

Fever Dreaming on TikTok: A Conceptual Framework for Performative Nostalgia

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Digital media technologies afford multiple modalities of nostalgia as communicative practices. Recognizing nostalgia's potential to *do* things in, through, and by media, this article offers a processual framework to define and study nostalgia *as* performance in socio-technical contexts. Using one of the most viewed videos linked to #nostalgia and the popular #nostalgiacore aesthetic on TikTok as a case study, this article asked how performative nostalgia takes shape in relation to the platform's temporal, spatial, and affective affordances for meaning-making. Through a multimodal artifact analysis of this performance event, I show how TikTok opens up the temporality of a thick present, encouraging liminal performances of nostalgia in which people imaginatively construct nostalgic worlds. I argue that these performances suggested a kind of digital place-making that resisted normative assumptions of nostalgia operating on a linear temporal horizon of action (i.e., backward/past vs. forward/future) as it is made, remade, and algorithmically circulated.

Keywords: nostalgia, TikTok, performance, temporality, affect, affordances

This article takes as its departure point the insight from performance studies that performance, like nostalgia, does not exist "*in* anything, but *between*" (Schechner, 2013, p. 30; emphasis added). Nostalgia, conventionally defined as a sentimental longing for the past (Becker, 2023, p. 2), is a shape-shifter. While often understood as a personal emotion oriented towards the memory of a biographical or historical past (Sedikides et al., 2015), nostalgia is a collective affair with multiple "modalities" that converge and even conflict in the digital age (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). At its most banal, it can take the form of a media object from one's own childhood (e.g., video game), the commodified form of nostalgic "readymade" (e.g., retro kitsch) from an ahistorical past, or a media ritual built into the design of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook Memories). More worrisome, it can be ideologically weaponized in the form of a political slogan (e.g., Make America Great Again). Amid this heterogeneity and contradiction, scholars increasingly

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recognize nostalgia as something people do and make meaningful in a communicative process intertwined with media (e.g., Niemeyer, 2014; Pentzold & Menke, 2020; Pickering & Keightley, 2006). In response to calls for more work in this vein, this article interrogates what it means to understand nostalgia “as” performance (Schechner, 2013) based on a case study drawn from TikTok, a social media platform designed to encourage performance.

TikTok offers an ideal site for exploring this question as its multimodal qualities and distinctive socio-technical affordances foreground contemporary debates about the role social media platforms play in enabling and constraining various modes of nostalgic engagement. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, TikTok emerged as a popular site for nostalgia within digital culture as young people took to the platform to socialize (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Kaye, Zeng, & Wikstrom, 2022). By April 2022, the main hashtag #nostalgia accumulated more than 30B views.² Designed around creating user-generated short-form video, TikTok encourages creative practices that remix the content of others in a rich multimodal sensory environment (Kaye et al., 2022; Schellewald, 2021). Equally, algorithmic processes, more so than interpersonal relations, influence whom and what content people interact with when using TikTok (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). On the one hand, the concern is that TikTok keeps the past in “shuffle mode” (see Becker, 2023, p. 53). On the other hand, nostalgia is an existentially vital emotion that motivates action in the face of threats (Sedikides et al., 2015), such as the pandemic (Niemeyer & Siebert, 2023). Accordingly, it remains to be seen what nostalgia means and does as it made, remade, and algorithmically circulated on the “stage” TikTok affords for performance as a platform that seemingly heightens the creative potential and mnemonic constraints of nostalgia found in other algorithmic contexts (Kidd & McAvoy, 2023; Kopelman & Frosh, 2023).

Despite recognition of how digital media amplify the performative aspects of nostalgia (Niemeyer, 2014, 2021) and the related concept of memory (e.g., van Dijck, 2005, 2007), there remains a lack of research that conceptualizes nostalgia itself in performance-theoretical terms. At the same time, a tradition in social media studies has applied performance theory to confront the contradictions platforms present for self-expression and sociality (e.g., Papacharissi, 2012) with growing attention to TikTok as a site for performativity (Kaye et al., 2022).

Bridging this gap, the present study conceptualizes nostalgia as a performative emotion, or “emotive” (Reddy, 2001), enacted in “performance events” (Bauman, 1986) in socio-technical contexts. In what follows, I used one of the most viewed videos linked to #nostalgia and the popular #nostalgiacore aesthetic on TikTok in April 2022 as a case study to explore how performative nostalgia takes shape in relation to the platform’s temporal, spatial, and affective affordances for meaning-making. #nostalgiacore offered a strong empirical case to ground this theorization as a social formation rich in modes of nostalgic representation and sentiment. Internet aesthetics are affect-laden “atmospheres” (Giolo & Berghman, 2023), defined by feeling and style. I carried out a multimodal artifact analysis (Norum, 2008) of this layered performance event as it is taken up in subsequent performances to examine these linkages across time and space.

² This number grew to 151.3B views as of December 12, 2023, as reported on the platform.

Ultimately, this article enriches current practice theory-based accounts of nostalgia and digital media by conceptualizing nostalgia *as* performance, not just a resource used *in* performance, to illuminate the interlinkages between what might otherwise be understood as disparate—if not contradictory—modalities of nostalgia.

Conceptualizing Nostalgia

While most scholars accept its lay definition, nostalgia resists explication as its object is inherently lost. Nostalgia is a “liminal, ambiguous phenomenon” (Niemeyer, 2014, p. 6) across time (past/present/future), space (here/there), and affect (bitter-loss/sweet-longing). Here, I discuss the strengths and limitations of extant typologies of nostalgia and media to develop the concept of performative nostalgia in response to calls for more process-based approaches to studying its multiple modalities (e.g., Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020; Pentzold & Menke, 2020; Pickering & Keightley, 2006).

Extant Typologies

Historians trace nostalgia’s origins, as a named emotion, to Alsatian doctor Johannes Hofer, who described a physical medical condition of homesicknesses (*nostos*: return home; *algos*: pain) experienced by Swiss troops fighting abroad in the 17th century (Becker, 2023; Sedikides et al., 2015). Nostalgia was understood as a “disease of an afflicted imagination” characterized by “high fever” and apparitions (e.g., “voices,” “ghosts”) while dreaming (Boym, 2001, pp. 3–4). Later, this pathological meaning transferred to cultural critiques of nostalgia with the rise of mass society and industrial cultural production in the 20th century (Becker, 2023).

Engaging with these debates, Grainge (2004) identified two concepts of nostalgia—*moods* and *modes*—prevalent in media and cultural studies. Nostalgia as mood speaks to its affective dimension as an emotional experience. Influenced by sociologist Fred Davis (1979), this view emphasizes nostalgia as a sensemaking resource that facilitates identity continuity in response to threats to place attachment. Nostalgia as a mode conceptualizes nostalgia as an aesthetic style or a form of representation. This view is associated with Frederic Jameson (1991) who argued that late capitalist cultural production erodes personal memory and dampens affect through the commodified “pastiche” of aesthetic styles typical of the “depthless” and ahistorical “nostalgia mode” (pp. xxiii–54). Despite their conceptual value, these types obscure the dynamics of the communicative process of which they are both a part (Pickering & Keightley, 2006).

As discussed by Niemeyer (2014, 2021), several developments across fields illuminated nostalgia’s performative aspects that comprise the focus of this study and prompted calls for new approaches to studying nostalgia’s mediated *modalities* (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). This included Boym (2001) who advanced a temporally varied view of nostalgia amid the “memory boom” (Becker, 2023). In the context of post-Soviet political trajectories, she theorized two types of nostalgia that today offer “heuristic devices” (Keightley & Pickering, 2012, p. 136) for assessing its functions. While “not absolute types” (Boym, 2001, p. 41), the *restorative* (backward-glancing) emphasizes nostalgia’s spatial dimension—*nostos*—in seeking the literal “reconstruction of the lost home” (p. xviii). The *reflective* (forward-looking) emphasizes nostalgia’s

affective dimension—*algos*—as it “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging” to imagine the future (Boym, 2001, p. xviii). Equally, social psychologists identified nostalgia as a “self-conscious emotion” with benefits for self-identity, existential meaning, and social connection (Sedikides et al., 2015, pp. 249–251). Within media studies, Niemeyer (2014) coined the term “*nostalgize*” (p. 10) to encompass nostalgia’s active dimension, a perspective, I add, consistent with the drift towards affordance theories of socio-technical action (Davis, 2020) and practice-based theories of communication (Pentzold & Menke, 2020). In this view, nostalgia is more than a feeling (a mood) or form of representation (a mode). It is something people “do actively,” alone and/or with others, and with media (Niemeyer, 2014, p. 11).

Related Research

Most social media studies of nostalgia center on Meta’s Facebook and practices of remembering. While nostalgia’s affective qualities distinguish it from memory, both are “intertwined modes of relating to time” (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020, p. 1641). Technologies are transformative in the “active staging of memory,” making the relationship between media and memory performative (van Dijck, 2005, p. 329). Despite the differences between Facebook and TikTok, which I discuss later, a few examples illuminate how the mediatization of memory (e.g., Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, & Reading, 2009; Hoskins, 2018; van Dijck, 2007) affects the performance of nostalgia in digital spaces.

First, social media impact the quality and quantity of nostalgia through the production, consumption, and circulation of “mediated memories,” understood as a process involving acts/objects and self/others (van Dijck, 2007, p. 21). The “connective” nature of digital memory (Hoskins, 2018) alters the spatial distance between the source of nostalgia and the nostalgizing subject, blurring personal and collective memory in ways that are enabling and/or constraining depending on the socio-technical context of interaction (e.g., Keightley & Pickering, 2012). Facebook Memories, for example, automate and quantify individual memory work through algorithms, rendering metrics “performative in memory making” (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021, p. 2). Whereas commercial Facebook Groups commodify memories through “the performance of various kinds of nostalgic labour” (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020, p. 1645), this feature permits people with shared cultural backgrounds to engage in “mood work” (Ekelund, 2022) and enact “expressive performances” (Pentzold & Menke, 2020) that generate knowledge about the past.

Second, social media emphasize the experiential present by encouraging the production of the “now” through archiving practices (Coleman, 2020; Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014). While nostalgia is pejoratively associated with presentism (Becker, 2023), studies of “algorithmic nostalgia” (Kidd & McAvoy, 2023) on the commercial ancestry site MyHeritage.com highlight how using deepfake technology to animate photos of deceased relatives performatively enacts an existential function beyond memory work (Kopelman & Frosh, 2023).

Taken together, these studies point to diverse practices—epistemic (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021), economic (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020), affective (Ekelund, 2022), existential (Kopelman & Frosh, 2023), and media cultural (Pentzold & Menke, 2020)—intertwined in nostalgic performances even if not so described. Less explored is aesthetics’ role in nostalgic performances on social media. Aesthetic practices entangle the practical and creative aspects of nostalgia—or what Keightley and Pickering (2012) call the

mnemonic imagination—despite the tendency to view them in isolation. As different sensory modes (e.g., aural, visual) permit different ways of experiencing, representing, and remaking the past (van Dijck, 2007), this calls attention to the need for a conceptual framework to study how nostalgia’s varied modalities are co-articulated in the rich, multimodal environments social media platforms afford for action.

Performative Nostalgia as an “Emotive”

Despite recognition of nostalgia’s active modalities and recent work within performance studies (e.g., Huell, 2020), the concept of performative nostalgia remains undertheorized and operationalized outside of marketing studies (e.g., Veresiu, Babic-Rosario, & Robinson, 2018). Furthermore, the relationship between media and nostalgia is often defined in terms of its object of longing—as “media nostalgia” (nostalgia for media objects) or “media-induced nostalgia” (nostalgia triggered by media objects)—or its affective state as “mediated nostalgia” (feeling in the form of media objects; see Niemeyer, 2021).

To better reflect the entanglement of moods (feelings), modes (forms), and modalities (functions) of nostalgia, I offer the concept of *performative nostalgia* as an “emotive” (Reddy, 2001) from emotion theory. Walking the line between constructivism and essentialism, Reddy (2001) argues that emotives are akin to Austin’s (1975) notion of performatives in that they “do things to the world” through the act of utterance, but they differ in that they are “not self-referential” and are “influenced directly by, and alter, what they ‘refer’ to” (p. 105). This means nostalgia shape-shifts with each utterance. In practical terms, it cannot be defined by its object of longing. Instead, it should be defined by the communicative act, or performance event, that dialogically links time, space, feeling, people, and objects/artifacts in inter-action. Next, I discuss how performance theory offers a framework to study what performative nostalgia *does* within the socio-technical context of TikTok, a social media platform designed around performance.

Performing Nostalgia on TikTok

Liminality and the Performance Event

Performances, like nostalgia, are communicative. From the grand dramaturgical stage of theatre to everyday life, performances consist of “actions, interactions, and relationships” (Schechner, 2013, p. 30) made meaningful in what Goffman (1983) described as the “interaction order.” To perform is to do something in the presence of other(s) with “some intentionality” (McAuley, 2009, as cited in Schechner, 2013, p. 38). While no performance exists without action, performance is not reducible to any single action. It is the social process of “doing” and “showing doing”—the rehearsing, the ritual, the display, and more—that characterizes the performance as it unfolds across time and space (Schechner, 2013, p. 28). Performances consist of “restored behaviors”—bits of ritualized and rehearsed action—that are made and remade in social interaction; accordingly, no two performances are the same even if they are “twice-behaved” (Schechner, 2013, pp. 28–30).

Performance is also a way of understanding the social world. This study takes seriously what Richard Schechner’s (2013) invocation from performance studies—that any object or event can be studied “as” performance—lends to the study of nostalgia and digital media. Studying an object or event as

performance means interrogating the processual dynamics of the action inherent in it. This perspective, Schechner (2013) argued, differs from a conventional definition that limits what a performance is to what a culture recognizes as one. Working within an oral performance tradition, anthropologist Richard Bauman (1986) conceptualized the performative process as a “mode of communication,” defined by connected acts of storytelling that intertwine form, function, and meaning in the situated context of performance events (p. 3). Though interrelated, he distinguished between the *narrative event* (the “performance”), the *narrative text* (the “story”), and the original *narrated event* the performance represents (the “event”), irrespective of whether it “actually occurred” (Bauman, 1986, pp. 1–10).³

The conceptual move to study nostalgia as performance is significant for several reasons. First, it offers a way around the empirical problems associated with the elusive status of the “original” nostalgic object by operationalizing performative nostalgia as an event that is processually enacted and thus temporally layered. In Bauman’s (1986) terms, it understands the performance event in which nostalgia is enacted in the present (e.g., making, sharing, or even watching a TikTok video) as distinct from, yet deeply imbricated in, the so-called original nostalgic event it seeks to represent and subsequent performances that may follow.

Second, it foregrounds the interlinkages between what might otherwise be seen as disparate actions, practices, and behaviors, augmenting extant practice theory-based accounts of nostalgia. Schechner (2013) understood performance as enacting various “interlocking” functions (pp. 45–48), ranging from the practical, or “efficacious,” to the artistic, or “entertaining” (pp. 79–80). A performance theoretical lens encompasses everyday acts of doing that practice theories emphasize (Pentzold & Menke, 2020) while also embracing spontaneous and creative acts of showing doing (Schechner, 2013). It further offers a diachronic perspective, as practices are sustained through performance (Schatzki, 2010).⁴

Finally, rather than seeing nostalgia’s liminality as a problem, it asks what it does in constructing social realities. Like nostalgia, performances exist in “betwixt and between” categories (Turner, 1969, as cited in Schechner, 2013, p. 66). Moments of transition introduce possibilities for transformation. Certain rituals, understood as “liminal performances,” suspend time and space, functioning as rites of passage with the performative potential to create “new situations, identities, and social realities” for those involved (p. 66).

Staging Nostalgia: TikTok’s Affordances

Since its global launch in 2018 by Chinese parent company ByteDance, TikTok has emerged as a popular site for youth creative expression and performance designed around user-generated short-form video (Kaye et al., 2022). While digital performances share properties with embodied stage performances, social media platforms affect the terms of the situation by altering the experiential terrain—or stage—upon which performing bodies and audiences interact (Gratch & Gratch, 2021).

³ Bauman’s (1986, p. 2) distinction draws from Roman Jakobsen’s (1971) definition of the “narrated event,” among other influences.

⁴ Performances ought not to be conflated with practices. Most definitions of performance presume the co-presence of actor(s) and audience(s) (see Schechner, 2013, p. 38).

The concept of affordances—as potentials for action—illuminates how TikTok’s socio-technical context enables and constrains performance. Not to be mistaken for specific technological features, affordances describe “how objects shape action for socially situated subjects” (Davis, 2020, p. 6).

Amid growing scholarly interest in nostalgia on TikTok (e.g., Brown, Carah, Tan, Angus, & Burgess, 2024; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022), few studies draw the connection between the platform’s affordances and the performative aspects of nostalgia. Laying this groundwork, the preceding discussion established how nostalgia itself can be understood as performance. Next, I briefly discuss how TikTok’s affordances of editability, association, persistence, and visibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) may impact the experiential terrain upon which performative nostalgia depends as an emotive.

First, short-form video is a “theatrical” medium that encourages performance (Wang & Suthers, 2022). TikTok’s *editability* affordances emphasize the co-creation of video content through creative practices that remix sensory modes (e.g., visual, aural) and media forms (e.g., moving images, music, text, filters, stickers) (Kaye et al., 2022; Schellewald, 2021). Second, in terms of *visibility* and *association*, TikTok’s recommendation algorithm creates an opaque socio-spatial terrain that users characterize as “sides” (Maddox & Gill, 2023). Accordingly, discursive practices and mimetic templates function as social binding agents, with studies highlighting music challenges (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) and aesthetics (Ryan & Televa, 2022) as focal points relevant to nostalgia. Third, in terms of *persistence*, TikTok’s main interface for content discovery—the For You page—encourages endless scrolling (Kaye et al., 2022) and engenders distinctive, often ambivalent, temporal, and affective experiences (Lin, Swart, & Zeng, 2023) that warrant further investigation for nostalgia.

One overarching question guided this exploratory study:

RQ1: How does performative nostalgia take shape in the #nostalgiacore aesthetic on TikTok, and what role does the platform’s temporal, spatial, and affective affordances for meaning-making play in this process?

Method

Through a performance lens, this study undertook a multimodal artifact analysis (Czerwinski, 2017; Norum, 2008) of one of the most viewed TikTok videos connected to #nostalgia and #nostalgiacore as a case study to explore the platform’s affordances for performative nostalgia (RQ1). One antecedent and three subsequent popular TikTok videos that used its original sound were also analyzed. Data collection occurred in April 2022.

Artifacts are not static objects. Influenced by cultural anthropology, artifact analysis understands them as “intrinsically malleable, dynamic, fluid, ever-changing and sometimes ambiguous” (Czerwinski, 2017, p. 2) because of the context in which they are embedded and understood. Thus, it offers a method for studying the reconceptualized “nostalgic object” as a living artifact of the performance event.

Data Collection and Sampling

Artifact analysis requires purposive selection criteria appropriate to the topic of interest and analysis method (Czerwinski, 2017). Given nostalgia's heterogeneity, I sought an artifact that was (a) multimodal in form (Dicks, 2019) and substance, given nostalgia's moods and modes (Grainge, 2004), and (b) widespread enough in reach to serve as an "ideal-type" case (Neves & Mead, 2017) for interrogating TikTok's affordances for performative nostalgia. While the situated nature of performance limits the generalizability of this case in terms of its content or meaning, Schechner (2013) stresses that "performances can be generalized at the theoretical level of restoration of behavior" (p. 36).

Because hashtags and sound are key content entry points on TikTok, I began with "a long preliminary soak" (Hall, 1975, p. 15) in videos tagged with #nostalgia—a hashtag TikTok dubbed a "trending meme" with 30.6 billion views as of data collection. After exploring the top videos, user accounts, and listed sounds linked to #nostalgia, I identified the #nostalgiacore aesthetic as the study's focus given nostalgia's association with aesthetics and the hashtag's significance based on the volume of views (234.3M).

Growing in popularity on TikTok during the pandemic, *Internet aesthetics* like nostalgiacore are digitally mediated, affect-laden social formations or "subjectively defined atmosphere(s)" (Giolo & Berghman, 2023, "Abstract"). Blurring the boundaries between feeling (mood) and style (mode), Internet aesthetics offered a rich empirical angle for this study. I immersed myself in the nostalgiacore aesthetic to assess its relationship to nostalgia and inform the selection of an artifact. I noted several hallmarks of the aesthetic in the videos observed, including childhood places and objects with a fuzzy patina ("Nostalgiacore," n.d.).⁵ Few videos depicted people.

Within #nostalgiacore, I selected the top video (4.4M likes, 54.7M shares, and 40.4K comments)—pseudonymized *Fallen Piano*—as the primary artifact for three reasons. First, the video contained an original sound repurposed in videos within and beyond #nostalgiacore. This included #nostalgia and adjacent Internet aesthetics (e.g., #dreamcore, #weirdcore, #darkacademia). Second, the video ranked among the top ten most-liked videos tagged with #nostalgia (on all-time basis), indicative of high reach and resonance with audiences. Third, it contained layers of nostalgic meaning, as it featured an out-of-tune piano rendition of a song by Toby Fox from the 2015 2D video game *Undertale* (Fox, 2015) entitled "Fallen Down" (n.d.) about a lost child trapped underground. Gaming is further associated with nostalgia in popular culture (Bowman & Wulf, 2023).

As a "thickening" strategy (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, & Millette, 2016) to enrich the artifact, I purposively selected three subsequent videos from the listed sound page associated with *Fallen Piano* and one antecedent video featuring another out-of-tune rendition of *Undertale*'s song, "Fallen Down" (Fox, 2015). These videos were selected based on the principles of maximum variation sampling, reflecting different communicative forms and associative linkages to nostalgia (e.g., aesthetics, objects, feelings) beyond their shared use of the song. While all videos came from public accounts, the data reported by this

⁵ These attributes align with the psychological "nostalgia prototype" (Hepper, 2012, as cited in Sedikides et al., 2015, pp. 196–198).

study were anonymized with account names redacted and potential identifying information obscured as a precaution, given TikTok's demographics and the contextual nature of online privacy (franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess, & Association of Internet Researchers, 2020).

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis was the TikTok video artifact, including its visual, textual, and aural content, comment thread (top 100 posts), and account profile, which constituted the performance. Following Bauman (1986), I analyzed three dimensions of this performance (Table 1) as a communicative process of storytelling: the video artifact as a performance event ("narrative event"), the event it recounted ("narrated event"), and its story ("narrative text").

Applying this lens, this study drew on a combination of interpretive techniques used in the cultural analyses of multimodal texts (Dicks, 2019; Hall, 1975). I approached the performance event from the standpoint of the content creator as well as the viewer, analyzing the artifact as a "text" in the sense of a cultural object. First, I applied a phenomenological sensibility as a researcher to analyze the artifact's temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions in relation to TikTok's affordances. Second, through a textual analysis (Hall, 1975) incorporating the social semiotic principles of multimodality (Dicks, 2019), I further examined the relationship between the artifacts' symbolic forms, performative functions, and meanings emerging in time through the performance event. To check my own subjective interpretations, I drew upon textual analysis of the comment thread as an indicator of resonance/dissonance. Finally, I used Boym's (2001) restorative and reflective nostalgia as a heuristic (see Keightley & Pickering, 2012) in interpreting the artifact's affective orientation and meaning within a wider performative process of nostalgic meaning-making as it was taken up across time and space in subsequent performances.

Table 1. TikTok Videos as Oral Performance Events.

Storytelling Elements <i>Bauman (1986)</i>	Description	Key Platform Affordances <i>Treem & Leonardi (2013)</i>	TikTok Video Examples
Narrative text (story)	The textual form(s) of content used by the performer to represent the “original” event	Editability	Sequencing of in-app video editing features (e.g., sounds, images, text, stickers, filters)
Narrated event (event)	The “original” event represented in the narrative text, as one dimension of meaning	Visibility Persistence	A childhood event (e.g., playing a video game or its song)
Narrative event (performance)	The communicative event in which the story is told, involving a performer, their audience(s), and TikTok as the stage	Visibility Association	Multiple events in creating/viewing/sharing a TikTok video: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act(s) of creating and sharing video • Act of watching video→subsequent performances→process continues

Artifact Analysis: *Fallen Piano* as Liminal Performance

The TikTok video *Fallen Piano* (Figure 1), like any artifact, “hides a secret” (Eco, 1992, p. 32). On its textual surface, the story its performance recounts is unremarkable: An imperceptible person plays a video game song on a “super old piano” in the basement of their school because “they like the sound of it” (personal communication, November 19, 2021). After 16 seconds, the performance ends, and the video is posted to TikTok.

While the “final secret” (Eco, 1992, p. 32), or interpretation, of an artifact can never be known, I contend *Fallen Piano* represents the kind of liminal performance TikTok permits for nostalgizing. The following analysis proceeds by addressing three dimensions—time, space, and affect—of this artifact at various levels of the performance event as it is restored, enacted, and reenacted via TikTok’s affordances. In examining these processual dynamics, I argue that TikTok affords building liminal worlds where one can create the space—the stage—for the self and others to play with ideas of time, place, and affect through nostalgic performances.

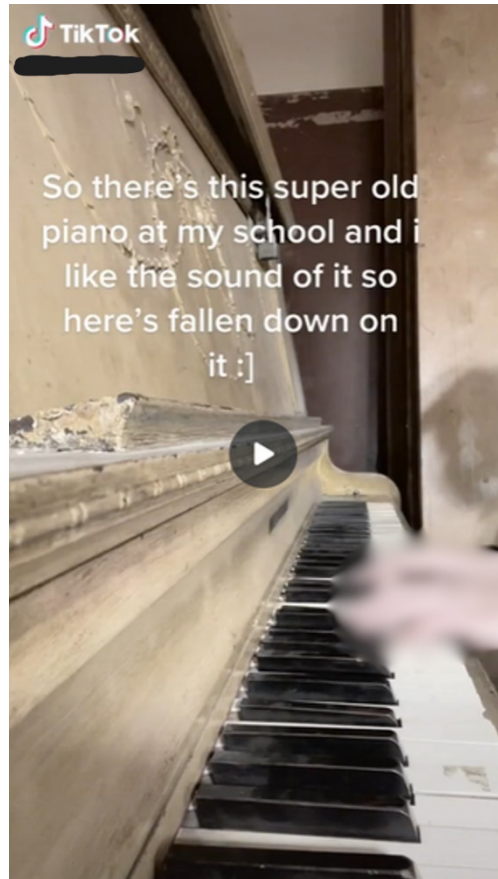


Figure 1. Screenshot of the main artifact, a TikTok video pseudonymized, "Fallen Piano" (personal communication, November 19, 2021).

The layered nature of performance on TikTok permits multiple temporalities, opening disjunctures as videos are made, circulated, and remade anew on the platform. Here, I show how the clash of temporalities between narrative event, narrated event, and narrative text produces a liminal sensation of time thickening in the present that structures subsequent performances. To concretize this point, I will briefly discuss how this dynamic unfolds at each level of the performance event in *Fallen Piano*.

First, I consider the perspective of the viewer and the performance event enacted by the experience of watching the video. At the level of the narrated event, the video slows down time through its symbolic representation of a lost past through the temporality of the song itself (i.e., evoking childhood memories of playing *Undertale*; Fox, 2015). This feeling is reinforced by the video's visual form as its aesthetic patina evokes memories of long-gone, better days for the piano. However, at the level of the performance event of viewing, a different temporality emerges from the presentness encouraged by the platform's affordances. Here, the effect of TikTok's looping-by-default feature for its videos creates a tension between the feeling

of security found in the experience of endless viewing time—as an affordance of “persistence” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013)—that stands at odds with the urgency accompanying the ephemeral nature of any single video appearing on the For You page (Schellewald, 2021).

The cumulative effect creates the temporal experience of a “thick present” (see Sandford, 2023) for the viewer: a feeling characterized by an enlarging of the present moment as one keeps watching the video for fear of losing the memory forever.⁶ Put differently, TikTok’s affordances permit a temporal mismatch that encourages the feeling (mood) of existing in the “liminal space-time” of the ritual (Schechner, 2013, pp. 71–72). Analysis of the video’s comment thread reveals mixed temporal metaphors (e.g., clocks, merry-go-rounds, church bells). Many viewers express a desire to linger (e.g., “I could watch this 100 times”; personal communication, March 20, 2022).

While these comments appear consistent with “social media time” (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014, p. 1155) by suggesting that TikTok’s temporalities keep users fixed in the present moment, I argue that the contradictions of the thick present permit a liminal experience not readily available on platforms like Facebook. Liminal performances are not temporally static experiences; they are transportations—rites of passage—across time and space (Schechner, 2013, p. 72). They occur both through ritual action (as modality) and aesthetics (as mode), making the moment of transition a site of action despite its temporary status.

At the first stage of passage, persons are “stripped of their former identifiers” as they enter a liminal “time-place” (Schechner, 2013, p. 66). As Schechner explains, this stripping of social identity creates a sense of timelessness as a precondition for transformation. The appearance of anonymity, therefore, represents a key element in the temporal experience of *Fallen Piano*. It permits both the creator and the viewer to enter the liminal nostalgic world made perceptually “real” via its staging. In this performance, the TikTok creator is not noticeably visible to the viewer. In lieu of the green Koosh-like mask they don in other videos, the piano emerges as a mask of another kind. It allows them to discard the scripts of their prior performances while incorporating the practice of self-erasure into this new performance. The video’s resulting emphasis on place allows the viewer to enter its imaginative space in the present moment of watching.

From the creator’s vantage point, this liminal thickness of time is also evident in *Fallen Piano*’s aesthetic form (the text) where its ahistorical quality clashes with the active presentness of the performance event. By playing a video game song on a seemingly broken analog object—a piano—the song is deprived of its historical specificity. However, what it loses in historical meaning, it gains in present life through the act of the performance event, as indicated by many viewer comments personifying the piano: “i think that Piano is very happy it's being played again :>” (personal communication, November 20, 2021). Subsequent videos underscore this interpretation as the creator performs caretaking rituals as if the piano (named Oswald) were human, wiping them with a wet cloth as though parched by its patina.

⁶ I want to acknowledge Andrew Abbott who brought the concept of the thick present to my attention, though I employ it here in the generic sense Sandford (2023) described: “A thick present has duration, and, within a thick present, ideas of the past, present and future are entangled, appearing alongside each other” (p. 5).

While these examples seem to support Jameson's (1991) thesis about late capitalist nostalgic aesthetics and the erasure of historicity, I argue that this argument holds at the level of the *narrated event* and its text, not the *narrative event*. When understood as liminal performances, these erasures operate like transportations as one enters the imaginary of the nostalgic world created. Ironically, the erasure of the self and time permits eventual re-embodiment in subsequent performance events.

Space

These liminal worlds unite the dimensions of time and space that constitute social reality (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Here, I define space in a dual fashion as the social space and material space afforded by TikTok's socio-technical environment. I argue that the act of tagging *Fallen Piano* with #nostalgiacore (as a performance event) locates the artifact within an aesthetic community on TikTok, transforming material space into a meaningful socially situated place imbued with "feelings of community" (Dean, 2010, as cited in Papacharissi, 2015, p. 9).

Social space on TikTok is less rooted in personal ties partly because of its recommendation algorithm (Kaye et al., 2022). Discursivity markers, such as hashtags and sound, are important to TikTok's affordances of association (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Thus, I suggest that Internet aesthetics (as textual modes with particular moods) afford modalities of nostalgic association. While #nostalgiacore predates TikTok, its surrealist aesthetics and mood typify content shared within its community on the platform as indicated by associated hashtags (e.g., #liminalcore, #dreamcore, #weirdcore, #feverdream) (see also Brown et al., 2024).

Consider the video (Figure 2) posted by another creator eight months before *Fallen Piano* featuring another rendition of *Undertale*'s (Fox, 2015) "Fallen Down." Despite formal similarities between the two videos (e.g., camera angle, out-of-tune piano, and song), their aesthetics diverge. In this case, the piano is pristine. The video's tags reinforce a denotive meaning of the narrated event linked to the object of the video game song itself (e.g., #piano #falldown, #undertale, #ranboo, #pianist).

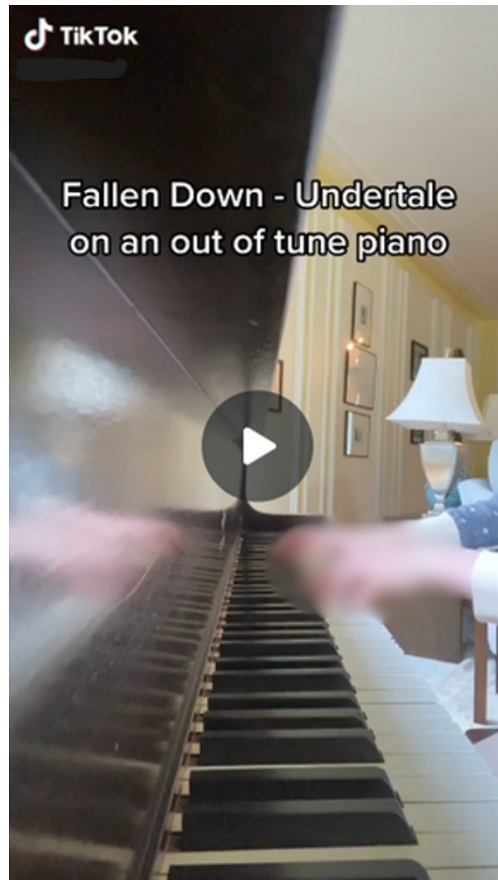


Figure 2. Screenshot of a TikTok video pseudonymized, "Original piano" (personal communication, March 31, 2021).

By contrast, in Figure 1, the piano is visibly weathered, set against the backdrop of peeling paint. When combined with the out-of-tune sound, the video's patina evokes bittersweet feelings marked by contrast for viewers: "this sounds so . . . eery but so good at the same time?" (personal communication, February 25, 2022). Sound here functions as a "technique of body display" (Craik, 2003, p. 9), enveloping the embodied self in a "prosthetic aura" (Riley Parr, 2021).

Accordingly, *Fallen Piano's* layered visual, textual, and aural modes work together to conjure feelings of a liminal, imagined place in which one can rest and find comfort, as indicated by comments like, "its...beautiful and scary, like something out of a forgotten dream, wow" and "Why does this remind me of a person just trying their best to keep it all together 🥺 so beautiful" (personal communication, November 19, 2021). Here, I argue that these moods and modes reinforce a nostalgic meaning of the narrated event consistent with the themes of abandonment and belonging found in the performance event of *Undertale's* (Fox, 2015) gameplay. In the game, the song "Fallen Down" (n.d.) accompanies interactions between the

protagonist, a lost child trapped in an underground world by a magical barrier, and a boss monster, Toriel, who cares for the children.

Finally, in terms of social space, the performative act of creating an “original sound” is consequential in allowing the video to come into interaction with others beyond #nostalgiacore, whether purposively or algorithmically, with affective implications discussed next.

Affect

TikTok encourages sound to be discovered, reused, and remixed (Kaye et al., 2022). This affordance allows *Fallen Piano*’s original sound to mimetically reappear within #nostalgiacore and adjacent aesthetics. As it crosses social space, the video’s affective meaning is interpreted polysemically, as it is experienced *in* time and remade *over* time through subsequent performances. Affect is not emotion; it is an intensity felt—an energy—moving people toward action via social media (Papacharissi, 2015). Performative nostalgia’s affective intensities can be understood as directed towards the desire to rebuild a lost home or imaginatively create a new one, as Boym’s (2001) restorative/reflective heuristic offers.

To understand how this works in *Fallen Piano*, I return to the liminal performance. Following Schechner (2013), aesthetic rituals (e.g., creating a video in the #nostalgiacore style) function like liminal performances in transporting and transforming those involved, even if momentarily. This means that nostalgia’s affective meaning can change as new situations are created, performance functions enacted, and different aspects of *Fallen Piano*’s moods and modes taken up (i.e., restored) across TikTok’s socio-technical contexts. Some examples illustrate this point across the performative process, revealing how—even in the act of mimesis—no one performance “exactly cop(ies)” the next (Schechner, 2013, p. 30).

In one sense, at the level of the narrated event, *Fallen Piano* can be understood as an act of “media nostalgia” (Menke, 2017) based on its aural content (e.g., a song from a childhood video game). As a media ritual, it evokes what Schechner (2013) typified as the “healing” function of performance. Viewer comments call attention to the repetition of behavior (e.g., “I felt so safe listening to fallen down every time that I would listen to it...”; personal communication, April 16, 2022). They evoke a past-directed longing that ranges from simple childhood reminiscence to more explicit recognitions of nostalgic loss. Interestingly, viewers who lacked personal memories (i.e., first-hand experiences) of the video game shared similar sentiments: “I like it. it gives a sense of nostalgia, even if I’ve never heard it. It’s grounding me, and it feels safe” (personal communication, April 5, 2022). These comments indicate varying restorative, past-directed affective impulses spurred by the triggered memory of the video game and the security that accompanied a “preferred” (Hall, 1980/1973) nostalgic reading of childhood.

In another sense, at the level of the narrative or performance event, I argue that the feeling of brokenness in the aural and visual aesthetics of *Fallen Piano* permits “negotiated” and “oppositional” meanings (Hall, 1980/1973) to emerge in subsequent performances as the sound is made anew. Indeed, an analysis of the mimetic uses of the video’s original sound—titled a “crusty” rendition—demonstrates how the mood it evokes is re-interpreted and re-embodied by different creators within and beyond the #nostalgiacore aesthetic on TikTok. For example, while another commenter on the video echoes the same feeling of safety-in-the-past

as others do, they also reflect on the future: "whenever i hear an old piano like this i just feel, like, safe? like nostalgia but for something new" (personal communication, November 19, 2021).

In Figures 3 and 4, I draw on three examples of TikTok videos linked to *Fallen Piano* by its original sound, showing how its repeated use permits both restorative and reflective affective meanings of nostalgia in subsequent performances by other creators. While sharing the same original sound, each of these subsequent performances indicates a different socio-technical context afforded by TikTok's affordances of association.

Linked to #nostalgiacore, Figure 3 depicts a rotating series of still images that signify an "early 00s girl's" childhood in the form of a mood board. In contrast to the place-based imagery used in Figure 1, this performance articulates childhood nostalgia through a Jamesonian pastiche of commodified objects in visual mode. Accordingly, I argue it emphasizes performance's "identity" function (Schechner, 2013) and signifies normative gender roles as a kind of "unmotivated appropriation of the past" (Wilson, 2003, p. 172) suggestive of restorative nostalgia.



Figure 3. Screenshots of a TikTok video pseudonymized, "2000s girl" (personal communication, December 25, 2021).

By contrast, Figure 4.1 uses *Fallen Piano*'s original sound to imaginatively construct a "scape" of trans rights through the creative use of AI-generated art. While linked to the same object of media nostalgia as Figure 1 (i.e., the video game song) via the hashtag #fallendown, this performance rearticulates its meaning through the frame of #transrights to blend the "create beauty" and "identity" functions of performance described by Schechner (2013). While it relies on still images, like Figure 3, a prospective feeling of motion emerges in their vibrant colors and conceptual nature, which I argue evokes reflective nostalgia in contrasting a vision for a hopeful future with the brokenness signified by the out-of-tune song. As such, this creator resembles the bricoleur, who "re-locates a significant object in a different position with that discourse" (Clarke, 1976, as cited in Hebdige, 1979, p. 104).

Finally, in Figure 4.2, another reflective meaning of nostalgia emerges through the embodied performance of a neurodivergent TikTok creator communicating an oppositional message to the #darkacademia aesthetic. In the video's text overlay, they state the aesthetic is not about fashion to them and co-tag it with #lightacademia, pointing to the "identity," "community," and "teach or persuade" functions of performance (Schechner, 2013). Here, the brokenness of *Fallen Piano*'s original sound lends itself to this critique while also imbuing nostalgic affect to an adjacent Internet aesthetic (i.e., #darkacademia).

While these examples seem idiosyncratic, my point is exactly thus. Cultural forms reflect the contradictions in which they are "enmeshed" (Wilson, 2003, p. 205). Whereas Dick Hebdige (1979) located the encoded source of sub-cultural style within "social groups" tied to "locales" with values that structure and articulate one another (p. 84), Internet aesthetics, like #nostalgiacore, on TikTok are not necessarily rooted in cultural practices that reflect a prior basis of social identification or offline place attachment. Rather, these examples suggest performative nostalgia's ability to imaginatively construct liminal worlds that blur the boundaries between nostalgia's affective impulse to restore the "the lost home" and/or reflectively "foster a creative self," as Boym (2001) described (p. 354). I argue that TikTok's temporal dynamics are foundational in these enactments of place, understood as a form of digital place-making (Basaraba, 2023); at the same time, they challenge the assumption of nostalgia functioning on a linear temporal horizon of action as it is algorithmically circulated and performed anew.

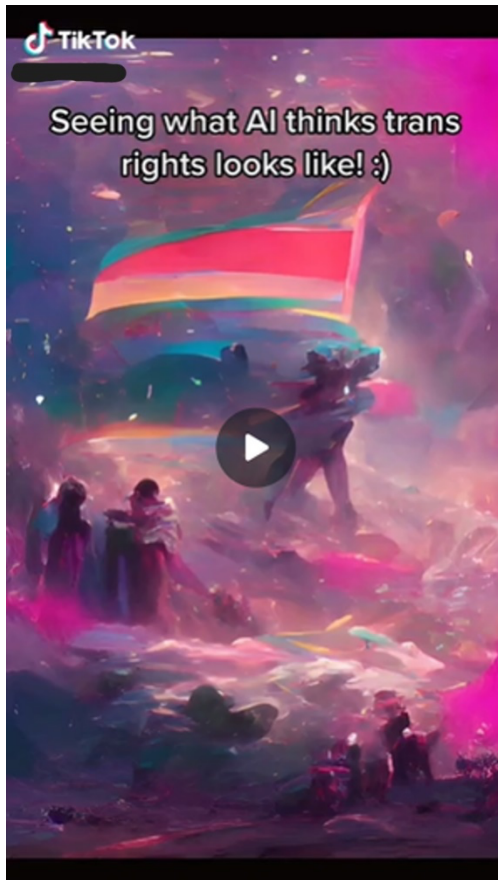


Figure 4.1. Screenshot of a TikTok video pseudonymized, "Trans rights" (personal communication, December 3, 2021).

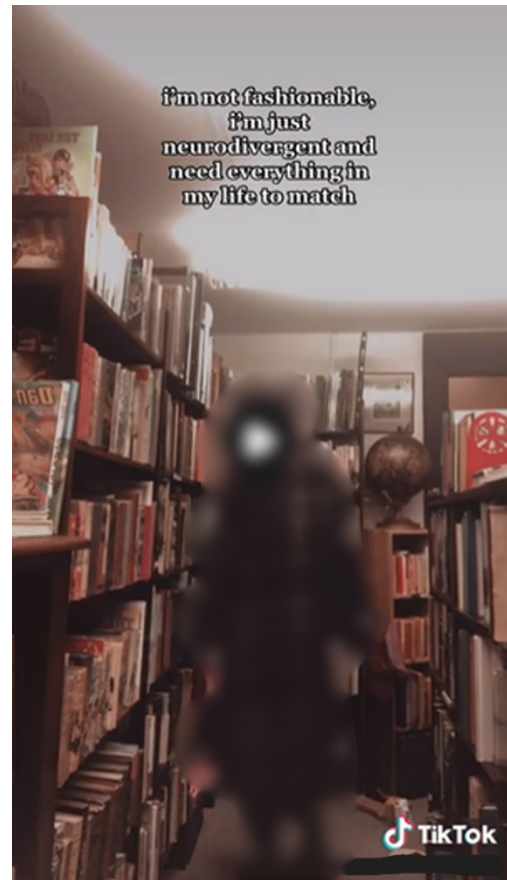


Figure 4.2. Screenshot of a video pseudonymized, "Neurodivergent fashion" (personal communication, December 21, 2021).

In this liminal space-time TikTok permits, I argue nostalgia's performative potential reveals itself as an "emotive" (Reddy, 2001). As this case study shows, the object of nostalgic longing and its attendant meaning(s) changes through the communicative process of repeated performance events in which no two are the same. These performances demonstrate the possibility of restoring to the present moment—even if only for an instant—the subjective feeling of an experience of what has been lost. At the same time, they transform what might be possible in the future by triggering experiences that encourage imaginative reflection in others. This dialogic reworking of experience between self and other, as Keightley and Pickering (2012) argued, is central to the mnemonic imagination as a creative practice and the cultivation of "a sociological aesthetics of remembering" (p. 12).

Conclusion

This article conceptualized performative nostalgia through an exploratory investigation of the phenomenon on TikTok, a short-form video platform designed around user-generated content and creative

expression (Kaye et al., 2022). Taking one of the most viewed videos associated with #nostalgia and the popular #nostalgiacore Internet aesthetic as a case study, I showed how TikTok's temporal, spatial, and affective affordances opened up the liminal space-time of a "thick present" (Sandford, 2023) to encourage liminal performances of nostalgia in which people imaginatively constructed nostalgic worlds. Through a multimodal artifact analysis of this performance event, this study demonstrated how nostalgia itself is reworked as its various moods and modes are taken up in subsequent performances. I argued that these performances suggested a kind of digital place-making (Basaraba, 2023) that resisted normative assumptions of nostalgia operating on a linear temporal horizon of action (i.e., backward/past vs. forward/future) as nostalgia, itself, is made, remade, and algorithmically circulated.

Although these findings are limited in their generalizability, this article offers an eventful, process-based framework for studying nostalgia through the lens of performance theory, which responds to calls for more work in this vein across nostalgia, memory, and digital media studies. While nostalgia is often defined in object-centric terms and normatively evaluated based on its content or temporal orientation, the concept of performative nostalgia shifts emphasis from the *what* of nostalgia (i.e., affective valence/mood or representational form/mode) to *how* its modalities come together in particular socio-technical contexts to generate meaning and possibilities for action for subjects.

Showing how nostalgia is performatively enacted with varied others, the present study raises theoretical questions for scholars interested in nostalgia's role in processes of social, cultural, and political change in digitally mediated contexts that blur the boundaries between publicity, privacy, and sociality (e.g., Papacharissi, 2012). A few implications are noteworthy for future studies.

First, the entanglement of mnemonic and aesthetic practices in constructing these liminal worlds suggests the salience of the mnemonic imagination (Keightley & Pickering, 2012) to TikTok. Researchers might undertake digital ethnography to understand the range of practices and meanings associated with these performances within and beyond #nostalgiacore in view of emergent work on digital place-making (Basaraba, 2023).

Second, this study contributes a valuable perspective on "algorithmic nostalgia" (Brown et al., 2024; Kidd & McAvoy, 2023; Kopelman & Frosh, 2023) as an ambivalent phenomenon. Understanding nostalgia as a "performance event" (Bauman, 1986) foregrounds how communicative action—whether triggered by algorithms or purposively by humans—is recursive in its "restored" or "twice-behaved" (Schechner, 2013, p. 29) nature even while open to change.

Ultimately, this study calls attention to what performative nostalgia *does*—as an "emotive" (Reddy, 2001) that links time, space, feelings, people, objects, and more—within the socio-technical environment TikTok affords for action. The liminal performances enacted in and beyond #nostalgiacore on TikTok are not merely liminal because of the empty spaces they depict, but more fundamentally, because of how they transport and transform those involved in/across subsequent performances. As Schechner (2013) reminds us, nostalgia does not exist *in* any one thing; rather, it exists *in-between* as a communicative process of meaning-making that, I argue, is fundamentally performative.

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