity about history. Our study indicates that historical nostalgia among Gen Z is a longing for the unlived past, but it also gives Gen Z a way to interpret the present through an imagined alternative. Participants were not necessarily longing for the 1970s, 1990s, or early 2000s as complete historical periods, but rather for the qualities those eras seemed to contain and that the present lacked. In this sense, this study extends understandings of historical nostalgia by showing that the unlived past can become aspirational when reconstructed around qualities that address present-day frustrations.

The idealization aspect is significant because it shows that nostalgia works through comparison. Earlier decades were imagined as more “organic” because social life seemed less mediated by phones, algorithms, and the pressure to constantly document daily life. The appeal of the past lies in its contrast with the present, as it represents a life in which people are imagined to be more present, more intimate, less curated, and less repetitive. This extends past-themed consumption literature by illustrating that the value of the past derives not only from aesthetic reworking but also from its ability to symbolically expose the present's emotional and social tensions (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020; Dam *et al.*, 2024). This does not mean that participants viewed the past as perfect. Instead, the past was selectively imagined around the emotional qualities that helped them question the social and affective costs of digital life.

Moreover, the algorithmic dimension further complicates this. The idealization of the past is not only contrasted in digital cultures but also made desirable through them. Social media repeatedly circulates nostalgic content in formats that are visually recognizable, emotionally resonant, and easy to engage with. As algorithmic culture literature suggests, platforms structure visibility through data, engagement metrics, and recommendation systems (Beer, 2017; Cotter, 2019; Airoidi & Rokka, 2022). Our contribution extends algorithmic consumer culture by showing that algorithms shape which versions of the past become familiar, emotionally desirable and culturally relevant. For Gen Z, the desire for a slower, less digitally saturated past is partly produced within the same digital environments that intensify feelings of speed, comparison, and fatigue. The past becomes an alternative to digital life, but this alternative is itself shaped by algorithmic visibility. Algorithmic visibility plays an important role in the construction of digital-mediated historical nostalgia, not merely as a channel through which nostalgic content circulates.

Participants did not necessarily want to fully abandon the present or return to previous decades. Rather, they desired selected qualities associated with the past: emotional depth, social presence, individuality, and relief from digital pressure. This makes historical nostalgia aspirational rather than purely retrospective. The study contributes by showing that the idealized past functions as an imagined reality, a symbolic space where Gen Z can imagine contemporary life without some of its exhausting digital conditions. It offers a symbolic language through which Gen Z can imagine what contemporary life might feel like if it were less accelerated, less performative, and less algorithmically saturated. This leads into the central paradox discussed next: the desire for a less digital past is accessed, validated, and performed through the digital platforms themselves.

5.3 The Paradox of Longing for a Less Digital Past Through Digital Platforms

The previous section showed that the past operates as an imagined alternative to contemporary digital life. This creates a central paradox: *Gen Z consumers often long for a past associated with authenticity, intimacy, spontaneity, and reduced digital pressure, yet access and express this longing through the same platforms that contribute to overstimulation, comparison, and performativity*. In other words, the past becomes desirable as an escape from digital culture, but this escape is made visible and meaningful through digital culture itself.

As previously mentioned, participants were not necessarily rejecting the present or attempting to fully revive the past. More precisely, they were selectively negotiating between both. They desired qualities associated with past eras, such as stronger social presence, slower routines, originality and less pressure to appear as “perfect”. This illustrates that digitally mediated nostalgia is not a rejection of contemporary digital culture, but rather a way of managing its tensions. Accordingly, the study demonstrates that nostalgia can serve as a form of negotiation and critique of the present: Gen Z consumers are immersed in platform culture while using nostalgic representations to question its emotional and social costs.

The algorithmic dimension of digital platforms deepens this tension. The same platform algorithms accelerate trend cycles, intensify visibility and circulate nostalgic representations that appear to offer relief from daily life pressures. As a result, the longing for a less mediated past is partly shaped by algorithmic mediation. Platforms do not only provide access to nostalgic content; they repeatedly amplify selected versions of the past that are appealing, emotionally resonant, and easy to relate to. This refines algorithmic consumer culture literature by showing that algorithms do not only organize visibility and taste in the present; they also shape consumers’ imagined relationship to the past.

Gen Z consumers use digital platforms to imagine a life less shaped by digital platforms. Their nostalgia expresses dissatisfaction with the present, but it does so through present-day practices: saving, reposting, commenting, liking, imitating, and curating. Therefore, nostalgia allows consumers to question the dissatisfactions of digital culture while continuing to participate in the systems that produce and circulate the nostalgic imaginary.

This ambivalence is one of the study’s key conceptual contributions. Platforms are seen as sources of pressure, but also as spaces where alternative feelings, identities, and lifestyles can be imagined. The past

nearly becomes an escape, but never a complete one. It remains tied to the digital conditions that make it recognizable, desirable, and socially validated. Accordingly, digitally mediated nostalgia should be understood as a longing for something beyond digital culture, yet constructed within digital platforms. The identified paradox strengthens the study's broader argument that Gen Z's nostalgia for unlived eras is not only about recalling the past itself, but about negotiating contemporary digital life through algorithmically circulated and collectively validated images of the past.

5.4 Nostalgia as Identity, Taste, and Collective Belonging

Following this paradox, the final layer of the discussion concerns how Gen Z consumers use digitally mediated nostalgia as a symbolic resource for identity expression, taste, and collective belonging. Once the past becomes visible, idealized, and socially meaningful, it can be incorporated into everyday practices through fashion, objects, reposts, filters, and celebrity references. Moreover, nostalgia becomes performative: a way for Gen Z consumers to communicate who they are, what they value, and where they feel they belong.

This connects to CCT as presented by Arnould & Thompson (2005), where, in the context of this study, the past functions not only as a historical reference but also as a symbolic representation that participants can adopt and adapt. Here, we posit that within digitally mediated nostalgia, identity work is constructed not only through material consumption but also through digital behaviors such as saving, reposting, liking, sharing, styling, and imitation. A 90s outfit, Y2K visual style, a retro camera filter, or a 70s-inspired music aesthetic can be a way of performing individuality, authenticity and relatability. Thus, nostalgia is not only about recalling the past but also about using the past to construct a desirable version of the present.

Accordingly, the idea that aesthetic meanings are collectively produced rather than naturally embedded in objects or styles can be seen among behaviors like commenting, reposting, liking and sharing, which turn nostalgic content into collective signals of belonging (Dagalp *et al.*, 2020). These actions explain why nostalgia for unlived eras is socially meaningful. Participants did not engage with the past in isolation, but through digital communities where likes are constantly displayed, interpreted and validated collectively. However, this process remains selective. Participants were not attempting to fully recreate past lifestyles, but to borrow specific aesthetic and emotional qualities from them. Gen Z consumers can adopt the eras' appearances, moods, or styles without accepting their full historical reality. This is why nostalgia can move easily across fashion, music, media, and lifestyle references, as it offers flexible cultural material that can be adapted into the present.

Hence, the thesis shows that digitally mediated nostalgia is both an individual and a collective process. Individually, it allows Gen Z consumers to express their tastes, values, and aspirational selves. Collectively, it creates shared codes through which users recognize and validate each other's emotional attachment to the past. This reinforces the broader argument of the discussion: nostalgia without memory is not simply a private longing, but a socially constructed practice through which Gen Z consumers make the past usable for contemporary identity, belonging, and cultural participation.

6 Conclusion

By examining the relationship between platform mechanics, aesthetic characteristics and collective meaning-making, this thesis addressed the central research question: *How do Gen Z consumers interpret and construct digitally mediated nostalgia for past eras they have not experienced?*

In answering this question, the study conceptualizes nostalgia as an active, socially constructed, and technologically mediated process of present-oriented meaning-making. In simpler terms, this study does not look at nostalgia as a private, randomly triggered emotion about the past. Instead, it is seen as something young consumers actively build together online, using social media to create a version of history that helps them make sense of their lives today. These empirical findings, grounded in a constructivist paradigm and a relativist ontology, demonstrate that Gen Z's longing for pre-lived eras begins and continues across four interconnected dimensions: platform and algorithmic exposure, aesthetic simplification, collective validation, and identity reconstruction.

6.1 Research Aims

Overall, the aim of this study was to explore how Gen Z consumers engage with and interpret nostalgic representations of unexperienced past eras within contemporary consumer culture, with an emphasis on the role of digital environments in shaping this process.

6.2 Research Objectives

To fulfill the aim, the study addressed its objectives through empirical findings. First, by evaluating platform exposure, the research showed how algorithmic recommendation loops and “explore” feeds act as managers of user attention, changing consumption from active search to passive, repeated exposure to the past. Second, the study explored how Gen Z constructs nostalgic meaning without lived memory. The data revealed that participants rely heavily on picking up aesthetic fragments through this repeated exposure to inform their emotional connections to the un-lived past. Additionally, the research analyzed how these digital interactions contribute to work on nostalgia, identity, and collective validation. Gen Z consumers employ idealized versions of history to express their personalities and tastes while critiquing modern digital life. Finally, the study investigated how platform features, like comment sections, take individuals' thoughts and feelings and turn them into shared reality. These online communities allow users to cross-reference their feelings to collectively reach peer alignment on what the past means for them.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this thesis offer practical guidance for marketers trying to capture the attention of Gen Z digital natives. First, marketers should understand that when targeting this demographic, accuracy is less important than visual and emotional recognizability. The findings suggest that Gen Z may respond less to historically complete representations of the past and more to nostalgic cues that are visually recognizable and easy to resonate with. Because Gen Z interacts with bits and pieces of history scattered throughout their feeds, campaigns do not require elaborate backstories. Instead, brands could make use of retro filters

or trending audios to make content that is easily shared, remixed, and reshared within short-form video formats. Second, branding strategies could directly play into the consumer tensions found in this study, especially the digital fatigue and desire for “organic” connection. Marketing campaigns that push products or experiences as ways to unplug or simplify daily life may resonate well with younger consumers who feel the pressures of constant connectivity. Finally, brands could endeavor to create digital spaces that invite consumers to comment and interact with their peers, helping the brand to gain social legitimacy through online co-creation.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides insight into how Gen Z consumers interpret and construct digitally mediated nostalgia for unlived eras, its findings should be understood within the bounds of its qualitative and interpretive nature. The study prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability, meaning that the findings do not aim to represent all Gen Z consumers, but rather to illuminate how nostalgia is constructed among digitally active participants who regularly engage with past-themed content. This is consistent with the study’s constructionist approach, which focuses on meaning-making rather than on measurable or causal relationships.

A first limitation concerns participant sampling. The study is based on a small group of Gen Z participants selected through purposive sampling, which enables relevant insights but may also limit the diversity of perspectives covered. Since the participants were selected for actively engaging with nostalgic or past-themed content, the analysis may overrepresent consumers who are highly invested in digital nostalgia culture. Gen Z consumers who engage less frequently with TikTok, Instagram, or nostalgic aesthetics may interpret the past differently. To expand on this, future research could explore quantitative methods to measure whether lower social media engagement correlates with less attachment to unlived eras, or an explicit comparison between active online creators and passive consumers.

A second limitation concerns the platforms used in the study. The research focuses on TikTok and Instagram, two highly visual and algorithmically driven platforms. These contexts are appropriate for examining digitally mediated nostalgia, but they may also promote aesthetics, trends, and visually simple forms of nostalgia. Other platforms, such as YouTube, Pinterest, and Reddit, may produce different forms of nostalgic meaning-making. Future studies could investigate other social media platforms to see if nostalgia is constructed differently. Exploring other platforms like Reddit, which is very text-dependent, or Pinterest, which is almost exclusively user-curated images on personal mood boards, may uncover nostalgia triggers beyond specific visuals, trending audio, or affirmations in the comments.

A third limitation is the role of algorithms in the research process. This study acknowledges that algorithmic systems shape which nostalgic content becomes visible and repeated, yet does not directly examine the technical operation of these systems. Instead, the focus remains on participants’ interpretations of algorithmically curated content. Therefore, the study can discuss algorithmic visibility as experienced and perceived by consumers, but not as a technical or causal analysis of a platform’s infrastructure. This limitation is also consistent with the study’s stated delimitation: the focus remains on consumers’ subjective responses to curated realities rather than on the curation process itself. Because technology moves fast, future research may benefit from long-term netnographic tracking among Gen Z

to observe how nostalgic attachments shift as algorithms cycle through trends. Additionally, future researchers should consider how generative artificial intelligence and virtual reality may alter how history is constructed and reconstructed for future generations.

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8 Use of AI

In this master's thesis, artificial intelligence tools were used as supportive instruments while maintaining academic integrity, critical thinking, and full author responsibility throughout the research process. AI was used primarily to support idea generation, refine the thesis's initial structure, and explore possible

approaches to topics related to digitally mediated nostalgia, Gen Z consumer culture, and platform-based meaning-making.

AI was also used in the early stages of the literature review as a starting point to identify potential theoretical directions and relevant academic concepts. However, the literature review itself was conducted by the authors, and no AI-generated references were used. All academic sources included in the thesis were independently searched, evaluated, selected, and interpreted by the authors.

In addition, AI and Grammarly were used to support language refinement, improve clarity, and check the organization of references in accordance with LUSEM's Harvard referencing style. Suggestions generated by AI were critically reviewed, edited, and adapted by the authors, and no AI output was used without evaluation. Additionally, Whisper AI was also used, in accordance with the course recommendations, to support the transcription of recorded interview audio. All transcripts generated with the support of Whisper AI were subsequently reviewed and checked by the authors to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' intended meanings.

The empirical material, analysis, interpretations, arguments, and conclusions presented in this thesis are based entirely on the authors' own research process, including the collection and analysis of netnographic data and interview material. The authors take full responsibility for the content, academic quality, and final form of the thesis.

9 Appendix

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? (age, background, daily routine)
2. What does a typical day look like to you? (hobbies, activities, fashion and lifestyle)

Nostalgia

3. When you hear the word *nostalgia*, what does it mean to you?
4. What kinds of things come to mind when you think about nostalgia?
5. Can you describe a time when you felt nostalgic?
 - a. What triggered that feeling?
 - b. How did it make you feel emotionally?

Vicarious Nostalgia

6. Do you ever feel nostalgic for a time or era you didn't personally experience?
7. Can you give an example?
 - a. What draws you to that time?
 - i. Why does it make you feel that way (it can be a bad or good emotion)?
 - b. How do you imagine it?
8. What kinds of past eras, trends, or moments do you feel connected to?
9. Did you personally experience them, or not?
 - a. Why do you think you feel connected to these?
 - b. Do friends, family, or online communities influence this connection?
 - c. Do you think this connection is shared with others your age?

Social Media

10. How would you describe your typical use of social media?
11. What social media platforms do you use most often?
12. What do you typically do on these platforms? (scrolling, posting, searching, etc.)
13. Have you heard of how social media algorithms work?
 - a. If yes: How do you think the algorithm affects the content you see?
 - b. If no: Do you feel like the platform "learns" what you like?
 - i. How do you think this influences the type of content (nostalgic content) you see?
 - ii. How does seeing more of it change how you feel about topics or trends (certain eras)?
 - iii. Do you have examples? Does that impact the way you view these posts or topics?
 - iv. Do you like this curated content? Why or why not?
14. What kinds of content or information do you usually look for on social media?
 - a. Entertainment, trends, education, inspiration?
 - b. Does nostalgic content fit into any of these categories?

Nostalgic Content

15. Do you come across nostalgic or retro content on social media?
16. What kind of nostalgic content do you engage with?
 - a. Do you actively look for it, or does it just appear?
 - b. What makes you stop and engage with a post?

Interviewee Example

17. Can you share the nostalgic example you brought?

- a. Why did you pick this?
 - b. How did you find this?
 - c. What about it makes you feel nostalgic? (In a positive way or negative way) and why?
 - d. Where did you find it?
 - e. How often do you see this type of content?
18. Have you shared nostalgic content with others?
19. Do you feel like nostalgia is something experienced collectively online?

Nostalgia Examples

20. What are your immediate thoughts about this? How does it make you feel?
- a. Does it feel nostalgic? Why or why not?
21. What stands out visually? Emotionally?
22. If you were to comment on this post, what would you say?
23. Why do you think people tend to comment in certain ways on posts like this?
24. Do you think there's a shared sentiment in the comments? (to compare their comment against real comments)

Technology

25. Do you ever feel nostalgic for times without technology (e.g., slower routines, childhood experiences)?
- a. What specifically about those moments stands out?
 - b. Do you think social media influences this feeling?

Conclusion

26. Why do you think people your age are drawn to nostalgia?
27. Do you think nostalgia means something different for Gen Z than it does for older generations?
28. If you could choose to be born in a different time period, which one would you choose? Why?
29. Do you have anything else to add, something that we have not already discussed?

Full interview transcripts are available upon request.

Appendix B: Participant Overview

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Interview Language
Hannah	25	Female	Colombia	Spanish
Taylor	25	Female	Peru	Spanish

Sabrina	23	Female	Mexico	Spanish
Harry	18	Male	Mexico	Spanish
Justin	25	Male	USA	English
Hailey	21	Female	Portugal	English
Zara	26	Female	Mexico	English

Appendix C: Netnographic Data Overview

#	ID	Account type	Platform	Entry Point	Search term	link	Content type	Engagement cue	Comments insight
1	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	#nostalgia		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHjpvb5dW/	Video	787K likes	"Back then when games were good"
2	Adriana	TikTok	related post	#nostalgia		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHjccGGr/	Video	430.6k likes	"What I would give to go back!"
3	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	#nostalgia		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsJWNAh/	Video	61k likes	"I'm also all about physical media I love retro lifes"
4	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	#nostalgia		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsef4a/	Video	20.9k likes	"Like before phone addiction got so bad"
5	Adriana	TikTok	related post	#nostalgia		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsdgaGg/	Video	673.7k likes	"Anyone else miss being a kid"
6	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	#retroaesthetics		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsRheVh/	Video	32.5k likes	"We love the aesthetic"
7	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	#retroaesthetics		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsRNbWB/	Video	1696 likes	"I really wish"
8	Adriana	TikTok	related post	#retroaesthetics		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsRbKL/	Video	1.3M likes	"What is Earth without ART"
9	Adriana	TikTok	related post	#retroaesthetics		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHs8j2ug/	Video	86.5k	I was born in the wrong time line
10	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	#retroaesthetics		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsNREgc/	Video	6995 likes	"I'm with you"
11	Adriana	TikTok	Keyword	this is what a day in the 2000s feels like		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsNFBNo/	Video	645.3k likes	"2000s movies were peak, pls take me back"
12	Adriana	TikTok	Keyword	this is what a day in the 2000s feels like		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsFKNL/	Video	20.1k likes	"Love this"
13	Adriana	TikTok	related post	this is what a day in the 2000s feels like		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsY8mak/	Video	165.2k likes	"I feel like modern cameras records moment, the r
14	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	this is what a day in the 2000s feels like		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsACBFJ/	Video	8135 likes	"What lifes feel like when you stay off social medi
15	Adriana	TikTok	related post	this is what a day in the 2000s feels like		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsATEFJ/	Carrousel	1592	"working doesn't feel like this"
16	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag	2026 is the new 2016		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsDReu/	Video	159.9k likes	"Outfit on point"
17	Adriana	TikTok	related post	2026 is the new 2016		https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsDyPSH/	Video	55k likes	"I feel like its 2016 again!"
18	Adriana	TikTok	Hashtag		2016	https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSHsJUN4vR/	Video	5.9M likes	2015-2019 best years of all time
19	Adriana	instagram	Hashtag	#nostalgia		https://www.instagram.com/reel/D7gQAw5kiNU/	Video	2.4M likes	"Nostalgia is a feeling that we cannot express in v
20	Adriana	instagram	Hashtag	#nostalgia		https://www.instagram.com/p/DXJCJzQzCisk/7igt/	Carrousel	10.4k likes	Agree
21	Adriana	instagram	related post	#nostalgia		https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9ZD9x9tD8v/?	Carrousel	4.3M	"Time flies so fast"
22	Adriana	instagram	related post	#nostalgia		https://www.instagram.com/reel/D8pm-7HCOWG/	Video	1.5M	"Yeah I took it all for granted, and now regret it!"
23	Adriana	instagram	Hashtag	#retroaesthetics		https://www.instagram.com/reel/D0mXK07kZ-9/	Video	145k	"Before 2010 everything was better"
24	Adriana	instagram	related post	#retroaesthetics		https://www.instagram.com/p/DVeiQT4CGLq/7iq/	Video		"Makes me sad for a place that no longer exists"
25	Adriana	instagram	related post	#retroaesthetics		https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKCu8W1x80V/	Video	1.4 M	"It is so worth it"
26	Adriana	instagram	related post	#retroaesthetics		https://www.instagram.com/reel/DN_GW_ADDy7/	Video	2.2M	Ohh I need this
27	Adriana	instagram	Hashtag	#retroaesthetics		https://www.instagram.com/reel/DXFLceXkQ-X/?	Video	26.6k	"We as a societe can bring back rotary phones"

****Full data set available upon request****

Appendix D: Coding Table

Raw empirical example	Code	Sub-theme	Theme
Participants described encountering nostalgic content through TikTok's For You Page, Instagram Explore, hashtags, and repeated recommendations.	Passive exposure to nostalgic content	Platform visibility	Platform and algorithmic exposure
"The algorithm... pushes this kind of content to people similar to me."	Algorithmic push	Algorithmic repetition	Platform and algorithmic exposure
Participants explained that once they liked or watched nostalgic content, similar posts appeared repeatedly.	Engagement-based repetition	Feedback loop of exposure	Platform and algorithmic exposure
Similar nostalgic posts appeared across personal and anonymous accounts.	Standardized visibility	Platform-led trend circulation	Platform and algorithmic exposure
Viral posts about old football shoes, 2000s culture, Y2K fashion, or "2026 is the new 2016" created shared awareness of past eras.	Viral nostalgic trends	Accelerated trend cycles	Platform and algorithmic exposure
Participants described the past through filters, old camera textures, grain, tones, fashion, music, and visual style.	Aesthetic cues	Visual and sensory recognition	Aesthetic simplification and mediation
"The filter... like a very old Digicam... and the song..."	Vintage filter recognition	The past as a sensory "vibe"	Aesthetic simplification and mediation
Participants associated older camera effects, low resolution, warm tones, and analog textures with authenticity.	Retro technology as authentic	Mediated authenticity	Aesthetic simplification and mediation
Participants discussed fashion from the 90s, disco aesthetics, Y2K style, and minimalist past looks.	Past eras as style codes	Aestheticized past	Aesthetic simplification and mediation
Participants recognized that nostalgic content often ignored political, economic, or social difficulties of the past.	Selective representation	Idealization of the past	Aesthetic simplification and mediation
Comments such as "life was better" or "I was born in the wrong timeline" appeared repeatedly under nostalgic posts.	Shared longing	Collective validation	Collective interpretation, remix and validation
Participants said reading comments helped them feel that others shared the same nostalgia.	Emotional reassurance	Comment sections as validation spaces	Collective interpretation, remix and validation
"I wasn't the only crazy one."	Normalizing nostalgia for unlivd eras	Collective legitimacy	Collective interpretation, remix and validation
Participants described sharing nostalgic posts with friends through DMs or reposting.	Peer sharing	Social circulation of nostalgia	Collective interpretation, remix and validation
Users repeated similar captions, sounds, filters, and editing styles across posts.	Repetition and imitation	Remix and trend participation	Collective interpretation, remix and validation
Participants imagined wanting to experience eras they had not lived through, such as the 70s, 80s, 90s, or early 2000s.	Longing for unlivd eras	Nostalgia without memory	Reconstructing the past
"I only know it from images and from videos."	Mediated knowledge of the past	Imagined access to history	Reconstructing the past
Participants described the past as calmer, more authentic, more intimate, or less performative.	Organic past	Past as alternative to the present	Reconstructing the past
Participants contrasted the past with today's social media pressure, perfection, and digital fatigue.	Staged present	Critique of contemporary digital life	Reconstructing the past
Participants admired past aesthetics but did not necessarily want to fully return to the past.	Selective longing	Paradox of nostalgic desire	Reconstructing the past
Participants used past aesthetics through fashion, music, reposts, filters, celebrities, and objects.	Performing nostalgia	Identity and taste work	Reconstructing the past
Participants admired retro fashion or celebrity aesthetics as something they wanted to imitate.	Aesthetic imitation	Nostalgia as lifestyle performance	Reconstructing the past
Nostalgic content helped participants express taste, belonging, individuality, and authenticity.	Nostalgia as self-expression	Identity construction	Reconstructing the past