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A Study on Generation Z's Reconstruction of Nostalgia Culture from the Perspective of Media Memory—Taking CCD Cameras as an Example

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Abstract:
In recent years, "nostalgic culture" has experienced an unexpected resurgence among Generation Z youth, with the culture centered on CCD cameras emerging as a particularly iconic cultural phenomenon. The rapid evolution of media in the digital age has given rise to a unique nostalgic cultural landscape among Generation Z. As a retro medium that serves both as a relic of past technology and a carrier of media memory, the CCD camera has become a key lens through which to study how Generation Z reconstructs nostalgic culture. Centered on media memory theory and drawing on related theories such as collective memory and mediatized communication, this paper examines social media content, user practices, and community interactions related to CCD cameras. It explores how Generation Z activates and reconstructs media memory through CCD cameras, thereby reimagining nostalgic culture. This study reveals the interactive mechanisms between media memory and youth subculture, offering a new perspective for understanding the generative logic of nostalgic culture in the digital age and the media practices of Generation Z.

Keywords:
media memory, Generation Z, CCD cameras, nostalgia culture

1 Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have been flooded with content tagged with hashtags such as "#CCDcamera" and "#CCDRetro"; in the secondhand market, prices for vintage CCD cameras have skyrocketed; and young users, wielding these "antiques," are capturing images characterized by distinctive grain, low saturation, and soft, dreamy halos, elevating them to an aesthetic style and cultural identity.

This phenomenon goes far beyond a simple return to vintage technology or consumer nostalgia. It is deeply intertwined with Generation Z's identity construction, memory practices, and cultural expression within a highly mediatized society. For Generation Z, nostalgia no longer refers to a recollection of actual history; rather, it has gradually evolved into a cultural practice rooted in specific media objects—one that is actively selected, appropriated, and even creatively reconstructed within the present context. Against this backdrop, media memory theory provides a crucial theoretical foundation. Media memory research examines how media function as carriers, agents, and constructors of memory, shaping both individual and collective percep-

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tions of the past. As a material remnant of technology and a symbolic signifier of memory, the CCD camera serves as a representative case study for observing how Generation Z interacts with media memory and, through this interaction, reconstructs a nostalgic culture specific to their generation.

This study aims to adopt media memory theory as its central framework, integrating theoretical resources such as collective memory and mediatized communication. Through empirical observation and theoretical interpretation of the CCD camera revival phenomenon, it seeks to explore the following core questions: Why and how has Generation Z, having grown up in a digital media environment, reincorporated the "obsolete" CCD camera into their cultural practices? What kind of media memory do they activate, invoke, and reconstruct through CCD cameras? How does this media-mediated nostalgic practice reflect and contribute to the reconstruction of contemporary nostalgic cultural logic? An analysis of this phenomenon not only helps us understand Generation Z's unique cultural psychology and media usage habits but also sheds light on the complex interplay between media memory, material culture, and youth subculture in the digital context.

2 A Theoretical Framework for Media Memory, Nostalgia, and the Mediatized Existence of Generation Z

2.1 From Collective Memory to Media Memory: Media as a Field and Agent of Memory

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs emphasized that memory is a socially constructed phenomenon, formed, maintained, and reconstructed within the framework of social groups.[1] Subsequently, Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann further developed the theory of "cultural memory," elucidating the mechanisms through which memory is transmitted across generations.[2]In a media-saturated society, media have become deeply integrated into every aspect of memory. Scholars such as Assmann have also noted that cultural memory in modern society increasingly relies on technological media[3]

The theory of media memory has been further developed within this theoretical framework. It emphasizes that media are not merely simple tools for storing or transmitting memory, but rather active agents of memory and constructive fields. Through selection, description, and presentation, media profoundly shape society's consensual narratives about the past. [4] Research on media memory focuses on: 1) Media as carriers of memory: such as old photographs, vintage newspapers, and antique media devices—material entities that bear the technological traces, usage habits, and aesthetics of specific eras; 2) Media as intermediaries in memory practices: individuals and groups activate, negotiate, and reproduce memory by manipulating, sharing, and discussing specific media content or artifacts; 3) The media ecosystem as the environment of memory: Different media technologies shape distinct memory patterns and cultural perceptions. For example, the CCD camera, as a physical medium, encodes the visual memory of the early 2000s through its imaging characteristics; meanwhile, the social media sharing surrounding it constitutes a mediated memory practice.

2.2 The Mediatized Emotional Structures and Culture Behind Digital Nostalgia

Nostalgia has traditionally been viewed as a longing for a home that is distant in both time and space. However, contemporary cultural studies tend to interpret nostalgia as a sociocultural emotion and discursive practice; rather than seeking a literal return to the past, it involves a creative reconstruction of the past based on

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present-day needs.[5]Scholar Svetlana Boym distinguishes between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. The former emphasizes the reconstruction of a lost homeland, while the latter focuses on the process of nostalgia itself, its fragments, and its incompleteness.[6] Generation Z's fascination with CCD cameras aligns more closely

with the latter. They may not have personally experienced the heyday of CCD cameras, yet they are captivated by the sense of the past symbolized by their technical aesthetics.

In the digital age, nostalgia has become increasingly mediated and materialized. Scholars such as Caitlin Van Dyke have introduced the concept of "digital nostalgia," noting that digital media has not only altered the way we remember but also transformed the objects and forms of our nostalgia[7]Nostalgia is often attached to specific media objects or styles. This form of nostalgia is a longing for the history of the medium itself—that is, media nostalgia. [8] For Generation Z, their upbringing has been marked by dramatic shifts in media technology: from feature phones to smartphones, from dial-up internet to 5G. This sense of discontinuity has made media objects themselves crucial reference points for defining eras and marking the trajectory of their growth. As a relic of the previous digital imaging era, the CCD camera naturally serves as a key vehicle for triggering and embodying this media-driven nostalgia.

2.3 Gen Z's media seeks anchors amid flux

Generation Z are true digital natives, whose ways of thinking, social patterns, and sense of identity are deeply intertwined with the internet. They are accustomed to the rapid flow of information, fragmented visual presentations, and the embrace of multiple identities. However, this constant online presence and the fleeting nature of information consumption may lead Generation Z to feel a sense of historical detachment and anxiety about their sense of belonging. Scholars have observed that Gen Z exhibits a strong yearning for authenticity and genuineness as a counterbalance to the excessive artifice and virtuality of the digital world[9]

In this context, the revival of CCD cameras can be interpreted as a paradoxical practice: on the one hand, it represents a deceleration and resistance against the rapid evolution of digital culture, attempting to capture a more authentic and vivid experience through the use of a more retro medium; on the other hand, this practice relies entirely on contemporary digital social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Weibo for display, dissemination, and the attribution of meaning; it is a quintessential form of postmodern nostalgia, namely, the use of the most current media platforms to consume and reinterpret a past media form. [10] Therefore, Gen Z's nostalgia through CCD cameras is a highly self-conscious and strategic act of cultural reconstruction, aimed at creating tangible, graspable memory points for themselves amidst the fluidity of digital existence.

3 The CCD Camera as a Technical Tool and Aesthetic Symbol in Media Memory

3.1 The Transition from a Technical Tool to a Cultural Symbol

In the history of technology, CCD cameras represent an intermediate stage in the transition from film to

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fully digital imaging. The specific visual characteristics resulting from their imaging principles were once technical limitations, but today they have been reimagined as a unique retro aesthetic. This aesthetic has been refined and labeled by Generation Z as the "CCD texture" or "millennial style," standing in stark contrast to the homogenized, polished, and airbrushed imaging styles prevalent today. CCD cameras have thus completed their transformation from practical technological tools into stylized cultural symbols.

At the core of this transformation lies the activation of their value as a medium of memory. Every CCD camera carries the imprint of its era; its body design, user interface, and storage medium—the SM card—all bear strong hallmarks of that time. When Gen Z uses them, they are consuming not just the imaging function, but also the immersive nostalgic experience brought about by these historical imprints. Endre Talvi's theory of episodic memory and the multisensory encoding of memory emphasize the importance of materiality in evoking sensory memories. Holding a bulky early digital camera, listening to the sounds of its focus and shutter, and waiting for the image to transition from blurry to clear—these physical and sensory engagements collectively create a sense of ritual and interaction that counters the immediacy and homogeneity of digital imagery.

3.2 Nostalgic aesthetics reflect Gen Z's longing for authenticity and their rebellion against perfectionism

The imaging flaws of CCDs—such as noise, color casts, and low dynamic range—have been redefined in contemporary times as sources of "authenticity" and "atmosphere." This creates an intriguing dialogue with today's mainstream visual culture. Smartphone photography and social media filters are dedicated to creating a perfect visual aesthetic that is clear, bright, and conforms to specific standards, underpinned by algorithms and packaged by consumerism. Conversely, the imperfections of CCD imagery are interpreted as an escape from and rebellion against this standardized visual system. They suggest a more personal, serendipitous visual experience, less subject to algorithmic interference, thereby fulfilling part of Generation Z's imagination of "authenticity."

This aesthetic is deeply rooted in the contrasting framework of media memory. Generation Z has fully experienced the transition of imagery from scarcity and preciousness to excess and ubiquity during their upbringing. The limited pixels and storage capacity of CCD cameras recreate the discipline and selectivity of pre-digital photography; these limitations themselves become part of the nostalgia, contrasting with the current era of unlimited image production and rapid consumption. Thus, the CCD aesthetic is not merely a nostalgic evocation of past visual styles, but also a subtle critique of contemporary digital life achieved by invoking specific memories of how media was once used.

4.Social Media Practices Among Generation Z: Cultural Production and Community Identity

4.1 The Performance of Memory on Social Media and Its Practical Significance

Gen Z's nostalgia for CCD cameras plays out primarily on social media. They not only share photos taken with CCD cameras but are also enthusiastic about showcasing the cameras themselves, unboxing videos, pho-

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tography tutorials, and comparisons between final images and raw footage. This constitutes a public performance of memory. Through specific visual rhetoric—such as uploading low-resolution images reminiscent of early internet photos and adding "Y2K"-style text overlays—they actively connect their personal experiences to a broader cultural memory of the millennium era.

In this process, user-generated content becomes the core material for reconstructing media memory. Algorithmic recommendations and trending topics aggregate countless individual fragments of CCD imagery, collectively piecing together a collective, highly stylized visual memory of the CCD era. This memory is not a one-to-one reproduction of history, but rather a selection based on contemporary aesthetic preferences. For example, some users specifically use CCD cameras to photograph campuses, old streets, and vintage objects, deliberately reinforcing their association with memories of youth and childhood, thereby shaping the CCD camera into a symbol of the vessel for youthful memories.

4.2 Community Interaction and Cultural Functions

A vibrant online community has formed around CCD cameras, with consistently active users on Douban groups, Weibo Super Topics, and the Xianyu platform. These communities serve not only as platforms for trading and sharing information but also as spaces for collective deliberation. Members discuss the differences in film-like quality among various models, share tips on hunting for secondhand cameras, and dig up old camera advertisements and review articles. These discussions essentially construct a knowledge framework and value system regarding CCD cameras. Consensus on which models represent classics and which color tones possess a "German" or "Kodak" feel is reached through community interaction.

This community practice serves important cultural functions. First, it collectivizes individual nostalgia, transforming a private fetish into a public cultural topic that can be shared and discussed, thereby strengthening group identity. Second, through the production and dissemination of knowledge, it systematizes fragmented media memories, forming a set of internally shared codes. Finally, it continuously revises and enriches media memories regarding CCD cameras. When a user discovers that a highly sought-after, niche CCD model actually produces mediocre images and shares this finding, the narrative surrounding that model may shift. Thus, memory here is fluid and open to debate.

4.3 Performative Nostalgia and the Commercial Logic Behind It

First, we must take a dialectical view of this wave of nostalgia. First, it has been keenly identified by capital and rapidly co-opted for commercial purposes. Through the "speculation" of secondhand camera dealers, combined with influencers driving sales through their massive followings, and even brands launching smartphone filters or apps that mimic the CCD imaging style, the underlying commercial logic is to transform this cultural rebellion into a new selling point for consumers. This may cause nostalgic practices to lose their original critical edge and degenerate into mere fashion commodities.

Second, some of these practices contain elements of performative nostalgia. For some Gen Zers, using CCD-style imagery is more of a strategic performance to craft a specific persona—the "retro enthusiast" or "artsy youth" personas are highly popular, and at their core lies self-presentation on social media. This performative aspect dilutes the emotional depth of nostalgia.

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Finally, the media memory reconstructed by Gen Z is characterized by significant fluidity, fragmentation, and hybridity. They may juxtapose CCD imagery with cultural symbols from diverse sources—such as vaporwave music, screenshots from Japanese anime, and Windows XP desktop backgrounds—to create a hybrid retro aesthetic. This memory is not linear or coherent but rather a collage based on mass emotional resonance and aesthetic preferences. It reflects the very characteristics of memory in the digital age: decentralization, and the ability to be freely linked and reorganized.

5.Conclusion: The Logic of Reconstructing Nostalgic Culture from the Perspective of Media Memory

Through an analysis of the resurgence of CCD cameras, this paper reveals several key logics underlying Generation Z's reconstruction of nostalgic culture from the perspective of media memory theory: First, the media shift in objects of nostalgia. In the digital age, nostalgic sentiments are attached to specific, outdated media objects. As carriers of memory, these media objects—with their materiality, operability, and the aesthetic orientations derived from their technical characteristics—become core elements that trigger and embody nostalgia. By consuming and using these relic technologies, Generation Z indirectly experiences and briefly appropriates a past they did not fully live through.

Second, the participatory and productive nature of memory practices. Generation Z's nostalgia is not a passive search for origins, but an active, creative cultural practice. Through content creation, style shaping, and community interaction on social media, they collectively activate, filter, interpret, and even invent memories of old media. In this process, media memory has been transformed into a sustainable, regenerative cultural resource.

Third, the complexity and contradictions of nostalgic motivations. This nostalgic trend encompasses both a cultural rebellion against the digital age's excessive speed, artificiality, and information overload, as well as a yearning to return to simplicity—reflecting Gen Z's pursuit of "authenticity." Yet it simultaneously relies heavily on digital platforms and traffic, inevitably becoming co-opted by commercial forces and taking on a performative quality. It is both a longing for the past and an expression entirely in the language of contemporary media; this internal tension is precisely what defines its era.

Fourth, the reconstructive nature of nostalgic culture. Through CCD cameras, Gen Z constructs a selective reconstruction grounded in contemporary emotional structures, aesthetic demands, and technological environments. What they yearn for is a romanticized, stylized version of the millennial media era—an impression of a simpler, more authentic past represented by low resolution and distinctive grain. This reconstruction essentially utilizes past media symbols to address current cultural and psychological needs and to shape a unique generational identity.

In summary, the revival of CCD cameras serves as a vivid example for observing how media memory operates in the digital age and how youth subcultures interact with history. It demonstrates that in an era where rapid information updates lead to rapid forgetting, nostalgia has become a powerful cultural force, and media plays a crucial role—whether as the object of memory or as the mediator of practice. For Generation Z, nostalgia does not signify regression but rather an active strategy for self-positioning and meaning-making

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within fluid modernity. Future research could further trace the resurgence of other retro media technologies, compare differences in media nostalgia practices across generations, and delve deeper into how technological algorithms covertly shape the flow and form of collective memory.

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