

# Exploring Nostalgia

Empirical Studies of Contemporary  
Experiences and Practices

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## **3 Neo-craft and nostalgia**

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# 3 Neo-craft and nostalgia

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## Introduction

Artisanal production has experienced a global revival over the past decade. This represents a distinctive manifestation of an emerging consumer ethos centred around the valorization of authenticity (Gerosa 2024) whose primary focus rests on ‘how’ products are made (Currid-Halkett 2017; Prieur and Savage 2013). Contributing to this revival is the popularization of a set of manual activities, traditionally considered low-status or performed by the working class, that are infused with ‘craft imaginaries’ (Bell, Dacin and Toraldo 2021) – and are thus increasingly perceived as ‘cool’ (Ocejo 2017). Collectively, these are grouped under the term ‘neo-craft’ (Land 2018), which identifies a set of practices that seek to repurpose long-lost, pre-industrial, or even non-industrial forms of production – yet grounded in a post-industrial context and characterized by ‘innovation in both product and process’ (Land 2018:np; Ocejo 2017). The popularization of neo-craft activities is commonly associated with the food and hospitality sectors. Emblematic of this trend is, among others, craft beer brewing, which has been the subject of significant research interest across various disciplines (Fox Miller 2019; Wallace 2019; Land et al. 2018). However, neo-craft activities span a wide variety of production practices, including jewellery, accessories, textile design, and cosmetics – along with practices traditionally considered craft, such as glassblowing and bookbinding. All of these are part of a cultural imaginary whereby the materiality of production is intertwined with a set of discursive practices aimed at emphasizing authenticity and ‘particularization’ (Gandini and Gerosa 2023), which provide these activities with the aforementioned aura of ‘coolness’.

The nostalgic appeal within this emergent context is evident. Neo-craft activities explicitly draw from a pre-industrial imaginary to portray their authenticity, explicitly branding themselves as innovators through the revival of forgotten, ‘particular’ production techniques. Interestingly, however, unlike other craft practices, neo-craft activities do not simply aim for the conservative restoration of traditional forms of production. On the contrary, their goal is to repurpose artisanal production within modern capitalism. In doing so, they align with what has been described as ‘progressive nostalgia’ (Gandini 2020) – a concept that grasps the idea of looking back to the past as a means of envisioning and constructing alternative, progressive

futures. Rather than advocating for a simple return to bygone eras, progressive nostalgia involves selectively integrating elements of the past to inform and inspire future-oriented approaches. Conceived as such, the re-emergence of handcrafted, vintage, and artisanal goods can be seen as part of the present-day ‘nostalgia wave’ (Davis 1979) in culture and society. Many workers of different walks of life are turning to neo-craft activities, attracted by the emphasis on handmade and small-scale production, as a source of meaningful work (Gandini et al. forthcoming). This process involves a romanticization of neo-craft production, whose positive features – fairer and more sustainable production practices, in particular – are not pitted against, but blended within, hyper-digitalized late modern societies. This is further popularized by social media platforms, which have played a significant role in fostering the popularity of neo-craft by enabling the combination of nostalgia with contemporary consumption trends. This has led to the development of a shared cultural imaginary wherein both nostalgia for the past and hope for a more sustainable, authentic future coexist.

However, a more in-depth empirical investigation aimed at illustrating the different dimensions through which nostalgia is mobilized by neo-craft activities is still lacking. This is the purpose of the present chapter, which discusses how a set of neo-craft activities operating in the European Union discursively employ nostalgia across their social media profiles and website pages. Through a research approach grounded in qualitative digital methods (Caliandro and Gandini 2017), which blends large-scale social media data collection with a digital ethnographic approach, the chapter shows how nostalgia is mobilized in neo-craft cultures across three main dimensions: (a) the production process and its narration; (b) the business history and foundational narrative; (c) the visual imagery displayed across their online pages. The analysis reveals that the role of nostalgia within neo-craft industries extends beyond conveying a romanticized idea that glorifies craft as a production practice in contrast to mass industrial production. Most importantly, nostalgia serves as a key cultural dimension to present such activities as innovative and modern, aligning with other discursive regimes central to contemporary production practices – especially, sustainability. This further underscores the positioning of neo-craft activities within the current ‘nostalgia wave’ and as an important example of progressive nostalgia. Neo-craft activities integrate artisanal practices within the dominant cultural framework of modern capitalism through the normative demand for authenticity (Gerosa 2024). The emphasis on the aesthetic and discursive dimension of handcrafted goods becomes part of a post-industrial process of commodification that grants artisanal production new audiences but also integrates it into the very system that artisanal cultures typically seek to critique, giving rise to fundamental contradictions.

The chapter unfolds as follows. In the next section, a contextualization of neo-craft activities is provided, focusing in particular on the role of social media and digital spaces in shaping the discursive dimension that is distinctive of neo-craft cultures in their integration with material production. Following a methodological note, the various ways in which nostalgia is mobilized by the neo-craft activities in this sample are presented, according to the interpretative dimensions outlined

earlier. The concluding section returns to critically discuss what the neo-craft phenomenon may reveal concerning the evolution of nostalgia as a key dimension for understanding contemporary culture and society, focusing on its contradictory aspects.

### **Neo-craft as a cultural scene**

Artisanal production today no longer represents a niche consumer trend but has become a mainstream force within contemporary capitalism. The origin of the current popularity of craft work may be located in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 economic downturn, as a ‘new wave of craft’ (Jakob 2014) represented a safe haven to come back to, providing individuals who may have found themselves out of a job with alternative means of livelihood and offering a resource for resilience in the wake of crisis (Luckman 2015). This has soon intertwined with the emerging logic of authenticity as a normative force of late capitalism (Gerosa 2024), fuelling renewed interest in forms of production and consumption that draw from the past and are henceforth perceived to be more ‘authentic’. Digital technologies have also played a key role in this revival of artisanal cultures. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Etsy have contributed to the creation a new kind of global marketplace for artisanal and handmade goods, enabling artisans to join online communities and thus reach new audiences. This is to date a growing market: as of 2024, Etsy recorded \$13.3 billion in gross merchandise sales, demonstrating the growing popularity of digital craft entrepreneurship (Etsy Market Report 2024).

Against this backdrop, neo-craft activities have affirmed as a contemporary, trendy variation of traditional artisanal work. Their distinguishing feature is the ‘resignification’ of occupations commonly considered to be low-status, or undertaken by the working-class – such as bartending, butchery, or baking – into ‘cool work’ (Ocejo 2017). This is achieved through the infusion of ‘craft imaginaries’ (Bell, Dacin and Toraldo 2021) into these jobs, which, in turn, provides them with a new sense of meaning (Gandini and Gerosa 2023). As a result, neo-craft work has become an original avenue for self-expression, creative autonomy, and social distinction. Many view it as an antidote to the alienation given by the increasingly ‘bullshit jobs’ (Graeber 2018) of the knowledge economy, offering a more personally fulfilling alternative to office work thanks to a direct involvement in material production (Gandini and Gerosa 2023; Gandini et al. forthcoming). The popularity of neo-craft is argued to be part of a ‘hipster economy’ (Gerosa 2024) where authenticity drives consumer preference. Within this framework, where the ‘how’ of production is as important as the final product, craftsmanship holds superior cultural value compared to industrial goods (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2019; Currid-Halkett 2017; Prieur and Savage 2013). Rather than opposing traditional craft, neo-craft activities exist on a continuum with it, yet emphasizing the prominence of the discursive dimension – a process that Alessandro Gandini and Alessandro Gerosa (2023) call ‘discursive materiality’. In neo-craft, discursive and material practices are inseparable, and their interaction provides meaning to this original form of artisanal work.

Although neo-craft activities are rooted in craft cultures and carry a ‘native’ orientation towards the past, they are embedded in a post-industrial imaginary that blends tradition with innovation (Land 2018). As they emphasize authenticity as a normative value (Gerosa 2024), neo-craft activities also distinguish themselves through the ‘particularisation’ of their production (Smith Maguire 2018), that is, by asserting ‘marginally different’ features that require consumers to exercise a degree of cultural competence to detect them (Gandini and Gerosa 2023). Unlike traditional craft, which often relies on stable lineages of techniques and apprenticeships, neo-craft is chiefly focused on the integration of symbolic meaning within artisanal practice, demanding that consumers not only recognize craftsmanship but also decode the markers of authenticity. For example, a handcrafted coffee table made by an independent woodworker is not simply an alternative to mass-produced furniture; its value derives from an assemblage of cues – for example, its recycled wood material, its small-batch production process, its minimalist rustic design – and their recognition by the consumer is essential to its value-making proposition. Thus, as Gerosa (2024:61) argues, neo-craft activities are ‘neo’ not merely because they revive past traditions but because, despite their reference to a mythologized pre-industrial past, they remain firmly embedded in the neoliberal, post-Fordist economy.

This is further emphasized by the engagement of neo-craft activities with digital platforms, which as said are essential to their economic survival. It may be argued that neo-craft activities merge the conservative ethos of artisanal revival with the future-oriented imaginary of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017). Social media platforms are the infrastructural backbone of neo-craft businesses, enabling the visibility, circulation, and monetization of neo-artisanal production to a potentially global audience; although their cultural reference is pre-industrial craftsmanship, their economic existence is highly dependent from digital mediation. Neo-artisans use social media to aestheticize their labour and curate entrepreneurial narratives; this has decisively contributed to shaping neo-craft work as ‘cool’, presenting an idealized image of the independent artisan working in a sunlit studio, engaging with an online community, and achieving financial sustainability through direct-to-consumer sales. (Gandini et al. 2024). This image, however, is highly aspirational, since it presents neo-craft work as an ‘easy’ alternative to other forms of work when, in reality, neo-craft work is marked by ‘hidden strains’ and is not exempt from issues of precarity, low pay, and labour-intensive routines (Delgaty and Wilson 2023).

The concept of ‘cultural imaginary’ (Caliandro et al. 2024) helps ground the discursive foundations of the neo-craft scene. This refers to the shared semiotic and affective frameworks that structure collective meaning-making processes (Jasanoff and Kim 2013). Social media have effectively reshaped the way cultural imaginaries are formed, circulated, and contested. Nostalgia plays a key role in this setting: Alessandro Caliandro et al. (2024) show that nostalgia on platforms such as Facebook is a powerful marketing tool for creating ‘digital consumer imaginaries’ around cultural objects of the past, such as music, ads, and television shows. Nostalgia on social media, they argue, follows specific grammars and vernaculars that

adapt to the platform-driven cultural ecosystem. The cultural imaginary of neo-craft is centred around grammars and vernaculars that reproduce a romanticized vision of pre-industrial craftsmanship, an emphasis on authenticity, and an anti-mass production ethos. This blends with social media cultures and practices to form a shared discourse that critiques industrial commodification while, at the same time, commodifying its own aesthetics. On social media, neo-artisans cultivate imaginaries of slow production, sustainability, and ethical consumption, contrasting industrial capitalism without, however, being ‘anti-digital’ (Gandini et al. 2025). Nostalgia is a central dimension underpinning this discourse, as it functions as a mediated affective structure integral to the cultural imaginary of contemporary artisanal revivalism. This represents an example of what Gandini (2020) describes as a form of ‘progressive nostalgia’ – that is, a form of nostalgia which promotes a return to the past with an explicit orientation towards the future. Particularly on the platform Instagram, which is a somewhat ‘native’ cultural setting of digital retro cultures (Boy and Uitermark 2023), the aestheticization of neo-craft activities manifests itself through various nostalgic cues, from vintage-inspired branding to the valorization of slow production. Neo-craft practitioners strategically deploy past-oriented aesthetics to generate affective resonance with their digital audiences, using nostalgia as a ‘cultural glue’ that structures consumer participation and sustains their claim of authenticity (Caliandro et al. 2024). In turn, social media facilitate the formation of affective communities where neo-artisanal producers and consumers inhabit a shared space. These communities function as sites of mutual recognition, where past-oriented aesthetic representations and value orientations translate the affective economy of neo-craft into forms of status display (Boy and Uitermark 2023). Yet, as neo-craft businesses tap into nostalgia as a discursive regime to connect with contemporary consumers, an investigation of the main dimensions through which nostalgia is expressed within this setting is still lacking. This chapter fills this gap.

### **Methodological note**

The study reported in this chapter is supported by research from the CRAFT-WORK project, which explores the lived experiences of neo-craft work within the European Union. Given the scarcity of specific data on neo-craft activities, we employed digital methods (Rogers 2019) to collect a dataset of social media posts that included the hashtag ‘artisanal’ and/or ‘artisan’ in the timeframe March 30, 2021 – March 30, 2022. These posts were sourced from Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. From this dataset, we identified 23,433 unique accounts associated with the collected posts. We then conducted an ethnographic content analysis (Caliandro and Gandini 2017) across the entire corpus, using a structured codebook devised with the goal of operationalizing empirically the existing definition of neo-craft work provided by the literature (Gandini and Gerosa 2023). This led to the identification of a sample of 346 neo-craft activities operating across 25 EU countries across several sectors, with a prominence of food and beverages but also including, among others, ceramics, woodworking, textile production, jewellery, and cosmetics (see Gandini et al. 2024 for an extended account).

Specifically, the present chapter builds on this data collection to devise a digital ethnographic analysis (Caliandro and Gandini 2017) of the social media accounts and website pages of these activities, looking to identify the main dimensions through which nostalgia is mobilized across these spaces. What follows is the illustration of this observation, which in practice consisted in the isolation of recurring narratives, patterns of self-presentation, and discursive strategies produced by the neo-craft activities in our sample across their digital spaces. This permitted to explore the role nostalgia plays in the broader self-presentation strategies of these entrepreneurial initiatives and as a ‘glue’ in the construction of the cultural imaginary around neo-craft. The data collected as part of this research is of a publicly accessible nature; nonetheless, this chapter will use pseudonyms in order to preserve the identity of the neo-craft activities surveyed in the study.

While our dataset enables a comparative, cross-platform (Rogers 2019) and cross-national analysis, this falls outside the scope of the present contribution and will be made object of a separate publication. Yet, while presenting the data, an initial comparative assessment across industries will be provided, without making overarching claims of international applicability or representativeness but rather signalling recurring patterns, interconnected variations, and repeated themes within the dataset, in the attempt of identifying a ‘multiplicity of differentiated outcomes’ rather than looking for a singular, generalized framework (Robinson 2022).

### **Rekindling the past: nostalgia in neo-craft activities**

This section presents how nostalgia is mobilized as a discursive framework among the 346 neo-craft activities surveyed in the CRAFTWORK project. Findings are presented in the context of a digital ethnographic approach that sought to isolate distinctive examples while focusing on the ways in which a nostalgic discourse and imaginary is constructed around. The social media accounts and website pages of these activities have therefore been observed across three main interpretative dimensions: (a) the production process and its narration; (b) the business history and its ‘foundational myth’; and (c) the visual imagery that is displayed across its online pages. Building upon this observational work, towards the end of the section, a discussion of the cross-cultural patterns that emerge in the way nostalgia is mobilized beyond local or national cultures is provided, to discuss the analogies that can be drawn across different kinds of businesses, such as baking, beer brewing, ceramics and textile production.

#### ***Production practices: artistry, tradition and sustainability***

One of the most significant dimensions through which nostalgia is discursively mobilized in neo-craft activities is the illustration of production practices. Hand-crafting, small-batch production, and the use of traditional techniques are central to the presentation and identity of these businesses. Virtually all of the neo-craft activities surveyed in this study explicitly state on their websites and social media pages that their production practices aim to rekindle a time when craftsmanship

was paramount. Handcrafting, whether in the form of baking, brewing, or pottery, is a dominant theme in neo-craft cultures. By returning to handmade, artisanal production, neo-craft businesses make a claim to reject mass-production methods and industrialization. Their insistence on creating something by hand is intended to bring a sense of authenticity to the product, resonating deeply with consumers seeking a ‘particular’ experience. However, the emphasis on non-industrial production is typically framed within an innovation-oriented context. Here, nostalgia does not serve as an explicit longing for the past, but rather as a cultural device to present neo-craft activities as forward-oriented ones. By drawing on historical production methods, these businesses showcase their production practices as a ‘new way of doing’, using nostalgia as the framework through which to present themselves as innovative.

A good example of such practices is *Levain* (pseudonym) in France. Based in Paris, this is a bakery that focuses on traditional sourdough bread production, using slow fermentation and natural ingredients. The business traces its history back to the 1930s, and its commitment to artisanal baking methods is presented as a nostalgic gesture to a time when bread-making was an authentic process, carried out in small, family-run workshops. The current master baker, Erica, is described as a ‘third-generation baker’ who aims to carry the historical values of the family business into the future of baking. She describes her approach to baking as ‘retro-innovation’, which, she maintains, represents a way of ‘combining the best of the past with the best of the present’. On the bakery’s website, the production process is described in detail, emphasizing the human intervention at every stage of the baking process and the ‘personal satisfaction’ that bakers take in their handmade work. The emphasis on *Levain*’s ‘particular’ production method, which is central to its nostalgic narrative, is further underscored by a specific practice: when the dough is ready to be baked, the bakers carve the first letter of the bakery’s name into each loaf. This signature, the brand claims, also represents a way of perpetuating a baking tradition passed down through the centuries.

A connection to the past is often presented as a distinctive component of the appeal of a neo-craft activity, which offers consumers a sense of authenticity and closeness to the craft. Yet, for many neo-craft activities, referencing the past in their production processes is not only a way to liaise with tradition but also a strategic choice, that specifically serves the purpose of aligning with the broader discourse around sustainable production that is central in modern consumer culture. This is inevitably more relevant in those neo-craft industries – such as textile production – where unsustainable production has been a lively concern, which led to a growing demand for ‘evidence’ of a company’s sustainability practices. Many neo-craft brands emphasize sustainability as a core value, yet they typically frame it as an ethos rather than a mere business strategy. This ethos is rooted in a nostalgic longing for a time when consumption was more mindful, and resources were used with greater care and respect. By explicitly underlining these historical practices, neo-craft activities develop a narrative that positions sustainability both as a modern necessity and a return to a more harmonious, pre-industrial way of life. Put differently, neo-craft activities valorize the past as a source of meaning

and inspiration for shaping a more sustainable future. This represents a landmark example of ‘progressive nostalgia’, insofar as the past is not viewed as something to be idealized or resurrected in absolute terms, but as a set of values and practices that can inform and guide contemporary and future business. The act of reclaiming traditional, small-scale (and henceforth more sustainable) methods of production allows neo-craft activities to position themselves as agents of change, advocating for a more thoughtful and ethically grounded mode of production that combines historical heritage and modern innovation, operating a fusion of past and future.

An example of this kind is Mokimo, a neo-craft activity that creates fashion items, mainly bags, from upcycled leather jackets. Upcycling is the process of creatively reusing or transforming old, discarded, or unwanted materials into something new and valuable, while enhancing the quality or aesthetic appeal of the original. Unlike recycling, which breaks materials down to create new raw matter, upcycling preserves and enhances existing materials. Mokimo is a local-global business: based in Copenhagen, its founder, Carolina, is a 25-year-old Eastern European fashion designer who sources leather jackets from country markets in Italy for her production. She frequently travels to Italy, where she has regular collaborators who help her scout the best materials for her collections. Her neo-craft activity is explicitly oriented to sustainability, yet the narration of this sustainability is set into a cultural imaginary that remains grounded in nostalgia, since the act of reusing materials is described with reference to the resourcefulness of past generations, when everything had a purpose, and nothing went to waste. A similar approach is adopted by Nuvu, a Finnish neo-craft woodworker specializing in handmade skis. Produced with sustainable materials and traditional methods passed down through generations, Nuvu’s sustainability narration is illustrated in a video, posted on their social media and website, in which a young artisan explains and showcases the production process in detail. Here, the artisan emphasizes that the defining feature of Nuvu’s products is its ‘simplicity’, and praises production in the past, when objects were more durable and crafted with better care. Another example of this kind is Solen, an Austrian neo-craft producer of leather bags, shoes, and accessories. Their website highlights the meticulous, time-consuming nature of their craftsmanship but also ties their approach to a broader narrative of sustainability and longevity, that is very much situated in present-day consumer cultures. By focusing on the creation of high-quality, durable products, Solen explicitly contrasts the poor quality of mass-produced items with the lasting value of handmade goods, highlighting its adherence to traditional artisanal techniques. The brand grounds its presentation in the nostalgia for a time when leather items were not just commodities but valued possessions, passed down through generations. This allows them to position their products as an explicit rejection of fast fashion, emphasizing quality over quantity and encouraging consumers to invest in goods that are built to last, rather than disposable items designed for quick replacement.

Taken together, these examples clearly demonstrate that the mobilization of sustainability in neo-craft is not merely a market device but also key to the development of a future-oriented nostalgic imaginary that uses nostalgia as an emotional knot that extends the connection between the brand and the consumer into

an emotional territory. This is broadly based upon a claim of ‘returning to roots’, when communities were more self-sufficient and products had a deeper connection to the people who made them. These examples also show how neo-craft businesses do not merely elicit a romanticized vision of the past, that is typical of traditional craft production. On the contrary, they position themselves as inherently ‘post-industrial’ activities, operating within a consumer market and aiming at bringing innovative approaches to it.

***Business histories: legacy, continuity and storytelling***

Corollarily with the presentation of their production practices, nostalgia in neo-craft activities is also conveyed through the tales of the ‘foundational myth’ of these businesses. Virtually all the neo-craft activities included in our sample display their foundational story as authentic and unique. This commonly occurs within a nostalgic imaginary where the relevance of heritage and continuity is put centre stage – again, within a future-oriented narration that introduces the past as a source for innovation. Many of these activities reference family traditions, regional pride, and craftsmanship passed down through generations as key aspects in their self-presentation as a business. By emphasizing their historical roots, neo-craft activities market themselves as the continuation of long-standing production practices, which they revive today by re-enacting old techniques or reviving forgotten local crafts. As previously illustrated, Levain positions itself as an artisanal bakery that revives a century-long tradition of French sourdough bread. Loufoque, an artisanal beer brewery based in Belgium, also provides a clear example of a business history that is tied to a nostalgic foundational tale. Its website emphasizes the history of the territory where the brewery operates, dating its existence back to the late 19th century, and outlines the various historical phases of the brewery, through the World Wars to the present day. In doing so, it underscores the brewery’s mission to preserve a beer brewing tradition that spans six generations, highlighting the cultural significance of its products and how their production benefits the local community. A Facebook post from February 2025 celebrates the brewery’s 175th anniversary, noting that when it began, there were ‘twenty-nine pubs and three breweries’ in the area, while today, Loufoque is ‘the only one still active’ and also retains its original name.

Interestingly, this nostalgic framing of the foundational tale of the neo-craft activity is not limited to businesses with long histories that have recently embraced neo-craft ideals, but also to more recent ones. For example, Van Braak is a Flemish butcher that draws upon its family-run butcher shop’s heritage, highlighting its deep connection to traditional butchery practices passed down through generations since the business opened in the 1970s. Although the foundation date of this business is more recent, its storytelling still taps into a nostalgic narrative, celebrating a time when butcher shops were the heart of local communities. The business prides itself on being the purveyors of ‘the fairest and tastiest meat’ in the area. A key element of their brand is the revival of the Belgian Red cattle breed, which nearly went extinct after World War II when local farmers favoured the more profitable

Belgian Blue breed. By highlighting its long-standing legacy in meat production, Van Braak uses nostalgia as a discursive framework to blend authenticity with innovation. Their Instagram posts often feature the slogan ‘Less but better’, encapsulating the post-industrial value of responsible and thoughtful consumption, and reinforcing the idea that quality should take precedence over quantity.

These examples demonstrate how neo-craft businesses strategically use nostalgia to present their business histories, frequently positioning themselves as the preservers of lost or forgotten production practices. This storytelling approach connects the business to a deeper sense of heritage, intertwining family- and community-centred imaginaries that not only look back to the past but also present this revival as a desirable evolution for the future. Even more interestingly, a similar narrative can be observed also among newer businesses, founded in recent years, which are inherently part of the contemporary neo-craft scene. A compelling example of this kind is Ceralis, a French candlemaker founded in 2017. Ceralis aims to revive traditional candle-making methods *à l’ancienne*, which were once widespread but have disappeared with the industrialization of production. For Ceralis, the restoration of this forgotten practice is not merely about craftsmanship, but is also deeply connected to nostalgia for the artisanal values of earlier generations, when small-scale, handmade production was the norm. This nostalgic return to craftsmanship is framed within a broader narrative that emphasizes the preservation of traditional methods but is framed in an innovation-oriented, future-facing imaginary. As stated on their website, Ceralis seeks to ‘restore candles to their former glory’, invoking a sense of reclaiming something valuable that was lost over time. Yet, in doing so, the company is also strategically positioning itself as a modern, forward-thinking business through the use of natural beeswax, targeting a growing market of consumers who are increasingly seeking sustainable, high-quality products. Their commitment to delivering ‘high-quality natural products to ecologically conscious customers across Europe’ reflects a sophisticated blend of progressive nostalgia, which offers further proof to the claim that neo-craft activities are not merely looking back but use their historical roots as the baseline for their claim for sustainable, ethical production in a modern marketplace.

### ***Visual design: nostalgia through aesthetic choices***

Visual design plays a crucial role for neo-craft activities, functioning not merely as an aesthetic enhancement but also as a strategic tool for communicating the brand’s cultural positioning. Aesthetic choices among neo-craft businesses, particularly in colour schemes and typography, are rooted in the visual language of hipster culture (Gerosa 2024) and commonly draw from retro imagery. Consistently, one of the most prominent visual trends among neo-craft businesses is the use of earthy tones, textured materials, and rustic imagery. These elements work together to evoke a sense of warmth, simplicity, and authenticity. Far from being merely decorative, these visual cues function semiotically to deliver within a visual economy that ties specific palettes and styles to broader narratives of tradition, craftsmanship, and locality. The colour palette of the Instagram profile of the aforementioned Levain

bakery clearly exemplifies this approach: warm, muted hues, ranging from soft browns and ochres to gentle creams, evoke the tactile and visual experience of an old French boulangerie. Yet, this is accompanied by visual references that construct a language that matches current trends. This reveals a consistent visual vernacular (Caliandro et al. 2024) that effectively situates the business within a nostalgic cultural framework that celebrates the handmade, the local, and the historically resonant – while also emphasizing its modern traits.

The Belgian brewery Loufoque, which we have also encountered before, offers another compelling example of how neo-craft activities strategically deploy modern retro visual aesthetics belonging to hipster culture to articulate their brand identity. A glance at their Instagram account highlights the use of vintage-inspired typography, muted colour palettes, and historicized imagery with modern tones functioning as a visual citation of brewing traditions, subtly reinforcing the brand's alignment with craftsmanship and heritage. However, their visual strategy does not explicitly recall nostalgia, as occurs instead in the case of Levain. Rather, it adopts the ironic grammars that are characteristic of hipster culture. By staging the past as both sincere and highly stylized, Loufoque taps into a consumer desire for products that are rooted in tradition yet remain quintessentially contemporary. The aesthetics of hipster culture in this case serve to appeal to a specific audience, negotiating the position of the brand between heritage and modernity, tradition and reinvention – which, as seen, are central tensions that animate neo-craft cultures.

In addition to the use of colour, interior design elements also constitute key vernacular expression of nostalgia within neo-craft visual design on social media. These operate as semiotic cues that reference historical periods associated with craftsmanship, care, and locality, which are values that remain central to the ethos of neo-craft production. Eleufera, a Greek artisanal ice cream maker, exemplifies this visual strategy, through its deliberate use of retro fonts, pastel palettes, and imagery that echoes the aesthetic of mid-20th-century ice cream parlours. This choice is not merely decorative; it performs a specific form of cultural work that is aimed at situating ice cream as a consumer practice that occurs in intimate, communal settings such as small, local shops. Through these visual references, Eleufera constructs a narrative that draws from the past to position its products as both temporally dislocated from mass production and symbolically closer to a slower, more authentic mode of consumption. The typography contributes to building a sense of warmth and familiarity – yet echoing the appeal to modern, hipster lifestyles that Loufoque more explicitly emphasized. In doing so, the visual language deployed by Eleufera functions as a device that aspires at communicating the act of ice cream consumption as a culturally and emotionally resonant experience, rooted in nostalgia and artisanal authenticity.

In sum, visual design in neo-craft activities commonly focuses on close-up shots of materials, tools, and production processes and emphasizes earthy tones, textured materials, and a rustic imagery. These aesthetic choices serve a powerful communicative function, insofar as they foreground the tactile and laborious nature of artisanal work. By showcasing textures, such as the grain of wood, the roughness of unglazed pottery, or the soft creases in hand-stitched leather, these

images emphasize the authenticity and materiality of the product, inviting consumers to imagine the craftsperson's touch. In doing so, they highlight the 'human' element behind the object, reinforcing the idea that each item carries the personal imprint of its maker. This visual strategy also strengthens the emotional connection between the consumer and the product, encouraging a form of affective consumption rooted in values of small-scale, ethical production. Most importantly, it constitutes a key element of the cultural imaginary of progressive nostalgia: a longing to the past aimed at reworking its values for their adoption in contemporary life. Within this framework, neo-craft production is framed as a combination of heritage and innovation, that honours traditional methods while explicitly liaising with modern practices.

### *Cross-cultural analogies and industry connections*

Despite the geographical and industrial diversity of the neo-craft activities surveyed in this study, clear patterns and analogies emerge across sectors. In particular, the fields of baking and brewing, on the one hand, and ceramics and textiles, on the other, tend to draw on a shared set of cultural references, where traditional techniques, heritage narratives, and retro visual aesthetics work together to create a coherent and clearly recognizable visual imaginary. At the same time, these references are anchored in the material and productive dimensions of the work, showcasing objects with both historical depth and present relevance, grounded in a nostalgic discourse.

Neo-craft bakeries and breweries, for instance, draw on a shared tradition of fermentation and small-scale production, embedding their practices within historical narratives of artisanal knowledge and transmission. The recurring emphasis on the slow, deliberate processes involved in baking bread or brewing beer evokes a nostalgia for pre-industrial modes of production, when food was prepared by hand, using local ingredients and recipes handed down through generations. More than a production method, this process is aestheticized and marketed as an act of care, patience, and devotion – positioning the baker or brewer not merely as a producer, but as a custodian of traditions. Visual aesthetics play a central role in reinforcing this ethos, with brands often employing rustic imagery, warm tones, and vintage-inspired typography that work to construct an idealized image of the past, which is idealized, emotionally resonant, and commercially compelling.

A similar interplay between nostalgia, materiality, and emotional engagement is evident also in ceramics and textile neo-craft activities, where the emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of handmade objects and their perceived authenticity. In both sectors, nostalgia functions as an explicit critique of mass production and the loss of individual touch and variation. Imperfection is valorized, framed as evidence of human intervention and artisanal labour. Visual strategies in these domains foreground the material qualities of the products themselves: muted, earthy tones, tactile surfaces, and close-up photography serve as aesthetic tools that emphasize and invite sensory engagement. Social media, as a primary platform for these practices, further amplifies this effect, allowing neo-artisans to document

their production process in ways that render craftsmanship a performative act, that consumers are encouraged to witness and emotionally engage with.

Put differently, across the diverse sectors and geographies of the neo-craft activities surveyed here, progressive nostalgia confirms as the broader cultural framework within which these practices unfold. This kind of nostalgia represents a structured mode of engagement with the past that works as a way of re-inscribing historical value into contemporary, post-industrial forms of production. By intentionally developing progressive, nostalgic imaginaries, neo-craft activities aim to offer more than just products; they build affective worlds that invite consumers into an experience of temporal displacement, a sensory and emotional journey back to what is perceived as a simpler, more meaningful time. In doing so, they position their work as a response to the alienation of modern industrial production – yet, without rejecting capitalism outright, but working to reshaping its terms. This depicts a cultural imaginary that fuses artisanal heritage with the present-day market imperatives of quality, aesthetic distinction, and sustainability.

Ultimately, the resurgence of neo-craft activities cannot be dismissed as a passing trend but must be understood as part of a broader cultural movement that reflects deeper societal anxieties and desires. In an era of increasing technological acceleration and mass-produced uniformity, the appeal of neo-craft lies in its promise of reconnection – with tradition, with place, and with the human touch. Crucially, this reconnection is mediated through what was described as a form of progressive nostalgia: a forward-facing engagement with the past that mobilizes historical references not as mere romanticism, but as resources for imagining alternative futures. Through their engagement with historical production practices, heritage-driven storytelling, and nostalgic visual design, these businesses offer consumers a means to access authenticity in an industrialized world, reasserting the enduring value of craftsmanship as both a material and cultural practice. In doing so, they position nostalgia not as a retreat, but as a tool for critique and renewal – one that aligns artisanal values with contemporary aspirations for sustainability, individuality, and meaningful consumption.

## **Conclusion**

By looking at the narration of their production process, business history and foundational narratives, and their visual imagery, displayed across social media profiles and website pages, this chapter has shown how the popularity of neo-craft activities serves as a valuable entry point to examine the resurgence of nostalgia in contemporary Western societies and cultures. The revival of craftsmanship, handmade techniques, and small-scale production reflects a broader yearning for authenticity, individuality, and historical continuity in an era increasingly defined by digitalization, automation, and globalized economies. The renewed interest in artisanal goods, whether in food, fashion, or accessories, not only aligns with a modern consumer ethos that rewards ‘conspicuous production’ (Currid-Halkett 2017) but also reveals a growing desire for a more personal, affective relationship with material objects. For many consumers, who are increasingly attentive to ‘how’ products

are made (Prieur and Savage 2013; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2019), handcrafted goods operate as aspirational lifestyle markers: they allow individuals to tap into cultural histories, heritage, and localized traditions while remaining anchored in modernity and simultaneously signalling familiarity with contemporary aesthetic and cultural trends.

One of the key insights offered by the rise of neo-craft activities in relation to nostalgia is its role in constructing an idealized past for purposes of present-day (and future-oriented) branding, storytelling, and consumer engagement. Artisanal products are often framed within narratives that emphasize traditional materials, slow techniques, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, suggesting a return to simpler, more meaningful ways of living as a way forward. In doing so, as argued here, neo-craft activities exemplify what Gandini (2020) defines as progressive nostalgia – a mode of cultural engagement that revives and reinterprets past aesthetics and practices not as ends in themselves, but as resources for envisioning a more sustainable, human-centred future. Neo-artisanal goods are not simply offered as alternatives to mass-produced items; they are framed as ethically superior, and their appeal is bolstered by a broader narrative of ecological responsibility. In an era of climate crisis and growing concern over the environmental impact of industrial production, neo-craft is positioned as not just desirable, but as ‘the right thing to do’. The emphasis on ethical sourcing, small-scale production, and reduced waste aligns with evolving consumer values, reinforcing the idea that nostalgic practices can be reimagined as socially and ecologically progressive.

Importantly, however, this cultural strategy constructs a curated and often sanitized version of the past that is tailored upon the notion of authenticity as a normative ideal in contemporary consumer culture. Progressive nostalgia, in this context, is mobilized to create a cultural and emotional bridge between heritage and sustainability that ultimately taps into a market economy wherein, besides value-drive considerations, ultimately neo-artisanal producers have to sell their products in order to make ends meet. This signals how the contemporary mainstreaming of neo-craft production is also deeply intertwined with the commodification of nostalgic aesthetics, which are increasingly disseminated and aestheticized through digital platforms. Instagram, in particular, plays a central role in shaping and amplifying the nostalgic language of artisanal production, reinforcing ideals of handmade authenticity through carefully curated imagery. Close-up shots of raw materials, tools, and slow processes contribute to an immersive visual narrative that makes the past feel sensorially accessible in the present. This platform-based mediation of neo-craft work paradoxically underscores one of the key contradictions of contemporary nostalgia: while it seeks to reclaim pre-industrial or pre-digital modes of production, it is simultaneously a core example of the very technologies that define modern society.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge the contradictions that underpin the nostalgic appeal of neo-craft activities. The nostalgia embedded in neo-craft work often romanticizes labour-intensive processes without fully addressing the social and economic ‘strains’ (Delgaty and Wilson 2023) that neo-artisans often find

themselves under. While neo-craft culture articulates a critique of industrialization, globalization, and uniformity, its access remains limited, and often available only to consumers who can afford the premium cost of handmade goods. Moreover, the aesthetic and cultural codes that shape the neo-craft space align with middle-class sensibilities that tend to leave out alternative or vernacular craft traditions which do not conform to this stylized, Instagrammable vision of artisanal authenticity. In this sense, the progressive nostalgia that animates neo-craft is not politically neutral, but risks reproducing forms of exclusion even as it offers a critique of modernity. Put differently, while neo-craft gestures towards a more humane and conscious future, it remains deeply entangled with the economic logics of the neoliberal marketplace. The progressive nostalgia it invokes is thus not without ambivalence, offering both a critique of the present and a product of its contradictions.

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