

MILLENNIAL GENERATION'S PERCEPTION OF NOSTALGIA-THEMED TOURISM IN SHAPING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This study examines how millennial tourists perceive nostalgia-themed tourism and how nostalgic emotional experiences are constructed during destination encounters. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving eight millennial visitors to nostalgia-oriented urban destinations. The findings demonstrate that nostalgic emotional experience is not an automatic response to sensory exposure but emerges through a layered and interpretive process shaped by the interaction of sensory activation, interpersonal authenticity, and reflective meaning-making. Visual and auditory cues such as heritage-style architecture, retro ambience, and old-era music function as initial triggers that activate autobiographical and collective memories and evoke emotional comfort. These emotional states are further reinforced through warm and personalized social interactions, which enhance perceptions of authenticity and emotional attachment. Conversely, inconsistencies in service delivery disrupt experiential continuity and weaken nostalgic immersion. Theoretically, this study advances nostalgia tourism and experience economy scholarship by conceptualizing nostalgia as a dynamic emotional process of reflection, identity negotiation, and emotional regulation rather than a static recall of the past. Practically, the findings suggest that destination managers should design nostalgia-themed tourism through coherent integration of atmospheric elements, human-centered service, and narrative storytelling to foster deeper emotional engagement and sustained destination appeal among millennial visitors.

Keywords: Nostalgia Tourism; Millennial Generation; Emotional Experience; Experience Economy; Urban Tourism.

1. Introduction

Global tourism continues to undergo transformation in line with shifting traveler preferences. In the past, tourism was primarily viewed as a recreational activity; however, a new paradigm has emerged that emphasizes the pursuit of more meaningful, personal, and emotional experiences. This shift aligns with the concept of the experience economy, in which the main value of a trip is no longer based solely on physical attractions, but also on the emotional engagement it creates (Vathari & Ritonga, 2023).

Within this context, nostalgia tourism has become an increasingly popular form of travel. This type of tourism evokes the past through attractions, ambience, and cultural experiences that stimulate both collective and personal memories. Previous studies show that nostalgia not only provides aesthetic enjoyment but also holds important psychological dimensions, such as enhancing satisfaction, fostering

emotional connection, and strengthening tourist loyalty toward a destination (Kafa & Berutu, 2025). Thus, nostalgia tourism can serve as an effective differentiation strategy for tourism destinations.

Millennials hold an important position in this trend. According to data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS) in 2025, the country's population reached approximately 284.4 million people. Of this number, the population aged 30–44, categorized as millennials, amounted to 64.5 million or around 22.7% of the total. This indicates that nearly a quarter of Indonesia's population belongs to this productive age group known for high mobility and diverse travel preferences. Meanwhile, in the Province of DKI Jakarta, Indonesia's center of social, economic, and cultural activity the population reached 10.6 million, with 2.49 million millennials aged 30–44, or roughly 23.4% of the total population. This significant proportion reinforces the strategic position of millennials as a key market in the development of urban tourism, including nostalgia-themed tourism. With characteristics that favor authentic, emotional, and meaningful experiences, this generation holds substantial potential in shaping tourism trends that emphasize not only entertainment but also emotional connection with historical values, culture, and past memories (Makawowor & Dewantara, 2023).

A similar phenomenon is evident in Indonesia. Retro-themed destinations such as Kota Tua Jakarta, Braga Bandung, and Malioboro Yogyakarta continue to attract young visitors (Ardiansyah & Julianto, 2023). Nostalgia-based initiatives have also been proven to increase visitation; for example, Nglanggeran Village recorded an increase of more than 200% in the past three years, with most visitors aged 18–35. In addition, the rise of vintage-themed cafés, retro music festivals, and traditional-style markets has gained strong popularity among urban youth. These facts demonstrate that nostalgia is not exclusive to older generations but also holds strong appeal among younger ones.

However, academic research on this topic remains limited. Much of the tourism literature still focuses on heritage tourism with an emphasis on conservation and education (Litta & Veronica, 2025). Studies that specifically examine millennials' perceptions of nostalgia tourism as an emotional experience are still scarce. Yet, it is precisely this emotional dimension that plays a crucial role in influencing satisfaction, revisit intention, and tourist loyalty.

Therefore, this research is important to conduct. Although millennials demonstrate a growing interest in nostalgia-themed tourism destinations, scholarly understanding of how they interpret, negotiate, and emotionally experience nostalgia within these settings remains limited. This study aims not only to explore millennials' perceptions of nostalgia tourism, but more critically to analyze the processes through which nostalgic emotional experiences are constructed during destination encounters. Specifically, the research examines how sensory cues, social interactions, and personal reflection interact to shape emotional meaning and attachment within nostalgia-themed tourism experiences. By doing so, this study seeks to explain how nostalgia tourism functions as an experiential mechanism that transforms memories of the past into emotionally meaningful experiences for contemporary millennial tourists.

Beyond its empirical contribution, this research advances the theoretical discussion on the experience economy and nostalgia tourism by positioning emotional experience as a dynamic and layered process rather than a static outcome. Practically, the findings provide an analytical foundation for urban destination managers to

strategically design nostalgia-themed environments and services that foster deeper emotional engagement and resonance among millennial visitors.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Experience Economy

The concept of the experience economy emphasizes the importance of creating memorable experiences through four key dimensions: education, esthetic, entertainment, and escapism (Juliana et al., 2023). These dimensions serve as the foundation for generating added value for consumers and tourists, not only creating lasting memories but also encouraging revisit intention, word of mouth, and industry sustainability. In line with this, experience-based tourism has been shown to significantly influence tourist satisfaction (Darmateja et al., 2025). However, satisfaction does not always directly lead to loyalty; consumer or tourist engagement through social interaction, active participation, and the pursuit of novelty becomes a crucial factor in strengthening emotional attachment and creating more meaningful experiences.

Other studies also show that the experience economy influences consumer behavior across various service contexts. For instance, within the tourism sector, three experience dimensions education, entertainment, and escapism positively affect tourist satisfaction, although the esthetic dimension is not always significant (Şeker & Unur, 2022). This underscores that the strength of each dimension may differ depending on the destination or service context. Furthermore, in service and restaurant industries, the experience economy plays an important role in shaping brand attitude, which ultimately enhances brand loyalty. Each experience dimension contributes differently depending on the form of service offered, whether technology-based or grounded in human interaction (Hwang et al., 2022).

2.2. Nostalgia Tourism

Studies on tourism indicate that tourists' emotional aspects particularly nostalgia and memorable tourism experiences play a crucial role in shaping behavior and perceptions of destinations. Zeng & Xu (2021) highlight that nostalgia is not homogeneous, but varies among individuals, shaped either through direct experience or cultural identity. This nostalgia drives visit motivation, emotional attachment, and the construction of both individual and group identity.

In line with this, Nguyen & Duong (2025) found that nostalgia strengthens destination image and supports the intention to share experiences through word of mouth. However, the influence of nostalgia on sustainable behavior is not direct; rather, it is mediated by factors such as destination image and satisfaction. This illustrates that the relationship between emotion, destination perception, and tourist behavior operates through a complex mechanism.

Meanwhile, Hidayat et al. (2024) emphasize that memorable tourism experiences significantly enhance satisfaction, destination image, and revisit intention. The quality of experience both in meaning and enjoyment proves to be a strategic factor that strengthens tourist loyalty and encourages destination promotion through recommendations.

2.3. Emotional Experience

Research on emotional experience in tourism suggests that emotions play a vital role in shaping tourists' perceptions, evaluations, and behaviors. Yang et al. (2023) highlight that cognitive evaluation of the tourism environment, whether natural or cultural, can evoke positive emotions such as awe or deep sentiment. These positive emotions act as mediators that strengthen cultural attachment and encourage more responsible tourist behavior toward destination conservation.

Hosany et al. (2021) expand this perspective by addressing methodological challenges in measuring tourist emotions. Common instruments such as self-reports are practical but often fail to capture the complexity of emotional experiences. Therefore, alternative approaches including psychophysiological measures, methodological triangulation, and real-time emotion tracking are needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Moreover, emotions are not merely positive or negative; they may co-occur and even remain in the subconscious, influencing tourist behavior.

Furthermore, Jordan & Prayag (2022) extend this understanding through the lens of cognitive appraisal theory, particularly within destinations associated with traumatic events. Their findings show that the emotions evoked both positive and negative can encourage individuals to adopt coping strategies, particularly emotion-focused coping. Such destinations may also serve as social spaces that enable reflection, emotional release, and the strengthening of resilience among individuals and communities. Thus, emotional experience in tourism not only affects tourist satisfaction but also contributes to broader social and psychological dimensions.

Overall, these studies reaffirm that emotional experience is a key element in tourism conceptually, methodologically, and practically. Emotions influence tourist perceptions and behaviors while also shaping cultural identity, destination conservation, and psychological well-being. Therefore, destination management must integrate strategies that evoke, manage, and measure emotional experiences more comprehensively to support tourism sustainability.

2.4. Millennial Tourism Preferences

According to Moedia & Pramitasari (2025), the advancement of Tourism 4.0 requires tourism destinations to adapt to the needs of younger generations, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, who currently make up the primary target market. This adaptation is reflected in the design of attractions that highlight visual and esthetic aspects as part of the visitor experience. Tourists tend to favor attractions that blend naturally with their surroundings through materials, colors, and forms to create harmony between artificial elements and the natural landscape. In addition, orderly and symmetrical designs are believed to enhance visual appeal, especially within the context of photography, which is an important part of young travelers' experiences. Thus, integrating artificial aesthetics with natural beauty becomes a key strategy in creating tourism experiences aligned with contemporary market preferences.

Similarly, Singgalen (2024) notes the rising popularity of staycations, particularly among millennials. Visitor preferences in this context are influenced by various factors, including demographic characteristics, types of accommodation, transportation modes, and choices of attractions and consumption. Young travelers use staycations as a practical form of recreation with relatively affordable costs, supported by easy access to digital information and proximity to their social

environment. This phenomenon indicates that tourism consumption is no longer solely driven by long-distance travel motivations, but also by the need for short, comfortable experiences aligned with modern lifestyles. Therefore, tourism product development must consider the characteristics and preferences of staycation tourists to remain relevant to market dynamics.

Furthermore, Juniarta et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of quality in alternative accommodations such as glamping in shaping positive tourist perceptions. Factors such as facilities, cleanliness, environmental quality, service, and architectural design are key indicators influencing satisfaction levels. These findings show that memorable tourism experiences are not determined solely by a destination's main attractions, but also by the quality of supporting services and environments. Hence, well-managed accommodations that prioritize cleanliness, comfort, natural landscape aesthetics, and friendly, professional service play an important role in enhancing satisfaction and encouraging loyalty through repeat visits.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explore millennials' perceptions of nostalgia-themed tourism in urban destinations, examine the process through which emotional experiences are formed, and explain how these experiences contribute to the creation of meaningful tourism encounters. This approach is considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of subjective perceptions and emotional meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement.

The primary research subjects consist of eight millennial tourists, in line with the number stated in the abstract. Millennials are defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1996, residing in Jakarta and its surrounding areas, and having direct experience visiting nostalgia-themed destinations such as Jakarta's Old Town, vintage-themed cafés, or retro music festivals. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on criteria including being between 30 and 44 years old, having firsthand experience with nostalgia-based tourism destinations, and demonstrating a willingness to openly share personal experiences and emotional reflections. The number of informants was deemed sufficient as thematic saturation was reached during the data collection process.

In addition to millennial tourists as the main informants, destination managers from nostalgia-themed sites (such as museums, retro cafés, or event organizers) were included as supporting informants to provide contextual insights into atmosphere design and experiential strategies. These supplementary perspectives were used to enrich interpretation rather than as primary analytical units.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation at selected tourism sites, and documentation in the form of social media content, photographs, videos, and related publications. In-depth interviews focused on informants' perceptions, emotional responses, and meaning-making processes. Participant observation allowed the researcher to capture ambience, interactions, and visitor expressions, while documentation supported data triangulation and contextual understanding.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure, involving interview transcription, open coding, category development, and the identification of key themes

and subthemes related to nostalgic emotional experiences. To enhance credibility, source triangulation was applied by comparing data obtained from tourists and destination managers.

This study adhered to basic research ethics principles. All informants participated voluntarily, provided informed consent prior to data collection, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Personal identities were anonymized, and the data were used solely for academic research purposes.

4. Results and Discussions

The findings of this study indicate that tourists' experiences of the destination are shaped through a layered perceptual process that extends beyond immediate sensory engagement and is mediated by memory, emotional disposition, and generational context. Although all informants occupied the same physical setting, they demonstrated markedly different perceptual constructions, indicating that nostalgic experience does not arise automatically from environmental exposure. Instead, nostalgia emerges through an interpretive process in which present experiences are continuously related to emotionally significant representations of the past. Empirically, this was reflected in the diversity of meanings attached to similar spatial and atmospheric cues, suggesting that nostalgia operates as a constructed mental experience rather than a uniform sensory reaction.

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that nostalgic perception was most frequently activated by environmental elements associated with childhood experiences, old-town ambience, and culturally shared memories of Indonesian heritage. Seven of the eight informants explicitly referred to heritage-style architecture, vintage ornaments, retro music, and warm lighting as triggers that evoked a sense of familiarity and emotional comfort largely absent from contemporary destinations. These elements were repeatedly associated with memories of family outings, early social environments, or formative life stages, indicating that sensory cues function as entry points into autobiographical recall. The dominance of environmental triggers across interviews supports the interpretation that the physical setting constituted the most salient catalyst for nostalgic perception, as evidenced by its consistent prominence within the thematic coding structure.

These findings suggest that nostalgic perception emerges when sensory stimuli activate autobiographical memory, which is then transformed into an interpretive process linking the destination atmosphere to personal identity narratives. In this sense, memory is not merely retrieved but actively reworked through reflection. This empirical pattern supports memory-based perspectives of nostalgia that emphasize identity continuity, while extending them by demonstrating that, for millennial tourists, autobiographical memory is reflexively interpreted in relation to present life contexts rather than recalled as a fixed representation of the past.

Emotional responses were found to play a central role in enabling access to nostalgic meaning. Across all interviews, informants consistently described their experiences using affective expressions such as comfort, calmness, warmth, and emotional ease. Notably, these affective states were described as emerging early in the experience and shaping subsequent interpretation, rather than appearing as outcomes after

cognitive evaluation. This indicates that emotional comfort functions as a structuring condition for nostalgic perception. Rather than merely responding to nostalgic stimuli, emotions guide how sensory cues are interpreted and connected to memory and self-understanding.

Within the discussion framework, this finding aligns with emotional appraisal perspectives that position emotion as an organizing force in experience interpretation. Extending this view, the findings demonstrate that in nostalgia-themed tourism, emotional responses operate as reflective catalysts that connect present affective states with autobiographical memory and identity continuity. Nostalgia, therefore, is not simply an emotional reaction to the past but a process through which emotions enable meaning-making and self-orientation within the tourism experience.

Social interaction also emerged as a significant mechanism reinforcing nostalgic perception, particularly in relation to authenticity. Most informants emphasized the warmth, attentiveness, and personalized nature of staff interactions, which were frequently contrasted with the impersonal character of contemporary service environments. For millennial tourists accustomed to digitally mediated communication, these interpersonal encounters were interpreted as emotionally authentic and contributed to the overall nostalgic atmosphere. Empirically, authenticity was thus experienced less through material heritage objects and more through affective social engagement.

This pattern supports relational and existential perspectives on authenticity, which conceptualize authenticity as emerging through social connection rather than material originality alone. The findings extend these perspectives by illustrating a shift in which authenticity within nostalgia tourism is primarily constructed through emotional resonance and interpersonal warmth. This reorientation highlights the growing importance of social and affective dimensions in shaping meaningful tourism experiences for millennials.

Several informants further noted that spatial layout and bodily movement contributed to nostalgic perception. Pedestrian paths, corridor patterns, and the rhythm of movement through the destination were associated with memories of older urban environments. These observations indicate that nostalgia can be activated through embodied spatial experience, even in the absence of explicit visual symbolism. Empirically, this was reflected in informants' references to how moving through space felt familiar rather than how it merely looked.

From a theoretical standpoint, this finding resonates with embodied cognition perspectives, which emphasize that memory and meaning are grounded in bodily engagement with space. The study extends existing nostalgia tourism research by demonstrating that nostalgic meaning is produced through embodied interaction and spatial navigation, thereby challenging approaches that privilege visual or purely cognitive explanations of nostalgia.

At the level of personal interpretation, nostalgic perception emerged through an internal dialogue between past and present. Informants associated nostalgia with childhood experiences, school and play environments, as well as emotionally grounded understandings of Indonesian history. These accounts reveal two primary pathways of

nostalgia construction: autobiographical memory rooted in lived experience and collective memory shaped by shared cultural narratives. Empirically, both pathways were often activated simultaneously, indicating that personal and social memories are intertwined in the formation of nostalgic meaning.

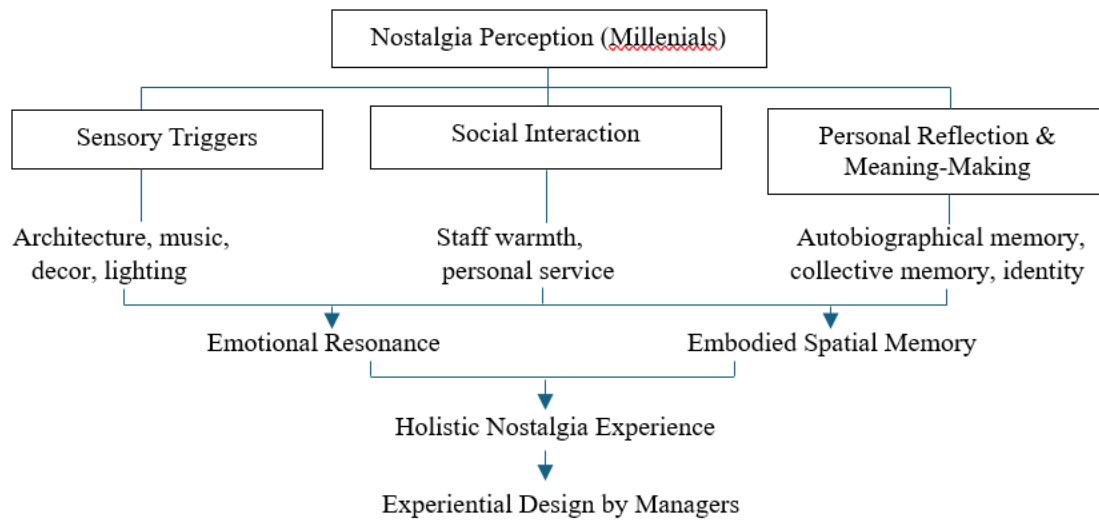
For millennial tourists, nostalgia functions as a mechanism of self-reconnection that supports emotional balance and identity continuity. Extending sociocultural memory theories, the findings demonstrate that millennial nostalgia is produced through an active negotiation between autobiographical and collective memory, allowing personal identity to be continuously constructed within culturally shared frames of meaning. While these findings illuminate millennial nostalgia within the Indonesian heritage context, the cultural specificity of collective memory suggests caution in extending this interpretation universally across different sociocultural settings.

Although most experiences were perceived positively, several informants reported that inconsistencies in service delivery disrupted experiential flow and weakened nostalgic perception. Delays, fragmented communication, or incomplete information interrupted emotional continuity, indicating that nostalgia is a fragile experiential state dependent on cohesive engagement. From an experience design perspective, this highlights the importance of maintaining uninterrupted experiential flow, as disruptions can fracture emotional immersion and diminish nostalgic meaning.

Insights from destination managers further revealed that nostalgia is intentionally curated as an experiential strategy rather than merely preserved as historical representation. Managers emphasized the deliberate translation of heritage identity into emotionally resonant experiences through architectural conservation, retro music selection, warm lighting, and narrative storytelling delivered via tours and interpretive media. This managerial orientation aligns with experience economy principles, framing nostalgia as an affective experience that must be actively designed and managed.

Managers also identified distinctive millennial behavioral patterns, including prolonged engagement in retro-themed spaces, strong interest in analog aesthetics, and heightened expectations for emotional authenticity. At the same time, they highlighted operational challenges related to maintaining service consistency during peak periods. To remain relevant, nostalgic content is continuously adapted to contemporary trends such as 1990s retro culture and creative community collaborations, underscoring the dynamic and evolving nature of nostalgic meaning rather than its attachment to a fixed historical moment.

Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Millennial Nostalgia Perception



Source: Data processed by the author, 2025

Figure 1 synthesizes these findings into a holistic conceptual model of millennial nostalgia perception. The model demonstrates that nostalgic experience emerges from the integration of sensory triggers, social interaction, embodied spatial engagement, and personal reflection. Sensory cues activate autobiographical and collective memory, social interaction reinforces affective authenticity, and embodied engagement anchors meaning in spatial experience. Personal reflection functions as the integrative mechanism through which these inputs are interpreted in relation to individual identity and life history, stabilizing nostalgic experience.

Unlike prior nostalgia tourism models that privilege sensory cues or memory recall alone, this model positions personal reflection as the central mediating mechanism that integrates sensory, social, and embodied dimensions into coherent nostalgic meaning. Theoretically, the study advances nostalgia tourism and experience economy scholarship by conceptualizing nostalgia as a dynamic process of emotional regulation and identity negotiation rather than a static emotional response to the past. By foregrounding reflection as an active mechanism, the study offers a more robust and defensible understanding of how nostalgic experiences are constructed and sustained within contemporary tourism contexts, particularly among millennial tourists navigating accelerated and fragmented modern life.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that millennials' nostalgic tourism experiences are constructed through an active and layered process of meaning-making rather than arising automatically from sensory exposure. Nostalgia emerges from the interaction of environmental cues, emotional responses, social interaction, embodied spatial experience, and personal reflection, which together connect present experiences with autobiographical and collective memories. Emotional comfort plays a structuring role early in the experience, guiding how sensory stimuli are interpreted and how authenticity

is perceived.

The findings contribute to nostalgia tourism and experience economy scholarship by conceptualizing nostalgia as a dynamic process of emotional regulation and identity negotiation rather than a static emotional response to the past. By positioning personal reflection as the central mediating mechanism, this study extends existing models that prioritize sensory cues or memory recall alone, demonstrating that nostalgic meaning is produced through the integration of sensory, emotional, social, and embodied dimensions. For millennial tourists, authenticity is therefore experienced primarily through emotional resonance and interpersonal engagement, rather than through material heritage in isolation.

From a practical perspective, destination managers should design nostalgia-themed tourism as emotionally coherent experiences instead of relying solely on visual or historical replication. Integrated sensory design, warm and personalized service interactions, and the maintenance of uninterrupted experiential flow are essential to sustaining nostalgic meaning. Spatial layout and bodily movement should also be intentionally considered, as embodied engagement significantly contributes to familiarity and emotional connection. To remain relevant for millennial visitors, nostalgic content should be treated as dynamic and adaptive, aligning heritage narratives with contemporary cultural references and creative trends. Future research is encouraged to examine the proposed conceptual model across different cultural and generational contexts in order to further validate the role of reflection in shaping nostalgic tourism experiences.

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