

Digital Media's Influence on Shaping Collective Memory through Misleading Nostalgia

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ABSTRACT

Digital media have transformed the ways individuals and societies encounter, preserve, and interpret the past. Social media platforms provide users with opportunities to revisit personal experiences, share cultural memories, and participate in collective forms of remembering. At the same time, digital environments can increase the visibility and repetition of representations of the past through social interaction, platform design, commercial nostalgia, and algorithmic curation. This narrative literature review examines how digital nostalgia relates to collective memory by synthesizing literature from psychology, media studies, communication, sociology, and digital memory studies. Research indicates that nostalgia can serve important psychological and social functions, including supporting identity, emotional connection, and social belonging.

The selective and repetitive circulation of nostalgic content may also encourage idealized representations of the past. Research on shared false memories, including the visual Mandela Effect, demonstrates that people can sometimes develop remarkably similar memory errors, although this research does not establish that social media itself causes such distortions. Recent scholarship on social media further suggests that platform features influence how memories are circulated and interpreted, while emerging research on artificial intelligence raises questions about the authenticity and accessibility of digitally mediated representations of the past. Overall, the literature supports the conclusion that digital media have changed the social and technological environment in which collective remembering occurs, but stronger causal evidence is still needed to determine how specific digital mechanisms affect memory accuracy.

Future research should use longitudinal, experimental, and cross-cultural approaches to investigate the relationship among nostalgia, digital platforms, algorithmic curation, and collective memory.

INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia is an emotional response associated with reflection on the past. Although people have long preserved and shared memories through oral traditions, written records, photographs, and other cultural practices, digital media have created new environments in which memories can be continuously accessed, circulated, and reinterpreted. Social media platforms allow individuals to encounter memories not only

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through their own recollections but also through photographs, videos, posts, memes, advertisements, and other digitally mediated representations.

This development raises an important question: How does digital nostalgia, driven by social media, affect the way people remember the past and construct collective histories? The question is significant because memory is not a perfect recording of previous experiences. Remembering is shaped by several interrelated factors, including emotion, social interaction, interpretation, and repeated exposure to information. Digital environments therefore provide a new context in which personal and collective memories can be reinforced, reconstructed, or challenged.

Existing literature presents both benefits and potential concerns. Research in psychology and social psychology emphasizes that nostalgia can contribute to identity and emotional experiences. Research in digital memory studies examines how social media changes the practices through which people preserve and share memories. Sociological and communication perspectives further demonstrate that personal memories can become part of broader collective narratives when they are publicly shared and repeatedly encountered.

However, the evidence does not support a simple conclusion that digital media directly causes collective memory distortion. Different sources also vary considerably in methodological strength. Some are peer-reviewed empirical studies, some are scholarly reviews, and others are professional or popular discussions. A credible examination of digital nostalgia must therefore distinguish among empirical findings, theoretical explanations of plausible mechanisms, and commentary illustrating contemporary cultural trends.

Rather than presenting digital nostalgia as inherently beneficial or harmful, the review considers how emotional, social, and technological processes interact to shape representations of the past.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a narrative literature review to examine existing research on digital nostalgia, social media, memory, and collective memory. Literature was identified primarily through Google Scholar, allowing research from psychology, sociology, communication, media studies, history, and interdisciplinary digital memory studies to be considered.

Searches used combinations of terms related to the research question, including “digital nostalgia,” “social media nostalgia,” “social media and collective memory,” “digital media and memory,” “false memories,” “Mandela Effect,” “nostalgia and identity,” “algorithmic curation and memory,” and “artificial intelligence and memory.” Additional relevant publications were identified through citations and references within sources located during the search.

Sources were considered relevant when they addressed at least one of the following areas: (1) psychological or emotional functions of nostalgia, (2) social media and remembering, (3) collective memory and identity, (4) false or shared memories, (5) commercial uses of nostalgia, or (6) technological influences on the circulation and interpretation of memories.

Because this review is narrative rather than systematic, sources were selected according to relevance to the research question rather than through a formal systematic-review protocol. Greater evidentiary weight was given to peer-reviewed empirical research and scholarly review articles when making claims about memory, nostalgia, and collective memory. Professional articles, news sources, and popular publications were used more cautiously, primarily to illustrate contemporary applications or public discussions of nostalgia rather than to establish psychological or causal effects. This differentiation is particularly important because the source base is interdisciplinary. Psychology provides evidence concerning memory and emotional processes; media and communication research examines how digital platforms structure the circulation of content; sociology and history provide perspectives on collective remembering and cultural narratives; and emerging digital-memory scholarship considers how platformization and artificial intelligence may alter memory practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Nostalgia, Emotion, and Identity

One of the strongest themes across the literature is that nostalgia can serve meaningful psychological and social functions. Nostalgia should therefore not be understood simply as inaccurate remembering. It can provide individuals with opportunities to connect their past experiences to their present identities and relationships.

Ekelund (2022) provides particularly relevant empirical evidence through a netnographic study of six retrospective Facebook groups. His research examines how emotions are practiced within these groups and how the Facebook interface influences interactions. Ekelund identifies three forms of “mood work”—fascination, nostalgia, and knowledge desire—and finds that interactions tend to produce brief and generalized accounts of the past rather than detailed historical narratives. This finding is important because it demonstrates both the emotional value of digital nostalgia and the role of platform structure in shaping how memories are communicated. Rather than showing that Facebook directly changes users' memories, Ekelund's findings suggest that the form in which memories are shared can influence the type of memory culture that develops. Short, fragmented interactions may encourage users to focus on recognizable or emotionally meaningful elements of the past. This contrast is important when considering identity. Nostalgic content can help individuals construct narratives about who they were and how their past relates to their present selves. Hakoköngäs (2025), in a review of collective memory and nostalgia, similarly emphasizes that collective nostalgia is dynamic and context-dependent. A memory can be emotionally meaningful even when it does not provide a complete historical account. Therefore,

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emotional significance and factual accuracy should be treated as separate dimensions when examining digital nostalgia.

Social Media and the Transformation of Collective Memory

Social media has also changed how personal memories become publicly accessible. Instead of memories remaining primarily within private conversations or physical collections, photographs, posts, videos, and discussions can remain available for extended periods and can be encountered by individuals who did not originally participate in the experience.

Jungselius and Weilenmann (2023) provide particularly strong evidence through a ten-year longitudinal study. Their research draws on 36 stimulated-recall interviews with the same group of participants in 2012, 2017, and 2022. This design provides a stronger basis for understanding how individuals reflect on their social-media practices over time than a single cross-sectional study. Their findings demonstrate that social media has become integrated into users' practices of reminiscing and remembering. Importantly, the study does not establish that social media causes memories to become less accurate. Instead, it demonstrates that digital platforms have become part of the environments in which people revisit and interpret their pasts.

Collective memory is not simply the sum of individual memories. It involves social processes through which groups interpret, preserve, and communicate understandings of the past. Adriaansen and Smit (2025) argue that social media has contributed to new forms of digital collective memory, including hashtag commemoration, memetic memory, and digital memory activism. Their review also emphasizes that platformization affects processes of remembering and forgetting through mechanisms such as algorithmic curation.

These findings suggest that social media can shape which memories become visible and how they circulate. However, visibility should not be treated the same as historical importance or accuracy. A memory may attract substantial engagement because it is emotionally compelling, culturally recognizable, or easily shareable, rather than because it provides an accurate representation of the past. The strongest conclusion supported by the literature is therefore more measured: social media has changed the conditions of collective remembering, but it has not been shown to determine what society remembers.

The Commercialization of Nostalgia

Nostalgia has also become increasingly important within digital marketing. Brands frequently use references to earlier cultural periods, childhood experiences, entertainment, fashion, and products to create emotional associations with consumers.

Kenan (2024), writing for Sprout Social, describes nostalgia as a marketing strategy used by brands to create emotional connections with audiences. Poiniski (2024) similarly discusses nostalgia marketing as a

strategy that can produce both opportunities and risks for companies. Rennie (2024) examines the growth of “new nostalgia” within digital culture, while Travers (2024) discusses nostalgia from a psychological perspective in a Forbes article.

These sources demonstrate the contemporary popularity of nostalgia marketing, but they should not be treated as equivalent to peer-reviewed empirical research. Their value is primarily descriptive: they show how businesses and popular commentators understand, frame, and use nostalgic content in digital culture. This evidence strengthens the overall argument by showing that commercial content can contribute to the cultural environment in which particular representations of the past become highly visible. However, the available evidence is insufficient to conclude that nostalgia marketing independently changes collective memory.

The relationship is better understood as part of a broader feedback process. Businesses identify cultural memories that already resonate with audiences, reproduce them through advertising and social media, and may increase their public visibility. Users then encounter these commercial representations alongside personal memories and other cultural narratives. The result is not necessarily false memory, but an environment in which some versions of the past receive greater cultural attention than others.

False Nostalgia and Selective Representations of the Past

The concept of ‘false nostalgia’ refers to idealized representations of the past that emphasize positive experiences while minimizing difficulties or contradictions. Norberg (2021) discusses this concept in a popular commentary rather than an empirical psychological study. Consequently, the source is most appropriately used to illustrate the concept rather than to establish a causal relationship between nostalgia and memory distortion.

The concept nevertheless provides a useful framework for interpreting digital nostalgic content. Social media can make highly simplified representations of the past easily shareable. A short video or image can communicate a broad emotional message about a particular historical period without providing the social, economic, political, or cultural context surrounding that period.

However, selective representation is not the same as false memory. A person can knowingly participate in nostalgic content without believing that the representation provides a complete historical account. Therefore, claims that digital nostalgia directly creates false memories would go beyond the evidence available in the sources reviewed.

The more defensible argument is that digital nostalgia can contribute to selective cultural remembering by increasing the visibility and repetition of emotionally resonant representations. Whether this exposure actually alters individuals' memories is a separate empirical question.

The Mandela Effect and Shared False Memories

Research on the Mandela Effect provides a stronger empirical foundation for discussing shared memory errors. The phenomenon refers to cases in which groups of people report similar memories that conflict with documented information.

Prasad and Bainbridge (2022) provide direct experimental evidence that certain visual stimuli can produce consistent false memories across individuals. Across multiple experiments, participants demonstrated shared and specific errors when recalling familiar visual icons. Their findings demonstrate that some false memories can occur consistently across people even when the majority of their visual experience involves the correct version of an image.

This research is particularly important because it moves discussion of the Mandela Effect beyond anecdotal internet examples. However, the experiments do not demonstrate that social media causes these false memories. In fact, the findings indicate that shared memory errors can arise from characteristics of the stimuli and human memory itself. Recognizing this difference is essential to the argument of this review. Digital platforms may provide environments in which false information or shared memory errors are discussed and reinforced, but the existence of a shared false memory does not prove that an algorithm or social-media platform created it.

McDonough (2023) and the Cleveland Clinic (2024) provide accessible explanations of the Mandela Effect and its relationship to false memory. These sources can help establish the cultural relevance of the phenomenon, but Prasad and Bainbridge provide substantially stronger evidence for claims about the psychological phenomenon itself.

The Mandela Effect therefore demonstrates an important principle for understanding digital collective memory: people can share highly similar memory errors, but the causes of those errors may be psychological, social, technological, or some combination of these factors.

Digital Platforms, Algorithmic Curation, and Memory

The role of algorithmic curation represents one of the most important emerging areas of research. Social-media platforms organize enormous quantities of information, meaning that users typically encounter only a portion of the available content. Recommendation and ranking systems can therefore affect which memories and historical narratives receive repeated exposure.

Adriaansen and Smit (2025) provide the strongest source in the current literature for this issue. Their review specifically examines how platformization reshapes remembering and forgetting and identifies algorithmic curation as an important feature of digital collective memory. They also identify methodological limitations in the existing field, including difficulties accessing platform data and a Western-centric bias.

These findings support the argument that algorithms are relevant to collective memory. However, they do not justify claiming that algorithms intentionally distort history or directly produce false memories. Algorithmic systems may influence exposure and visibility without determining how users interpret or remember the information they encounter.

This can be represented as a potential pathway:

1. Algorithmic curation
2. Differential exposure
3. Repeated engagement
4. Increased visibility of selected narratives

Table 1: Potential Pathway of Algorithmic Influence on Narrative Visibility

The downstream relationships—whether repeated exposure changes individual memory and whether such changes contribute to collective memory—require additional empirical evidence.

This relationship therefore represents an emerging research question rather than a settled conclusion. Longitudinal studies that track both digital exposure and memory accuracy would be particularly valuable for determining whether algorithmic environments have measurable effects on remembering.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Digital Memory

Artificial intelligence introduces another developing dimension of digital memory. Generative AI can create text, images, audio, and other representations that may resemble historical records or personal memories. This raises questions about how people will distinguish between preserved evidence and newly generated representations.

Hoskins (2024) provides a scholarly examination of this issue, arguing that generative AI creates new challenges for human agency over remembering and forgetting. Rather than treating AI as an established cause of collective memory distortion, Hoskins frames it as part of a rapidly changing environment in which the relationship between humans, technology, and representations of the past is becoming more complicated.

Claims that AI will necessarily rewrite history or produce widespread false memories would therefore be premature. A more defensible concern is that AI may increase the volume and accessibility of synthetic representations of the past. As these technologies develop, researchers will need to determine how users evaluate the authenticity of AI-generated historical content and whether exposure to synthetic representations affects confidence in personal or collective memories.

AI should therefore be considered an emerging factor that may transform memory practices rather than a proven cause of memory distortion.

Collective Memory, Cultural Context, and Historical Representation

The relationship between technology and collective memory can also be understood through cultural practices that existed before digital media. Binney's discussion of Māori oral narratives and Pākehā written histories demonstrates that historical representation has long been shaped by the perspectives and priorities of those who preserve and transmit the past.

Binney (2004) explains that both oral and written histories involve interpretation and that historical narratives are shaped by cultural context. This perspective is useful for understanding digital memory because it demonstrates that memory has never been completely neutral or static.

Digital media therefore represents a transformation of an existing human process rather than the creation of memory construction itself. The difference is that digital platforms can increase the speed, scale, accessibility, and persistence of memory circulation. This comparison also cautions against treating digital memory as uniquely unreliable. Oral traditions, written histories, mass media, and digital platforms all involve selection and interpretation. The distinctive feature of digital platforms is the technological infrastructure through which memories can be rapidly reproduced, publicly evaluated, algorithmically organized, and potentially modified.

Critical Synthesis Across Disciplines

The literature across psychology, media studies, communication, sociology, and history reveals a broad area of agreement on one central point: memory is socially and culturally situated rather than completely isolated from its surrounding environment.

Psychological research provides the strongest evidence for claims about memory errors and emotional processes. Prasad and Bainbridge's (2022) experiments demonstrate that people can develop consistent shared visual memory errors. Their research supports the broader claim that human memory is capable of systematic distortion.

Digital-memory research provides evidence for a different but related claim. Ekelund (2022) demonstrates how the structure of Facebook groups shapes nostalgic interaction, while Jungselius and Weilenmann (2023) show how social media has become integrated into users' long-term reminiscing practices. These studies support the conclusion that digital platforms influence the context and practice of remembering.

Media and communication research further emphasizes platform structures. Adriaansen and Smit (2025) argue that algorithmic curation and platformization are important parts of contemporary collective memory. This provides a plausible mechanism through which digital systems can influence the visibility and circulation of memories, although it does not establish a direct causal effect on memory accuracy.

Social psychological research adds another dimension. Hakoköngäs (2025) demonstrates that collective nostalgia can have different effects depending on context. Nostalgia can contribute to social identity and collective engagement without necessarily producing negative outcomes. This challenges interpretations that treat nostalgia itself as inherently misleading.

Finally, research on AI suggests that the technological environment surrounding memory is continuing to change. Hoskins (2024) identifies generative AI as a developing challenge to human agency over remembering and forgetting. However, because this research area is relatively new, its long-term consequences remain uncertain.

Taken together, these disciplines suggest a more nuanced model than the simple claim that “social media distorts memory.” Digital media can change how memories are encountered, shared, repeated, preserved, and interpreted. Psychological processes influence how individuals respond to that information, while social and technological systems influence which representations become visible. Collective memory emerges from the interaction of these factors.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature reviewed, the following conceptual framework summarizes the proposed relationships among digital media, nostalgia, emotional engagement, algorithmic curation, memory distortion, and collective memory.

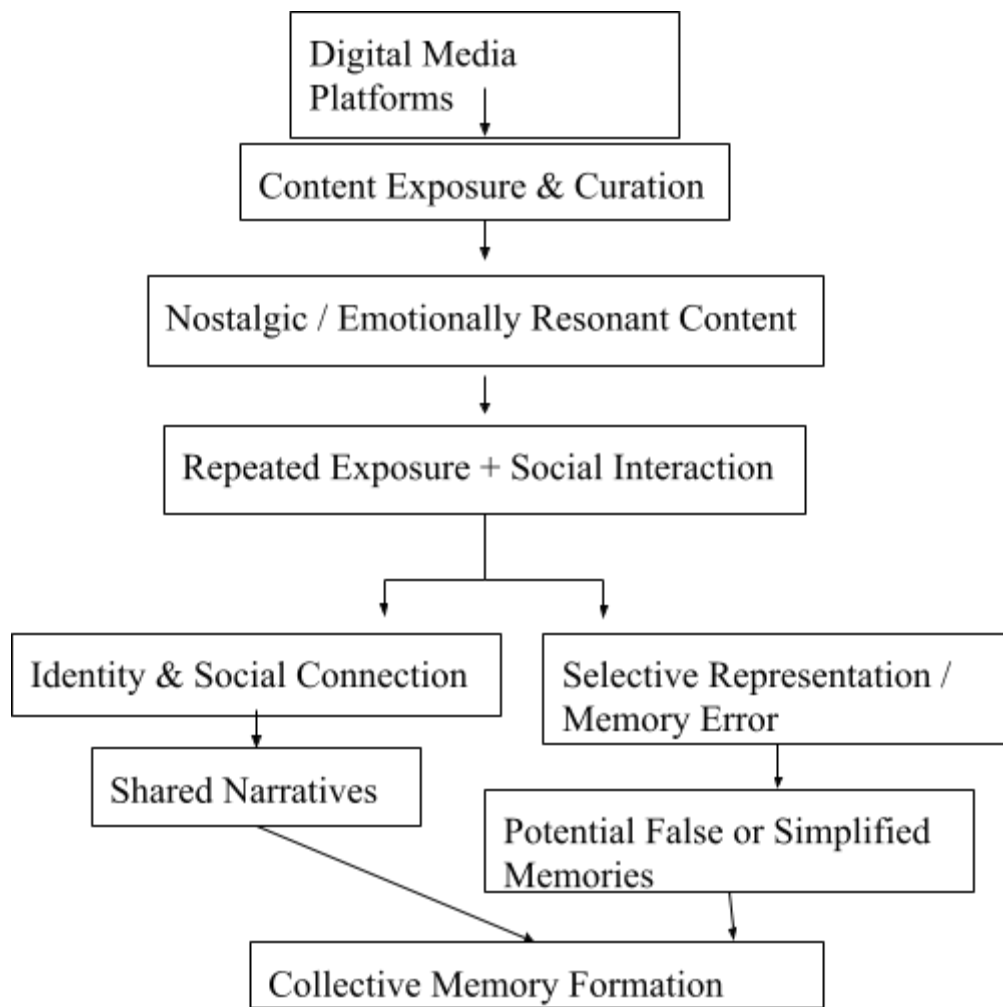


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Digital Nostalgia and Collective Memory

Note. This framework represents a proposed synthesis of relationships identified across the literature. It does not establish a causal pathway. Existing research provides evidence for individual relationships within the framework, while the overall pathway requires additional empirical testing.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this review.

First, this study is a narrative literature review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. The literature was identified primarily through Google Scholar, and sources were selected based on relevance rather than through a formal systematic-review protocol. Consequently, relevant research may have been missed.

Second, the evidence base contains sources with different levels of scholarly credibility. Peer-reviewed empirical studies, including Ekelund (2022), Jungselius and Weilenmann (2023), and Prasad and Bainbridge (2022), provide stronger evidence for specific claims than professional articles or popular commentary. Sources from Forbes, Medium, Sprout Social, Healthline, the Cleveland Clinic, and similar outlets are useful for illustrating public discussions and contemporary examples but should not be interpreted as equivalent to primary academic research.

Third, publication bias may affect the available literature. Studies reporting novel or significant relationships may receive greater academic or public attention than studies finding weak or nonexistent effects. This may make relationships between digital media and memory appear stronger than they are.

Fourth, digital media research faces a rapidly changing technological environment. Platforms, recommendation systems, content formats, and artificial intelligence technologies can evolve more quickly than researchers can study them. Findings about one platform or technological system may therefore have limited applicability to future platforms.

Fifth, the literature has limitations in geographic and cultural representation. Adriaansen and Smit (2025) specifically identify a Western-centric bias as a challenge within digital memory studies. Because collective memory is influenced by culture and historical context, findings from Western social-media environments should not automatically be generalized to all populations.

Finally, the available research does not yet establish a clear causal chain connecting digital nostalgia, algorithmic exposure, individual memory distortion, and collective memory formation. Some relationships are empirically demonstrated, while others remain theoretical or emerging. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the conclusions of the review.

CONCLUSION

Digital media have changed the conditions under which individuals and societies remember the past. Social media allows personal experiences to become publicly accessible, enables users to participate in shared reminiscing, and creates new forms of collective memory. Nostalgia within these environments can support identity, emotional connection, and social belonging.

At the same time, digital platforms can increase the visibility and repetition of particular representations of the past. Research demonstrates that human memory can contain systematic errors, and digital

environments provide new spaces in which information and memories can be repeatedly shared. However, these findings do not establish that social media directly causes collective memory distortion.

The strongest evidence in the literature supports several more specific conclusions. First, nostalgia can perform meaningful emotional and social functions. Second, social media has become an important environment for reminiscing and collective memory practices. Third, people can develop shared false memories, as demonstrated experimentally by research on the visual Mandela Effect. Fourth, platform features such as algorithmic curation may influence which memories and historical narratives receive visibility. Finally, artificial intelligence is creating new challenges concerning the authenticity and interpretation of digitally mediated representations of the past.

These findings illustrate why the relationship between digital media and collective memory should be approached with nuance. Digital media does not simply replace accurate history with 'false nostalgia.' Instead, it creates a new environment in which memory is preserved, selected, circulated, interpreted, and sometimes reconstructed.

The distinction between established evidence and emerging possibilities is especially important. Psychological research provides evidence that memory can be distorted and that people can share similar false memories. Digital-memory research demonstrates that social media has transformed remembering practices. However, the extent to which algorithmic recommendation systems cause changes in memory accuracy remains uncertain. Similarly, artificial intelligence represents a rapidly developing area of concern, but its long-term effects on collective memory have not yet been fully established.

Future research should therefore move beyond broad claims about social media and memory. Longitudinal studies could examine whether repeated exposure to specific digital narratives predicts changes in memory over time. Experimental studies could investigate whether algorithmically selected nostalgic content affects memory differently from randomly presented content. Cross-cultural research could determine whether these relationships vary across communities with different traditions of remembering. Researchers should also examine how AI-generated images, videos, and text influence perceptions of historical authenticity.

Ultimately, digital nostalgia should not be understood solely as a threat to historical accuracy. It is a complex cultural practice that can simultaneously preserve meaningful experiences, strengthen social identities, and encourage selective representations of the past. Understanding this complexity is essential as social media and artificial intelligence become increasingly integrated into the ways people encounter, interpret, and remember history.

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