

An investigation of the place of Nostalgia in our Contemporary Cultural Mosaic.

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Table of Contents

Topic Summary	p. 3
Introduction	p. 4
Chapter 1: Nostalgia	p. 5
Chapter 2: Design	p. 13
Chapter 3: Consumerism	p. 19
Conclusion	p. 24
Bibliography	p. 26
List of Figures	p. 27

Topic Summary

This Independent Inquiry discusses how nostalgia works, the meaning of nostalgia, other forms of nostalgia, how it is incorporated in the design of products, how we behave with consumerism and how companies are controlling the way we consume. I investigate aspects of nostalgia that go beyond our sentimentality with objects and where we come from, and how this is being weaponised by companies to sell more products. We do not notice the details in our daily lives because we have grown too dependent on the companies we trust. Companies have found a method to sell their products more, and it all starts with us.

Introduction

There is a great deal of beauty in ordinary objects; but are they furthermore special to us if they hold certain memories and feelings. As we grow and mature there are experiences along the way, these can be both good and bad, but people tend to reminisce more on the positive experiences rather than the negatives. One of the best ways to recall these memories is through memorabilia, which can be both tangible and intangible. We may believe that these are essential in order to carry on living and that might be true. But this can also be exploited for profit by a third party. Companies are always looking for new opportunities to make money from their audience; with past trends resurfacing in modern culture from films, video games, fashion and other forms of consumerism. Maybe you have wondered why you purchased some items more than you needed even though you only planned to window shop. Have you ever asked yourself why you have kept that article of clothing from your youth? Why are trends being recycled every now and then? We will look at the triple threat that is causing the sudden surge in reboots and returning trends; Nostalgia, Consumerism and Design.

Chapter 1 – Nostalgia

The word nostalgia came from Swiss physician Johannes Hofer (Beck, 2013). He identified it as a form of psychosis linked with homesickness in soldiers. The Oxford Dictionary defines Nostalgia as "a form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one's country or home; severe home sickness" (1973, p. 1415). This definition links nostalgia with the idea of home. Moreover, the Merriam-Webster dictionary published an article highlighting the history of the topic by focusing on the meaning of the first syllable:

The nost- in nostalgia means "homecoming" and such sentimental yearning for home during field operations was viewed as a disorder of the brain, with symptoms ranging from melancholy and malnutrition to brain fever and hallucinations (2019).

When we see these memories and it brings us a sense of safety and warmth, this is called nostalgia. Nostalgia can be recent or way into the past it can even take the food we used to eat as a child, a show we grew up with, a place that your family would visit often and even a certain smell. What does home mean to us? It is where we retire to after a long day of work, where we feel our safest and it is the location of our bed. But home can also be somewhere else, someone, and even it can also be a memory. Sure, we cannot go into our memories physically. But we can remember what it was like, the sensations, the smells and tastes that we long for. For most people, they have a hometown and/or patriotic pride. But for people who do not have an idea of traditional nostalgia then they celebrate it in unique ways perhaps through fandoms and their interests like comic and gaming conventions. When people have nostalgia for such cultural motifs, it becomes possible to see nostalgia as a fluid

thing, a mouldable concept that we can apply to everything we experience. It evolves from the origins of the term.

The term nostalgia was coined by Hofer in his 1688 medical dissertation (Beck, 2013) in which he used the word "hallucinations", which has relevance to how we look at objects from the past, especially ones we were not even alive for. For example, a student who was born in 1998 may look at a piece of vintage clothing from the '70s and they "remember" what it was like but in reality, they are imagining images taken from films, tv shows and music. Hauntology looks into the "paradoxes found in postmodern society, particularly contemporary culture's persistent recycling of retro aesthetics and old social forms" (Findwords.info, 2019). The "concept of hauntology has gained a new currency in the 21st century, when music has lost its sense of futurism" (Fisher, 2013, p.42). This also applies to the concept of false nostalgia when something is lost in time and can be applied to anything, anytime by anybody. These hallucinations we encounter in our heads are shaped by what we see and what we grew up with. Meaning that someone who grew up in the Eastern Hemisphere may have a different idea of the year 1996 compared to someone who grew up in the Western Hemisphere.

As shown above, though the term's origin has links to our psyche, the word "homecoming", hallucinations or hauntings from the past and the longings felt for our origins, our roots and our home, there are some people, like me, who have a different version and understanding of nostalgia and for whom it is connected to experiences and ephemera rather than to a place.

Born in the Philippines in 1998, I have always felt like I did not belong there even though it is my home country. I only went to school in the Philippines for about 5 years. Therefore, when my mother announced that she would be moving over to the United Kingdom and promised she would send for us after a year, I was both anxious and filled with joy. After a year she fulfilled her promise and my father and I moved to North Yorkshire, I was 8 years old. Again after 7 months, my parents acquired new jobs in the East Midlands and again, I had to adjust and learn. I was 9. Then, at age 14, I moved again to South Wales, where I still live. During these developmental stages, I was constantly moving and so I have limited knowledge of where I was born and growing up. As such, I have no longing for 'home' as a place, rather the things I have consumed have become nostalgic cultural objects which replace my notion of home. Wherever I have been I have watched movies, tv shows, cartoons, read comics and books and these were the best method of learning English for me and they were and still are my 'sintrofa' (friendly companion) (Highmore, 2009, p. 213). This is what nostalgia is for me and other people who had the same experience as I had; we do not fully know where we officially grew up and all we had was the media we consumed during these times and not where we came from. The media that I grew up with were all from various decades ranging from the '50s to the '90s and most of them were American and thus I developed an American accent not to mention the education system in the Philippines was also Americanised. Making me a Far Eastern Asian who lives in the United Kingdom with an American accent.

Most of my development came from communication from the media and print. The situation for me was moving around every now and then; this was my lifestyle. Rather than home, I attached to experiences such as the shows and movies

I watched. These experiences and cultural representations communicated via the television helped shape me as a person. Suchman writes:

Communication, correspondingly, is an exchange of information, based on our observations, about the facts of the situations in which we find ourselves. Whatever agreement we have about what is factual, on this realist view, comes simply from our common ability to see things as they are. (Suchman, 1985, p. 38)

The phrase "human-machine communication" from Suchman's (1985) book titled 'Plans and Situated Actions: The problem of human-machine communication' relates to how I developed an American accent through the media I had and continue to consume. It is a side effect of the countless hours that I have stared into the television. The problem with human-machine communication is that it takes away the human element, the feelings and it mainly desensitises us from morbid imagery and leaving us clueless from certain details leaving gaps in our imagination. Marc Prensky coined the term "digital natives" and that accurately describes people like me who grew up and learned with technology. Meaning that we are evolving as a generation and everything can be subjective and culture itself has since branched out to other intangible things.

But even with nostalgia and culture rapidly evolving there is also an unseen side effect, false nostalgia. These are the hallucinations and blurry memories we have of experiences and events. In a way, it is related to the Mandela Effect, but it interacts with our memories. When you are engaged in conversation and the person you are speaking to recalls something from their childhood and you have definitely heard of it, but you have never properly seen or grown up with it. A great example of false nostalgia is the familiar "Keep Calm and Carry On" Posters that litter every souvenir shop and anything that is trying to pass as British, Hatherley writes:

I was going into the flagship Warsaw branch of the Polish department store *Empik* and there, just past the revolving doors, was a collection of notebooks, mouse pads, diaries and the like, featuring a familiar English sans serif font, white on red, topped with the crown above the legend, in English: KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON (Hatherley, 2016, p. 14).



Fig 1: *KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON RED POSTER*

Hatherley pinpoints the familiar text and imagery in a department store in Poland, 953 miles away from London via air travel. The fact that a poster made in 1939 in preparation for World War 2 has become a tool to give it a false identity is seriously strange and how "it was nearly recognisable as Coca-Cola or Apple" (Hatherley, 2016) shows that companies will weaponize every bit of nostalgia especially if the

subject is mainstream, companies and even independent companies will try to capitalise on peoples false sense of nostalgia. Sure, tourists that are visiting the UK can buy souvenirs to have a reminder of their trip but the fact that the quote "Keep Calm and Carry On" is now overdone and can be seen on basically any object is just plain tacky and cheap. But this is still an effective way to make some cash from the general public.

Experiences such as going to the amusement park or going to the cinema with your parents. These stick with us regardless if it was positive or negative. For some people, their teenage years may have been memories of going to the park to play sports or consume media from their favourite medium. Looking at a popular medium, video games have been around since 1958 with the creation of the grandfather of video games and household name "Pong" created by Physicist William Higinbotham in the month of October 1958 (Tretkoff and Ramlagan, 2008). With this came a wave of trends with game titles being printed onto clothing, school equipment and virtually anything that can be printed on. Enthusiast and fans of the medium do not fully care, as long as their nostalgia with these games' lives, companies will provide. Boym comments, "Nostalgia as a historical emotion came of age at the time of Romanticism and is coeval with the birth of mass culture" (Boym, 2001, p. 16).

Nostalgia is and always will be linked with emotions and experiences, both positive and negative. But it will need to survive by craving and feeding for those experiences and we do so by seeking out fixes, otherwise, it will just fizzle out and therefore leave us feeling empty. In a way our relationship with the subject is of a mutual benefit; we keep it alive and thriving every time we reminisce on the past and in return, we get to

experience that memory even for just a little while. One musical artist who benefited from this is Christopher Edwin Cooksey, better known as Frank Ocean. Ocean created an entire mixtape sampling his favourite artists growing up and artists that inspire him, he named the mixtape 'Nostalgia, Ultra'. During an interview with Complex Magazine, Ocean states, "It's nostalgic. It's a longing for the past. That's what the record felt like. I named it five minutes before we finished mastering" (Baker, 2011).

Indeed, Ocean pulled inspiration from his past; he was inspired to make the mixtape to tell the story of longing for home when his hometown of New Orleans was hit by Hurricane Katrina. Ocean's choice to create and pull things from his childhood resulted in a mixtape worth listening to over and over. "The old-school touch lends *Nostalgia, Ultra* the feel of a personal, friend-to-friend mixtape" (Dombal, 2011).

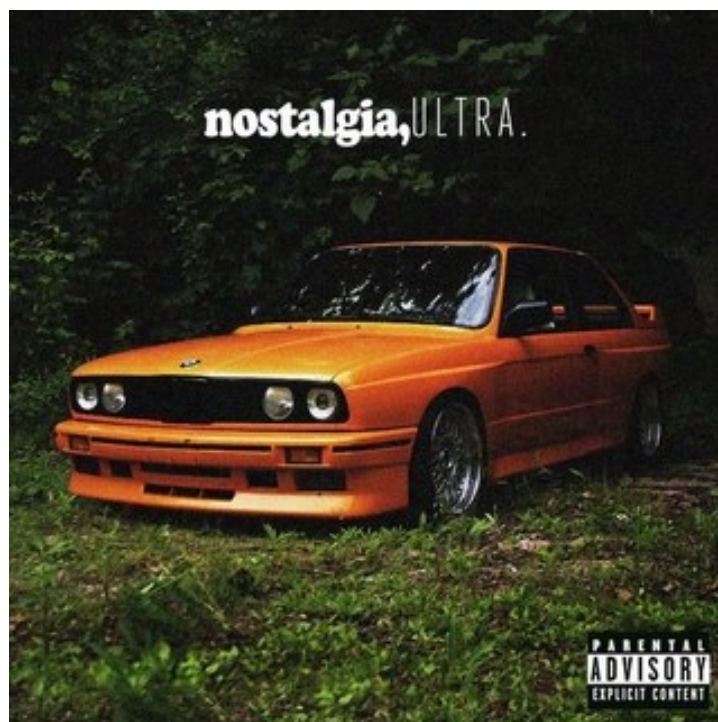


Fig 2: *Nostalgia, Ultra* by Frank Ocean

We can tap into this enigma and get different results every time but sometimes it is worth the risk. It can inspire us; it can hurt us but, in the end, one thing is truly clear. We simply just can't let things go. It helps us build character, learn from mistakes and accomplishments it can remind us of what was so we can prepare for what will be. It seems arbitrary but no matter the situation, humans have the power to create memories from anything; we make anything our little piece of home, a safe place conveniently stowed in our mind.

Nostalgia is heavily noticeable in our current contemporary culture and it really does not matter whether we grew up with something or we created a false sense of nostalgia around a time period. In the end, it is what we make of it we can knock ourselves out with consuming reboots and imitated retro items as much as we would like as long as it distracts us from our problems for a temporary amount of time or to relive our glory days. There is another element at play when we start to notice these things in our everyday lives. It is so subtle that the general public does not notice when a minute detail is changed.

Chapter 2 – Design

The element that is Design is a huge part of our daily lives that we cannot even stop to appreciate it, yet it contributes greatly to how we function in our daily lives. From how our coffee is made, how we get to work, check our emails and even take a shower. It helps life run smoother. A designer has to think about how something functions and add the tiniest amount of detail to improve it. But this can be dark due to the fact that it is possible to exploit it for various reasons, Chapman writes:

Designing contemporary genres of emotionally demanding objects that do nothing but provoke and antagonize their users may not be the most effective approach to optimizing product longevity. (Chapman, 2005, p. 89)

Objects can be dysfunctional as time goes on, but we are too busy to provide maintenance to these products, therefore causing us annoyance and we end up purchasing a brand new one hoping that it will last longer than the last. For example; mobile phones can be obsolete after a few years of use both functionally and also fashionably. Objects can also be seen as an emotional tether, some form of nostalgia even. Objects that we grew up with or used during a memorable trip such as a camera or an article of clothing. This can affect a large majority of customers, therefore, making the product more profitable. Norman writes:

Beyond the design of an object, there is a personal component as well, one that no designer of an object or manufacturer can provide. The objects in our lives are more than mere material possessions. We take pride in them, not necessarily because we are showing off our wealth or status, but because of the meanings they bring to our lives (2004, p. 6).

As much as we would like to admit it, we can be quite sentimental beings when it comes to objects but as time goes on that favourite mug or that special piece of clothing that you have been keeping in your wardrobe starts to become obsolete and

we find a new favourite mug and a brand new article of clothing. It begins to become a cycle.

Just like the trends that get recycled every now and then, especially the way things look and work. Vintage clothing is currently the juggernaut that is most people experiment with today with vintage kilo sales and reseller websites such as *Depop* and *Beyond Retro* offers ease of access for their customers. Recycled pieces of clothing can be profitable to the resellers and brands because "fashion induces a change in mass taste" (Welters and Lillethun, 2007, p. 85) and as long as a big celebrity or social media influencer is wearing a "vintage" cap from 1975 even though it is made in 2019 and just made to look old, their fans would flock to the stores to purchase anything that resembles it because we are wired to be fearful of being left out. This is the current design structure of our society. Fashion is a key factor in the trends that are reoccurring in current contemporary consumer culture. Today you will see the urban youth wearing flared jeans and corduroy jackets making them look almost out of place Welters and Lillethun again point out that:

Fashion is a collective phenomenon and has an objective existence apart from any individual. It makes attractive what often seems outrageous and bizarre to the preceding generation as well as the next. (Welters and Lillethun, 2007, p. 85)

The younger generation has access and are able to mix and match articles of clothing from varying decades and for the people that grew up wearing these pieces it can be highly nostalgic. But this seems like we are all just following a pattern in our culture when it comes to trend, everything cycles back, and we do not seem to mind at all. It is completely up to us individually to adapt to these changes. Recycling of

trends can also be seen as a type of homage to the generations they came from, celebrating self-expression and freedom.

Weaponized nostalgia is a tactic that companies use when they decide to re-release something that they have made a long time ago and they may control how we consume and how we feel towards a product. It is their way of saying that they have been around for a lengthy amount of time and that they should be trusted because of this fact. And this is a powerful tool to utilise when selling their products. Norman comments:

In the world of products, a brand is an identifying mark, the symbol that represents a company and its products. Particular brands produce an emotional response that draws the consumer toward the product or away from it. Brands have taken on the emotional representation. They carry with them an emotional response that guides us toward a product or away from it. (Norman, 2004, pp. 59–60).

Functionality is a crucial part of our daily lives, if something we usually do not see starts to become dysfunctional, we start to notice, and it begins to affect us in a negative way. We heavily rely on everything running smoothly and, in a way, it has made us somewhat lazy. So, we stick with what we know. Products with household name brands and we continue to purchase products from these companies because they have built a reputation for being reliable. For example, the recent revival of the old *Motorola RAZR* phone. It was famous for being a reliable and fashionable phone back in the 2000s and it has now been updated for the modern market with a touchscreen but it is honouring the tradition of the *RAZR* line with a foldable screen so it will still be a flip phone. Truly sparking some nostalgia from a time where we can dramatically hang up on someone we are talking to and also a time where

everything was simple, our phone batteries lasted the entire day and we needed to press one button about 3 or 4 times just to get to type one letter.

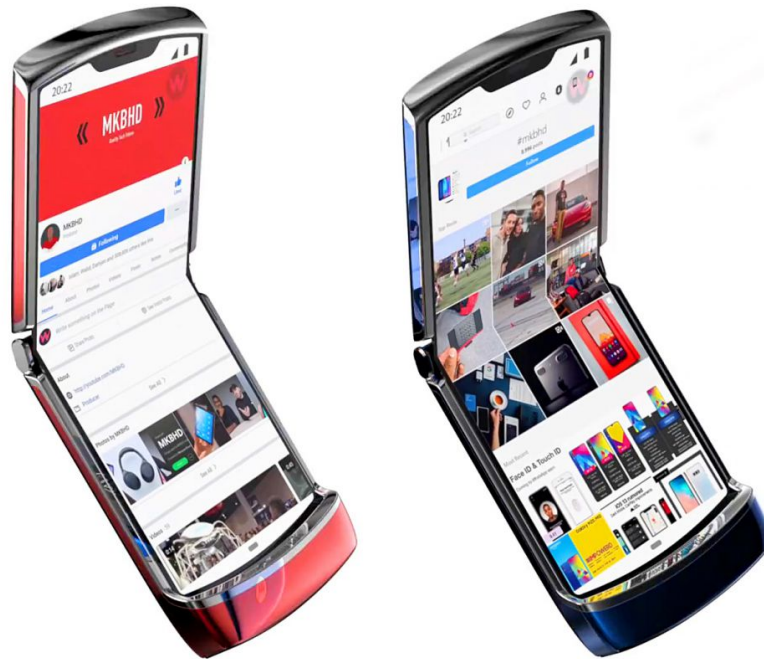


Fig 3: *Motorola RAZR 2019*



Fig 4: *Motorola RAZR 2004*

This is definitely not a coincidence, they know how they are affecting their customers and they anticipate how they will react, Gross writes:

Designers can use nostalgia to appeal to their audience on a feel-good level. By tapping into people's desire to feel a sense of belonging, meaning, and security, designers can endow their creations with emotion and sentimentality that connects with their audience and elicits a pleasurable feeling. (Gross, 2019)

And this is what we are essentially seeing when they release products with the characters we grew up with and know and love. We cannot help but to obtain them because they remind us of a happier time. The general public does not notice this at all, and they will buy products based on how the product makes them feel. It is virtually invisible to the untrained eye. This may start another wave of recycling a trend but this time it may be for technologies. People who may not have had the chance to be a part of the clique who owned a flip phone when they were younger, now have the chance to purchase it and may finally be included.

This is not at all a bad thing; in fact, it is quite the opposite. The more we feed into this cycle, the more we get in return and also getting to relive some parts of our life even for just a while. For example, if we start investing in up and coming companies and they have cracked the code in weaponizing nostalgia as a design tool then the investment that we have placed comes back to us larger, this is what happens when we buy from big companies. But as time goes on the company that was once fresh and new becomes something that the public starts to grow tired of and criticise. Companies like Amazon and Apple. Sure, they still gave their loyal customers but if you focus on the social media traction Apple gets every year when they announce their brand-new smartphone, there is satire posted all over the internet. You cannot help but feel like it is intentional. Almost like it was designed to be made fun of so

that the general public advertises for them. The same can be said for Amazon, they have built a reputation for swift and reliable services but also a reputation for treating their workers poorly. Lieber writes an article about Bernie Sanders calling out the founder and CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos:

Sanders has repeatedly spoken out against Amazon, and last week he sent out an email to his supporters asking them to join forces against Amazon, which he accused of paying its workers poor wages while its CEO and founder amasses unprecedented wealth (Lieber, 2018).

But since Amazon and Apple have become this familiar brand that people just know like hearing the name Tony Hawk and instantly knowing that he is a famous skateboard athlete. People have trusted them and most likely will not give attention at the scandals because it is too much of a hassle to find new reliable brands that compare to them, we would rather ignore the maltreatment and underpayment of hard-working employees just so we can have access to one-day delivery and the cheapest deals on the latest technology and clothes.

This is how companies weaponize our weaknesses towards reliance, laziness and nostalgia. And we advertise them for free with every post in social media and them being the gigantic platform most people use. This leads to more people being informed about the products and services, but in the end, it is truly all down to what design can reach within us both emotionally and logically. This is a blurred line simply because people may have just bought the item as an impulse from seeing on a celebrity's social media page which means they were not influenced by the company at all. Either way, it is designed to reach the mainstream and we continue to consume and there is a huge chance that we will continue to consume or else what would become of our way of life?

Chapter 3 – Consumerism

This topic is a thin red line. Consumerism is no doubt part of our daily lives. We take part in this heavily with all the clothes we buy, the technology we purchase, the food we order and even the shows we watch. Consumerism is known to be the idea of consumption of items and services is the main goal to maintain our happiness and wellbeing we rely on the materials we purchase. It may sound highly negative, but the practice is seen to be beneficial for the economic growth of a country. It also has its negative side effects; Chappelow writes in an online article about the topic:

Environmental problems are frequently associated with consumerism to the extent that consumer goods industries and the direct effects of consumption produce environmental externalities. These can include pollution by producing industries, resource depletion due to widespread conspicuous consumption, and problems with waste disposal from excess consumer goods and packaging (Chappelow, 2019).

If you are an advocate of climate change then you may want to rethink how you consume, where your purchased items are from and how they are made. It can truly have a noticeable impact on the way we live once we start to become aware of how much we spend on items, most may not even be essentials such as food, water and shelter. We cannot deny that our impulses are strong especially in modern times due to the fear of missing out and the craving for being included. It is how we are wired. And we let it control us and how we are seen in social settings, we have our ranks. Bauman explains:

Not that the idea of self-improvement was totally unheard of; individual members of the ranks were indeed encouraged to strive for perfection. But the ideals of perfection were as numerous as the ranks themselves; and as impenetrable, separate, and-in theory-immune to change. (Bauman, 1992)

Perfection is a word that most people are afraid of. No matter the context, it could be about our appearance, something we attempted or something we crafted with our bare hands. Perfection is used as a describing word but the impact it has in our psyche is gigantic. Depending on the context it is being used the word could either lift our spirits up or it could bring us down to our knees. It has become our master; we allow these 3 syllables to control our emotions. But we continue to fuel the flames to submitting to it and following false icons, purchasing the same clothes they wear, the same food they eat and recreate the same lifestyle. We have become sheep. It is and never will be a healthy trade.

An example of people becoming sheep is with a clothing brand named Supreme. Supreme is currently part of the prominent and heavily in-demand brands, and the brand caters to a younger audience but there are some millennials who part takes in the hype of the brand. The company released a singular clay brick with the company's logo pressed onto it for £28 each. It sold out within minutes on the company's online store and resellers have begun reselling them, triple its normal price and some resold bricks go for £1000. The resellers of these high demand items tend to create a whole business of overpricing. Mackey comments:

The reason why neo-classical economics continues to survive as a model are twofold. First it relies on a highly theoretical 'science' that is more concerned as to whether a social behaviour can be modelled with a mathematical algorithm than whether this algorithm actually describes anything in the world outside. Secondly, there is one element of consumer choice which, when considered at the level of the aggregate (or collective) impact of consumers, does serve to support the economists' model – this is the concern for low prices. The idea of supporting the cheapest producer is to create the cheapest goods for the consumer (Mackey, 1997, p. 41-42).

The consumers that miss the window of purchasing items online when it is at its lowest price, will spend more just so they can obtain these branded items to be part of the clique due to the fear of missing out. Knowing this may seem like the only party that are benefitting from this exchange are the companies but it depends on the consumers, they may feel like it is a fair trade, the companies provides an item that becomes a huge trend and people purchase it to feel like they are not ranked the lowest in the social hierarchy. It is truly ironic given that the logo for Supreme is identical to the works of Barbara Kruger. Kruger is an American artist known for her combination of typography and image, and her feminist pieces of work. She also often looks into the behaviours of consumerism. And not to mention, it looks like the logo for the toothpaste brand known widely as Colgate.



Fig 5: *Supreme Box Logo*



Fig 6: *I Shop Therefore I Am*

Looking at this piece from Barbara Kruger also applies to what perfection and social rank do to us. The meaning of I shop therefore I am is that a person is defined by their material possessions and not the content of their character. Essentially highlighting the problem with our society today. The rarer the item we own, the higher we are in the ranks of society. Lenton states:

But, when it comes down to it, what drives people to cough up these prices in the first place? Exclusivity is all well and good, and the feeling of knowing you have something that very few other people in the world have is understandable, but there are plenty of other brands out there that the average person on the street would find equally as cool upon seeing its logo emblazoned across your chest (Lenton, n.d).

Rarity can ironically be rare in this current day and age; you can thank mass production for that. Handmade items are also now in high demand and they can be personalised which could trigger our nostalgia from when our grandparents would knit us a scarf or stitch your name on an article of clothing to avoid losing it. These can be expensive but at the same time, you fully know where your purchased item is made, what it is made out of, and who made it. And as a bonus, we get to support a small business grow and our money goes to someone instead of a big corporate entity. But we can ask ourselves, are we ready as a society to ignore our trusted brands and pursue a new method of consumption? Are we prepared to abandon our wiring, our nostalgia towards these companies? We have already created a cultural mosaic with trends and designs being recycled and nostalgia being a huge part of it. Our nostalgia towards these giant companies may be a strong enough glue to keep us tethered to them. Therefore, leaving the small and local business to find unique ways to attract new customers.

Conclusion

Looking at the 3 ingredients for a new method of catering to our “needs” we can theorize that this has been in use for quite some time now maybe even longer!

Nostalgia is a powerful and mouldable concept that can quickly be poisoned and used for negative intentions. Design plays a key part in everything we see and do every day. It is the bridge that links Nostalgia and Consumerism together, without it, the idea of companies using our own memories against us will cease to exist.

Consumerism feeds on our ability to be impulsive and without noticing this, we keep consuming and it becomes a tiresome cycle of using our hard-earned cash to purchase objects that we have already had. But since it is from a time of innocence and simplicity, we cannot help ourselves but to fill that gap just to get a feel for what has already happened. In conclusion, we do not notice the details and the way companies manipulate us to sell more products. We subconsciously ignore these tactics and the way they weaponize our nostalgia. These companies incorporate our memories linked with a positive and simpler time and we continue to consume and it does not matter if we grew up with the imagery they are using, as long as we have heard of it or a celebrity we idolise wears it in a photograph. The fact that these giant companies know us better than we know ourselves is quite worrying. These companies incorporate nostalgia into the designs of their products just because we tend to rely on materialistic things to spark some joy. In a way, we may not want to notice them because it could cause us more of a hassle to switch our mannerisms with consumerism. We need to be careful with how we react, nostalgia is an amazing tool that we can use anytime but it is a worse weapon to be used for profit. In the end, it is up to us individually if we begin to notice them and steer away from the path

that these gigantic companies have laid out for us or stick to what we are comfortable with.

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