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Seeing past in the DREAM: a computational grounded theory analysis of comments on nostalgic videos

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Abstract

Introduction. The paper adopts computational grounded theory approach to analyse comments on nostalgic videos, noting that the viewers' information experiences of video-based nostalgia remain underexplored. It aims to identify nostalgic elements in viewers' comments on nostalgic videos, and to uncover the underlying sociocultural attributes.

Method. Comments were collected from Bilibili videos tagged '*nostalgia/Chinese retro*' that met view and comment thresholds, yielding 15,734 cleaned comments. Nelson's computational grounded theory method was applied, integrating BERTopic modeling (silhouette score = 0.55) with iterative human coding by trained coders.

Analysis. BERTopic generated 67 topics and hierarchical clustering supported human coders. Coders reviewed representative comments for each topic, conducted independent coding, and adjudicated discrepancies through comparison and discussion.

Results. Five dimensions of nostalgic information experiences emerged: Dates, Relations, Events, Artifacts, and Milieus. Building upon this, the paper preliminarily developed the DREAM framework. At the sociocultural level, comments revealed the collective memory reproduction, everyday life emotional traces, and reflections on current society.

Conclusion(s). This study provides an initial framework for analysing nostalgic elements in nostalgic video comments and demonstrates the integration of computational and qualitative approaches. Future work will model the mechanisms of nostalgic information experiences in HCI contexts and propose insights for user experience design.

Introduction

Nostalgia is a multidimensional socio-emotional phenomenon characterised by a yearning for bygone times, accompanied by bittersweet emotions (Larsen et al., 2021; Wildschut et al., 2006). Typically originating from self-referential memories, nostalgia produces several core emotional effects, such as alleviating existential threats and enhancing self-esteem (Sedikides et al., 2008). However, nostalgia transcends private sentiment, intertwining with collective memory (Hakokõngäs, 2025) and intergenerational bonding (Wildschut et al., 2018) to become a pivotal driver of collective meaning-making (Sedikides et al., 2008).

With the proliferation of digital technology, nostalgic sentiments are continuously produced and disseminated through multimodal content (e.g., images, music, videos, and games) on social media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. These technology-mediated actions effectively promote dynamic modes of information making and taking (Huvila, 2022). Notably, the dynamic characteristics and coherent narrative rhythms of nostalgic videos that have emerged in recent years significantly enhance users' sense of presence and authenticity, greatly enriching their cognitive appraisal and affective resonance (Juhl & Biskas, 2023). Although previous studies from communication, marketing, and advertising perspectives have extensively explored nostalgic experiences—primarily focusing on how nostalgia promotes users' engagement with memory (Hakokõngäs, 2025; Jacobsen & Beer, 2021), identity (Hong et al., 2022), and cultural values (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022; Zou & Petkanopoulou, 2023). However, research treating nostalgia as a distinct category of information experience remains scarce.

This paper attempts to explore the information experience generated when users interact with nostalgic videos, a specific IT artifact, by extracting and analysing user comments derived from such videos. This approach frames video commenting as a dynamic process of continuously generating meaning. In particular, meaning is not rigidly transmitted but rather expressed, experienced, and co-created within specific contexts (Chassanoff & Chen, 2025). Commenters simultaneously make information and take information. The nostalgic elements derived from user comments on nostalgic videos effectively reflect collective memory, social norms, and values within everyday information practices, thereby enriching both information use in the material world (Ruthven, 2024a) and its social materiality within the information world (Zhao et al., 2021).

This paper adopts the epistemological concept of information-as-potentiality (Chassanoff & Chen, 2025), focusing on treating user comments in nostalgic videos as *experienced information.*' It seeks to understand which elements people primarily recall, cherish, commemorate, and yearn for in the '*good old days*' when triggered by nostalgic visuals. Specifically, this study employs computational grounded theory approach to analyse user comments on nostalgic videos within Chinese social media. It extracts relevant nostalgic information experiences while revealing the sociocultural attributes embedded within the nostalgic canvas. By situating nostalgic experiences within the field of information behavior, this research aims to contribute theoretically to the potential of information use—particularly information making and taking—while also informing future user experience design in social media.

Literature review

Nostalgia is a sentimental yearning for the past or a bittersweet attachment, blending warm memories with melancholy for things lost (Wildschut et al., 2006). This concept was initially viewed as a neurological disorder, often intertwined with homesickness (Rosen, 1975). Nostalgia encompasses diverse dimensions and can be triggered by multiple stimuli (Gu et al., 2021; Sedikides et al., 2008; Xia et al., 2021). It exhibits broad and even diverse moderating effects across various psychological and behavioral outcomes (Santini et al., 2023; Weingarten & Wei, 2023) and reliably supports meaning-making and perceptions of self-continuity (Routledge et al., 2011, 2012; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). For instance, experience-sampling reveals that nostalgia is negatively

correlated with well-being (Turner & Stanley, 2021), whereas recent studies emphasise the collective effervescence and ecological validity pathway that link nostalgia to enhanced psychological well-being (Naidu et al., 2024; Newman et al., 2020). These patterns emerge in various cultural contexts where nostalgia is viewed as a valuable resource that individuals utilise to make sense of the present (Routledge et al., 2013; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022).

Today, nostalgia research has evolved from its origins as a medical condition into a thriving interdisciplinary field. Contemporary studies have fundamentally transformed the traditional narrow understanding of nostalgia, revealing it not merely as a pathological state but as a functional psychological resource that helps individuals cope with the challenges and uncertainties of modern life (Dodman, 2023). Due to nostalgia's profound impact on human behavior, cognition, and social functioning, this concept has garnered significant attention within academia. Relevant research has expanded beyond psychology (Dang et al., 2024) and neuroscience (Yang et al., 2022) into sociology (Jacobsen, 2024), marketing and consumer research (Santini et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2012), communication studies (Menke & Wulf, 2021), cultural studies (Legg, 2004), and information science (Stanley Jothiraj et al., 2024), forming an interdisciplinary landscape encompassing diverse methodologies and applications (Srivastava et al., 2023).

In the information field, research on nostalgia remains relatively scarce. Drawing upon the I-model proposed by Zhang & Benjamin (2007), related research primarily focuses on themes arising from the interplay of three components: information, people, and technology. Examples include nostalgia-driven inclusive design (Huang, 2024), nostalgia-enabled affective design (Yu, 2022), nostalgic reminiscence in technological appropriation (Alizadeh et al., 2022), nostalgia and knowledge management in personal data lifecycles (Stahlman, 2022), and the impact of nostalgia on data hoarding and data curation practices (Maemura & Wagner, 2025). It is worth noting that the proliferation of social media has also presented opportunities for nostalgia research. A small number of studies have attempted to identify and categorise nostalgic elements based on social media posts. For instance, Stanley Jothiraj et al. (2024) analysed nostalgic conversations on Twitter and sought to create a large-scale nostalgic tweets dataset. Davalos et al. (2015) conducted content analysis and clustering analysis on nostalgic posts on Facebook to explore themes and linguistic styles associated with nostalgia. However, there are still research gaps. Existing studies have primarily focused on social media posts, emphasising the analysis of nostalgic content. To the best of our knowledge, few studies have specifically analysed user comments generated by nostalgic videos in order to better understand viewers' information experiences. Secondly, existing research relies heavily on data from major international social media platforms. Given the cultural sensitivity and context-dependent nature of nostalgia (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022), analyses of nostalgic discourse on Chinese social media are scarce.

Method

Data collection

The nostalgic videos in this study were selected from Bilibili, a prominent Chinese social media platform. This platform hosts a vast collection of videos tagged with '*nostalgia*' or '*Chinese retro*'. Popular nostalgic videos across various themes feature extensive user comments, providing a rich corpus for analysis. This study employed Python 3.9 to collect comments from the related videos within the top three pages of Bilibili's '*General*' ranking. Inclusion criteria were: (1) views $\geqslant$ 100,000; (2) comments $\geqslant$ 300; (3) exclusion of videos where '*nostalgia/Chinese retro*' appeared only in ads, titles, or tags but was irrelevant to content. After deduplication, 18,043 comments from 20 videos were collected as raw data. Since some crawled user comments contained irrelevant or meaningless expressions like emojis, user mentions (@username), URL links, and hashtags, the three authors screened and proofread the comments using keyword and Boolean searches. Ultimately, 15,734 comments were retained for analysis.

Data analysis

This study employs computational grounded theory (CGT) approach. Proposed by Nelson (2020), this methodology addresses the subjective limitations of coding and interpretation inherent in traditional grounded theory methods. It specifically tackles the challenge of efficiently analysing the exponentially growing text corpora in qualitative research within the big data era while preserving the thick description emphasised by traditional qualitative methods (Younas et al., 2023). CGT advocates integrating computer-assisted natural language processing with researchers' domain expertise and unique insights to achieve rigor, reliability, and reproducibility. The CGT methodological framework comprises three steps: pattern detection, pattern refinement, and pattern confirmation. The first step emphasises using computational methods to explore relevant themes within large corpora. The second step requires researchers to generate contextualised categories through in-depth reading, interpretation, and assessment. The third step validates the coding from the first two steps using ad hoc computational methods to ensure the validity of theory development (Nelson, 2020). This methodology has been widely adopted and applied across disciplines including information science (Bratt et al., 2024), information systems (Wagner et al., 2022), human-computer interaction (HCI) (Gao et al., 2023; Gebreegziabher et al., 2023), and communication research (Carlsen & Ralund, 2022).

We first employed the BERTopic modeling technique, which automatically extracts dense topics from large documents via clustering algorithms (Grootendorst, 2022). We based our approach on video comments and utilised the '*moka-ai/m3e-base*' sentence transformer model. This model demonstrates strong performance in Chinese semantic processing and sentence similarity evaluation. Subsequently, we performed dimensionality reduction using UMAP, employed HDBScan to identify dense clusters of similar comments, and extracted core keywords for each topic via c-TF-IDF. The BERTopic model ultimately generated 67 topics with a silhouette score of 0.55 (above the 0.5 threshold), indicating a clear and high-quality topic clustering structure (Han et al., 2022). To address significant overlap among several topics, hierarchical clustering was employed for substantive integration, yielding the initial clustering overview shown in Figure 1. It should be noted that these unsupervised topics serve only as auxiliary references for subsequent manual coding, not as final classifications.

Subsequently, two trained coders independently reviewed five representative comments per theme and manually coded them using a traditional grounded theory approach. Disagreements were resolved by a third coder. Through continuous comparison and hierarchical cluster analysis, we consolidated the 67 unsupervised themes into five dimensions: **D**ates, **R**elations, **E**vents, **A**rtifacts, and **M**ilieus, representing the primary nostalgic elements viewers referenced when commenting on nostalgic videos. This study then proposed the **DREAM framework** (compiled from the initials of each category) for analysing nostalgic information experiences, as shown in Table 1. It should be noted that these five dimensions represent higher-level categories rather than BERTopic themes. Each category can map to multiple themes, and comments may receive multiple category labels.

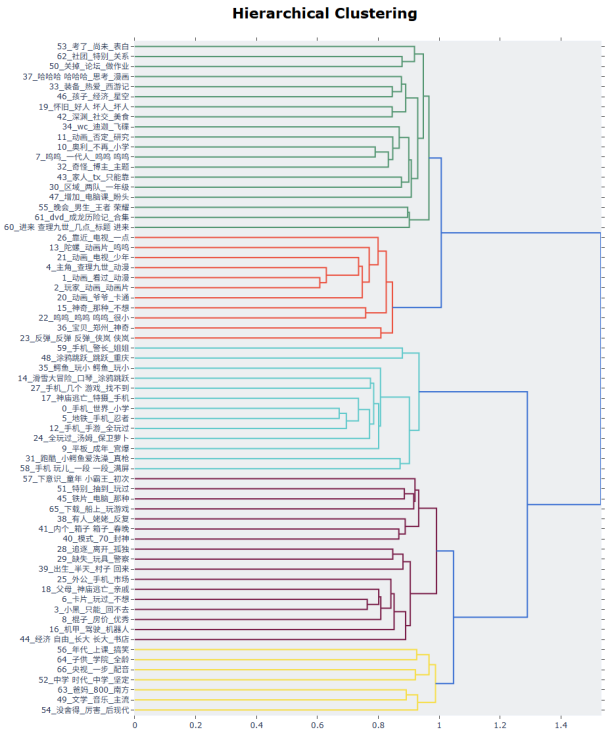

Figure 1. Hierarchical clustering of the BERTopic.

Dimensions	Main categories	Representative Topics in BERTopic	Initial Concept/Keywords
Dates	Old days Life stages Seasons Vintage	Topic 3 Topic 21 Topic 52 ...	以前 Previously, 千禧年 Millennium, 小时候 When I was a child, 夏日午后 Summer afternoon, ...
Relations	Family bonds Social networks Public figures	Topic 18 Topic 28 Topic 41 ...	父母 Parents, 祖父母 Grandparents, 邻居 Neighborhoods, 成龙 Jackie Chan, ...
Events	Major events School-related activities Childhood games Daily routines	Topic 8 Topic 39 Topic 63 ...	北京奥运会 Beijing Olympics, 期末考试 Final exam, 捉迷藏 Hide-and-seek, 放学 After school, ...
Artifacts	Entertainment media Personal items Obsolete technologies Urban infrastructures	Topic 4 Topic 17 Topic 47 ...	动画片 Cartoon, 小零食 Snacks, 电视机 TV, 收音机 Radio, 报刊亭 Newsstand, ...
Milieus	Domestic spaces School spaces Urban and rural landscapes Weather imagery	Topic 30 Topic 49 Topic 55 ...	家里 Home, 小卖部 Convenience store, 少年宫 Youth center, 乡村 Countryside, 下雨天 Rainy day, ...

Table 1. DREAM framework for nostalgic information experiences.

Preliminary findings

A categorisation of nostalgic information experiences

After analysing the themes, we identified five categories of nostalgic information experiences

expressed by viewers in their comments: *Dates*, *Relations*, *Events*, *Artifacts*, and *Milieus*. Specific details are as follows.

Dates provide temporal anchors for users' memories, evoking old days, life stages, seasons, and vintage. Users often frame their recollections using time labels such as '*the 1990s*', '*the millennium*', or '*2008*', highlighting the fact that nostalgic information experiences are often tied to particular historical periods. Life stages such as '*when I was at primary school*' or '*back in high school*' suggest a strong link to personal growth. Temporal markers such as 'summer vacation', 'autumn dusk', or '*winter morning*' enrich the sensory and atmospheric details of a memory. Furthermore, moments such as '*after school*', '*early mornings*', and holidays like the Spring Festival and National Day served as ritualistic time points that intensified affective resonance.

Relations encompass a range of interpersonal connections, including familial bonds and social networks, as well as public figures. Comments by frequent users on close family members were often accompanied by expressions such as '*miss*' or '*remember*', suggesting a strong emotional attachment rooted in familial bonds. Recollections of relationships with peers during childhood, such as playing with neighbors or classmates, are regarded as important cues for recapturing nostalgic sentiment and often involved an idealisation of past social life. Additionally, public figures such as celebrities, athletes, and film stars were frequently mentioned. These figures not only recalled shared generational memories, but also reflected the aesthetic values and cultural identity of a specific era.

Events include both collective and personal experiences, mainly referring to major events, school-related activities, childhood games, and daily routines. Comments on national crises, such as the SARS outbreak or the Wenchuan earthquake, demonstrate how major emergencies become embedded in collective memory. At the same time, expressions relating to school life, such as '*starting a new semester*' or '*taking exams*', were frequently mentioned, revealing it to be a recurring source of nostalgic reflection. Games such as jump rope or hide-and-seek capture the playful and imaginative nature of childhood. Notably, seemingly subtle routines such as eating dinner, watching television after school, or enjoying the cool breeze in the courtyard emerged as affective anchors, demonstrating how nostalgia can be deeply rooted in ordinary, everyday lived experiences.

Artifacts are symbolic objects and material items that evoke nostalgic memories and emotions. These include entertainment media such as classic cartoons, pop songs and video games; personal items such as cheap snacks and vintage stationery; and obsolete technologies such as flip phones, CRT TVs, and cassette players. These items act as symbolic expressions of everyday life in earlier decades and are often commemorated as quintessential tokens of a vanished childhood. Urban infrastructures such as phone booths and newsstands also frequently appeared in comments, representing not only remnants of urban development, but also fading imprints of a slower lifestyle.

Milieus contain spatial environments that shape users' formative experiences of engaging with information. As previous studies have revealed, individuals' information behavior is deeply constrained by the boundaries of their milieus and influenced by its characteristics (Chatman, 1991; Lewis et al., 2003). These milieus include domestic and school spaces, as well as broader urban or rural landscapes and weather imagery. Old neighborhoods, children's palaces and public buildings of a similar style were frequently evoked in urban spaces, as were rural settings such as farmland and country lanes. These spatial expressions convey not only physical settings, but also users' nostalgia for a lost sense of slowness and freedom associated with the past times and places that cannot be returned to. Interestingly, weather imagery, such as rainy days, dusk, and warm winter sunlight functioned as sensory-laden symbols of nostalgia, contributing to the overall affective appraisal of memory.

The sociocultural attributes in comments on nostalgic videos

First, the comments reflect a shared sense of collective memory, in which specific events, time periods, and cultural milestones have been preserved and recalled in a ritualistic manner through nostalgic engagement. The concept of collective memory within a specific sociocultural context has been a topic of interest in information science (Henninger & Scifleet, 2016; Liu et al., 2024). Keywords such as '*the SARS outbreak*', 'the 2008 Olympics', or '*the turn of the millennium*' become temporal anchors that activate a sense of communal remembering. National traditional holidays, as well as school rituals such as entrance ceremonies and final exams, often feature in comment threads. These memory cues trigger interactions such as likes and replies, forming a kind of participatory remembrance. This suggests that nostalgic videos act as catalysts for the ritualised confirmation of generational identity, enabling users to co-construct a sociocultural narrative of '*what we have lived through*' and how this past experience defines who *we* are today.

Second, many comments focus on everyday life. Although seemingly trivial, these moments have accumulated emotion over time. Expressions about routines such as '*walking home from school*', '*watching cartoons before dinner*', or '*waiting for a hot breakfast on winter mornings*' are reinterpreted through retrospection as meaningful imprints. These emotional narratives demonstrate how everyday experience and information can shape affective memory, particularly when filtered through the lens of social change. As users recall these shared details, they also reveal how sociocultural structures potentially shape ordinary life. In this way, nostalgia does not merely arise from grand historical narratives; it is also encoded within the micro-practices of everyday life. This aligns with Ruthven's (2024b) metaphor of information sculpting.

Third, the comments express a wide range of social emotions and values. Viewers interpret and critique the present through the lens of a nostalgic past. While many viewers express warmth and gratitude for the simplicity of earlier times, these sentiments are often accompanied by a subtle dissatisfaction with current life. Comments such as '*Life was slower then*' or '*Now everything is too rushed, too digital*' suggest a collective emotional comparison between an idealised past and an indifferent present. In this context, nostalgic expressions serve to articulate value conflicts, psychological fatigue, and a yearning for relational closeness and stability. The nostalgic comments section thus becomes a space where users can reflect on what has been lost, what is still meaningful to them, and the kind of lifestyle they wish to retrieve or preserve.

Future work

As an ongoing project, this study aims to uncover the nostalgic information experiences and their sociocultural attributes as manifested in video comments. Subsequent work will build upon the information-as-potentiality framework (Chassanoff & Chen, 2025), further integrating comments with nostalgic video features. From a multimodal data analysis perspective, we will empirically explore how content cues and design genres shape viewers' experiences of nostalgic information. Concurrently, future research plans to use the affordance lens and sociomateriality theory to investigate the cognitive and affective aspects of nostalgic information behaviors. This will inform user experience design and explore the embodied nature of nostalgic information practices.

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