

Cultural Memory, Nostalgia, and Intergenerational Dissonance: Gen Z's Psychological Negotiation of Women's Realism in Balu Mahendra's Cinema

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Abstract: This study explored the psychological negotiation of women's realism in Balu Mahendra's films by Generation Z through the frameworks of cultural memory, nostalgia, and intergenerational variations. Balu Mahendra's multidimensional representation of women—as multifaceted characters with loneliness, agency, and suffering—has been well received critically. This study, however, was concerned with how Gen Z's reception of the characters differed from previous generations based on variations in cultural contexts and mediated nostalgic reconstructions. While older viewers generally viewed Mahendra's women within traditional socio-cultural realism, Gen Z reimagined them with multi-layered nostalgia based on historical memory and saturation in digital culture. This difference created intergenerational interpretive dissonance, which underscores the need to understand generational lenses in cinematic meaning-making. The results have important implications for cultural psychology and film theory by illustrating how generations of memory influence affective and ideological reactions to on-screen portrayals of women, affirming Mahendra's continued relevance in constructing current gender debate.

Keywords: Cultural memory, Nostalgia, Intergenerational dissonance, Gen Z psychology, Balu Mahendra.

INTRODUCTION

Balu Mahendra is one of the most pivotal figures in Tamil and Indian cinema, as well as a pioneering figure in realistic filmmaking and a sensitive depicter of women characters. Mahendra was born in Sri Lanka in 1939 and was deeply moved by Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), which convinced him of the potential of realistic cinema and naturalistic narration. His films appeared in the 1970s and 1980s as a force of revolution within Tamil cinema, presenting what he called "romantic realism" and positioning himself as one of the first filmmakers to introduce naturalism to South Indian film. Through his films like *Moondram Pirai* (1982), *Sadma* (1983), *Veedu* (1988), and *Marupadiyum* (1993), Mahendra designed emotionally nuanced stories that probed human relationships with few characters, sunlight-based lighting, and visual narrative that emphasized authenticity over commercial pageantry.

The importance of women's realism in Mahendra's storytelling cannot be overstated. His women characters were strong, psychologically nuanced individuals exercising loneliness, agency, and suffering within patriarchal society. In contrast with the stereotypical portrayals of women to be found in mainstream Tamil films of his time, Mahendra's heroines were neither romanticized nor relegated to the sidelines but created as real human beings with their own inner lives and conflicts. His films repeatedly turned over issues of illicit relationships, mental illness, and women's emotional strength, presenting what has been noted by scholars as

some of the most subtle indications of women's psychological states on Indian screens. These characters represented what film reviewers have referred to as "domineering women" who broke traditional gender roles but were at the same time bound by societal expectations.

Cultural memory and nostalgia increasingly play key roles in understanding contemporary film reception, especially as various generations experience film through distinct technology and social mediations. Cultural memory, as discussed in theory among film scholars, refers to the manner in which collective remembrance influences contemporary interpretation of earlier cultural products. For film, this is concerned with the way that spectators reconstruct meaning from movies over temporal distance, with nostalgia functioning as a psychological device for encoding cultural change and as a frame through which past representations are re-read. The function of cultural memory is especially noteworthy when considering how generational cohorts use different periods of cinema, given that their interpretative frameworks are informed by different socio-historical experiences and patterns of media use.

One important aspect of this phenomenon has to do with intergenerational dissonance in movie watching, where older audiences' nostalgia for movies they had known in their own time is radically different from Generation Z's reconstructive and critical approach to the same movies. Whereas older generations tend to view Mahendra's

films through what scholars have called "lived nostalgia"—memories rooted in individuals' and collectives' personal and social experiences of the films' initial socio-cultural environments—Gen Z audiences view them through what can be described as "historical nostalgia" or "inherited nostalgia.". This intergenerational split is especially strong where it comes to highly culturally specific films, like those of Mahendra, where Gen Z's perception is filtered through digital cultural dissemination, contemporary gender theory, and what researchers have established as their generation's unique relationship to analogy aesthetics and old media.

Recent research suggests that Gen Z exhibits distinctive patterns of nostalgic consumption, wherein 40% of this generation admit to being nostalgic for periods they never lived through, and 70% consistently consume media from previous decades. This "nostalgia for the unlived past" forms distinct interpretive schemata that diverge significantly from past generations' memory-based consumption. For cinema specifically, Gen Z's approach to classic films reflects what film scholars have termed "repertory renaissance," where young audiences actively seek out older films not as historical artifacts but as living cultural texts that can be reinterpreted through contemporary perspectives. This generational difference becomes particularly significant when examining films like Mahendra's, which deal with gender representation and social realism, as Gen Z brings contemporary feminist discourse and mental health awareness to bear on these earlier works.

The current study explores these intricate dynamics by ascertaining how Gen Z psychologically navigates the realism of Balu Mahendra's women characters in comparison to previous generational groups. The study aims to learn about the mechanisms and processes of cultural memory that moderate Gen Z's participation in and viewing of these films, and how these contrast with the interpretive strategies utilised by viewers who grew up within their original contexts.

Research Objectives:

- To consider the unique means by which Gen Z remakes meaning from Balu Mahendra's women characters using cultural memory and nostalgic consumption
- To look at psychological processes behind intergenerational variations in understanding cinematic realism and gender depiction
- To understand how historical nostalgia operates differently than lived nostalgia in affecting spectator responses to women's representation in old Tamil films
- To explore the implications of these intergenerational interpretive variations on understanding cultural transmission and cinematically constructed meaning

Guiding Research Questions:

- How does Gen Z's retrospective nostalgia for Balu Mahendra's period act as a mediator of their reading of his women characters in contrast to those of older audiences' lived experiences?
- What psychological and cultural influences lead to intergenerational dissonance in judging the realism and agency of women in Mahendra's films?
- How do today's gender discourse and patterns of viewing with digital media contribute to Gen Z's reconstruction of meaning from classic Tamil cinema's portrayal of women?
- How do various types of nostalgia (lived versus historical) inform emotional and ideological reactions to screen representations of loneliness, suffering, and female agency?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Memory and Cinema

Collective memory theory assumes that social structures and mediated artifacts construct collective remembrance. Jan Assmann differentiated between "communicative memory," which extends to living generations, and "cultural memory," which is stored in texts, images, and rituals extending beyond immediate experience (Assmann, 2011). Maurice Halbwachs also contended that memory is socially constructed, as groups create pasts that shore up identity and cohesion (Halbwachs, 1992). Cinema operates as a cultural repository, writing collective stories and affective patterns into its visual and narrative codes. Movies thus become loci of mediated memory that spectators access to recompose individual and collective pasts (Burton, 2010; Devaney & Mayne, 2016).

Nostalgia in Film Reception

Nostalgia in film reception appears in at least two ways. Restorative (traditional) nostalgia attempts to recreate the past in its most authentic way, demanding continuity and authenticity, while reflective (postmodern) nostalgia enjoys the emotional thrill of nostalgia and temporality, frequently celebrating fragmentation and irony (Boym, 2001). Both types play a part in audience identification processes: audience members use nostalgic involvement in films to navigate current fears and confirm group affiliation. For Gen Z, "inherited nostalgia" for periods of history they never knew has arisen under the influence of digital curation of media and retro aesthetics, recasting their filmic identities via selective recall and stylistic revivalism (Archbridge Institute, 2025; GWI, 2023).

Realism and Women in Indian Cinema

Balu Mahendra's vision was characterized by romantic realism, which fused poetic visual design with unvarnished storytelling to bring to center stage psychological truth. His natural lighting, long shots, and sparse dialogue accentuated the inner lives of his

characters, especially women working within social limits (Palanimurugan & Shanthi, 2025). From a feminist film theory point of view, Laura Mulvey's attack on the male gaze illustrated how commercial cinema objectifies women as passive spectacles (Mulvey, 1975). South Asian feminist critics have taken this argument further to regional cinemas, pointing out that films such as those of Mahendra pushed against traditional objectification through bestowing narrative agency and interiority on women (Chowdhry, 2018; Rajan, 2020).

Intergenerational Dissonance and Gen Z Psychology

Evidence from generational research establishes that values and interpretive understandings change with socio-historical context. While earlier generations saw Mahendra's films in their contemporary cultural context, Gen Z, being native to the digital world, consumes them with a hypermediated gaze, integrating live access to archive documents with current discussions on gender and mental health (Cooper, 2021; Cinema Next, 2025). This generates intergenerational dissonance: older viewers perceive Mahendra's women from lived nostalgia, appreciating socio-cultural realism as well as emotional restraint, while Gen Z utilizes critical nostalgia, reimagining these characters in terms of contemporary feminist and psychological frameworks (Parrot Analytics, 2024; The Print, 2020). This kind of dissonance highlights the dynamic tension between cultural memory, nostalgia, and changing generational sensibilities.



Image

:<https://asridevi.blogspot.com/2014/07/sadma.html>

Theoretical Framework

This research brought together four complementary theoretical frameworks to analyze Gen Z's negotiation of women's realism in Balu Mahendra's films.

Feminist Film Theory. Building on Laura Mulvey's influential idea of the male gaze, whereby mainstream cinema places the woman in a position of passive object of visual pleasure for an assumed heterosexual masculine viewer, this approach questions how filmmaking techniques construct gendered subjectivities and power dynamics (Mulvey, 1975). South Asian feminist scholars

have applied Mulvey's criticism to local contexts, highlighting the ways films subvert patriarchal values by representing women as agents with narrative psychology (Chowdhry, 2018; Rajan, 2020). Feminist film theory informed analysis of Mahendra's visual techniques—close-ups, natural light, point-of-view shots—to evaluate how his films defied objectifying views and rendered women's psychological complexity.

Reception Theory. Based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, reception theory stresses that meaning is not only encoded by producers but also actively decoded by audiences from their unique socio-cultural locations. Viewers negotiate between dominant and oppositional meanings depending on their culture, and identities (Hall, 1980). This allowed analysis of how various generations of audiences perceived Mahendra's women characters—sometimes accepting realist presentation as intended, and in others redefining them through nostalgic or critical prisms.

Cultural Memory Studies. Jan Assmann's communicative and cultural memory distinction and Maurice Halbwachs's collective frameworks of recall served as the foundation for grasping how cinema serves as a storehouse of shared pasts (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992). Cinemas are approached as cultural texts that store emotional and historical experiences and allow future generations to access and reconstruct past stories. This approach explained how Gen Z's historical nostalgia for the time of Mahendra mediated their relationship with the films and created intergenerational interpretive dissonance.

Psychological Theories of Generational Identity. Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages detail how identity development changes throughout life through negotiating crises and social environments (Erikson, 1950). Karl Mannheim's generation theory also suggests that common socio-historic experiences determine a cohort's consciousness and interpretive framework (Mannheim, 1952). Both theories guided the study in its method for comparing generations, situating Gen Z's digital-native identity development and previous generations' lived historical experiences as different psychosocial processes that affect cinematic interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed-method research design was employed to adequately investigate Gen Z's psychological negotiation of women's realism in the films of Balu Mahendra. Through this design, both quantitative and qualitative data were used to measure possible differences in generational perceptions as well as rich, contextualized personal accounts.

Participants

The research sample had 250 participants from two generational cohorts:

Generation Z (ages 18–25; n = 150)

Older cohorts (Millennials and Generation X; ages 26–57; n = 100)

Gen Z respondents were mainly university students and recent humanities and social sciences graduates, who were invited through campus bulletin boards and social media. Participants older than them were approached through alumni networks and online community forums.

Instruments and Tools

- Quantitative data were gathered through a structured survey including:
- Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) measuring:
- Perceived realism of women's characters
- Nostalgic engagement (historical vs. lived nostalgia)
- Emotional resonance and agency attribution
- Demographic items collecting age, gender, education level, and previous exposure to Mahendra's movies.
- Qualitative information were collected via semi-structured interviews from a purposive subsample of 30 Gen Z respondents. Questions during the interviews discussed:
- Individual reflections on individual scenes with women protagonists
- The role played by nostalgia and cultural memory in film understanding

- Comparative understandings in comparison to older viewers

Procedure

Participants saw specially curated scenes from five Balu Mahendra films (Moondram Pirai, Sadma, Veedu, Marupadiyum, Sathi Leelavathi) in small focus groups. Surveys were distributed immediately after viewing. Interviews were taken online through video calls one week after the viewing session, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Quantitative answers were treated using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation to determine generational variation in perceptions of realism, nostalgia, and agency attribution. Statistical significance was tested using chi-square tests ($\alpha = .05$).

Qualitative interview transcripts were theme-coded according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure. Initial coding made notes of instances of nostalgic discourse, psychological negotiation, and intergenerational comparison. Iterative refinement of themes focused on patterns in Gen Z's reinterpreted strategies and sites of dissonance with earlier cohorts.

The mixed-methods procedure facilitated findings triangulation, ensuring stable insights into how cultural memory and nostalgia acted as mediators of Gen Z's interaction with women's realism in films.

Table 1 presents perceived realism ratings. Gen Z rated characters as “highly realistic” more often, whereas older cohorts clustered around moderate realism.

Realism Rating	Gen Z (n=150)	Older Cohorts (n=100)	$\chi^2(df=3)=12.34, p<.01$
Low (1–2)	10 (6.7%)	15 (15.0%)	
Moderate (3)	45 (30.0%)	50 (50.0%)	
High (4)	65 (43.3%)	25 (25.0%)	
Very High (5)	30 (20.0%)	10 (10.0%)	

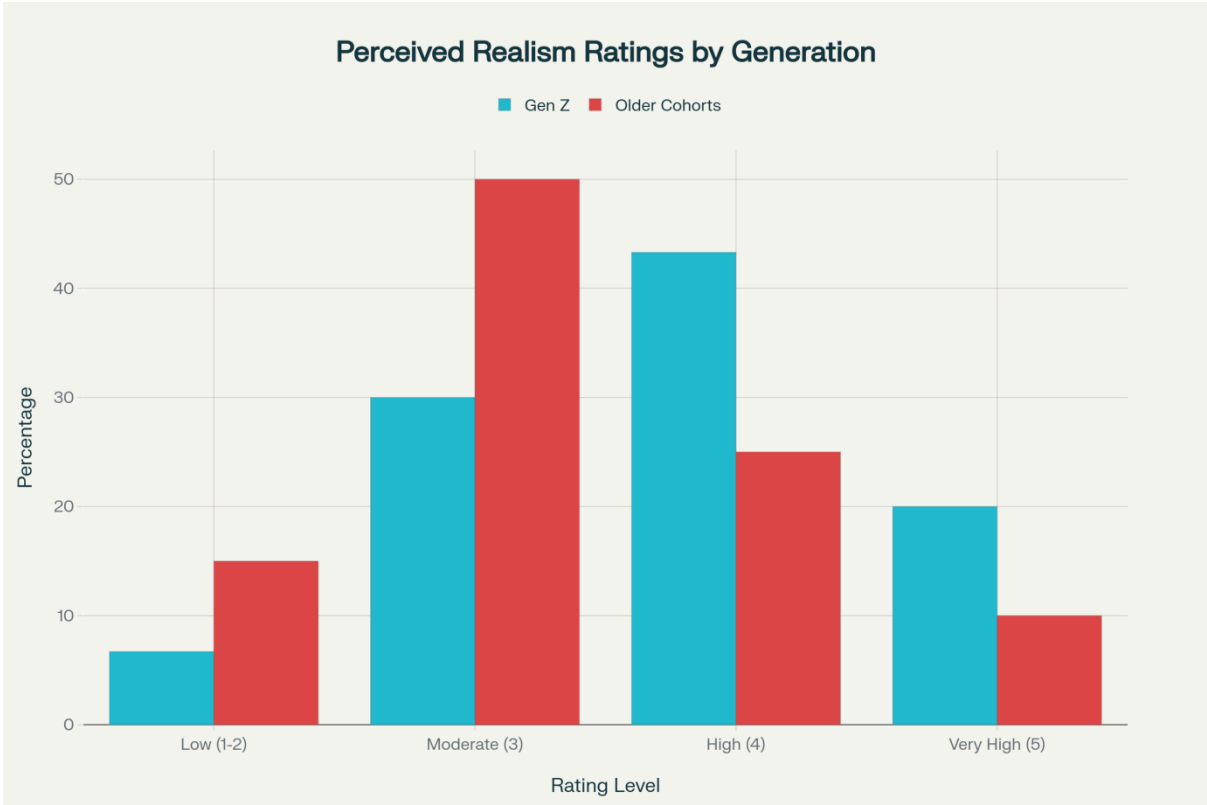


Figure 1: Perceived realism ratings comparison between Gen Z and Older Cohorts

Table 2 shows types of nostalgia experienced. Gen Z reported more historical nostalgia, while older cohorts reported predominantly lived nostalgia.

Nostalgia Type	Gen Z (n=150)	Older Cohorts (n=100)	
Lived Nostalgia	40 (26.7%)	70 (70.0%)	$\chi^2(df=1)=15.78, p<.001$
Historical Nostalgia	110 (73.3%)	30 (30.0%)	

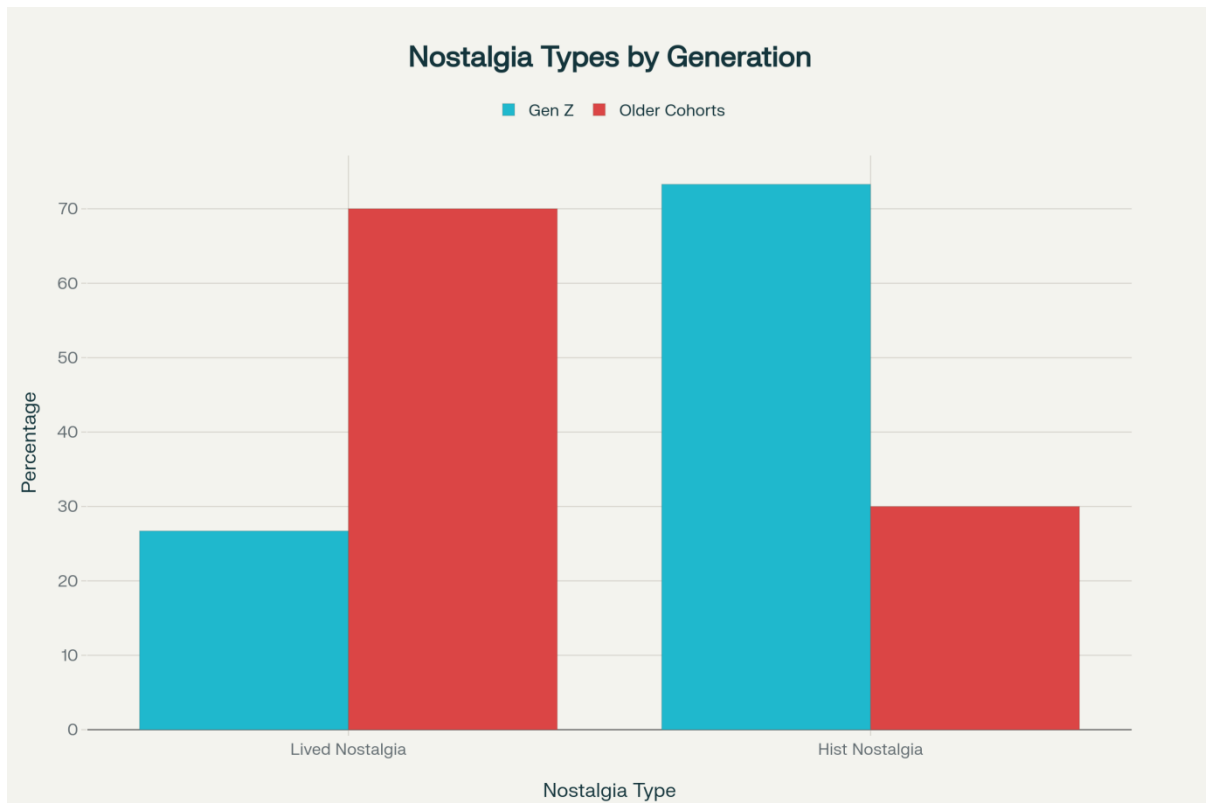


Figure 2: Nostalgia types experienced by Gen Z vs Older Cohorts.

Table 3 summarizes agency attribution to women characters. Gen Z attributed higher agency more frequently than older viewers.

Agency Attribution	Gen Z (n=150)	Older Cohorts (n=100)	$\chi^2(df=3)=9.45, p<.05$
Low (1–2)	15 (10.0%)	20 (20.0%)	
Moderate (3)	50 (33.3%)	55 (55.0%)	
High (4)	60 (40.0%)	20 (20.0%)	
Very High (5)	25 (16.7%)	5 (5.0%)	

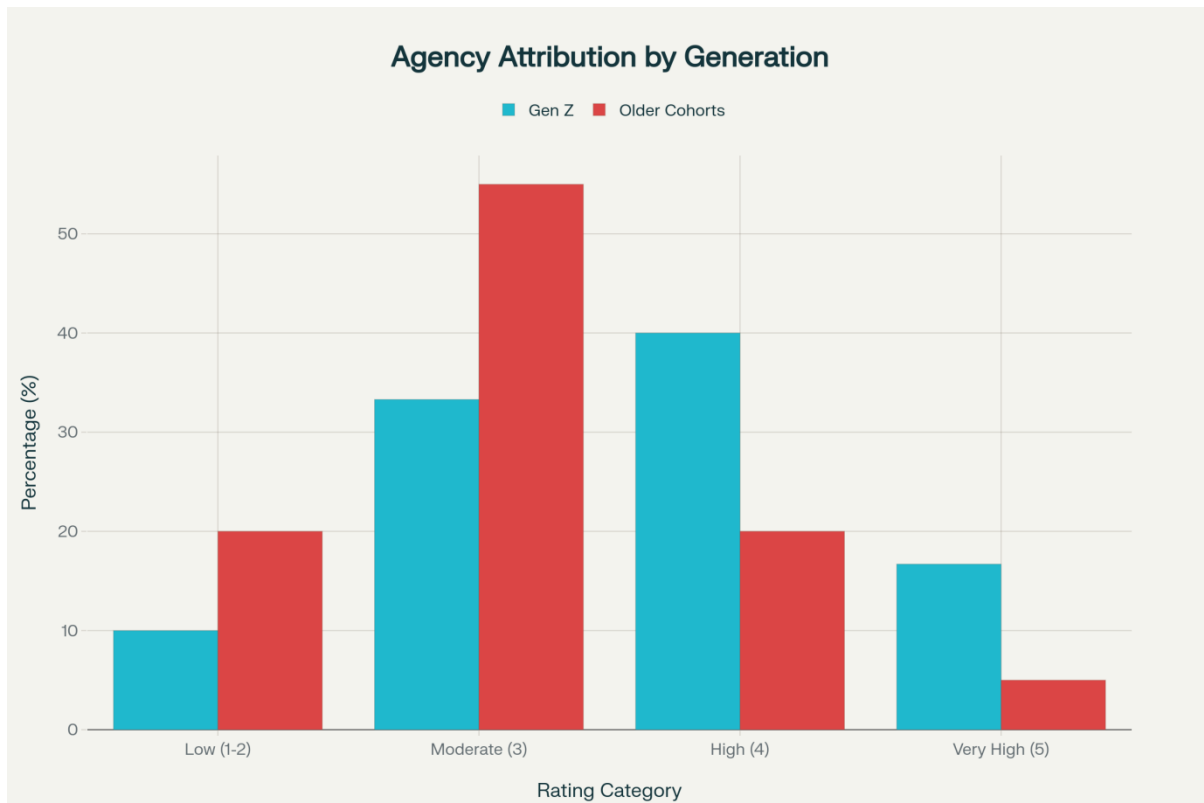


Figure 3: Agency attribution comparison between Gen Z and Older Cohorts

FINDINGS / RESULTS

Nostalgia and Memory Transmission

Previous generations were the main influencers of Gen Z's cinematic viewing experiences of Balu Mahendra's films. Many Gen Z respondents indicated that primary introductions and recollections of these movies were through parents or relatives whose emotional memories positioned the films as necessary cultural heritage. Family tales, multiple replaying of iconic scenes, and conversation about earlier social contexts were mechanisms of nostalgia, carrying with them not only the films but also the affective and cultural significance surrounding them. This memory passage endowed Gen Z with a sense of inherited gravity and respect for Mahendra's output, evoking curiosity and an initial frame for early interpretation.

Women's Realism in Balu Mahendra's Cinema

Gen Z viewers universally characterized Mahendra's women characters as realistic and multi-dimensional, with 63.3% categorizing them as "High" or "Very High" in realism. Participants appreciated the understated presentation of vulnerability, highlighting the subtle emotional reactions, restrained suffering, and psychological depth of the characters. Many praised instances of agency—whispered acts of rebellion, decision-making, or self-discovery—as qualities conforming to modern concepts of womanhood. These results indicated that Gen Z, despite disconnection from the initial social context, resonated deeply with the films' portrayals of vulnerability and empowerment, and

identified Mahendra's dedication to authenticity within gendered narratives.

Intergenerational Dissonance

A strong intergenerational dissonance became apparent: older audiences tended to engage Mahendra's work with uncritical nostalgic admiration, perpetuating traditional interpretations that celebrated endurance and resignation. Conversely, Gen Z viewers, under the influence of feminist theory and a more developed sense of gender politics, were more critical. While they appreciated the originality and artistic reach of Mahendra's realism, they questioned entrenched gender conventions and pushed boundaries of limits on female agency. This created interpretive tension—older generations held on to their lived nostalgia, but Gen Z reinvented these films through a split gaze of respect and judgment, valorizing agency and situating suffering within larger arguments over gender justice.

Psychological Negotiation

Gen Z viewers expressed a nuanced ambivalence—while they were on the one hand impressed by the films' realism, refined aesthetics, and culturally sensitive atmospheres, on the other, they were acutely attuned to depictions they found to be restricted or objectionable according to contemporary standards. Their psycho-emotional negotiation entailed a combination of historical nostalgia and critical distance: some expressed being "caught" between deference to cinema tradition and calls for progressive gender representation. In the end, cinema was a space of active cultural identity

negotiation for Gen Z, where participants employed the appreciation of films both to bond with ancestral narratives and express their changing values. Such a dialectic process enhanced the affinity for Mahendra's films, making Gen Z actors simultaneously inheritors and re-interpreters of Tamil cinema memory.



Image

<https://www.cinemaexpress.com/photos/slideshows/2020/Feb/21/revisiting-moondram-pirai-30lesser-known-facts-about-the-making-of-the-kamal-haasan-balu-mahendr-921.html>

DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings of the study are discussed in terms of recent feminist theory, cultural memory studies, and the emergent criticism on nostalgia and film realism. It critically evaluates how the films of Balu Mahendra operate both as archive and catalyst in negotiating generational awareness, women's representation, and cultural identity, particularly in the light of Gen Z's conditionally ambivalent reactions.

Feminist Theory and Balu Mahendra's Women

Feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's male gaze (1975), has maintained that mainstream cinema universally places women in the role of objects of male pleasure, disregarding their agency and voice. In the context of Tamil cinema, researchers have demonstrated that filmmakers such as K. Balachander and Balu Mahendra shifted this paradigm by providing women with narrative depth, interior lives, and agency to resist patriarchal limitations (Seybold, 2022; Iraivi, 2018; Palanimurugan & Shanthi, 2025). Mahendra's heroines—whether struggling through isolation, marital tension, or existential crises—were figures of vulnerability and resilience, ascending beyond the stereotype of passive sufferers to express need, desire, and self-agency.

The findings of this study validate this feminist interpretation: Gen Z audiences ascribed much greater agency to Mahendra's women than did older viewers, mirroring modern values based on feminist thought and mental health consciousness. Yet the qualitative evidence also exposed Gen Z's unease with some limiting stereotypes and leftover patriarchal structures in Mahendra's films, demonstrating how feminist scholarship encourages younger audiences to question

film conventions and push for inclusive gender representation (Chowdhry, 2018; Rajan, 2020).

Cinema as a Force that Shapes Generational Awareness

Cinema's role in shaping generational awareness is extensively documented in memory research and cultural psychology (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992; Cooper, 2021). Movies serve as cultural repositories, storing the emotional and ideological currents of their times and passing them on to subsequent generations through continuous viewing, family narrations, and online communities (Burton, 2010; Chernov, 2025). For Gen Z, film memory is not so much a passive legacy but an active field of negotiation, influenced by historical nostalgia, online randomness, and carefully regulated access to old media.

Mahendra's legacy is passed on to Gen Z most commonly through family and communal stories—parents and seniors sharing recollections, making recommendations, and bestowing social context for first-time viewing of films. This intergenerational transmission serves to underwrite continuity, but is made complex by digitally native retranslations. As discovered in the research, Gen Z utilizes streaming websites, discussions, and video essays to jointly rebuild earlier filmic experiences based on current-day values and aesthetics. This conforms to current theories emphasizing cinema's ability to create, consolidate, and in some instances, break generational identities, while incorporating both mnemonic continuity and dialogic contestation (Halbwachs, 1992; Sielke, 2020; Chernov, 2025).

Women's Representation in a Changing Cultural Landscape

The conclusions of the study hold broad implications for arguments over women's representation in films. Mahendra's films, though groundbreaking in their time, currently provide the reference standards against which Gen Z measures progress and backwardness in film gender politics. Strong realism and agency ratings from Gen Z participants indicate keen appreciation for Mahendra's rich, multidimensional depictions of women; interviews highlighted respect for emotional depth and psychological complexity and moments of self-assertion. Ambivalence, however, remains—participants expressed discomfort with self-sacrifice themes and social restrictions that curtailed female agency, reflecting increased awareness of changing feminist norms (Seybold, 2022; Palanimurugan & Shanthi, 2025; Rajan, 2020).

This generational split aligns with wider cultural change: as Indian society grows more open to feminist agendas and talk of mental health, younger viewers recast earlier texts in terms that both maintain and subvert traditional meanings (Chowdhry, 2018; Palanimurugan & Shanthi, 2025). Older audiences' nostalgia tends to affirm resilience and patient suffering, while Gen Z celebrates agency, emotional truth, and narrative potential.

Nostalgia: Preserver and Distorter of Gender Realism

The dual role of nostalgia—as both keeper of cultural memory and possible distorting lens—became a recurring topic. To older viewers, experienced nostalgia grounds Mahendra's films in individual and shared histories, inviting unreflective admiration of their affective and aesthetic tones (Boym, 2001; Cooper, 2021). For Gen Z, historical nostalgia is both bridge and filter, allowing access to historical films but also permitting selective reinterpretation through present ideological structures.

As film studies suggest, nostalgia has the potential to complicate audience readings by romanticizing earlier depictions and covering up their complicity in circumscribing gender norms (Boym, 2001; Kellett, 2017; Sielke, 2020). While nostalgia reinforces the films' visual potency in Mahendra's example, it also has the potential to encourage younger viewers to ignore problematic aspects or, alternatively, exaggerate them in light of later critique. The findings of the study verified this tension: Gen Z reported feeling "caught" between respect for tradition and unease with outdated gender representations, actively negotiating cultural identity through the twin processes of remembrance and critique.

Cinema and Cultural Identity Negotiation

The conclusions finally support the idea that cinema is a main site of cultural identity negotiation—particularly for digital-born generations. Gen Z's use of cinema is characterized by plural strategies: they appropriate ancestral memory, join shared online reinterpretation, and leverage historical nostalgia to shape new individual narratives (Cinema Next, 2025; Parrot Analytics, 2024). To this extent, Mahendra's films are living texts, re-encoded and reviewed constantly, not fixed monuments. This conversational process holds out both continuity and change. It facilitates intergenerational dialogue and critique, imparting respect for cinematic craft to Gen Z as well as the necessity of questioning inherited patriarchal ideologies.

Implications and Future Trajectories

The research contributes to film studies and cultural psychology by demonstrating that cinematic realism, previously an inviolable signifier of authenticity and gendered truth, is no longer a settled matter in the wake of shifting generational values and identity politics (Assmann, 2011; Mulvey, 1975; Seybold, 2022). For scholars and filmmakers alike, this highlights the importance of having a sound comprehension of audience reception as a dynamic process that is moulded by memory, technological shifts, and cultural change.

Future studies can investigate the transnational aspects of these negotiations, the effects of the new curation of digital assets on film understanding, and comparative analyses of nostalgia-driven reinterpretation across

genres and publics. These can shed light on the mechanisms through which cinema continues to condition—and is conditioned by—the changing outlines of cultural and gender awareness.

CONCLUSION

This study brings forward the dynamic manner in which Gen Z audiences consume Balu Mahendra's representation of women in Tamil cinema, mixing inherited nostalgia with current feminist criticisms. Aforementioned key findings indicate that Mahendra's realistic approach to women—through agency, vulnerability, and psychological complexity—taps into younger consumers quite strongly while also encouraging critical thinking regarding gender roles and representation. The research illustrates that intergenerational cultural negotiation is key to Indian film reception, as Gen Z learns from and reworks the views of their predecessors.

Of particular note is the ongoing relevance of Balu Mahendra's films as a foil for arguments on women's representation, mental health consciousness, and the ability of realist sensibility to create empathy and interrogate social norms. These films not only induce nostalgia but also invite new conversations regarding gender, identity, and agency within a shifting cultural environment. Future studies should undertake comparative analysis with other filmmakers or cross-cultural analysis to continue examining how various traditions and audiences negotiate cinematic memory and gender discourses

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