Nostalgia-Based Media in a Post-Postmodern World

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the Netflix series *Stranger Things* as a contemporary case study in nostalgia, pastiche, and post-postmodern media culture. As one of the most influential nostalgia-driven television series of the past decade, *Stranger Things* constructs a stylized version of the 1980s that resonates with both audiences who lived through the decade and younger viewers experiencing it through mediated memory. Drawing from theories of post-postmodernism, pastiche, and nostalgia, this study explores how the series blends aesthetic imitation, cultural references, and character representation to reframe the past in a way that is emotionally meaningful, commercially strategic, and culturally impactful.

Using a visual textual analysis, content was reviewed and coded across categories such as material culture, popular media references, character aesthetics, and evolving visual motifs. The analysis focused exclusively on visual cues, including settings, props, fashion, and cinematographic parallels. Findings reveal that the show consistently uses visual pastiche to evoke both direct and mediated nostalgia, relying on familiar cultural markers of the 1980s. The results also show a shift across seasons, from more subtle references toward increasingly heightened and hyperreal recreations of the decade.

This study demonstrates how Stranger Things functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that shapes collective memory of the 1980s. The series blends sincerity with stylization, illustrating the role of nostalgia within a post-postmodern media landscape and highlighting how contemporary audiences engage with reconstructed versions of the past.

Keywords: nostalgia, pastiche, post-postmodernism, *Stranger Things*, visual textual analysis, media studies, 1980s culture

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES……5

INTRODUCTION…..……6

STRANGER THINGS SYNOPSIS…..……...…….7

LITERATURE REVIEW…..……...……...….9

Post-Postmodernism and Pastiche……...9

Post-Postmodernism……..11

Pastiche……..13

Nostalgia……17

RESEARCH QUESTIONS……...22

METHODOLOGY……22

Collecting, Organizing, and Reviewing Data……23

Choosing Units of Analysis……...24

Extracting and Coding Data……...24

Organizing, Describing, and Interpreting Extracted Data…….25

Reporting Findings……25

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION……25

80s Culture References……..26

Film and Television……26

Music……..38

Youth Culture…….43

Political Culture…….45

Material Culture: Décor and Objects of the 80s……48

Domestic Spaces……48

Consumer Goods and Branding……54

Technology and Everyday Objects……58

Falsehoods in 80s Representations……61

Visual Representations of Characters……63

Archetypes Through Styling……...63

Fashion, Hair, and Makeup Trends……...66

Evolution of Nostalgia……...71

Shifts in Style……..71

Commodification and Market Integration……75

Emotional Amplification……79

CONCLUSION……..82

REFERENCES……..87

APPENDIX A……..106

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Train Track Comparison	28
Figure 2	Bike Riding Youth	30
Figure 3	Core Cast as Ghostbusters	33
Figure 4	Winona Ryder: 1980s to Now	34
Figure 5	Sean Astin: 1980s to Now	35
Figure 6	Robert Englund: 1980s to Now	36
Figure 7	Music Influences in Max and Eddie	41
Figure 8	The Wheeler's Presidential Choice	46
Figure 9	The Byers Home	50
Figure 10	The Wheeler Home	52
Figure 11	Nostalgic Product Placement	55
Figure 12	Storefronts Featured in Starcourt	57
Figure 13	Walkie-Talkie Representation	60
Figure 14	Anchronism Examples	62
Figure 15	Steve Harrington and Nancy Wheeler	65
Figure 16	Max and Eleven's New Wardrobe	68
Figure 17	The Evolution of Karen Wheeler	70
Figure 18	Downtown Hawkins versus Starcourt Mall	74
Figure 19	Burger King Stranger Things Collaboration	77
Figure 20	Dungeons & Dragons Representation	80
Figure 21	H&M's Season 4 Collaboration	81

Nostalgia-Based Media in a Post-Postmodern World

With every passing moment, every piece of media that is being created is being cemented as a snapshot in time: creating a visual representation of the current decades morals, values, aesthetics, and understandings. With streaming platforms now becoming the societal preference for media viewing (Song, 2024), concerns for content over-saturation are now driving audiences to become a bit more particular in the content that they are watching (Avery, 2024). Platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and more have helped create the rise of nostalgia and nostalgia-based media that has placed a stronghold on audiences; transporting them back to the familiar sights of yesteryear when life seemed to feel simpler (Verdon, 2024).

As the world evolves and generations mature, a sense of longing usually can be found for a formative time, inciting the ideology of nostalgia. Younger audiences are clinging to the resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s whether they themselves have experienced it or not (Harlow, 2023), creating a demand for new age nostalgia and content that could supplement it (Travers, 2024). This led to the creation of the ever-popular *Stranger Things*, one of the most watched television series of the past decade, and the series credited with inciting the contemporary nostalgia trend within television and film (Breier, 2022; Chilton, 2022; Pallotta, 2022; Porterfield, 2023). *Stranger Things* tells a sci-fi thriller story that is glamorized by big hair, flashy neon, and backed by quintessential 80s hits; creating the perfect memory of the 80s for those who lived it and supplementing the perfect fantasy for those that did not (Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

This thesis examines Netflix's *Stranger* Things as a visual case study in nostalgia, pastiche, and post-postmodernism. It explores how the series uses aesthetic imitation and cultural

memory to construct a mediated version of the 1980s that resonates with both lived and imagined experiences of the past. Through visual textual analysis, the study investigates how *Stranger Things* operates as a nostalgic-media catalyst within a post-postmodern zeitgeist. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: how is nostalgia represented within *Stranger Things*, how do characters engage with and represent nostalgia, and how does the visual pastiche of the 1980s evolve over the course of the series?

Stranger Things Synopsis

Stranger Things is often identified as the catalyst for the recent wave of nostalgia that has surged in popularity across television and film (Breier, 2022; Chilton, 2022; Orazi & van Laer, 2022; Unrau, 2022). Netflix released the entire first season of *Stranger Things* on July 15th, 2016, following the acclaimed successes of other original series from the video streaming juggernaut, such as *House of Cards* or *Orange is the New Black* (Rumble, 2018). Created by Matt and Ross Duffer, who are known professionally as the Duffer Brothers, *Stranger Things* was born from the inspiration of pop culture's past from the brothers' own childhoods from the late 80s and early 90s. The show was initially constructed after the creation of the Duffer's 2015 film *Hidden* and their work on the FOX series *Wayward Pines*, where the duo was mentored by director M. Night Shyamalan during the creation of *Stranger Things'* first season (Leon, 2016).

The brothers claim that the initial pitch for *Stranger Things* was rejected by many different networks due to them believing that an adult story starring children just would not entice modern audiences, and the story should simply focus on the adults and their experiences with the paranormal plot line (Grow, 2016). It was not until the brothers pitched the story to Shawn Levy and Dan Cohen, co-executive producers of 21 Laps Entertainment, did the show take off into production, with Levy stating that he understood the show's potential only three

pages into the script (Leon, 2016). With an initial budget of $6 million per episode on an eight-episode season (Lealos & Wasif, 2020), *Stranger Things* has since cemented itself as one of the most streamed shows in Netflix's history following its initial release (Moore, 2025).

Set in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana, *Stranger Things* follows the story of a missing boy and the supernatural occurrences that happen in their small town following his disappearance, all wrapped perfectly in the aesthetic of the 1980s (IMDb, n.d.). The Duffer brothers describe the show as if "Steven Spielberg directed a Stephen King novel," directly tapping into the cult classics of the 80s that were pertinent to the creators' own childhoods (Sternbergh, 2017).

In the first season, set in 1983, a young Will Byers goes missing on his way home after a night of playing Dungeons and Dragons with his friends Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, and Lucas Sinclair in the basement of the Wheeler home. The boys actively search for their missing friend, but along the way manage to uncover strange paranormal happenings that all seem to point back to a secret government base located in their town. They are aided in their quest to find Will by an unusual young girl named Eleven and her even more unusual set of powers (telekinesis, for starters) which again led back to the odd government base. The group of kids are not the only one's privy to the seemingly malevolent supernatural forces praying on the town, given that the adults of the show, notably played by 80s stars such as Winona Ryder and David Harbour, are also attempting to solve the mystery in their own right (IMDb, n.d.). As the story progresses through the seasons, solved mysteries of seasons past lead to even bigger unknowns as the characters and audience are connecting leads to a bigger threat to the overall picture, all still relying heavily on the 1980s itself as a plot device. The final fifth season of the show is

slated to be released in the fall of 2025, nearly a decade after the show's initial release (Alexander, 2024).

Since its release in 2016, *Stranger Things* has won 12 primetime Emmys (Romano, 2023) and is categorized by modern audiences as one of the top television series of all time (IMDb, n.d.). With ratings like 8.7 out of 10 on IMDB (IMDb, n.d.) and a 91% on Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.), the show has since acclaimed a cult-like following that has initiated the rise of 80s-based nostalgia throughout audiences of all ages. *Stranger Things* reminded audiences of everything they loved from the 1980s, which influenced this trend of bringing as much of the 80s culture back to modern times as possible, sparking an entire nostalgia-based movement (Gonzalez, 2022). *Stranger Things* alone is credited for the upheaval of 80s-based trends in movies and television, essentially revolutionizing a new industry of creators to buy in to the marketability of nostalgia; promoting fashion and music of the decade as well as revitalizing technology of times past for the sake of appealing to the concept of retro-marketing (Ross, 2021; Ortega, 2022).

Literature Review

Post-Postmodernism and Pastiche

For the sake of understanding nostalgic media responses and their connection to audience groups, the current study's research uses post-postmodernism, a developing theory that is definitive for our current state of media understanding as a contemporary society. While some modern texts label post-postmodernism as "metamodernism" (Rustad, 2024), for the sake of clarity, this study will solely use the term 'post-postmodernism.'

The concepts of the modernism hierarchy are quite simple in comparison: where modernism might focus on sincerity, postmodernism would in turn focus on irony in comparison,

thus leaving post-postmodernism to focus on sincerity in the way that it challenges irony (Cantone et al., 2020). To understand the 'post' in post-postmodernism, there must be a definition of exactly what postmodernism is in relation to media, given that the implication of the 'post' is derivative of preconceived knowledge (Barr, 2006; Çolak, 2021; Foster, 1983).

Postmodernism is a direct response and antithesis of modernism defined as "an approach that is the sum of certain breaking moments occurring in the historical development of the western societies," (Çolak, 2021, p. 262). This theory then rejects any utopia, goal, meaning or uniqueness; meaning time does not move forward and rather has no base message, instead assuring that pastiche, parody and irony can be the only concepts in question (Çolak, 2021). With this way of thinking, the postmodernist strategy then becomes clear: "to deconstruct modernism not in order to seal it in its own image but in order to open it, to rewrite it" (Foster, 1983, p. xi). Thus, post-postmodernism is considered the label of the contemporary zeitgeist that is characterized by three major features: enthusiasm, engagement and sincerity (Cantone et al., 2020). Beginning roughly in the 1970s, postmodern culture has run rampant throughout our media ideologies up until about the past decade, where true post-postmodern ideologies have started to take form. Even though the ideologies of postmodernism continue to dictate many of our behaviors and strategies, the post-postmodern zeitgeist is creating a new genre of nostalgia that is becoming regenerative and aspiring for change. Where postmodernism emphasizes "social and institutional innovations" instead of "technological innovations," post-postmodernism can't exist independently of ongoing technological innovations (Barr, 2006, p. 169).

The comparison between these two ideological ways of thinking can also help in understanding responses to nostalgic based media from audiences of varying backgrounds given that their understanding and relations to media seem to be different (Holbrook, 1993; Jones,

2023; Kalinina, 2016b). Though, focusing solely on post-postmodernism seems to create this layer of understanding for both ways of thinking, truly having a full circle moment of coming back to the roots of modernism and combating it through the lens of postmodernism. In a way, there is a level of irony that is held over the idea of using post-postmodernism in relation to the feeling of nostalgia, given that the theory itself is based on comparing theories of the past for the sake of finding a common ground. Using this theory in this kind of research is also important because it draws on the specificity of the human individual experience, which can be universal to differing groups of individuals despite any preconceived differences they might have (Baya, 2013; Bolin, 2014; Holbrook, 1993). This relies well in the thought process of nostalgia-based media being something that a collective can bond over, whether they fully have any shared experiences for the time or place that they are having the nostalgia incited over.

Post-Postmodernism

Despite post-postmodernism still being relatively new, research has applied many analyses of the theory in reference to media (Kellner, 1999; Kowalik, 2023; Soukup, 2010). In a study of audiences and source material, Kowalik (2023) takes four novels by four different authors and uses a comparison of postmodern and post-postmodern viewpoints to analyze what message the text is displaying and how proverbial audiences would react to such information. By using both postmodernism and post-postmodernism within the same study, Kowalik (2023) emphasizes the fact that post-postmodernism cannot function without postmodernism, thus creating a codependence between the two. The researcher states the “unresolvable tension” between postmodernism and post-postmodernism is based on not only the “blurred lines” between experiment and realism, but the general co-dependence that the two theories have to one another (Kowalik, 2023, p. 3). This tension lends itself to emphasizing the neoliberal turn of

modern media and how audiences may react in accordance to both theories. This neoliberal turn is based on modern media straying away from "late capitalist manipulation and postmodern irony" (Kowalik, 2023, p. 4) and instead enables a relationship between reader and author that goes beyond the limitations of the text itself. This study also brings light to the work of Turner (2019) and the viewpoint of U.S. culture in relation to the post-postmodern turn of media, citing concern with the specific emphasis placed in post-postmodern ideology. Turner (2019) describes an insecurity that "the conscious counterfeit might become a dominant American mode" due to the referenced "duplicated and second-hand nature of American culture" (Turner 2019, pp. 3, 7). Therefore, post-postmodernism is guilty of this second-hand nature by design due to the reliance it has upon postmodern irony despite the greater emphasis on post-postmodern sincerity (Kowalik, 2023).

Another study by Kellner (1999) on *The X-Files* series also provides an in-depth elaboration of post-postmodernism, and its relation to television audiences. Within this study, Kellner (1999) specifically focuses on television aesthetics and how *The X-Files* has combated postmodern irony by invoking post-postmodern sincerity within audiences and how they critically engage with media, thus challenging the historical form of television as a medium. It is also argued that the series itself has paved the way within contemporary television as one of the first post-postmodern series by straying away from common aesthetic strategies and its "quest for truth on behalf of its protagonists, its seriousness, and its lack of the sort of postmodern cynicism, irony, and play with generic codes characteristic[s]" that most contemporary series do (Kellner, 1999, p. 164). Combating these aesthetic strategies then allows audiences to challenge the established institutions, authorities, and practices that television has taught its viewers, creating instead an emphasis on "popular paranoia" (Kellner, 1999, p. 169). Popular paranoia,

and the use of postmodern sublime and allegory, then provides a method of representing the unrepresentable, which allows audiences then to question any dominant societal values and institutions to develop critical consciousness. Therefore, any series which uses post-postmodern culture in relation to the "novel and complex dynamics of the present era" through new representational and aesthetic strategies then truly depicts the contemporary moment (Kellner, 1999, p. 174).

Pastiche

One of the most prolific practices within postmodern theory in relation to nostalgia is the concept of pastiche (Davis, 1977; Fiske, 1991; Foster, 1983; Jameson, 1983). Introduced by Fredric Jameson as the concept of a "blank parody", defined similarly to parody in which it is a stylistic imitation, though it completely lacks the "satirical impulse" that otherwise categorizes parody as mocking (Jameson, 1983, p. 114). Since that initial definition, pastiche is now characterized as borrowing, copying, or rendering; an imitation that pays homage to previous works in a way that brings them forward into contemporary concepts (Cantone et al., 2020). Though similar, it is important to understand the difference between pastiche and parody. Jameson emphasizes that this difference is related to our current times in how they devalue parody to pastiche (Jameson, 1983). In other words, wherever it is pastiche might appear, parody has then essentially become impossible (Çolak, 2021). Nostalgia and pastiche both have been widely mobilized by Western contemporaries through the likes of television, film, advertising and photography industries (Baya, 2013; Cantone et al., 2020; Holbrook, 1993; Kozík et al., 2015).

Pastiche has also lended itself to many media studies within the past decade, becoming a usual companion when discussing audiences and post-postmodernism (Çolak, 2021; Harry,

2008; Rustad, 2024; Schmickrath, 2021; Soukup, 2010). Pastiche in postmodernity is broadly referred to as an open ended and patch-worked amalgamation of ideas, thus making any understanding be deemed extremely elastic (Goulding, 2000; Rosenau, 1992). Essentially postmodern and post-postmodern ideas of pastiche are still regarded as an imitation, though it is now becoming less clear exactly where the source of the pastiche is, and the actual purpose of this type of imitation (Cantone et al., 2020). Like the relationship between postmodernism and post-postmodernism, pastiche also has a co-dependence with parody and the extent in which they relate to one another.

Fiske (1991) follows the relationship between television and pastiche, and how the two concepts manage to cohabitate with one another. This emphasis on dependence argues that pastiche is essentially the infrastructural form of television, given that it is "suited to the culture of the fragment," (Fiske, 1991, p. 58). Television then brings together pre-established contextual fragments, styles, and influences, thus adequately affirming its position as an all-inclusive pastiche in and of itself (Fiske, 1991).

Pastiche as a concept seems to be widely studied as a storytelling form but lacks a "significant exploration as a television narrative device" (Harry, 2008, p. 235). Harry (2008) explores Fiske's (1991) logic through a study of episodes from the television series *Cheaters* by analyzing the genre-based differences of pastiche and parody within television genres. By analyzing television media this way, it clarifies how standardized genres, visual imagery, and storytelling devices are collectively categorized as either a pastiche or a parody (Harry, 2008). By focusing on television as an "increasingly fragmented commercial entertainment system," audiences can understand the importance of pastiche as a key element within a postmodern

zeitgeist by recognizing how fundamental a "genre-in-dominance' is in a political economy (Harry, 2008, p. 244).

Pastiche subsequently ties directly into how nostalgia and history are delivered to audiences through visual media and whether that history is a true reflection of times past. These concepts are examined thoroughly in a study by Schmickrath (2021) over the *Back to the Future* franchise and its proposed pastiche of the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause.* Many pieces of media that are intended to portray a time-period that has passed within recent history tend to subvert the overall zeitgeist of that time in favor of providing a more palatable and collective memory, and according to Schmickrath (2021), the *Back to the Future* franchise is no exception, especially in relation to the consumerist agenda that it promotes. This detail of consumerism is not only linked to direct monetary products depicted in the films, but also the sake of nostalgic commodification by sampling from *Rebel Without a Cause* to invoke a specific association with 1950s United States culture (Schmickrath, 2021). Schmickrath then argues that repurposing for the consumerist agenda, regardless of the postmodern nature of borrowing, is then a "negative effect pastiche," which arrives in media when parody "is exhausted to the point that there is no longer a norm or one truth related to modernism's contestation of society through unique voices [and] irrespective of the art form," thus indicating the desire to create only for the nostalgic gratification it provides (Schmickrath, 2021, p. 837).

Both post-postmodernism and pastiche as theories rely heavily on intertextuality, which is especially indicative in relation to television. Soukup (2010) emphasizes this relationship through a study of the VH1 television show *I Love the 80s* and its role in creating an intertextual pastiche through a post-postmodern lens. As exemplified in the study by Schmickrath (2021), when combining historical elements into your media, it is seen as a common pastiche practice to

create a commodification of the past rather than expressing any overt truth, thus creating a concept coined by Soukup known as “decade-ization” (Soukup, 2010, p. 88). This concept relies heavily on public memory of a time rather than proper narrative, which then periodizes these memories and events in a way that evokes a vague implication of the identity of the given time period (Soukup, 2010). Given the episodic ability of summarizing years of a decade, *I Love the 80s* works best within the mediated space of television, which aids in the assertion that postmodern history is best exemplified through visual media (Soukup, 2010). Rather than narratives, moral or not, emphasizing “shared cultural values and commitments,” postmodern history then instead utilizes “moral detachment and ironic irreverence,” which in turn defies any narrative order by leaning into a playful montage of the decade (Soukup, 2010, pp. 87-88). This concept promoted by Soukup is interesting because it emphasizes the active participation needed by audiences to provide any meaning to the media texts, given that this nonlinear collage of iconography is ambiguous in how it calls upon pop culture memories (Soukup, 2010). Thus, historic pleasure is born, a concept derived of the hyperreal pastiches developed when audiences seek a sense of identity within the content they consume creating a communal connection through public memory without the complexity and depth of cultural meaning; “history without moral understanding or a pursuit of knowledge,” (Soukup, 2010, p. 91).

In a post-postmodern zeitgeist, pastiche is no longer considered a “blank-parody” (Jameson, 1983) and instead is loaded with emotion that is usually indicative of genre commodification (Blythe & Wright, 2006; Mazzarotto, 2015; Rustad, 2024). By looking at pastiche as a critical mode that signifies fragments of stories past for the sake of familiarity (Williams, 2021), post-postmodern creators then create pastiche scenarios that rely heavily on emotion (Blythe & Wright, 2006). For pastiche to be effective in a contemporary sense, it must

rely on emotion for the sake of invoking nostalgia (Rustad, 2024). By relying on these emotions for pastiche, media texts then become a “productive parody”, which recontextualizes the past by subverting and confirming the power of representation in history (Mazzarotto, 2015, p. 67). Therefore, in order for pastiche to be looked upon through a post-postmodern lens, there must be some connection to audiences’ subconscious expectations of the past, driving home any nostalgia or familiarity possible (Kemp, 2002; Williams, 2021)

Nostalgia

The concept of nostalgia was first introduced in the seventeenth century as a disease recognized in young Swiss mercenaries when they were stationed away from home (Davis, 1977; Legg, 2004). Coined by Swiss physician Johnannes Hofer, the term itself is derivative of the Greek terms nostos and algai, translating literally as a painful condition; a painful longing to return home. The term itself has changed connotations many times since the seventeenth century and has since been demilitarized and non-medicalized, though one thing remains the same: the material of nostalgic experience is based solely in the past (Davis, 1977).

The definition most used with nostalgia as a concept was introduced by professor Fred Davis in the late seventies, following what he coined as the modern ‘nostalgia wave’ that media audiences were experiencing as technology continued to evolve (Davis, 1977, pp. 417, 420). This wave of nostalgia is indicative of pandering to times past by focusing on certain putative features of a formative period, reconstructing the past in a way that evokes a positive recollection that can be seen as more superior or fathomable than what allegedly exists today (Davis, 1977). Nostalgia then has become “the means for holding onto and reaffirming identities which had been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times,” (Davis, 1977, p. 422), relying solely on the past as a

comfort for the present. Memory is also highly indicative of how nostalgia manifests within audiences, which can heavily challenge any dominant interpretations of the past (Legg, 2004). Nostalgia has, and always will be, a general response to fear and discontent within a modern world. When modern hardships are compared to past happiness and content, there will always be a way to deflect and find a psychological haven in something more comfortable (Davis, 1977).

As an experience within media, nostalgia is organized between two categories: media nostalgia and mediated nostalgia (Bolin, 2014). While media nostalgia is nostalgia evoked by media and media formats, mediated nostalgia is a type of nostalgic practice in which media serves to mediate experiences of the past whether they are media related or not (Bolin, 2014; Kalinina, 2016). Therefore, visual mediums such as television and film can satisfy both nostalgia types by catering to audience interests (Fiske, 1991; Kalinina, 2016). Mediated nostalgic narratives of the past then play into audiences' emotional longing for times gone (or never experienced) by creating a more appealing notion of the past that aids in shaping individual and collective identities (Kalinina, 2016). Nostalgia can be either voluntary or involuntary, implying that it is not an imminent, pre-existing state but rather is a "response to a temporal and spatial displacement," (Kalinina, 2016, p. 5329). Therefore, nostalgia is instead an act of interpretation, which is completely subjective and indicative of an individual's experience.

Menke (2017) focused on nostalgia, and its evolution into a coping mechanism for modern audiences. The study establishes that nostalgia as a term has been conceptualized into something far broader than what it was originally defined as, changing only from a longing for a place, and instead broadened into a longing for a specific time that has been inferred to be lost and now needs to be constructed to contrast the present. At its core, nostalgia has always been based on the notion of change; effectively linking the times before and after a perceived shift in

time that audiences are drawn to. Despite the times of the past not literally being superior, there is a bias in memory amongst individuals by remembering positive aspects of change versus anything negative (Menke, 2017). Mediated communication is credited for putting nostalgia in the forefront of everyday life, thus emphasizing the comfort nostalgia can provide by adding a "wistful flavor" to memories of a time past (Menke, 2017, pp. 627, 630). Subjects of this study were asked to rank their nostalgic longing on a set of scales for the purpose of determining if nostalgia could be seen as psychologically stabilizing amongst various groups, with results implicating that nostalgia proneness is based upon frequency and relevancy of one's nostalgic engagements (Menke, 2017). This study shows that as media progresses, audiences who feel as if they are forced into adapting to new media societies will then use media nostalgia as a method of coping with any inference of change (Menke, 2017).

Shaw (2021) exemplifies the connected nature of nostalgia and television, reminding audiences that television is indicative of both individual and collective memory. However, television's ability to mark a collective experience is now evolving within a post-pandemic and ever technologically advancing society, complicating any domestic associations, thus fracturing nostalgia as an emotional process for audiences and their methods of viewing specific programming (Shaw, 2021). Shaw (2021) emphasizes the increased prevalence of nostalgic themes within youth and young adult culture due to the influx of diversifying media technologies, which enabled accessibility of past media to engage in. It is then argued whether this new mediated version of pastness in these young audiences are creating a loss of true historical understanding, or is instead a "problematic sign of rampant neoliberalism," (Shaw, 2021, p. 289). In turn, both backwards-focused nostalgia and aesthetic nostalgia seem to be what is providing more of a forward-looking approach that combats the neoliberal ideology by using

more creative re-appropriation in modern, nostalgia-based television programs (Shaw, 2021). Overall, the important takeaway from this article is understanding that structures of meaning regarding the past are now more multifaceted than ever and instead offer more creative approaches to past representations that are regarded as “cool” within popular retro culture (Shaw, 2021, p. 288).

Jones (2023) exemplifies the codependent relationship between television and fandom and how they have been intertwined with nostalgia. By surveying audiences of television revivals, this study details the clear relationship between nostalgia and the life course of a fandom through revivals, reboots, and remakes (Jones, 2023). Jones (2023) reiterates that audiences and the fandoms they facilitate are the purpose in which works of media are created and recreated for in the first place, emphasizing that without these audiences there would be no reason to incite nostalgia. Fandom, much like nostalgia, relies on collective memory to function, relying heavily on an individual's identity and how they engage with the media they consume (Jones, 2023). Jones’ (2023) study surveyed different audience reactions to recent revivals of popular sci-fi television series’ and how their nostalgia was either enhanced or subdued by the work. Conclusions from the study showed that audiences were aware of the nostalgia pandering that the creators were inciting by initiating a revival of content, however audiences were more inclined to have that nostalgia counteracted by something new and creative (Jones, 2023). Therefore, nostalgia can’t be understated as a simple marketing tool and instead is an integral part of a fandom's identity (Jones, 2023).

As introduced by Davis (1977), the nostalgia wave and subsequent nostalgia boom of the late 70s developed nostalgia as a cultural style of the burgeoning zeitgeist model at the end of the 20th century. Grainge (2000) uses this ideology to focus on the specific nostalgic styles of

American culture through a study of nostalgic moods and modes of retro United States. Grainge (2000) asserts that the United States as a country and a culture becomes drawn to recent history as a method of detaching from any social or political discomfort of the present; finding solace in reminiscing of the golden age or greatest hits of years past that, in comparison, outshine modern attitudes. While the production of nostalgia seemingly grows alongside present unrest, it cannot be predominantly associated with loss and malice due to the increased commodification and aestheticization used to sell these nostalgic modes as exciting (Grainge, 2000). Though these modes of nostalgia are not generated by moods of nostalgia, and vice versa. Instead, the nostalgia mode represents a stylized version of the past despite the current understanding of the past already becoming estranged (Grainge, 2000). The aestheticization of nostalgia has allowed for a new kind of engagement of the past from U.S. audiences, thus disjoining nostalgia from any specific meaning located in the past (Grainge, 2000). Therefore, "Retro America" no longer needs to describe a culture in crisis, but instead "suggest a moment distinguished by its re-evaluation and re-presentation of the forms, contexts, and values of the past," (Grainge, 2000, p. 33).

As streaming services solidify themselves as the United States' most-watched media platforms (Wile, 2023), a new exploration of nostalgia and nostalgic-based media has begun. Jenner's (2021) study focuses on nostalgia's tendency to depoliticize the past through Netflix's use of nostalgia as textual politics within a transnational streaming market. Jenner raises the question "To what extent can engagement with the past be radical rather than using regressive, narcissistic nostalgia as a mode of storytelling?", which emphasizes the assumption that new content will employ strategies of nostalgia that devalue engagement with history and reframes contemporary understandings (Jenner, 2021, p. 302). Through compared analysis of Netflix

originals such as *The Crown* or *Bridgerton*, Jenner (2021) implicates that nostalgia on Netflix relies on complicated, intertextual references to pop culture of the past rather than the true past itself. This reframing of the past with nostalgia is then categorized under "narcissistic nostalgia", a concept that is said to develop individualized pasts defined by idealized versions of history (Jenner, 2021, p. 303). Given the apolitical lens adopted for the sake of appealing to transnationalism, Jenner (2021) asserts that nostalgia functions differently on Netflix's platform by avoiding history as a political narrative and instead using it as an aesthetic representation.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore Netflix's *Stranger Things* and how the content within the series is used to specifically encourage nostalgia through methods of pastiche.

- How is nostalgia represented in *Stranger Things*?
- How do characters engage with and represent nostalgia within *Stranger Things*?
- How does the visual pastiche of the 1980s evolve over the course of *Stranger Things*?

Methodology

This study explored the visual representations of nostalgia and pastiche through a visual textual analysis of the series *Stranger Things*. Visual analyses "enhance the richness of data by discovering additional layers of meaning, adding validity and depth, and creating knowledge," which adds to traditional methods by capturing a different kind of data with more detail in comparison to verbal and written methods (Glaw et al., 2017, p. 1). Visual analyses also address the cultural significance of visual data by investigating a text's aesthetic qualities and how they are represented without any additional input from other qualitative measures (Cardwell, 2006; Knoblauch et al., 2008).

This study utilized a visual discourse analysis method based partially on Ben-David et al. (2024) by adapting the visual-verbal video analysis framework (VVVA) developed by Fazeli et al. (2023). This study will be adapting the visual-verbal video analysis framework (VVVA) developed by Fazeli et al. (2023) for the sake of focusing on a visual textual analysis. The VVVA provided a qualitative framework for analyzing multiple facets of different visual content by identifying the relationships between verbal and visual data of a given text (Fazeli et al., 2023).

There are six steps that are outlined within the VVVA method: "(1) Collecting, organizing, and reviewing data; (2) Transcribing verbal data; (3) Choosing units of analysis; (4) Extracting and coding data; (5) Organizing, describing and interpreting extracted data; and (6) Reporting findings" (Fazeli et al., 2023, pp. 4–5). Because this research focused exclusively on the visual aspects of *Stranger Things*, step two was omitted. However, the remaining steps provided a flexible structure for collecting and interpreting visual information relevant to nostalgia and pastiche.

Collecting, Organizing, and Reviewing Data

Data were collected on the Netflix streaming platform by viewing the complete released series[1]. By following a thematic analysis, pastiche was organized in the following categories: spaces, objects, clothing, and music. Each episode of each season was systematically analyzed according to these categories to identify recurring visual motifs and nostalgic signifiers. While not visual, music is still categorized with the other forms of visual pastiche due to the effect it has upon the meaning, significance, and perceived emotion of a visual scene (Parke et al., 2007).

[1] Given the November 2025 release date for season 5, this study will solely focus on seasons 1-4.

Notes for each episode were recorded using a data collection sheet (see Appendix A), which ensured consistency and detail across all observations.

Choosing Units of Analysis

Each episode functioned as an individual unit of analysis that contributed to an overall representation of each season, given the varying episode amounts and episode minute average (34 episodes total and more than 35 hours of content) (Netflix, n.d.).

Extracting and Coding Data

By examining the results organized with the episode note sheet, specific results of visual pastiche were organized by frequency and category to then analyze the type of nostalgia that is evoked. Coding was conducted repeatedly, requiring multiple viewings of particular episodes or scenes to ensure accuracy and completeness. This process allowed for the identification of patterns in nostalgic representation across the series.

Across the full dataset, more than 60 hours of dedicated coding and rewatching were completed. Scenes were repeatedly paused, replayed, and cross-referenced with earlier notes to confirm consistency and refine category placement. This process allowed for precise identification of visual patterns, emerging themes, and the evolution of nostalgic representation throughout the series. Ultimately, the depth of analysis ensured that the final coded results captured both the overt and nuanced ways Stranger Things employs visual pastiche to evoke nostalgia.

Organizing, Describing, and Interpreting Extracted Data

Once all data were collected and categorized, findings were synthesized into a comprehensive consensus document. This document highlighted recurring visual themes, patterns, and symbols tied to 1980s nostalgia. Through this synthesis, connections between pastiche, aesthetic representation, and audience perception were identified and compared across seasons (Fazeli et al., 2023).

Reporting Findings

The results were presented through four major thematic categories derived from the analysis: popular culture references, material culture, visual representations of characters, and the evolution of nostalgia across seasons. These categories collectively revealed how Stranger Things constructs nostalgia through visual means and how these representations evolve throughout the series. The final findings provided a comprehensive understanding of how visual pastiche functions as both aesthetic homage and cultural commentary, aligning with the of this research for future publication (Fazeli et al., 2023).

Results and Discussion

This study ultimately seeks to understand how *Stranger Things* functions as a visual text that both reproduces and reshapes cultural memory of the 1980s. The findings of this study came from a visual textual analysis using a modified visual-verbal video analysis (VVVA) framework developed by Fazeli et al. (2023). While the method typically examines both verbal and visual material, it was adapted here to focus only on the visual aspects of *Stranger Things*, highlighting the cultural and aesthetic markers that represent the series. The results are presented across four main categories: (1) references to 1980s popular culture, including film, television, and music;

(2) material culture, such as decor, consumer goods, and technologies indicative of the 1980s; (3) visual representations of characters, with attention to makeup, costuming, and archetypal cues; and (4) the evolution of nostalgia across seasons, showing how the series shifts from subtle representations to more saturated displays. The purpose is to not only identify what the series references but explore how those references operate: as emotional tools, means of commodification, and as expressions of post-postmodern sincerity. In doing so, the study situates *Stranger Things* within a larger cultural conversation about nostalgia's evolving role within contemporary media and how the past is reconstructed, marketed, and re-experienced by audiences who may never have lived it firsthand.

80s Culture References

Film and Television

This section addresses the first research question: How is nostalgia represented within *Stranger Things*? One of the most prominent ways *Stranger Things* invokes nostalgia is through its deliberate use of 80s film and television references. The series draws heavily on visual motifs from classics of the decade to shape its narrative. It is no secret that series creators Matt and Ross Duffer drew inspiration from a variety of influences including Stephen King, John Carpenter, and Steven Spielberg (Leon, 2016). These influences add to the pastiches within their work by borrowing character types and replicating iconic visual cues that have become synonymous with 1980s media (Barr, 2006; Çolak, 2021). In doing so, *Stranger Things* constructs a world that feels both new and familiar, creating an affectionate reassembly of cinematic memory (Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

This nostalgic construction is most clearly visible through direct cinematic parallels. The main group of kids navigating the mystery of their small town strongly references the 1986 film *Stand By Me*. The coming-of-age story within *Stand By Me* (1986) is a method of nostalgia within itself, being a film about the 1950s that was created in the 1980s (Lang, 2016). In both *Stranger Things* and *Stand By Me* the child protagonists are small-town boys at a transitional age, navigating an uneasy balance of carefree youth and the reality of their morality.The visual reference of Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Eleven walking along the train tracks while searching for Will is a direct connection to a similar, iconic scene within *Stand By Me* (Howie, 2024)(see Figure 1). Both groups of friends face threats from bullies armed with switchblades, further emphasizing their vulnerability. Season 1 Episode 4 is titled “The Body”, which directly references the name of the Stephen King novella that inspired *Stand By Me* (Lang, 2016).

Figure 1

Train Track Comparison

Note. A visual comparison of the influence of *Stand By Me* (1986) on Season 1 of *Stranger Things* (Reiner, 1986; The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Building on this foundation, *Stranger Things* also borrows heavily from the 1982 film *E.T.*, both in character design and narrative structure. Characters like Jonathan, Will, and Holly have costumes that mirror those of *E.T.'s* protagonists Micheal, Elliot, and Gertie. Narratively, the Byers family dynamic closely resembles that of Elliot's, complete with a divorced mother

and two brothers navigating an absent father figure (Breier, 2022). Season 1 Episode 1 opens the series with the boys playing Dungeons & Dragons while eating pizza; a direct nod to the scene where Elliot's older brother Micheal does the same. The scene later in the episode where Will runs to the shed is a direct parallel to the one in the film (Sepinwall, 2016). Several cues within *Stranger Things* references the film, including subtle props such as an *E.T.* lunchbox or Dustin's E.T. doll within his bedroom. Season 1 Episode 2 echoes Elliot's introduction of E.T. to normal life through Mike's bonding with Eleven, while Season 1 Episode 4 references Gertie dressing up E.T. during Eleven's makeover. The most iconic visual cue comes from Season 1 Episode 7 where the children's bike chase sequence with the Hawkins Lab agents purposefully references E.T. 's iconic escape scene (See Figure 2) (The Duffer Brothers, 2016b).

Figure 2

Bike Riding Youth

Note. A visual comparison of the iconic bike riding sequence from *E.T.* and the many bike riding sequences withing Season 1 of Stranger Things (Spielberg, 1982; The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Stranger Things also draws substantial inspiration from the 1985 film *The Goonies*, particularly in the archetypal cues. The film's ensemble of kids and teenagers find clear

counterparts in the characters from Hawkins: traces of Mikey, Chunk, Mouth and Data are seen clearly through the characterizations of Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will (Hedash, 2021). Beyond characters, visual narrative echoes are also evident, such as the children exploring the Upside Down tunnels in Season 2 Episode 9, which mirrors the *Goonies'* cave explorations in search of One-Eyed Willy's pirate ship, maintaining the sense of discovery, danger, and camaraderie. By interweaving these parallels throughout the series, the Duffers turn cinematic memory into a collective one, layering recognizable imagery into something that simultaneously feels nostalgic and new.

As the series progresses, these connections grow bolder, blending subtle visual nods with explicit recreations. These connections go beyond subtle nods; they are explicit recreations for the sake of reference (Jameson, 1983). The most direct example is the Halloween sequence in Season 2, Episode 2, where the central group of boys dressed as the characters from *Ghostbusters*, directly referencing the 1984 film (see Figure 3). This scene places the characters within a familiar cultural context, helping the viewers connect to the period and create a reaction through instant recognition (Cantone et al., 2020). Other direct references are made in the form of offhand cameos of pop culture, effectively integrating them into the world of the series to create an authentic 80s atmosphere. In Season 3, the characters go to a screening of *Back To The Future* (1985), a sequence that not only references one of the most iconic films of the decade but also placing the fictional town of Hawkins in the same cultural universe as its audience (Seely-Katz, 2021). In Season 2, Billy Hargrove is seen watching MTV, a cultural phenomenon that shaped the youth identity of the decade (Rabey, 2011). Additionally, casual references to shows of the time such as *Miami Vice* (1984) and *Cheers* (1982) add to the deliberate immersion of 80s media culture. These moments range from well-known blockbusters to deep-cut nods that could

be niche even to those who were alive during the decade. Scenes such as these serve as a nostalgic shorthand, allowing audiences to access collective memories of the 1980s, while for younger viewers, they are introduced to the era in a mediated and stylized way (Rustad, 2024).

Figure 3

Core Cast as the Ghostbusters

Note. Dustin, Mike, Lucas, and Will dressed as the characters from *Ghostbusters* (1984) in Season 2 (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Transitioning from television and film references to the people who once embodies them, *Stranger Things* reinforces its nostalgia strategy through carefully chosen casting. These actors serve as living artifacts of 1980s cinema, connecting the show's fictional world to real-world cultural memory. Winona Ryder's role as Joyce Byers is perhaps the most iconic (see Figure 4). Ryder became well-known for films like *Beetlejuice* (1988) and *Heathers* (1989), which established her as a defining face of the decade (Bender, 2024). Her casting resonates beyond

playing Joyce, showcasing the evolution of her work from being a teen in the 80s to playing a mom of teens set in the 80s.

Figure 4

Winona Ryder: 1980s to Now

Note. Winona Ryder's characters; Heather Chandler in *Heathers* (1989) and Joyce Byers in *Stranger Things* (Lehmann, 1989; The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Sean Astin's appearance as Bob Newby in Season 2 furthers this nostalgic layering. Known for his role as Mikey Walsh in *The Goonies* (1985), the earlier mentioned inspiration and namesake for the show's own Mike Wheeler (Hedash, 2021), Astin's presence carries the memory of youthful adventure into adulthood. In *Stranger Things*, Bob directly contrasts Mikey: he is a kindhearted, awkward adult who longs for the simple joys in life (see Figure 5). The difference between his iconic role as the adventurous Mikey and the suburban Bob reinforces the

series' nostalgic approach through a cultural reference while also recognizing the passage of time for both the actor and the audience: a symbolic reflection of what happens when 1980s innocence grows up.

Figure 5

Sean Astin: 1980s to Now

Note. Sean Astin's characters; Mikey Walsh in *The Goonies* (1985) and Bob Newby in *Stranger Things* (Donner, 1985; The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Similarly in Season 4, Rober Englund's performance as Victor Creel draws directly on his 1980s ties to horror cinema, particularly his iconic role as Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Englund's legacy from playing Freddy Krueger is tied closely to the horror boom of the decade (Drapkin-Grossi, 2023). By casting Englund as a tormented psychiatric

patient connected to the supernatural mysteries in Hawkins, the series draws a direct line between popular horror tropes of the 1980s and the renewed interest of those aesthetics today, allowing Englund to explore a new character dynamic while also being a cultural reference himself (see Figure 6). These casting choices work as built-in intertextual signals, encouraging audiences to recall earlier cultural cues and reinforcing the series' position as a collage of 1980s media (Çolak, 2021; Barr, 2006).

Figure 6

Robert Englund: 1980s to Now

Note. Robert Englund's characters; Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and Victor Creel in *Stranger Things* (Craven, 1984; The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

All these strategies function as what Jameson (1983) describes as pastiche, a blank imitation without parody's satirical intent. Rather than mocking or critiquing the past, *Stranger*

Things presents 1980s culture as a sincere aesthetic choice (Cantone et al., 2020; Rustad, 2024). Its references to films, television, and actors are not meant to challenge the source material but instead reframe it as a nostalgic point for audiences. In this way, nostalgia acts to build collective memory. For older viewers, recognition of these allusions could produce a sense of return to a formative cultural time, affirming how popular culture has shaped their personal histories. Seeing familiar cultural texts reimagined in a modern series can create a feeling of deja vu, given they are experiencing the past and present almost simultaneously (Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

For younger audiences, however, the experience is quite different. Lacking the direct memory of the decade and ties to the cultural signifiers, these viewers see the decade as a constructed idea instead. The references are still understood, but they act less like genuine memories and more like lessons in culture. This is what Orazi and van Laer (2022, para. 5) call "pseudo-nostalgia", that yearning for a bygone era that an individual never personally lived but instead has romanticized through media representations. *Stranger Things* offers a stylized version of the past that feels emotionally significant even for those experiencing it for the first time. The decade shifts away from real experiences and instead becomes an idealized cultural narrative, a pseudo highlight reel, which younger audiences can embrace as part of their own shared memory with each other (Cantone et al., 2020; Rustad, 2024).

Thus, the cultural references in *Stranger Things* work on multiple levels simultaneously. For those who lived through the 1980s, these references serve as authentic callbacks that affirm their own personal memories. For those who did not, they create a mediated cultural experience, a shared framework through which the 1980s can be enjoyed as both entertainment and identity. This duality highlights how pastiche is used as a post-postmodern strategy, allowing cultural moments to hold different meanings for different audiences while still having a genuine

emotional connection with nostalgia (Barr, 2006; Çolak, 2021; Cantone et al., 2020). Ultimately, the series' use of pastiche shows how collective memory is formed not just from lived experiences, but also from the cultural recycling of the past within media.

Music

Another central way *Stranger Things* builds upon its 1980s aesthetic is through its deliberate use of popular music of the decade. The soundtrack serves not only to create atmosphere, but also as an important cultural anchor, layering familiar songs into key scenes that reinforces authenticity and enhances any emotional impact (Travers, 2024). These choices are not just for background ambiance, instead they are carefully selected cultural pieces that root the series into the auditory landscape of the 1980s. Music, as both narrative and emotional shorthand, allows the series to make nostalgia something that can be heard as much as seen (Cantone et al., 2020; Rustad, 2024).

From the start, Season 1 establishes music as an essential marker of the period. One of the earliest examples is The Clash's *Should I Stay or Should I Go* (1982), which became a recurring song associated with Will Byers. The song first plays on a cassette tape in his brother's room and later acts as a symbolic signal of his presence in the Upside Down. The repeated use of this track shows how a single musical reference can act as both a cultural marker and storytelling device, allowing the first season to align with the soundscape of the early 1980s (Orazi & van Laer, 2022). Other songs such as Joy Division's *Atmosphere* (1980) and Toto's *Africa* (1982) integrate into the season's sound design to remind viewers of the cultural environment in which the story takes place (Bolin, 2014). These early inclusions lay the groundwork for how *Stranger Things* will continue to use music as both a tool of immersion and emotional connection.

As the series moves into Season 2, the soundtrack evolves to include both diegetic and non-diegetic music, immersing audiences even deeper into the decade. A standout moment happens during the Snow Ball dance scene in the season finale, where Cyndi Lauper's *Time After Time* (1983) plays as Mike and Eleven share their first dance together. The track symbolizes both the innocence of young love while also resonating with older viewers who experienced the song from its original release (Cantone et al., 2020). Similarly, the Police's *Every Breath You Take* (1983) playing during the closing scene and credits reinforces the series' usual nostalgic sentiment even within supernatural scenes. Other examples include songs like the Scorpions' *Rock You Like A Hurricane* (1984) or *The Ghost In You* (1984) by The Psychedelic Furs, both having released in the season's year of continuity, 1984. These musical choices emphasize the series' attempt to recreate the authentic sound of the 1980s and create more of a nostalgic impact on audiences (Verdon, 2024; Travers, 2024).

Season 3 continues this approach with heavy emphasis on upbeat pop music that is stereotypical of the time, especially with the inclusion of bright, neon mall culture through the in-universe atmosphere of Starcourt Mall. Songs like Huey Lewis and The News' *Working For A Living* (1982) and Madonna's *Material Girl* (1984) capture the aspirational and consumer aspects of mid-80s economic culture, relating fashion, social life, and affluence with the economic boom of the decade (Anderson, 1997; Rustad, 2024). These music selections paired with neon visuals and almost stereotypical 80s fashion creates a stylized version of 80s consumerism (Çolak, 2021). This season has the largest selection of iconic 80s tracks within its soundtrack, playing purposefully off well-known hits in an attempt to resonate with a wide variety of audiences. Perhaps one of the most iconic inclusions of a musical reference in the series comes from Season 3 Episode 8 where characters Dustin and Suzie perform a duet of the

theme from the 1984 film *The NeverEnding Story*, epitomizing this balance of humor, affection, and sincerity, capturing the show's growing self-awareness of its own nostalgic appeal (Cantone et al., 2020). This season is treated as a visual and auditory centerpiece of the decade, with its soundtrack underscoring the bright, commodified version of nostalgia that the show increasingly embraces. By this point, *Stranger Things* is not just recreating the 1980s; it is performing it, inviting the audience to indulge in the joy of recreation.

By Season 4, music becomes more than just atmosphere, it becomes integral to the emotional stakes of the story. Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)* (1985) and Metallica's *Master of Puppets* (1986) represent the peak of *Stranger Things'* use of music as both a narrative device and a method of cultural revival. These songs carry emotional weight within the story: *Running Up That Hill* as Max Mayfield's lifeline against Vecna, and *Master of Puppets* as Eddie Munson's act of defiance and sacrifice (see Figure 7). Their inclusion not only drives the plot but also revitalizes the songs themselves, sending them back to global charts decades after their initial releases (Lipshutz, 2022; Tangcay, 2022). This revival represents how the series bridges generations: older audiences reencounter the songs through memory, while younger audiences discover them as if new. The show thus transforms nostalgic listening into shared cultural experience, using music to collapse the boundaries between past and present.

Figure 7

Music Influences in Max and Eddie

Note. Influential scenes that include music for the characters Max Mayfield and Eddie Munson in Season 4 (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Taken together, these music choices show the dual aspects of media nostalgia and mediated nostalgia (Bolin, 2014). For older audiences, the inclusion of artists from the decade evokes personal memories tied to the era, representing media nostalgia. For younger audiences who did not experience these songs when they first came out, the series creates mediated, "pseudo-nostalgia" (Orazi & van Laer, 2022). These viewers are encouraged to connect emotionally with a version of the past that they never have experienced, constructed through a carefully selected soundtrack. Both responses are valid and intentional, allowing the same piece of music to connect audiences across time through shared emotion. In this way, *Stranger Things*

shows just how music can act as both an authentic gateway to the past and an invitation for nostalgia, depending on the audience's perspective.

Research on music-evoked nostalgia explains why these soundtrack moments are so effective in *Stranger Things*. According to Sterenberg, Mahon, and Roth (2023), the four factors of song familiarity, enjoyment, emotional arousal, and autobiographical salience can predict how strongly a song evokes nostalgia for a listener. Autobiographical salience, which is the extent in which a song connects to a personal memory or significant experience, is considered the strongest predictor (Sterenberg, Mahon & Roth, 2023). When *Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)* becomes Max's lifeline, it is not just the song itself that matters, but rather how closely the lyrics also relate to the characters journey, a journey that perhaps older viewers may recognize from their own experiences in connection to the song. For younger viewers, the repeated use builds familiarity that evolves into emotional meaning (i.e. mediated nostalgia) (Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

Overall, the soundtrack of *Stranger Things* works not only as a tool for historical accuracy, but also as a cultural marker to connect past and present by using autobiographical salience and emotional arousal to intensify the nostalgic experience. Music serves as an authentic entry point for those revisiting their own memories and as an invitation for younger viewers to experience the 80s through a stylized perspective. Nostalgia itself is already a method for social connectedness, and music is one of the largest indicators of a shared experience (Sterenberg, Mahon & Roth, 2023).

In this context, the music in *Stranger Things* serves not only as a nod to the decade but also to build collective memory. It does this by combining song familiarity, personal resonance,

and emotional impact; highlighting exactly what makes music so powerful for nostalgia (Sterenberg, Mahon & Roth, 2023). Ultimately, the series goes beyond simply recycling hits, it instead breathes new life into them to create moments where the past and the present align, and where nostalgia can be used as a means of connections across generations.

Youth Culture

Alongside film, television, and music, *Stranger Things* relies heavily on the relatable experiences of youth culture of the time. From the very first episode, the series presents core representations of childhood for their main group of boys; bike riding, walkie-talkies, and *Dungeons & Dragons*. Right away, audiences are reminded of a simpler way of living, a way of life that did not involve the heavy surveillance state that we live in today (Rustad, 2024). These early depictions create a clear contrast between the analog freedoms of the 1980s and today's relentless connectivity. While experiences like playing *Dungeons & Dragons* or being a part of the school's AV Club might only resonate fully with a specific audience, the overall feeling of freedom that is associated with childhood is easily understood by any viewer. The series makes a point of emphasizing communal spaces for their young protagonists, depicting quick bike rides over to the arcade or mall without any worry whether their parents knew where they were, reinforcing a cultural norm of unsupervised exploration (Soukup, 2010).

These depictions highlight the broader idea of the "latch-key kid" generation, which defined much of a 1980s childhood (Roos, 2017). Kids rode their bikes everywhere, spent long stretches of time unsupervised, and relied on themselves to be responsible. The show embraces this idea through repeated scenes of children moving freely throughout Hawkins. They explore the woods, sneak into government facilities, and roam the town without any adult supervision.

While it is common for youth-oriented narratives to have a lack of adult supervision, the way that *Stranger Things* represents the relationships between parents and their children seems deliberate in its attempt to emphasize the freedom that children of the time felt. This independence is heavily romanticized in hindsight, with the series presenting it not as neglect but as self-sufficiency that today's kids cannot experience in the modern social climate (Cantone et al., 2020).

Building on this theme, *Stranger Things* compresses the cultural markers of 1980s youth into a cohesive, recognizable aesthetic. When viewed together, these cues demonstrate what Soukup (2010) calls "decade-ization", which is the process of compressing an entire decade into individual, recognizable pieces. In *Stranger Things*, 1980s youth culture is not recreated in full, but rather is boiled down to its most iconic elements: tabletop games, arcades, malls, and completely unsupervised exploration. These cues create that commodified version of the decade that is easily recognizable, even to those who did not experience it firsthand. By doing this, the series creates a commodified version of childhood that many younger viewers yearn for, even if they have similar experiences today (Ali, 2024). The method of packaging youth culture into consumable cultural fragments reflects a nostalgic idealization of the past, making it seem more vibrant, adventurous, and free than our current reality.

At the same time, these depictions also resonate with a post-postmodern tension by recognizing that modern technology would make much of the show's plot impossible. Without the use of cell phones or the internet, the characters' stories are able to unfold in ways that are not only believable for the 1980s setting but are also a refreshing contrast to our hyper-connected present (Rustad, 2024). Audiences can easily recognize that if the show were set in today's time, the mysteries of Hawkins would quickly be solved through a Google search or a phone call. This

contrast reminds audiences of just how much independence has been lost in a world of constant communication and surveillance. By presenting the 1980s as a time where freedom was easily attainable, *Stranger Things* indirectly critiques the restrictions of the modern childhood, suggesting that while technology offers convenience, it also has restricted the social possibilities of youth.

Not only then is *Stranger Things* a mediated window of 80s nostalgia but is also a commentary on how modern conveniences can change stories within youth culture. For older audiences, these images invoke authentic memories of their own childhoods, reaffirming those feelings of independence. For younger viewers, they create a stylized version of childhood that is appealing simply because it feels distant and unobtainable now. Regardless of whether audiences experienced the 1980s firsthand, these depictions bring forth a longing for childhood defined by freedom (Bolin, 2014; Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

Political Culture

As *Stranger Things* moves from the realm of personal nostalgia into the collective, it also begins to explore the political culture that defined the 1980s. While the series is most often celebrated for its pop culture references, the series also reflects the political climate of the decade through subtle visual references. Politics are not directly referenced within the narrative but instead are used in the background as a way to shape the social and cultural context of Hawkins, Indiana. Through visual cues, background elements, and character archetypes, the show hints at the Reagan era, local politics, and Cold War paranoia in ways that emphasize the nostalgia of the decade (Buchanan, 2024; Rossinow, 2016).

A clear example comes from references to the Reagan presidency. Within the middle and high schools, framed portraits of Ronald Reagan hang on the walls, emphasizing the then-president as one of the decade's key identifiers. Campaign signs and political ads appear in suburban yards throughout Season 2, given the season is set in the 1984 election year (see Figure 8). These details may not drive the plot, but they place the show in the proper historical context, reminding viewers that the 1980s were as much defined by political imagery as pop culture (Onion et al., 2018; Soukup, 2010). These visual cues show how deeply politics influenced the everyday life of the decade, even in ordinary settings.

Figure 8

The Wheeler's Presidential Choice

Note. A Regan-Bush campaign sign sits in the front lawn of the Wheeler home for the 1984 campaign that takes place during Season 2 (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

The series expands this commentary in Season 3 through the introduction of Mayor Larry Kline, played by Cary Elwes. As an exaggerated self-serving version of a career politician, Kline represents the cynicism of small-town politics during the Reagan era. His emphasis on business interest over community needs, particularly through his partnership with the developers of the Starcourt Mall, critiques the neoliberal focus on deregulation and corporate expansion (Rossinow, 2016; Cantone et al., 2020). While Kline's character is a parody, his actions still resonate with the political culture of the 1980s, where image-driven leadership and profit often was emphasized more than community duty.

The most consistent political theme in the show, however, revolves around Cold War tensions and the fear of Soviet infiltration. From the first episodes alone, Hawkins National Laboratory is shown as a secretive government facility aimed at competing with Soviet advancements; Eleven as a character is being raised in the lab to literally become a spy through the use of her developed telekinetic powers. This connection, initially hinted at in Season 1, evolves into major plot points by seasons 3 and 4. The elaborate underground operation under Starcourt Mall and the gulag-like prison character Jim Hopper is held at after being transported to Russia literally highlights the "Red Scare" movement, turning those cultural fears into key plot points (Llewellyn et al., 2012). Although these storylines are heightened to aid the show's supernatural elements, they still mirror how the 1980s media often portrayed the Soviet Union as a faceless, threatening entity (Barr, 2006; Buchanan, 2024).

Together, these elements show how *Stranger Things* weaves politics into its nostalgic framework. Unlike the overt nods to pop culture, the political references are more subtle, surfacing as background details, caricatured archetypes, or exaggerated subplots. Yet the subtly in and of itself reflects 1980s politics: shaping the cultural atmosphere in indirect ways, filtering

into schools, neighborhoods, and local communities through symbols, policies, and fear. In a way, the series captures the constant presence of politics in everyday life, something society still deals with today, all the while packaging it through a nostalgic lens.

The inclusion of political elements emphasizes that nostalgia does not only have to be about entertainment or consumerism, it also covers the broader cultural context of its era, defining the decade through both optimism and anxiety. By embedding politics within its pastiche, *Stranger Things* acknowledges that the 1980s cannot be remembered solely for its pop culture icons but also must be remembered through the defining presence of its politics, thus allowing for a more "genuine" and "authentic" portrayal of the decade within the show's narrative context (Jameson, 1983; Barr, 2006).

Material Culture: Decor and Objects of the 80s

Domestic Spaces

This section addresses both the first research question and the third: How is nostalgia represented within *Stranger Things*, and how does the visual pastiche of the 1980s evolve over the course of *Stranger Things*? One of the most consistent ways *Stranger Things* grounds itself in the 1980s is through the domestic interiors of its characters' homes. While there are plenty of suburban homes showcased throughout the seasons, none stand out more on a consistent level than the homes of the Wheeler and Byers families. These households serve as visual opposites, showcasing different socioeconomic positions, aesthetic choices, and cultural associations to the decade. These contrasts anchor the series in recognizable aspects of small-town America while also creating a heightened, stylized version of the decade (Bolin, 2014; Cantone et al., 2020).

Across the seasons, both homes change in ways that reflect not only the families' changing dynamics but also the broader nostalgic aim of the series (Rustad, 2024).

The Byers' home is consistently represented as modest, cluttered, and lived-in; visually reinforcing the family's lower-income status (see Figure 9). Dark wood paneling, mismatched furniture, and decor from the 1960s and 1970s dominate the space, creating a visual narrative that this family is doing whatever it takes to survive. Over the three seasons that the family lives in Hawkins, the home remains largely unchanged, give or take for the few supernatural instances that have damaged the house a time or two. The home displays financial insecurity, frugality that makes sense for a single mother raising two children on her own. In a way, this representation feels more authentic, more real to the decade that perhaps a lot of older audience members could relate to (Orazi & van Laer, 2022). The children are allowed to decorate their spaces however they see fit, and the dark warm colors make the home feel more inviting. It is only after the family moves to California in Season 4 do we see a change in their living space, a show home that was clearly curated for them instead of them building a space for themselves. While still dated, the house is more modern and more stylized, something that not only stands out visually, but narratively as well. It's very clear that a family like the Byers do not belong in a home like this and instead are playing into a stereotype of the era.

Figure 9

The Byers Home

Note. Exterior and interior shots of the Byers home as represented in Season 1 (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

The Wheeler home, in contrast, is the quintessential representation of the middle-class suburban aesthetic that is so commonly seen in 1980s media (see Figure 10). Spacious living areas, coordinated furniture sets, patterned wallpaper, and carefully maintained appearances project an image of stability and comfort. Throughout the course of the series, the Wheeler home interior evolves to reflect the change in design trends of the decade, purposefully showing the evolution not only with bedrooms but communal living spaces as well. Spaces like the kitchen are filled with newer technology of the time, with newer furniture and decor to accompany the rest of the home. It purposefully feels polished, barely lived in besides the children's bedrooms. Even then, Mike and Nancy's rooms respectfully are filled with new and trendy furniture, decor, and luxuries that most other kids probably did not have until later in the decade, especially with the initial Season 1 representations set in 1983. The only area of the house that feels truly "lived in" would be the basement where Eleven is held most of the time throughout the first season. It's cluttered and full of older furniture, clearly whatever set used to be upstairs before Karen and Ted replaced them for newer models. Season 1 emphasizes the muted earth-tones and traditional decor of the late 70s, while later seasons introduce brighter patterns and subtle signs of upward mobility in their social class. This evolution mirrors the stereotypical "American Dream" end-goal for suburban families of the decade, reinforcing that the Wheeler household represents prosperity and conformity (Barr, 2006; Wei, 2024).

Figure 10

The Wheeler Home

Note. Exterior and interior shots of the Wheeler home as represented in Season 1 (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

The deliberate juxtaposition of these two households upholds the insistence of intertextuality as a means of nostalgia by the series. The Byers' home recalls depictions of struggling families in 80s media like *Rosanne* (1988) and *Married... with Children* (1987), where clutter and dimly lit rooms signified the working-class family. The Wheeler's home, meanwhile, mimics the polished sets of sitcoms like *Family Ties* (1982) or *Growing Pains* (1985), where their homes symbolized stability and aspirational middle-class values. Neither home is recreated with absolute historical accuracy, and instead just draws on familiar decor and objects as signifiers rather than exact replicas, properly creating a mediated pastiche of the era (Jameson, 1983; Fazeli et al., 2023).

The use of decor and set dressing within the series as pastiche creates what Baudrillard (1994, p. 11) calls a "hyperreal environment". These representations present a version of the 1980s that feels more real than reality itself because it is built from the most recognizable cultural elements of the decade (Bolin, 2014; Cantone et al., 2020). The Byers' and Wheeler homes function not only as narrative backdrops, but as curated spaces that exaggerate the domestic aesthetics of the decade. The paneling, wallpaper, and furniture focus less on authentic representation and more on creating a mediated shorthand that is instantly identifiable as "the 1980s" to audiences (Rustad, 2024). While these spaces might seem familiar to those who lived during the decade, younger viewers are instead offered a stylized archetype of what the decade is supposed to "look like", despite the image being a simple reconstruction of collective memory.

By consistently comparing the two households, *Stranger Things* highlights economical and societal differences while also demonstrating the flexibility of nostalgia. Both homes can invoke feelings of nostalgia respectfully through using different strategies: The Byers through a more realistic, collective memory of a 1980s home, and the Wheelers through the polished ideal

commonly associated with 80s media of the time. By condensing a decade into recognizable decor and aesthetics, *Stranger Things* reimagines 1980s living spaces as hyperreal nostalgic environments that resonate across generations (Travers, 2024).

Consumer Goods and Branding

Alongside the domestic spaces showcased within the series, *Stranger Things* grounds its nostalgic aesthetic by showcasing various consumer goods and brands, presenting everyday objects associated with the decade as cultural anchors. Products, brand names, and retail environments are used to firmly place the series in its 1980s setting through cultural recognition (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019; Schmickrath, 2021). These objects and settings serve as a shorthand for consumer culture, reminding audiences of how deeply branding shaped the decade.

Some of the most notable examples come through different food and drink products of the decade. A standout for the series is Eleven's obsession with Eggo waffles, something that remains consistent across seasons. By highlighting a product clearly associated with the 1980s, the series uses the Eggo waffles not only as a character trait but as a nostalgic commodity that audiences can easily relate to through cultural memory (Cantone et al., 2020; Griffith, 2022). Coca-Cola appears frequently throughout the series, most notably through the "New Coke" campaign referenced in Season 3 (see Figure 11). With that season being set in 1985, the short-lived New Coke campaign reference is a definitive marker of the time, creating a moment of brand intertextuality that focuses on a famous consumer memory of the 1980s (Andrivet, 2025).

Figure 11

Nostalgic Product Placement

Note. Eleven in Season 1 and Lucas in Season 3 blatantly interacting with product placements (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Cars, electronics, and fashion also play a large role in reinforcing consumer nostalgia. Vehicles like Joyce's Pinto, Nancy's Station Wagon, or Billy's Camaro act not only as status symbols but indicators of personality as well, all the while reflecting realistic visual representations of what people could be driving in small-town America. Stores like RadioShack, where Sean Astin's character Bob Newby works in Season 2, assists in representing the technological landscape of the decade. Tape decks, camcorders, and walkie-talkies are among the most common representations throughout the series, purposefully being used as cultural shorthands of the decade and as a reminder of the separation from modern technological dependence (Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

Popular retailers of the decade such as The Gap, Sam Goody, and Esprit are featured in the Starcourt Mall, purposefully highlighting the important role that mall culture had on the decade (Polgar, 2020). The mall itself, introduced in Season 3, becomes a literal showcase of common 1980s branding, fueling cultural memories for those who experienced the decade, while curating a mediated representation for younger audiences who do not have a modern equivalent experience (Bolin, 2014). The mall alone with its bustling crowds and neon signage is enough to drive plenty of nostalgia into audiences, purposefully reminding some of a time past, while enforcing a feeling of longing for those who were not around to experience it (see Figure 12). These references remind audiences of the consumer identity within the 1980s, where brands were symbolic of lifestyles. Though, like the rest of Season 3, the mall itself is a hyperreal representation of the decade, being able to incorporate all the bright colors and common visuals that are heavily associated with the decade (Barr, 2006).

Figure 12

Storefronts Featured in Starcourt

Note. Common 80s storefronts represented in Starcourt mall in Season 3 (Coming Soon: the Starcourt Mall! | Hawkins, Indiana, 2018; The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

The prominence of these spaces and products represents a sort of nostalgic commodification (Schmickrath, 2021). Brands are revived and redefined not only for their narrative usefulness, but for their connection to memory. In *Stranger Things,* Coca-Cola and Eggo waffles are not simply consumed, they are presented as pastiche symbols of the decade. Neither of these inclusions operate neutrally, instead they rely on audience recognition and

cultural memory by condensing the era's identity into everyday objects (Fazeli et al., 2023). This strategy emphasizes how *Stranger Things* functions as a sort of nostalgic machine, taking ordinary commodities and reimagining them into symbolic representations, encouraging viewers to re-experience the past through a specific lens of brand consumption (Griffith, 2022; Hartmann & Brunk, 2019). The series's world is filled with these items: cars, consumables, electronics, storefronts. Each is shown in detail without emphasis, creating recognition without crossing into parody (Jameson, 1983). In this way, commodification becomes essential to how nostalgia works within the series, allowing the product placement to be methods of memory, whether real for viewers who have experienced the 1980s or recreated for those who are experiencing it secondhand. By presenting consumer goods as cultural markers, *Stranger Things* illustrates that nostalgia is dependent on world-building contexts within the narrative (Cantone et al., 2020).

At the same time, these elements showcase a post-postmodern sincerity in how the brands are treated. Unlike the ironic product placements found in postmodern media, *Stranger Things* revives consumer goods with affection (Travers, 2024. The show does not ridicule the products and brands it represents but instead embraces them as an authentic representation of 1980s life. This sincere revival blurs the lion between cultural reference and marketing, creating a dynamic where products operate both as narrative devices and vessels of nostalgic memory.

Technology and Everyday Objects

Stranger Things reinforces its nostalgic identity through the inclusion of everyday technologies that in context serve as powerful visual anchors for memories of the decade. The series is full of objects that once defined 1980s home and social life: rotary phones, CRT televisions, VHS tapes, walkie-talkies, cassette tapes, and many more. These items not only

appear as set dressings for the series but are also used as active storytelling devices. Each of these technologies, though ordinary at the time, acts as a tangible link to the slower, analog era within the show (Özer, 2024). For audiences familiar with these objects, they evoke what Bolin (2014) describes as media nostalgia, a longing for the engagement associated with earlier technologies. For younger viewers, these same items then create mediated nostalgia, generating a sense of familiarity for technologies that they never have personally experienced but instead see as cultural symbols of the past (Rustad, 2024; Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

Throughout the series, *Stranger Things* uses these technologies as both narrative tools and symbols of nostalgia. The boys' walkie-talkies, for example, are not used just for plot convenience, but as a pre-digital way of communication that rivals the instant communication of modern technology (Cantone et al., 2020). Their constant use during moments of crisis or coordination emphasizes the inherent need of these older technologies for the plot to function, given that modern methods of communication and tracking would diminish the tense and urgent nature of the series (see Figure 13). In the modern era, everything is housed usually on a cell phone, which reduces the need for carrying any extra devices that have their own individual functions. The series instead uses this older technology for both emotional and historical significance, anchoring the time in a world where technology was more tactile (Bolin, 2014). These depictions then will remind older viewers of the physical engagement with technology, while introducing younger audiences to an era where technology was bound by imperfection.

Figure 13

Walkie-Talkie Representation

Note. Mike and Eleven hearing Will on an era accurate walkie-talkie in Season 1 (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

Common items like rotary phones and tape decks add to the analog immersion that the series offers. The corded kitchen phone in the Byers' house that Joyce uses multiple times in an attempt to contact Will throughout the first season depicts the commonality of answering a phone with that required staying in place, speaking aloud, and waiting, all with no caller ID. Season 4's emphasis on music showcased the limited playing power of a cassette tape through Max Mayfield's constant use of her Sony Walkman, reminding audiences of the 1980s relationship to

music as a private yet tactile experience. Non-electric items like the repeated use of bikes in earlier seasons furthers the analog motif, symbolizing autonomy and movement before cell phones and GPS tracking. *Stranger Things* uses objects that were once mundane to evoke an era defined by tangibility and limitations, turning them into icons of nostalgia (Travers, 2024).

Together, these material details act as anchors of mediated memory, allowing technology to be the place where audience experience and cultural imagination meet (Bolin, 2014; Fazeli et al., 2023)). For those who lived through the 1980s, these depictions hold a genuine nostalgia that recalls firsthand kinesthetic feelings with analog technology. For younger viewers, however, the series reconstructs these experiences through stylized repetition and visual framing, thus inciting the fauxstalgia phenomenon: a yearning for experiences of a past they never inhabited (Orazi & van Laer, 2022). The insertion of a VHS tape into a VCR, the static crackle from a walkie-talkie, the warm hum of a CRT television screen; all examples of a sensory landscape that feel authentic even in a hyperreal state. *Stranger Things* turns everyday items of the 1980s and turns them into emotional conductors, inviting viewers to engage with the past through these physical items. By contrasting these analog devices with modern digital technologies, the series highlights what has been lost in the move toward seamless connectivity: the patience, imperfections, and personal touches of technological interaction. In doing so, the series reclaims that everyday objects of the 1980s not just as set dressing, but as the emotional infrastructure of nostalgia itself (Barr, 2006; Bolin, 2014).

Falsehoods in 80s Representations

While *Stranger Things* is praised for its representation of the 1980s, the series is not perfect. Like any media that leans heavily on the use of nostalgia, it sometimes gets details

wrong, and those little inaccuracies say a lot about how the series utilizes its depiction of the past (Bolin, 2014; Rustad, 2024). Instead of total historical accuracy, the series leans into what the decade *felt* like, focusing on the mood and motion of the era rather than upholding pure facts. In other words, these are not true mistakes as much as they are reminders that nostalgia, by nature, is selective and stylized.

Below are some examples of the slip-ups and anachronisms that pop up across the series:

Figure 14

Anachronism Examples

SEASON	INCONSISTENCY	DESCRIPTION
Season 1 (1983)	Car Model from the Future	The car driven by Barb is a late-1980s model that didn't exist in 1983, the show's first-season timeline
Season 1 (1983)	Prozac Mention Too Early	Joyce and Hopper mention Prozac, which was not introduced until 1987, four years after the show's setting
Season 1 (1983)	Millennium Falcon Toy from the 2000s	The Millennium Falcon model shown in Mike's basement is a 2004 reissue, not an early-1980s version
Season 2 (1984)	Modern Periodic Table	The Hawkins Middle School classroom periodic table includes elements discovered long after the 1980s
Season 2 (1984)	Crayola 120-Crayon Box Too Early	The 120-count Crayola box referenced wasn't sold until the 1990s
Season 2 (1984)	"Proton Packs" Used Too Early	Boys refer to Ghostbusters "proton packs" though term wasn't used until sequel (1989)
Season 2 (1984)	Chicago Skyline Inaccuracy	The skyline includes post-1980s buildings and an incorrect skyline angle
Season 3 (1985)	Red M&Ms Shown Too Early	Red M&Ms appear in candy bags and mall decor, though they were pulled from shelves in 1976 and didn't return until 1987
Season 3 (1985)	Song Timeline Errors	Several songs used before their actual release dates, creating timeline mismatches
Season 4 (1986)	HTML Coding Displayed	Suzie's computer shows HTML code, which wasn't created until 1993

Note. Examples from each season of any period inaccuracies within *Stranger Things* (Shelton, 2023).

Though, these minor mistakes do not really break the illusion, if anything, they highlight what *Stranger Things* does best. The series is not attempting to be a perfect time capsule; it is trying to capture the *feeling* of the 80s. Even when something is not technically accurate, it still looks correct, and that is what matters most for the story's nostalgic impact (Bolin, 2014).

This is where pastiche thrives. As Jameson (1983) describes it, pastiche is not about historical precision, but rather recreating familiar texts in a way that feels authentic. The Duffer brothers rely on this exact principle, choosing to emphasize emotional recognition over factual correctness (Fazeli et al., 2023). Whether it is a wrong car model or the wrong color of M&M, each mistake fits the world because it feels authentically vintage. These inaccuracies also show how nostalgia works for different audiences. Viewers who grew up in the 1980s might notice a misplaced product or timeline error and recognize the oversight, while younger viewers experiencing a mediated version of the decade, take it at face value as part of a stylized, "authentic" version of the past, thus again inciting fauxstalgia (Bolin, 2014; Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

Overall, these small falsehoods illustrate the duality of *Stranger Things'* nostalgic strategy: between striving for a hyperreal 80s environment through pastiche (wood paneling, neon lights, analog technology, etc.) and allowing occasional historical inaccuracies in props, songs, cars, or fashions for the sake of aesthetics or narrative convenience (Cantone et al., 2020). It is more about emotion than evidence, and that nostalgic power is what makes the world of Hawkins feel so realistic. These missteps reinforce that nostalgia, especially in media, must always be viewed as a constructed experience that emulates memory rather than replicates it.

Visual Representations of Characters

Archetypes Through Styling

This section addresses the second research question: How do characters engage with and represent nostalgia within *Stranger Things*? One of the strongest ways *Stranger Things* creates its nostalgic world is through its characters, using their appearances and styles as they move

through the 80s-inspired setting. The cast functions collectively as a patchwork of instantly recognizable archetypes, creating what can be read as a visual collage of the decade's most familiar media identities (Bolin, 2014; Travers, 2024). From the suburban mom to the awkward teen, the preppy jock to the brooding outcast, the ensemble intentionally draws from recognizable 1980s character types, allowing audiences to navigate the show's world through visual recognition as much as through the story.

The ensemble effect relies heavily on costuming and styling as a shorthand for cultural roles (Fiske, 1991). Characters are designed to be understood almost instantly by their appearance alone. Steve Harrington's carefully styled hair, Members Only jacket, and Ray Ban sunglasses mark him as the classic 80s high school heartthrob, invoking characters like Jake from *Sixteen Candles* (1984) or Ferris from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) (see Figure 15). Nancy Wheeler's soft blouses, high-waisted skirts, and evolving wardrobe across seasons reflect the shift from small-town sheltered teen to independent young woman, mirroring broader 1980s gender themes seen in films like *Heathers* (1988) or *The Breakfast Club* (1985) (Hemenway, 2023). Even secondary characters like Karen Wheeler or Billy Hargrove represent familiar archetypes through visual cues: Karen as the fashionable but bored suburban mom, Billy as the hypermasculine rebel in double denim. None of these designs are accidental; they are visual fragments of a constructed 1980s world, meant to be recognized as such (Jameson, 1983; Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

Figure 15

Steve Harrington and Nancy Wheeler

Note. Character Steve Harrington in Season 2 and character Nancy Wheeler in Season 3 (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

As Fiske (1991) describes, television often communicates through pastiche and visual fragmentation, relying on cultural codes that the audience already understands. *Stranger Things* fully embraces this concept by creating its characters as a living collage of 1980s references, each reflecting different aspects of social and popular culture. This approach reiterates how pastiche, not parody, is a genuine imitation of recognizable cultural styles (Jameson, 1983). Rather than fully attempting to represent "realistic" people within the 1980s, the show's characters act as symbolic representations of the decade's shared visual language. The hairstyles,

clothing, and even body language draw from familiar cinematic sources, inviting viewers to decode these images using their collective memory of the era (Bolin, 2014; Rustad, 2024).

Soukup's (2010) concept of "decade-ization", which is the process of summarizing an entire era through iconic signifiers, is key to this ensemble's design. *Stranger Things* does not attempt to capture every aspect of 1980s identity, but instead focuses on a select set of visual markers that signal "the 80s" as an aesthetic category. Letterman jackets, graphic t-shirts, acid-was jeans, and preppy sweaters become symbols of the decade, all neatly organized for recognition (Cantone et al., 2020). This visual shorthand allows audiences to access nostalgia instantly, skipping over historical complexities in favor of clear style.

What makes this collage effect so effective is how it balances exaggeration with sincerity. The show's costume design does not mock or parody its references, but instead embraces them, allowing viewers to see each character as both a product of the 1980s and a reflection of an idealized version. Together, the ensemble creates a hyperreal version of the decade, one that feels authentic because it is made from fragments of common media memories (Baudrillard, 1994; Bolin, 2014). In this way, *Stranger Things* shows how visual representation can serve as both tribute and reconstruction using costuming as a nostalgic language that speaks directly to collective cultural memory (Fiske, 1991; Jameson, 1983).

Fashion, Hair, and Makeup Trends

The evolution of fashion, hair, and makeup throughout *Stranger Things* serves as one of the series' clearest visual indicators of the time, guiding the audience through the shifting aesthetic landscape of the 1980s. Each season corresponds roughly to a different year, 1983 through 1986, and the costuming and styling choices reflect that ongoing transformation

(Cantone et al., 2020; Soukup, 2010). These choices are more than just background detail, instead they anchor the series in specific moments of 1980s culture, signaling character growth while also acting as a shorthand for broader cultural shifts within the decade.

In *Stranger Things'* early seasons (1983 to 1984), fashion is rooted in the subdued, practical aesthetics of small-town America, borrowing clearly from late 1970s trends as they emerge into the decade. Characters like Joyce Byers wear muted plaid shirts and denim jackets, mirroring working-class realism. Nancy Wheeler's early looks, including structured blouses, knee-length skirts, and soft curls, reflect the modest femininity typical of early-decade teen fashion (Schmidt-Rees, 2020). Men like Jonathan and Steve wear casual layers, plain t-shirts, and straight leg jeans, showcasing understated masculinity of youth in the era despite different socioeconomic statuses. Hair and makeup are relatively restrained. Feathered bangs and natural tones dominate, matching the more grounded tone of the first season's suburban setting (Ramzi, 2024).

By Seasons 3 and 4 (1985-1986), the visual landscape becomes significantly brighter and bolder, aligning with the era's love for color, experimentation, and excess (Teather, 2021; Waddell, 2024). As the series transitions into the Starcourt Mall setting, the wardrobe is overwhelmed with neon hues, graphic prints, and shoulder-padded silhouettes. Eleven's makeover in Season 3, complete with patterned shirts, high-waisted pants, and trendy suspenders, marks one of the clearest examples of the stylistic changes of the decade. Gone are the muted browns and earth tones of the early years of the decade, now only the fluorescent neons and Memphis Group patterns remain[2]. Eleven's new look mirrors the rise of mall culture

[2] *Memphis Group* patterns refer to a 1980s design style characterized by bright colors, geometric shapes, and playful, abstract forms. Originating from the Milan-based Memphis design collective, these patterns became visual symbols of the decade.

and the growing influence of pop fashion, particularly through icons like Cyndi Lauper and Madonna (Teather, 2021) (see Figure 16). Similarly, Max's skater wardrobe with oversized jackets, high-top sneakers, and denim shorts, captures the casual athleticism that defined mid-80s teen style (Anderson, 1997; Waddell, 2024).

Figure 16

Max and Eleven's New Wardrobe

Note. Characters max and Eleven during their mall fashion montage in Season 3 (The Duffer brothers, 2016a).

Hair and makeup trends evolve just as noticeably. Steve Harrington's famously coiffed hair becomes almost a visual joke by Season 2, directly referencing the meticulous haircare that even 80s teens went through. Meanwhile, Karen Wheeler's look evolves into a polished blend of suburban glamour and daytime drama, positioning her as a representation of 1980s women's fashion stereotypes (see Figure 17). From bright lipstick to bold eyeshadow, to bleached and

permed hair, her style reflects the decade's fascination with femininity as a performance, women who were both homemakers and trendy (Ramzi, 2024). Even smaller details, such as brightly colored nail polish or geometric earrings that appear more frequently in later seasons, reflect how 1980s consumer culture filtered identity through fashion and cosmetics (Griffith, 2022; Schmickrath, 2021). These visual markers act as a cultural shorthand, reinforcing the audience's understanding of both time and tone. The gradual shift from neutral tones to saturated color, from natural looks to stylized glamour, visually mirrors the 1980s' cultural journey, from recession-era realism to bright, consumerist optimism. In doing so, *Stranger Things* mirrors the decade's cinematic representations, where appearance often told a story just as much as dialogue.

Figure 17

The Evolution of Karen Wheeler

Note. Character Karen Wheeler as she has evolved in style over the course of four seasons (The Duffer Brothers, 2016a).

What makes this approach so effective is how it fits within the broader nostalgic logic of the series. Instead of treating fashion and styling choices as background realism, *Stranger Things* presents them as deliberate choices, a kind of visual pastiche that celebrates the iconic nature of 1980s style. As with Karen Wheeler's stereotypical fashion sense or Eleven's various makeovers across seasons, these moments embody visual codes of cultural belonging (Fiske, 1991). They align with audience memory more than historical accuracy, breaking the decade down into recognizable tropes that are easy to understand (Orazi & van Laer, 2022; Soukup, 2010). Ultimately, the series' approach to fashion, hair, and makeup reflects a layered strategy of nostalgia. It reconstructs the 1980s through aesthetics that feel emotionally authentic even when exaggerated for effect. This results in a stylized but affectionate representation of the decade, one that uses visual styling not just to set a scene, but to make the past feel vivid and real.

Evolution of Nostalgia Across Seasons

Shifts in Style

How nostalgia is represented with *Stranger Things*, and how the visual pastiche of the 1980s evolves over the course of the series, are central to understanding its stylistic development. Throughout its four seasons, *Stranger Things* gradually changes how it recreates and represents the 1980s. What began as a quiet, grounded depiction of a small Indiana town slowly transforms into a highly stylized, hyperreal version of the decade (Baudrillard, 1994; Bolin, 2014). The shift reflects both the growing narrative complexity of the show and the expanding role of nostalgia within it. The transition from subtle realism to an exaggerated aesthetic marks the evolution in how *Stranger Things* uses the past, moving from immersive realism toward a deliberate spectacle (Fazeli et al., 2023; Jameson, 1983).

In the first season, the portrayal of the 1980s feels understated and natural, allowing the setting to blend seamlessly with the characters' lives. The muted colors of Hawkins' suburban streets, the cluttered simplicity of the Byers' home, and the classroom spaces for the kids are all examples that contribute to the believable environment. Costumes are practical and realistic. Striped shirts, denim jackets, and graphic t-shirts feel authentic rather than specifically curated. The lighting is soft and warm, reflecting the quietness of Midwestern domestic life in the decade, while everyday technologies like corded phones and television sets are treated as functional objects, not period pieces. In these earlier episodes, nostalgia works beneath the surface; viewers experience the era through its textures rather than stereotypical visual cues (Soukup, 2010). This realism reflects the emotional depth of the story, anchoring it within a believable historical world (Bolin, 2014).

However, by the time the series reaches Season 3, the visual atmosphere becomes much more dramatic. The color palette shifts toward vibrant hues, with bright primary colors dominating the visuals both in settings and clothing. The once muted tones of Hawkins are replaced with the visual overload of the Starcourt Mall, complete with neon signs and eccentric storefronts. Scenes set in the mall are purposefully filled with consumer imagery, turning the setting into a celebration of 1980s abundance both diegetically and through nostalgic recognition (Schmickrath, 2021). Even outside this central location, the overall design of the show now begins to embrace this excess. Eleven and Max's patterned shirts and scrunchies, Nancy's working-woman attire, and even Steve and Robin's Scoops Ahoy uniforms contribute to the playful, almost theatrical representation of the decade that the series is now adopting.

This steady increase in intensity illustrates what Schmickrath (2021) calls negative effect pastiche, when the layering of nostalgic references becomes so overwhelming that it could

diminish emotional engagement. The detailed recreation of the past in later seasons sometimes borders on excessive: each background prop, costume, and song reference competes for attention, thus turning nostalgia into a visual performance (Bolin, 2014; Mazzarotto, 2015). Yet rather than collapsing under this visual weight, *Stranger Things* manages to transform this density into productive parody (Mazzarotto, 2015). The series exaggerates these elements to highlight the constructed nature of nostalgia while still inviting emotional connections. The dichotomy of the settings within Hawkins is a visual representation of different levels of nostalgia, ranging from realism to hyperrealism (Baudrillard, 1994). The juxtaposition of downtown Hawkins versus the bright Starcourt Mall in and of itself is representative of these different levels of nostalgia, and how these representations impact the story (see Figure 18). This duality demonstrates how the series uses aesthetic overload not to trivialize the past but instead explore how collective memory reshapes it into something more vivid and sentimental than it ever truly was (Travers, 2024).

Figure 18

Downtown Hawkins versus Starcourt Mall

Note. Visual representations of shopping centers through Season 1's downtown landscape and Season 3's mall atmosphere (The Duffer brothers, 2016a).

As the series' visual style evolves, so does its tone. The realism of Season 1 evokes personal, grounded nostalgia rooted in familiar domesticity, while the later seasons lean into communal nostalgia, where the 1980s becomes a cultural fantasy. The neon decor, stylized hair, and story cliches of later episodes signal a decade reimagined through memory instead of accuracy (Soukup, 2010). This change reflects a broader commentary on how nostalgia functions in media: the more we revisit and reproduce the past, the more stylized it becomes. *Stranger Things* captures this process visually, beginning as a quiet reconstruction of everyday life and ending as a colorful celebration of a hyperreal 1980s (Baudrillard, 1994).

In this progression, *Stranger Things* does more than just depict the 1980s; it dramatizes how nostalgia itself evolves over time. The slow shift from subtle realism to visual spectacle reflects how collective memory works (Bolin, 2014; Cantone et al., 2020). Every retelling amplifies certain details, smooths imperfections, and turns a lived history into a cultural mythology. Through this change in style, the series reminds viewers that nostalgia is not simply a return to the past, but a reinvention of it, creating an aesthetic experience that grows louder, brighter, and more cinematic the farther we move away from the original moment.

Commodification and Market Integration

As *Stranger Things* developed into a global media phenomenon, its nostalgic portrayal of 1980s consumer culture expanded beyond the show's narrative world and into real-world markets (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019; Schmickrath, 2021). The series' integration of mall culture, branded imagery, and consumer aesthetics turned nostalgia from an emotional experience into a commercial one. What started as a homage to the past became a marketing framework, sparking interest in retro designs, products, and logos that mirrored the show's aesthetics. This process

demonstrates the full commodification of nostalgia, where emotional familiarity and cultural memory are transformed into profitable branding opportunities (Griffith, 2022; Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

The portrayal of Starcourt Mall in Season 3 is central to this process. Within the season, the mall represents 1980s prosperity and excess: neon-lit corridors, storefronts like The Gap and Sam Goody, and bright color schemes capture the optimism of the Reagan-era economic boom (English, 2023). Yet beyond its narrative purpose, Starcourt functions as a visual invitation for audiences to reconnect with the commercial spirit of the decade. The detailed reconstruction of mall culture, complete with recognizable logos and brand names, encourages viewers to relive, and in some cases re-consume, the consumer habits of the era. In this way, *Stranger Things* does more than depict 1980s capitalism; it helps revive it.

This nostalgic appeal has proven to be commercially effective. Following the release of Season 3, brands featured in or associated with *Stranger Things* (Coca-Cola, Nike, Burger King, etc.) experienced renewed visibility through direct marketing collaborations ("Concave Brand Tracking", 2019). Coca-Cola notably reintroduced "New Coke", a product initially viewed as a marketing failure, as a limited-edition tie-in in 2019, following its mention in the show's script ("1985: New Coke and Stranger Things", 2019). Burger King capitalized on the various inclusions of their brand within the show by launching a limited time "Upside Down Whopper" meal complete with 1980s packaging and social media campaigns that blurred the line between fandom and consumer nostalgia (Valinsky, 2019) (see Figure 19). Even clothing retailers embraced the show's aesthetic: H&M and Levi's launched capsule collections inspired by the 1980s styles worn by the characters, while Nike and Reebok brought back retro sneaker designs seen in promotional images (Rearick, 2019). These partnerships show how nostalgia serves as a

form of market integration, transforming memory into merchandise and emotional connection into economic value.

Figure 19

Burger King Stranger Things Collaboration

Note. An advertisement from the 2019 collaboration between Burger King and *Stranger Things* (Valinsky, 2019).

This resurgence of retro branding fits broader trends of nostalgia-driven marketing, where companies turn older logos, packaging, or product lines to create a sense of authenticity and trust (Slyman, 2024). As marketing researchers have noted, nostalgia in this form becomes not just an emotion but a commercial strategy, one that relies on the emotional stability of the past amid

present unpredictability (Muller, 2024; “Nostalgia Marketing”, 2024; “Nostalgia Marketing”, 2025). In the case of *Stranger Things*, the presence of recognizable products within the series created an ample opportunity for this strategy to succeed. Brands found in the world of the series a ready-made aesthetic: warmly familiar, slightly idealized, and highly marketable (Jameson, 1983). The result is a feedback loop: the show celebrates the look and feel of 80s consumerism, and modern corporations, in turn, revive that imagery to capitalize on the audience’s renewed interest (Schmickrath, 2021).

This relationship reveals the dual role of nostalgia in late-capitalist media (Bolin, 2014; Graham, 2023). On one hand, it functions as an emotional bridge, connecting viewers to a shared cultural past; on the other, it serves as a method of commodification, turning that emotional connection into consumption. The mall, once a physical space of youth independence, becomes both a nostalgic symbol and metaphor for modern consumer culture: spaces designed to curate and profit from sentimentality (Griffith, 2022). Through this integration of marketing, design, and emotion, *Stranger Things* illustrates how nostalgia has shifted from personal memory to commercial architecture.

Ultimately, the series shows that the revival of the 1980s is not just an artistic movement but an economic one (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019; Schmickrath, 2021). The return of old logos, the re-release of defunct products, and the resurgence of vintage fashion and aesthetics all indicate a cultural feedback system driven by media-induced memory. Nostalgia becomes both the product and the selling point, a cycle of recognition and desire continually renewed by media that knows exactly how to repackage the past (Orazi & van Laer, 2022). In this way, *Stranger Things* not only portrays the consumer culture of the 1980s but actively engages in its revival, turning the aesthetics of memory into the language of the market.

Emotional Amplification

As *Stranger Things* progresses, its nostalgic cues evolve beyond visual and aesthetic references, instead these cues are used as powerful emotion triggers and emphasizes moments where the past resonates deeply across generations (Bolin, 2014). What began as a tribute to the 1980s gradually changes into what could be called emotional nostalgia, where specific cultural elements are revived not only for recognition but for renewed cultural significance (Cantone et al., 2020). These moments, whether through music, fashion, or technology, demonstrate how *Stranger Things* turns nostalgia into a collective emotional experience, blurring the lines between remembrance and reanimation.

The series' recurring focus on Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) has played a significant role in the game's current revival (Armstrong, 2019). What was once a niche hobby often associated with nerd culture has become a mainstream phenomenon once again, thanks in part to its heartfelt portrayal in *Stranger Things*. Early scenes of the kids gathered around their basement table in Season 1 capture the intimacy and imagination of 1980s youth culture, reminding audiences of the creativity that predated digital entertainment (see Figure 20). After the show's success, D&D saw record-breaking sales and increased cultural visibility, securing its status as both a nostalgic icon and a modern pastime (Circana, 2022; "Data: Stranger Things", 2022). Here, nostalgia reshapes the present, reintroducing tactile, communal experiences to an audience raised on digital media.

Figure 20

Dungeons & Dragons Representation

Note. The core cast of boys gathered around a game of Dungeons & Dragons in the Wheeler basement from Season 1 (The Duffer brothers, 2016a).

A similar emotional revival has happened with the renewed affection for physical media. Throughout the series, VHS tapes, cassette players, and record collections appear as familiar fixtures of the domestic 1980s world, but their recurrence also aligns with a real-world revival of analog formats (Scherer, 2025). Vinyl sales have skyrocketed over the past decade, cassette tapes have made niche comebacks, and even retro-style VHS packaging has become a form of collectible nostalgia (Lele, 2024). *Stranger Things* feeds into this tactile longing, the desire to hold, rewind, and re-experience media physically through media nostalgia (Bolin, 2014; Fazeli et al., 2023). For older viewers, this evokes a genuine memory; for younger viewers, it offers a romanticized depiction of a more tangible, thoughtful relationship with culture.

The same cycle appears in fashion (see Figure 21). As *Stranger Things* shifted from muted realism to stylized maximalism, the visual signatures of its costuming (bold colors, high-waisted denim, patterned shirts, voluminous hair) reentered mainstream fashion. This renewed interest in fashion from the decade reflects not just an appreciation of retro style, but a broader cultural desire for what the series represents: individuality and optimism through nostalgia (Rustad, 2024). The feedback loop is clear: *Stranger Things* utilizes 1980s fashion within its characters, and the fashion industry then brings back those same looks for modern consumers.

Figure 21

H&M's Season 4 Collaboration

Note. An advertisement for the fashion line at H&M propoting the 2022 release of *Stranger Things* Season 4 (Stranger things x H&M, 2022).

Together, these revivals show how *Stranger Things* connects emotional and commercial aspects of nostalgia. As Cantone et al. (2020) point out, post-postmodern culture has shifted toward renewed sincerity, favoring emotional connection over irony. In modern media, nostalgia has become a means of emotional reattachment, allowing audiences to find authenticity in remembering (Rustad, 2024). *Stranger Things* embodies this change by treating its nostalgic cues with genuine affection, inviting viewers to feel the past wholeheartedly. Whether through the resurgence of 80s music, pastimes, technologies, or fashion, the series transforms nostalgia into connection, turning fragmented memories into shared cultural experiences.

Ultimately, *Stranger Things* shows that nostalgia can be more than decorative, it can be transformative. Its ability to revive music charts, inspire new players to pick up dice, spark trends in clothing, and renew interest in physical media highlights the emotional weight that sincere nostalgia can carry. In a media landscape often defined by irony, *Stranger Things* reminds audiences that authenticity still matters, and that revisiting the past can sometimes be a way of restoring humanity to the present (Bolin, 2014; Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how *Stranger Things* develops a mediated version of the 1980s through the interplay of nostalgia, pastiche, and authenticity (Bolin, 2014; Jameson, 1983). By analyzing its use of cultural cues ranging from media references and music to domestic design, youth behavior, and consumerism, this research explored how the series recreates the decade not as a perfect replication, but as a carefully curated emotional experience (Cardwell, 2006). Through its deliberate use of visual, auditory, and narrative elements, *Stranger*

Things transforms the past into a shared cultural memory, accessible to both those who lived through it and those encountering it for the first time (Orazi & van Laer, 2022).

The findings of this study demonstrates that *Stranger Things* functions as a nostalgic text that blends realism with stylization. Its effectiveness lies not only in historical accuracy, but in its ability to evoke what the decade felt like (Knoblauch et al., 2008). The series' use of film and television aesthetics borrows heavily from the style's of 1980s media. It reintroduces practical effects, cinematic lighting, and period-specific framing to create an atmosphere that resonates beyond generations (Chilton, 2022; Leon, 2016). The show balances homage and originality, borrowing from recognizable tropes without falling into parody. In doing so, it creates a cinematic landscape that feels genuine to the decade while still being filtered through contemporary storytelling.

Similarly, music plays a central role in shaping *Stranger Things'* nostalgic power. The carefully selected soundtrack, from The Clash's *Should I Stay Or Should I Go* to Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill*, demonstrates how auditory experiences can connect emotional memories across time (Sterenberg, Mahon & Roth, 2023). These songs do more than set the mood; they embody the emotional texture of the series, bridging generational gaps through shared cultural familiarity (Lipshutz, 2022; Tangcay, 2022). The revival of 80s music in the series highlights how nostalgia acts as remembrance for older audiences and as mediated discovery for younger ones. Furthermore, the growing interest in 1980s hobbies like Dungeons & Dragons, the renewed appreciation for analog media like vinyl and VHS, and the cyclical return of 1980s-inspired fashion all reflect how *Stranger Things* has reignited cultural touch points that extend beyond the screen.

The representations of youth culture within *Stranger Things* reinforces the show's nostalgic framework by glorifying the independence and camaraderie of a pre-digital childhood (Roos, 2017). Through visuals of bike rides, arcade visits, and long stretches of unsupervised exploration, the series presents the 1980s as a time of freedom and analog adventure, aligning with Soukup's 2010) concept of decade-ization.. This portrayal of childhood independence contrasts sharply with the surveillance and connectivity of the modern era, generating both nostalgia and critique. For older audiences, these depictions recall authentic memories of a freer era; for younger viewers, they create an idealized image of youth that feels distant yet desirable.

Beyond cultural nostalgia, the series also weaves political themes reflective of the Reagan era and Cold War anxieties. Through subtle visual cues like campaign posters, television broadcasts, and the recurring fear of Soviet influence, *Stranger Things* captures the sociopolitical mood of the 1980s without making politics its overt focus. This inclusion places the show's nostalgic world in a broader historical context, reminding audiences that the decade's optimism and consumer growth existed alongside paranoia and ideological tension, an inherent reflection of the sociopolitical state today. Such portrayals emphasize that nostalgia is rarely neutral; it often simplifies the complexities of its source material in favor of emotional coherence (Llewellyn et al., 2012).

The domestic and material culture of the series also plays a significant role in contributing to its nostalgic aesthetic. The contrasting homes of the Byers and Wheeler families serve as visual symbols for socioeconomic diversity and the duality of realism and idealism (Wei, 2024). The Byers' clutter, dimly lit interiors embody working-class authenticity, while the Wheelers' pristine suburban home represents aspirational conformity. These environments, along with the consumer brands scattered throughout the series, show how *Stranger Things* uses

familiar commodities to create emotional recognition. Everyday products like Eggo waffles, Coca-Cola, RadioShack electronics, and mall storefronts become icons of nostalgia marketing, turning the act of recognition itself into sentimentality (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019; Schmickrath, 2021).

However, the study also acknowledges that *Stranger Things* is not a flawless reproduction of the 1980s. Inconsistencies and misplacements appear throughout the series through misplaced props, inaccurate songs, or minor timeline errors, but these imperfections serve an important purpose. They reveal that nostalgia, by nature, is selective (Baudrillard, 1994). The show's inaccuracies highlight its reliance on pastiche as a creative approach, prioritizing emotional recognition over factual accuracy. In this way, *Stranger Things* creates a hyperreal version of the past; one that feels more authentic than reality itself because it is built from the collective memory of what the decade looked like, sounded like, and meant to those who experienced it.

Overall, this study finds that *Stranger Things* exemplifies the changing role of nostalgia in contemporary media. The series does not simply exercise retro aesthetics but uses nostalgia as a storytelling framework to explore the intersections between memory, identity, and media consumption. It illustrates how modern audiences connect with the past not through direct recollection, but through mediated experiences, showing how the 1980s lives on as a shared cultural imagination rather than a strictly historical period (Bolin, 2014). The emotional impact of *Stranger Things* lies in this duality: it makes the past both familiar and new, encouraging reflection on how memory itself is shaped by the media that preserves it (Rustad, 2024).

Despite these insights, the study has limitations. Because it focuses on visual analysis, it cannot fully address individual audience interpretations or cultural differences in nostalgia responses. It also does not cover the production and marketing strategies that might influence the show's nostalgic tone. Future research could build on this foundation by incorporating audience studies to examine how different generations and cultural backgrounds interpret *Stranger Things*' portrayal of the past. Comparative analyses between *Stranger Things* and other 80s nostalgia-driven media like *The Goldbergs, IT (2017),* or *Ready Player One* could reveal broader trends in how media industries shape collective memory. Additionally, exploring the economic implications of nostalgic marketing and brand revival might enhance understanding of how cultural memory becomes commodified in contemporary entertainment.

Stranger Things succeeds not because it perfectly recreates the 1980s, but because it captures how the decade is remembered. Through its visual design, music, and everyday culture, it transforms history into feelings; an emotional experience that unites generations and redefines how nostalgia works in the 21st century. The series ultimately reminds viewers that nostalgia is not a retreat into the past, but a reflection of the present: a way to understand who we are, what we long for, and how media continues to shape our relationship with time. In the end, *Stranger Things* is less about the 1980s than about our need to look back to make sense of the present. Its world of flickering neon lights, analog technology, and small-town mysteries has become a shared language through which audiences explore memory, identity, and belonging. The show's success proves that nostalgia, when handled sincerely, is not simply escapism: it is a mirror, revealing the ways we continue to remake the past to comfort, connect, and define ourselves in an ever-changing present.

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Appendix A


STRANGER THINGS
SEASON: 1 2 3 4
EPISODE:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Spaces
Objects
Clothing (Characters)
Music
WELCOME TO HAWKINS