

Study sheds light on how songs, movies and memories shape how people enjoy lighthearted entertainment

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We've all heard a song or seen a movie that brings back a memory or reminds us of an earlier time. A new study from the University of

Kansas has found that people tend to have more memories associated with older songs and movie clips than newer ones, and they tend to be happier memories as well. People also tend to appreciate content that triggers a memory more, and the findings help shed light on why people often find meaning in lighthearted entertainment such as pop music or superhero movies.

Researchers played song clips from artists either from the current day or roughly 10 years ago and did the same with [movie clips](#), then asked research participants about any associated memories from the samples. Older entertainment evoked more memories, and people appreciated older music more as well. They appreciated both forms more when they activated memories, regardless of when it was released.

"What we're trying to do is understand what happens when we encounter [media](#) and how that affects us. We also look at the implications regarding our sense of identity," said Judy Watts, assistant professor of journalism & [mass communications](#) at KU and a co-author of the studies.

"People often travel mentally back to a time period when they re-encounter beloved media, but we want to unpack what exactly they're experiencing when they do that. Did they have appreciation, happiness or other emotions? Music was picked for the first study because it tends to be especially nostalgic. The second study was designed to see if those same effects would happen with audiovisual cues."

The studies, written with co-authors James Alex Bonus and C. Joseph Francemone of Ohio State University, were published as a paper in the *Journal of Communication*.

For the music-based study, more than 400 [college students](#) heard six song selections from an artist, released either in 2020 or roughly a

decade earlier, during their early adolescence from artists such as Taylor Swift, John Legend or Charli XCX. They were asked whether the song activated a [memory](#), and if so to describe the memory.

They were also asked about their memory engagement with statements such as "I was so young and naïve in this memory," "life was so much simpler at the time of this memory" or "I felt completely immersed in this memory."

For the second study, more than 400 college students were similarly shown clips from a recent or older movie, such as "Frozen" or "Frozen II," or "Avengers: Endgame" or "Guardians of the Galaxy." They were then asked the same questions about whether the media had associated memories, and of what type.

As expected by the researchers, study one results showed older music produced more memory recall and the songs were more appreciated. Additionally, the memories associated with older music were also older, more positive and had more downward temporal comparisons—meaning participants felt that while the memories were positive, they also believed their lives were better now than at the time of the memory.

Whether a memory was specific or more social did not vary widely, but several variables such as memory recall, memory immersion and positive effect were predictors of appreciation. That suggests people appreciate any type of entertainment that activates a memory, the researchers wrote.

The study with movie clips replicated most of the memory-related findings from that conducted with music, particularly older pieces of media having more associated memories, and those being older, more positive and having more temporal comparisons.

One notable difference was that specific memories were a predictor of appreciation of the content versus general memories—and were associated with less appreciation. Also, appreciation did not differ between older and newer movies, but people had a higher level of appreciation overall for movies versus music.

The findings help further understanding of autobiographical memory and how media effects are part of such mental processes. While it has long been understood and accepted that a [song](#), movie or other piece of popular media can trigger a memory, little research has been conducted on whether these memories result in meaningful experiences.

In contrast, media effects research tends to focus on more "meaningful" media, such as highly regarded, classic or highbrow forms of entertainment, not necessarily lighter fare such as pop songs, superhero movies or other popular forms of entertainment, Watts said.

Better understanding of the emotional outcomes of such media-induced reminiscence is important as well, as such media can potentially help people deal with stress and negative feelings. That is especially true of the temporal findings explored in the study, or whether people feel like life was better at the time of a memory induced by media, or if they are doing better now than when they were younger, and what types of memories are associated with appreciation of media.

"We tend to assign meaning to pieces of entertainment we experience in formative times of our lives. That's typically cast off as something that's not particularly meaningful," Watts said.

"But we think it matters because it's about how you experienced it, often with people we care about, and when we revisit it, we can feel warm, happy or other emotions. We're interested in the psychological processes of [memory](#) and media, and it is one way, I think, to speak to a person's

memories, how they connect media to a time, place or people."

More information: James Alex Bonus et al, When "meaningless" means more: biographic resonance and audience appreciation of popular entertainment, *Journal of Communication* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/joc/jqac028](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqac028)

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