

# Living in the past, it's a new generation: “We are all Generation Z”



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Lindi Esmée Eijsker  
5971160

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Supervisor: Dr. Imar de Vries

Second reader: Dr. Michiel de Lange

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The title of this master thesis is derived from the song *Bad Reputation* by Joan Jett (1980). The illustration is made by Bryce Chan (2019).

# Living in the past, it's a new generation: “We are all Generation Z”

L.E. Eijssker

## Abstract

As long as time machines haven't been invented yet, we can only (re)live the past through feelings of nostalgia. Many have tried to understand how nostalgia plays a crucial part in our lives. However, many studies focus on nostalgia experienced by middle-aged individuals and the elderly only since nostalgia-proneness has been hypothesized to peak as individuals move into middle age and during the retirement years. The current study questions this assumption and stresses that it is necessary to include young nostalgics in research since we can observe Generation Z longing for objects and experiences outside their lived past on video-sharing app TikTok specifically. This yearning for an indirectly experienced past by Generation Z, referred to as vicarious nostalgia, forms the basis of this study. Through textual, semiotic analysis of three popular TikTok videos showcasing vicarious nostalgia and online semi-structured interviews with six respondents aged 18-24 with a passion for the past, this study examines how the technological and cultural affordances of TikTok play a role in showcasing vicarious nostalgia and how Generation Z gives meaning to their nostalgic tendencies.

Findings indicate that TikTok videos with nostalgic content can function as screen memories, showcasing positive, often recreated footage of times passed. The short duration of this sweet representation of the past resembles a fleeting memory, triggering nostalgia and making Generation Z long for more, similar content. The algorithmic, short videos are easily spread and archived, fit the current zeitgeist, and result in a nostalgia boom. As Generation Z are in their formative years, they construct their self-identity and experience a community feeling on TikTok. Findings further indicate that leveling criticism against new media is not only a trait of older generations: just like parents' nostalgia becomes their children's nostalgia, Generation Z seems to have taken over their parents' cultural pessimism. Although Generation Z longs for the past as they believe people used to live in the moment with fewer sensory stimuli, they put things into perspective: the present is both a curse and a blessing marked by the pressure yet possibilities of the internet and the Covid-19 pandemic which they go through together, armed with nostalgic content at their fingertips to resort to: “We are all Generation Z”.

**KEY WORDS** vicarious nostalgia, technostalgia, social media, TikTok, Generation Z, popular culture

## 1.0 Introduction

“The world is not the same, and there is no turning back. And this fact produces nostalgia for times that will never return” (Bolin, 2014, p. 126).

### 1.1 The nostalgia boom

As long as time exists, the mystery of nostalgia keeps a hold on us. Many have tried to understand the significant role nostalgia plays in our lives. Journalist Corinne van der Velden is one of those people, who wrote her book *Negentig* (2020) about the obsession Millennials tend to have with the 1990s. According to her, every generation looks at their childhood through a romantic haze but Millennials are especially fascinated by the 1990s due to it being the last decade with a shared pop culture: youth watched the same series and listened to the same music. Today's pop culture is much more fragmented, according to Van der Velden. Dutch newspaper NRC shared an interview with Van der Velden about her new book on LinkedIn, where a young woman left a comment. She found the interview quite interesting, but what she foremost wondered was why younger generations like Generation Z who have no (vivid) memories of the 1990s are fascinated with this period as well,

which she noticed on video-sharing app TikTok specifically. This woman expressed exactly what I, the researcher of this study, have been wondering for a few years now. NRC replied to the comment, tagging Van der Velden: “Perhaps you know the answer to this question, Corinne van der Velden?” No one, including Van der Velden, responded.

According to Katharina Niemeyer’s *Media and Nostalgia* (2014), the 21st century is marked by an increase in expressions of nostalgia, nostalgic objects, media content and styles, causing a *nostalgia boom*. She gives various examples of this current boom, from fashion and music to Facebook groups and forums with titles like ‘nostalgia’ and ‘vintage’ where videos and pictures with nostalgic statements are posted. She further observed current films with nostalgic themes, several old television series that have been revived, and the digitization of retro design on mobile phones. According to Christina Goulding (2002), nostalgic imagery alike the examples just discussed, especially in advertising, has traditionally been targeted at the Baby Boom generation and the elderly. This mainly is the case since nostalgia-proneness has been hypothesized to peak as individuals move into middle age and during the retirement years (Havlena & Holak, 1991). This idea is shared by Charles Areni (2020). In his research, comments on YouTube videos with nostalgic content were analyzed, where mostly middle-aged people experienced nostalgia. In the comments, they quite paradoxically expressed their concerns with contemporary media accompanied with their longing for old, and in their eyes better, media. They experienced new media as disruptive communication technologies (DCT), causing psychological divisions between contemporary practices and memories of experiences from the past. From research done by Göran Bolin (2015), we see the same focus on middle-aged people, in this case, parents who experience nostalgia as the result of the (im)possibility of transferring intergenerational knowledge. They experienced a joyful nostalgia when their children showed interest in their nostalgic objects, like record players and cassette tapes, but experienced a more grieving nostalgia when their children used new media, like Spotify, instead. As scholars thus assume nostalgia to be an emotional reaction most frequently experienced by middle-aged people and the elderly, youth’s nostalgic tendencies are often ignored in research (Goulding, 2002). This in turn leaves us yet unable to answer the question posed by the LinkedIn user.

## **1.2 TikTok**

Nevertheless, every question deserves to be answered. The internet and social media in particular are attributed as possible explanations for nostalgia experienced outside youth’s lived past, as social media can function as online social archives. Sheenagh Pietrobruno (2013) emphasizes the role video-hosting websites play in enabling a relationship between official heritage and non-official, informal archiving practices. She calls the development of informal archives ‘social archiving’, as it occurs in the social space. Since many videos from video-hosting websites are derived from mainstream traditional media and commercial advertisement, the past can be stored and in doing so, relived. To quote Areni (2020, p. 2): “Nostalgia channels on YouTube and other social media platforms have

become big business generating millions of dollars”. This way, the web can be seen as a “huge attic or bric-a-brac market where individual and collective nostalgias converge and spread”, Niemeyer notes (2014, p. 1). Video-sharing app TikTok, which is currently the most popular app among youth globally (BBC News, 2020) with a core 13-24-year-old market (Galer, 2020), seems to play a substantial role in making nostalgic content easily accessible, spreadable and archivable. Apart from its popularity among youth, the app is known for its user-generated content in the form of short videos. The videos usually could be a maximum of 15 seconds long, but this limit has been extended to 60 seconds when you string four 15-second segments together.

Due to this technical affordance, TikTok might resonate with nostalgic content more compared to other video-hosting apps. The short, fleeting character of the videos might resemble a fleeting memory, as nostalgia can be characterized as a fleeting yearning for the past (Batcho, 2013). In addition, the awareness of the fleeting nature of a positive experience can motivate people to spend a longer time reminiscing about it (Huang, Huang & Wyer, 2016). This nostalgic reminiscence appears to be all over TikTok: we can recognize the roller disco craze and its associated dreamy, free aesthetic from the 1970s and early 1980s experiencing a renaissance (Short, 2020). We can notice the use of older songs: young people are discovering their new – yet old favorite tunes layered under bedroom makeup tutorials (Aroesti, 2019), and the hype of the “Old Hollywood” look, where women call themselves #vintagegirls, with according hair, makeup and wardrobe (Dall’Asen, 2020). To illustrate further, TikTok account @happy.vibe5 posts nostalgic videos, among which footage of an American high school class in 1989 hanging around and having fun. A TikTok user comments “The reason this seems so happy is bc nobody had phones 📱 📱”, an idea which is shared by many other commenting users. The most striking is the following comment on a similar TikTok video about the 1980s: “This is nostalgic for a time I wasn’t even around for 😊”. At the moment of writing this, the comment got 50100 likes.

### **1.3 Research question**

This is what we can observe: Generation Z, often called digital natives with no experience with life before the *cyberculture* we live in today (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly, 2009), longing for times prior to cyberculture, visible on TikTok specifically. We can hypothesize the rise of social media to be a reason for a nostalgia boom among youth, and there are more possible triggers for nostalgic behavior which will be discussed thoroughly in the theoretical framework. Could the purpose of loving and owning old things just serve as a means to ‘look nice’, managing one’s identity (Hirsch, 2014)? Or do these feelings of nostalgia indicate an ongoing crisis (Niemeyer, 2014)? Assuming the latter could very well be the case, it is necessary to explore this phenomenon. What sets the current study apart from previous studies which mainly focus on Baby Boomers and the elderly, deeming youth’s nostalgic feelings outside their lived past impossible if mentioned at all (Bolin, 2014; Bolin, 2015; Davis, 1979; Niemeyer, 2014), is thus the focus on youth, and in particular the nostalgic tendencies outside their lived past. This way, the current study follows Goulding’s

(2002) call to start including youth in nostalgic research. The notion of vicarious nostalgia forms the basis of this study, which will be further explained in the theoretical framework. Consequently, this study aims to explore the nature of this nostalgic behavior, with a particular focus on vicarious nostalgia and the younger nostalgics who are often overlooked in studies on the subject. The following research question has been compiled to conduct the research:

“How do the technological and cultural affordances of video-sharing app TikTok play a role in showcasing vicarious nostalgia, and how does Generation Z give meaning to their passion for the past?”

## 2.0 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Theories of nostalgia

The notion of nostalgia is based on the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (longing). Its first appearance and meaning dates back to 1688 where it was mentioned in a doctoral dissertation as a medical neologism signifying homesickness. This homesickness was common among soldiers, considered a huge health problem within the military (Niemeyer, 2014). In a more modern view, nostalgia can be explained as a bittersweet yearning for the past. From a sociological perspective, nostalgia allows individuals to maintain their identity in the face of major transitions which serve as discontinuities in the life cycle (Havlena & Holak, 1991). These discontinuities from one stage to another (for example going from childhood to pubescence, from adolescence to adulthood, etc.) are closely linked to age-related stages in a developmental process (Furlong, 2012). During transitional periods, individuals tend to feel nostalgic emotions more strongly, but not all past experiences or eras are equally likely to evoke nostalgic feelings. According to Fred Davis (1976), there is a preponderance of key life cycle discontinuities during adolescence and early adulthood, thus deeming this transition the most *fertile period* from which to draw nostalgic experiences. In addition, this tendency to engage in nostalgic feelings varies throughout the individual's lifetime. Nostalgia-proneness has been hypothesized to peak as individuals move into middle age and during the retirement years (Areni, 2020; Havlena & Holak, 1991). This underscores the importance of the current research, as Generation Z tend to go against this hypothesis by showing nostalgic behavior at a young age for times they have not lived.

As made clear by Bolin (2014; 2015), social scientist Karl Mannheim writes about the *formative years* during youth - comparable to Davis' term fertile period - between the ages of 17-25. According to Mannheim, we show a peak at 17 specifically, when we are most receptive to phenomena we are confronted with. During these formative years, youth experience 'fresh contact' with objects, events and phenomena through which generational experience is formed. Formative moments can include wars or crises but also discovering a cherished artist or film star that would make a lasting imprint on one's life. According to social scientists Anouk Smeekes and Maykel Verkuyten (2015), the past is thus crucial for our sense of self: without the ability to recall our past we are not able to understand who we are in the present. Stacey Baker and Patricia Kennedy (1994) argue the same, by stating that a certain amount of nostalgic reflection is probable as one reflects on how it is that s/he got to where s/he is today, determining our self-identity. The psychiatric framework adds to this that nostalgia can be considered a longing for a sanitized impression of the past, what in psychoanalysis is referred to as *screen memory*. A screen memory is not a true recreation of the past, but rather a combination of many different memories, all integrated together, and in the process, all negative emotions filtered out (Hirsch, 1992). What becomes clear, is that nostalgia is defined differently in various disciplines, but those definitions are certainly not mutually exclusive: they rather complement each other. Niemeyer (2014) justly argues nostalgia to be a "liminal, ambiguous phenomenon that migrates into deep emotional and psychological structures as well as



into larger cultural, social, economic and political ones” (p. 6). Due to this interdisciplinary approach, there is no need to classify different types of nostalgia into distinct categories. Instead, she states that it might be more useful to grant nostalgia its plural meanings by using the notion of *nostalgias*. This is especially of use when it comes to media, she writes, since in media different nostalgias interact: media can function as platforms, projection places and tools to express nostalgia. Media are often nostalgic for themselves as well, their past, structures and contents. Shortly said, media can produce content in a nostalgic style, but the medium itself can at the same time trigger nostalgia too.

## **2.2 Technostalgia and nostalgic envy**

The latter is explained by Bolin (2015) as *technostalgia*. Technostalgia stands for the preference of old, often analog, technologies. It's the longing for an old, firsthand experience of the use of a certain media technology itself, deeming the content less- to not important. Bolin found that technostalgia is directed towards now 'outdated' communication forms such as letter writing, comics, cassette tapes and vinyl records. It can be understood as a longing for a kind of pre-digital connectedness that precedes contemporary social media platforms. Bolin explains technostalgia to be twofold: it is partly a mourning of dead media technologies in themselves, but the mourning also includes the disappearance of tangible materiality of the media that produces nostalgic remembrances, like memories triggered by LP album covers. As previously stated, technostalgia is seldom connected to the content itself: the songs of an old vinyl record are now accessible on contemporary platforms such as YouTube and Spotify. Although songs can definitely be nostalgic – Niemeyer (2014) states that songs were used as a remedy for soldiers' nostalgic diagnoses and Bolin states that music triggers the memory – the songs live on and stay easily accessible, in contradiction to the old technologies they were once played on. Laura Marks (2002) recognizes the desire for pre-digital expressions in youth specifically and sees it as an example of *analog nostalgia*, a theory made against the specific educational setting of digital video makers. According to Marks, analog nostalgia is a desire for indexicality: “A restrospective fondness for the “problems” of decay and generational loss that analog video posed” (p. 152). She states that analog nostalgia seems to be especially prevalent among works by students who started learning video production when it was fully digital. Marks explains how the students who have only worked with the high-fidelity of digital video seem to long for analog physicality by importing images of electronic dropout and decay, such as “TV snow” and the random colors of unrecorded tape in their videos. She tries to explain this phenomenon by stating that the age of so-called virtual media has hastened the desire for indexicality. According to Marks, youngsters nowadays are used to seeing computer simulations and they therefore long for something real, hunting for unmediated reality. Bolin (2015, p. 257) is not satisfied with Mark's statement, as he wonders whether analog nostalgia among students who never experienced analog video making is nostalgia at all, by stating: “Can one long for a home where one has never lived?” He answers his own question by stating it rather means longing for someone else's home – a specific kind of *nostalgic envy* of the home one never had. He describes nostalgic envy as a phantom pain

caused by a more general fascination of preforms to the present technologies. Like Bolin, many scholars state that a key element defining nostalgia is that while experiences undoubtedly draw from the past, they must draw from one's personal history rather than from books, stories, or other sources. According to Davis (1976), an individual cannot be nostalgic for a period, event, or objects during which s/he has not lived. Niemeyer (2014, p. 9) calls this *false nostalgia*: "A pleasure-seeking yearning for former times that we have not, in fact, lived".

### **2.3 Vicarious nostalgia**

In contrast, Goulding (2002) questions this assumption. She argues that we no longer need to have lived a past in order to feel nostalgic for it. Goulding uses Morris Holbrook's and Robert Schindler's (1991) definition of nostalgia as: "a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favourable affect) towards objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)". Holbrook's and Schindler's view of nostalgia covers any and all liking for past objects that, for whatever reason, are no longer commonly experienced. They believe it is possible to identify psychologically with figures, experiences, or cultural moments dating from before one's birth. Although William Havlena and Susan Holak (1991) believe that interest in times outside one's lived past is not identical with true nostalgia which relies primarily on individual memories and experience, they agree with Holbrook and Schindler that a similar reception is possible. They state that the feelings of warmth, happiness and security that may be evoked are likely to be similar enough to those evoked by true nostalgia-based stimuli. Goulding refers to research done by Stacey Baker and Patricia Kennedy (1994) too, who alike Holbrook and Schindler make a distinction between *real nostalgia* (a bittersweet yearning which can only be experienced if a person has lived through the event), and *vicarious nostalgia*. The latter consists of *simulated nostalgia* and *collective nostalgia*. Simulated nostalgia refers to a sentimental or bittersweet yearning for the indirectly experienced past and may be remembered through the eyes and stories of a loved one or antiques and collector's items. This way, objects from the past are reintroduced or used by individuals to evoke nostalgic feelings from the past of which they have not been a part. Thus, objects can help preserve memories: there may be a deeper meaning in an object than just the tangible object itself. For instance, family heirlooms, photos, or souvenirs preserve memories of loved ones and the heritage of all that the family has done. Even when the experiential, lived past component is blocked from awareness, there is still an emotion present. Baker's & Kennedy's third type of nostalgia, collective nostalgia, is generation-specific: it refers to the bittersweet yearning for the past which represents a culture or generation. It's a collectivist notion that makes the emotion more consistent between individuals of a similar background when it is presented in the same context. Havlena and Holak (1991) agree there is a collective identity among members of the same generation in terms of their nostalgic experiences, and that nostalgia holds an important intergenerational phenomenon. As one generation both privately and collectively reminisces about its adolescence, these memories become,

in essence, a new experience for the next generation. This way, we see how collective nostalgia can result in simulated nostalgia. Havlena and Holak quote Davis (1979, p. 61): "...when today's adolescents reach middle age it is probable that their nostalgic revivals will include symbolic fragments and residues of what had been the nostalgia of their parents." The notion of vicarious nostalgia as explained by Baker and Kennedy forms the basis of Goulding's study and the current study alike. Through self-reported stories and in-depth interviews with a group of (young) adults aged between 20-40, Goulding concludes that nostalgia is a learned emotion. Hereby she underlines Baker's and Kennedy's idea of simulated nostalgia, stating that nostalgia as a learned emotion depends on a degree of socialization, usually in the early years, which may include positive accounts of personal experiences from family, repetition of these over a period of time, close contact with nostalgic people, and available stimuli.

#### **2.4 Nostalgia as a coping mechanism**

As mentioned, there are rather different forms of nostalgias than one nostalgia, generally referring to a bittersweet yearning for the past which can be relived through social archives. And as discussed, individuals are hypothesized to feel more nostalgic during transitional periods and due to the (in)ability to pass on media practices and experiences. Nostalgia is therefore argued to be a reaction to fast technologies, despite using them, in desiring to slow down (Niemeyer, 2014). According to Niemeyer, a re-emergence of nostalgia mainly indicates a crisis of temporality. A fast-changing media landscape or going through life changes can be seen as 'crises', triggering nostalgia as a coping mechanism. Areni (2020, p. 12) writes the following: "Nostalgia functions as an "existential resource" that is often triggered by sadness, loneliness, a lack of purpose or meaning, or an existential threat". Nostalgia can thus be a reaction and/or desire to escape crises of all sorts. According to Baker and Kennedy (1994), the amount of nostalgic reflection may be dependent on the perceived quality of life in the past. To quote Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley (2006): "a desire to imaginatively return to earlier times is then felt to correlate with an acute dissatisfaction with the present, and to involve an attempt to recapture a putative continuity and coherence unavailable in the fragmented modern or late modern environment". Thus, an individual's perceived quality of life may be an important mediator for nostalgia. Looking at the popularity of nostalgia among youth and especially among TikTok users, one could argue they are currently experiencing a crisis of some sort. As stated in the introduction, TikTok users comment that they long to live in the past, without smartphones and social media. Next to the fact that youth seem to long for times outside their lived past, they long for times they have lived through, too. The interesting thing here is that the times longed for are not long ago at all: sometimes no less than five years back. TikTok users romanticize the overall aesthetic of objects, clothes and popular media of 2014 like Tumblr and We Heart It (Cooke, 2020; Jennings, 2020). In an era where the present feels inescapable, youth seem to long for better times: be it before their birth, or just a few years back, as the whole world changed so fast due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This way, the pandemic may be causing a 'second wave' of,

and/or amplifying the already existing nostalgia boom which characterizes the current century. Alan Hirsch (1992) predicted that the use of nostalgia in marketing communications would increase in the coming decade since the more dissatisfied consumers are with life as it is today, the more they will want to revert to the past. Taking the current pandemic into consideration, one might argue Hirsch's prediction has come true (Baker & Kennedy, 1994). In addition, as individuals may face sadness, loneliness and meaninglessness during the pandemic, nostalgia is triggered and can help combat this feeling in return: it enhances well-being, feelings of social connectedness, and perceptions of meaning in life (Areni, 2020; FioRito & Routledge, 2020). In an interview with *Wired*, 19-year-old Ava McDonald says she never expected her freshmen year roommates wouldn't be fellow students, but her parents. Ava tries to vicariously live through her parents' great college experiences on campus, as she in contrast is going to a virtual freshmen year (Erasmus, 2020). This nostalgic trend among youth, Generation Z, is necessary to investigate as it might indicate a current declining state of perceived quality of life.

### **3.0 Research methods**

As the overall aim of this study is to explore and understand Generation Z's nostalgic behavior with a particular focus on vicarious nostalgia as showcased on TikTok, a qualitative methodology was considered most appropriate. Suitably, two qualitative methods were used to answer the research question. First, textual analysis using semiotics was conducted on three popular, nostalgic TikTok videos. Second, semi-structured online interviews were conducted with six Generation Z respondents with a passion for the past. In the following sections, the methodological choices and processes are explained thoroughly.

#### **3.1 Selected platform and videos**

Video-sharing app TikTok was selected as a case study since TikTok is currently the most popular app among youth globally (BBC News, 2020), showcasing (vicarious) nostalgia. It is the most downloaded app of 2020 as well, and the first app after Facebook's marquee app, WhatsApp, Instagram and Messenger to break past 2 billion downloads since January 1, 2014. The intense growth of TikTok seems to go hand in hand with the enduring Covid-19 pandemic, as youth search for entertainment on the internet (Galer, 2020). TikTok, known in China as Douyin, was released and developed by ByteDance in 2016. As TikTok heavily relies on its algorithm, the videos that show up on the so-called *For You* page differ by user. Once you have created your TikTok account, the app asks what your interests are. This way TikTok tries to show you what you like, according to the topics you selected. In addition, TikTok's algorithm learns from every action its users take within the app. The interactions a user has, the videos watched until the end and the ones a user shares, define how the For You page is formed. In theory, this means that if a user comes across a video with nostalgic content and likes, comments, or shares the video, it is likely that similar videos will follow. To avoid biases, videos with nostalgic content that came across the researchers' For You page were not subjectively selected, as the algorithm has learned that the researcher has a great interest in nostalgia and will therefore show lots of related content. Instead, a more objective selection was carried out, based on the popularity and content of the video.

The current study distinguishes between real nostalgia and vicarious nostalgia, as advocated by Baker and Kennedy (1994). According to Holbrook and Schindler (1991), vicarious nostalgia can be lived through family and objects (simulated nostalgia) and may draw from popular culture and esthetic consumption experiences, consisting of music, movies, literature, television, fashion, food, and other aspects. As this research focuses on nostalgia outside Generation Z's lived past, TikTok videos showcasing this type of vicarious nostalgia were selected only. This study considers youth part of Generation Z when they are born from 1997 onward, as set by Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019). As (young-) adults have difficulty recalling events that occurred before the age of about 3.5 to 4, referred to as childhood amnesia (Fivush & Schwarzmüller, 1998), this study argues Generation Z's lived past to start approximately in the years 2000, 2001 (if one was born in 1997). TikTok videos showcasing nostalgia for times later than 2001 were thus excluded. Subsequently, the

study searched the hashtags ‘nostalgia’ and ‘vintage’ on TikTok, as these hashtags are often used on social media platforms to mark corresponding content (Niemeyer, 2014). Considering the short time span of the research and to ensure the feasibility of the study, the three most popular videos showcasing vicarious nostalgia were selected on Thursday, 11 March 2021. Concerning the comment section, only comments written in English were gathered for analysis. The characteristics of the selected videos are displayed in the table below with like-, comment- and view counts as they appeared on 11 March 2021.

Video title	Video creator	Uploaded	Likes	Comments	Views	Searched hashtag
Sneaking out to a party in the 1980s 🍷 #retro #vintage #80s #transformation	@undiscoveredtiktokstar	01-09-2021	4.900.000	53.400	17.700.000	Vintage
Sunny Hill HS '95 💛 #90sbaby #90schallenge #90sstyle #90slook #90saesthetic #90slove #90sfashion #the90s #nostalgia #fyp #foryou #90skid #90s #1990s	@90s00s	12-06-2020	2.200.000	13.800	9.400.000	Nostalgia
Picture day 1997 📷 Ib: @gracebritt #aesthetic #90's #vintage #retro #style #fashion	@michaila.c	01-20-2021	1.600.000	13.300	7.900.000	Vintage

### 3.2 Textual analysis and semiotics

The selected videos in the case study are considered as ‘texts’. By analyzing texts, we evaluate the many meanings they hold and try to understand how written, visual and spoken language helps us to create our social realities (Brennen, 2017, chapter 8). This way, the TikTok videos and comments are types of texts interpreted by the researcher in an effort to understand some of the many relationships between media, culture and society. Texts of all kinds, in this case TikTok videos, are thought to provide traces of socially constructed reality. These traces may be understood by considering the words, concepts, ideas, themes and issues that reside in texts as they are considered within a particular cultural context. With this in mind, many different types of textual analysis can be done in media studies. Concerning this study, the semiotic approach was considered to be the best fit. Semiotics is a type of textual analysis that helps us to interpret codes and signs to understand how aspects of a text work with our cultural knowledge (Brennen, 2017, chapter 8). Semiotic theorists are not only interested in the definitional meaning or denotation of signs, but they rather consider the connotative meanings. Denotation involves a detailed description of a text, described as literal as possible. Connotation, on the other hand, involves cultural meanings connected to the text. It is necessary to describe the denotative layer first, to show the reader what the researcher's interpretations, the connotative layer, are based on. To provide a detailed description of the ‘texts’, concepts of film analysis with a particular focus on mise-en-scene were applied as explained by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2010). Next, connotative layers were extracted from the denotative

layer: the denotation was analyzed, decoded and interpreted by the researcher into plausible connotative interpretations and meanings, discussed in chapter 4.

### **3.3 Respondent sample and recruitment procedure**

Next to the sample including three TikTok videos, a second sample was constructed in order to conduct interviews. The sample consisted of six Dutch respondents between the ages of 18-24, born respectively between 1997 and 2003, who identified with nostalgic feelings and were passionate about the past. The most common age of the respondents was 22. The sample consisted of four women and two men. The respondents were either enrolled in higher education or held a degree (five on university level, one on higher professional education level). All respondents had the Dutch nationality, of which four respondents had a Dutch ethnic background as well compared to two respondents with a bicultural background.

Respondents were recruited based on purposive sampling, which means that the sample is intentionally selected according to the needs of the study (Boeije, 2010). Thus, respondents had to meet certain criteria in order to be selected, among which the before-mentioned birthyear criterium: respondents had to be part of Generation Z (born from 1997 onward) but older than 18 since children cannot legally consent to participate in research without the permission of a parent (Boeije, 2010). All respondents had to identify with nostalgia, having a passion for the past, to be selected. Next to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used to ensure respondents were able to recruit future respondents from their acquaintances who fit the study's criteria as well. To gain respondents, a flyer was made including brief information about the research (appendix 7.1, p. 40) which was shared on social media platforms of the researcher. Furthermore, the flyer was shared on social media platforms by friends of the researcher and shared in an e-mail newsletter by Study Association AKT. Aspiring respondents were provided with the informed consent by e-mail (appendix 7.2, p. 41). After the respondent and the researcher had both signed the informed consent, a date was set for the online interview.

### **3.4 Interviews and data analysis**

Interviewing allows the researcher to find out the personal context and explore themes in-depth as well as in detail (Brennen, 2017; Evers, 2015). Hence, semi-structured online interviews were conducted in order to understand Generation Z's passion for the past. The interviews were held in Dutch as respondents might not be able to fully express themselves in English or to understand concepts in a foreign language. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and were conducted with a topic list as a conversation aid, as explained by Jeanine Evers (2015) (appendix 7.3, p. 43). The researcher conducted the interviews in a quiet, closed room without other people present. The respondents were asked to sit in a closed room as well, using their laptop/computer to log into the videotelephony platform of their choice (either Zoom, Skype, or Teams) instead of their mobile phone, so that both the respondent and the researcher had access to a larger screen. This enhanced the opportunity to experience each other's body language and non-verbal cues, which is of great

importance since the interviews could not be conducted face-to-face due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With the respondents' consent, the interviews were recorded as audio and video files. The first approximately five minutes of the interview were used to build trust, create openness and establish an environment where questions could be asked and answered in a non-judgmental manner, by using icebreaker questions as explained by Brennen (2017, chapter 3). The informed consent was reviewed again and the respondent was asked to tell something about him/herself. To guarantee confidentiality, the respondent was asked to choose a pseudonym in place of his/her real name. Next, the topics of the topic list were discussed. In addition, the three selected TikTok videos used for textual analysis were shown and discussed in the interview as well (topic 5) as a means of elicitation technique, as explained by Evers (2015).

After the interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. This way, spoken word was converted into a transcript in such a manner that the message was captured exactly the way it was spoken. Since the interviews were conducted online, internet connectivity issues and intelligibility problems were reported as well. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were sent to the respondents to carry out a member check. Member checks are a direct test of the reliability of the observation, verifying the research, as it gives respondents a chance to review and comment (Boeije, 2010). The member checks have proven to be valuable, given the glitches in the recordings could foster incorrect transcriptions. After the member checks, the transcripts were imported in Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software program. The use of NVivo search and query functions enhanced the ability to identify trends and search for salient themes in the data. The coding process in Nvivo consisted of three rounds, namely open coding, axial coding and selective coding as explained by Hennie Boeije (2010). The exported codebook can be found in the appendix (appendix 7.4, p. 49). The findings from the data analysis are discussed in chapter 5. All information that could identify respondents and violate the promise of confidentiality was removed from the findings.



#### **4.0 Analysis: connotative findings and implications**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the semiotic approach was used to analyze the TikTok videos. First, the videos were described in detail using concepts of film analysis, and the most liked and corresponding comments were drawn up to describe the denotation of the text (see appendix 7.5, p. 56). In summary, the first TikTok video *Sneaking out to a party in the 1980s* shows a young woman, the creator of the video, acting as if she's dressing up for a night out in the 1980s. The song *Everybody Wants To Rule The World* by the English pop-rock band Tears For Fears (released in 1985) is audible in the video. The second video *Sunny Hill HS' 95* shows footage of high schoolers in 1995 as they are interviewed about their future goals. A slowed version of the song *Pluto Projector* by British recording artist Rex Orange County (released in 2019) is softly audible in the background of the video. The third video *Picture day 1997* shows a young woman, the creator of the video, who recreates a school picture day in 1997, showing off different persona and styles. The song *Smells Like Teen Spirit* by American rock band Nirvana (released in 1991) is audible in the video. For a full denotative description, I refer the reader to the appendix once more. In the following sections, connotative interpretations and possible meanings are described.

#### **4.1 Creating a VHS effect**

Flowing from the denotation, the first and third video are created to impersonate and recreate footage from times passed, while the second video shows actual footage from 1995. The video creators have tried to capture the ambiance, fashion, trends and technical specifics from times outside TikTok's core audience, Generation Z. To establish this, the video creators of the first and third video deployed filters, which can alter the range of tonalities in quite radical ways (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). In the first video, a flickering filter with a top-right PLAY sign was deployed to enable a VHS effect. By using this filter, it is as though the creator of the video aimed to express what Marks (2002) described as analog nostalgia, a desire for indexicality. The VHS effect adds to the authenticity of the video, as if it was really filmed in the 1980s. As TikTok's core audience did not experience the 1980s, all the footage they have ever seen of this era is indeed analog: it is the only way they could have encountered these times. Therefore, the filter is associated with times passed, associated with nostalgia. Although the third video does not show flickering nor a PLAY sign, it shows the VHS-like filter is used to make the image unsharp. If both videos were filmed in full HD, it wouldn't look or feel like a video from the 1980s anymore: the illusion would crumble, as the filter creating a VHS effect can be decoded as a sign of the past. From the comment sections of the videos, we learn that the filters were deployed by the video creators during editing outside of TikTok, using editing software and apps. This teaches us that TikTok allows its users to film and edit a video outside of the platform, using filters and other effects from different apps to create a VHS effect. This VHS effect can in turn be associated with a time where everything was still analog, a highly romanticized media landscape without disruptive, new digital communication technologies.

#### **4.2 Mise-en-scene, music and a perfected past**

Besides the filters used, the creators of the first and third video arranged the mise-en-scene to impersonate and recreate footage from times passed. This is visible in the setting, costume and behavior of the figures. In the third video, we see how the young woman's movement from left to right helps create the concept of different types of students queuing up for their yearly school photo. The blue curtain and the stool are staged to serve as a school photo setting and clothes specifically define different characters present in a school class in 1997. In the comment section, we can see how popular 1990s fashion is today: users comment Generation Z is bringing 1990s style back, making it difficult to spot a difference between actual footage from the 1990s, recreated footage, and even footage of youth's outfits today: "I love how all over these look normal to me". In the first video, we see the same focus on clothes to recreate a 1980s scenery, but the props are quite important too. The plaid on the bed, the David Bowie poster and the Polaroids all signify the 1980s. The hair rollers, metallic make-up and statement earrings can be interpreted as indicators of the 1980s as well. This way, objects from the past are reintroduced or used by individuals to evoke nostalgic feelings from the past of which they have not been a part. As we have learned from the theoretical framework, objects can help preserve memories (Baker & Kennedy, 1994). The use of props in the first and third video may thus evoke feelings of vicarious nostalgia, as it aligns with the viewer's idea of nostalgic objects. The music used can evoke feelings of vicarious as well as real nostalgia too, as the viewer might have heard it before, maybe through an older relative. The music amplifies the period authenticity as well: the first video showing a recreation of the 1980s used a popular song released in the 1980s, and the third video which recreates 1997 used a song popular in the 1990s. The second video, which shows actual footage from 1995, used a song released in 2019 instead. The song is slowed however, resulting in a dreamy sound, which perfectly goes with the dreams the high school students share about their future.

Even though the first and third video are overall deemed as good representations by TikTok users, probably due to the symbolic 1980s and 1990s mise-en-scene, this study argues these videos to be quite literally staged screen memories, as explained by Hirsch (1992). It is not a true recreation of the past, but rather a combination of many different, integrated signs indicating the 1980s and 1990s, with negative emotions or experiences filtered out. This in turn seems to create an alternative dimension that TikTok users long for. As previously mentioned, TikTok videos have a very limited duration. This study argues that due to this fleeting element, users comment that they want to stay in this alternative, happy dimension: "omg pls let me stay on 80s tiktok". The pleasant screen memory goes by so fast, while users want to keep seeing this interesting alternative dimension in which youth their age dresses up in cool clothes, expressing their taste, and sneak out to parties. The second video could be interpreted as a screen memory as well, however to a lesser extent as it is not recreated nor staged. The video shows 'normal' students having a 'normal' school day, but at the same time it's a fleeting 20-second glimpse: it does not show the homework they got or other features that could be interpreted as negative. We see young people laughing, chasing each other

while dreaming and bragging about their future. Accompanied with a dreamy sound, it's the beauty of being young: the world is their oyster. This can evoke feelings of vicarious nostalgia, wondering if these students made their dreams come true and where they are now, as a comment reads: "Wonder if they fulfilled their dreams".

#### **4.3 Take me back to the time my mom was young**

Now let's take a closer look at the comments in particular. For more information regarding the comments, the amounts of likes and sub-comments, see appendix 7.5. As mentioned, the presented screen memories may evoke fleeting yearnings for times passed in TikTok users. Users question and try to explain their nostalgic feelings too, showing they find it odd to feel nostalgic for something they haven't lived through: "this makes me nostalgic even though i've never done it", "Your soul could've been alive back in the 80's and that's why it feels nostalgic 😊 😊" and "Apparently all of us wanna live in the 80s and I love you all for that". Further, we can see users expressing changes in the media landscape followed by changes in their perceived quality of life as possible nostalgia triggers. They seem to be dissatisfied with the time they are trapped in, trapped in their generation even: "Anyone not like being gen z?" They wish they were born earlier: "i always wished I was born in this era 😞" but knowing they can't, they collectively want to 'stay' on this nostalgic side of TikTok. We can interpret a lot of dissatisfaction with new media as well: "i hate it wish it was the 80s wit no phones so much better connection wit people and more safe to go out ugh i wish i was born then". TikTok users wish for a time where phones and social media didn't exist. We can see this recurring in all three comment sections, which is quite striking to find on an app ruled by youngsters, as this kind of criticism is hypothesized to be characterizing for middle-aged individuals only (Areni, 2020). The lack of new media in these videos seem to symbolize a state of being 'in the moment', a time in which people thus lived happier lives: "This made me wish phones didn't exist and that we just lived in the moment all the time not thinking about social media & everything ..." Paradoxically, as Areni discussed as well, these users could not have seen these videos let alone leave comments if they weren't on their phone, where TikTok brought them together. No matter how online connected these users are, by liking, commenting and sharing videos, they altogether seem to show a yearning for offline connectedness: a form of connectedness that can only be found in times outside their lived past. Although the comments do not show a longing for older media instead, this rejection of new media can be understood as technostalgia, as Bolin (2015) explains technostalgia to be a longing for a kind of pre-digital connectedness that precedes contemporary social media platforms.

Actual or recreated footage from times past on TikTok thus seems to evoke a bittersweet yearning. TikTok users' love for nostalgic and vintage videos is not visible in the number of likes alone, but in the appraisal they show for the video creators too. Especially the creator of the third video was praised for her accuracy and users expressed how they enjoyed watching all the different 1990s outfits: "you pulled off every look SO WELL ❤️ 🙌 🧑". But as mentioned, these yearnings are not only sweet; they are bitter too. The comment section of the second video shows users

commenting they feel sad, and they often don't know why. Some again blame the absence of phones to be the reason people lived happier lives in the 1990s: "This was such a happier time, no cell phones or social media". Furthermore, we can see how TikTok users identify with the high school students shown in the 1995 footage. They actively compare the perceived high school experience with their own. As the part of Generation Z that is currently enrolled in high school have quite a different experience due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they express their sadness in the comments. Examples are: "This makes me sad how they got to have a normal high school experience and now so many kids aren't getting that", "Welp I'll never have my high school experience", and "Where are their masks 🙄 🙄 🙄". This sadness as expressed by users can be seen as nostalgic envy as explained by Bolin (2015). They long for an experience they cannot have themselves and thus want to be taken back in time. As the perceived quality of life today compared to the dreamy, vintage worlds in the TikTok videos appears to be much worse, nostalgia can be triggered and help combat this sad feeling in return (Areni, 2020; FioRito & Routledge, 2020). Just like Ava tries to vicariously live through her parents' great college experiences on campus (Erasmus, 2020), the users might try to live vicariously through the high school experiences as seen in the second video. The nostalgic enviousness underscores Holbrook's and Schindler's (1991) idea that it is possible to identify psychologically with figures, experiences, or cultural moments dating from before one's birth, as the TikTok commenters clearly identify with and compare themselves to the figures shown in the second video.

The TikTok video creators know that most fellow users, their possible audience, are too young to have experienced life in the 1980s and 1990s, but they do assume them to recognize the times portrayed and that they will possibly perceive them as nostalgic. The popularity of the videos draws on tacit knowledge, the assumption that users have seen similar images before, for example in series or films from- or recreating that era: "Teachers pet and Preppy gave me Clueless vibes!! 😍 😍 😍", "Freak And Geeks vibe". Their feelings of nostalgia are thus simulated, as explained by Holbrook and Schindler (1991). Next to series and films, we can see this yearning for an indirectly experienced past through the eyes of a loved one, and one loved one stands out most: mom. Users not only wonder why these videos make them feel sad, they wonder why they are fascinated or even obsessed with the time their mother grew up in too: "Why am I obsessed with the times my mom grew up in...". The creator of the third video says in the comments that she got tips from her mother to help her put the outfits together, who was in high school in the 1990s. Fellow users express that their mothers had the same hair rollers: "omggg my mom had one of those curling holding thing machines", wore the same clothes or were simply just alive during the period these users seem to long for. This underscores Havlena's and Holak's (1991) and Davis' (1979) idea that children can share their parents' nostalgia: their parent's reminisce has become a new experience for the next generation.

## **5.0 Analysis: interview findings and implications**

Following the textual, semiotic analysis, interviews were conducted which yielded rich data. The following sections loosely follow the order of topics from the topic list (appendix 7.3, p. 43). First, we discover how Generation Z give meaning to their passion for the past by defining nostalgia (5.1), nostalgic objects (5.2), the start of their interest (5.3), their feelings towards the present (5.4), the past (5.5), life cycle discontinuities, and crises (5.6). Ultimately, the respondents' reactions to the shown TikTok videos are described, including their vision of the ongoing nostalgia boom on TikTok (5.7). The presented findings below are actively linked to the theoretical framework as well as to the preceding semiotic analysis, in order to compose a conclusion in chapter 6. All respondent's names (Stephanie, Frans, Lieke, Afaf, Nala and Dexter) are anonymized. Respondent's quotes have been translated into English since all interviews were conducted in Dutch.

### **5.1 Definitions of nostalgia**

The respondents gave different, but similar definitions of nostalgia. Two respondents emphasized the bittersweet nature of nostalgia: despite the positive side, nostalgia is accompanied by feelings of sadness and melancholy. But above all, four respondents mentioned that nostalgia is beautiful, as it is associated with good times and/or good memories. Respondents were aware that their memories and interpretations of times passed were possibly and easily romanticized by others or by themselves. Frans thus described nostalgia as a yearning or glorification of what has been, an idea shared by Lieke. Nostalgia was described as a short, fleeting moment as well by Nala, consistent with Krystine Batcho's definition of nostalgia (2013). When Nala studied abroad, she took a hand cream with a specific scent home that reminds her of her time there. When she smells it she briefly gets nostalgic, but then gets back to her day. Stephanie described nostalgia as yearning back for a time that was good to you personally, a time you must have lived through. This way, she described real nostalgia as explained by Baker and Kennedy (1994). By way of contrast, two other respondents defined nostalgia primarily as a longing for a past they did not experience, before their birth.

To me, it means having a lot of interest and maybe even missing a time in which you didn't live yourself. So for example, a desire to live in the 1970s or 1980s, in that subculture and that music. Like, missing that, while you've never actually experienced it.

- Lieke, 21, female.

Like this study, two respondents made a difference between real nostalgia and vicarious nostalgia. They distinguished between sweet memories from their personal past, symbolized by all kinds of nostalgic objects, and a positive longing for things, objects, and people from the past they were not a part of. Frans distinguished between three forms of nostalgia. He described nostalgia from one's own lived past as personal nostalgia, which is consistent with this study's term real nostalgia. Nostalgia felt by a certain group of people for times past was described by Frans as national nostalgia,

consistent with collective nostalgia. Collective nostalgia was mentioned directly and indirectly by Frans and Nala only. The latter experienced collective nostalgia as she reminisced with her friend about their mutual experiences while studying abroad. Lastly, Frans explained nostalgia triggered by family heirlooms as family nostalgia, which this study indicates as simulated nostalgia. Frans was the only respondent to mention three different types of nostalgia at the beginning of the interview, but other respondents soon discovered nostalgia had multiple meanings for them too. After the interview, Dexter acknowledged how broad the concept of nostalgia is, something he had not realized before. Just like Niemeyer (2014), he came to the understanding there are rather different nostalgias that transcend disciplines.

### **5.2 Nostalgic objects**

Personal nostalgic objects included all sorts of mostly small objects like notes, receipts, souvenirs and flowers. Certain music and specific scents were rendered as personal, real nostalgic experiences too. Objects and experiences outside the respondents lived past that were considered nostalgic were foremost record players and vinyl: five respondents mentioned they enjoyed collecting, playing and even decorating their room with vinyl album covers. When asked about their preference for vinyl, two respondents mentioned the importance of the tangible materiality, the crackling sound it makes, the artful design on album covers and the “ambiance” playing vinyl provides: all examples of technostalgia (Bolin, 2015). Respondents further mentioned enjoying older music in general, looking through their parents’ photo albums, wearing vintage clothes, vintage furniture, vehicles, typewriters and historical newspapers. Furthermore, they collected black-and-white photos and old cameras. Respondents mentioned family heirlooms or personal items from (deceased) family members as well, like a pocket watch, vase or clock. All six respondents described that their nostalgic objects are part of- or help shape their identity to a certain extent. Lieke described how she expressed her taste in music by wearing band T-shirts, Afaf didn’t have the heart to throw her nostalgic notes away as she claims them to be part of her identity, and when Nala smells her hand cream, she thinks about the ways her life has changed since she studied abroad. This supports Smeekes’ and Verkuyten’s (2015) and Baker’s and Kennedy’s (1994) idea that the past helps us form an understanding of where we have been and where we are today, creating our sense of self. Dexter was the only respondent to mention that he believes Generation Z’s love for record players is not because the sound is so beautiful, but because of the “vintage, hipster vibes”. Generation Z aims to present itself to others and to themselves in a way that is different from the norm. However mentioned by Dexter only, this supports Zach Hirsch’s (2014) idea that people like having old things just as a means to ‘look nice’.

### **5.3 Formative years and simulated nostalgia**

When asked about the start of their interest in the past, three respondents recalled being around 15-18 years old. According to Lieke, she was in high school, mid-puberty, when she started exploring things she liked, in search of herself. Both Lieke and Stephanie recalled a romance to be an

inspiration for them to explore music that was different from what they used to listen to and introduced them to vinyl, which they then further explored through their fathers' old playlists. This age range, 15-18 in which 16 was mentioned most, seems to be consistent with Mannheim's idea of formative years, in which youth show a peak at 17. Just like Mannheim, the respondents described being most receptive during these years for the fresh contact they made with popular culture, in this case popular culture of the past introduced by loved ones. Two other respondents believed their interest in the past emerged earlier, around the time they were in elementary school. Afaf recalls the perfume of her teacher and the time capsule she made with her friends in seventh grade. Frans remembers his grandparents' clock from 1820 which he was astonished by at age 10. This underscores Goulding's (2002) finding that nostalgia is a learned emotion that usually starts in the early years by degrees of socialization. Dexter recalled his interest to start later, around 21 years old. He described discovering the world around the ages of 16-20 and it was after these years that he could take more time for himself and reflect on his past and compare it to his parent's past, which triggered his interest. The influence of parents appeared to be a salient theme in the data. Four respondents mentioned they yearn- and feel vicarious nostalgia for times in which their (grand-)parents were young. This finding is consistent with the simulated nostalgia found in the comment sections of the TikTok videos. These comment sections showed simulated nostalgia through mothers, however from the interviews we learn that three respondents mentioned their father specifically, who introduced them to music that was popular when he was young. Respondents hypothesized that even though they didn't experience their fathers' music consciously as a child, they picked it up anyway. This underscores Havlena's and Holak's (1991) and Davis' (1979) idea that children can share their parent's nostalgia.

For me, I think it started with my father's taste in music, which I used to dislike. I didn't want to know about it as a kid, I only wanted K3 [Flemish girl group] on my iPod. But later I went through his playlists anyway and yes, I immediately liked it very much. It also sounded a bit like coming home, because I did recognize the music.

- Stephanie, 22, female.

This finding is consistent with Bolin's (2015) idea of the (im)possibility of intergenerational experience. Transferring generational experience, in this case the transfer of musical taste, is made possible as the respondents explored their parents' old record collections and picked up the same taste. According to Bolin, this transfer causes parents to feel nostalgic only. This study's interviews show however that transferring generational experience causes youth to feel nostalgic too, be it vicariously and simulated. When asked about the current nostalgia boom among Generation Z on TikTok, Frans was not surprised at all. He replied the boom was easily explainable, as Generation Z's parents lived through the 1990s, for example. This way, youth automatically have an interest in this period, since they have seen fashion or heard music from their parents: "the seed has already

been planted". Generation Z's fascination with this specific period could thus be explained as an expression of simulated nostalgia, an intergenerational transfer from their parents' experiences. Frans explained: "This is something that happens in a greater and lesser extent in every generation of course, that things and interests are passed on." But something special is going on with Generation Z. It seems as if Generation Z is not only reproducing their (grand-)parents nostalgia, but their criticism leveled against new media too. Frans described this as the transference of cultural pessimism: a conviction that the culture of humanity is in a process of irreversible decline.

Yes, I think that comes with a bit of cultural pessimism, which is taken over from the older generation I think, all the anti-telephones, anti-internet. While, ultimately, that's also what makes it possible to look back to the times that we're all so interested in.

- Frans, 22, male.

But what would be the reason for Generation Z to take over this new media criticism, this cultural pessimism, from their elders? According to Frans, this must be due to today's fragmented pop culture, an idea shared by Van der Velden (2020). Frans explained that perhaps because there is such a "deluge of media and culture", that "we as a generation no longer know what to do". He mentioned preferring listening to music on vinyl over Spotify for this very same reason. According to Frans, you lose focus when you open Spotify because there is immediately so much music to choose from. He rather collects his own vinyl albums, creating his own more "static" musical archive. Due to this overload that new media platforms may induce, Generation Z might recognize contemporary media as chaotic and stressful, resulting in similar criticism which is characteristic for and expressed by older generations.

Not just one thing is popular anymore; there are hundreds of sub-trends and I think people find that extremely difficult because it really forces you to choose what you like. You can't just do what the group does, which used to be the case. Because in the 1960s, you could just like The Beatles, everyone liked them, that was fine. But it doesn't work like that anymore, so I think people have lost that control a bit.

- Frans, 22, male.

#### **5.4 Living in the present: both a curse and a blessing**

This overwhelming effect of today's pop culture was indeed mentioned by the respondents, as they all discussed criticism and downsides of contemporary media to a certain extent. Criticism leveled against new media was found in the comment sections of the TikTok videos as well. Four respondents mentioned experiencing stress, frustration and addictive behavior as new media, their smartphone in particular, create an expectation pattern of always being available and always being online. According to Dexter, it's not an expectation pattern created by one person only: it's a pattern



that has crept into society unconsciously. The online world is at the expense of real, valuable communication. By connecting online, communication becomes very businesslike, flat and superficial, according to Dexter.

Nowadays, a telephone is a computer, a GPS, almost a kind of satellite in your pocket. (...) Since the whole world is in your pocket, you are expected to be up to date. So yeah, that's what I consider a downside.

- Dexter, 24, male.

Dexter further mentioned how new media make it possible to manipulate images, like photoshopping women's bodies on Instagram and the problems that come with it. Dexter's statement seems to be consistent with Marks's (2002) idea that youngsters are used to seeing computer simulations and therefore long for something real, hunting for unmediated reality. Despite the downsides described by the respondents, they underscored the many positive possibilities new media provide too. They were able to put things into perspective, which is in contrast to the comments of the TikTok videos where users spoke negatively of new media only. All six respondents described being contented with the possibilities and information the internet provides, even when they argued not to be satisfied with contemporary media in general. It's what Dexter described as both a curse as a blessing: all sorts of communication possibilities are within reach thanks to the internet, but at the same time it creates the expectation pattern to always be available online. Four respondents realized that these possibilities provided by the internet include the searchability and spreadability of nostalgic content. Five respondents mentioned they watch old music performances via YouTube, two respondents follow Instagram accounts showcasing nostalgic photos and videos, and one respondent is part of a Facebook forum where nostalgic photos are shared. They recognized the role social media play in archiving nostalgic content, serving as social archives as explained by Pietrobruno (2013).

Interviewer: are you satisfied with contemporary media?

Yes I think so, because there is a lot of material to find, from nostalgic times too, from earlier times. So on the one hand, I think it's really cool all of that has been stored. And I also think that a lot is possible, for example... It does not necessarily have to do with nostalgic music, but in corona times I can just see a band perform live via my phone, late in the evening. So I think that's a great advantage, so I'm actually really happy with it.

- Lieke, 21, female.

The respondents recognized that they need new media as a means to discover content that they consider nostalgic. This realization, putting their passion for the past in perspective and acknowledging the archival character of the internet, was not found in the TikTok comments. Nor is

it consistent with Areni's (2020) findings, where middle-aged people expressed criticism towards new media only without realizing they needed YouTube to watch the nostalgic content. Afaf indicated she strongly believes that Generation Z's nostalgic tendencies are made possible by the fact that they have so much content within reach via social archives. She already felt simulated nostalgia through her parents' stories alone, but the internet made these stories come to life, by watching videos and gaining information about the time in which her parents were young. She recognized feeling real nostalgia for times that are just a few years back too, possibly due to the current pandemic as hypothesized by Shawn Cooke (2020) and Rebecca Jennings (2020), but even more so due to the simple access she has to all the photos she took years ago, archived on her smartphone.

But it's also the opportunity that you indeed have media from 2014, which just makes it easy to lose yourself in it. The other day I experienced just that with the photos from the gallery from my phone. Well, you can totally lose yourself in that, right? And those are just things from a few years ago.

- Afaf, 22, female.

It is easy for Generation Z to bring back their past, as everything is stored. But due to the internet and social archives, it's easy for digital natives to discover footage from times before their birth too. Vicarious nostalgia is just a click away, always at their fingertips. Afaf further hypothesized that Generation Z sees and experiences the past as more 'real' than previous generations due to the good documentation of it, widely available on their smartphones and the internet. Therefore, an ancient past, even if not experienced in person, might be vicariously experienced more strongly by Generation Z.

### **5.5 Living in the past: an oasis of calm**

When respondents were asked if they'd rather live in the past than the present, five respondents were doubtful but eventually replied 'no'. This was due to the overall better quality of life in the present. According to them, the present is characterized by a higher life expectancy and better human rights: less poverty, less racism and less homophobia. And of course, as previously discussed, the internet holds various possibilities that were not possible in the past. To have the best of both worlds however, respondents agreed a time machine to be the ultimate solution. Afaf was the only respondent who did recognize the advantages of the present but wanted to live in the past anyway. Her biggest reason for wanting to live in the past was the idea that there were fewer sensory stimuli, *prikkels*, in Dutch. It showed to be a salient theme in the data: including Afaf, four respondents shared the idea that there were fewer sensory stimuli in the past. According to Stephanie, the past was a lot quieter and therefore more pleasant. Dexter shares the idea that the past must have been a lot more quiet and simple. He explained that within a world full of possibilities, he finds the simplicity of the past "charming". He is not looking for the latest gadgets, instead, he recently bought what he calls a

“basic phone”: a more old-fashioned phone with a smaller screen. The past before the respondent’s births, or the respondent’s childhood before the invention of the smartphone, symbolizes simplicity and transparency for the respondents. There has thus been a change in the media landscape: the smartphone can be seen as a disruptive communication technology, severing the (lived) past from the present, as explained by Areni (2020).

I extremely associate it with smartphones. That smartphones kind of made the difference. So the time before that, when I was little, things were different in my opinion too. But indeed also the time that I have not experienced. And then I have the feeling that others go along really well with it. They just continue, go with the flow of the future and developments, and I cannot do that.

- Afaf, 22, female.

According to Afaf, new disruptive technologies like the smartphone aren’t just technological innovations: they changed society and the way we interact with each other in an extreme matter. According to two respondents, people used to be more hospitable in the past, which made it easier to make contact. Respondents hypothesized that because there was no option to communicate and meet people in an online environment, people had no choice to meet physically and be more receptive to possible new friends. The presumed hospitality and easiness of making contact were accompanied by spontaneity, according to Afaf. Nowadays, people plan to meet friends via WhatsApp. Afaf longs for more spontaneity, to just meet people depending on coincidence. She described how she believes people in the past would just go to the city centre, to possibly run into their friends. And if they didn’t, another adventure would await. This spontaneous lifestyle without modern communication devices and fewer sensory stimuli would result in “living in the here and now”, something the present society is lacking, according to Afaf. The idea that people lived in the moment and were better connected in the past is consistent with the TikTok videos’ comment sections. The presumed connectedness in the past also led to more solidarity, according to two respondents. Although Lieke realizes she might be romanticizing the past, she believes people would gather in parks to listen to music, attend demonstrations and protests. Both Lieke and Stephanie envy the ‘protest generation’ who lived through the 1970s and described their fascination with the hippie culture. Stephanie believes there were more protests and gatherings in the 1970s because people had no other choice than to meet physically. Lieke and Stephanie seem to show nostalgic envy as explained by Bolin (2015) for an assertive trait that is characteristic for an older generation. This is somewhat similar to the nostalgic envy for 1990s high school experiences, as found in the comment section of the second TikTok video.

Nowadays, we as students never take to the streets again if we don’t agree with something. I have the feeling that people protested way more often in the past. That’s what my parents say

all the time too, come on now, take to the streets! You guys don't do anything, you know? In the present day, we'll start another online petition again. And then I think, well, goddamn!

- Stephanie, 22, female.

Lastly, Afaf described how the stories she heard about her parents' past made her believe that people used to be more "ambitious". They weren't "spoiled": instead, they worked hard, believed in the "makeability" of society and were "hyped" about the future. Nowadays, there has been a shift in thinking, according to Afaf. Instead of being excited about the future, people have a gloomy view of what's ahead. Like Frans mentioned, we have turned into cultural pessimists: people worry about climate change and whether one should bring children into this declining world. In the past, people believed the future would be better. But now that we live in that future, we believe the past is better. This shift in mindset is consistent with Hirsch's (1992) prediction that nostalgia would increase in the coming decade, as people become more dissatisfied with life and start to revert to the past. Together with the comments on the TikTok videos, indicating that Generation Z longs for a time without smartphones and social media, Generation Z seems to believe that technology has advanced enough. As argued by Niemeyer (2014), nostalgia is thus a reaction to fast technologies, despite using them, in desiring to slow down.

### **5.6 Life cycle discontinuities and crises**

Three respondents mentioned they have trouble letting go and thus try to hold on to nostalgic objects that symbolize specific persons or times. When Nala's grandmother passed away, she noticed how her grandmother's possessions immediately became more valuable to her. She mentioned doilies her grandmother crocheted that she had never seen before, but after her grandmother died, it was important to her anyway. As argued by Baker and Kennedy (1994), even when the experiential, lived past component is blocked from awareness, there is still an emotion present.

Yes, in any case, I always find it difficult to close things. I'm quite loyal and faithful, and I like to hold on to things. And yes, when a new phase comes, I think I automatically become a bit nostalgic.

- Dexter, 24, male.

We see how respondents try to hold on to the past, especially when a disruption in their life occurs caused by the death of a loved one or by moving from one stage of life into the other. This shows to be consistent with the idea that changes in the life cycle trigger nostalgia (Davis, 1979). Four respondents considered the transition from elementary school to high school, as well as the transition from high school to college, to be life cycle discontinuities triggering feelings of nostalgia in particular. The latter is consistent with Davis' idea of fertile periods as well. Lieke mentioned she missed the safe bubble of her childhood when she reached a new phase in her life: college. As Lieke

defines nostalgia as a longing for times before her birth only, she didn't render these longings as nostalgia, but she did recognize how life cycle discontinuities make you long for the unchanged, save past. She recalled looking through old agendas, notebooks, WhatsApp group chats and listening to music that she used to listen to in high school, to get another glimpse of how easy and simple her life was back then. Furthermore, three respondents described nostalgic yearnings as an attempt to escape reality. Respondents argued that if one is not happy with the current life circumstances, one will try to escape and hide in an (imagined) past: they experience changes in the perceived quality of life. This is consistent with Pickering and Keightley's (2006) theory that the desire to imaginatively return to the past correlates with an acute dissatisfaction with the present. Stephanie described it like this: "It's basically just like video games; you can lose yourself in some kind of different world." To illustrate, she described how she puts on music from *The Sims 2*, a game she used to play as a child, when she is in a bad mood or has to clean her room. The music makes her happy, reminding her of how simple her life was when she was a child and could play the game all day. As previously stated, we see here how nostalgia is triggered by negative feelings or unpleasant circumstances and can help combat these feelings in return (Areni, 2020; FioRito & Routledge, 2020). The idea that nostalgia is an indicator of crisis, as argued by Niemeyer (2014), was substantiated by Dexter. According to him, in times of crisis, people revert to the old familiar. Not only in the field of media, but on a political level too. During the current Covid-19 crisis, he explained how he believes the VVD turned out to be the biggest political party in the Netherlands again after the elections of March 2021 since people revert to the old familiar, in this case familiar leadership. In addition, three respondents noticed they felt less satisfied with life and had more mood swings than before the pandemic, which caused them to increasingly long for the past.

### **5.7 The role of TikTok in the nostalgia boom**

This yearning to escape reality was mentioned by respondents concerning the three shown TikTok videos too. When asked why they thought the shown videos had so many views, Stephanie replied that she believes TikTok users must be dissatisfied with their life, their generation, and go against what their generation "produces". This seems to be consistent with the popular comment on the first TikTok video: "Anyone not like begin gen z?" (appendix 7.5, p. 56). As a reaction to the first video, Stephanie replied the following:

I think that music style is very appealing to some people, or that clothing style. They prefer to daydream about that image than the current image because they don't like it. I for example like this more than going to De Vrienden [party cafe] and hearing the latest hit by Ronnie Flex [Dutch rapper] or so.

- Stephanie, 22, female.

### 5.7.1 Video 1

Let's further look at how respondents reacted to the first video, *Sneaking out to a party in the 1980s*. When asked how the video made them feel, four respondents replied they liked the video and found it fun to watch. They mentioned they liked and/or recognized the music specifically. It made Lieke feel nostalgic too, as she replied "ooh, it really seems nice to live like that". Afaf and Frans mentioned to like the music but did not find the video interesting. Afaf specifically described she didn't feel the "80's vibe" enough: the video wasn't nostalgic and authentic enough for her. The respondents who did like the video however, paid close attention to the scenery, the filter and the way of filming in general. Four respondents mentioned the clothes, hair, plaid, poster and polaroid pictures specifically as signs of the 1980s, which is in line with the textual analysis of the video. Two respondents mentioned the filter too, pretending as if the video was shot with an old camera. According to these respondents, this helped recreate a 1970s, 1980s and vintage "feeling". Some respondents mentioned that despite the video recreated the 1980s very well in their eyes, they could tell it wasn't actual footage from that time. Nala called it more a "mix of times and styles". In addition, Stephanie mentioned how the video showed an "idea" of the 1980s, showing positive elements only, which made the video fun to watch. Like it was argued in the textual analysis, Stephanie recognized how the video functions as a screen memory, as explained by Hirsch (1992). The purpose of the video was by five respondents described as informative and inspirational, creating a "1980s atmosphere". Dexter and Frans described how this informative character could lead to a nostalgia boom. Dexter sees social media, in this case TikTok, as a first step, a stepping stone: it spreads nostalgic content, but it's not yet the "real deal". After watching such a video, the TikTok user's nostalgic feelings are fueled, but s/he has to look further for a documentary for example to really dive into similar material. The short video can thus be the inspiration to look further and explore one's nostalgic interest, possibly creating a boom. Frans shared the same view and described how nostalgic videos can gain popularity among Generation Z, as youth feel informed and inspired after watching. They might start wearing clothes- and listen to music from the 1980s and eventually make a TikTok video of their own, using the same contemporary music. This way, interest in the past can spread easily. In addition, Lieke described how the current pandemic may cause Generation Z to be more prone to nostalgic videos like this one. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the video we see a young woman getting ready for a night out in the 1980s. Youth currently cannot go out themselves, since bars and cafes are closed. Lieke believes Generation Z's longing for the past is thus fueled, resulting in nostalgic envy.

### 5.7.2 Video 2

The respondents were less interested in the second video, *Sunny Hill HS' 95*. When asked how the video made them feel, four respondents replied they didn't care much for the video. Two of those respondents mentioned the video did not make them yearn for times past and it thus lacks nostalgic value. Dexter explained how he understands possible positive longings for the first video, "wishing life was as great now as it was back then", but he does not have those longings after watching the second video at all. Four respondents mentioned they didn't see much difference between the video

that was shot in 1995 and today, which might be the reason why the video didn't interest them that much, and why the video fails to make them feel nostalgic.

You could make the same video of people now. It's just a little older and they are dressed slightly differently, but it doesn't make me think oh god, I wish I was there, I wish I could stand there among them.

- Stephanie, 22, female.

Dexter described how he thinks informative videos like the first one can cause a nostalgia boom but doesn't think the second video can contribute to it. He explained the video is not powerful enough as it doesn't make you long enough for the past: it simply looks too much like the present, even though it's actual footage from the past and not recreated. Together with the textual analysis of the second video, we can argue that it functions less like a screen memory than the first video, which shows a perfected, recreated past. We should keep the current hype for vintage clothes in mind, however, as this might explain why images of youth in the 1990s are not that different from youth today. This was found in the comment section of the third TikTok video too, where commenters mentioned that Generation Z is bringing 1990's fashion back.

You could watch the video and think oh, this could still be filmed in the present with an old camera, adding a very old-looking filter. The people still look very much like the people of today, there's not really a difference in style or so.

- Nala, 22, female.

Afaf was the only respondent who liked the second video more than the first one, as she values the fact that the second video's footage is shot in the past. In addition, Lieke was the only respondent who mentioned the second video made her nostalgic, as it made her wonder whether the high school students interviewed in the video managed to make their dreams come true. Lieke's nostalgic feelings caused by the student's hopes and dreams for the future are consistent with the most liked comments on the video: "Makes me wonder where they are now" and "Wonder if they fulfilled their dreams" (appendix 7.5, p.). Lieke believed the video can contribute to a nostalgia boom, as she believes both the first and the second video contain a positive ambiance. The first video shows the excitement and preparation for going out, and the second video shows youth at school, which Lieke believes brings back high school memories. She also mentions how the weather looks nice and warm, which contributes to the positive feeling. She believes both the first video and the second video are therefore romanticized, only showing nice, fun images. Unlike the other respondents, Lieke interpreted the second video as a screen memory too.

### 5.7.3 Video 3

The respondents were more positive towards the third video, *Picture day 1997*. When asked how the video made them feel, all six respondents replied they liked the video and found it fun to watch. Alike the first video, five respondents mentioned they liked the music specifically. According to Lieke and Nala, the Nirvana song is well chosen for this video, as they assumed it is widely known and thus functions as a point of recognition. Simultaneously, they argued that the music can be considered nostalgic, as it was released in the 1990s. Another reason why the respondents liked the video and why the video is popular on TikTok, is due to the focus on clothing style. According to two respondents, clothing can be very appealing in general, just like music can be appealing, contributing to the popularity of the video. According to those respondents, showing off different clothing styles is generally liked by everyone. According to Lieke, the video is heavily romanticized however. It makes the viewer believe that every high school student in 1997 had either one of the awesome clothing styles as depicted in the video. The third video thus seems to function as a screen memory too, which is consistent with the textual analysis of the video. Lieke further mentioned how nostalgic videos with a focus on clothes can contribute to a nostalgia boom, as she thinks clothes are the easiest aspect of the past to recreate. Nala agreed with Lieke that the 1990s clothing style is back in fashion; they both specially recognize peers who dress in the grunge style depicted in the video. This is consistent with the comment section of the video, where lots of popular comments read “i’d be grunge 100%” (see appendix 7.5, p. 56). Stephanie agreed with Lieke as well that vintage clothing is very popular among Generation Z and an easy way to identify and to show their passion for the past, but both Stephanie and Lieke believed it’s also a result of another characteristic that is associated with Generation Z specifically: sustainability. Lieke mentioned how it can be a combination of both a passion for the past, resulting in visiting thrift shops and vintage stores to buy clothes from earlier times, and simultaneously not buying fast fashion and caring for the environment. Furthermore, four respondents shared their appraisal for the TikTok creator, as they thought she did a great job recreating a nostalgic school photo scenery and gathering the time-appropriate outfits. According to Afaf, the image created in the video connects very well to the image she already has about this time, evoking a nostalgic feeling. Appraisal for the TikTok creator was found in the comment section of the TikTok video as well.

### 5.7.4 Why TikTok?

In the previous sections, respondents’ reactions and thoughts regarding the shown TikTok videos were discussed. There were some overarching affordances and characteristics of TikTok however, not necessarily belonging to a specific video, which will be discussed below. First off, four respondents mentioned the importance of TikTok’s algorithm in making videos spread extremely fast, possibly creating some sort of boom. Stephanie described how TikTok’s strong algorithm can throw you in a “rabbit hole”: if you see a (nostalgic) video once, which you like, you can be sure similar videos will follow. Once you are stuck in this rabbit hole or “bubble”, those videos become your “reality and vision”. Dexter mentioned every boom nowadays has to be linked to social media,



as it's such an inherent part of society. As described, TikTok videos can function as a stepping stone for a nostalgia boom. A second important affordance of TikTok is the short, fleeting character of the videos. Dexter described how YouTube has a similar yet less 'strong' algorithm, but TikTok is more popular spreading nostalgic content due to the short duration of the videos. Videos consist of short sketches, which youth can scroll through fast. Watching a nostalgic video thus stimulates nostalgic feelings for a few seconds, giving just enough positive feelings and information about times passed for youth to search for more corresponding content, be it on TikTok due to the strong algorithm or via other media. Dexter believes the concept of short video content fits perfectly with the current zeitgeist. According to him, people nowadays have a short attention span: we watch fun, short videos for entertainment that can be consumed everywhere. Concerning the third video, Lieke mentioned how she thinks people like to watch all sorts of styles in a short video. It feels satisfying to be informed in a fun way about all different kinds of clothing from 1997, and it doesn't feel like it's time-consuming at all, it's easy entertainment: "in a very short time, you already feel you've been informed pretty well about the subcultures of that time".

Interviewer: why do you think there's a nostalgia boom on TikTok specifically?

TikTok as a medium in general perhaps fits the current human needs and cravings best. So maybe it's not necessarily linked with nostalgia, or maybe it is. But it fits well with our short attention span, it's fast, algorithmic, only showing things that interest me.

- Dexter, 24, male.

Frans agrees and described the fleetingness of TikTok too. As the videos are so short, he believes it doesn't take long to make a video, too. Therefore making and uploading a video is easy, leaving little to no barrier to join the rapid pace of short videos. The amount of user-generated content is thus extremely high, higher than Instagram according to Frans, and most of all, fast. TikTok's whole culture is "just very fleeting. The hypes don't last long, often two days, and then it's the next one. So it just goes really fast!" The easiness and speed with which user-generated content is uploaded to TikTok, in contrast to the "slowness of Instagram", has to do with TikTok's younger audience, according to Frans. He believes his generation, Generation Z, and specifically the minors to be very skillful and proficient in recording videos. As they are digital natives, making short, funny videos is peanuts for them. TikTok provides all sorts of filters, effects and sounds to make a short masterpiece. And since TikTok allows its users to edit videos outside the app too, they can let their creativity and editing skills run wild. TikTok thus seems to be the perfect platform for young, creative digital natives. Together with the current pandemic, canceling all kinds of activities for youth, TikTok showed to be the most popular app for Generation Z to resort to (Galer, 2020). More respondents, four in total, elaborated on TikTok's young audience. They believe the popularity of TikTok and the apparent nostalgia boom has everything to do with the receptiveness of the young, the way they are

finding out who they are and what they like. On TikTok, they see videos made by people their age, showing their passion for the past through recreated or actual footage from the past, leaving users with a feeling that they want to join this hype.

Interviewer: do you think videos like these could contribute to a nostalgia boom among Generation Z?

Yes, I certainly think so. Because I really see on TikTok how people very much adopt to what is popular. For example, the fact that everybody got a curtain bangs haircut and dyed their hair, so it really has an effect. And if more nostalgic videos like these come across your timeline, I think you'll start to think more and more oh, actually this is a lot of fun, I want that too, you know. I truly think so, yes. I think Gen Z really is adapting to what's popular, maybe even more than youth did in the past.

- Nala, 22, female.

Concerning the second video, Lieke believes it's a popular video since the high school students in the video have the same age as most TikTok users. Young people thus feel addressed and can empathize with the students, asking themselves the question 'what do I want to be when I grow up?' Being able to make this comparison as the people in the video are just as young as you, can evoke nostalgic feelings, according to Lieke. Just like most respondents described, their interest in the past started around the ages of 15-18, in which they were searching for themselves, going through the discontinuity of teen to young adult. In this search for one's identity which Nala went through herself when she was around that age, she believes youth might feel like they want to live in another time. They might have the feeling they don't fit in and are in search of a style in music or clothes they can identify with. TikTok can help them find their style, and as most TikTok users are between these ages, they are all looking for things to identify with, creating a boom of TikTok videos showcasing all kinds of styles from the past. Stephanie shares this view. After watching the third video, she replied the following:

Interviewer: can you imagine this video to be popular on TikTok?

Yes. It's fun of course, seeing people dress up very differently, in a style you don't longer see today. You can project your style on that image. Plus, you hear different music styles that were popular back then, listened to by everyone in the past. Yes, I can imagine it makes you think wow, this is it! This is how I feel, these people understand me, this whole subgroup. I think this mainly is the case when you are a little younger, the teen phase. That's when you are really looking for yourself, I think, and I believe teens are all over TikTok. That must have quite an influence.

- Stephanie, 22, female.

This whole bunch of young Generation Z on TikTok must indeed have quite an influence. Stephanie further described how she thinks TikTok creates a community feeling. As Havlena and Holak (1991) argued, there is a collective identity among members of the same generation that thus seems to be shared on the app, functioning as a community. Stephanie wished TikTok existed when she was 17, so she could see she wasn't the only one dressing in a certain way. She mentioned being active on YouTube during her teenage years, but YouTube's community feeling is nothing compared to TikTok, according to Stephanie. This has to do with technical affordances. Stephanie described how she never reacted to a YouTube video by writing a comment in the comment section. With TikTok, you don't necessarily have to write a comment in order to react to the video: you can react to a video, with a video. TikTok offers the Duet tool, which allows users to create reaction videos on a split-screen. With the Stitch tool, instead of the split-screen format, the videos are integrated into each other. Both the original and new video are cut and edited together into one video. So without having to write a comment, you can "watch all those videos, and you are still a part of the community". This way, getting in contact with the creator of a TikTok video is easy and you can see the person behind the video. This is different from YouTube according to Stephanie, where you can only see someone's initials, not knowing if a YouTube commenter and/or content creator is old or young. On TikTok, you easily see content creators and other users your age that you can identify with, creating a feeling that "we are all Generation Z".

## 6.0 Conclusion and discussion

### 6.1 In conclusion

It is time to conclude, summarize and acknowledge what this study has observed, researched, and found. To return to the research question, how do the technological and cultural affordances of video-sharing app TikTok play a role in showcasing vicarious nostalgia, and how does Generation Z give meaning to their passion for the past?

Respondents referred to their passion for the past as nostalgia in multiple forms: they recognized nostalgia for their lived past (real nostalgia), outside their lived past (vicarious nostalgia) through loved ones and objects (simulated nostalgia), and shared experiences (collective nostalgia). In addition, examples of technostalgia, analog nostalgia, and nostalgic envy were found in both the TikTok videos, comments, and interviews. For the majority of the respondents, their interest in the past started around their formative years and was indeed strengthened by changes in the life cycle, changes in the media landscape, and perceived quality of life due to crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Both respondents and TikTok users actively gave meaning to their nostalgic feelings. From the nostalgic TikTok videos that mainly draw on users' tacit knowledge of times past, we saw users questioning as well as recognizing their longing for the past, specifically the past their mothers grew up in. From the interviews, we learned how fathers played an important role in transferring generational knowledge. Both the respondents and the TikTok users longed for a pre-digital past with fewer sensory stimuli, more connectedness and spontaneity, and there was a predominant desire for technology to slow down. This study indicates that criticism leveled against new media, as well as feelings of all kinds of nostalgias, is not specifically experienced by the middle-aged and the elderly only, as advocated by Areni (2020). The current fragmented pop culture can be perceived just as stressful for the old as for the young, even though the young have no experience with life before cyberculture. Just like simulated nostalgia, transmitted through family members, cultural pessimism is transferred. In contrast to the TikTok users however, the respondents were able to put their passion in perspective. They realized their vision of the past is often romanticized and recognized the benefits of the present as well: changes in the media landscape were viewed as both a curse and a blessing. They were aware of the paradox as mentioned by Areni: they realized they needed new media, functioning as social archives, to get access to nostalgic content. Due to the stored past in social archives and their personal past stored on their smartphones, this study argues Generation Z to have a significantly strong connection to the past. Nostalgia remains continually on their fingertips, just a click away.

As TikTok currently is the most popular app among Generation Z, it is no wonder we see this passion for the past and flood of nostalgic videos pop up here. Next to being the most popular app, TikTok holds technical- and cultural affordances that this study argues to explain why we see a nostalgia boom on this app in particular. An important aspect turned out to be the age of TikTok's core audience. Especially Generation Z minors are thought to be very skillful and proficient in recording videos, thus being able to join the trend. As TikTok's young audience is in their formative

years, they are more receptive to phenomena they are confronted with, creating their self-identity. Clothes worn and sounds audible in TikTok videos that were popular in the past seem to interest the young audience in finding their style. As the young are collectively finding out what they like by recording and viewing videos from actual or recreated footage from the past, a community feeling arises: we are all going through this together, we all share the same generational experience, we all want to 'stay' on this nostalgic side of TikTok, and we are all Generation Z. This community feeling is further fueled by the visibility and transparency of TikTok users. Instead of hiding behind initials and commenting with words, users can comment by video, showing what they look like and how old they are. Generation Z on TikTok are like-minded peers brought together by its strong algorithm, going through the same life discontinuities, media changes, and crises. Furthermore, the duration of TikTok videos is an important affordance for passionate longing: TikTok's short video format resembles memories and symbolizes the fleeting feeling of nostalgia. The shown vicarious nostalgia is just enough to make Generation Z long for more, functioning as a stepping stone, evolving in a nostalgia boom. TikTok's strong algorithm can throw its users in a rabbit hole of nostalgic content. The fast hypes and videos fit perfectly in the current zeitgeist and youth's seemingly short attention span. Watching a video requires the slightest effort and the same goes for uploading and sharing videos, making the videos easily spreadable and archivable. TikTok videos showing vicarious nostalgia, especially recreated ones drawing on Generation Z's tacit knowledge by paying attention to the mise-en-scene, function as screen memories making its audience long for more.

### **6.1 Strengths and limitations**

To avoid confirmability, the findings of the interview data should be the result of the experiences of the respondents as much as possible, not a result of the preferences of the researcher. It is thus important to reflect on the role of the researcher, my role in this research. I am a young nostalgic myself and I meet the same requirements that have been set for the respondents to be included in the research. This way I was on the same level as the respondents, which helped gain the respondent's trust, creating a safe environment where respondents felt free to discuss their interests and ideas. It made the interviews fun for both parties, facilitating contact between like-minded and creating mutual understanding. At the same time, I was able to distance myself to ensure the objectivity of the research. This applies to the textual analysis too, where TikTok videos were selected on popularity and vicarious nostalgic content instead of being hand-picked. Furthermore, the denotative layers of the analyzed TikTok videos are included in the research to provide thick description. This contextual information enables the reader to determine to what extent the interpretations made by me, the connotative layers, are plausible. More than one method and more than one sample were used to collect data on the same topic, which means triangulation was achieved. Triangulation facilitates the validation of data through cross verification from different sources. Triangulation can be seen as a way of assuring the validity of the research. Furthermore, combining the two methods enabled me to uncover similarities and contradictions between the samples.

However, this research has its limitations as well. Regarding the interviews, respondents could not be recruited in public places due to the pandemic, which caused me to search in my own (online) social network and through social media. This resulted in a fairly homogeneous sample: all respondents were white, well-educated, and were not younger than 21. Furthermore, I had the tendency to lose the focus on TikTok now and then and instead got carried away with interesting sociological and psychological explanations of nostalgia. I found it difficult to find a balance between a more digital, technological approach focused on TikTok's affordances and a more anthropological, philosophical approach focused on respondent's experiences. To ensure a good balance between these two aspects of the research question, I had to leave out lots of interview findings (approx. 4000 words) in the final version, which was not an easy task for someone who likes to write a lot. The findings that did not make the final cut were definitely interesting sociologically speaking but did not have a strong relation to TikTok or new digital media in general. Next to killing my darlings, connecting the findings from the semiotic analysis and the interviews turned out to be quite a challenge as well. I aimed to link the findings as precisely as possible, discussing similarities as well as contradictions, and at the same time linking all findings to the theoretical framework.

## **6.2 Recommendations for further research**

As discussed, youth is often ignored in nostalgic research, while this study shows just how important they are to include. The current research thus contributes to the visibility of a youth-included nostalgia research field that needs to be explored further. For instance, I recommend further research to apply the walkthrough method. The walkthrough method as described by Light et al. (2018) enables a detailed analysis of an app's intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings, and implied ideal users and uses. It provides a way to engage directly with an app's interface and in doing so examining its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references. By performing this method, an understanding of how an app guides users and shapes their experiences can be created. As this study relied on a semiotic analysis of three TikTok videos and online semi-structured interviews with Generation Z respondents to explore affordances and experiences, further research focusing on more technical functions and everyday use of the app would be a great replenishment. Moreover, I consider focus groups an interesting qualitative method for further research in the nostalgia discourse. By hosting focus groups, respondents from different generations can discuss and discover similarities as well as differences regarding their vision of the past and their nostalgic longings.

During the interviews, two respondents mentioned they did not really feel part of Generation Z, as they felt they were at the top of the generation's age curve. They didn't identify as Millennials instead but as *Zillennials*. The term is explained on websites and blogs as the forgotten generation, or the generation nobody talks about (Magalhães, 2020; Warna, 2019). Zillennials refer to those born between 1993-1998 that graduated high school from 2012-2016 (*Urban Dictionary: Zillennial*, 2020). People born in this period seem to have mixed traits of both Millennials and

Generation Z, but cannot fully identify with either of those: they feel like they are trapped in the middle. Although this tiny in-between generation is not internationally recognized (yet), I recommend further research to take this phenomenon into account.

The current study analyzed TikTok videos in order to get an understanding of TikTok's cultural and technological affordances, and Generation Z's passion for the past. By analyzing these videos, I extracted the connotative layer and interpreted the social meanings of the moving images and user's comments. Lastly, I would recommend further research to shift the focus from commenting users to video creators. This way, further research can explore and get an understanding of video creators' motives through interviews. Would video creators consider their videos screen memories themselves? What is their experience with the nostalgia boom?

## 7.0 Appendix

### 7.1 Flyer



### **...Feeling nostalgic yet?**

Are you between 18-24 years old and do you have a passion for the past? Are you for example keen on 90's fashion, do you love vinyl records, or do you like scrolling through nostalgic TikTok videos?

**Then I'm looking for you!** I would like to invite you for an online interview (approx. 40 minutes) for my master thesis. You can contact me at [1.e.eijsker@students.uu.nl](mailto:1.e.eijsker@students.uu.nl).



## 7.2 Informed consent

### INFORMED CONSENT



Universiteit Utrecht

Information letter  
For participation in academic research

*“Living in the past, it’s a new generation”*

**Master programme:** New Media & Digital Culture at Utrecht University

**Researcher:** Lindi Eijssker ([l.e.eijssker@students.uu.nl](mailto:l.e.eijssker@students.uu.nl))

**Supervisor:** Dr. Imar de Vries

#### **Purpose of the research**

Have your parents ever told you that you will go square-eyed if you watch too much television? Has your grandmother ever asked you to put away your smartphone and be ‘social’ for once? The answer is probably yes. Research shows that older generations often express negative views on contemporary media. They long for old- and in their eyes better media. They are nostalgic for times passed, or how we like to say it in Dutch: “Vroeger was alles beter”.

But something’s going on here: not only older generations long for the past. Generation Z tends to show nostalgic behavior too: wearing vintage clothes, organizing ‘back to the nineties’-parties, buying vinyl records or scrolling through nostalgic TikTok videos. Simply put, they yearn for times they have not in fact lived. How, and why? I would like to conduct online interviews with youth of Generation Z (between 18-24 years old, born in 2003-1997 respectively) with a ‘passion for the past’ in order to form an understanding of their nostalgic feelings and preferences. Do you recognize yourself in this description and would you like to participate in an online interview? If so, please read further.

#### **Conducting the research**

This research will be conducted in order to write a thesis on behalf of the master New Media & Digital Culture at Utrecht University. More information about this master’s programme can be found on this [webpage](#).

Online interviews will be conducted, either via Zoom, Skype, or Teams, lasting approximately 40 minutes. The name of the respondent will be anonymized at all times. Any personal information that could identify the respondent will be removed or changed before files are shared with the supervisor, other researchers, or results are made public. Participation in this study is voluntary; there is no compensation in return. If the respondent prefers not to answer a certain question, s/he has the right to indicate this and the researcher will not propose the question again. Furthermore, the respondent has the right to discontinue the interview and withdraw from the research at any time, without stating reasons.

Well-designed qualitative research has inherent checks and balances that ensure participation protection. To guarantee confidentiality, it is important that the data obtained from the interviews are handled sensibly. By conducting the interviews, the researcher will get information that identifies the respondent. This may include information that might directly identify the respondent, such as name and address. This information will only be used in ways that will not reveal who the respondent is. The respondent will not be identified in any publication from this study or in any data files shared with other researchers. This information will be kept for the length of the study. After that time all identifiable information will be destroyed. In conclusion, participation in this study is confidential: the data cannot be traced back to the respondent.

## INFORMED CONSENT



Universiteit Utrecht

Declaration of consent  
For participation in academic research

*“Living in the past, it’s a new generation”*

- I have been informed about the research. I read the information letter. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and consider my participation in the study. My participation is voluntary, offering non-coerced willingness to participate. I know my name will be anonymized at all times. During the interview I may not answer a question if I don’t want to, take a break or stop the interview if needed. I have the right to refuse or withdraw from the research at any time, without stating reasons.
- I consent to audio and video recording of the interview. I understand all personally identifying information collected about me will be destroyed once it is no longer needed for the study.

I agree to participate in this study:

Name:

Date of birth:

E-mail address:

Signature:

City:

Date:

Please check all that apply:

- I would like to receive the complete thesis by e-mail;
- I would like to receive a summary of the research by e-mail;
- I do not want to be informed about the results of the research.

---

The undersigned responsible researcher hereby declares that the above-mentioned respondent has been informed in writing about the research.

Name: Lindi Eijlsker

Occupation: researcher

E-mail address: [l.e.eijlsker@students.uu.nl](mailto:l.e.eijlsker@students.uu.nl)

Signature:

Date:

## 7.3 Topic list

### 7.3.1. English version

Duration of the interview: approximately 40 minutes | online interview through Zoom, Skype, or Teams

Before the start of the interview:

- The informed consent is signed and returned to the researcher;
- The researcher asked for permission once again to record the interview in audio and video file;
- The researcher mentioned once again that the respondent is not obliged to answer questions and can withdraw from the research at any time;
- The researcher asked the respondent to choose a pseudonym in order to anonymize the transcript;
- The researcher mentioned she may write notes during the interview;
- The researcher mentioned that if the internet connection is lost in the online environment, the respondent can wait as the researcher will start the call again;
- The researcher mentioned her whereabouts and asked the respondent to sit in a comfortable, closed room too.

### Introduction (icebreaker questions)

First, the researcher starts introducing the research and asks the respondent to introduce him/herself.

- Can you tell a little something about yourself? Who are you, where are you from?

The respondents' answer must at least contain:

- First name
- Age and birthyear
- Residence
- Educational level
- Ethnic background

### Topic 1: object(s) and definition of nostalgia

- What does nostalgia mean to you?/What is the definition of nostalgia, according to you?
- You have a passion for the past. Can you explain how this expresses itself?/What kind of objects, odors, pictures, media, fashion, memories... → Why do you like these objects?
- When did your interest in the past start, and how? How old were you?

- Do you recognize similar nostalgic tendencies in friends/peers? Why do you think they (don't) show a similar interest?

### **Topic 2: internet and (social) media**

- Do you consume nostalgic content on the internet, via social media? If so, on which social media platforms?
- How do you see the role of the internet in showcasing content that can be considered nostalgic?
- Do you think old media are more 'authentic' than new media? Why or why not?

### **Topic 3: satisfaction**

- Do you feel like you are born too late?/Would you like to live in the past?
- Are you satisfied with contemporary media? Why?
- Are you overall satisfied with your life right now? – *could be a sensitive question.*

### **Topic 4: nostalgic tendencies explained**

- Can you try to explain your own nostalgic behavior? Can you think of a possible reason or cause?
- Do you think your passion for times passed might derive from friends and/or family who actually lived through those times?
- Do you feel like these objects from the past are a part of your identity?/help determine your self-identity? Why?

### **Topic 5: elicitation technique**

The researcher shows the respondent the three TikTok videos from the textual analysis. After showing each video, the following questions are asked:

- How does this video make you feel?

- What do you think is the purpose of this video?
- Can you imagine why this is a popular video in this genre on TikTok in particular? Why?
- Could these videos contribute to a nostalgia boom (among Generation Z)? Why?

Question for video 1 and 3 only:

- Does this video feel authentic to you? Why?
- To conclude the interview, the researcher asks the respondent if s/he wants to mention or add anything of relevance that has not been discussed yet. After this final question, the interview is done. The respondent will be informed by e-mail about the research and the member check.

### 7.3.2. Dutch version

Duur van het interview: ongeveer 40 minuten | online interview via Zoom, Skype of Teams

Voor de aanvang van het interview is:

- De informed consent ondertekend en terug gestuurd naar de onderzoeker;
- Nogmaals toestemming gevraagd voor het opnemen van het interview in audio en beeld;
- Aangegeven dat de respondent niet verplicht is te antwoorden op vragen en op elk moment de deelname kan stopzetten;
- Aangegeven dat namen worden geanonimiseerd en de respondent zelf een naam mag kiezen;
- Aangegeven dat de onderzoeker af en toe meeschrijft;
- Aangegeven dat als de verbinding wegvalt dit geen probleem is en de onderzoeker opnieuw belt;
- Aangegeven waar de onderzoeker zich bevindt en gevraagd naar de omgeving waar de respondent zich bevindt.

### Introductie (icebreaker questions)

Allereerst introduceert de onderzoeker het onderzoek en vraagt daarna de respondent iets over zichzelf te vertellen.

- Kun je iets meer over jezelf vertellen? Wie ben je, waar kom je vandaan?

In het antwoord moet ten minste voorkomen:

- Voornaam
- Leeftijd en geboortjaar
- Woonplaats
- Opleidingsniveau
- Ethische achtergrond

### Topic 1: object(en) en definitie van nostalgie

- Wat betekent nostalgie voor jou?/Wat is de definitie van nostalgie, volgens jou?
- Jij hebt een passie voor het verleden. Kun je uitleggen hoe zich dat uit?/Wat voor objecten, geuren, foto's, media, fashion, herinneringen... → Waarom vind je deze objecten zo tof?
- Wanneer is jouw interesse in het verleden begonnen, en hoe? Hoe oud was je?
- Herken je vergelijkbare nostalgische neigingen bij vrienden/leeftijdsgenoten? Waarom denk je dat ze (g)een vergelijkbare interesse tonen?

## **Topic 2: internet en (social) media**

- Bekijk/consumeer je wel eens nostalgische content op het internet, via social media? Zo ja, op welke social media platform(en)?
- Wat is naar jouw idee de rol van het internet in het tonen van content dat als nostalgisch kan worden bestempeld?
- Denk je dat oude media 'authentieker' is dan nieuwe media? Waarom?

## **Topic 3: tevredenheid**

- Heb je het idee dat je te laat bent geboren?/Zou je in het verleden willen leven?
- Ben je tevreden met hedendaagse media? Waarom (niet)?
- Ben je op dit moment over het algemeen tevreden met je leven?

## **Topic 4: nostalgische neigingen verklaard**

- Kun je proberen je eigen nostalgische gedrag te verklaren? Kun je mogelijke reden of oorzaak bedenken?
- Denk je dat je passie voor vervlogen tijden voortkomt uit vrienden en/of familie die die tijden daadwerkelijk hebben meegemaakt?
- Heb je het idee dat deze objecten uit het verleden deel uitmaken van je identiteit?/Helpen bij het bepalen van je zelfidentiteit? Waarom (niet)?

## **Topic 5: elicitatie techniek**

De onderzoeker laat de respondent de drie TikTok video's zien die gebruikt zijn voor tekstuele analyse. Na het tonen van een video, worden de volgende vragen behandeld:

- Wat vind je van deze video?
- Wat is volgens jou het doel van deze video?

- Kun je je voorstellen waarom dit een populaire video is in dit genre, specifiek op TikTok?  
Waarom (niet)?

- Zouden deze video's kunnen bijdragen aan een nostalgia boom (onder Generatie Z)?  
Waarom (niet)?

Vragen voor video 1 en 3 specifiek:

- Vind je deze video authentiek? Waarom (niet)?

- Afsluitend vraagt de interviewer of de respondent nog iets kwijt wil of iets wil toevoegen betreffende het onderwerp wat nog niet is besproken in het interview. Hierna wordt het interview afgesloten. De respondent wordt per mail op de hoogte gehouden van het onderzoek en de member check.



## 7.4 Nvivo codebook

Name	Description	Files	References
Collective nostalgia		2	3
Definitie nostalgie		6	24
Bittersweet		2	4
Fleeting		1	1
Herinnering		1	1
Positieve herinneringen		3	4
Romantiseren		1	2
Terugverlangen		1	1
Tijd missen zelf niet meegemaakt		3	3
Verschillende soorten nostalgie		3	8
Duurzaamheid		2	2
Hedendaagse media		6	24
Bewerken, fotoshop		1	1
Cancelcultuur		1	1
Eenzaamheid		1	1
Geen tijd zonder voorstellen		1	1
Nieuwe media even authentiek als oude media		1	1
Nieuwe media information overload		1	2
Ontspanning		1	1
Oppervlakkig		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Smartphones		1	1
Stress en frustratie		2	2
Veel mogelijkheden		3	5
Verlies interesse		1	1
Verslaving		2	3
Zowel vloek als zegen		1	2
Identiteit		6	9
Dagelijks leven		1	1
Heeft me gevormd		3	3
Profileren		1	2
Terugkijken voor sense of self		2	2
Zoeken naar mezelf		1	1
In een andere wereld verliezen		4	14
Changes in media landscape		1	1
Goed willen voelen		1	2
Ontevreden met huidige tijd, crises		3	7
Sfeer creëren		1	2
Trucje om eruit te komen		1	1
In het verleden leven		6	34
Eenvoud		1	4
Hippies		2	3

Name	Description	Files	References
Huidige wereld beter, maar...		5	6
Tijdmachine		1	1
Leven in het hier en nu		1	2
Maakbaarheid		1	2
Minder prikkels		4	5
Nee, leven is beter nu		1	1
Protesteren		2	3
Spontaniteit		1	1
Tastbaar, kunstwerkje		2	3
Vroeger meer (fysiek) contact		2	4
Leeftijd start passie verleden		6	11
Pas later nostalgisch		1	1
Tieners kwetsbaarder		2	4
Life cycle discontinuities		5	14
Niet los kunnen laten		3	9
Nostalgie en studeren		4	5
Nostalgische content		6	20
Documentaires		2	2
Facebook		2	2
Foto's en video's		2	3
Instagram		3	3
Optredens terugkijken		5	6
YouTube		2	4

Name	Description	Files	References
Nostalgische objecten		6	25
Boeken		0	0
Camera's		1	1
Foto's		2	3
Geuren		1	1
Interieur		1	1
Kleding		1	1
Kranten		1	2
Nostalgie muziek		4	7
Platen		5	10
Platen als kunst		1	1
Rijtuigen		1	1
Trivia		2	7
Typemachine		1	1
Rol internet		6	20
Algoritme		1	2
Foto's inkleuren		1	1
Searchability		3	3
Social archive		3	10
Spreadability		2	3
Verkoop vintage spullen		1	1
Simulated nostalgia		6	28
Cultuur pessimisme overgenomen		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
Erfstukken		1	2
Nostalgie ouders wordt nostalgie kinderen		3	6
Nostalgie ouders, grootouders		4	10
Nostalgie vader		3	6
Nostalgie vrienden, partner		1	1
TikTok		6	113
Community		1	2
Filmpjes en trends vluchtig		3	4
Jongeren		2	3
Knappe vrouw werkt in voordeel		2	6
Likes vangen, zelfpresentatie		1	4
Video 1		6	41
Boom door algoritme TikTok		4	4
Filter		2	2
Inleven, interesse, informereren		5	6
Leuk gefilmd		1	1
Leuk, grappig		4	5
Leuke kleding		2	2
Muziek is leuk		4	4

Name	Description	Files	References
Niet interessant of nostalgisch genoeg		3	5
Niet veel veranderd		1	2
Scenery		3	3
Screen memory		1	1
Sfeer creeren		2	2
Verlangen door corona		1	1
Wegdromen		2	2
Zelfpromotie		1	1
Video 2		5	17
Boom door algoritme		1	1
Doet me niet veel		2	3
Geen nostalgisch verlangen		2	3
Weet niet wat het punt is		2	2
Weinig verschil met nu		4	7
Grappig		3	3
Informatief		1	2
Leuker want echte beelden		1	1
Nostalgisch		1	2
Screen memory		1	1

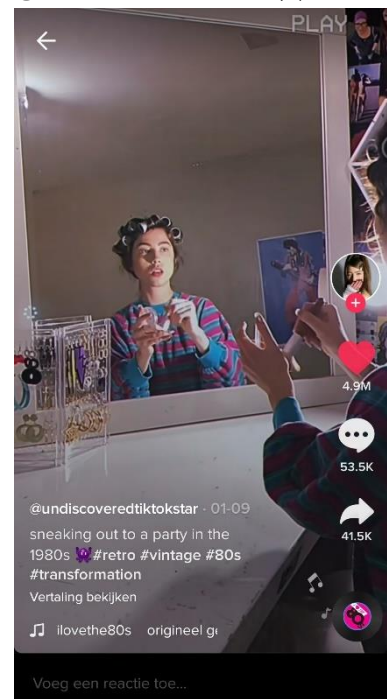
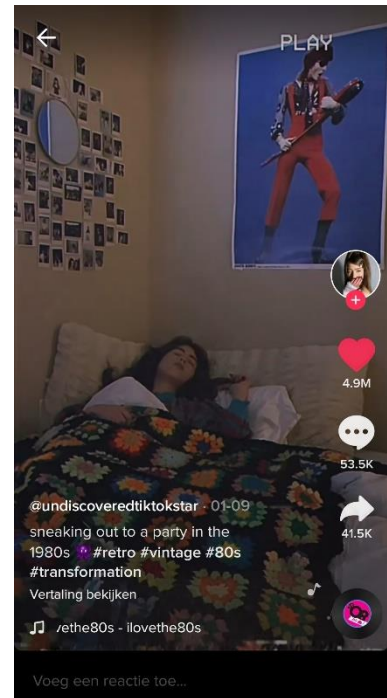
Name	Description	Files	References
Sfeer laten proeven, inkijkje		2	2
Sluit aan bij leeftijd TikTokers		1	1
Wegdromen		1	1
Video 3		6	34
Goed gedaan		2	3
Goed gefilmd, filter		1	1
Grappig		2	2
Kleding (komt terug)		4	14
Leuk		1	1
Leuke muziek		5	6
Schoolfoto setting nostalgisch		1	2
Screen memory		1	2
Verplaatsen in anderen		3	3
Zillennials		2	2

## 7.5 Analysis: denotation

### 7.5.1. Video 1: *Sneaking out to a party in the 1980s*

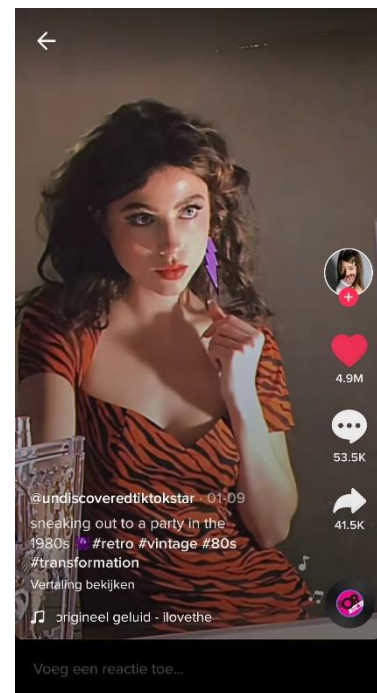
The video consists of 22 shots, lasting around a second each. Every shot shows a different action made by the video creator, indicated in the following detailed description by the number of the shot in parentheses. Most of the shots are medium shots, showing the video creator from head to waist. A filter is used displaying a 'PLAY' sign in the top right and causing a flickering film effect throughout the video. Concerning sound, the song *Everybody Wants To Rule The World* by the English pop-rock band Tears For Fears (released in 1985) is audible in every shot. In the first medium long shot, we see a white girl with long brown hair around the age of 20 – the video creator – sleeping in bed under a colorful crochet bedspread. On the wall behind her, we see a poster of David Bowie. On the other wall, a round mirror is attached surrounded by several polaroid pictures (1). She then steps out of bed, reaching for her glasses and wearing a striped sweatshirt and white legging (2).

In the following close-up shot we only see her legs and feet, walking on her tiptoes in her white legging and white socks (3). The girl is now in the bathroom with her glasses on, leaning over the sink, letting out a sigh (4). In the following medium long shot, the girl has apparently left the bathroom and now stands in front of a dresser in her bedroom, carrying a set of hair rollers (5). She sits down and wraps her hair around the rollers. We can see the hair roller set, pins, and a plastic see-through jewelry stand with earrings on her desk. Through the mirror, the David Bowie poster on the wall is still visible (6). In the seventh medium shot, which takes a split second, her hair is half up half down and she burns her finger on one of the rollers (7). In the next shot, the rollers are all set in her hair and she swirls with a makeup brush in a makeup pallet (8). Next, we can see her coloring her eyebrows (9), followed by a close-up shot of a makeup pallet with eight different shimmering, metallic eyeshadow colors (10). Further on we see her applying mascara (11) and false eyelashes (12). She also has lipstick in her hand and makes a funny face in the mirror (13). The medium shots sitting in front of the mirror are followed by a medium long shot, where she now stands in front of the mirror, looking at herself dancing (14). She pulls up her legging and looks at herself side to side (15). In the next shot she sits down again, half of her curled hair is now let down, the other half still wrapped around rollers. She knots her head, her curly hair bounces along (16). Now all the





rollers are out and she styles her hair with her hands, going back and forth (17). The girl stands again, holding a clothing hanger in her left hand with an oversized black bomber jacket, showing the MTV logo on the back. In her right hand, she holds a clothing hanger with a black and red striped dress. She first holds the bomber jacket against her body and then the dress, while looking in the mirror (18). In a split second, we see a close-up of the jewelry stand. We see her hand pick a big, purple-colored, lightning bolt earring (19). In the next medium close-up shot, the girl looks at herself in the mirror with the striped dress on, touching the purple earring she put in her ear (20). The shot is followed by a medium shot, showing the girl in the dress nodding to herself in the mirror. The shot ends while she turns to the left (21). In the final long shot, we can see that the girl turned towards the door of her room, showing her from the back. She now wears the black MTV bomber jacket over her dress and leaves the room (22). Up from shot 8 to shot 22, the camera slowly zooms in and out per three shots, deeming the PLAY sign outside some of the shot frames.



Popular comments on the video read “this makes me nostalgic even though i’ve never done it”, as commented by TikTok user p1xi3bitch with 270.700 likes and 547 sub-comments. The most liked sub-comment (1815) by TikTok user nomnomblub reads “Your soul could’ve been alive back in the 80’s and that’s why it feels nostalgic 😊 😊”. Another popular comment written by TikTok user kalebjd03 with 37.700 likes and 169 sub-comments goes: “Apparently all of us wanna live in the 80s and I love you all for that”. TikTok user the.navarose wrote “omg pls let me stay on 80s tiktok” and got 45.100 likes and 94 sub-comments. Lots of comments express this same desire to ‘stay on 80s TikTok’. Another popular comment was written by literally\_violet\_ with 10.400 likes and 62 sub-comments: “Why does this make me feel nostalgic? I was born in 2003 🤪 🤪”. A lot of people expressed how they were not happy being Generation Z as well: “Anyone not like being gen z?” by mizxn\_7 with 1756 likes and 46 sub-comments. One of those sub-comments reads: “i hate it wish it was the 80s wit no phones so much better connection wit people and more safe to go out ugh i wish i was born then” by devyjackson with 192 likes. There are more comments similar to the latter, as a comment by paytontrinkwon with 5469 likes and 67 sub-comments: “This made me wish phones didn’t exist and that we just lived in the moment all the time not thinking about social media & everything ...” Comments that did not get as many likes, but were commented over and over again by different TikTok users were: “i always wished I was born in this era 😞” (by amayasadventures, 3765 likes, 83 sub-comments), “i wanna go back 😞” (by emmast019, 49 likes, 1 sub-comment), “I wanna live back then” (by yasminonarozak01, 52 likes), “I wish I was a teen in the 80s” (by annahbanannas, 30 likes, 1 sub-comment) and “i was born in the wrong time” (by alex.vandaalen, 176

likes, 1 sub-comment). Other comments focused on mise-en-scene: the clothes worn in the video, the David Bowie poster and specifically the hair rollers: “MY MOM USED TO HAVE THAT HAIR CURLERS MACHINE AND I WAS SO INTIMIDATED BY IT” (by newaccisdancetilldead\_, 52 likes, 2 sub-comments), “omggg my mom had one of those curling holding thing machines” (by tgkay\_la, 36 likes).

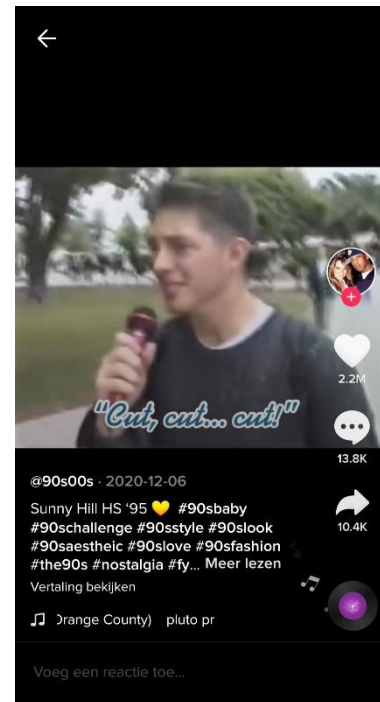
### 7.5.2 Video 2: *Sunny Hill HS '95*

The video consists of 10 shots, lasting around a second to three seconds each. As the title suggests, the video shows footage of high school students in 1995. In 8 of the shots, a different student is asked the same question by a male student: “what do you want to be when you grow up?” The footage is filmed outside, and every shot shows what appears to be Sunny Hill High School and its students walking around in the background. Every shot is indicated in the following detailed description by the number of the shot in parentheses. Apart from the asked questions and answers, the sound of the video consists of background chatting and ambient noise well. Furthermore, a slowed version of the song *Pluto Projector* by British recording artist Rex Orange County (released in 2019) is softly audible in the background of every shot. In the first medium close-up shot, we see a white, blonde girl in front of Sunny Hill High School, with students walking in the background. We hear the interviewer asking “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and we can read the question from the screen too (What do you wanna be when you grow up?), as the video creator added bright colored subtitles to the shots. The girl answers “Rich”, simultaneously shown in pink subtitles (1). In the next shot, we see a medium close-up of an Asian-looking boy stating “I’ll probably become a teacher”, in blue subtitles (2). Next, we see a medium close-up, high-angle framed shot of a white girl with dark blonde hair. The girl states “I want to be an anesthesiologist”, in pink subtitles (3). We now see a quick close-up shot of an Asian-looking girl, with students sitting and standing behind her. She laughs at the camera and states: “I don’t know... play doctor”, shown in purple subtitles (4). The shot is followed by a medium close-up shot of an Asian-looking boy stating “Successful, I’ll buy you a car”, simultaneously shown in blue subtitles (5). We now see a medium close-up of a blonde, white girl who smiles broadly and states “Rich”, simultaneously shown in pink subtitles (6). She is followed by an Asian-looking boy, stating “Probably a dentist”, simultaneously showed in purple subtitles (7). In the eighth shot, we see a close-up of a blonde, white girl. She appears to sit in a classroom, as we can spot a green chalkboard on the right side of the frame. She states “I don’t know, I’m still debating on that”, simultaneously shown in red subtitles (8). We now see a medium close-up shot of the interviewer: a white male student, walking with a microphone in his hand, stating “Cut, cut... cut!”, simultaneously shown in blue subtitles (9). The last shot is a long shot, showing a male student running away from the camera with a backpack on his



back and what appears to be a video camera bag in his right hand. The shot is unstable, as the person filming runs after him (10).

Popular comments on the video read “The anesthesiologist is probably making bank rn” as commented by TikTok user [aiden.\\_m\\_](#) with 255.600 likes and 192 sub-comments. Another popular comment written by TikTok user [leam\\_0822](#) with 174.400 likes and 752 sub-comments goes: “Gen Z be like: ✨ dead ✨”. TikTok user [pingu2splashy](#) wrote “These guys are like 40 now 😞” and got 107.600 likes and 324 sub-comments. Lots of TikTok users wrote something alike the comment by [yaayson](#): “Makes me wonder where they are now”, with 48.200 likes and 97 sub-comments, or along the lines of the comments by [littleenaa](#): “Wonder if they fulfilled their dreams” (21.100 likes and 16 sub-comments) and [ashleyrose.27](#): “they’re kids are probably watching this...” (15.300 likes and 66 sub-comments). Another popular comment by [see.dot.jay.dot](#) with 24.800 likes and 107 sub-comments focused on the appearance of the students in the footage: “was acne just not invented back then or what”. Lots of TikTok users asked themselves why the video made them feel sad. They pointed out how the students in the video look happy, and they wished they were alive during that time, stating the students in the video lived a better life: “This made me sad and nostalgic for no reason” (by [thom\\_karas](#), 4984 likes, 10 sub-comments), “Idk why but this makes me rllly sad” (by [guccimood](#), 647 likes, 7 sub-comments), “This was such a happier time, no cell phones or social media” (by [heyheatha](#), 959 likes, 45 sub-comments). “everyone was cool in the 90s 🥰 🙌” (by [hobis\\_tortilla](#), 683 likes), “Take me to that generation” (by [payan\\_pal](#), 52 likes, 9 sub-comments) and “Why am I obsessed with the times my mom grew up in... 😞 ❤️” (by [luckylashesco](#), 44 likes). In addition, TikTok users expressed their grief concerning the Covid-19 pandemic: “this makes me sad how they got to have a normal high school experience and now so many kids aren’t getting that” (by [helloworldsupremacy](#), 512 likes, 6 sub-comments), “Welp I’ll never have my high school experience” (by [camyamariee\\_](#), 428 likes, 4 sub-comments), “I wanna be happy” (by [caleb1503](#), 233 likes, 1 sub-comment) and “Where are their masks 🤒 🤒 🤒” (by [sunshineandbesties](#), 43 likes, 2 sub-comments).



### 7.5.3 Video 3: *Picture day 1997*

The video consists of five shots, lasting around five seconds each. All shots are static long shots, thus showing the girl in the video, the video creator, in full length without mobile framing. Every shot shows a different action made by the video creator, indicated in the following detailed description by the number of the shot in parentheses. A filter is used, causing the image to be unsharp throughout the video and to cause a camera flash effect. Concerning sound, the song *Smells Like Teen* by American rock band Nirvana (released in 1991) is audible in every shot. In the first shot, we see a blue curtain with a stool in front of it. White subtitles are added at the top of the screen, stating “1997 picture day” and “Who are you?”. A white girl with blonde ponytails walks into the frame, wearing a colorful tracksuit and carrying a basketball. She sits down on the stool and throws the basketball out of the frame as if she’s throwing it to someone. Simultaneously, the subtitles stating “Athletic” appear at the height of the stool. After throwing the ball, the girl looks into the camera, straightens her track jacket and the image lightens up like a flash, as if a picture was taken. She then stands up and walks out of the frame again, in the opposite direction (1). In the following shot, the girl walks into the frame again, now with loose hair, jeans shorts, and a striped top. She has a backpack on her back and carries what appears to be a notebook in her hand. Simultaneously, the subtitles stating “Teacher’s pet” appear at the height of the stool. She sits down with her legs and feet close together, tilts her head, and looks into the camera. After the flash, she walks out of the frame again in the opposite direction (2). We now see the girl dressed in a red turtleneck, white cardigan, tartan skirt, and black stockings, carrying a tiny red purse. She throws her hair back and sits down while simultaneously the subtitles stating “Preppy” appear at the height of the stool. She looks into the camera and the flash appears after she walks out of the frame again in the opposite direction (3). The girl then walks in wearing jeans, a white blouse, a blazer, and glasses. She is carrying a book which she reads from. She keeps her eyes on the book while walking and sitting down. Simultaneously, the subtitles stating “The book worm” appear at the height of the stool. She briefly looks up from her book, the flash follows, after which she continues reading her book while walking out of the frame again in the opposite direction (4). In the last shot, the girl walks in wearing black jeans, a green plaid blouse around her waist, and a black



crop top with The Beatles image. Simultaneously, the subtitles stating “Grunge” appear at the height of the stool. She carelessly sits down, spreads her legs, and looks into the camera. The flash appears, she stands up and walks away one final time in the opposite direction (5).

Popular comments on the video read “you pulled off every look SO WELL ❤️👉👍”, as commented by TikTok user violettedel with 58.100 likes and 12 sub-comments. There were lots of comments similar to the latter, complimenting the video creator for the accuracy. TikTok user meg\_loves\_coffee stated: “Coming from someone who lived through high school in the 90’s...this is spot on” with 11.900 likes and 33 sub-comments. The creator of the video, michaila.c sub-commented: “Thank you! My mom was in HS in the 90s and she gave me some tips haha”, which got 4532 likes.



Another popular comment written by TikTok user asanoyas..child with 22.800 likes and 99 sub-comments goes: “\*casually vibing to nirvana\*”. TikTok user theredheadedwench wrote “i’d be grunge 100%” and got 14.100 likes and 83 sub-comments. Like theredheadedwench, lots of TikTok users expressed their character choice as the video proposes the question “Who are you?” In addition to the compliments for the video creator, TikTok users expressed critique as well on the grunge look: “I’m sorry but the Beatles are not grunge. 😞” (by thebuckskinlady, 1295 likes, 62 sub-comments), “I didn’t know the Beatles played grunge music” (by Iroskies18, 198 likes and 15 sub-comments). Other TikTok users mentioned the looks created in the video were similar to the television series *Freaks and Geeks* (1999) which is situated in the 1980s and the movie *Clueless* (1995): “Freak And Geeks vibe” (by lulia.roche, 451 likes, 8 sub-comments), “Teachers pet and Preppy gave me Clueless vibes!! 😂😂😂” (by blk\_is\_biutiful, 716 likes and 1 sub-comment). Comments that did not get as many likes, but were commented over and over again by different TikTok users were: “I love how all over these look normal to me” (by sumeragis\_pet, 3250 likes, 16 sub-comments), “I wish I was alive during this time period” (by cowtownboys0, 1364 likes, 23 sub-comments), “I was born in 97 😂” (by pinuppixie, 727 likes, 13 sub-comments), “I love how gen z teenagers are kind of bringing 90s fashion and clothing back with the way that we dress today” (by thatrandomk02, 71 likes, 4 comments), “I wish I lived during these days” (by malachidavisofficial, 53 likes, 1 sub-comment), “WOW I WISH I WAS BORN IN THESE TIMES SO BADLY” (by srvoqq, 29 likes). TikTok users mentioned their mother often: “My mom was the preppy type! So cute 😂” (by badgal.tea, 34 likes), “My mom was in high school in the late 80s and it’s reminds me of her photos” (by user1626887137255, 16 likes, 1 sub-comment).

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