

A Critical Review on the influence of Nostalgia in undermining Psychological and Social Health.

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Abstract

Nostalgia, originally considered a neurological disease, has evolved into a predominantly bittersweet albeit positive emotion linked to enhanced well-being and social connectedness. However, recent findings demonstrate that nostalgia also leads to negative affect, poor psychological well-being, and promote socially undesirable attitudes and behaviours. Thus, this critical review aims to synthesize existing evidence that focus on the negative consequences of nostalgia at the individual, relational and societal level. At the individual level, individual differences such as personality and attachment style, sociodemographic characteristics, and coping strategies intensify nostalgia's maladaptive effect and worsening psychological distress. At the social level, nostalgia through ingroup identification leads to out-group hostility, and intergroup conflict, particularly at the nationalistic or collective contexts. Further, it is also found that nostalgia influences ethical decision-making by promoting maladaptive behaviours in individuals such as resisting social innovation. There is also a need for longitudinal, experimental, and cross-cultural research to get a deeper insight into the complex mechanisms of nostalgia and unravel its boundary conditions. Implications for political discourse, clinical practice and academic research is discussed.

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INTRODUCTION:

Nostalgia, from being considered a “neurological disease” by early physicians, has now transitioned to being recognized as a predominantly positive and restorative phenomenon (Hofer, 1934/1688; Sedikides et al., 2008). Existing studies has shown that nostalgia is capable of enhancing mood, promoting social connections, and acts as an adaptive coping strategy in the face of adversities such as loneliness, mortality, or uncertainty (Routledge et al., 2013; Umar Ismail et al., 2018). However, this view is being challenged by a limited yet growing scientific evidence. Recent research shows that while nostalgia has restorative benefits,

it also encompasses a “bitter potential” that exacerbates the negative affect, promotes maladaptive cognition and behaviour, and can even promote attitudes and actions that are socially undesirable or individually harmful (Verplanken, 2012).

Primarily, nostalgia serves as a buffer between the past memories and the present. At its core, nostalgia involves the psychological process of. This connection between the memories of a meaningful or idealized past and present experiences can enhance perceived social support, security, and belongingness (Wildschut et al., 2010).

Yet, this same mechanism, when triggered in the context of collective or national nostalgia, strengthens in-group boundaries by reinforcing out-group boundaries (Smeekes, 2015).

Nostalgia's effect on well-being and social functioning at the individual level is not entirely positive. A growing body of literature suggests that nostalgic reflection during identity discontinuity can intensify psychological distress (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2016). Moreover, the adverse effects of nostalgia depend on multiple factors such as individual differences, personality, socioeconomic status, and everyday living context. For example, individuals with increased loneliness can experience nostalgia as a reminder of what is missing in the present, thereby exacerbating the negative emotions (Newman et al., 2020). This highlights nostalgia's bittersweet nature and the importance of contextual and individual differences in understanding its consequences.

This critical review thus synthesizes the existing evidence on the negative consequences of nostalgia. Through this review we will critically examine the influence of nostalgia at the individual, relational and societal level and explore the mechanisms and boundary conditions of this effect. Further we also discuss the implications and propose directions for future research in this field. Recognizing nostalgia's complex role beyond sentimental reminiscing can inform interventions aimed at mitigating its darker impacts and fostering more inclusive, resilient social bonds.

Individual Differences and Psychological Vulnerability

A number of studies have shown that individual differences such as personality, coping style and sociodemographic characteristics have a profound impact on nostalgia's emotional consequences. The adverse effect of nostalgia is profound

among individuals who are habitual worriers, high on neuroticism, insecure attachment, maladaptive rumination and so on. For instance, Verplanken (2012) found that among individuals who habitually worry, recalling past memories can increase the symptoms of anxiety and depression. However, among less worried individuals there is an opposite effect, wherein nostalgia improves their mood. Among this vulnerable group, nostalgia can trigger an unfavorable comparison between an idealized past and a troubled present leading to increased distress.

Similarly, Cavanagh et al. (2015) showed that nostalgia only facilitated sadness recovery after loss for securely attached individuals; those with higher attachment insecurity recovered less and, in some cases, worsened after nostalgic recall. Garrido (2018) also shows that for individuals prone to depression, nostalgic reflection may result in negative affective outcomes. This could be further exacerbated by the influence of rumination and maladaptive coping styles.

Socioeconomic status can sharpen nostalgia's negative edge. Newman (2022) found that among low-income individuals, nostalgia proneness predicts lower life satisfaction. Age and gender also moderate nostalgia's effects. Kim and Yim (2018) found that, in older women, nostalgic prompts can increase self-discontinuity (particularly in relation to body image) and reduce perceived youthfulness and positive mood, with corresponding negative attitudes toward nostalgic advertisements, whereas older men tend to experience youth-enhancing benefits.

Nostalgia's role in undermining Well-Being

Daily and cross-sectional studies demonstrate that nostalgia is reliably associated with negative affect including sadness, regret, and frustration at both

dividual and momentary levels. Notably, this is not confined to those with pre-existing vulnerabilities. Even people with secure attachments or high income can experience nostalgia as a poignant reminder of past joys and current loss (e.g., during anniversaries, bereavement, or major transitions). For instance, Newman and Sachs (2020) found that in the context of daily life, nostalgia not only fails to buffer against loneliness but can exacerbate negative affect in the presence of loneliness. In their study, it was found that both nostalgia and loneliness reduced positive affect and increased negative affect in daily reports. Notably, the negative effect of nostalgia on mood was stronger on days when loneliness was high. This suggests that nostalgia amplifies rather than compensates this interaction. Further, Newman et al. (2020) showed that experiencing nostalgia in daily life is generally associated with lower well-being, including more negative emotions and less life satisfaction. Results from the lagged analyses revealed that nostalgic feelings led to mixed or sometimes even negative effects on well-being, on the same day or next day.

Nostalgia can also trigger feelings of envy, particularly envy for self. Newman et al. (2025) in a cross-sectional study found a positive association between nostalgia and envy, even after controlling for the effects of demographics and personality traits. Further, their experimental studies show that nostalgia increases envy while regret and envy for one's past mediate this relationship. Daily states of nostalgia were positively related to daily feelings of envy after controlling for daily negative events. Lagged analyses indicated bidirectional effects, such that nostalgia predicted greater envy on the following day and vice versa (Newman et al., 2025).

Nostalgia and Relationships.

Nostalgia, while often perceived as a social emotion, it carries notable negative consequences in social and romantic

relationships that warrant critical attention. Nostalgia does not universally enhance relationship satisfaction and romantic motivation. According to Juhl et al. (2012), it is only among individuals with low attachment avoidance, nostalgia increases relationship satisfaction and desire to pursue relationships. On the other hand, it diminishes relationship satisfaction among those in a relationship and further, it is noted that it diminishes the desire to pursue a relationship among those who are single among individuals high on attachment avoidance. Insecure attachment or avoidant relational styles, therefore, act as boundaries for nostalgia's relational benefits.

One prominent concern, in the context of nostalgia's influence on social relationships is its dual role. While it enhances in-group cohesion, on the other hand while it can also aggravate prejudiced attitudes toward out-groups. Studies of national or collective nostalgia reveal that longing for an idealized past tied to group identity can strengthen in-group solidarity but at the cost of increasing prejudice, hostility, and sharper social boundaries against perceived outsiders. For example, national nostalgia among majority group members tends to promote an ethnic understanding of identity that excludes immigrants and minorities, thereby undermining social cohesion and exacerbating intergroup tensions (Smeekes, 2015).

Moreover, collective nostalgia can also increase the negative emotions toward out-groups, which in turn leads to discriminatory or defensive collective actions. This emotional polarization thus interferes with constructive intergroup relations and could also escalate social conflict. This effect is particularly profound when groups perceive their cultural continuity or political autonomy under threat. The mobilization of resentment, rooted in feelings of insecurity, relative deprivation, and powerlessness, also

underlies collective nostalgia's negative social impact, linking it to support for exclusionary political agendas and reinforcing social divisions (Cheung et al., 2021; Rogenhofer et al., 2022).

On a more personal level, nostalgia does not uniformly enhance well-being; when individuals experience disruptions in identity continuity—that is, when the connection between past and selves or groups is weak—nostalgia can paradoxically reduce well-being and exacerbate feelings of distress (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2016).

Facilitating Maladaptive and Unethical Behaviors

Notably, with environmental issues, Wang and Chao (2020) provide experimental evidence that nostalgia nudges consumers away from “green” or sustainable choices, mediated by an enhancement of past orientation and further amplified by mortality salience. This implies that nostalgia narrows attention to the past and away from collective needs for adaptation and future well-being.

The tendency in nostalgic reflection to glorify the past often transcends itself as resistance to change and innovation. Studies by Dang et al. (2024) and Kremer et al. (2022) show that nostalgia can increase skepticism toward new technologies, artificial intelligence, and automated products. While social connectedness fostered by nostalgia can promote interest in technology, the more reliable finding is a barrier effect. Nostalgia by evoking uncertainty about change, enhances one's preference for tradition. This diminishes openness to innovation and willingness to adopt new products.

Surprisingly, nostalgia is also found to play a role in ethical decision making. Li et al. (2023) found that nostalgia through increased sense of social connectedness

promotes unethical behaviour such as bribe taking. Nostalgia by lowering psychological barriers facilitates bribe-taking particularly when it is framed as relational or friendship-building. In controlled experiments, individuals recalling nostalgic memories reported greater willingness to involve in bribery and exhibited increased bribe-taking in behavioural games. This effect was profound, when bribery was presented as socially meaningful act that helps maintain relationships. Social connectedness mediated this effect, while positive affect or moral disengagement did not, suggesting that nostalgia's social virtue could lead to unethical relationships and behaviours. Nostalgia can also increase risk taking among individuals through its social connection mechanism. Zou et al. (2018) found that nostalgia led to greater risk-taking behaviour in the context of financial risks. This effect was enhanced by individuals' perception of family support triggered by nostalgia.

Lammers et al. (2025) extend nostalgia's negative potential from the personal to the societal domain. It was found that nostalgia can enhance favourable attitudes toward harmful or regressive past conditions, such as opposition to smoking bans, car safety measures, and gender equality policies. Both correlational and experimental studies show that nostalgia-prone individuals, and those exposed to nostalgic induction, express greater preference for outdated practices and disbelief in the necessity of health and social reforms even among people with direct incentives for progress, like non-smokers or feminists.

Mechanisms, Moderators and Boundary Conditions through which Nostalgia functions

Time perspective theory helps illuminate why nostalgia can sometimes lead to misleading judgments or distorted interpretations. Nostalgia increases “past

orientation” an attentional focus and cognitive bias toward the past which distracts from future-oriented thinking and action. This shift in focus results in decreased willingness to adopt sustainable practices, support innovation, or change societal norms. In the contexts where thinking about the future is crucial (e.g., climate change, public health responses) this backward pull of nostalgia can undermine collective adaptive action.

Self-continuity plays a pivotal role in determining the influence of nostalgia either in the positive or negative direction. When individuals feel an identity “crisis” nostalgia can intensify feelings of loss, or discontinuity, especially among vulnerable groups like older women or those traversing life transitions, resulting in lowered well-being, youthfulness, or openness to change. For instance, Iyer and Jetten (2011) found that nostalgia improves well-being and the ability to cope only if people feel a strong continuity between their past and present identity.

Deepening social connections is often seen as nostalgia’s primary virtue. However, this same mechanism can lower moral defenses and lead to unethical behaviour such as bribe taking as seen in the findings of Li et al. (2022). Further, insecure attachment, excessive worry, socioeconomic situation and personal characteristics all serve as a prominent moderator that intensify the negative effect of nostalgia.

The effectiveness of nostalgia interventions depends on their alignment with personal orientation (“person-activity fit”). Layous et al. (2022) demonstrated that repeated, multi-week nostalgic reflection benefits only those high in dispositional nostalgia while others experience decline in well-being over time. Interventions that ignore personal fit may backfire and cause harm. Interventions or therapies leveraging nostalgia should screen carefully for these

individual factors to avoid unintended outcomes.

Methodological Critique and Future Directions

While the literature reviewed is comprehensive and employs a range of methodologies such as daily diary, cross-sectional, experimental, meta-analytic several methodological limitations and gaps constrain the generalizability and depth of current knowledge, creating avenues for future research.

The existing studies are predominantly cross-sectional in nature and depend on survey methods and self-report measures to assess nostalgia, identity continuity, emotions, and attitudes. These studies cannot establish causality. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to disentangle cause-effect relations and temporal patterns. Further, Self-reports measures are inherently prone to response and social desirability bias. Using other techniques such as ecological momentary assessment and diary methods can provide deeper insights about the complex process of nostalgia as it occurs in real life. Further, examining the neural correlates of nostalgia in the context of negative consequences could unveil the unconscious processes related to it.

Majority of the study has been conducted in the western context which limits cultural generalizability. Particularly, undergraduate students and online panel samples dominate the literature. There is a need to test the universality of nostalgia’s consequences in non-Western, collectivist, and intergenerational contexts. Cross-cultural research is important to examine how cultural factors influence nostalgia’s social functions. Additionally, exploring the role of gender, age, socioeconomic status, and political ideology could reveal how nostalgia impacts different population segments uniquely.

While much focus is on nostalgia's positive consequences, a limited number of studies has explored the negative effect. Future studies need to focus extensively on the adverse effects of nostalgia and the boundary conditions to its positive influence.

IMPLICATIONS

The recognition of nostalgia's negative consequences in social relationships has important implications across several domains.

Nostalgic appeals, especially at the collective or national level, are increasingly employed in political discourse to mobilize support by invoking a glorified past. While these appeals can enhance cohesion and identity, they posit the risk of deepening social divides by promoting discriminatory attitudes, prejudice, and antagonism toward minority or immigrant groups. Thus, it is crucial that policymakers and leaders be cautious about using nostalgic rhetoric in their discourse. Further, constructing collective memories in ways that emphasize inclusivity and shared values rather than ethnic identity boundaries should be considered.

Triggering collective nostalgia during times of perceived social or political threat can intensify conflict. Understanding the emotional mechanics by which nostalgia fosters outgroup hostility and collective action can inform conflict resolution and community-building initiatives. Interventions could focus on fostering shared narratives that bridge past and present inclusively, reducing the threat perception that drives exclusionary nostalgia.

Clinicians should recognize nostalgia's complex emotional effects on individuals, especially those experiencing disruption in identity continuity or facing socioeconomic adversity. Nostalgia can exacerbate distress and social isolation in

vulnerable groups, so therapeutic approaches should be sensitive to its double-edged nature. Encouraging constructive nostalgia that reinforces continuity and resilience, while preventing rumination or disconnection, may enhance psychological well-being.

Academically, these findings underscore the necessity for multidisciplinary, rigorous research approaches to understand nostalgia's social impact fully.

Conclusion

Nostalgia is a multifaceted emotional phenomenon with powerful implications for social relationships. On the individual level, nostalgia's effects depend heavily on identity continuity and contextual factors; where this continuity is fragmented, nostalgia may reduce well-being and complicate social functioning. Existing evidence shows that particularly in the context of collective and national nostalgia, may intensify in-group cohesion at the expense of out-group exclusion, prejudice, and hostility. Methodologically, current research is limited by cross-sectional designs, self-report methods, and limited cross-cultural exploration, and insufficient differentiation of nostalgia types. It is important to address these gaps through longitudinal, experimental, and cross-cultural research. This will help in understanding the full potential of nostalgia develop effective interventions. The implications of nostalgia's negative consequences are profound for social policy, political discourse, clinical practice, and public education. Recognizing nostalgia as a double-edged phenomenon can guide efforts to harness its positive aspects while mitigating its divisive potential, promoting social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies. In sum, nostalgia's power extends beyond personal sentiment, shaping collective identities and social realities in ways that can both unite and divide.

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