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FEVER DREAMS AND *THE FUTURE OF NOSTALGIA* ON TIKTOK

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From politics to popular culture, no aspect of contemporary society appears to be immune from nostalgia – the bittersweet emotion commonly associated with “a sentimental longing for the past” (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019). At the same time, despite the short duration of their personal biographies and memories, young people are making affective investments in social media platforms, like TikTok, that appear to enable the collective (re)production, consumption, and circulation of the lost cultural objects of our past in the form of “nostalgic readymades” (Boym, 2001, p.351) such as reboots of defunct brands and revived songs. In one sense, the saturation of nostalgia in media ecosystems suggests that Frederic Jameson’s (1991) post-modern “nostalgia mode” prophecy has come true as a durable aesthetic feature of late capitalism. Yet, changes in digital media technology have since introduced new *modalities* (Pickering & Keightley, 2006) in, through, and by which nostalgic experience, expression, and meaning-making can occur (Niemeyer, 2014). In this other sense, there is something different about the “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1961) to digitally mediated social formations of nostalgia today. While the political economy of platforms renders nostalgia more distant, commodified, and quantified (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021; Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020; Drakopoulou, 2017; Lizardi, 2017), their affordances also permit active “nostalgizing” (Niemeyer, 2014) and new communicative practices of remembering and sensemaking (Pentzold & Menke, 2020).

To the extent digital media condition us to see the world through nostalgia-colored glasses at the same time that they afford new forms of nostalgic expression, the political issue at stake is whether these emergent social formations of nostalgia invite us to look regressively (*restoratively*) back or enable us to move forward imaginatively (*reflectively*) in the face of the complex problems facing societies around the world, as Svetlana Boym (2001) invites us to consider in *The Future of Nostalgia*.

In response to this problematic, this paper contributes to the growing body of literature that interrogates the modalities of nostalgia afforded by digital media technologies (Niemeyer & Siebert, 2023) with a focus on its performative dimension within one social formation of nostalgia – the TikTok aesthetic. Specifically, this paper draws on a

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qualitative, artifact analysis of the popular #nostalgia aesthetic to explore how TikTok's socio-technical affordances enable and/or constrain Boym's (2001) restorative and reflective modalities of nostalgia and the imaginaries they enable as a basis for action. TikTok offers an ideal setting in which to explore this dynamic for two reasons. First, teens and young adults, which TikTok targets (Zeng et al, 2021), have been described in the popular press as one of the most nostalgic generations with more than 140B views for #nostalgia on the platform as of October 2023. Second, the literature on TikTok's affordances as "hub for creative expression" (Abidin, 2021) point to communicative forms, such as the documentary, explanatory, and interactive (Schellewald, 2021), that suggest the possibility for new nostalgic practices to emerge in a socio-technical environment with distinctive temporal, spatial, and affective dynamics owing to the social structuring effects of its algorithm (e.g., Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, Hautea et al, 2021, Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I review the literature on digital media and nostalgia to explicate an elusive concept. Echoing Pickering and Keightley's (2006) invocation to explore nostalgia's "modalities," I suggest that extant typologies of nostalgia as either an affective "mood" or a "mode" of representation (Grainge, 2004) limit our ability to appreciate how nostalgia constitutes an active communicative process of mediation. Nostalgia, by its very definition, rearticulates time and space in response to the affective sensation of loss. Drawing on performance studies and emotion theory, I conceptualize nostalgia as an "emotive" (Reddy, 2001) to foreground its performative dynamics and allow for further study of nostalgia as a performance or "narrative event" (Bauman, 1986) that connects time, space, and affective feeling through the "dialogic imagination" (Bahktin, 1981).

Second, applying this theoretical framework to the study of TikTok's affordances for performative nostalgia, I conducted an artifact analysis (Given, 2008) of the most viewed video connected to #nostalgia on the platform (figure 1) with a widely used original sound. I examined how its spatial, temporal, and affective affordances enabled and/or constrained nostalgia's restorative and reflective (Boym, 2001) dimensions drawing on a multimodal analysis of the content of the video (inclusive of its visual, aural, and textual dimensions) and its top comments as well as one antecedent and three resultant TikTok videos that used its original sound. While prior studies emphasize the constraints of algorithmic environments on nostalgia as a mnemonic resource (Kidd & Nieto McAvoy, 2023; Jacobsen, & Beer, 2021; Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014), this study's focus on a single artifact permitted a fine-grained analytical distinction between Bauman (1986)'s *narrated event*, or the so-called memory of the nostalgic object, and the *narrative event*, or the performative triggering event represented by the act of a creator posting a nostalgic TikTok video.



Figure 1. *The primary artifact selected for analysis, the most viewed TikTok in #nostalgiacore at the time of this study in May 2022, centers on a rendition of a song (Fallen Down) about a child lost in a magical underground from the 2015 2D Toby Fox video game, Undertale, as played by a TikTok creator on a dilapidated, out-of-tune piano at their school.*

Showing how the narrative event is taken up and remade within and beyond the #nostalgiacore community through platform affordances (Davis, 2020), I argue that TikTok affords a digital place-making resource (Basaraba, 2023) for young people to enact liminal performances (Turner, 1969; Schechner & Brady, 2013) that permit the imaginative social construction of nostalgic worlds in which new subjectivities and possibilities for action emerge through subsequent performances. Through the interplay of its spatial and temporal dynamics, TikTok affords this potentiality by producing a feeling of the “thick present” (Abbott, 2016; Haraway, 2016) – or the spatialized stretching of the present moment into a liminal time-space. This precondition of temporal presence (Coleman, 2020, 2018), in turn, provides a spatial terrain upon which subsequent creative practices, like nostalgic place-making, can occur.

Ultimately, I contend that these fever dream-like performances blend the restorative and reflective dimensions of nostalgia, resisting normative assumptions of nostalgia operating on a linear temporal horizon of action (i.e., backward/past vs. forward/future) as its expressive form is made, remade, and algorithmically circulated. Contributing to recent work on “algorithmic nostalgia” (Kidd & Nieto McAvoy, 2023), these findings suggest that creative and mnemonic practices are entangled in algorithmically structured aesthetic social formations of nostalgia and invite further consideration to how TikTok encourages the “mnemonic imagination” (Keightley & Pickering, 2012)

through performance. Future research might explore what participation in these formations means to young people in the context of the emergent digital place-making practices (Basaraba, 2023) illustrated by this study.

In conclusion, while it is easy to dismiss the popularity of nostalgia on TikTok as symptomatic of the latest generational nostalgia wave inviting retreat to the past, technology changes our relationship with time and space – the terrain upon which nostalgia takes root – calling attention to how nostalgia changes, performatively, in the interstitial spaces and varied time horizons the platform's affordances permit.

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