

Flavors that Linger: Childhood Food Memories as Emotional Anchors in Adult Life

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ABSTRACT

In an age marked by rapid technological advancement and constant digital engagement, adults increasingly seek sources of emotional comfort and stability within the familiarity of everyday experiences. Food has emerged as a subtle yet powerful medium through which individuals regulate emotions and reconnect with a sense of psychological ease. This study examines how childhood food memories shape present-day emotionally comfort-oriented food consumption among adults aged 25 and above, a cohort whose formative years were characterized by slower routines, fewer digital distractions, and deeper immersion in everyday social and sensory experiences. During childhood, food-related moments were embedded within daily life through school routines, family interactions, and shared rituals, allowing them to become deeply encoded within autobiographical memory. Drawing on nostalgia research and autobiographical memory theory, this study proposes that visually familiar food-related cues encountered in adulthood can spontaneously reactivate these childhood memories. Rather than functioning as passive recollections, such memories are psychologically mobilized to provide comfort, reassurance, and emotional continuity in the present. When adult life becomes emotionally demanding, recalled childhood food memories offer a sense of safety and grounding by reconnecting individuals with life phases perceived as simpler and emotionally secure. Focusing on adults who grew up in a pre-smartphone-dominated environment, this research highlights how reduced digital mediation strengthened memory encoding around ordinary food experiences. Consequently, food consumption extends beyond nourishment, becoming a quiet mechanism of emotional self-soothing and stability.

Keywords: Childhood Food Memories, Nostalgia, Emotional Comfort, Autobiographical Memory, Comfort Food Consumption

