

Revisiting National Nostalgia: Make America Moral Again!

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Abstract

Sometimes people miss the “good old days” of their country. This *national nostalgia* can fuel populist movements worldwide, rallying supporters with promises of restored glory. Socio-psychological work has characterized national nostalgia as a coping mechanism for collective self-discontinuity, but it remains theoretically unclear which aspect of collective identity (e.g., national, political, or moral) is most central in shaping national nostalgia. We propose the *Moral Nostalgia Hypothesis* (MNH), which posits that moral identity is central. MNH predicts trait sensitivity, meaning that people who prioritize moral values are dispositionally prone to national nostalgia, and threat sensitivity, meaning that perceived moral decline evokes nostalgia more strongly than economic decline as a situational response. We test MNH across four studies in 20 societies ($N = 4,924$) using surveys and two centuries of English and Chinese texts. Values tied to hierarchy and tradition emerged as the strongest dispositional predictors of national nostalgia, even after controlling for multiple individual- and societal-level variables, while perceived fairness decline was the most powerful situational trigger. These findings identify moral identity content, rather than material welfare or generic group cues, as the key mechanism linking collective self-discontinuity to national nostalgia, illuminating why nostalgic political rhetoric framed as moral restoration resonates so powerfully.

Keywords: national nostalgia, moral decline, self-discontinuity, political rhetoric

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Humans have long relied on cooperation for survival. From foraging to defense, most tasks are inefficient or impossible to accomplish without cooperation (Henrich & Muthukrishna, 2021). Cooperation endures across generations only when people perceive their groups as stable and enduring, which is known as *collective self-continuity*, the sense that “we” remain the same entity over time despite shifting social, political, and economic conditions (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sani et al., 2008; Sedikides et al., 2023; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2014). When continuity feels threatened, groups risk fragmentation and reduced cooperation (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013).

One psychological response to such threats is *collective nostalgia*, a longing for the group’s past (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019; Smeekes et al., 2023). Collective nostalgia can restore a sense of temporal stability and cooperation, yet like other mechanisms that heighten the salience of collective identity, collective nostalgia is a double-edged sword: it can strengthen solidarity among ingroup members while sharpening intergroup boundaries and fostering exclusion (Wildschut et al., 2014). Smeekes, 2019b has cataloged several triggers of collective nostalgia (e.g., perceived collective discontinuity, relative deprivation) and documented its consequences (ingroup protection, outgroup rejection). However, no existing theory has yet identified which aspects of group identity make discontinuity most psychologically destabilizing, leaving the underlying mechanism underdeveloped.

We try to address this gap with the *Moral Nostalgia Hypothesis (MNH)*, which proposes that shared moral values, more than group cues or material concerns, anchor the collective self. In this sense, collective nostalgia is recruited as a moral emotion to safeguard collective self-continuity. MNH frames moral identity threats as the most powerful triggers of collective nostalgia. Drawing on research on the essential moral self, which shows that moral traits are central to self-continuity such that moral loss implies self-loss (Strohming & Nichols, 2014), even moderate changes to a person’s moral identity lead others to perceive them as fundamentally different. We extend these insights to the

group level. If moral values define “who I am” as an individual, they can also serve as the foundation of “who we are” as a group. Thus, shared moral decline should uniquely threaten a group’s sense of self. Building on past evidence on collective self-continuity and nostalgia (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019; Smeekes et al., 2023), MNH suggests that nostalgia functions as an affective mechanism that reestablishes a morally coherent image of the collective. In this view, nostalgia is not merely sentimentality or partisan rhetoric, but a moralized emotion that is recruited to regulate cooperation by orienting groups toward a morally imagined past.

If collective nostalgia is morally relevant, then, drawing on MNH, we derive two corollaries specifying its mechanism: *who* is most susceptible at a dispositional level and *when* it is most likely to arise at a situational level. First, regarding *Trait-sensitivity* (who is most susceptible, dispositional), if moral traits are central to personal identity (moral loss \sim self-loss) and groups are incorporated into the self-concept (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Strohming & Nichols, 2014), then individuals who chronically endorse moral values should be especially prone to collective nostalgia, even in the absence of an immediate threat. Their strong moral commitment heightens motivation to preserve the group’s moral image (Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Lasaleta et al., 2024; Skitka et al., 2005). Second, regarding *Threat-selectivity* (when nostalgia is most likely to arise, situational), among threats to collective self-continuity, *perceived moral decline* should be the most powerful trigger. Moral deterioration suggests that “we are no longer the same us,” whereas economic or material decline undermines welfare without directly challenging the group’s moral essence (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019; Smeekes et al., 2023; Strohming & Nichols, 2014).

To empirically test MNH, we focus on *national nostalgia*, where the group is one’s country. National identity is a universally salient form of group membership, rich with historical narratives, and deeply tied to contemporary political behavior, making it both theoretically meaningful and methodologically practical for studying collective nostalgia.

With only one exception (e.g., organizational nostalgia; (Leunissen et al., 2024)), most research on collective nostalgia has centered on nations, and the literature often uses the terms *collective nostalgia* and *national nostalgia* interchangeably (Smeekes et al., 2023; Wildschut et al., 2014). To evaluate MNH’s distinctiveness, we directly compare moral values and perceived moral decline against alternative explanations, including political ideology and national identification, thereby specifying morality as the key identity content underlying national nostalgia.

Present Research

We derive two specific predictions from MNH and test them across four studies.

Trait-sensitivity Prediction

Endorsement of moral values is the strongest predictor of national nostalgia, above and beyond political ideology, national identification, personal nostalgia, and several key control variables. This prediction is tested in Studies 1 and 2. Specifically, Study 1 examines trait-sensitivity prediction in a U.S. sample. This foundational test is necessary to establish morality as an independent explanatory factor in national nostalgia. We operationalize moral values using Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; (Atari et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2013)), a socio-cultural framework that defines morality across six domains: care (sensitivity to others’ suffering), equality (fairness and in-kind reciprocity), proportionality (rewards and punishments based on merit), loyalty (group obligations), authority (respect for hierarchy and tradition), and purity (values related to chastity). Next, Study 2 replicates and extends this test across 19 countries to evaluate whether the morality–national nostalgia link is robust across diverse cultural and economic contexts. Because the salience of specific moral foundations varies across cultures, this study examines whether the link between morality and national nostalgia is universal or instead bounded by cultural context. Controlling for economic indicators (e.g., GDP, inequality, unemployment) and cultural variables (e.g., individualism, cultural distance to the U.S.) ensures that the observed effects are not artifacts of structural context.

Threat-selectivity Prediction

Perceived decline in shared moral values predicts national nostalgia more strongly than perceived economic decline (controlling for political ideology and national identification). This prediction is tested in Studies 3 and 4. Specifically, in Study 3, using a U.S. sample, we directly compare perceived moral decline with perceived economic decline to predict national nostalgia, while controlling for political ideology, national identification, and moral values themselves. Study 3 isolates the relative contribution of moral versus non-moral threats. Lastly, Study 4 takes a historical approach, analyzing two centuries of American and Chinese texts to examine whether concerns about moral decline and national nostalgic expression co-fluctuate over time. The very notion of moral decline is inherently temporal, presupposing that present standards are worse than those of the past. While Study 3 captures this perception through self-report, such measures are bound to contemporary frames of reference. Historical text analysis provides an ecologically valid test of the hypothesis by treating language as a cultural archive, allowing us to examine whether moral decline and nostalgia reliably co-occur across generations (Chen et al., 2024). Including both American (COHA) and Chinese (People’s Daily) corpora assesses whether the link holds across two traditions with distinct moral frameworks.

Study 1

The primary goal of Study 1 is to determine if moral values predict national nostalgia in the American context. The analysis controls for a range of related variables, including personal nostalgia, the general tendency to live in the past or future, memory vividness, conservatism, national identification, and age.

Methods

Participants were recruited through Prolific ($N = 622$), with the sample stratified by political orientation and gender. They first completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire-2 to assess moral values (Atari et al., 2023), followed by control measures, the National Nostalgia Scale (Smeekes, 2019a), and demographic questions.

Measures

Moral Foundation Questionnaire-2 (MFQ-2). We assessed moral values using the Moral Foundation Questionnaire-2 (MFQ-2), which measures six domains: Care, Equality, Proportionality, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity (Atari et al., 2023). Participants rated 36 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (Does not describe me at all) to 5 (Describes me extremely well). A sample item for each foundation is, respectively: “It pains me when I see someone ignoring the needs of another human being.” (Care); “I believe that everyone should be given the same quantity of resources in life.” (Equality); “I think people who are more hard-working should end up with more money.” (Proportionality); “Everyone should love their own community.” (Loyalty); “I think having a strong leader is good for society.” (Authority); “I admire people who keep their virginity until marriage.” (Purity). In the present sample, the Cronbach’s α coefficients for the subscales were strong: Care ($\alpha = .89$), Equality ($\alpha = .87$), Proportionality ($\alpha = .78$), Loyalty ($\alpha = .85$), Authority ($\alpha = .87$), and Purity ($\alpha = .86$).

National Nostalgia. To assess *national nostalgia*, we used four items ($\alpha = .86$) adapted from (Smeekes, 2019a). Participants responded on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items include: “I get nostalgic when I think back to my country in past times,” “I experience nostalgic feelings when I hear my country’s music of the past,” “I often long for the old days of my country,” and “I often think back about the good old days.” We averaged the four items to form a composite score ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.54$).

Personal Nostalgia. We measured personal nostalgia using the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (Routledge et al., 2011). Participants responded to items (e.g., “How often do you experience nostalgia?”, “How prone are you to feeling nostalgic?”) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Does not describe me at all) to 5 (Describes me extremely well). We averaged the five items to form a composite score, where higher scores reflect greater nostalgia proneness ($\alpha = .91$; $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.45$).

Past Orientation. To assess past orientation, we used a single-item created for this study, which asks: “If you were to live in a different time, would you prefer to live in the future or the past?” Responses were coded such that 0 corresponds to Future and 1 corresponds to Past ($M = 0.66$, $SD = 0.47$).

Past Vividness. We measured past vividness with a single item developed for this study, which asks: “Which time (the past vs. the future) can you more vividly imagine in your mind?” Responses were coded such that 1 = Distant future, 2 = Near future, 3 = Recent past, and 4 = Distant past ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.84$).

Conservatism. We measured conservatism with a single item on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*Left/Progressive*) to 6 (*Right/Conservative*). Participants’ average score was $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.62$.

National Identification. To measure national identification, we asked participants to rate their agreement with the statement “I identify with my country” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). We averaged responses to form a composite score ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.59$).

Results and Discussion

To isolate the unique contribution of moral values in predicting national nostalgia, we ran two sequential multiple regression models in R (R Core Team, 2021). The first model (Model 1), which included only the control variables, was statistically significant, $F(6, 448) = 70.52$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 48.6% of the variance in national nostalgia

The second model (Model 2) extended Model 1 by including the six moral values as additional predictors and was also statistically significant, $F(12, 442) = 47.95$, $p < .001$. This new model accounted for 56.6% of the total variance, explaining an additional 8% of the variance in national nostalgia (see Figure 1).

A comparison of the models reveals that the inclusion of moral values in Model 2 partially accounted for the effects of national identification, conservatism, and equality. Specifically, the coefficient for national identification dropped from $b = 0.320$ ($SE = 0.046$;

$t = 6.90, p < .001$) in Model 1 to $b = 0.185$ ($SE = 0.051; t = 3.61, p < .001$) in Model 2. Similarly, the coefficient for conservatism dropped from $b = 0.135$ ($SE = 0.044; t = 3.05, p = .003$) in Model 1 to $b = 0.106$ ($SE = 0.047; t = 2.24, p = .026$) in Model 2. Finally, equality emerged as a significant predictor in Model 2 ($b = 0.125, SE = 0.045; t = 2.76, p = .006$). These reductions in coefficients suggest that the moral values included in Model 2 partially account for the effects of national identification and conservatism on national nostalgia.

Regarding the effects of group-based moral values, equality ($b = 0.125, SE = 0.045, t = 2.76, p = .006$) and authority ($b = 0.256, SE = 0.063, t = 4.08, p < .001$) were significant predictors of national nostalgia in Model 2.

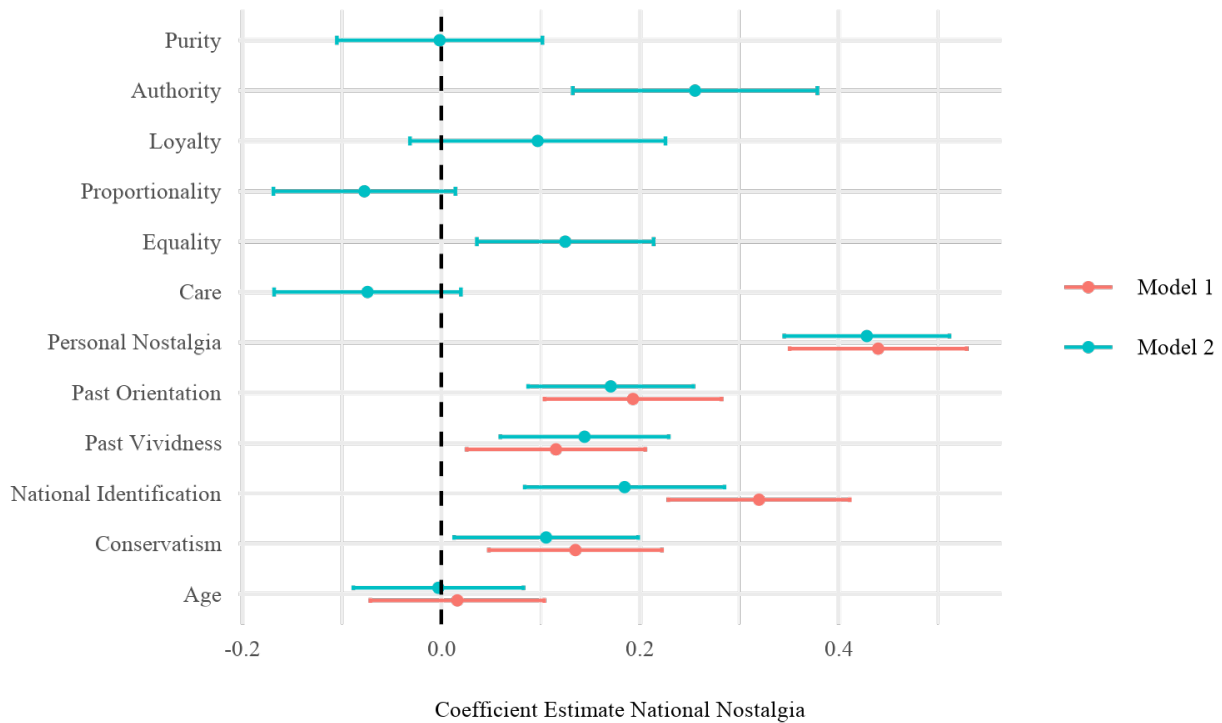


Figure 1

Standardized regression coefficients from Study 1 predicting national nostalgia. Orange and green dots represent coefficients from Models 1 and 2, respectively. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

The findings of Study 1 provide initial support for the trait-sensitivity corollary of the MNH. Moral values explained unique variance in national nostalgia beyond political conservatism, national identification, and dispositional nostalgia.

Consistent with prior work portraying nostalgia as predominantly conservative and hierarchical in nature (Smeekes et al., 2021), we found that conservatives were generally more nostalgic. However, the effects of authority and equality were not moderated by conservatism, indicating that these moral commitments contribute to nostalgic sentiment across the ideological spectrum, suggesting a broadly moral rather than purely partisan basis for national nostalgia.

Because Study 1 focused on a single national context, it remains unclear whether the association between moral values and national nostalgia generalizes across societies that differ in cultural and economic conditions. Study 2 therefore extends the test of the trait-sensitivity corollary across 19 diverse societies while examining potential macro-level moderators.

Study 2

Building on Study 1, which established a link between moral values and national nostalgia in the United States, Study 2 examines the cross-cultural generalizability of this finding. We test whether moral foundations consistently predict national nostalgia across 19 diverse nations ($N = 3,902$), deliberately selected based on cultural distance metrics (Muthukrishna et al., 2020) to ensure broad variation in cultural and economic contexts.

Participants completed the same primary measures as Study 1: MFQ-2 and the National Nostalgia Scale. Our analysis controlled for the same individual-level factors (including personal nostalgia, ideology, and age) and also introduced key national-level variables, such as the Human Development Index (HDI), the Gini Index (a measure of income inequality), GDP, and the Misery Index.

Methods

Our cross-cultural investigation involved 3,902 participants, recruited from nationally stratified samples across 19 countries to reflect national demographics of gender, education, and age. The selected countries—Argentina, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Egypt, France, Ireland, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Nigeria, Peru, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates, were chosen to represent a broad spectrum of cultural distances (Muthukrishna et al., 2020). Data collection was managed by Qualtrics Panels, resulting in cohorts of 205-207 participants per nation. Prior to administration, all study materials were translated into Spanish, French, Arabic, Japanese, and Russian using the standard back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970), with independent bilingual researchers verifying the translations to ensure accuracy and resolve any discrepancies.

Measures

In addition to the individual-level variables examined in Study 1, our analysis incorporated the following society-level covariates:

GDP. We incorporated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to assess each country’s economic performance. GDP, which measures the total value of all goods and services produced within a nation’s borders in a specific period (typically one year), is a common proxy for a nation’s economic prosperity and standard of living. The GDP data used in this study were collected from the World Bank Data website¹ Notably, all GDP figures were log-transformed prior to analysis to normalize their distribution.

Gini Index. We incorporated the Gini coefficient to measure country-level income inequality. The Gini coefficient, a statistical measure that quantifies the degree of income distribution inequality within a country, ranges from 0 to 100. A score of 0 represents perfect equality (where everyone has the same income), whereas a score of 100 represents perfect inequality (where one person has all the income). The Gini coefficient data used in

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

this study were obtained from the World Bank’s Data website².

Misery Index. We utilized the Misery Index to assess the overall level of economic distress in each country. The Misery Index, an economic indicator designed to measure financial hardship, is calculated by combining a nation’s unemployment rate with its inflation rate. The data for this measure were obtained from Statista³.

Individualism. To account for cultural differences in social values, we included a measure of country-level individualism. This dimension contrasts individualistic cultures, which emphasize personal rights, autonomy, and self-reliance, with collectivistic cultures, where preference is given to group harmony, cooperation, and integration into the social structure (Oyserman, 2017). The country-level individualism indices used in this study were obtained from Hofstede (Hofstede, 2013).

Human Development Index (HDI). We included the Human Development Index (HDI) to provide a broad assessment of national well-being and quality of life. The HDI, a composite statistic from the United Nations, evaluates a country’s overall development by incorporating three key dimensions: life expectancy, education (based on mean and expected years of schooling), and per capita income. The data for this index were obtained from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Reports⁴.

Results and Discussion

Similar to the first study, we ran two models: Model 1, which excluded moral values, and Model 2, which included moral values. To account for the nested nature of our data, we used multilevel models using “lme4” R package (Bates et al., 2015). Figure 2 illustrates the variations in national nostalgia across 19 nations.

Model 1 accounted for 43% of the variance in national nostalgia when considering

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/227162/most-miserable-countries-in-the-world/>

⁴ <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index>

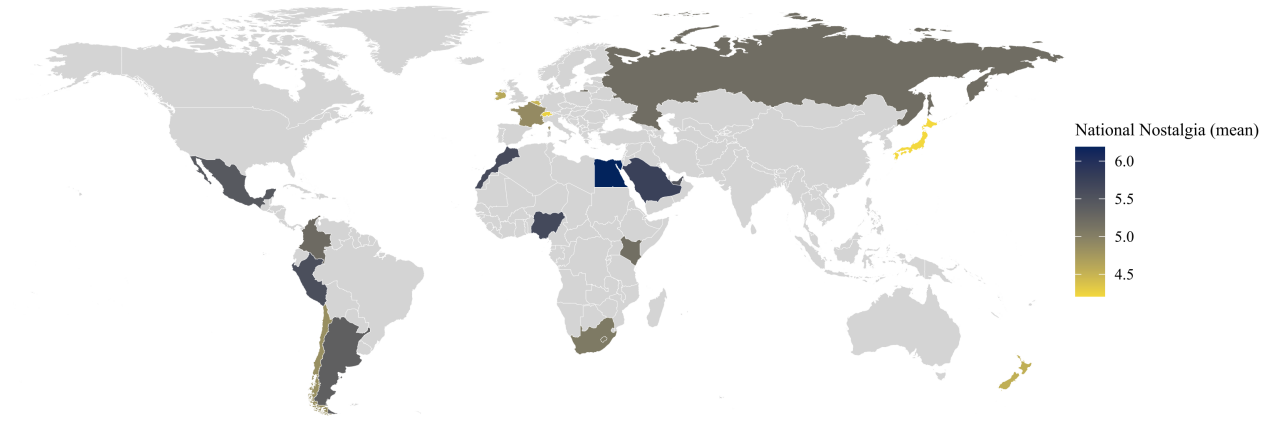


Figure 2

Country-level means of National nostalgia across 19 nations; darker shading indicates higher scores. Countries with no data are shown in gray.

only the fixed effects, and 44% when including both fixed and random effects. Model 2 extended Model 1 by including moral values as additional predictors (see Figure 3). The overall multi-level model accounted for 50% of the variance based on fixed effects and 51% when accounting for both fixed and random effects. The addition of these fixed effects successfully captured the variance attributable to country-level differences, leaving very little unexplained variance at the country level: only about 2% of the variance in Model 1 (country-level variance = 0.024, residual variance = 1.18) and 1.6% in Model 2 (country-level variance = 0.017, residual variance = 1.04).

Focusing on Model 2, we found a positive relationship between national nostalgia and conservatism ($b = 0.106$, $SE = 0.047$, $t = 2.24$, $p = .026$), national identification ($b = 0.140$, $SE = 0.015$, $t = 9.34$, $p < .001$), personal nostalgia ($b = 0.336$, $SE = 0.013$, $t = 25.67$, $p < .001$), MI ($b = 0.009$, $SE = 0.002$, $t = 3.93$, $p = .003$), authority ($b = 0.298$, $SE = 0.041$, $t = 7.35$, $p < .001$), loyalty ($b = 0.158$, $SE = 0.037$, $t = 4.27$, $p < .001$), and

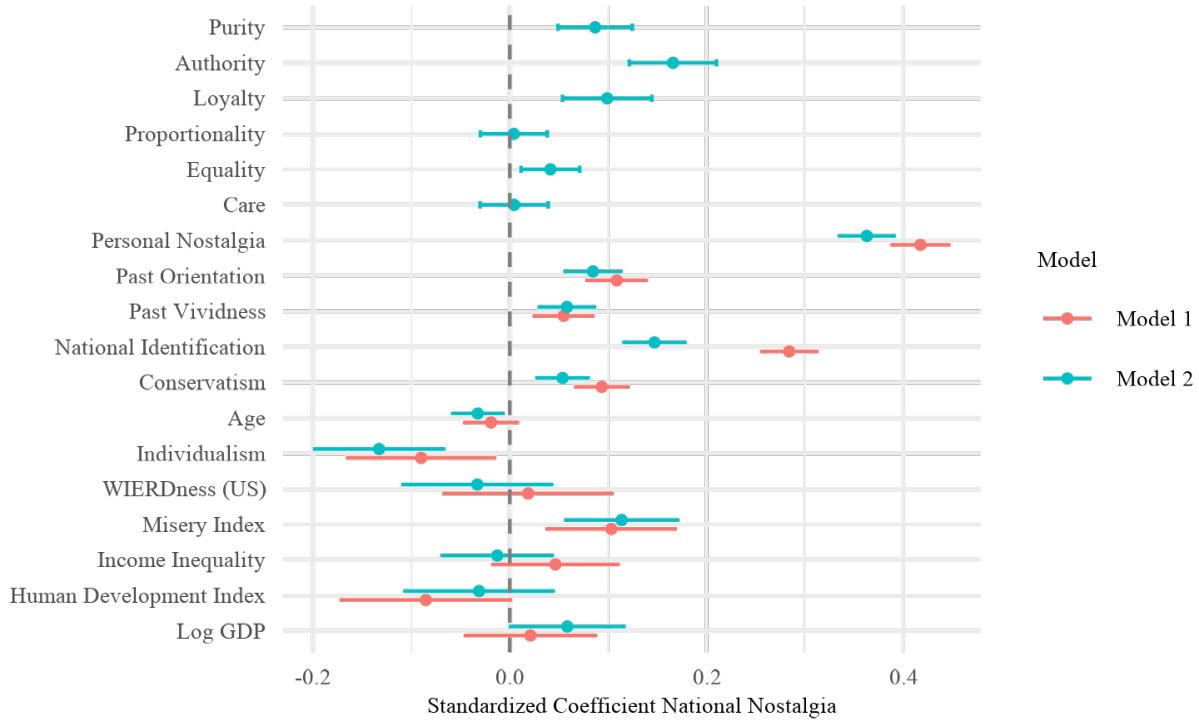


Figure 3

Standardized regression coefficients from Study 2 predicting national nostalgia. Orange and green dots represent coefficients from Models 1 and 2, respectively. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

purity ($b = 0.132$, $SE = 0.029$, $t = 4.50$, $p < .001$). Also, we found evidence of a negative association between individualism ($b = -0.009$, $SE = 0.002$, $t = -3.98$, $p = .003$) and national nostalgia.

Comparing the two models, including moral values in Model 2 reduced the effect sizes of the coefficients for national identification and conservatism. Specifically, the effect of national identification decreased from $b = 0.270$ in Model 1 to $b = 0.140$ in Model 2, and the effect of conservatism decreased from $b = 0.135$ in Model 1 to $b = 0.106$ in Model 2. This suggests that values partially explained the variance in national nostalgia previously accounted for by national identification and conservatism.

Study 2 extends the MNH beyond a us context by showing that its trait-sensitivity

prediction generalizes across 19 nations. Adding moral values to the model substantially reduced the influence of national identification and conservatism, indicating that part of what these variables capture is people’s underlying moral orientation. Authority values are the strongest predictors of national nostalgia. Once moral values were modeled, very little unexplained variance remained at the country level, suggesting that the psychological link between moral identity and nostalgic longing is remarkably stable, despite significant cultural, political, and economic differences. At the same time, macro-indicators such as the Misery Index and individualism influenced overall levels of nostalgia but did not alter the person-level moral pattern. These findings demonstrate that moral identity content travels well across societies and that cross-national differences in nostalgia largely reflect structural conditions rather than a change in the underlying moral mechanism.

Study 3

Building on Studies 1 and 2, which supported the trait-sensitivity prediction of the Moral Nostalgia Hypothesis by showing that people who chronically endorse certain moral values are more prone to national nostalgia, Study 3 tests MNH’s second key claim: threat-selectivity. According to this prediction, nostalgia should not only stem from stable moral commitments but also be activated when people perceive that their nation’s moral fabric is eroding. We therefore examined whether perceived moral decline predicts national nostalgia above and beyond stable moral values and other dispositional factors (personal nostalgia, ideology, national identification, temporal orientation, and age). To test MNH’s specificity, we contrasted moral decline with perceived economic decline, asking whether nostalgia responds more strongly to moral threat than to material hardship.

Dataset and Procedure

A total of 400 U.S. participants were recruited through Prolific using stratified sampling to ensure variation in political orientation, age, and gender. Participants completed measures assessing their moral values (MFQ-2), perceptions of moral decline, perceptions of economic decline, and national nostalgia. Control variables included

personal nostalgia proneness, political ideology, national identification, past orientation, and age. As in Studies 1 and 2, all items were scored so that higher values reflected stronger endorsement or greater perception of decline.

Methods

Measures

Perceived Moral Decline. To assess perceived moral decline, we created six items corresponding to the six moral foundations (Care, Equality, Proportionality, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity). Participants rated the extent to which each moral value is less respected in today’s society compared to the past. Example items included: “It seems like people today care less about helping others and showing compassion compared to the past” (Care decline), “Society used to value treating everyone equally, but nowadays it seems more divided and unfair” (Equality decline), and “In the past, people valued chastity and modesty more than they do today” (Purity decline). Each item was conceptually aligned with its respective MFQ-2 foundation to ensure consistency with the moral values measured in earlier studies. Participants responded on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and they reported moderate to high levels of perceived decline: Care ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.72$), Equality ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 2.02$), Proportionality ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.56$), Loyalty ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.59$), Authority ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.33$), and Purity ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.45$).

Perceived Economic Decline. Perceived economic decline was measured with two items to capture both collective and personal perspectives on economic loss. The first item was: “I believe my country’s economic strength has diminished compared to what it was in the past.” The second item was: “My financial situation was better in the past.” Participants responded to both on the same 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Perceived economic decline was $M = 4.65$ ($SD = 1.46$).

Other Measures. All other variables, including national and personal nostalgia, moral foundations (MFQ-2), political ideology, national identification, past orientation, and

age, were assessed using the same instruments and response formats as in Studies 1 and 2.

Results and Discussion

We regressed national nostalgia on perceived moral decline scores, moral foundations, and all control variables. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(17, 379) = 61.20$, $p < .001$, explaining 73.3% of the variance in national nostalgia ($R^2 = .733$, adjusted $R^2 = .721$). Among the six perceived moral declines, three emerged as significant predictors: perceived equality decline ($b = 0.149$, $p < .001$), perceived proportionality decline ($b = 0.131$, $p < .001$), and perceived purity decline ($b = 0.078$, $p = .040$). However, the effects of current moral values (MFQ-2) were largely non-significant, with the exception of authority ($b = 0.389$, $p < .001$).

Perceived economic decline was a weaker predictor ($b = 0.059$, $p = .10$) and only marginally significant. Personal nostalgia ($b = 0.354$, $p < .001$), temporal orientation ($b = 0.413$, $p < .001$), and conservatism ($b = 0.139$, $p < .01$) also predicted national nostalgia.

These findings are consistent with the MNH, which proposes that national nostalgia is most strongly activated when people perceive moral, rather than economic, values to be under threat. The results refine our understanding of national nostalgia as shaped by both enduring dispositions and situational perceptions of societal change, and they contribute to broader theories of collective memory and moral motivation. The authority endorsement predicted nostalgia even in the absence of perceived authority decline, suggesting that some values may function as chronic dispositions: valuing order and tradition can evoke a longing for the past, even in the absence of an explicit threat to these values. However, the strong influence of perceived declines in equality and proportionality highlights the threat-selectivity mechanism; national nostalgia intensifies when people sense that fairness has been eroded. This distinction suggests that not all moral concerns are associated with nostalgia in the same way: values such as authority can sustain a baseline of longing, whereas fairness-related values activate nostalgia primarily in response to perceived threats.

The consistent role of equality across Studies 1–3 further suggests that fairness concerns may operate as a unifying moral driver, potentially resonating across ideological divides. Together, these findings imply that collective longing for the past is not solely a conservative impulse to restore hierarchy but can also reflect aspirations to recover moral fairness and cohesion in times of perceived societal change.

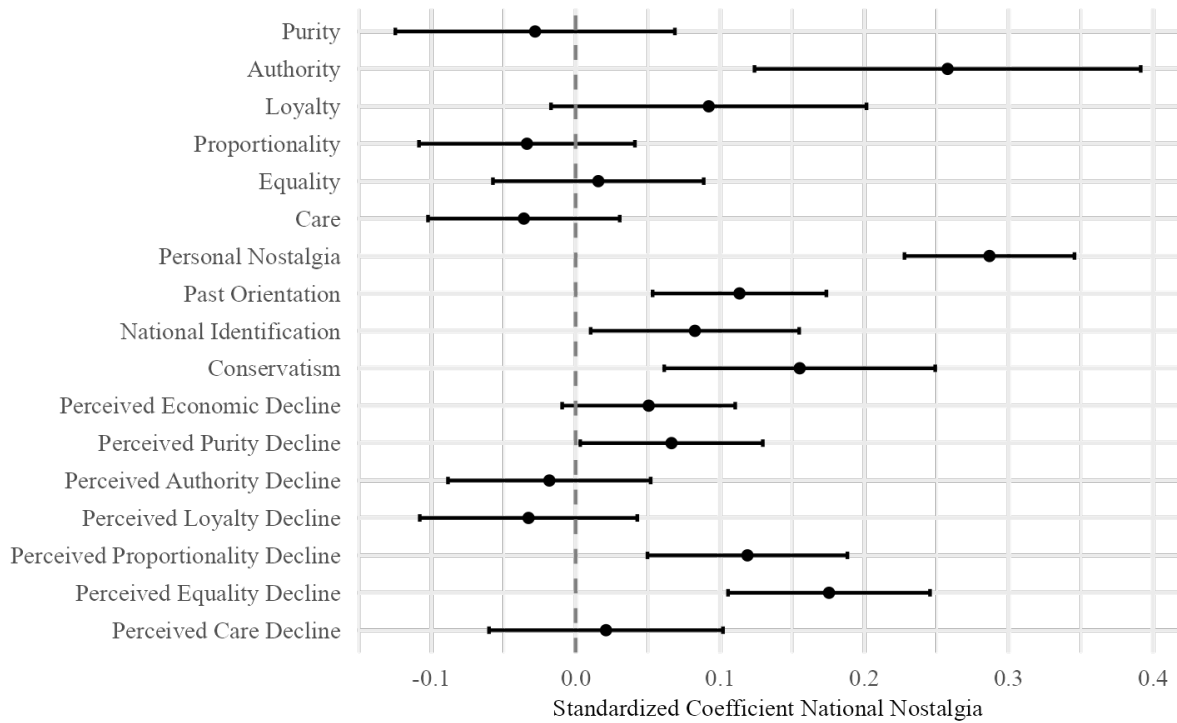


Figure 4
Standardized regression coefficients from Study 3 examining predictors of national nostalgia. Significant predictors include perceived declines in Purity, Proportionality, and Equality. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Study 4

In Study 4, we examined whether discourse about moral decline and national nostalgia co-occur historically in public language. Whereas previous studies established an individual-level link between moral concerns and national nostalgia, these findings relied on self-reports that can be influenced by memory biases, motivated reasoning, and current

political attitudes (Mastroianni & Gilbert, 2023). Moreover, moral decline is not an objective marker, but a socially constructed and historically variable perception that shifts in response to broader cultural contexts. To address these limitations and test whether the MNH generalizes beyond individual assessments, we analyzed large-scale historical language data. If national nostalgia is, in part, a response to moral concerns, then historical fluctuations in discourse about moral decline should systematically align with expressions of longing for the national past.

Methods

Corpus

We analyzed historical English and Chinese texts using a combination of natural language processing and time series modeling. For English, we used the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), which contains over 400 million words spanning from the 1810s to 2010s across diverse genres, including fiction, journalism, academic prose, and spoken dialogue. For Chinese, we used the *People’s Daily* corpus, a comprehensive and longitudinal textual archive of the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, which has been published daily since 1946. As one of the most authoritative sources of public discourse in modern Chinese history, the corpus offers insight into how moral and national narratives have been shaped by, and have reflected, state ideology, sociopolitical shifts, and cultural transformation. It includes millions of articles across politics, economy, society, and culture, making it a rich resource for tracing moral and nostalgic discourse in a highly centralized media environment.

Language Analysis

To extract construct-relevant signals from these corpora, we used the Contextualized Construct Representation (CCR) method (Chen et al., 2024). CCR quantifies the presence of psychological constructs in text using sentence embeddings derived from validated scale items. We operationalized both moral decline and national nostalgia using the same face-valid survey items employed in Study 3. CCR computes

cosine similarities between item embeddings and sentences in the target corpus, aggregating across time to produce annual construct prevalence scores.

Preprocessing and Analysis. For both corpora, we first generated yearly time series of average CCR scores for national nostalgia and moral decline. We applied autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) modeling using the `auto.arima` function (Hyndman & Khandakar, 2008) to identify optimal (p, d, q) parameters for each series based on the corrected Akaike Information Criterion (AICc). Differencing (d) was applied as needed to achieve stationarity, and residual diagnostics (Ljung–Box tests at lags 10, 15, and 20) confirmed adequate whiteness. Residuals from these fitted models were then used in cross-correlation analyses to test contemporaneous and lagged associations between moral decline and national nostalgia. Statistical significance was evaluated against the $\pm 1.96/\sqrt{N}$ confidence band with Bonferroni-corrected p values. To obtain robust 95% confidence intervals and test cross-corpus differences, we implemented a restandardized block bootstrap (block size = 5).

Results and Discussion

In the English-language COHA corpus, cross-correlation analysis revealed a significant contemporaneous association between residualized national nostalgia and moral decline scores, peaking at lag 0 with $r = .368$, $p = 2.83 \times 10^{-7}$ (Bonferroni $p = 1.16 \times 10^{-5}$). The effect exceeded the $\pm 1.96/\sqrt{N}$ confidence band (± 0.146 ; $N=180$), and the Fisher z -based 95% confidence interval was $[0.234, 0.488]$. This indicates that moral decline and national nostalgia discourse moved closely together over historical time in U.S. English (see Figure 5).

We observed a similar pattern in the *People’s Daily* Chinese corpus, where residual cross-correlation likewise peaked at lag 0 with $r = .577$, $p = 2.60 \times 10^{-6}$ (Bonferroni $p = 1.07 \times 10^{-4}$). This value exceeded the $\pm 1.96/\sqrt{N}$ confidence band (± 0.267 ; $N=54$), with a corresponding 95% confidence interval of $[0.366, 0.732]$. These results again suggest strong synchrony between moral decline and national nostalgia discourse (see Figure 6).

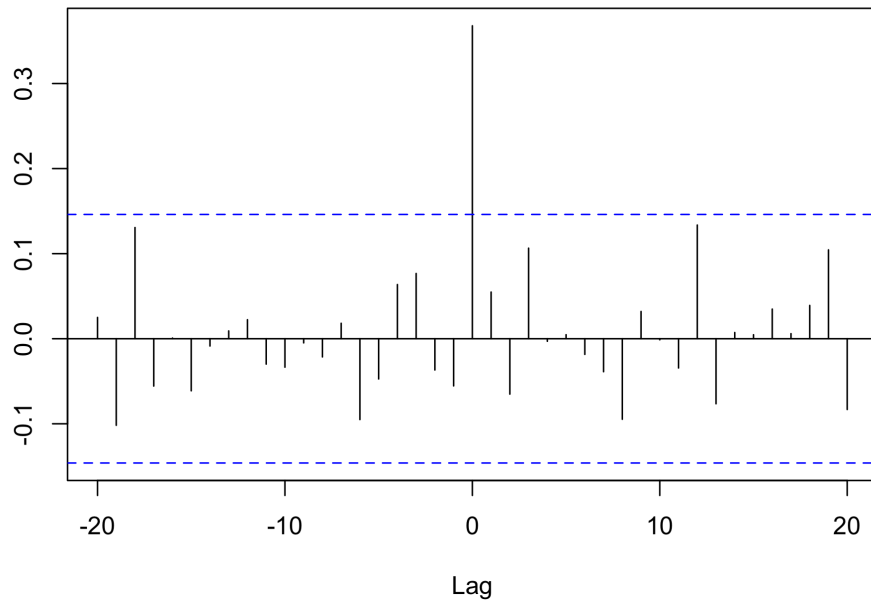


Figure 5

Cross-correlation between national nostalgia and moral decline discourse in the COHA corpus (English). The residual cross-correlation peaked at lag 0 ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), indicating strong contemporaneous coupling.

Across corpora, the Chinese peak was numerically stronger ($\Delta r = 0.21$). A Fisher z difference test yielded $z = -1.71$, $p = .087$, and a restandardized block-bootstrap test of the lag-0 difference produced $p_{\text{boot}} = .178$, indicating that the difference did not reach statistical significance. Ljung–Box tests confirmed adequately whitened residuals in both corpora ($p = .19\text{--}.74$ in COHA; $p = .39\text{--}.92$ in *People’s Daily*), supporting the validity of these inferences.

Study 4 extends the MNH beyond individual perceptions by demonstrating that moral decline and national nostalgia historically fluctuated together at the cultural level. The cross-corpus synchrony observed in both U.S. and Chinese texts supports the idea that when societies express concerns about declining morality, they concurrently evoke nostalgic ideals of a better national past. Although the association was numerically stronger in the Chinese corpus ($r = .58$ vs. $r = .37$), this difference was not statistically significant.

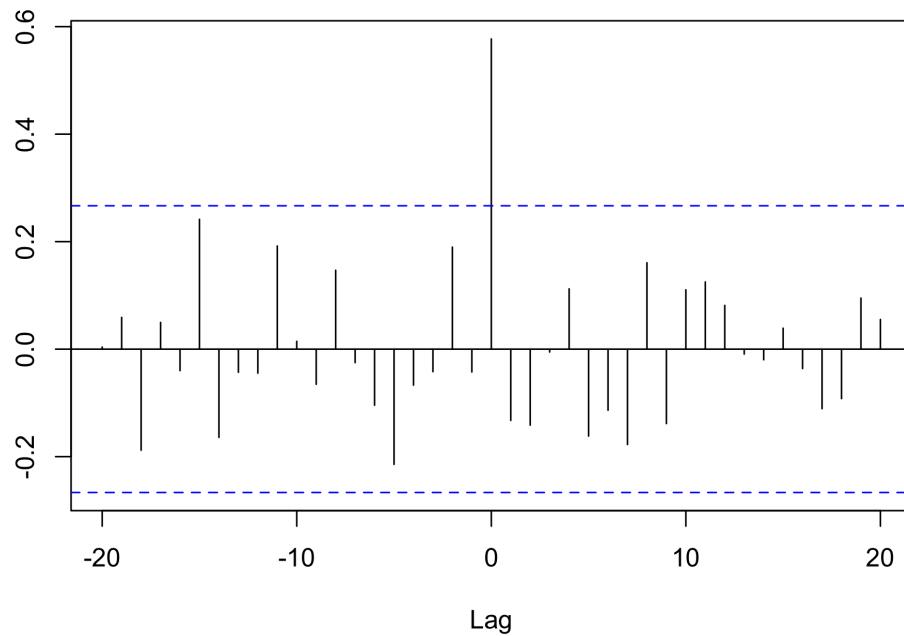


Figure 6

Cross-correlation between national nostalgia and moral decline discourse in the People's Daily corpus (Chinese). The residual cross-correlation peaked at lag 0 ($r = .58$, $p < .001$), reflecting strong synchrony in state-controlled discourse.

Overall, the findings indicate that public moral and nostalgic discourse rise and fall together over historical time, suggesting that the relationship between moral threat and national longing generalizes across distinct cultural and political contexts.

General Discussion

In February 2016, during a rally in Las Vegas, protesters interrupted Donald Trump's speech. After security escorted them out, Trump told the crowd, "In the good old days, this doesn't happen because they used to treat them very, very rough. And when they protested once, they would not do it again so easily. I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They'd be carried out on a stretcher."⁵ Featured prominently in DuVernay's documentary *13th*, the

⁵ The Washington Post, March 2016; DuVernay's *13th* (2016).

remark captures more than nostalgia for a bygone political style; it invokes a moral vision of hierarchy, discipline, and deference to authority.

Our findings show this is no isolated flourish. Across 20 cultural contexts and roughly 4,924 participants, authority values consistently emerged as the strongest predictor of national nostalgia, even after accounting for ideology, national identification, personal nostalgia, and economic conditions, a broad “return to order” rhetoric. Yet authority’s influence appears dispositional rather than reactive: in Study 3, perceived declines in authority did not significantly predict nostalgia.

However, fairness-related values functioned primarily as reactive triggers. Perceived declines in equality and proportionality, rather than mere endorsement of these values, were among the strongest situational predictors of nostalgia, echoing the populist narrative that “the system is rigged.”. At the macro level, higher Gini coefficients and Misery Index scores correlated with stronger national nostalgia, suggesting that inequality and economic hardship create fertile conditions for longing for the past (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2016, 2019). Yet when participants were asked directly about economic decline, its predictive power vanished once moral decline was taken into account. This pattern implies that structural economic upheavals, fading powers, rising competitors, and widespread economic volatility are psychologically reframed as moral failures of fairness rather than as purely material losses (Judis, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

This dynamic resonates with the broader geopolitical context. The post–Cold War order has eroded: once-dominant powers fade as new ones rise, and multipolarity and uncertainty define the current international landscape (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019). Rising income inequality over recent decades, documented by the World Inequality Report 2022⁶, has further intensified perceptions of unfairness, making earlier eras seem comparatively more equitable. Such structural upheavals amplify anxieties about who “we” are as a nation and whether resources are distributed justly (Norris & Inglehart, 2016).

⁶ <https://wir2022.wid.world/>

Populist movements across diverse contexts—including Trumpism in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally in France, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency in Brazil, and Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy—tap into these sentiments, wielding nostalgic rhetoric such as “Make America Great Again” (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). By framing contemporary challenges as moral decline rather than mere economic hardship, these movements transform national nostalgia into a powerful mobilizing force.

At the same time, the robust and stable association between authority values and national nostalgia underscores a trait-level pathway: even in the absence of perceived decline, those who prioritize hierarchy and tradition are predisposed to view the past as morally superior. Together, these findings suggest that material distress and structural shifts prepare the ground, but moral concerns, especially fairness and authority, provide the emotional spark.

Our historical analysis reveals that moral-decline discourse and nostalgic rhetoric consistently co-fluctuate over time, indicating a dynamic interplay between moral concerns and collective memory. While these data do not establish a causal direction, they open a promising avenue for future work. Experimental and longitudinal designs could clarify whether perceptions of moral decline cause nostalgia, whether nostalgia itself moralizes the past, or whether both processes reinforce one another. By spanning 20 cultures and combining surveys and text analyses, our evidence provides a robust foundation for MNH; the next potential step is to test its scope beyond national identity to explore other moral dimensions that might similarly mobilize nostalgic longing.

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