nostalgia

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Abstract:

Ключовата дума представя ролята на носталгията при изграждането на представа за настоящето и надежда за бъдещето чрез идеализирането на миналото. Носталгията има своята положителна роля за преодоляване на проблемите в трудни моменти от човешкия живот, защото носи позитивни емоции, дава утеха и надежда. В същото време тя е средство за манипулация, защото често създава идилична представа за живота в предходни периоди, като по този начин легитимира социалното неравенство.

В този текст представяме различните проявления на носталгията, като посочваме и примери, които показват на практика как носталгията „се промъква“ в живота на хората по различни канали и с различни цели.

Etymology:

Boym (2001) states that “[t]he word ‘nostalgia’ comes from two Greek roots: νόστος, *nóstos* (“return home”) and ἄλγος, *álgos* (“longing”). The word was invented by the Swiss student Johannes Hofer and it was first used in his medical dissertation in 1688. That's why Boym classifies it as "Pseudo-Greek, or nostalgically Greek".

During the centuries it has been described as an illness – curable or not. Today it is seen mostly as a reaction to modern *daily living, busy hectic* lifestyles, as a yearning for a time ‘before’ now, as a longing for a place or a period of time which are no longer existent if they ever existed (Boym 2001). Bonnett (2016, p. 3) also states that “nostalgia is born out of modernity”.

Cultural specificity:

As nostalgia is a yearning for the time before, for the good old times, it is closely connected to historical events, and stereotypical or mythologised perceptions of the past of groups, communities, or states. That is why nostalgic triggers are often culturally specific and are connected to folklore narratives and their modern imitations, to the historical myths of ‘the golden years’ of the family, community and nation. Nostalgia as a culturally-specific notion is a social phenomenon which is fuelled by publicly spread tales linked with both official stories which can be found in school books, historical novels by famous authors, as well as in alternative narratives about the past of a nation which are very popular on the Internet. It contains the idea that something important has been lost – values, feelings, relationships, military and cultural power.

Problematization:

Nostalgia is a controversial phenomenon. It may be seen as a community builder, “as a creative and progressive resource, a tool for commodification, or an agent for identity and community building to articulate cultural or generational belonging” (Menke & Schwarzenegger, 2016). The positive consequences of nostalgia have been also investigated recently (for example, Sedikides, 2015; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016; Todorova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2021). Kalinina (2016, p. 11) presents an overview of the research of different investigators who consider that nostalgia is a way for easier crossing through difficult times and who conclude that “[n]ostalgia, therefore, can be regarded as an essential tool that individuals use to adapt to unavoidable changes in life.” Moreover, nostalgia may help people to connect with others (Batcho, 2007) and it may provoke inspiration, influence positively creativity, and increase optimism (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016). All these features of nostalgia have been very useful during the time of the COVID-19 lockdown (Padareva & Todorova, 2021) as those days many people felt lonely, isolated, even desparate and the sweet memories of their happy past moments made them overcome the present hard times.

Nostalgia can be seen as a negative phenomenon as well (for example, Abramov & Chestiakova, 2012) as

it has “fuelled populism and nationalist identity politics” (Menke & Schwarzenegger 2016, p. 2). As it helps people feel better with the help of memories (true or false), the view of nostalgia as “an escapist reaction to change has a long history dating back to its diagnosis as a pathological medical condition, and later as a psychological condition.” (Kalinina, 2016, p. 8).

Nostalgia is an emotion (or cocktail of emotions), not only a specific social phenomenon (Budinova, 2010, p. 236). Havlena and Holak mention that the "bittersweet" quality of emotion is a distinguishing characteristic of nostalgia. It refers back to an earlier period in the individual's life and draws on biased or selective recall of past experiences. According to the authors, it may be described as "a painful yearning to return home” and it is broadly used in advertising, marketing, and public relations (Havlena & Holak, 1991). At the time of the COVID-19 crisis, it started representing the longing for the previous life: and this is not surprising. Kostova-Panayotova (2016) says that a person always yearns for past times and distant places: the person who is sent away desires to come home, the person at home dreams of travelling.

Communication strategies:

Nostalgia is frequently invoked as part of media communication, social media, political and everyday life. Usually, it is not the word itself that is used, but the different manifestations of nostalgia based on its characteristics as described above.

In every aspect of everyday life people tend to indulge in nostalgia, even younger ones, talking about good memories; joyful, interesting moments; good, quality music; worthwhile movies, or just remembering past years when they were younger. Such communication is even more popular in the social media where it is easy to communicate with people from all over the world. Different social and online groups are based on nostalgia and explore its different manifestations: for example, a group of graduates/alumni from the same school or university – in these online communities members share common memories, old pictures and thus they remember ‘the good old days’, feel connected and keep the past alive.

Namely because of its potential to bond with others (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014, p. 129), to increase optimism, and to mobilise people for action (FioRito & Routledge, 2020), nostalgia has also been used as a means of overcoming the psychological consequences of isolation, anxiety and trauma during the COVID-19 crisis (Todorova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2021). The lack of real human contact and normalcy in everyday life drives people towards their memories. Communication through social media in the months of isolation was largely nostalgic. For example, on Facebook and Twitter the so-called *nostalgic games* were very popular, people challenged one another to share pictures from different places where they have been travelled in the past. (Todorova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2021, p. 120).

Nostalgic COVID-19 communication could be classified into different categories such as social historical past, personal past, literary reminiscences and as we said - even nostalgic games that provoke people to perform certain actions or share certain experiences.

Outside of the COVID-19 times, we could argue that these types of communication can be seen as valid for nostalgic communication in general. Historical past, personal memories and literature, as well as art, can be triggers for feelings, urges and even actions.

Nationalistic parties are often presenting a nostalgic view of good old times focusing on the times of national pride and upsurge. In Bulgaria, these are the times of the Golden Age of the First Bulgarian Empire, the government of Tsar Ivan Asen II at the time of the Second Bulgarian Empire, or the times of the National Revival (a period of socio-economic empowerment of the Bulgarians and the struggle for national liberation from Ottoman rule, which flourished in the 19th century).

Some politicians also use nostalgia to show how nowadays the world is threatened by moral decline and the lack of order. Eibach and Libby (2009, pp. 402-403) call its representations “the vivid image of lost innocence” and state that “the rhetoric of decline may function to achieve wider public support for conservative social movements”.

In post-communist countries, nostalgia for the communist times is also used in political campaigns. For example, in

Bulgaria, plots from popular movies of the past have been used in commercials and political advertising (Padareva & Todorova, 2016). This strategy successfully draws parallels between the past and the present to suggest continuity and to affect the nation emotionally.

These nostalgic topics and the belief that the past is better are also used in commercials, marketing, and PR (Padareva-Ilieva & Todorova, 2016; Todorova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2018). The media use the symbols of the past as a strategy to evoke the myth of the golden days of the past as a manifestation that in the past life was more genuine. Nostalgia is an actual and widespread manipulative device as humans tend to memorise the good events of the past and to forget the bad ones as it helps them to overcome problems. Therefore, the success of such a strategy is a result of the existing nostalgic inclinations in society, which are additionally intensified by emotional and touching images and messages. The strategy is built on the basis of an idealised emotional state, as written by Budinova (2010, p. 236).

This state is awakened by memories and longing for the past. Therefore, the relevant era is recreated by reproducing activities and the use of symbolic images or objects characterizing past times. The media often address this concept through various broadcasts, verbal communication, or through music and movies – elder people dressed in folk costumes, traditional houses representative of the particular historical period (in Bulgaria they are usually from the time of the Revival), traditional food, traditional or well known old music and so on.

Subversion:

In commercials and marketing the idea that the modern world rests on the foundations of the past is used as a strategy for gaining popularity and increasing sales. As a result, some sustainable images (stereotypes) are created. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary stereotype is “something conforming to a fixed or general pattern, especially**:** a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.”

These mental pictures or images are sometimes indefinite, generalised, and vague; they are characterised by some specific distinctive features, indicating their belonging to the past. The reference to time is chronologically unclear, but the past represents some positive features – tradition, quality, taste, warmth, and stability. For this reason, the products presented by such a strategy are more often traditional for the culture (Todorova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2018). For example, for Bulgarian culture such traditional food products are ‘*kiselo mlyako*’ (a yogurt containing the famous *Lactobacillus bulgaricus*), ‘*sirene*’ (white salted cheese, typical for the Balkans), ‘*lyutenitsa*’ (tomato-pepper mix, cooked, thickened and canned in jars). For better nostalgic effect and marketing success commercials use multimodal techniques – both texts and images. These multimodal advertisements evoke some stereotypical models formed in the past but still alive and productive, even for consumers, for whom the authentic products or tastes are not familiar. The marketing strategy is built on archetypal images that people have and carry within them.



Cow cheese "Bozhentsi". The taste of Bulgarian tradition! (This picture presents the image of the traditional house with a common architecture from the Bulgarian Revival (19th century). It could be seen in other Balkan countries.)



Fresh milk "Grandmother`s" (This image contains some elements of the traditional culture – an old-fashioned food and liquid container and clothes typical for the Revival time)



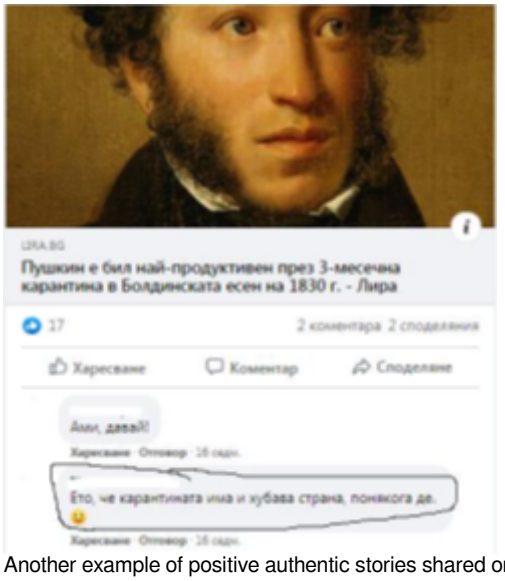
Lyutenitsa "Rachenitsa" (This is a jar with 'lyutenitsa' – a typical Bulgarian food, made from tomatoes and peppers. The label shows a famous piece of art – "Rachenitsa" by Ivan Markvichka (1894), which presents Bulgarian national customs and a traditional dance called 'rachenitsa'.)

Some of the popular advertisements and political campaign videos are built on the basis of specific and familiar art works and characters from the past, i.e. iconic works of famous writers and artists. All these images are multi-layered and carry messages in two directions – on the one hand, a return to the family and roots, on the other – a reference to the pieces of art recognized by all (Todorova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2018). Slogans, products' names, and images contain reminiscences of the past (the usual characters in many food product advertisements are grandparents; people with traditional clothes; houses typical for the past periods, etc.)

An interesting phenomenon was noticed during COVID-19 pandemic communication. People`s curiosity and inherent longing for the past, and above all the desire to show that isolation can also have a positive side, found examples which became very popular using the power of social media no matter whether they correspond to the historical truth or not. We share some of them below (the stories of Newton and Pushkin) and although these are authentic, really positive, and inspiring, on the Web some completely unauthentic stories circulated. In all these cases, multimodal text and image techniques are used.



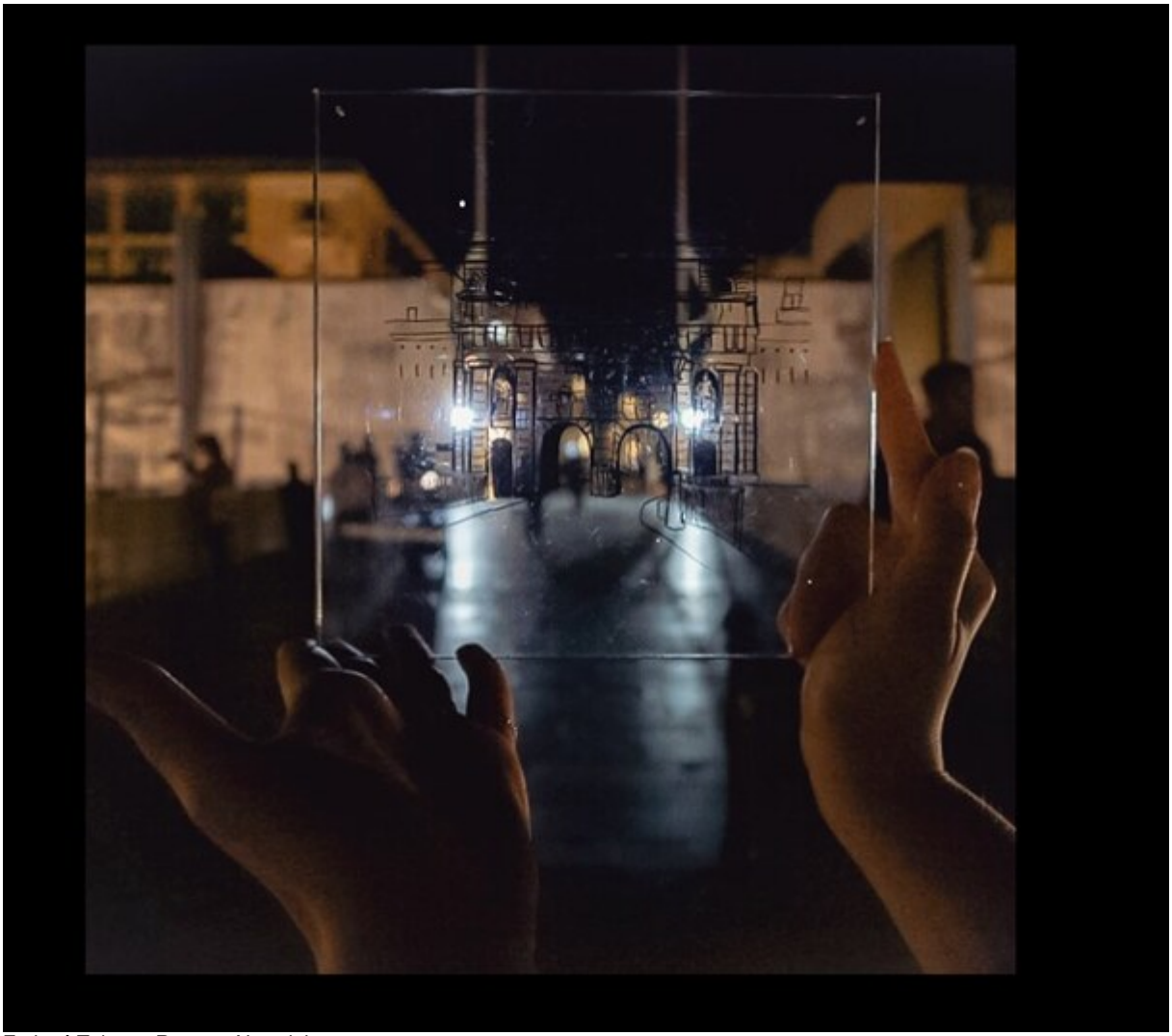
An example of positive authentic stories shared on the Web: *Newton described gravity in 1665 when Cambridge was closed due to a bubonic plague pandemic.*



Another example of positive authentic stories shared on the Web: *The Russian poet Pushkin isolated in Boldino in 1830 (Pushkin's Boldino Autumn, known as the most fruitful in his life) due to an epidemic of cholera, created great works.*

Social media and modern technologies make it possible to create 'new products' based on old, forgotten stories or memories that live 'a new meaningful life' in the specific COVID-19 situation, modelled by the culture and mentality of people in isolation (Todorova & Padareva-Ilieva 2021).

Nostalgia may be seen as an art inspiration when art creators are looking for new techniques. The white-black photography, old school filming techniques (characters leaving the scene, the Dutch tilt, etc.), old painting techniques, the unplugged versions of the hit songs, the covers of the songs, are only some among many ways to evoke nostalgia. Some artists play between past and present, challenging our perception, as Enriqué Tabone in their illustration installation *Reverse Nostalgia*:



Enriqué Tabone: Reverse Nostalgia

In the design market, one of the most popular new trends in the post-COVID time is the so-called 'Newstalgia' – as the blending word suggests it is a combination of the retro style techniques and the new technologies (Meister 2001). The Urban Dictionary describes it as “Something new that harks back to something old”.



Credits: Roman Samborskyi / Shutterstock)

Discussion:

- Is nostalgia motivating and constructive, or on the contrary, does it stop progress and development?
- Returning to the past always brings a certain emotion to which marketing relies. Do you think that in this way the past lives in the present?
- Can speaking nostalgically underestimate the modern achievements of humankind?
- Is nostalgia a strategy or a natural phenomenon?
- To what extent the nostalgia strategy can distort nostalgia as a good, warm feeling?

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