

Nostalgia – the Sentimental Feeling We All Have

In this series we publish blog posts written by our undergraduate students for the PB101 Foundations of Psychological Science course. Here, Hanying Yao explores the concept of nostalgia: what it is, when and why we might experience it, as well as its potential psychological benefits and downsides.

It's the end of a long day. From flipping through beige photographs, to listening to that song you used to jam to with your buddies, you pick up fragmented pieces of the past in present tense, and proceed to relive the long-forgotten moments with loved ones. As you immerse in the good old days, you can't help but feel... nostalgic.

What is Nostalgia?

Defined as “a sentimental longing for the past”, nostalgia is a bittersweet feeling when you are reminded of a memorable occasion and feel a sentimental yearning for the past. It is a universal emotion, regardless of age, race and gender ([Madoglou, 2018](#)). Nostalgia is often triggered in times of transition and loneliness, or in cues of childhood, music, old pictures, and odour ([Yang et al., 2022](#)). Due to the irreversibility of time, the feeling of nostalgia seems inevitable, but what's more behind that?

Mental Transportation

In *Ratatouille*, when the food critic took that one bite of Remy's Ratatouille, with the explosion of drooling flavour and drooling odour, drastically, he “teleported back” to his childhood. Obviously, nostalgia is more than an ordinary memory recall – it is reliving a recollection of the past ([Sedikides et al., 2023](#)), and you feel like you're re-experiencing the scene; you're re-collecting the emotions... But how is that achieved?

Let's first look inside our brains. Autonoetic consciousness is our cognitive capability to vividly situate ourselves in temporal states (including past, present, and future), and to experience the sentiment of previous events. Nostalgia's magical ability to relive memory is closely associated with it: while you're presented with a nostalgic trigger, through the

neural activation of the medial prefrontal cortex, the reminisced event is retrieved from the episodic memory (i.e., the memory for personal experiences) with autonoetic consciousness. Excitingly, we are then able to relive our dearest memories through the re-experience of personal schemas (i.e., cognitive patterns) associated with the event. This is how mental transportation (i.e., mental capability to travel in time) is made possible ([Evans et al., 2021](#)).

Mental transportation helps to increase the vividness of one's nostalgic experience, and this is statistically proven to be able to mediate the bring-about of multiple psychological benefits, including self-esteem, subjective well-being and sense of belonging ([Sedikides et al., 2008](#); Routledge, 2015; [Evans et al., 2021](#)).

Yet, note that all these advantages claimed are based on experimental correlation observation. We're not quite sure why – the conferral of how nostalgia commences such proximal gains remains uncertain. We can consider the effects of rosy retrospection, a cognitive bias that sheds a disproportionate amount of positive light onto the past – you may notice that during nostalgia, memories are often reinterpreted in an appreciative comparison to the present ([Coleman, 2018](#)).

“Wish we can turn back time, to the good old days.” Old days aren't necessarily good, but we always perceive them to be.

Identity and Self-continuity

Yes, we wish we could turn back time – but life is a continuous flux of events. We encounter events with our varying emotions; our body changes every single second; our personality shifts – what is there to ensure that we are the same person over time? How do we persist our sense of self to be continuous? You might be surprised, but recent studies suggest the answer to be – nostalgia.

Allow me to first introduce the backbone of our identity – self-continuity. Self-continuity is the sense of connectedness between one's past and present self (James, 1890; [Izadifar, 2022](#)). Such a term first emerged when William James proposed the concept of an active-self constantly evaluating our own behaviour to compose a continuous sense of life out of discrete events (James, 1890). To initiate an action, we must process the thoughts and judge decision through established experiences. We can see that self-

continuity acts as a pre-requisite to the functioning of human behaviours ([Sedikides et al., 2023](#)).

And guess what? There is a unique linkage between nostalgia and self-continuity. In a study, participants were asked to write and reflect on a nostalgic occasion (the control group with a normal occasion), then to provide evaluation on statements like “I feel connected to my past.”. The results revealed an amplified effect on self-continuity with participants that experienced nostalgia ([Sedikides et al., 2016](#)). In a case study, nostalgia was also shown to engender repatriates’ self-continuity in their host country ([Zou et al., 2018](#)).

One of the major explanations to such link is using social connectedness as the mediator: we internalize intimate relationship and execute practices of reflected appraisal (i.e., the process of how we believe others perceives us modifies our self-concept). As a result, one’s current self blends with the past conceived perceptions from others. This engenders self-continuity. It bridges discrete events in life and builds a continuous life trajectory ([Sedikides et al., 2016](#)). Hence, some scientists suggest that nostalgia exists because of our need of self-continuity.

Such idea was not left unchallenged – have you ever felt terribly remorseful when you reminisce of the old days? Claiming that nostalgia in turn leaves a person “stuck in the past”, [Iyer and Jetten \(2011\)](#) attempted to flip the argument: could nostalgia instead make one depreciate reality? Well, it may. But there has been increasing evidence that nostalgia serves in a redemption trajectory, i.e., emotion progresses from disheartening starts to constructive ends ([Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018](#)), hence scholars argue that the eventual outcome of nostalgia still favours self-continuity.

Existential Intervention

Other than the proximal advantages of nostalgia, it has also been dubbed as an existential resource to substantiate the meaning of life for us. Often involving the reminiscence of influential or wholesome periods of time, nostalgia impacts our perception of the meaning of life by reminding us of our mortality and increasing our sense of identity.

For empirical evidence, researchers manipulated nostalgic exposure by presenting

popular songs, scented oils, music lyrics and active recall of life events, and they all saw an increase in perceived meaning of life in participants. Regarding threats to existential meaning, interestingly, researchers prepared philosophical essays which highlighted the insignificance of humans in the universe. This time, instead, the loss of meaningfulness triggered our nostalgia. They also discussed the possibility of inducing nostalgia as a clinical intervention to mitigate the threat of meaninglessness in life ([Routledge et al., 2012](#); [Routledge et al., 2016](#)).

Perhaps it is this innate desire to peruse a meaning of life, and to fight against the threats of mortality – it is assuring to see how nostalgia serves as an emotional shield in our lives. Sometimes, you may look back and reminisce, but ultimately, you've come to realise the past is what make you, you.

- This post was originally written as part of PB101: Foundations of Psychological Science, which is a core course on the BSc Psychological and Behavioural Science. It has been published with the permission of the author.
- The opinions in this post are of the author, not of the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science or LSE.
- Cover image by Lisa Fotios from [Pexels](#).

References

- Batcho. (2013). NOSTALGIA: The Bittersweet History of a Psychological Concept. *History of Psychology*, 16(3), 165–176. [Link](#).
- Coleman, A. (2018). Rosy Retrospection. Masters thesis. [Link](#).
- Evans, Reyes, J., Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., & Fetterman, A. K. (2021). Mental transportation mediates nostalgia's psychological benefits. *Cognition and Emotion*, 35(1), 84–95. [Link](#).
- Hong, Sedikides, C., & Wildschut, T. (2022). How Does Nostalgia Conduce to Global Self-Continuity? The Roles of Identity Narrative, Associative Links, and Stability. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 48(5), 735–749. [Link](#).
- Iyer, A. & Jetten, J. (2011). What's Left Behind. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101 (1), 94-108. [Link](#).
- Izadifar. (2022). The Neurobiological Basis of the Conundrum of Self-continuity: A

- Hypothesis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 740542–740542. [Link](#).
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*, Vol. 1. Henry Holt and Co.
 - Lieberman, M. D., Straccia, M. A., Meyer, M. L., Du, M., & Tan, K. M. (2019). Social, self,(situational), and affective processes in medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC): Causal, multivariate, and reverse inference evidence. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 99, 311-328. [Link](#).
 - Madoglou, A., Gkinopoulos, T., Xanthopoulos, P., & Kalamaras, D. (2017). Representations of autobiographical nostalgic memories: Generational effect, gender, nostalgia proneness and communication of nostalgic experiences. *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences*, 7(1), 60-88. [Link](#).
 - Panelas. (1982). *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. Fred Davis. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 87(6), 1425–1427. [Link](#).
 - Routledge, C. (2015). *Nostalgia: A psychological resource*. Routledge.
 - Routledge, C., Arndt, J., Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Hart, C. M., Juhl, J., Vingerhoets, A. J. J. M., & Schlotz, W. (2011). The Past Makes the Present Meaningful: Nostalgia as an Existential Resource. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(3), 638–652. [Link](#).
 - Routledge, C., Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Juhl, J., & Arndt, J. (2012). The power of the past: Nostalgia as a meaning-making resource. *Memory (Hove)*, 20(5), 452–460. [Link](#).
 - Routledge, C., Roylance, C., & Abeyta, A. A. (2016). Nostalgia as an existential intervention: Using the past to secure meaning in the present and the future. In P. Russo-Netzer, S. E. Schulenberg, & A. Batthyany (Eds.), *Clinical perspectives on meaning: Positive and existential psychotherapy* (pp. 343–362). Springer International Publishing AG. [Link](#).
 - Sedikides, C., Hong, E. K., & Wildschut, T. (2023). Self-Continuity. *Annual review of psychology*, 74, 333–361. [Link](#).
 - Sedikides, Wildschut, T., Cheung, W.-Y., Routledge, C., Hepper, E. G., Arndt, J., Vail, K., Zhou, X., Brackstone, K., & Vingerhoets, A. J. J. M. (2016). Nostalgia Fosters Self-Continuity: Uncovering the Mechanism (Social Connectedness) and Consequence (Eudaimonic Well-Being). *Emotion (Washington, D.C.)*, 16(4), 524–539. [Link](#).
 - Sedikides, & Wildschut, T. (2018). Finding Meaning in Nostalgia. *Review of General Psychology*, 22(1), 48–61. [Link](#).
 - Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., Gaertner, L., Routledge, C., & Arndt, J. (2008).

Nostalgia as enabler of self continuity. In F. Sani (Ed.), *Self continuity: Individual and collective perspectives* (pp. 227–239). Psychology Press. [Link](#).

- Yang, Wildschut, T., Izuma, K., Gu, R., Luo, Y. L. L., Cai, H., & Sedikides, C. (2022). Patterns of Brain Activity Associated with Nostalgia: A Social-Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. [Link](#).
- Zou, X., Wildschut, T., Cable, D., & Sedikides, C. (2018). Nostalgia for host culture facilitates repatriation success: The role of self-continuity. *Self and Identity*, 17(3), 327-342. [Link](#).