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# INTERGALACTIC NOSTALGIA: THE INTERTWINED NATURE OF MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND STAR WARS FANDOM

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the multifaceted relationship between nostalgia, commerce, and community within the Star Wars franchise. It analyzes how nostalgia, employed both as a narrative theme and a marketing strategy, has shaped the franchise's development and sustained its popularity. The study draws upon diverse fields including media, consumer culture, and fandom studies to understand nostalgia's role in connecting fans to the franchise's history and fostering a sense of collective identity. By analyzing Star Wars through Fredric Jameson's concept of the "nostalgia film," the paper investigates the origins of its nostalgic appeal within postmodern culture. It also explores how "reflective" and "restorative" nostalgia manifest in fans' relationships with different Star Wars properties. Utilizing a post-structuralism framework, the paper examines how the desire for Star Wars collectibles, often seen as an expression of the "extended self" – theoretical insights from Anthony Giddens and Russell Belk's works – contributes to individual identity and group belonging within the fandom. Ultimately, this analysis illuminates the far-reaching impact of nostalgia on fan culture, the cultural economy, interaction with media, and consumer practices.

KEYWORDS: Collecting, Fandom, Identity, Memory, Nostalgia, Star Wars, Toys.

#### I. INTRODUCTION

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." This iconic opening line instantly catapults



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audiences worldwide to the realm of Star Wars, firmly anchoring its narrative in the past. George Lucas's decision to position the story in a bygone era established a prevailing backward-looking aspect within the franchise, extending far beyond its mere temporality. This inherent nostalgia, combined with the release of merchandise like toys and action figures, has traditionally fostered a sense of connection and engagement among fans. However, the rise of digital content, from online platforms to video games, has dramatically transformed the way audiences interact with the franchise, reshaping the very perception and use of nostalgia. Star Wars not only utilizes nostalgia as a thematic element but also leverages it as a strategic marketing tactic. By capitalizing on the audience's yearning for the past, the franchise has cultivated a dedicated fanbase, sustained interest over decades, and ensured the successful release of sequels, prequels, and spin-offs. This nostalgic branding has played a significant role in the franchise's enduring cultural impact and longevity.

As Reynolds notes, "in the second half of the twentieth century, nostalgia became steadily more and more bound up with popular culture" and simultaneously "thoroughly entwined with the consumer-entertainment complex." This trend has intensified in recent years, with the rise of digital platforms and streaming services. Audiences can now revisit the familiar and beloved world of the original Star Wars trilogy through Disney+ popular TV shows like *The Mandalorian* (2019) and *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021). In a review article titled "The Mandalorian Is Pure Uncut Nostalgia, and That's What Makes It Great," Chris Gates praises the show for its veneration of the original films' aesthetics. Indeed, *The Mandalorian* is packed with nostalgic cues – from bringing back elements of the Star Wars' semi-forgotten past (e.g., Blurrgs from the made-for-TV movie *Ewoks: The Battle for Endor*) to dropping hints to the now non-canon Expanded Universe (EU) (e.g., mentioning the legendary Mythosaurs).

It is evident that Disney has embraced a marketing strategy of appealing to the emotional sentiments of longtime fans "to extend the franchise for future storytelling while playfully engaging with its past." This strategy effectively creates a strong bond between the franchise and its fans. By invoking shared memories and experiences, Star Wars builds a community of viewers who are emotionally invested, contributing to its enduring popularity and financial profitability. This is what Svetlana Boym refers to as "the souvenirisation of the past". That is "nostalgic longing was defined by loss of the original object of desire, and by its spatial and temporal displacement. The global entertainment industry of nostalgia [however] is characterized by an excess and complete availability of desirable souvenirs ... in the West objects of the past are everywhere for





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sale. The past eagerly cohabits with the present."

The concept of nostalgia is a vital tool for analyzing the evolution of franchises like Star Wars. However, current theoretical frameworks utilized for studying these franchises often overlook the emotional aspect of nostalgia. This is partly due to the fact that nostalgia is a heavily mediated experience in the digital age. The ever-increasing recycling of images, sounds, styles, and narratives, massively encouraged and enabled by participatory convergence culture, has led to an almost endless production of nostalgic content. Given these circumstances, it is only natural to wonder – are the reminiscences of the original trilogy in recent Star Wars films and TV shows simply fan service? Or does the saga's relationship to the past run deeper and longer?

This paper explores how the concept of nostalgia has influenced the development of the original Star Wars trilogy and what role it plays in the current practice of collecting material objects related to the franchise. Before delving deeper into the role of nostalgia in the development of the Star Wars franchise, it is essential to unpack the origins of the notion of nostalgia within cultural theory. This will provide a more robust foundation for understanding the transformative power of nostalgia in shaping the cultural economy and audience engagement with media franchises.

The origins of nostalgia within cultural theory are complex and multifaceted. It was initially considered a form of melancholia or homesickness (from the Latin words *nostos* – return home and *algia* – longing), a longing for a past that is unreachable. This understanding of nostalgia has gradually transformed, particularly with the advent of modernity and the increasing pace of social and technological change. Nostalgia has become less about pathological longing for a specific place and more about longing for a different time, often idealized and romanticized – a wistful yearning for the past. This shift is particularly evident in the increasing role of nostalgia in popular culture, where it is adopted and commodified across various media platforms.

The understanding of nostalgia has further evolved with the rise of new media and digital technologies. The internet, social media, and digital gaming have created new spaces for engaging with the past, offering more than just passive consumption of nostalgic content. These digital platforms provide an interactive space where users can actively recreate, reinterpret, and engage with their past. Scholars such as Charles Zwingmann and Svetlana Boym have extensively analyzed nostalgia as a crucial area of scholarly inquiry, exploring our relationship with time,



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place, and the media. In her seminal work, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym differentiates between two types of nostalgia – reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia. The former stems from a longing for lost time or objects, often associated with personal memories and experiences. It's introspective, dwelling on the gaps and distances of time.

The latter, in comparison, focuses on reconstructing the past in the present, bringing back or reimagining cultural traditions, historical periods, or idealized versions of the past. It's proactive, seeking to shape the present in the image of an idealized past. In the context of the Star Wars franchise, these two forms of nostalgia are evident in fans' reactions to different trilogies and TV shows. The original trilogy often evokes reflective nostalgia, cherished as a relic of childhood, while newer installments may stimulate restorative nostalgia, attempting to recapture and reproduce beloved elements of the Star Wars universe. The recent release of Star Wars movies and TV shows such as *Solo*, *Rogue One*, *The Mandalorian*, *Obi-Wan*, and *The Book of Boba Fett* exemplifies restorative nostalgia. These productions aim to recreate the aesthetics and sensibilities of the original trilogy, providing fans with a familiar yet fresh experience.

This demonstrates the producers' awareness of the nostalgia factor and its potential to engage audiences. However, the use of nostalgia is not without its criticisms. While some fans appreciate the return to the original aesthetics, others feel that it lacks originality and relies too heavily on past successes. Despite these criticisms, the use of nostalgia in the Star Wars franchise continues to be a powerful tool for attracting audiences, demonstrating that our longing for the past is a potent force in contemporary culture.

#### II. STAR WARS AS A "NOSTALGIA FILM"

Although Star Wars laid the groundwork for a new generation of science fiction texts in the 1980s and 1990s, the franchise itself presents a curious blend of futuristic and nostalgic elements. While its technology appears cutting-edge, it often draws on familiar tropes like X-Wing fighters inspired by WWII bombers, or the iconic Mos Eisley Cantina scene echoing the ubiquitous saloon sequences of classic Westerns. This intriguing fusion has led to the categorization of Star Wars as a "nostalgia film," a term adopted by postmodern critic Fredric Jameson to describe a cinematic form emerging in the 1970s. Jameson argued that nostalgia films, drawing from a vast array of historical periods and media forms, extract specific tropes, motifs, and clichés to create a pastiche of past voices, aesthetics, and visuals.



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This blending of past and present creates a unique cinematic experience, and Jameson saw it as a response to the American audience's yearning for the perceived "innocence" of the past. He pointed specifically to the Saturday afternoon television serials of the 1950s, such as Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, as sources for this nostalgic longing. Jameson used a term "atemporal nostalgia" to denote such a longing for the past that exists alongside the present, unconstrained by time. Contemporary cultural critics have further identified nostalgia as a symptom of a broader postmodern condition. Paul Grainge suggests that the backward-looking longing and accompanying sense of nostalgia constitute a "mode" within art, "symptomatic of the postmodern 'crisis of historicity'." Nostalgia, often perceived as an inhibiting and emotional phenomenon that reacts against change and modernity, represents a yearning for the past while simultaneously manifesting as dissatisfaction with the present. Lincoln Geraghty directly links the emergence of Star Wars to the social and political climate in America, particularly the demise of the so-called "victory culture" as described by Tom Engelhardt. In 1977, America was grappling with a range of social and political issues, including a severe recession, the ambiguous outcomes of the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal, which further eroded public trust in the political system. In this context, the creation of a fictional world with allusive comments and critiques of contemporary issues offered a sense of escapism.

The historical context further ties Star Wars to the notion of nostalgia, as it:

...is especially likely to exist when a society is under pressure, providing a framework for people to think about what is going wrong and what should be done about it. In this instance, nostalgia takes on an ideological dimension, where images of the past, albeit distorted, hold a certain appeal, and individuals embrace these past visions without critical appraisal. Rather than confronting the realities of the present, individuals can retreat to a comforting past that never truly existed or that belonged to someone else.

Conceived as a way to "cope with reality" and re-establish a sense of hope, Star Wars narratives are deeply rooted in classical archetypes and universal themes that resonate across cultures and generations. Furthermore, the franchise's unique blend of nostalgia-driven themes serves as a powerful tool for audience engagement. It creates a comforting familiarity while inviting viewers to explore these themes in new and unexpected ways. Will Seabrook points out that films initially created to evoke nostalgia will naturally attract individuals yearning to rekindle those emotions,



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chasing an increasingly elusive image of a mythic past.

This escape to a simpler time – a place where good and evil is clearly defined, and where heroes triumph over villains – can be argued as one of the key reasons behind the enduring popularity of Star Wars. In this manner, the franchise's success can be attributed not only to its captivating storytelling but also to its distinctive nostalgic aesthetic, its ability to tap into a collective sense of longing and remembrance. By employing a timeless narrative structure akin to the Hero's Journey, the stories in the Star Wars franchise manage to be both innovative and familiar, offering audiences a sense of comfort while simultaneously challenging their perspectives.

# III. POST-MODERN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH STAR WARS CONSUMPTION

The enduring popularity of the Star Wars franchise transcends mere entertainment, reaching deeply into the hearts and homes of its devotees, particularly through the act of collecting. While the franchise's success can be partly attributed to its nostalgic aesthetic, it's crucial to understand the multifaceted nature of collecting practices and the complex interplay of nostalgia, memory, and identity that they represent. The act of collecting Star Wars merchandise, often driven by nostalgia, is not a simple, singular act. Though somewhat overlooked in comparison to fan costuming (cosplay) and pilgrimage, the practice of collecting items of popular media culture has recently been brought to the forefront of Fandom Studies. Lincoln Geraghty, in his monograph Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture, aptly highlights memory and nostalgia as central motivations for adult fan collectors. While nostalgia undeniably plays a vital part, a critical examination reveals that it is not the sole factor driving this practice. Indeed, the relentless barrage of Star Wars merchandise, marketed to evoke a sense of familiarity and comfort associated with the past, can create a manufactured longing for a "golden age" of childhood.

This can be viewed as a form of manipulation, creating a longing for a past that may not have been as idyllic as it is perceived. As Joseph Partin points out in his Master's thesis, "The Commodification of Nostalgia: Star Wars, Advertising, and The Collectors," this manufactured yearning is often fueled by advertising strategies that evoke a sense of comfort and familiarity associated with the past. Such a focus on the commodification of nostalgia can lead to a negative perception of collecting as a form of consumption rather than production. However, the emotional connection collectors feel towards these objects is genuine. They often view their acquisitions not merely as nostalgic objects, but as symbolic representations of their identity. The internet has



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further amplified this complex relationship between collecting and nostalgia. Online auctions, forums, and virtual hangouts provide collectors with opportunities to connect with others who share their passion, engage in discussions, and participate in a global marketplace for Star Wars memorabilia.

This interconnectedness, facilitated by digital platforms, creates a unique relationship between personal and collective memory, blurring the lines between individual experiences and shared cultural narratives. A real-life example of post-modern nostalgia linked to Star Wars collecting practice is a long-running YouTube show Звёздные коллекции [Star Collections] (former Illuminator Star Wars). In each episode of this show, a group of 2-4 hosts discuss their collections of Star Wars collecting figures, toys, and memorabilia. This group's (re)collection of the past is not linked to a particular time or spatial frame, neatly fitting the definition of the postmodern atemporal nostalgia, which flattens out the difference between past and present. Additionally, the group primarily interacts and acquires their valuable collectables online, reflecting a characteristic of post-modern nostalgia that involves recycling images, objects, and styles from the recent past, with the Internet serving as a key platform for this recycling process. Notably, some of the hosts first met online and only later gathered face-to-face. For them, the act of sharing their experience of the first encounter with the original Star Wars trilogy as well as admiring features of the collectables ties them both together and with their viewers into a closeknit group. This aligns with Anthony Giddens' concept of "symbolic tokens," where individuals in modern society seek to define their identities through the acquisition and display of symbolic objects. This self-identification within the larger fandom is further explored by Lincoln Geraghty, who, referencing Kendall L. Walton's work, suggests that toys evolve beyond mere playthings, becoming emblems of personal identity. The experience of playing with action figures in childhood helps collectors to establish more complex relationships with the toys and figures in their adulthood.

This emotional connection enhances the objects' perceived value, transforming them from mere objects of play to cherished artifacts within the fan community. The participants in Partin's documentary, "The Collectors," reveal a shared sentiment: collecting Star Wars merchandise evokes a strong sense of nostalgia, serving as a tangible link to cherished childhood memories. In her work Nostalgia and the Power of Memory in the Digital Age, Elizabeth E. Guffey observes that nostalgia acts as a "tug of childhood memory" or a "flooding joy of relief," triggering deep



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emotional responses within individuals. This subjective experience, while shaped by external factors, is not devoid of genuine emotion. The re-experiencing of childhood memories through the acquisition of Star Wars merchandise can indeed provide a sense of comfort and connection. This becomes further evident while studying the case of the YouTube channel "Collection Wars," where the hosts recall taking their Star Wars action figures to the elementary school as the time when "the world was innocent." The act of collecting, therefore, transcends mere material acquisition. It becomes a form of cultural participation, a way of engaging with the Star Wars universe on a deeper level, constructing a personal narrative through the tangible objects that embody this shared cultural experience. The value of such objects is often defined by the sense of nostalgia. While market value can be determined based on year of production, condition, and the number of remaining copies, the sentimental memories tied to personal collections significantly impact the valuation process. For sellers and buyers, the transaction goes beyond a strict business

deal, reflecting the emotional weight attached to these objects. This imbues Star Wars toys and

collectibles with a unique cultural significance, transforming them into "cultural commodities"

that can be procured and exchanged. Companies like Regal Robot capitalize on the nostalgic

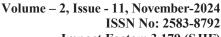
appeal of the original trilogy by producing prop replicas, themed furniture, and unique collectibles.

Their limited-edition releases, coupled with strong marketing strategies that create a sense of urgency, further fuel the desire to own and possess these "cultural commodities." The company's Star Wars Archive Collection & Replicas offers avid collectors a one-of-a-kind opportunity to acquire replicas of rare concept maquettes from the extensive Lucasfilm archives. The founder of Regal Robot, Tom Spina, emphasizes the transformative power of the original Star Wars film, which ignited his passion for sculpting and prop creation. The Star Wars collecting practice, therefore, reveals a multifaceted phenomenon driven by a complex interplay of nostalgia, personal and collective identity, and the influence of consumer culture. The act of collecting, whether driven by genuine nostalgia, the allure of rare objects, or a desire to connect with a shared cultural history, represents a deeper engagement with the Star Wars universe and a powerful expression of fandom in the modern era.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the complex interplay of nostalgia, commerce, and community within the enduring legacy of Star Wars. Through its narrative themes and strategic marketing, the franchise has cultivated a devoted fanbase and become a powerful force in the cultural economy. By





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analyzing Star Wars as a "nostalgia film," as defined by Fredric Jameson, the paper has revealed the origins of the nostalgic longing inherent in the franchise, situating its success within the broader context of postmodern culture. This nostalgic aesthetic, fueled by the franchise's skillful manipulation of "reflective nostalgia" and "restorative nostalgia," has generated a deep emotional connection with audiences, contributing to the franchise's enduring appeal across generations. The paper further delved into the intricate relationship between nostalgia, identity, and memory within the Star Wars fandom, particularly through the lens of collecting practices. It argued that the act of collecting Star Wars merchandise transcends mere nostalgic sentiment, becoming a powerful means of identity construction, memory preservation, and social connection.

Drawing upon theoretical insights from fandom studies and consumer culture, the paper demonstrated how the digital sphere has profoundly impacted the collecting experience, facilitating a global community of collectors and transforming the relationship between personal and collective memory. This analysis underscores the need for nuanced understandings of nostalgia within fan culture and the broader cultural economy. It reveals nostalgia as a potent force that shapes identity, fosters community, and fuels a thriving marketplace. As fans continue to engage with the Star Wars franchise through collecting, participating in online communities, and contributing to the ongoing narrative of the franchise, they demonstrate the enduring power of nostalgia to bridge the gap between past and present, uniting generations in their shared passion for a galaxy far, far away.

Ultimately, the success of Star Wars lies in its ability to tap into the profound human need for connection, comfort, and belonging. The franchise provides a familiar and comforting escape while also offering opportunities for exploration, innovation, and the creation of new meaning. As we navigate an ever-changing world, the nostalgia embedded in Star Wars serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring influence of the past on our present and future. Through a poststructuralist lens, the paper has examined how the practice of collecting Star Wars merchandise transcends mere nostalgia, becoming a means of identity construction, a way of preserving memories, and a conduit for social connection.

This analysis has broader implications for fandom studies and cultural theory. By understanding how nostalgia functions within the Star Wars fandom, we can gain a deeper understanding of how fans engage with the media and construct their identities. Moreover, the study of nostalgia in Star Wars can serve as a model for analyzing other franchises and fandoms, shedding light on the



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enduring power of this complex and multifaceted sentiment in shaping our cultural landscape. By highlighting the complexities of nostalgia within the Star Wars fandom, this analysis underscores its multifaceted nature and its significance in shaping contemporary culture. As we navigate rapid technological advancements and societal changes, the nostalgic elements within Star Wars serve as a reminder that even as we venture into the unknown, we carry with us the stories, symbols, and values of the past – a form of nostalgia that anchors us amidst change.

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