

Global Youth Re-create Symbols from Past Popular Culture: Discussion about the Popularity of Retro Culture on TikTok

Tanghaorui Li

*Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science,
London, United Kingdom
Krl01_anor@163.com*

Abstract. In the era of globalization, the recreation of retro cultural symbols by youth groups through social media platforms (especially TikTok) has become a remarkable phenomenon. Through focusing on the re-creation of retro culture, this paper explores how youth develop novel and unique cultural expressions by deconstructing, reorganizing and reinterpreting historical symbols. The paper also argues that this symbolic practice represents a form of cultural resistance through carnivalization and emotional deconstruction. Youth utilize visual, verbal, and behavioral symbols to construct a comprehensive system of expression. This system serves as a medium to convey their identity, emotional needs, and resistance to mainstream societal norms. The re-creation of retro culture is not only a kind of nostalgic behavior, but also an important way for youth to establish meaning, realize self-expression and emotional belonging in the digital space.

Keywords: TikTok, youth culture, retro culture, symbol recreation, culture studies

1. Introduction

TikTok, as a social application featuring vertical short videos, has become an important cultural communication platform in the 21st century globally. Scholar Granados points out that TikTok is one of the fastest-growing platforms. Generation Z (Generation Z), as a generation that grew up in an environment of Internet popularization, constitutes the core user group of TikTok [1]. According to Robehmed's report, the majority of TikTok users are between the ages of 13 and 21 [2], indicating that the platform has a significant influence on youth.

The rise and development of social media has provided a new space for youth groups to carry out aesthetic activities. The development not only influences and reshapes their aesthetic perception, but also shapes youth aesthetic trends characterized by revelry, niche interests, and mobility. At present, some youth are tired of the homogenization cultural expression, and turn to pursuit retro and nostalgic styles for a greater sense of authenticity and cultural value thickness. In this trend, some opinion leaders are attempting to revive retro styles by establishing nostalgia-oriented aesthetic benchmarks.

Although scholar Marten points out that youth culture has always been influenced by multiple factors such as geography, race, class, gender, and technology [3], TikTok, as a global media platform, still demonstrates rapid cross-geographical dissemination. As Patel and Binjola argued,

TikTok has become a tool for youth to showcase their talents, express their opinions, and its dissemination transcends national boundaries and other social barriers to a certain extent [4].

In the following chapters, this paper will focus on the following two questions in the light of specific cases and theories in the literature: first, what are the main forms of popular culture's re-creation? Secondly, what are the reasons that drive the phenomenon of re-creation? Overall, this paper argues that the relationship between contemporary youth culture and mainstream culture is not just about resistance. It's a dynamic process of two-way construction and mutual penetration. Recreating symbols serves as a means of expressing subjectivity and reflecting contemporary society.

2. The forms of cultural re-creation

In semiotic theory, the scholar Stuart Hall refers to the recoding and decoding of symbols. Media producers “encode” ideologies into texts, and audiences “decode” them based on their own contexts (dominant, negotiated or antagonistic) [5]. This accurately describes the dynamic process by which cultural symbols are constantly recreated and reinterpreted. This paper agrees with the theory and argues that cultural re-creation refers to the behavioral process in which youth generate new meanings and practices by extracting, translating and reshaping existing cultural symbols.

In contemporary youth culture, the wave of nostalgia has shown remarkable vitality: youth use obsolete media technologies (e.g., CCD cameras) for self-presentation and memory-sharing, and even make these technologies themselves objects of nostalgia. Youth preserve, transform and redesign these old media to express nostalgia. In the following subsections, we will focus on analyzing the culture implications of specific symbols.

2.1. Visual symbols and bricolage

In their video creations, youth engage in cultural recreation through distinct visual strategies such as bricolage, appropriation, recontextualization, grafting, and representation. These practices allow them to deconstruct and reassemble existing cultural symbols, generating new meanings compatible with their own community's values and styles. This process not only forms a shared expressive language within the group but also enables youth to actively reshape culture by selectively repurposing pre-existing social objects and meanings.

Moreover, digital platforms facilitate the global flow of these cultural symbols, transcending geographical and national boundaries. Acting as cultural “translators” and “intermediaries”, young people integrate global motifs into local contexts, resulting in a phenomenon often described as “glocalization”[6]. A clear example is the transformation of the “Slogan T-shirt”. Originally a medium for advertisements or political messages, it has been reinvented by young creators worldwide as a vehicle for expressing personal identity, humor, and community[7]. Through ironic or self-referential texts printed on T-shirts, private identities are cleverly fused with public symbols. This represents a concrete form of symbolic recreation via grafting, collage, and re-contextualization.

2.2. Re-contextualization of material culture

Specific vintage objects have been given a new lease of life on the new media platform. CCD cameras utilize charge-coupled devices (CCDs) as light-sensitive components, earning them the nickname “card cameras” during their popularity at the turn of the 21st century. In contemporary

retro culture, CCD cameras have become a symbol of fashion and trend, allowing people to find a sense of slowing down in the fast-paced modern life. The CCD camera's primary purpose has evolved from a mere image-recording device into a symbol that represents aesthetic expression, slow living philosophy, and cultural sophistication.

According to the statistics of BBC News, #digitalcamera has been viewed more than 220 million times on the Tiktok platform [8]. As pioneering digital imaging devices, CCD cameras frequently generate photographs characterized by distinctive nostalgic aesthetics and unparalleled visual textures. The pixel quality and photographic aesthetics of CCD cameras remain challenging to replicate with contemporary digital technology. Under the culture of nostalgia, a large number of bloggers and netizens on social media platforms such as Tiktok, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo (in China) share works taken with CCD cameras, and this viral spread has greatly increased the popularity of CCD cameras.

Compared to cell phone touch-screen shooting, CCD camera buttons enhance the real-life “presence” experience while providing physical feedback to the subject. Youth confirm their metaphysical cultural perceptions through hands-on practice, and this past-present overlap and mutual verification build an important foundation for the realization of rituals. Underneath the mechanical shutter of the CCD camera, there is an intergenerational flow of memory and emotional reflection. Shooting can reinforce memory in the mind and facilitate the shaping and reproduction of memory from the objective dimension. In the shooting activities of CCD cameras, Generation Z youth groups have shaped a “memory ritual” that manifests materiality and authenticity, and have put this “sense of memory” into practice through intergenerational collective verification.

3. The causes of cultural re-creation

3.1. Self-expression of subjectivity

In the context of new media, the individual is both a user of technology and a “digital subject” that is reconfigured by technology. As Stuart Hall notes, considering the cultural production of audiences in a symbolic sense represents an important academic concept [9]. Hall views the cultural symbol system as a divisible, combinable, and creative text, in which the public can break the rules of the everyday symbol system, collage and recreate meanings, and acquire a “cultural identity”. This perspective emphasizes the resistance and productive power of the masses in front of mainstream culture, and the essence of their cultural production is to reshape the subject by competing for cultural leadership.

At the same time, the templated production provided by various video editing platforms promotes the formation of what Henry Jenkins calls “participatory culture” [10]. This model lowers the barriers to artistic expression and symbolic production. It provides strong support for individual creation and sharing, facilitating the transformation of nostalgic memory practices from private domains to public performances [11]. At the same time, the templated participation has the quality of memetic communication. A popular “nostalgia puzzle” template is like a successful cultural gene, expanding rapidly on the Internet.

On the one hand, nostalgic culture often embodies the shared values and memories of particular groups. Through social media, these values and memories reach wider audiences, thereby strengthening group cohesion. On the other hand, nostalgic culture on social media is often integrates with regional culture—such as local cuisine and traditional festivals—enabling people to more deeply experience their connection to and sense of belonging within their region. This

integration promotes both the preservation and development of local culture while providing an important cultural foundation for group identity formation.

3.2. Emotional relief under social pressure

The world today is in an era of constant change in both new technologies and technological techniques. In order to remain competitive, individuals and societies continue to invest resources, making the maintenance of competitiveness both a means and an end. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the youth population. Unlike the life experiences of previous generations, new media technologies have fundamentally changed the way modern youth perceive time and space. Throughout their basic education, youth have always been accompanied by a certain amount of academic pressure in their growth process. In this era of information explosion, youth face a huge influx of information daily, and their fast-paced lifestyle leaves them feeling pressurized.

Design psychology suggests that people tend to feel anxious when dealing with information overload and rapid change [6]. This anxiety prompts them to seek an emotional haven. Through nostalgia we are provided with an “emotional safe zone” in our fast-paced lives. When surrounded by new information and changes every day, an old object with memories and a familiar traditional style can instead keep people grounded. The openness of the Internet provides young people with the possibility of building participatory communities around common symbols across geographical boundaries. Young people interact and share anonymously in such communities, building their identities based on subcultures, while their behaviors show obvious entertainment and pleasure-oriented characteristics.

4. Challenges of superficial engagement and commodification

Leveraging its interactivity and algorithmic mechanisms, TikTok has established a distinctive “production–dissemination–identification” cycle for the symbolic re-creation of youth culture [1]. While this model effectively converges individual emotions into collective action—transforming affective symbols into shared identity markers and fostering communal participation among like-minded users—it also introduces significant challenges related to superficial engagement and commodification.

One major issue is the trend toward homogenized production. Although TikTok enables rapid trend creation—compared by some scholars to the cultural function of MTV in the 1990s and 2000s, yet distinct in its reliance on Gen-Z creators [1]—this very efficiency often results in cultural outputs that are repetitive and standardized. Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), who act as “cultural transcoders” by rendering nebulous nostalgia into imitable paradigms [12], frequently operate within commercial frameworks that prioritize virality and algorithmic appeal over cultural depth [13]. As a result, even creative practices become streamlined into reproducible templates, diluting the diversity and authenticity of symbolic expression.

However, in this process, the symbolic recreation of youth culture also faces the obvious challenges of commodification and superficiality. As the main group of fashion consumers, young people's cultural behaviours are not only influenced by pluralistic values, but are also more and more easily absorbed and exploited by commercial forces. Behind many retro trends, they are essentially the result of commercial operations. They employ social platform communication mechanisms to precisely cater to young people's nostalgia, transforming personal emotions into collective consumption behavior.

In this process, memory is no longer an autonomous, in-depth retrospection, but is selectively activated and presented according to the platform's interactive logic and visual rules. As German philosopher Wolfgang Iser pointed out, in today's highly developed electronic media, real material experience is gradually replaced by highly visualised media perception [14]. Reality has become manipulable and glorified, and pleasure and fun are pursued. Nostalgia is no longer derived from authentic historical experiences but has been molded into a 'retro trend' suitable for dissemination and easy consumption.

Therefore, although young people demonstrate cultural activity and autonomy through symbolic recreation, we must be wary of the underlying commercial logic and flattening tendencies. This tendency may not only weaken the criticality and depth of cultural practices, but also make the identity of young people more vulnerable to the dual influence of consumerism and platform rules.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the phenomenon of cultural re-creation among Generation Z on TikTok, examining its forms, causes, and challenges. The research identifies three primary forms of symbolic recreation: visual symbols and bricolage, the re-contextualization of material culture like CCD cameras, and the creation of "memory rituals." These practices are driven by two main factors: the need for self-expression of subjectivity in the digital age and the pursuit of emotional relief under social pressure. Through nostalgic cultural practices, young people not only assert their identity but also build communities across geographical boundaries, creating a dynamic process of mutual construction between youth culture and mainstream culture that transcends simple resistance. However, there are still some limitations in this study, especially in the fact that the platform case only focuses on TikTok, and the study can be extended to more social media platforms of different regions and types in the future, so as to further promote the understanding and theoretical construction of youth symbolic practices globally through systematic and cross-cultural comparisons.

References

- [1] Abbas, L., Fahmy, S.S., Ayad, S., Ibrahim, M. and Ali, A.H. (2022). TikTok Intifada: Analyzing Social Media Activism Among Youth. *Online Media and Global Communication*, 1(2), pp.287–314. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2022-0014>.
- [2] Robehmed, N. (2017). From Musers To Money: Inside Video App Musical.ly's Coming Of Age. [online] *Forbes*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2017/05/11/from-musers-to-money-inside-video-app-musical-lys-coming-of-age/> [Accessed 3 Sep. 2025].
- [3] Marten (2023). *Oxford Handbook of the History of Youth Culture*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] Patel, K. (2020). TikTok the New Alternative Media for Youngsters for Online Sharing of Talent: An Analytical Study. *Journal of Advanced Research in Journalism & Mass Communication*, 07(01), pp.17–20. doi: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2395.3810.202005>.
- [5] Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*. Birmingham Univ. Of Birmingham.
- [6] Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., Arndt, J. and Routledge, C. (2008). Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(5), pp.304–307. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2008.00595.x>.
- [7] Wu, K. (2025). "Slogan T-shirt" has become the best item for Gen Z to express their personality by conveying their attitude through fashion!. [online] *Vogue Hong Kong*. Available at: <https://www.voguehk.com/zh/article/fashion/slogan-tee-gen-z/> [Accessed 3 Sep. 2025].
- [8] Farrell, M. (2023). Digital cameras back in fashion after online revival. *BBC News*. [online] 6 Feb. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-64512059>.
- [9] Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.
- [10] Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture : Media education for the 21st century*. [online] Cambridge: MIT Press. Available at: <https://www.mitpress.mit.edu/books/9780262083593>.

//www.macfound.org/media/article_pdfs/jenkins_white_paper.pdf [Accessed 3 Sep. 2025].

- [11] Granados, M. (2020). I Turn My Camera On: Notes on the aesthetics of TikTok. *The Baffler*, [online] (54), pp.96–103. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975672> [Accessed 3 Sep. 2025].
- [12] Shaozhi, W. (2020). An empirical research on social media marketing and consumer responses: Leveraging the power of online opinion leaders. *The Kyoto Economic Review*, [online] 87(182), pp.34–63. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48619711> [Accessed 3 Sep. 2025].
- [13] Jenkins, H., Ford, S. and Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- [14] Wolfgang Iser (1997). *Undoing aesthetics*. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.