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"Slavic Core" – an Internet Aesthetic or Generation Z's Struggle for Identity?

Introduction

In 2001, Polish scholar Michał Lisecki stated that, in the years to come, the internet would be the most important factor shaping the course of studies on language, culture, folklore, sociology, etc. These almost prophetic words were written in the publication "Słowiańszczyzna w kontekście przemian Europy końca XX wieku", which focuses on different aspects of changes in and new challenges for Slavic cultures in the early 21st century. Lisecki also stated that radical changes in forms of communication and the spaces in which com-

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munication takes place open new fields of research for those willing to keep up with the *zeitgeist* of the XXI century (Lisecki, 2001, p. 237).

In 2018, the University of Gdańsk published a collection of works titled "Słowiańskie inspiracje". In the opening passages of this publication, the editors claim that Lev Gumilov's conception of "Creative Slavdom" ("Kreatywna Słowiańszczyzna") is materialising right now (Gostomska & Lechocka, 2018, p. 9). With the rising interest in Slavic cultures, their visible over-representation in popular culture, and the genuine fascination with everything "Slavic" in social media (or increased interest in folklore generally – more on that later), this idea of an exceptional surplus of creative powers seems more than reasonable.

Without doubt, TikTok is most appealing to the adolescent audience. Due to the pandemic, it has become the most popular form of communication among this demographic, at the same time creating a form of "safe space" that adolescents find suitable for sharing their thoughts and issues (Machowska, 2022, pp. 61–66).

The focus of this paper is an attempt to analyse this relatively new phenomenon. The authors will try to characterize younger generations' interpretation of what it means to be Slavic and provide information on the specific subculture of TikTok users who contribute to the development of this trend. This includes the general idea of modern "Slavness" in social media, along with more detailed concepts, including geographical connections to specific locations, correlations with economic and political situations, and, obviously, what "Slavdom" means in comparison to other general social and civilizational identities. Finally, we will try to determine whether "Slavic Core" is another short-lasting trend in the kaleidoscope of social media activities or an element of the younger generation's struggle for identity in the world of progressive globalization.

The subject of TikTok as an adolescents' platform of communication has already been addressed by several authors in articles such as "Psychology Tok: Use of TikTok, Mood, and Self-Perception in a Sample of College Students" (Barry et al., 2024), "'I Can Spend Forever on It Without Getting Bored': Analyzing What College Students Like and Dislike About TikTok" (Martinez et al., 2024), or "The Role of TikTok in Students' Health and Wellbeing" (Ramsden & Talbot, 2024). This further proves that this subject has recently become popular in the scientific community, underlining the need for analysis of its various aspects.

1. Implemented methodology – the proposed sociocultural approach

The main disciplines involved in the following analysis are cultural studies and studies of audiovisual arts. Some components of this paper involve concepts from disciplines such as sociology and linguistics (especially issues surrounding theory of communication). Based on the definition provided by T. A. van Dijk (2001, pp. 9–44), the authors admit that the Slavic Core phenomenon is a communication situation. We will not focus on this (linguistic) aspect of it, rather using it as a supportive element for the cultural and social angle of analysis. Throughout this work, the authors will use publications on social media issues, statistics and press articles that highlight certain trends and movements occurring in the still-developing space of social media communication and also function as an introduction to the studied issue.

Analysis will be conducted using the comparative method, defined, and implemented on the basis of Jerzy Apanowicz's book "Metodologia Ogólna" (Apanowicz, 2002, pp. 24–36). We will provide descriptions and analyses of various TikTok videos; then, through induction, we will try to obtain a clear and credible representation of what Slavic Core is. In this case, "representation" is a term indicating the construction of cultural reality by members of a particular group (Barker, 2003, p. 8). This will provide representative material to compare and assign to separate groups, implicating TikTok users' differing motivations for creating content which falls into the category of "Slavic Core". Other aspects of the methodology we use that are suitable for cultural and socio-cultural studies will be based mainly on Chris Barker's aforementioned work "Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice".

As the paper will focus on one particular social media platform that is dominated by one specific age cohort that has its own developing approach to various problems, it is rather easy to classify this paper as touching sociocultural issues, namely issues whereby specific social groups or cultures influence each other in areas such as symbolism, art etc. (Bokszański, 2012, pp. 49–51).

2. Subculture on TikTok: social media users' idea of aesthetics and activism in internet communication

TikTok, like many similar internet platforms, is a very specific place for cultural communication. The nuances of this platform of information exchange are well described by Michał Lisecki in his article "Język w sieci – zmiana paradygmatu", where TikTok is described as a hybrid between spoken and written language due to the simplification of written communications that imitate everyday speech. TikTok content is rather chaotic and unplanned, with a tendency towards strong, simple messages (Lisecki, 2001, p. 233).

The popularity of TikTok is caused, inter alia, by how the application works. The main part of TikTok is the For You page, which contains an endless number of videos that are highly personalized for the user. The app algorithm selects videos to present on the basis of the user's engagement with content (TikTok, 2020). One way in which the algorithm recognizes types of content is by the hashtags that are used in video descriptions. The algorithm then assigns these to different categories, which users often refer to as the "sides of TikTok" (Sommer, 2020).

However, not every hashtag on TikTok ends with the "-tok" suffix and is extensive enough to be called a "side". This brings us to another category of TikTok videos: aesthetic videos. To proceed, we first need to define aesthetics in the context of TikTok. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "aesthetic" means "the particular style of appearance that something or someone has" ("Aesthetic", n.d.). Taking this into consideration, it is possible to understand that aesthetic videos are focused more on the visual aspect of a topic rather than actively discussing it, the result being that users interact more passively with them. To navigate through different types of aesthetics, TikTok users often give them specific names that are later converted to hashtags. Most often, this is done by taking the most prominent trait of that aesthetic and adding the "-core" suffix (Kelly, 2022). Examples are: #cottagecore, #gothcore or #emocore.

It is worth noting that these two different ways of creating content on TikTok are not always separate but are quite often intertwined, thus hashtags

such as #slaviccore are created that combine a demographic category but in terms of an aesthetic.

Having in mind how the TikTok algorithm functions and how it creates platforms for communication and creating content for like-minded communities, it is also important to describe the characteristics of the sides of TikTok that focus on ethnicity.

In the opinion of the authors of this paper, a milestone in terms of the ethnic and cultural aspect of TikTok content was a video posted by Native American (Salish nation) creator Tia Wood on 06.10.2020. It features the author having her hair braided by her mother, who is dressed in traditional native attire. Tia is lip-singing a song, "Savage Daughter" by Sarah Hester Ross. The 21-second video has since gained over 22 billion views and almost 5 billion likes (tiamiscihk, 2020). Its message is strongly connected to anti-colonial voices among young Native Americans, encouraging them to embrace their own heritage in different aspects of everyday life (Allaire, 2020).

This new trend of feeling proud of one's ethnic background, in opposition to globalized modern culture, quickly became increasingly popular, with hashtags such as #arabtok, #nativetok, or our focus, namely #slavictok. Users can entertain and educate themselves while watching these countless videos, which oscillate around topics such as Slavic folklore, pre-Christian mythology, or general habits attributed to the Slavic population (#slavictok, TikTok.com, https://www.tiktok.com/search?q=slavictok&t=1682602570531). This emphasis on native Slavic traditions on TikTok could be attributed to several important factors.

The first of these factors is the general tendency of bringing back and reinterpreting old Slavic culture, or, more precisely, its popular image. For example, in contemporary Polish culture, the "slavness" trend can be traced back to the extensive use of Slavic motifs in the fantasy literature of the 1990s. From this angle, this pop-cultural image of "slavness" was something revealing but at the same time homely, superficial, and lacking strong academic quality, presenting a predominant approach based on stereotypes and clichés (Brzóstowicz-Klajn, 2022, pp. 7–11).

The second, albeit still rather underrepresented, reason for the emphasis on native Slavic traditions on TikTok is activism and the spreading of awareness. The Slavic population, like probably most existing ethnic groups, has to face not only positive and neutral but also a wide range of negative stereotypes. In American culture, traces of negative Slavic traits

can be traced back to the end of 19th century. Immigrants from Eastern Europe were seen as physically strong but lacking intellectual capabilities (Bicha, 1982, pp. 18–19). The oversexualization and fetishization of eastern European, especially Russian, women that has been visible in the media for some time is even seen by some scholars as Western discourse's "obsession" with the Slavic population's sexuality (Borenstein, 1996, pp. 142–147). Particularly this last topic has recently become the subject of polemics in media discourse again (Dorn, 2022).

Summing up this part of the paper, the whole idea of what is called "Slavic Core" is based on ethnicity and its representation. From a sociocultural perspective, an ethnicity is a community based on common symbols, a language (or languages), ideas and practice. These are important elements in the process of the members of particular group determining who they are. At the same time, ethnicity have similar function, marking fundamental differences between various communities (Barker, 2003, pp. 285–286). This discourse is understood as the use of language to communicate messages surrounding the Slavic question on TikTok ("Discourse", n.d.). However, bearing in mind how multimedia content is created on this platform, a strictly linguistic definition would not be enough to cover Slavic Core's full cultural potential. To add to this distinction, if we consider a whole posted video as an act of communication – even through visual representation – it would still be relevant to the widest definitions of this term: a discussion in a certain situation and cultural space (Sławkowa, 2006, pp. 92–94). Representation is shaping cultural reality through communication, not only by members of a community but also by others describing them – in the case of Slavic Core aesthetics (Barker, 2003, p. 8). With this in mind, the space of communication is TikTok; the method of communication in discourse is TikTok videos, and "Slavic Core" is the representation. With these theoretical background sketches, the most important thing to do is to observe and study how this representation is implemented in practice by users.

3. "Slavic Core" as generation Z's communism nostalgia

The phenomenon of communism nostalgia exists, to various extents, in all Slavic countries. This specific kind of idealization of the past is described as "sentimentality for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations" (Boym, 2001, pp. 13–14). The harsh transformation to

a capitalist economy, memories of relatively stable employment and the swiftly changing cultural norms are some of the main reasons for communism nostalgia's popularity among older generations (Nikolayenko, 2008, p. 244; Roeske, 2014, pp. 142–144). However, especially interesting and valid for this paper are the reasons why younger generations who didn't, or to a small extent, experience socialist reality are tempted by this idea.

Małgorzata Roeske, author of the publication "Moda czy nostalgia? O tym, jak PRL funkcjonuje w wyobraźni społecznej współczesnych Polaków", stated that younger population's nostalgia for communism can be viewed as a fragment of a much wider tendency called "retrospective orientation". Roeske describes this as "positive valuation of 'oldness' and 'tradition'" (Roeske, 2014, pp. 144–145). At the same time, it is worth mentioning the theoretical absence of negative connotations, political turmoil, limited civil liberties etc. Polish journalist Zdzisław Pietrasik stated that even these aspects of communist reality got "cabaretized", meaning party officials and security officers became funny, harmless figures. Therefore, in the Polish cultural space, young people's perception is influenced by period movies, fashion, and their own relatives' nostalgia (Pietrasik, 2018). This has to be underlined because a nostalgic perspective is subjective, based on personal experience, and can vary from one group to another. Brocki underlines the process of transforming one's psychological picture into a socially digestible narrative – creating polyphonic nostalgia (Brocki, 2011, pp. 26–30). A positive attitude towards the socialist past (and various aspects of its everyday life) among youth has also been noticed by south Slavic media and scholars ("Britanski ugledni medij raspisao se o usponu 'jugonostalgije'", 2022; Todorović & Pavko-Čuden, 2017, pp. 5–6).

The return of the patterns, colours, and general aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s is especially visible among youngsters. Rooted deep in postmodernism and the "recycling of culture", this tendency is an element of the *vintage* trend, putting emphasis on the quality and originality that is attributed to the fashion of the past (Roeske, 2014, pp. 148–149). That would correspond with journalists' reports which show that the youngest and most-aware generations are overstimulated by the internet and modern reality. At the same time, they are looking for an accessible way of connecting to "simpler times", in this case via nostalgia and *retro* fashion. In this way, they can limit their (paradoxically) overwhelming, unlimited possibilities in any aspect of everyday functioning (Glasheen, 2023).

4. Implementation: chosen examples of Slavic Core videos

This part of the paper consists of transcriptions of chosen TikTok videos, with short analyses of some communicational and visual aspects. To provide the full contexts, descriptions will include the author's comment, the hashtags used, a transcription of the video and, if necessary, the background music. The videos will be chosen based on the presence of hashtags such as #slavic, #slaviccore or similar hashtags that feature the elements mentioned in the theoretical part of this article. The interpretations of the videos are based on the factors mentioned in previous parts of the paper.

The first video has the comment "the best", with icons showing two Lithuanian flags and hashtags: #lithuania #easterneuropean #summer #batlic #slavic #polish #russia #foryoupage #fyp #foryou #xyzbca. The text on screen says, "Eastern European summer (and icons representing different European countries flags) >>", followed by a slideshow of pictures of sunflower seeds, Heineken beer, garlic bread (?), a screenshot of Google street view depicting a forest road, two people swimming in a lake, a pack of snacks, vanilla ice cream in a wafer cup, white plastic garden chairs, grey block of flats in winter, and slices of sausage, bacon, cucumbers, and cake. The soundtrack is a remix of a song by American singer Pitbull, with a folk music background (onlyeasterneurope_, 2023).

The creator of this video implies the superiority of summer in eastern Europe, based on the variety of snacks and landscapes, which could be interpreted as familiar to an average Slavic person. The choice of the mentioned countries is questionable as it features not only western and eastern Slavic countries but also Albania, Greece and even Austria. The elements of the summer landscape that are shown are also neither necessarily Slavic nor eastern European – for example, Dutch Heineken beer. These can simply be considered some of the general positive aspects of spending free time during summer, but with an emphasis on a countryside location – implying its positive connotations.

The next video is described by the comment "Slavic winter core(?)", with the hashtags #balkan #slavwinter #wintercore #slavaesthetic #slaviccore #slavicwinter #balkanwinter #bimbocore #cig4retteaesthicc #romania. The first

part of the video is captioned "Your winter" and shows Starbucks coffee cups, woollen gloves, and various winter village landscapes (presenting a rather alpine and therefore Western style). The second part has the caption "My winter" and shows mostly young women dressed in fur caps (resembling the eastern *papacha* style), a snow-covered block of flats, and a distinctive image of young girl in her underwear or night gown next to full drinks glasses (_saturnxs.edits_, 2022).

In the case of this video, it is rather hard to arbitrarily say if it was created by a Slavic person. The question mark in the description implies uncertainty about the posted content. However, emphasis is put on presenting it as an aesthetic, as is confirmed by the commentary and the hashtags. The style of the fur hats, as well as the cold weather and the consumption of alcohol, are common stereotypes in popular culture about Russia (Abbasova, 2019). Importantly, the video features only a conventionally attractive young woman. These factors may suggest that video was not meant to serve as a message to fellow Russians/other Slavs but is rather based on stereotypes and colonial fascination with Russian woman, thus it probably wasn't created by a person familiar with the codes of that community.

The next video features the comment "u had to be there" and the hashtags: #polishcore #easterneurope #easterneuropean #poland #ukraine #aesthetic #fyp #fy #dc #foryoupage #dlaciebie #slavic #trending #olddays #childhood; the text reads "you don't get it", and there is a block of flats with winter scenery as the background. It is followed by a slideshow of pictures of a child in a playground, a school gym, a tram, and a flea market; there is a picture of St. Mary with Jesus covered with dust and cobwebs, and the inside of a train, a van full of fruit at sunset, an old kitchen, a wet road, an old staircase, a dirty window, and a block of flats. The background audio comprises a quote, "bunkrów nie ma, ale też jest zajebiście", from the Polish movie "Chłopaki nie płaczą", which translates to "there are no bunkers, but it's awesome anyway". The quote is followed by a song "Where is my mind" by the Pixies (yoursforcomfort, 2022).

This video caries a strong emotional message and definitely falls into the category of nostalgia. However, the creator did not focus on an idealized retrospection. The reality shown in the video seems rather melancholic and grey, implying eastern Europe's poor economy and lack of prospects for its inhabitants (some of the photos show poorly maintained infrastructure). This interpretation might be based on the #olddays and #childhood hashtags. The "u don't get it" caption implies that non-Slavic people are unable to feel or understand the atmosphere presented.

The creator of this video is showing the aforementioned element of auto-identification of the Slavic community by separating it from others. The presented reality is not necessarily seen as positive or negative, rather as something which is a common experience in the Slavic community. This is confirmed by the movie quote – possibly known mostly to the Slavic audience – that the presented reality is not the best but is still good because of its familiarity to a particular ethnicity.

The next video has the description "this is exactly what americans romanticise" (Original spelling). The hashtags used are #fyp #foryoupage #poland #foryou #poor #poverty #americans #easterneurope #easterneuropeans #slavic #slaviccore #polishcore #vibe #vibes #aesthetic. The pictures, with the caption "life in Poland", mostly show poorly maintained city infrastructure, massive grey blocks of flats, and the interiors of small grocery shops or poor/traditional flats. Many of these pictures were taken at night or in bad weather. The musical background is a melancholic song by Belarusian post-punk band Molchat Doma (.easteuropa olka <3, 2023).

This video possesses two of the previously mentioned elements: setting boundaries and activism. The creator is implying that "Americans" create an aesthetic from something that is everyday life for much of the Slavic population. Hashtags such as #poverty or #poor underline the fact that the privileged population romanticizes eastern Europe's neglect and lack of economic power, which should be seen not as a melancholic trend but probably as a social issue.

To limit the amount of description and emphasize the repeatable elements, some similar tendencies will be grouped below.

- Pointing non-Slavic users' hypocrisy and turning cultural codes/everyday life elements into an aesthetic or stereotype:
  - "Remember my ethnicity is not your aesthetic" (kitxxyc0l, 2022).
  - "Americans drinkin' v0dka saying they r so 'slavic core'" (froggy_boo, 2021).
  - "romanticises poor areas in the easter Europe; wars ushanka with symbol on it" (enkara, 2023).
- Idealizing post-Soviet/eastern European/urban Slavic reality by members of the non-Slavic community, or even pretending to be Slavic:
  - "I wish I could be Slavic so much" (Fukuchi Hate Club Official <3, 2022).
  - "Man I wish I was SLAVIC" (slavic…aesthetic, 2021).

– Embracing one's culture and ethnic background – negative or positive – via common experiences among the Slavic community, possibly in a therapeutic, sometimes ironic way:
  - "The life I came from" (ol.shevaa, 2022).
  - "going to a middle of literal nowhere at 3am is an ultimate slavic experience" (dazaisfart.com, 2022).

There are many more examples of similar types of videos available under the aforementioned hashtags. Several tendencies become visible throughout their analysis. Now that the elements characteristic of certain groups of Slavic Core videos have been classified, it is necessary to elaborate further on those which are most visible.

5. An attempt to interpret the "Slavic Core" phenomenon

The first of the mentioned referents, namely cultural polemics, can to some extent be viewed as part of postcolonial discourse. Though used mostly in the context of non-European nations, some formerly marginalized or strongly stereotyped groups of the Old Continent also can be seen as a part of this tendency. This is an enormous change in the perception of Slavic people because they have finally gained the ability to advocate for themselves and create their own narrative. This privilege is no longer only available to outside groups in the position of power (Olaniyan, 1993, pp. 744–745). In this case, youngsters of Slavic origin, possibly encouraged by their peers from other parts of the world (as seen in the case of the video by Tia Wood, some of the positive comments are written in Slavic languages), have begun to modify the popular discourse on their own ethnicity. This also corresponds with the opinion that it is a form of cultural and creative protest against Anglophone domination in the virtual world (Lisecki, 2001, p. 235).

Interpretation of this first tendency naturally leads to another conclusion: that this demography's answer to their stereotyped image is common discourse created by themselves. They took up the formerly mentioned act of representation that non-Slavic groups would not fully understand – as is mentioned in the described videos. Every regional youth culture creates a syncretic mix of local and global (Barker, 2003, pp. 453–454). This is visible in the creations of "Slavic Core" creators who are members of that wide cultural

circle; sometimes very subtle cultural symbolism or even representation of certain emotions is involved, therefore fulfilling the role of communication based on a common experience. The fact that these creators' platform for exchanging information is a global social media application only provides them with a wider range of recipients from the targeted circles. This also corresponds with another theory that many youth subcultures (if we consider #slaviccore creators and recipients as a subculture) are constantly struggling to preserve authenticity – in this case, the authenticity of the Slavic "experience" (Barker, 2003, p. 458), even though it is not always positive or idealized (Nikolayenko, 2008, pp. 253–255).

Important factors of nostalgia must also be mentioned. Some of the videos implicate a direct connection between growing up in a certain environment and certain social and cultural behaviour. Probably the most plastic and frequently shown symbol of this generation's nostalgia is communist-era blocks of flats. Due to their prevalence in all former communist states, including all Slavic countries, they have somehow become a symbol of growing up in certain reality; again, this is a shared experience that is, however, unavailable to "Americans" – a term that is used to refer to stereotypically ignorant or wealthy Westerners rather than American nationals (Jastrząb, 2019, pp. 247–248).

Finally, some implementations of "Slavic Core" can be seen as a mere trend – a "slavic aesthetic" mostly used by members of non-Slavic communities who want to be Slavic. These people's interpretation of "Slavic Core" is frequently based on harmful stereotypes and lack of knowledge of the nuances of Slavic cultures, thus meeting firm resistance from ethnic Slavic creators – as is visible in multiple videos. Some creators even go as far as creating whole informative videos, explaining why treating elements of Slavic culture as an aesthetic is morally wrong (cygnus river, 2022).

Summary

The growing interest in Slavic cultures has been a phenomenon in popular culture for some time. The opportunities provided by modern multimedia are certainly an important factor in this tendency (Makowski, 2018, pp. 16–17). However, it has come a long way from just an interesting innovation in fantasy literature to a developed and still-developing discourse of auto-identification.

Younger generations, said to be members of the "global village" who are creating homogeneous youth culture, have unexpectedly become the avant-garde of this movement. What this paper has hopefully shown is that members of generation "Z" are not only aware of their Slavic ethnic legacy but have also become guardians of their culture in social media, steadily confirming that it is more than just another internet "aesthetic".

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Slavic Core – internetowa estetyka czy walka o tożsamość pokolenia Z?

Przedmiotem uwagi jest istniejący na portalu społecznościowym TikTok fenomen tzw. *Slavic Core*. Autorzy dokonują próby wyjaśnienia, czym on jest oraz jak jest implementowany przez użytkowników. Ponadto proponują, jak interpretować wykazane tendencje. Perspektywa badawcza opiera się na założeniach kulturoznawstwa i odsyła do zagadnień z zakresu sztuk wizualnych oraz socjolingwistyki.

Słowa kluczowe: Slavic Core; estetyka; media społecznościowe; tożsamość etniczna; nostalgia; pokolenie Z

"Slavic Core" – an Internet aesthetic or generation Z's struggle for identity?

The main focus of the work is the so-called "Slavic Core" TikTok phenomenon. The authors attempt to describe what this new trend is, how it is implemented by users, and how to interpret the results of its analysis. The research draws from cultural studies, implementing elements from the fields of visual arts and sociolinguistics.

Keywords: Slavic Core; aesthetic; social media; ethnicity; nostalgia; generation Z

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