

Retro Rewind: Vicarious Nostalgia and the New Cassette Culture

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Abstract

Young consumers are increasingly drawn to outdated technologies and products, driven by a form of nostalgia for a past they never experienced. Known as vicarious nostalgia, this phenomenon is particularly evident in the music domain, where analog formats are undergoing a notable resurgence. Despite growing attention in the media and marketplace, no academic studies have yet explored vicarious nostalgia in the context of music consumption. This research employs a netnographic approach to investigate why young consumers develop emotional attachments to products introduced before their time. The analysis reveals four key dimensions underlying this phenomenon: heritage, signature sensations, distancing from digital, effortful engagement with music. Findings contribute to the understanding of emerging consumption behaviours amongst younger generations, offering implications for retro branding, cultural meaning-making, and the evolving dynamics of product life cycles.

Keywords: Vicarious nostalgia, Netnography, Music consumption, Cassette tapes

Introduction and Theoretical Overview

“Gen Z loves cassettes. But wait, how do these things work?” – Wall Street Journal

This headline from the Wall Street Journal (Pisani, 2024) captures a paradox at the heart of contemporary consumer behavior: the growing attachment to outdated technologies and products by individuals who never experienced them in their original context. From cassette tapes to analog cameras and vintage fashion, products once considered obsolete are being rediscovered – and romanticized – by younger generations.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the music context: music cassettes, vinyl records, CDs, and walkmans are experiencing a renaissance. Contemporary artists such as Taylor Swift and Kendrick Lamar are releasing their albums in analog formats that sell out within minutes, and record store owners report an increase in consumers seeking vintage analog goods (Hogan, 2024). What is especially interesting is that, as reports and news outlets highlight, the main buyers of these products are consumers who never actually experienced the analog music era (e.g., Bearne, 2024). The so-called “Spotify generation” is purchasing music albums on physical formats, effectively learning how people listened to music in the 1980s and 1990s (Bearne, 2024). Surprisingly, these consumers say that listening to analog music is partly grounded in nostalgia for them (Hogan, 2024).

This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as vicarious nostalgia, a sentiment that “deals with nostalgia for a period outside of the individual’s living memory” (Goulding, 2002, p. 542), evoked in consumers who have never directly experienced the era in question (Merchant & Rose, 2013). Stern (1992) originally described a similar concept under the term historical nostalgia, defining it as the emotional connection to, and idealization of, experiences and associations from past eras.

Although widely discussed in the media and increasingly leveraged by the market, this phenomenon within the music industry has received little to no attention in the academic literature to date. The main studies on vicarious nostalgia within the marketing literature have primarily focused on age-related vicarious nostalgia, advertising-evoked vicarious nostalgia, and its effects on brand heritage perceptions (e.g., Goulding, 2002; Merchant & Rose, 2013; Singh et al., 2020). Despite the concept being introduced over two decades ago (Goulding, 2002), it has never been examined in the context of music consumption. Moreover, the underlying motivations driving this sentiment remain unexplored. To address this gap, the present study investigates the recent resurgence in cassette tape consumption. Adopting a netnographic approach, it seeks to answer the following research question: Why do young consumers feel attached to goods introduced before they were born?

Understanding the psychological and cultural mechanisms behind this “nostalgia without memory” offers valuable insights into contemporary consumption patterns, retro branding strategies, and the lifecycle of consumer trends.

Methodology

To explore how and why young consumers develop emotional attachment to products that were introduced before their birth, this paper deploys a netnographic approach (Brown et al., 2003; Kozinets, 2019). Netnography involves the resettlement of ethnography, one of the most respected and time-honored research procedures in marketing, to the multitude of consumer communities that populate the Web.

Adhering to Kozinets (2019) guidelines, data collection followed a three-step process based on investigation, immersion, and data integration. During the investigative phase, Reddit has emerged as the most suitable platform for addressing the research question, owing to its structure of specialized communities – known as subreddits – each centered around specific interests or topics. Within these subreddits, data has been gathered from the 13 most diverse and meaningful discussions – referred to as “threads” – concerning the use of cassette tapes among younger demographics.

After an initial screening, the final dataset consisted of approximately 400 online traces drawn from six threads within the subreddits r/cassetteculture and r/audiophile, selected for their recent activity, data richness, as well as dynamic interactions among users. Additionally, seven Taylor Swift-related threads have been included, given that her *1989 (Taylor’s Version)* ranked among the two best-selling cassette releases of 2023 (Caulfield, 2024).

During the immersion stage, each researcher maintained an immersion journal to accompany the data collection and analysis phase. These journals served as spaces to document interpretative reflections, linking observed patterns with theoretical constructs and abstractions. Lastly, during data integration, the commentary from selected threads have first been coded and examined individually by each researcher, and then compared collaboratively to minimize potential biases. A combination of deductive and inductive coding was employed, guided by an hermeneutical approach

(Thompson et al., 1994) that involved moving back and forth between emergent codes and their interpretation in relation to the whole context.

Results

The analysis highlighted four key dimensions driving consumption of music cassettes among young consumers, namely: heritage, signature sensations, distancing from digital and effortful engagement with music. In addition to explicit, non-nostalgic purchase motivations – such as collecting or the perceived functionality of cassettes compared to other analog formats – these dimensions reveal deeper, more latent aspects of nostalgic attachment. Figure 1 shows the four dimensions and their respective sub-dimensions. Heritage speaks to ways in which cassettes evoke personal and cultural memory; signature sensations capture unique tactile, auditory and aesthetic appeals of the format; distancing from digital reflects a yearning for concrete ownership and hands-on engagement; and effortful engagement with music underscores the intentionality behind discovering, curating and savoring analogue listening experiences.

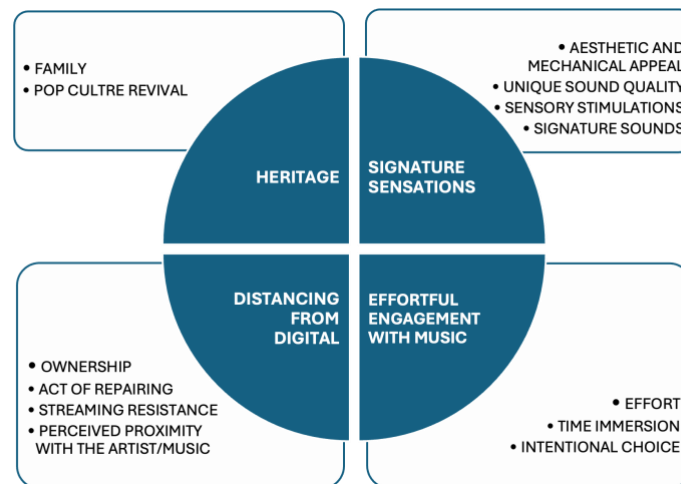


Figure 1. Diagram of dimensions and sub-dimensions identified

Young consumers' attachment to cassette tapes is rooted in a sense of *heritage* passed down through family narratives and a broader pop-culture revival. Many participants recount hearing stories from parents or older siblings about mixtapes or were exposed to their parents' collection of cassettes, or simply had them in the house when they were children, therefore creating an intergenerational bond despite never having lived through the 1980s. Concurrently, resurgence of cassette tapes among young consumers is driven by their evocative power as pop-culture artifacts – whether seen in books, TV shows, or video games – that transport listeners into imagined worlds and bygone aesthetics. Together, these forces situate cassettes not merely as retro curios but as

heritage artifacts through which consumers can vicariously connect with, and even reshape, a nostalgic past.

Beyond heritage, the *signature sensations* of cassettes constitute a powerful draw. Participants describe the satisfying “click” when inserting a tape and pressing the buttons, the textured sound quality characterised by the hissing of the tape and a unique warmth of the sound that streaming music can’t replicate. Furthermore, participants also note the distinct visual appeal of cassettes in a shelf display and of the varied artwork present on the covers. Consumers also report enjoying the overall mechanical feel of cassette tapes and recorders. These tactile and auditory stimuli create a multi-sensory ritual, turning music listening into a physical event rather than a passive background activity.

Cassettes offer young consumers a form of *distancing from digital*, that is, an act of resistance to the dematerialized and ephemeral nature of streaming content. Ownership of a physical tape – and the booklet or J-card that comes with it – infuses music with concreteness and personal value, fostering an emotional proximity to the artist and the music itself. Moreover, the deliberate act of handling, picking and fixing tapes, as well as recorders satisfies a desire to “get one’s hands dirty”, standing in contrast to infinite playlists and algorithmic recommendations of music streaming platforms. This distancing translates into an empowering sense of agency over one’s music library, as well as compensating for the fear of losing one’s favourite music.

Lastly, cassette-based listening is experienced as an *intentional, effortful engagement with music*. Users emphasize that selecting and handling a tape requires more time and care than a tap on a screen – for example, when listening to a tape you must listen to the whole album. This intentionality fosters deeper listening: individuals research artists and savor each side of the tape, transforming music consumption into an active, mindful practice. Such conscious curation stands in relief against passive streaming habits, endowing each playback with renewed significance. Another important aspect that draws young consumers to cassettes is the possibility of creating mixtapes and the satisfaction of crafting the perfect 90 minutes tape; some also mention exchanging and gifting mixtapes. Overall young consumers seem to feel more grounded when interacting with music through cassette tapes compared to other media.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on vicarious nostalgia by examining how young consumers develop attachments to goods that predate their lived experience. Focusing on cassette tapes, the findings reveal that this sentiment is not unidimensional but unfolds through a holistic interplay of cultural, sensory, and experiential dimensions. By identifying four key drivers – heritage, signature sensations, distancing from digital, and effortful engagement with music – the study shows how consumers engage with analog media in meaningful and immersive ways.

From a theoretical perspective, this research extends the understanding of vicarious nostalgia into the domain of music consumption, demonstrating how it can emerge through everyday practices and community-based meaning-making. From a managerial standpoint, the findings highlight opportunities for brands to craft strategies that evoke emotional resonance through sensory richness, ritual engagement, and generational storytelling – especially in markets dominated by digital immediacy and dematerialization.

As a preliminary investigation based on netnography, this study lays the conceptual groundwork for future research. Further studies could employ quantitative methods, examine cross-cultural differences, or explore additional product categories where vicarious nostalgia shapes consumer behavior in similarly layered ways.

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