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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘Nostalgic food heals for us’: A qualitative exploration of experiences with nostalgia, food, and mood

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## Abstract

**Issue Addressed:** Nostalgia—the bittersweet reliving of the past—has been linked to social connection and psychological wellbeing. Although food consumption is often an intrinsically social experience, relatively little research has examined how individuals experience and understand how food consumption relates to feelings of nostalgia, food and mood.

**Methods:** In the current study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Australians from varying cultural backgrounds to explore their experiences with nostalgia, food and mood.

**Results:** Reflexive thematic analysis identified three key themes from the data: (i) *The bittersweet experiences of food-evoked nostalgia*—individuals' descriptions of food-evoked nostalgia and how it impacted their mood both positively and negatively (ii) *social connection and identity continuity*—participants' description of food-evoked nostalgia and how this provides an opportunity for social connection and identity continuity throughout life, which positively influences mood, and (iii) *the role and relationship of food-evoked nostalgia and mood*—individual descriptions of the important role that nostalgic food plays in their life, in addition to their relationship with food, and how this impacts mood.

**Conclusions:** Understanding the positive component of nostalgic foods allowed individuals to bolster positive mood states with food-evoked nostalgia, increasing their quality of life.

**So What?** Understanding the link between food-evoked nostalgia and mood has significant implications, suggesting that negative mood states altered by nostalgic foods may result in positive mood states. Appropriate use of food-evoked nostalgia may increase the quality of life for individuals experiencing low mood states.

## KEYWORDS

food, food-evoked nostalgia, mood, nostalgia, psychological wellbeing

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In Australia, 21% of individuals aged 16–85 years have experienced a mental health disorder in the previous 12 months, with 44% predicted to experience a mental health disorder in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, treatment for mental health disorders, particularly mood disorders such as depression, includes psychotherapy and psychopharmacology<sup>2,3</sup> and, at times, more invasive techniques such as electroconvulsive therapy.<sup>4</sup> However, such treatment methods have been associated with adverse outcomes, including fatigue, heightened suicidality, diminished sex drive, and weight gain.<sup>5–8</sup> The burgeoning field of nutritional psychiatry has provided a novel treatment approach to mood disorders, focusing on lifestyle factors such as changes in diet, which may be targeted in treatment for conditions such as depression.<sup>9,10</sup> Research in this field has indicated a direct link between food and mood, highlighting the importance of continued research in this area.<sup>11–13</sup> Similarly, in mood research, a direct link has been established between emotions such as nostalgia and mood.<sup>14–16</sup> Exploring the connection between food evoked nostalgia and mood provides a promising opportunity for health promotion. Research in this area can inform targeted strategies to harness the therapeutic benefits of nostalgia and food to enhance mental wellbeing.

Nostalgia is a bittersweet, wistful affection and sentimental longing for the past.<sup>17</sup> Nostalgia is an essential emotion that positively influences psychological health and wellbeing and is universally felt across cultures and the lifespan.<sup>15,16,18</sup> Although the impact of nostalgia is typically positive, it also involves a mixture of positive and negative affect<sup>16,19</sup>: when nostalgic, we feel a mixture of happiness and sadness, understanding that moments from the past are not replicable.<sup>19</sup> The feeling of nostalgia can be evoked by varying external or internal stimuli, prompting an individual to reflect on a past time, including people, objects, and smells.<sup>20</sup>

Psychological health plays a significant role in physiological health. Positive mood and mental health are associated with better physical health outcomes. In contrast, negative mood and mental health have been linked with a decrease in physical health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, weakened immune response and metabolic disorders such as obesity.<sup>21</sup> There is also a bidirectional link in the relationship between food and mood. High-quality diets rich in fresh and natural vegetables, fruits, seeds, whole grains, nuts, and legumes have been associated with decreased risk of mood disorders such as depression and low-quality diets high in ultra-processed and hyper-palatable food and sugar-sweetened beverages have been associated with increased risk depressive symptoms and lower mood.<sup>10,12,13</sup>

Nostalgia has been found to positively influence health by enhancing emotional wellbeing, fostering social connection and increasing quality of life.<sup>15</sup> Nostalgia is often preceded by a negative mood state, triggered by feelings such as loneliness and meaninglessness.<sup>15,22</sup> But nostalgia acts as a mood repair mechanism, whereby the initial negative mood state is counteracted, resulting in an improved mood state.<sup>15,23</sup> Research suggests that experiencing nostalgia results in short and long-term benefits, including a heightened

sense of life's meaning and increased positive affect.<sup>21</sup> It is understood that comfort food consumption is often in response to nostalgic emotions.<sup>20,24,25</sup> The consumption of comfort foods is understood to positively influence mood.<sup>26–28</sup> The interaction between nostalgia, food, and mood suggests the potential to use this phenomenon to inform strategies to enhance health promotion and wellbeing.

Nostalgia has been found to positively influence numerous areas of individuals' lives, improving positive affect, self-regard, and social connectedness.<sup>15,22,23</sup> Research recurrently identifies social connectedness—a sense of social acceptance and belonging—as a by-product of nostalgia.<sup>29</sup> The correlation between nostalgia and social connectedness is multi-factorial, with several ways in which social connection is fostered.<sup>18</sup> It is also suggested that nostalgic memories often include more than the self, usually centred on social contexts that involve loved ones.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, recollection of nostalgic memories allows for a feeling of social connection and the opportunity for memories of loved ones to be brought from the past to the present. Nostalgia is also closely correlated with identity continuity, allowing individuals to foster a sense of self and develop a connection between their past and current selves.<sup>30,31</sup> Identity continuity can be founded on many factors: culture, attitudes and beliefs, and relationships; however, nostalgia promotes identity continuity as individuals bolster their sense of self by incorporating past memories. Research has identified a correlation between identity continuity, as a result of nostalgia, and wellbeing. A sense of identity continuity may allow individuals to feel a sense of belonging in social and cultural contexts, fostering social connectedness.<sup>31</sup>

### 1.1 | Nostalgia, food and mood

The close associations between food and social experiences (family, culture, and tradition) mean that food consumption can provide emotional comfort and produce nostalgia.<sup>20,24,32</sup> Foods remembered from childhood—like comfort foods—are potent producers of nostalgia, and their consumption increases feelings of wellbeing and provides psychological comfort.<sup>26</sup> Commonly, foods higher in calorie content, sugar and carbohydrates, such as ice cream or chocolate,<sup>26,27</sup> are often considered comforting as they induce hedonic pleasure, influencing mood positively in the short term.<sup>28</sup>

A recent study by Lasaleta et al.<sup>32</sup> assessed the relationship between nostalgia, food, and wellbeing, focusing on the physical component of wellbeing. The American study consisted of two randomised control sub-studies. The first was conducted on 405 university students and found that participants felt socially connected when nostalgic, which led them to consume healthier food. The second study was conducted with 382 participants and found that nostalgia positively influenced consumer behaviour in making healthier choices. Additional research from the United States has assessed the relationship between nostalgia, food and mood.<sup>25</sup> Results revealed that food-evoked nostalgia is a similar experience to other nostalgic situations evoked by different stimuli like music; however, the emotional result of food-evoked nostalgia is more positive than other stimuli, resulting

in a significantly positive impact on psychological wellbeing.<sup>25,33</sup> The research by Lasaleta et al.<sup>32</sup> and Reid et al.<sup>25</sup> using quantitative methods shows promising results for the relationship between nostalgia, food, and mood. Still, no research to date explores individual experiences and perceptions of nostalgia, food, and mood. As such, the current study aims to understand the experience of nostalgic eating by exploring a rich understanding of individuals' lived experiences with nostalgia, food, and mood.

## 2 | METHODS

Using the COREQ guidelines,<sup>34</sup> we employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore individuals lived experiences with food-evoked nostalgia and mood using a semi-structured interview process. The ontological and epistemological stance in phenomenology acknowledges that reality is subjective and constructed through participants lived experience, emphasising the importance of understanding the phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing it.<sup>35</sup> We aimed to explore the phenomena by understanding participants' subjective experiences and perceptions providing a deeper understanding of how food-evoked nostalgia and mood intersect in shaping wellbeing. Further, the phenomenological approach allowed participants to share emotional and personal meaning associated with their food-evoked nostalgia and helped the researchers to understand the phenomena through the participants eyes—authentically capturing the essence of their nostalgic encounters with food and its impact on mood.<sup>35</sup> This ontological and epistemological stance could introduce bias into the work as the researchers preconceived ideas, personal experiences and cultural backgrounds may influence the approach to the study from research design through to interviewing participants to analysis and reporting of the experiences.<sup>36</sup> However, this phenomenological research design allowed for a rich exploration of the complex relationship between food-evoked nostalgia and mood, providing in-depth exploration for potential holistic approaches to mental health promotion and wellbeing while attempting to reduce the researcher's biases, beliefs and preconceived ideas. To minimise bias in interpretations of the participants experiences a reflexive diary was kept throughout the study to reflect on the researchers' ongoing beliefs, preconceived ideas and attitudes brought to the project and reduce the impact of these beliefs in data collection, analyses and interpretation.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.1 | Participants

The study's ethics approval (Ethics #KS00821) was obtained from Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee. Australian participants of varying cultural backgrounds were recruited using convenience sampling on Twitter. Inclusion criteria were limited to individuals over the age of 18. No exclusion criteria were utilised as the study aimed to include a variety of voices with varying demographics and backgrounds. Interested participants were asked to

express their interest via email, where they were provided with the participant information sheet and inclusion criteria. Researchers received 47 expressions of interest in response to the study. Of the 47, nine individuals responded to the email inviting them to schedule an interview. Eight individuals responded, and interviews occurred over 2 weeks. No demographic details were recorded to be non-invasive.<sup>38</sup> All participants provided informed written or digital consent. Participants were required to attend interviews in person at Bond University or online via Zoom, with the primary researcher present. Participants were offered a \$50 gift card incentive for their involvement in the study.

### 2.2 | Procedure

Interviews took place in person in a private room on a university campus or online via Zoom and were conducted. Interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, a female BPsychSc (Hons) student. The primary researcher was under the supervision of a Senior Teaching Fellow (ML) and an Assistant Professor (DA) at Bond University. Communication with participants was minimal prior to conducting interviews and was only used to gain informed consent and organise interview schedules. Participants were advised that this research was being conducted as a part of the interviewer's course requirements and that they were interested in the experiences of individuals who consume food for nostalgia and their psychological wellbeing.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were recorded on the researcher's password-protected laptop and phone. The study adopted a semi-structured interview approach to understanding each individual's experiences with food-evoked nostalgia and mood. An example of questions include: 'Considering the definition of nostalgia, do you feel there are times when you eat certain foods to feel connected to a past time?' and 'When eating out of nostalgia, can you describe your emotions after eating this food'. The semi-structure interview questions were inspired by nostalgia research conducted by Sedikides et al.<sup>16,19,30</sup> See supplementary material for a list of all interview questions. A follow-up email was sent the day after the interview to thank participants for their time.

### 2.3 | Reflexive thematic analysis

Data from the interviews were analysed using the Braun and Clarke<sup>39</sup> six-stage reflexive thematic analysis approach. The first stage involved transcribing audio recordings into Otter software ([www.otter.ai](http://www.otter.ai)) and cross-checking all data transcribed to ensure accuracy. All names and identifying information were deidentified at this stage, and pseudonyms were applied to each participant (Anna, Belinda, Danny, Carlie, Jess, Jim, Melissa and Bryce). Qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used for the following stages.<sup>40</sup> The second analysis stage involved generating 36 code labels. These code labels were developed into nine codes during a meeting with the three researchers. In Stage 3, the primary researcher independently

identified potential candidate themes that the code labels and codes formed. The research team discussed these candidate themes and agreed on three overarching themes. Stage 4 involved the researcher cross-checking code labels, codes, and themes against the transcripts to ensure all data was accurately analysed. Stage 5 involved a meeting with all researchers to discuss final themes. An email was sent to all participants for member checking of the results, but no participants responded that they would like to be involved in this process. Finally, the analysis was contextualised in a report of the three main themes.

### 3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to gain a rich understanding of individuals' experiences with food-evoked nostalgia and mood through individual interviews. Eight Australian participants (four female and four male) were interviewed face-to-face and via Zoom for approximately 45–60 min each. The reflexive thematic analysis identified three themes: (i) *The bittersweet experiences of food nostalgia*, (ii) *social connection and identity continuity*, and (iii) *the role and relationship of food-evoked nostalgia and mood*. These themes included descriptions of participants' positive and negative emotions when eating nostalgic food, social connection, cultural connection, and relationships with food. Table 1 outlines the thematic mapping of code labels, codes and themes identified during reflexive thematic analysis.

#### 3.1 | Theme one: The bittersweet experiences of food-evoked nostalgia

Theme one focused on participants' descriptions of how they understood their experience of food-evoked nostalgia and its antecedents and consequences. Participants recognised the connection between food and nostalgia and how this can be imprinted from an early age. Furthermore, participants highlighted the bittersweet aspect of nostalgia, whereby both positive and negative emotions are associated with nostalgic eating.

Participants described the origin of their nostalgia and how specific stimuli such as food led to reliving those memories. Danny described the connection between stimuli such as food and nostalgia and how the presence of such stimuli can evoke nostalgic emotions: 'I think it is pretty powerful how these sorts of moments and memories can be engraved upon our brains, and then retrieved by such subtle senses such as taste and smell'. Danny highlights the power of nostalgia, whereby specific moments can be memorialised and recalled later through experiences such as eating particular foods. The process Danny describes indicates the importance of food and how specific moments can be recalled later through such stimuli. This suggests that the connection between food and nostalgia is important, whereby food can act as a gateway to nostalgia. This is consistent with recent research conducted in the United States, which found that 72% of food experiences elicited nostalgia, significantly higher than other nostalgia-inducing stimuli such as music.<sup>25</sup>

**TABLE 1** Code labels, codes and themes.

Code labels	Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't enjoy certain food/drinks but do it for the memory</li> <li>• Food and negative affect</li> <li>• Food and positive affect</li> <li>• Food as a connection over distance</li> <li>• Food as a reminder of someone passed</li> <li>• Importance of childhood meals</li> <li>• Imprint of nostalgia</li> <li>• The negative experience of nostalgia</li> <li>• No nostalgia</li> <li>• Positive nostalgia</li> <li>• Travel-induced nostalgic eating</li> <li>• Triggers of nostalgia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative nostalgic feelings and negative affect</li> <li>• Positive nostalgic feelings and positive affect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Bittersweet Experiences of Food-evoked Nostalgia</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrations with family and food</li> <li>• Cultural tie to food</li> <li>• Dinner more sociable and enjoyable</li> <li>• Eating alone versus with people</li> <li>• Food needs to be cooked/prepared in the same way to 'hit the spot'</li> <li>• Generational food and cooking</li> <li>• Importance of eating out</li> <li>• Importance of home cooking</li> <li>• Organised/formal meals</li> <li>• Quick foods</li> <li>• Recognises social aspect</li> <li>• Recreating childhood foods/traditions with family now</li> <li>• Retrospectively recognises nostalgia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture and familial traditions</li> <li>• Social connectedness</li> <li>• Time of day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Connection and Identity Continuity</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caloric or fast foods</li> <li>• Eating for function</li> <li>• Food and illness</li> <li>• Food as reward</li> <li>• Importance of food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfort blanket</li> <li>• Food and feelings</li> <li>• Food as a function</li> <li>• Food restriction/food guilt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Role of and Relationship with Food</li> </ul>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Code labels	Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindful eating and cooking</li> <li>• No connection to comfort food</li> <li>• The novelty of comfort food</li> <li>• Relaxed eating style</li> <li>• Restriction from food</li> <li>• Thoughts and feelings on food</li> </ul>		

The participants shared the idea that childhood memories are influential to nostalgic experiences. Anna described a childhood meal her mother used to make and its emotional value: 'The meatloaf is definitely more special, and I suppose a richer connection'. Anna recognised the value of childhood meals and acknowledged that food from her childhood holds more meaning than the foods she enjoys as an adult. This concept is commonly understood in nostalgia research, whereby childhood foods hold significant nostalgic value.<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon is known as 'long-standing nostalgia', which relates to the deep-rooted emotion to childhood memories, in comparison to 'first-time nostalgia', which includes significant life events that are unique or considered 'firsts'.<sup>41</sup> This 'long-standing nostalgia' is closely linked to identity continuity, as remembering nostalgia based on childhood memories holds more significant value,<sup>41</sup> perhaps as they are associated with a time of happiness and innocence.

Participants were aware of the bittersweet, wistful, and sentimental longing features of nostalgia.<sup>17</sup> When reflecting on a meal made by her father, Anna noted:

Nostalgia is the perfect word for it...I guess it heightens any feelings of missing him [Father]...I don't know it's like this feeling of sort of contentedness or satisfied when it's finished. It's a really nice, it's a really good warm and fuzzy feeling.

Anna's experience of nostalgia resonates with the bittersweet nature of nostalgia, whereby cooking and eating the foods her father used to prepare for her emphasises the sadness she feels due to missing him. However, eating these dishes also induces a positive mood state, where she feels a greater sense of connection to her father through the food.

Although the bittersweet nature of nostalgia was recognised during the interviews, participants tended to associate nostalgia with a positive mood. Participants reported general feelings of contentment or comfort from eating foods that were nostalgic to them. When reflecting on nostalgic foods, participants said: 'I think a hearty sort of contentedness would be the main emotion' (Danny) and 'I don't know what the exact word is but probably love and loved. Like contentment' (Jess). This suggests that after eating food with a nostalgic connection, participants noticed a positive influence on their mood. The bittersweet

nature of nostalgia is well-understood, where mixed affect is apparent, with bitter feelings like loss co-existing with sweet emotions like love. Nonetheless, the positive aspect of nostalgia ordinarily outweighs the negative, with individuals reporting an increase in psychological well-being, such as mood, and a sense of meaning in life.<sup>15,25,32</sup>

Other participants also shared this sentiment; however, they expressed the often negative emotions that act as a precursor to nostalgic eating. As previously highlighted, nostalgia is often triggered by a negative mood, with triggers such as loneliness and meaningless acting as the antecedent and a positive mood emerging as a consequence.<sup>22,23</sup> This sentiment was expressed by Belinda when describing her motivation to cook comfort food that induced nostalgia:

I guess a wanting or a longing to make it [comfort food]... probably what would drive it would be a little bit of maybe sadness, or kind of loneliness or something. I would feel more comforted because I enjoy it.

Although Belinda acknowledged that the trigger to her nostalgia is often a negative affect, her description of her experiences highlights the transition to the positive affect that nostalgic eating provides, ultimately leaving her in a more positive mood state.

Carlie described that she consumed nostalgic foods to induce happy childhood memories, even if she did not particularly enjoy the specific types of food her health-conscious mother fed her when she was younger:

I went to one of these healthy shops, and I saw the... wholewheat muffins that I hated when I was a kid, and I actually bought them just to see how it tasted... and they were disgusting, and I still had one with the coffee saying like, oh, this is like childhood- bad childhood - but like childhood.

This scenario described by Carlie suggests that individuals may consume food that is not necessarily appetising purely for nostalgia. Such a concept has not been identified in the literature to date. Still, it poses a question as to whether this is a phenomenon experienced by others and whether individuals regularly engage in nostalgic eating of foods they do not necessarily enjoy. In this theme, participants associated a strong connection between food and nostalgia. The bittersweet nature of this emotion was described by participants, where they experienced both positive and negative moods in association with nostalgia.

### 3.2 | Theme two: Social connection and identity continuity

Theme Two included participants' discussion of how food and nostalgia provide the opportunity for social connection and how this impacts mood. Furthermore, participants described the identity continuity that food-evoked nostalgia provides.

When discussing familial and cultural traditions, Melissa highlighted the importance that her family places on Anglo-Indian dishes for celebrations, irrespective of these dishes not being the traditional Christmas dishes consumed in the Australian Christmas heat:

This is where we get really nostalgic...when it's Christmas time, and it's 38 degrees, we all are wanting curry.... Because now that precedent has been set for us... And it's almost like we have this simultaneous frustration, but also, we have to have the curry; we will literally go insane if we don't have the curry.

Melissa's description of her family's desire for a curry at Christmas highlights the importance of these nostalgic foods and how these dishes provide identity continuity, paying homage to her traditional Indian roots. While eating curry at Christmas in India is appropriate given the cool climate, such a dish in the Australian summer is not considered a traditional dish. The fact that Melissa's family still eat this dish at Christmas, despite the discomfort it causes them, highlights the important nostalgic value that the curry holds. Melissa suggests that a Christmas without curry would 'not feel like Christmas at all'. Such a strong connection with food aligns with traditional culture's relationship with food. Dubé et al.<sup>27</sup> suggest that culture plays an influential role in what may trigger the need for nostalgic comfort food. Although the interviewed participants felt a nostalgic connection to food, regardless of their culture, those with traditional cultural backgrounds, such as Indian and Spanish, expressed a significant connection to the foods of their culture. Furthermore, research on nostalgia has found that such memories are usually centred around celebrations with family and friends, such as birthdays, holidays and cultural milestones.<sup>32</sup> The findings from this study support such a concept, as participants commonly identified that their nostalgic eating habits stemmed from a time in the past when they were celebrating with family and friends.

Participants also expressed the notion of identity continuity through the desire to continue traditions with new generations. Carlie explained that with the birth of her first niece, she and her sister felt the urge to document their family recipes to continue traditions: 'Because now that my niece was born, we need to make the bulk of family recipes... We thought it was super important'. Jess shared this sentiment, explaining that now he has children, he has introduced rituals that his parents performed with him as a child: 'There's heaps of things I remember from my childhood, and then I find myself now... replicating those with [my child]'. Carlie and Jess both expressed that with the introduction of children into their lives, they place a higher value on maintaining food traditions, allowing for the continuation of familial identity. Hirsch<sup>42</sup> suggests that individuals may satisfy nostalgic feelings via food, particularly through generational family recipes. This was a common behaviour reported by participants, whereby family recipes or food rituals induced nostalgia, usually positively influencing mood.

Participants also expressed the social connection that nostalgic eating provides. Sharing nostalgia over familial recipes via technology was common among the interviewed participants, who could reminisce on nostalgic foods with loved ones, regardless of their distance.

Carlie explained that when she makes macaroni, a dish her father made for her and her siblings when they were younger, it allows connection with her siblings:

My brother moved eight years ago to Columbia, so I haven't seen him for eight years, and whenever I do that [make macaroni], I take a picture of the dish and send it to the brother and sister group I have with them over WhatsApp because it's like, 'hey macaroni like my dad used to make it' and it just became an inside joke that when you're missing them, you take a picture of macaroni.

The notion that food can provide social connection, irrespective of the distance between loved ones, was also described by Anna when talking about her father and the social connection that special meals provide for them:

I don't see him a whole lot, maybe two to three times a year...the other night, we made homemade pasta, and I sent him a text and sent him a picture...and even next week, I'm planning to sort of zoom and cook with him and have a bit of dinner.

Carlie and Anna's iterations highlight that nostalgic food provides the opportunity for social connection and that sharing food-evoked nostalgia with loved ones is important regardless of distance. Modern-day technology allows participants to maintain a social connection with loved ones, irrespective of their physical location. This global concept has become more familiar due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With quarantine orders and restrictions worldwide, social connection via technology became the norm, with dinners shared over Zoom, drinks on FaceTime and messages connecting individuals with loved ones.<sup>43-45</sup> The participant's comments on sharing nostalgia-centred food via technology with loved ones indicated there was still a positive impact on their mood and wellbeing. This phenomenon is in line with previous research, which has found that the positive use of technology for social connection is associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression.<sup>46</sup>

In this theme, participants described how food-evoked nostalgia provides the opportunity to connect with loved ones and the positive impact this has on their mood. It was also evident that food-evoked nostalgia provided identity continuity, whereby participants felt connected to their younger selves from their nostalgic connection to food.

### 3.3 | Theme three: The role and relationship of food-evoked nostalgia and mood

Theme Three involved participants' descriptions of their relationship with nostalgic food and the role that such food plays in their lives, focusing on how this impacts mood. When discussing foods that are nostalgic for Belinda, she explains:

I feel really happy, and I guess fortunate to have these kinds of foods that I can turn to, and they have these memories, and I love the feeling of nostalgia and reminiscing and things that remind you of good times.

This highlights the meaningful role that nostalgic food plays in Belinda's life and emphasises her positive relationship with these foods, which positively influence her mood. Melissa shared a similar sentiment when discussing cultural foods that have a nostalgic connection. She explained the powerful role they play:

I guess part of this nostalgia is maybe... the healing qualities that food has in that mental wellbeing. I think food heals for us... food that is good for you on a physical level, as well as mental wellbeing.

Melissa experiences a positive relationship with nostalgic foods that provide comfort and mood-boosting effects. Consistently, nostalgia has improved many facets of psychological wellbeing, including mood and affect.<sup>15,19</sup> Similarly, this effect is reported when studying comfort foods and mood, where consuming such foods result in an elevated mood.<sup>26,47</sup> Lee et al.<sup>47</sup> describe the concept of food-evoked nostalgia and mood, reporting that adult individuals often consume comfort foods they were exposed to as children, relieving loneliness and increasing positive thoughts.

In contrast to this sentiment, Carlie acknowledged both the positive and negative relationship she has with nostalgic food and the effect that it may bring on mood:

It can easily lead to a bad relationship with food... When I was in the UK, and [going] through a breakup, I was in bad shape, I used comfort food first as a soothing tool, and it quickly became a bad relationship with food... I have to be very careful right now because, for me, food is a very powerful thing. But it also is a thing that can be out of control too quickly... But the positive aspect to it is such a fine line towards the problematic use of food. So the same thing can be used to soothe you and help you, can also be a source of problematic behaviour and more stress.

Carlie's relationship with food is similar to nostalgia, with a bitter-sweet aspect with positive and negative associations.<sup>25</sup> Investigation of nostalgia as a coping mechanism assists in understanding the phenomena described by Carlie. Such research identified that nostalgia could negatively impact individuals with tendencies for maladaptive coping styles and depression.<sup>48</sup> This evidence suggests that although nostalgia is often considered an adaptive tool that acts as a mood repairer, it may also be regarded as a maladaptive coping tool that results in negative affect. Such a phenomenon is described by Carlie, who uses nostalgic foods as a comfort tool during a time of experiencing negative affect, which is both adaptive and maladaptive.

There was a common theme among participants when describing the comfort foods they reached for to improve their mood: the

nutritional profile. The foods identified by participants as comfort foods were generally higher-caloric foods that tended to be higher in fat or sugar. Anna explained:

I remember when I used to get sick, I used to always crave... the San Remo Alfredo [packet pasta]. That is another real nostalgic food that I still eat and gravitate towards when I'm feeling like I need a bit of a pick-me-up.

The description of higher-caloric foods as comfort foods was also shared by Carlie and Jim. When asked what she chooses when looking for comfort food, Carlie describes: 'Extra caloric I would say... and it became a ritual, [making] the mug cake. It was something I use to do on a Sunday night when I was home alone after a weekend with my parents'. Similarly, Jim explains the childhood foods he considers comfort food: 'Mac and cheese... and then Tik Tok biscuits... like mad nostalgia... and salt and vinegar chips'.

Participants' descriptions of comfort foods are consistent with trends identified in research on comfort foods. These are typically higher-caloric, nutrient-poor foods with a nutritional profile high in sugar, fat or carbohydrates.<sup>20,49</sup> Comfort foods are closely related to nostalgia, as they are typically associated with childhood and are usually prepared traditionally.<sup>26</sup> As such, comfort foods often increase mood, allowing an individual to feel connected to the past or loved ones. Regardless of the immediate short-term psychological benefits, the use of comfort foods can be counteractive to psychological wellbeing in the long term. Overconsumption of these foods can be maladaptive, resulting in adverse health outcomes such as obesity, which can negatively impact mental health.<sup>49,50</sup>

Interviews with participants provided a rich understanding of their experiences with food-evoked nostalgia and mood. The results suggest that individuals eat food that induces nostalgia, which often positively influences their mood. However, participants also acknowledged the bitter aspect of nostalgia, whereby negative emotions such as grief may also be felt. Evidently, nostalgic eating allowed for social connection with loved ones and the continuation of identity as one ages. Finally, varied relationships with these nostalgic foods were described, with participants highlighting the valuable role that some of these foods play in their lives. This research suggests that understanding the positive components of nostalgic foods could empower individuals to leverage food-evoked nostalgia as a means to improve positive mood states and quality of life and decrease risk of negative mental health. This insight has implications for overall psychological and physical wellbeing, suggesting that harnessing food-evoked nostalgia may offer a promising avenue for mood improvement and overall health promotion.

### 3.4 | Strengths, limitations, and future research

Nostalgia, food, and mood have been extensively researched in isolation; however, combining the three factors is novel. Given the novelty of this topic, a phenomenological design allowed for an initial



understanding of all three factors combined. Additionally, a reflexive diary was maintained throughout the research process, reducing the impact of researcher preconceived ideas, beliefs and attitudes. The sample of the current study is limited in that eight Australian participants were interviewed. This provided insight into the phenomenon of food-evoked nostalgia and its impact on mood; however, it may limit the generalisability and variability of the results. Future research may look to expand sampling to address this limitation. In addition, qualitative research does not allow for causality to be determined. As such, while a pattern is evident in participants' explanations of their experiences, it cannot be determined how the factors of nostalgia, food, and mood interact. Future research may build upon this understanding by adopting a quantitative approach to quantify the relationship between nostalgia, food, and mood. Moving forward, future researchers could explore the mechanisms underlying the relationship between food-evoked nostalgia and mood, as well as explore potential interventions or strategies for utilising nostalgia-inducing foods in mental health promotion.

The current study provides a rich understanding of lived experiences with nostalgia, food, and mood. This qualitative approach has been beneficial in giving context to this novel topic; however, it provides the opportunity for future research to take a quantitative approach to explicitly define the relationship between nostalgia, food, and mood. Through delving into participants' lived experiences, it may be suggested that a direct link exists between nostalgia, food, and mood, providing a unique insight into individual differences, particularly with mood, where both positive and negative affect were apparent. Understanding this link between food-evoked nostalgia and mood has significant implications, with the ability for negative mood states to be altered by nostalgic foods, resulting in a positive mood state. Appropriate use of food-evoked nostalgia may increase the quality of life for individuals experiencing low mood states.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the confidential nature of the interview transcripts but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Ethics approval, participant permissions, and all other relevant approvals were granted for this data sharing.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The study's ethics approval (Ethics #KS00821) was obtained from Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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