

Why your old playlists still hit hard even if you never press play

June 1 2026, by Sayan Tribedi

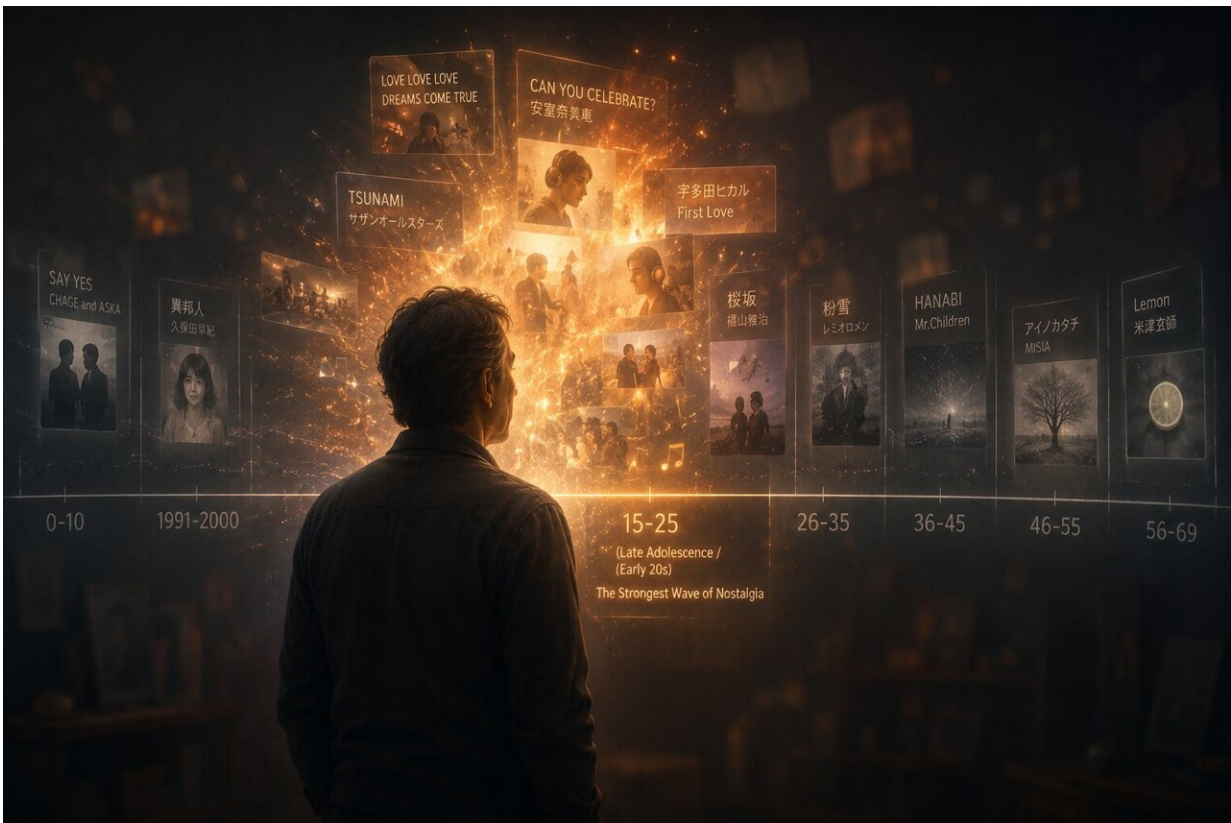


Image created by the author using AI tools for illustrative purposes

Past research has shown that music is a significant source of nostalgia that boosts well-being and social bonds. In fact, hearing a tune from your youth is a powerful cue for rich, vivid memories. But what about hearing

nothing at all?

Researchers Satoshi Kawase and Kei Eguchi asked whether text alone could do the job. In their experiment, 3,741 Japanese adults (ages 20–69) were shown lists of hit songs (titles and artist names) from every year between 1983 and 2022. Participants indicated which songs they knew and rated how nostalgic they felt.

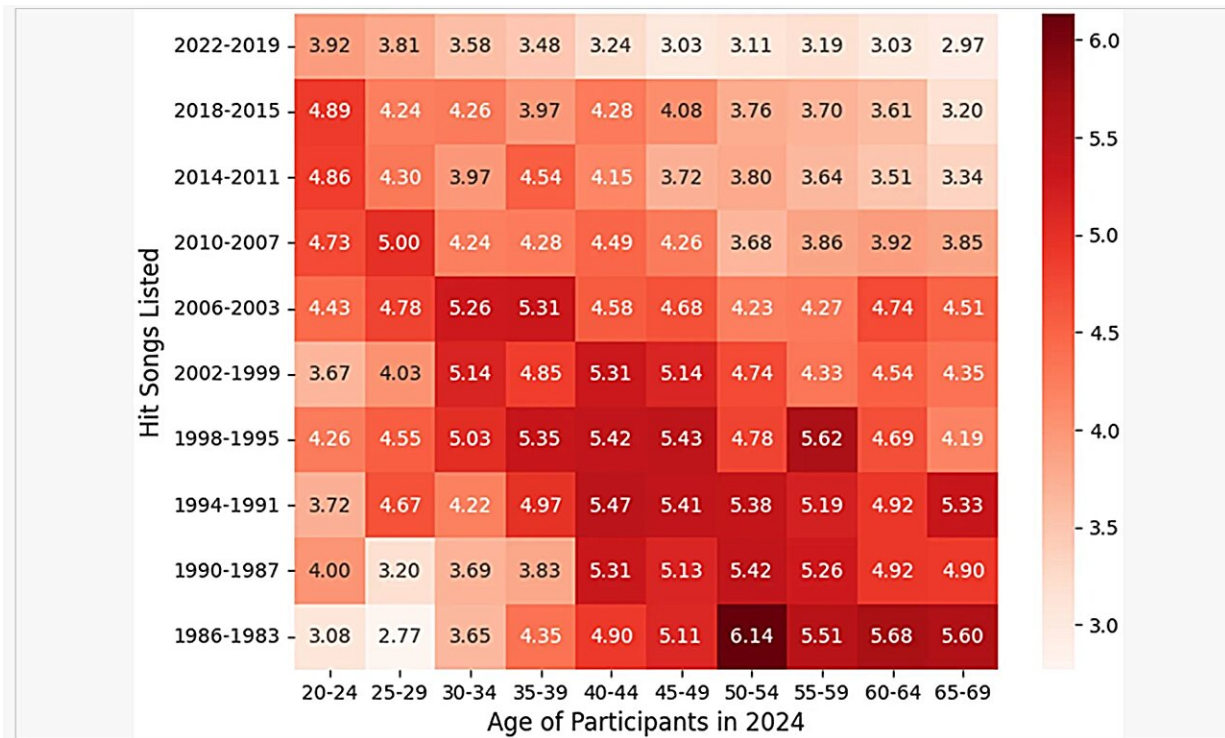
Beyond the music: Nostalgia in titles

Before this, most work on nostalgia focused on the sound of music. In a [previous study](#), Constantine Sedikides and colleagues noted that [nostalgic music](#) supports connectedness and meaning, strengthening social ties and a sense of self-continuity.

In their study published in the journal [Frontiers in Psychology](#), Kawase and Eguchi's bold question was whether simply reading song titles—with no melody—could unlock similar feelings. The answer was yes. Even without an audio clip, people felt nostalgic just from the printed lists.

As the authors report, "Nostalgia was effectively evoked by simply observing the song titles and musicians' names, and ... the more songs the participants knew, the stronger the response." In other words, the brain linked familiar names to personal memories almost as readily as hearing the songs.

One participant might see "City of Joy" by Anzen Chitai and feel a warm flash of high school memories, even though the music never played.



The average nostalgia ratings of participants who looked at the hit lists. The vertical axis represents the years of the hit lists included in the list of songs, and the horizontal axis shows the age of the participants. The numbers in the cells demonstrate the average nostalgia ratings. The values in a single cell represent the average result of approximately 40 participants. Credit: Satoshi Kawase et al, *Evoking nostalgia by presenting hit-song lists*, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2026). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1800653

Teenage hits hit hardest

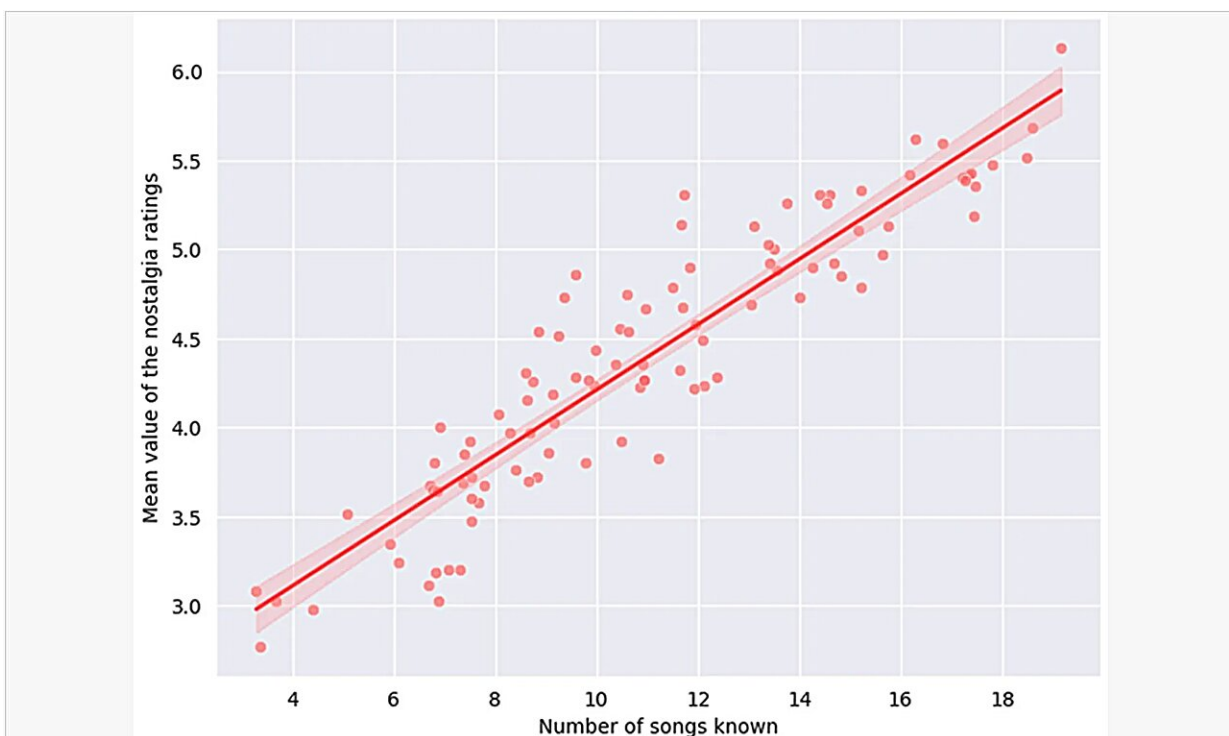
Why does nostalgia flare up so vividly for some songs? The new data match a well-known pattern in memory called the reminiscence bump. Psychological research finds that people (especially over 40) disproportionately recall memories from their teens and early 20s. Kawase and Eguchi found the same effect. Song lists tied to each person's late adolescence produced the strongest nostalgia.

In their words, "Nostalgia peaked in the music hit lists that were associated with participants' [late adolescence](#), which was consistent with the reminiscence bump phenomenon."

This lines up with prior work: in a broad survey, young adults also reported the most vivid song-related memories for hits from around age 14. In short, our teenage years seem to imbue songs with supercharged memory power.

Consider a scene like this: someone browsing through crates of old vinyl at a market. The records might represent music from many generations, but the buyer is especially drawn to the records from the '70s and '80s; songs that played during their youth. These images, without sound, already suggest the nostalgic power of the era.

The study found that recognizing more familiar titles intensified nostalgia, and the peak of nostalgia was squarely in each person's youth.



Relationship between the participants' ratings of nostalgia and the number of songs on the list that they indicated they knew. The rated values, regression line, and 95% confidence intervals are shown. The horizontal axis indicates the number of songs on the list that participants indicated they knew. The vertical axis indicates nostalgia ratings. Credit: Satoshi Kawase et al, Evoking nostalgia by presenting hit-song lists, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2026). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1800653

Nostalgia's surprising benefits

It's not just an odd feeling—nostalgia serves useful functions. Kawase and Eguchi measured how nostalgic feelings affected people's psychology. They found that the strongest link was with [self-continuity](#): feeling emotionally connected to your past self.

In their data, nostalgia from song lists most strongly boosted the sense that "you and your past are the same person." (Connections to friends or community were also seen, but to a lesser degree.) This echoes other findings: music-induced nostalgia often increases meaning in life and social bonding.

In short, even without hearing the tune, recalling those old songs helps stitch together our life story. Interestingly, however, just looking at titles did not noticeably change people's immediate mood—the effect was more about identity than instant happiness.

The researchers emphasize how text alone can be a potent nostalgia trigger. "Text-based music cues such as hit lists can function as powerful triggers for nostalgia," they write.

That suggests daily life is filled with small nostalgic cues if we know where to look: old playlists, lyric excerpts, even mentions of a favorite band name. In a world of streaming and algorithms, simply seeing a list of songs could be a quick way to tap into comforting memories.

Looking ahead, the team suggests intriguing possibilities. Might apps one day recommend playlists by title alone to uplift someone's spirits? Could [therapists](#) or care workers use nostalgic song lists to spark memory and conversation when a device can't play music?

Right now, the findings are limited to Japanese pop hits, so more work will test whether the effect is global. But the takeaway is clear: you don't need sound to feel a soundtrack of the past. That old song title on your screen can be just as effective at carrying you back as the melody itself.

More information: Satoshi Kawase et al, Evoking nostalgia by presenting hit-song lists, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2026). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1800653](#)

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