
What Does My “Comfort Food” Say About My Memories?

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Abstract

The term “comfort food” shows that food is usually a companion in emotionally charged moments, positive or negative. Certain meals act as memory cues reminding us of important events or people in our life. Thus, in this paper, I argue for designing artefacts to capture and replay the eating experience (food scent, food flavour and recipes) in external memory prosthetics. I propose two scenarios for using food as a memory cue to augment the human memory, enhance reminiscence and trigger social communication among people sharing the food experience. The *first* is creating a collective automatic family cookbook to preserve family heritage through recipes. The *second* is creating a diary using scents and flavours of food eaten in an “exciting moment” to create a vivid reminiscence experience and encourage communication with people sharing the moments. Adding food experiences to memory prosthetics is a step forward towards comprehensive preservation of human experience.

Author Keywords

Lifelogging; Human-Food Interaction; Recipes; Memory Augmentation

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous

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Introduction

Scents and flavours are powerful, yet under-utilized cues for triggering memories. We extensively use both of them since our infancy to perceive our surroundings. Babies identify their mothers through their scent and try to taste surrounding objects. Food comprises both and also releases body chemicals, such as Serotonin, responsible for making us feel happy. The term “Comfort food” shows how food is associated with emotional situations for people. It inherently reflects the distinct experience of a person. For example, The taste of cherry can evoke happiness for someone as it reminds them with a happy vacation in their childhood, while distressing another because it tasted like their cough syrup. In this manuscript, I advocate (via two scenarios: E-cookbooks and E-diaries) capturing and replaying food cues via external memory prosthetics to enhance emotional reminiscence and promote social communication.

Recalling Recipes from Ancestors

Childhood holidays are usually associated with happy memories of meals we had with our ancestors. The “grandma’s recipes” are nostalgic because they are delicious and they are a means of showing love to younger generations. However, replicating those recipes by anyone else is a challenge due to missing quantities of ingredients and steps. The recipes never taste the same yielding to frustration and lost family food heritage. Thus, there is a need for designing systems to automatically log and share recipes across families to enhance the communication between the elderly and the young and preserve collective memories. Such system could enhance social communication across families as they discuss and share the recipes. It could also augment the association between the recipe and the creator, where the recipe becomes an emotional memory cue to the owner.

A current challenge in the literature is to automatically identify the ingredients and their quantities. Thus, an envisioned near-future design would enable manual logging of ingredients while support automatic logging of quantities (via new weight-sensitive utensils) and the recipes’ steps (via video-recordings from wearable cameras). However, participatory design practices shall unravel solutions for challenges such as preferring to sprinkle ingredients to using tools.

Recalling Food From Exciting Moments

Reminiscence is the act of remembering past experiences. It is essential for our emotional and mental growth as we reflect on our evolving values and emotions towards the same events across time. Reminiscence occurs when we are exposed to memory cues that trigger recalling an experience. In this scenario, I propose amplifying the reminiscence of “exciting moments” through artificially capturing and replaying the scents and flavours of collocated eating activities. An example is smelling and tasting the macaroon you had in your first trip to Paris. Similarly, it can nudge us to reconnect with people from the past via cueing us to past happy events with them. An example is calling cousins after their social media posts smell and taste like the cinnamon buns you always had with them during Christmas as a child. On the other hand, using scents and flavours of past food could help people dieting to gain weight by provoking their personal cravings.

Capturing complex scents and flavours in unobtrusive devices remains to be a challenge in the current literature. There are also unresolved humanitarian considerations such as the changing affect associated with moments through time, and defining the best moments to play such cues. Thus, such systems fall on the far-future spectrum of visions for memory prosthetics.