

From Theory to Canvas: Harnessing Nostalgia for Innovation in Art

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Abstract

Purpose: This study extends previous experimental research on the cognitive-emotional effects of nostalgic scents on creativity by applying the “Creative Recall” method in a real-world artistic context. Creative Recall is defined as a structured practice that combines nostalgic sensory stimulation (typically olfactory) with autobiographical memory reflection to evoke emotionally rich mental imagery and enhance creative ideation. **Method:** Building on prior findings that the combination of nostalgic scent and autobiographical memory recall enhances divergent thinking and originality, the method was implemented by a visual artist using nostalgic olfactory priming and reflective journaling during the creation of two original paintings. **Findings:** Both artworks were selected as semi-finalists in an international competition, suggesting that nostalgia-induced emotional immersion may enhance originality and emotional resonance. **Conclusion:** The study provides preliminary evidence that the Creative Recall method can serve as a practical and affectively rich tool for applied creativity beyond laboratory settings.

Keywords

Nostalgia, Art, Creativity, Flow, Originality, Scent, Autobiographical Memory, Emotional Cognition

*“Nostalgia can be a beautiful source of inspiration, but we don’t want to live there. Creativity happens in the present.”, Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being**

1. Introduction

Creativity is widely recognized as a foundational human capacity and a core driver

*This article builds upon doctoral research conducted at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences. The real-world application described was independently undertaken by the author following completion of the laboratory phase.

of cultural, scientific, and economic progress. Defined as the ability to produce ideas or artifacts that are both novel and valuable (Runco & Jaeger, 2012), creativity has long been studied through the lens of cognitive psychology. Early models emphasized abstract problem-solving, divergent thinking, and associative fluency as key mechanisms underlying creative output (Guilford, 1967; Benedek et al., 2012). These constructs focus on an individual's ability to generate multiple, varied, and original responses to a given problem or stimulus. Yet, in recent years, there has been a growing acknowledgment that creativity is not solely a cognitive activity but is also deeply affective, embodied, and autobiographical. Emotions, memory, and subjective experience play a central role in how individuals access, transform, and express novel ideas (Ye et al., 2013; Petratou et al., 2021). In particular, emotional states can serve as both barriers and gateways to creative thought. Positive emotions have been found to broaden attentional scope and cognitive flexibility, both of which are essential to ideation (Baas et al., 2008). But beyond general mood effects, specific emotional experiences, such as nostalgia, appear to hold unique potential as creative catalysts. Nostalgia is a bittersweet, self-relevant emotional state that involves the recollection of meaningful past experiences, often associated with a sense of loss or longing coupled with warmth, connection, and identity (Sedikides et al., 2006; Wildschut et al., 2010). It is typically elicited through sensory cues—especially olfactory triggers—and linked to autobiographical memory. The evocative power of smell in particular, due to its direct neural connections to the limbic system, makes it a uniquely potent inducer of emotionally rich, vivid recollections (Royet et al., 2000; Chu & Downes, 2002). These nostalgic memories can generate feelings of comfort, belonging, and meaning, all of which are known to support resilience and psychological well-being (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019). Importantly, nostalgia is not only psychologically comforting; it also has strong motivational and imaginative functions. Recent studies suggest that nostalgia enhances creativity by facilitating mental imagery, symbolic thinking, and reflective insight (Reid et al., 2015; Batcho, 2020). It can increase narrative complexity, aesthetic sensitivity, and openness to experience, all of which are key predictors of creative expression. Nostalgia can thus be seen as a form of affective-cognitive enrichment that deepens the emotional layers and symbolic value of creative work.

Our previous empirical research explored this connection by examining whether nostalgic scent, specifically, childhood-evocative smells like bubblegum or caramel—could serve as a tool to enhance creativity in a laboratory context. In a controlled experimental study (Petratou et al., 2021), we demonstrated that the combination of olfactory cues and guided autobiographical memory recall significantly increased originality and fluency scores on standardized creative tasks compared to both control and single-modality groups. The resulting technique, the Creative Recall method, can be succinctly defined as a two-stage process that first uses nostalgic sensory priming (e.g., scent exposure) to evoke autobiographical memory, followed by structured reflection designed to translate that emotional-

cognitive state into creative ideation. While laboratory results were promising, the next critical step was to evaluate whether this method could translate into real-world creative practices. This study represents the next step, documenting the first applied implementation of the Creative Recall method in a professional visual arts context. Specifically, the author used the technique in the development of two original paintings submitted to a prominent international competition. Both works, produced under the influence of nostalgia-evoking scent and memory journaling, were selected as semifinalists—an outcome that provided not only subjective validation but also third-party recognition of creative excellence.

The theoretical foundations of this work integrate several key psychological frameworks. First, the Proustian memory effect describes how scent-induced recollections elicit autobiographical memories with exceptional vividness and emotional intensity (Willander & Larsson, 2006; Royet et al., 2000). These emotionally charged memories can, in turn, activate rich associative networks that enhance ideational fluency and thematic depth in creative outputs. Second, nostalgia has been shown to promote positive affect, meaning making, and a coherent sense of identity (Sedikides et al., 2006; Batcho, 2013). These are not incidental to creativity—they are core components of the motivation to create and the capacity to imbue work with emotional and narrative significance. For many artists, creativity is not just the generation of new forms, but the expression of internal landscapes, memories, and existential questions. Nostalgia, in this light, becomes a tool not only for generating ideas but for shaping those ideas into work that resonates emotionally and symbolically. Third, this research is informed by embodied cognition theories, which argue that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the environment (Barsalou, 2008). Smell, as a visceral sensory input, grounds the creative process in physical experience, making ideation less abstract and more emotionally resonant. The Creative Recall method operationalizes this principle by engaging multiple sensory and emotional modalities simultaneously, offering a rich, immersive stimulus for creativity.

The transition from controlled research settings to applied artistic practice offers valuable insight into the ecological validity of this approach. Creativity, after all, is not confined to the laboratory; it lives in real-world problem-solving, innovation, and expression. By documenting how an empirically validated method can be adapted for professional artistic production, this study bridges the gap between experimental psychology and applied creative disciplines. In doing so, it contributes to a growing interdisciplinary interest in how emotion, memory, and embodiment intersect to shape human creativity, not just in terms of output quantity or originality, but in terms of emotional richness, symbolic depth, and personal meaning. As creative industries seek more integrative and human-centered approaches, methods like Creative Recall provide tools that align with both psychological research and artistic intuition.

2. Present Study

This study sought to explore how a method of nostalgic induction, specifically

through scent and autobiographical memory, translates into a real-world artistic context, and what effects it has on the creative process and resulting artistic output. In earlier laboratory work (Petratou et al., 2021), we developed and tested a method—termed Creative Recall—designed to enhance creativity through nostalgic induction. This involved two forms of stimulation: 1) olfactory cues using a childhood-associated scent (bubblegum), and 2) autobiographical memory reflection through guided journaling.

In that study, university students were assigned to one of four experimental groups: 1) olfactory stimulation only, 2) memory reflection only, 3) combined olfactory and memory stimulation, and 4) a control group. Creativity was assessed using the Wallach-Kogan Creativity Test. The results indicated that the combined condition significantly enhanced both fluency and originality in creative output, supporting the hypothesis that nostalgia, when evoked through multiple sensory-emotional channels, can act as a powerful facilitator of divergent thinking.

The current study seeks to explore the ecological validity and creative applicability of the Creative Recall method beyond the laboratory. Specifically, it documents the method's use in a professional artistic context, where it was applied by the author—an artist and researcher—during the production of two paintings. The method included scent-based nostalgic priming, reflective memory journaling, and immersive creative engagement, consistent with the prior experimental protocol.

These artworks, *Swirling Chaos* and *Echoes of the Unconscious*, were later submitted to a juried international art competition and were both selected as semifinalists. Their development was also compared to a third painting, *Through the Void*, created without the use of the Creative Recall method, which did not receive recognition. This comparison provided preliminary qualitative evidence suggesting that the method not only supports creative ideation but may also enhance originality and emotional resonance in artistic output.

The primary research question of this study is:

- Can a method grounded in psychological experimentation—specifically, nostalgic induction via scent and memory—successfully enhance creativity in a real-world artistic context?

In answering this question, the study contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary research at the intersection of psychology, neuroscience, and the arts, and proposes nostalgia as an underutilized yet powerful tool for enhancing both the process and product of creative expression.

3. Method

3.1. Application of the Creative Recall Method (Real-World Artistic Practice)

To examine whether laboratory findings could extend to professional creative contexts, the Creative Recall method was applied in a naturalistic, artistic setting. The author, a visual artist and researcher, employed the method while creating two

large-format paintings later submitted to an international art competition.

3.2. Olfactory Cue and Emotional Priming

In line with the laboratory design, the nostalgic scent of bubblegum was used as the primary stimulus for autobiographical activation. The scent was presented in the same masked vial format used in experimental conditions to maintain procedural continuity. Prior to painting sessions, the artist spent approximately 5 - 10 minutes inhaling the scent in a quiet, undistracted environment, allowing it to evoke spontaneous memory associations without forcing any cognitive direction.

The goal was to trigger involuntary autobiographical memories—often referred to in literature as “Proustian moments” (Willander & Larsson, 2006; Royet et al., 2000)—in order to induce a nostalgic emotional state and activate the limbic and memory systems that support both emotional processing and associative thinking (Soudry et al., 2011).

3.3. Autobiographical Memory Reflection

Immediately following scent exposure, a structured journaling session was conducted. The reflection exercise included prompts such as:

- “Describe a moment from your childhood in vivid sensory detail.”
- “What emotions are tied to this memory?”
- “What colors, forms, or textures would symbolize this moment?”

These reflections were used to deepen autobiographical immersion, strengthening the affective and cognitive state intended to facilitate creative ideation. This step was essential to transition from mere sensory activation to a richer, embodied emotional-cognitive state.

3.4. Immersive Creative Engagement

Painting sessions began immediately after the memory recall phase to preserve emotional-cognitive priming. During these sessions, the artist noted a transition into a flow state characterized by heightened focus, time distortion, and deep emotional absorption.

Post-session journal entries described sensations of “being fully inside the color”, “a dissolving of self-consciousness”, and “memories turning into visual texture”. These reflections suggest that nostalgic induction facilitated a seamless fusion of memory and perception, aligning with established descriptions of flow as total creative immersion (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

3.5. Informal Self-Assessment and Creative Output

Qualitative assessment of the creative process included self-report notes regarding:

- Emotional engagement;
- Depth of associative imagery;
- Originality of themes;

- Ease of idea generation;
- Emotional or symbolic meaning of visual motifs.

Two paintings, *Swirling Chaos* and *Echoes of the Unconscious*, were created using this method and submitted to the TARGET PRIZE 2025 international competition. Both were selected as semifinalists.

A third painting, *Through the Void*, was produced using the artist's typical non-nostalgic process, without scent induction or memory journaling. This painting was guided by spontaneous abstraction and intuitive color experimentation, representing the artist's baseline approach prior to adopting the Creative Recall method. It was not selected for external recognition, offering a useful internal comparison highlighting the method's unique effects on originality and emotional depth.

3.6. Reference to Prior Experimental Protocol

The real-world implementation closely followed the structure of a previous laboratory study (Petratou et al., 2021), in which the combination of nostalgic olfactory cues and guided autobiographical reflection significantly enhanced creative fluency and originality on standardized creativity tests. This earlier work provided the empirical foundation for the Creative Recall method applied in the present study.

4. Measures

While the present study did not include quantitative psychometric instruments in the real-world artistic application, the Creative Recall method was originally validated in a laboratory context using standardized measures of creativity. These metrics, detailed in Petratou et al. (2021), included the following:

1) Wallach-Kogan Creativity Test (WKCT): Participants completed both verbal and visual subtests designed to assess fluency (the number of ideas generated) and originality (the uniqueness of responses). Originality was rated by independent evaluators blind to experimental conditions, following standard scoring procedures.

2) Southampton Nostalgia Proneness Scale (SNS): Used during participant recruitment in the lab study to identify individuals with moderate nostalgia proneness, based on the Greek-translated version (Petratou, Pezirkianidis, & Stalikas, 2019).

These instruments provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of the Creative Recall method under controlled conditions. In the current real-world context, no psychometric tools were employed. Instead, qualitative outcomes such as artistic recognition, creative flow experience, and thematic originality were used as informal indicators of creative enhancement. Two paintings produced under the method were selected as semifinalists in a competitive international art competition, offering external validation of creative merit.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the Creative Recall method, a structured nostalgic induction combining scent and autobiographical reflection, can meaningfully enhance creative output in authentic artistic contexts. The Creative Recall method, which combines olfactory stimulation with autobiographical memory reflection, had previously been shown to significantly enhance creative fluency and originality in experimental settings (Petratou et al., 2021). In this study, the method was implemented in the context of professional visual art production, and the resulting artworks were externally recognized as semifinalists in a juried international art competition. These findings offer preliminary but compelling evidence that nostalgia, when strategically induced, can serve as a reliable catalyst for creativity not only in laboratory tests but also in authentic, emotionally driven artistic expression.

This study's outcomes support the growing body of literature that positions nostalgia as an affective and cognitive resource capable of enhancing creativity. Traditionally, creativity has been studied as a function of divergent thinking, associative fluency, and problem-solving capacity (Guilford, 1967; Benedek et al., 2012). However, recent approaches emphasize that creativity also draws heavily on emotional states, personal meaning-making, and autobiographical memory (Sedikides et al., 2006; Ye et al., 2013; Reid et al., 2015). Nostalgia, in particular, is a unique emotional-cognitive state that integrates elements of memory, identity, and imagination—making it especially conducive to creative ideation (Batcho, 2013; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019).

The real-world application of the Creative Recall method demonstrated that nostalgia-induced immersion could facilitate a flow state and produce creative output perceived as emotionally resonant, thematically original, and professionally competitive. These outcomes are consistent with research showing that nostalgia enhances symbolic thinking, emotional engagement, and reflective insight—all traits that contribute to both the depth and distinctiveness of creative work (Reid et al., 2015). In this study, the act of accessing childhood memories through scent and structured journaling appeared to deepen the associative networks from which the creative imagery emerged, enabling a richer and more intuitive creative process.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings resonate with the framework of value creation through creativity, as outlined in the accompanying literature (Petratou, 2021). Creativity is not solely defined by the production of novel content, but also by its capacity to generate personal, social, or aesthetic value. Value in this context is multilayered: it includes emotional value (e.g., self-expression and catharsis), narrative value (e.g., autobiographical storytelling), and cultural or societal value (e.g., resonance with others, artistic recognition). The paintings created under the Creative Recall method not only fulfilled the criteria of originality but also achieved value in terms of external validation—being selected by jurors in a competitive art setting—and in terms of internal, emotional significance for the crea-

tor.

This aligns with perspectives on creative authenticity, where value is derived not merely from technical innovation but from the meaningful integration of personal experience into the creative product (Glăveanu, 2010). The evocation of emotionally rich, autobiographically grounded imagery through nostalgia may contribute to what some scholars refer to as “deep creativity”, where the output is not only novel but also affectively powerful and symbolically complex (Sternberg, 2012). In this light, the Creative Recall method does more than stimulate ideas; it enables creators to access emotionally laden symbolic material that lends depth and resonance to their work.

Moreover, these results can be interpreted through the lens of embodied cognition. The use of olfactory cues—specifically the bubblegum scent previously validated in your lab studies—illustrates how sensory experiences can activate deeply embedded emotional and cognitive processes. According to embodied cognition theories, cognitive functions such as memory and creativity are not abstract or disembodied, but instead rooted in sensory-motor and emotional systems (Barsalou, 2008). The nostalgic scent served as both a psychological and physiological primer, facilitating the kind of immersive, emotionally charged state that is often conducive to creative flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

An additional contribution of this study lies in its methodological innovation. Unlike many creativity interventions that rely on structured training, ideation strategies, or group brainstorming, the Creative Recall method is non-directive, experientially grounded, and personally meaningful. It requires no external instruction beyond the induction procedure, and it taps into intrinsic sources of imagination, narrative, and affect. This makes the method not only accessible and cost-effective, but also adaptable to various creative domains—including visual art, writing, performance, and design.

Despite being qualitative in nature, the study provides compelling early evidence that nostalgia can be deliberately and productively harnessed to support meaningful, emotionally resonant creative output. These findings offer promising directions for creative professionals and researchers interested in affective and autobiographical methods for enhancing originality, expressiveness, and value creation in their work.

Reflexivity and Expectation Bias

Given the author’s dual role as both researcher and artist, there is potential for expectation bias in interpreting creative outcomes. To mitigate this, reflexive journaling was used throughout the process to document subjective experiences and maintain transparency regarding emotional and cognitive responses. Additionally, the inclusion of an internally controlled comparison painting (Through the Void) served to contextualize the observed differences within the artist’s own practice, rather than assuming generalized effects.

Deep Creativity

This study also engages with the concept of deep creativity, defined as the pro-

duction of work that is not only novel but also imbued with emotional authenticity, symbolic complexity, and personal significance (Sternberg, 2012). The Creative Recall method appears to facilitate such depth by integrating three mechanisms:

- 1) Affective immersion through nostalgic emotion;
- 2) Autobiographical meaning-making that personalizes creative material, and;
- 3) Sensory embodiment that anchors ideation in lived experience.

Together, these processes enable artists to access symbolic imagery and affective material that extend beyond surface-level novelty, producing work that resonates emotionally and conceptually.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

While the findings of this study are promising, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the absence of standardized psychometric measures in the real-world application limits the ability to quantify creative outcomes. Although external recognition (e.g., selection in an international art competition) offers a form of validation, such assessments are inherently subjective and context-dependent. Without pre-established creativity metrics applied to the artistic process or output, conclusions regarding effectiveness remain largely qualitative and exploratory.

Second, the study relies on a single-subject case study design, in which the author is both researcher and creative practitioner. While this aligns with established models of practice-based research in the arts, it limits the generalizability of the findings. The subjective experience of nostalgia and its creative expression may vary widely across individuals, depending on factors such as personality, artistic style, cultural background, and prior exposure to creative training.

Third, the control condition in the real-world setting—i.e., a painting created without the Creative Recall method—offers a useful internal comparison but lacks independent evaluation. Future research could benefit from a more robust comparative design, possibly involving blind external raters or pre-/post creativity assessments applied to multiple participants using and not using the method.

Finally, the study focused exclusively on visual art. While the theoretical foundation of the Creative Recall method suggests potential applications across domains such as music, writing, and design, this has yet to be tested. Further exploration is needed to determine the method's adaptability, effectiveness, and potential modifications required for different creative disciplines. In sum, these limitations do not diminish the study's contributions but rather highlight the need for future research to build upon this initial application—through replication, expanded sample sizes, and the integration of both quantitative and qualitative evaluation tools.

Practical implications

The Creative Recall method, as demonstrated in this study, offers a practical and accessible approach to enhancing creativity through intentional engagement with

autobiographical memory and sensory-emotional priming. While rooted in experimental psychology, the method's simplicity and low-cost implementation make it particularly attractive for a wide range of applied settings where creativity, originality, and emotional depth are valued.

1) Application in Professional and Emerging Artistic Practices

This study illustrates that the Creative Recall method can be used effectively by artists seeking to access deeper symbolic material, emotional resonance, and narrative coherence in their work. The combination of olfactory nostalgia and memory journaling encourages creators to draw from personal experiences in a structured yet intuitive way. This process fosters what has been described in the literature as “authentic creativity”—the ability to produce work that is not only novel but also deeply meaningful and personally expressive (Glăveanu, 2010).

Beyond visual arts, the method could be readily adapted for writers, musicians, filmmakers, and performance artists, offering them a pathway to tap into their emotional memory networks. The non-directive nature of the method also allows for creative autonomy while supporting cognitive-emotional states that promote ideation and flow.

2) Use in Education and Creative Development Programs

In educational contexts, particularly in art and design schools, the method could serve as a pedagogical tool to enhance student engagement and originality. Structured sessions incorporating scent-based memory triggers and reflective writing could be integrated into creative curricula to help students move beyond superficial ideation and access more personally relevant and emotionally grounded concepts. Given the increasing emphasis on mental health, identity development, and emotional intelligence in education, the Creative Recall method may also serve as a dual-purpose intervention—enhancing both creative output and self-awareness.

Moreover, educators could use the method in multicultural classrooms by tailoring scent triggers and journaling prompts to accommodate diverse backgrounds, thus supporting inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to creativity training.

3) Innovation and Design Thinking

The method may also have potential applications in the fields of design thinking, branding, advertising, and product innovation, where emotional storytelling and authenticity are increasingly important. For instance, nostalgic scent priming could be used in brainstorming sessions to access latent emotional associations that enrich product narratives or brand concepts. Memory-based ideation could be particularly useful for crafting consumer experiences that resonate across generational or cultural lines.

4) Therapeutic and Expressive Contexts

Finally, while not designed as a clinical tool, the method shares qualities with techniques used in expressive arts therapy and narrative therapy, where personal storytelling, symbolic imagery, and sensory grounding are used to facilitate self-

exploration and emotional integration. With appropriate safeguards and professional facilitation, Creative Recall could complement such practices by helping clients externalize internal experiences in visual or narrative form.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix. Paintings Created Using the Creative Recall Method

This painting was created immediately following nostalgic induction using the scent of bubblegum and structured memory journaling. It was selected as a semi-finalist in the TARTGET Prize 2025. (Figure A1)



Created: April 2025 | Medium: Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm.

Figure A1. Swirling chaos.

Second artwork developed under the Creative Recall method, also selected as a semifinalist in the TARTGET Prize 2025. The imagery was derived from emotionally rich childhood memories evoked during scent exposure. (Figure A2, Figure A3)



Created: May 2025 | Medium: Acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 55 × 46 cm.

Figure A2. Echoes of the unconscious.



Created: March 2025 | Medium: Mixed media, 120 × 120 cm.

Figure A3. Through the void.