

RETRO REVIVAL

Old tech finds new life in the hands of Generation Z

By Nick Bilton



For a glimpse of what teenagers are into these days, all you have to do is visit Abbot Kinney Boulevard in the Venice neighborhood of Los Angeles. On weekend nights, the half-mile shopping drag is packed with style-conscious kids who traipse past coffee shops, ice cream parlors and boutiques, often while taking selfies. Yet one of the most popular destinations for these teenagers is a white, single-story building with big pink letters on the roof that spell “Vnyl.” The store sells vinyl records, and the kids who gather there are often in awe.

“I’d say half of the teens who hang out in my store have never seen a record player before,” said Nick Alt, the founder of Vnyl. “They will walk up to the turntable, and they have no concept where to put the needle.” But once they figure out that the needle goes into the outermost groove, those smartphone-toting teenagers are hooked.

Whenever a new technology comes out, we often believe it will make an older technology obsolete. As a reporter who has been covering technology for more than a decade, I’ve made such proclamations, saying that the iPad would kill the Kindle (I later realized the error of my ways, and now own both), that eBooks would be the death of print (I later reversed myself, several times), and that driverless cars will make driving passé and allow us to nap in the front seat (this has yet to be disproved).

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But what I’ve come to realize is that while the new thing gets people excited, the old thing often doesn’t go away. And if it does, it takes a very long time to meet its demise.

Just look at film cameras. You

would think they have been vanquished from the planet, but millions of people still use them. In 2012, more than 35 million rolls of camera film were sold, compared with 20 million the year before.

And while Polaroid has filed for bankruptcy (twice) in the age of digital cameras, the company is making a resurgence (again). One of Polaroid’s largest growing demographics, surprisingly, is teenagers who want a tangible photo but also don’t want to wait. (Polaroid has also become the go-to camera for people who take nude photos and fear that their phones could be hacked.)

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Other types of physical media have also held on. More than 767 million print books were sold in the United States in 2023. About 20 million newspapers still land on doorsteps every morning. As for those vinyl records, 50 million LPs were sold in 2023, ten times the number sold a decade ago, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. (Records are also one of the few growth areas for the beleaguered industry.)

So why does old tech survive and, in some cases, undergo a revival? For some consumers, it’s about familiarity (e.g., newspapers and print books), while for others, it’s about nostalgia (e.g., record players and film cameras).

For example, I’ve been taking photos for over 25 years, and what made me fall in love with photography was the dirt, grit and grime of film (I used to shoot with Tri-X 3200 for the film nerds out there). And as much as I love my digital cameras, I’ve been shooting with film again to capture some of that visceral quality I no longer get with pixels.

The resurgence of old tech doesn’t stop with physical media.

For example, tens of millions of Americans still own a landline; millions of USB thumb drives are still being used, even though you can store anything in the cloud free; and people still use and buy tens of millions of flip phones every year, including such notables as Mayor Bill de Blasio, Anna Wintour, Warren Buffett, Iggy Pop and Rihanna. Pagers also never completely died.

You’ve probably heard the saying that the minute that you drive a car off a dealer’s lot, it loses value. Well, that is no longer true for old cars. Some vintage cars have increased in value by 500 percent. (One reason for this is that younger car owners want to be able to fix and tinker with their own cars. Try doing that with a Tesla, and you’ll void the warranty.)

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Of course, there are some outdated technologies that die a fateful death and never return. I don’t know many people with a dedicated car phone, for example. (Though I’m sure some hipster just posted one to Instagram.)

To be fair, we have been wrongly predicting the demise of old technologies for some time. In 1876, for example, when The New York Times first wrote about the telephone, and later the phonograph, the writers of the day said that these devices would empty the concert halls and churches, as no one would ever want to leave home again.

And yet, just this month, Diplo held a concert for an estimated half-million people in Cuba. Something tells me that some of those people will also be buying the performer’s album on vinyl.



RECORD PLAYERS & VINYL

While many modern listeners enjoy the ease of use and clarity that comes with listening to music digitally, the popularity of vinyl records has soared in recent decades. Records have become more than just collector’s items sitting on shelves — many artists now release their albums on vinyl, and many audiophiles say they prefer this 100-year-old format for music listening.



TYPEWRITERS

In recent years, the use of typewriters in certain circles has increased dramatically, with Tom Hanks being among the most famous typewriter enthusiasts. Those who prefer to use them enjoy the satisfying click of the keys and the variety of design in the machines.

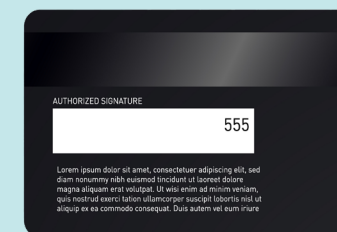


PIECES OF TECH GOING THROUGH A RESURGENCE



FLOPPY DISKS

Those rectangular pieces of plastic that held computer programs, files, and other data didn’t completely go out of style with the invention of the CD-ROM and later the switch to Cloud storage. Because a lot of older technology, especially expensive technology such as airplanes and naval ships, is still in use, many of the other pieces of technology that help them run are still around.



MAGNETIC STRIPE CARDS

In an age when Instagram has altered the photography world, instant-print cameras are conquering the digital era. Sales of DSLRs and point-and-shoot digital cameras are down, but the instant-print shooter—the lowest-tech camera available—has won over many. It’s projected that the market for these 1970s-era devices will approach \$2 billion in revenue within three years.



POLAROID CAMERAS

Mobile payment options allow users to pull up an app on their phones or tap a smartwatch to complete the same operation as a credit card’s magnetic stripe. Many consumers, however, still prefer to swipe their cards to complete their transactions. Additionally, technology at many stores hasn’t kept pace with the newest methods of payment, making magnetic stripe credit cards the payment method of choice for those who don’t carry cash