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We Were Hungry, but We Were Also Free: Narratives of Russia's First Post-Soviet Decade on Instagram

Abstract: The first post-Soviet decade occupies an important place in the Russian collective memory. Associated with the transition to democracy, but also economic hardships and violence, it constitutes a complex amalgamation of traumatic and nostalgic recollections. The ambiguous role of the 1990s memories is further complicated by their intense instrumentalization by the Kremlin for consolidating the public support as well as their counter-instrumentalization by the civil society for criticizing the revival of authoritarian tendencies in Russia. Under these circumstances, it is important to understand how the remediation of narratives about the first post-Soviet decade is influenced by social media platforms capable of both countering and reinforcing hegemonic discourses about the past.

With this aim, the chapter examines how trauma and nostalgia associated with the 1990s are remediated via Instagram. Using a sample of Instagram data, it examines whether memory remediation on the platform reflects the above-mentioned intense politicization of nostalgia and trauma associated with this period and how this remediation is affected by the consumption-oriented nature of Instagram. The chapter's findings demonstrate that Instagram is primarily used for showcasing cultural products associated with the 1990s and expressing a yearning towards childhood and teenage years that coincided with the post-Soviet transition. Despite the absence of explicit political statements, however, nostalgic content on Instagram can still be seen as a form of challenging the hegemonic narrative of the 1990s as a time of misery and hardships.

Introduction

The first post-Soviet decade – or ‘the 1990s’ – occupies a special place in the Russian collective memory. The abolishment of the planned economy and the opening of the Russian market to the Western material and cultural products were the integral part of Russia's transition to democracy and normalization of relationship with the West. However, the downside of these transformations was the rise of poverty and crime amplified by the dismantlement of the Soviet social security system and a series of armed conflicts in the former Soviet republics. This combination of economic and creative opportunities, but also disillusionments and hardships, explains

why this period is collectively known as *likhie devianostye* ('the rowdy 1990s' in Russian; Boele 2019).

Until now, memories of the first post-Soviet decade maintain a substantial presence in the Russian public sphere. During the third presidential term of Vladimir Putin, references to *likhie devianostye* and the hardships brought by them became a recurring element of the Kremlin's rhetoric (Malinova 2018). Employed for consolidating public support by contrasting current economic stability with the chaos of the post-1991 transformations, the 1990s are referred to as "the tragic years" (Putin 2019), when Russia was "on the edge of losing its sovereignty and being dismantled" (Putin 2019a). Yet, the very same contrast also inspires more nostalgic feelings, with the post-Soviet transition being praised as a period of unprecedented economic and political freedom which contrasts with the revival of authoritarian tendencies in the 2000s (Medvedev 2019).

An important factor in the interactions between different narratives of the 1990s is the digital turn in individual and collective remembrance in the post-Soviet countries (Rutten, Fedor and Zvereva 2013). By enabling new possibilities for cultural and political self-expression (Kukuljin 2013), digital platforms facilitate the construction of mnemonic counter-narratives which have the potential for exposing and revitalizing suppressed memories. At the same time, the digital turn can also be used to reinforce hegemonic historical narratives via new digital formats (Makhortykh and Sydorova 2019) and subjugate alternative views by abusing platform affordances.

To achieve a better understanding of how the digital memory turn impacts memories of the post-Soviet transition, the chapter examines how trauma and nostalgia associated with the transition are remediated via Instagram. Instagram is a Western digital platform that is used for storing, sharing, and discussing photos and videos. Before its ban in Russia in 2022 as part of the reinforcement of the Kremlin's control over the domestic information sphere following the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Instagram was highly popular in Russia (more than 47 million users; Statista 2020), in particular among female and younger (25–34 years) audiences with average (39.2% of users) and above average (32% of users) income (data for 2020; Gaitbaeva 2020).

Instagram features prominently in digital memory research¹ with its affordances enabling different forms of sharing and engaging with individual and collective past. Simultaneously, the platform's frequent use for business purposes makes it rather consumption-oriented, which makes Instagram an important component in the process of "memory commercialization" (Björkdahl and Kappler 2019). Furthermore, Instagram is less subjected to Russian state censorship,

1 For some examples see Hochman and Manovich 2013, Avedissian 2015, Commene and Potton 2019.

which facilitates its use for online (counter)memory campaigns, including the ones focused on memories of the 1990s (IRK 2018, Merzliakova 2020).

Based on a sample of Instagram data dealing with the first post-Soviet decade, the chapter examines how the platform is used to produce and communicate memories of the post-1991 transition, to what degree these processes reflect the intense politicization of nostalgia and trauma associated with this period, and how these processes are affected by the consumption-oriented nature of the platform. By doing so, the paper addresses the following questions: How are post-1991 socioeconomic transformations in Russia presented and interpreted via Instagram? What are the recurring visual tropes employed by Instagram users to communicate nostalgia and trauma related to this transition period? And to what degree does Instagram serve as a platform for countering official narratives of the 1990s and promoting alternative interpretations of the period?

Post-post-soviet digital trauma and nostalgia in Russia: Theoretical background

Trauma and nostalgia in digital environments

The unprecedented saturation of contemporary societies with digital technologies has a significant impact on how the past is engaged with on the individual and collective levels (Hoskins 2017). The growing connectivity between individuals enabled by platforms and mobile devices accelerates the formation and contestation of memories in digital environments (Hoskins 2009). Together with the extensive possibilities for capturing and storing memorabilia, these factors shift the balance between remembrance and forgetting with the former becoming a default condition in human relationship with the past (Mayer-Schonberger 2011).

This digital turn also has profound implications for the ways in which feelings of trauma and nostalgia are formed and processed. While often conceived as opposite states, both trauma and nostalgia characterize a condition under which the past intrudes on the present (Arnold-de Simine 2013). This intrusion is accompanied by a sense of rupture and radical discontinuity caused by the “irretrievable loss” (Horowitz 2010, 49). Yet, in the case of nostalgia the intrusion of the past is centered around the positive attachment, whereas in the case of trauma “the negative inability” (Legg 2004, 103) to deal with the past prevails.

Besides both being located on the same “threshold between remembering and forgetting” (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 62), nostalgia and trauma are often causally related to each other. Nostalgia is frequently viewed as a consequence of

trauma, both on individual (Talu 2009) and collective level (Kalinin 2011), with nostalgic feelings being a reaction to post-traumatic shock (Mazur 2015). However, trauma not only causes nostalgia by creating a yearning for the time preceding the loss as, for instance, in the case of post-Soviet nostalgia caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Mazur 2015), but also can be an object of longing itself. Arnold-de Simone (2013) discusses how the sinking of the Titanic or the German bombing of Britain stimulate nostalgic feelings for the time of greatness and the communal spirit despite being highly traumatic events. Similar logic can explain the nostalgic longing for the Stalinist period in post-Soviet countries, where it is associated with strong leadership despite it also being related to many unresolved traumas of mass atrocities (Gugushvili and Kabachnik 2019).

The process of digitization creates new venues for expressing and interacting with nostalgia and trauma. The platform-based connectivity facilitates establishment of mnemonic communities, where nostalgic and traumatic recollections can be shared (Kalinina and Menke 2016), thus countering silence which is particularly prominent in the case of trauma (Menyhert and Makhortykh 2017). By offering a venue through which trauma can be shared, platforms can help to cope with the past and prevent secondary traumatization related to a society's unwillingness to listen to the victims (McKinney 2007). At the same time, memory digitization also increases possibilities for accidental encounters with the content that triggers nostalgic or traumatic experience. This can lead to re-traumatization of individuals who experienced trauma (Majeed, Sudak and Beresin 2019) as well as their successors in the case of historical traumas (Carlson et al. 2017).

The digital turn also influences the societal uses of nostalgia and trauma. Because of their strong affective potential, both of them serve as powerful factors of mobilization and are often instrumentalized for political aims, e.g., collective identity-building (Kalinina and Menke 2016). While such instrumentalization can empower grassroots initiatives and counter memory hegemonies, there is also the growing recognition that the exclusive focus on the democratizing potential of digitally mediated trauma and nostalgia can be misleading (Makhortykh and Aguilar 2020). The nostalgic yearning for a 'golden age' (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019) is increasingly utilized by populist politicians around the world to secure their political gains (Kenny 2017, Buzalka 2018). Similarly, traumatic recollections of past injustices such as 'one hundred years of humiliation' in China (Wang 2008) or the October revolution in Russia (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz 2020) often serve as important elements of neo-authoritarian 'identitarian' (Kneuer 2017) narratives.

At the same time, the affectivity of trauma and nostalgia also encourages their use in other domains, such as commerce. Nostalgia in particular has long served as an important element of the advertisement industry, where sentimental yearning for an idealized past was used to drive consumption (Volčič 2007). The

growing visibility and frequency of interactions with the past online facilitates commodification of nostalgia as a commercial device in the structure of global capitalism (Jeziński and Wojtkowski 2016). The examples of platform affordances which further stimulate commercial uses of nostalgia are low costs of retrieval and actualization of mnemonic content (Lizardi 2014) as well as affect circulation in online communities (Keightley and Niemeyer 2020).

Digitization of trauma and nostalgia in Russia

Digitization of trauma and nostalgia is a particularly important topic in relation to the post-Soviet states due to the multiple unresolved traumas caused by political repressions and armed conflicts. These historical conditions result in a complex amalgamation of traumatic and nostalgic feelings towards the past, and specific features of public interactions with memory in the local context. Many of these countries, including Russia, demonstrate what Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik called ‘fractured memory regimes,’ in which political actors try to control public memory practices and use them to legitimize their own status (2014, 17). Consequently, ordinary citizens have limited possibilities to influence how the past is publicly remembered with the state using multiple means to sustain its mnemonic hegemonies. These means vary from legal repercussions for promoting alternative narratives as in the case of Russian memory laws (Koposov 2017) to hijacking grassroots memory movements such as the Immortal Regiment (Fedor 2017).

Under these circumstances, digital platforms offer Russian citizens a space where the past can be discussed and engaged with.² While the process of reactivating memories often involves discursive clashes about what is true and what is not (also known as ‘web wars’; Rutten, Fedor and Zvereva 2013), it still allows individuals to reflect on their affective attachment to the past and, potentially, process it constructively (Trubina 2010). However, the combination of the profound disagreements about what shared (mnemonic) symbols of the Russian collective identity should be (Morenkova 2012) and of unresolved traumas related to the past make such constructive processing a challenging task and result in frequent contestation of online engagements with memory.

Another challenge of digitization of nostalgia and trauma in Russia is the growing use of platforms by pro-Kremlin forces for targeting their opponents and

² The chapter has been written before the 2022 Russian invasion in Ukraine and the subsequent changes in Russian digital media landscape. While after 2022 digital platforms still provide some space for counter-state reflection and self-expression, the intense suppression of the dissent by the Russian state limits their use for critical engagement both with the historical and the recent past.

mobilizing popular support. Such instrumental uses often involve appropriation of trauma for constructing negative identities of political opponents to undermine their reputation or even dehumanize them. Recent examples of such abuses of affective attachment to the past come from Russia's war against Ukraine, where references to Second World War memories were employed to stigmatize the Ukrainian side and draw parallels between the new pro-Western Ukrainian government and Nazi Germany (Gaufman 2017, Makhortykh 2018).

Besides the new possibilities for political uses of trauma and nostalgia in Russia, the digital turn also enables new ways of using nostalgia in commercial contexts. Despite the slower shift towards online marketing by local businesses, Russia currently is one of the major digital markets – the situation that leads to the intense use of platforms for product advertisement. The large pool of digital memorabilia available for the use in commercial purposes (Kalinina 2014), together with the ability to deliver them in a more individualized manner (e.g., via Facebook news feed), facilitates evocation of nostalgic feelings, which are used by Russian companies for increasing profits.

Post-post-Soviet nostalgia and trauma

In contrast to the numerous studies devoted to the nostalgia and trauma associated with the Soviet period,³ there is relatively little research on affective attachments to the post-Soviet era and how these attachments are influenced by digitization. One reason for this discrepancy is that the first post-Soviet generation has just recently reached maturity. In addition, the discontinuity between the Soviet and the post-Soviet periods can be argued to be more pronounced than in the case of the transition from the 1990s to the 2000s, albeit the rise of authoritarian tendencies in Russia in the 2000s results in a strong discontinuity between the 1990s and the 2010s.

These two factors can explain why the feeling of rupture and loss associated with the 1990s has only recently become mediatized on a larger scale and, thus, attracted more scholarly attention. So far, however, the research on post-post-Soviet nostalgia tends to focus on the analogue media. Boele (2019), for instance, examines TV series dealing with the first post-Soviet decade and points out the complex composition of the period's perceptions, varying from the appreciation of the freedom and the prowess required to survive its excesses. Mazur (2015)

³ See, for instance, Boym 2001, Todorova and Gille 2010, Kalinina 2014 and Boele, Noordenbos and Robbe 2019. For the research on digital forms of post-Soviet nostalgia, see Kalinina and Menke 2016, Duijn 2019, Semolina 2013.

identifies a similar mix of feelings, varying from the nostalgic recollection of the end of Soviet-era deficits and the possibility to travel abroad to the less sentimental recollections of the consequences of the diminishing social security net.

The larger volume of research on post-post-Soviet trauma similarly tends to discuss it in the analogue context. Shevchenko (2009) examines the perception of the 1990s in Moscow and shows how the post-Soviet transition was interpreted as a perpetual crisis with a few isles of stability such as family. Similar observations come from Gorkshkov (2016), who shows how the period of transition is remembered as the time of anguish and insecurity, in particular as a result of the financial crises. Hashamova (2007) shows how these traumatic feelings are also reflected in popular culture with wounded national pride and anxiety about the unclear future having a substantive impact on post-Soviet Russian cinema.

The relatively limited scope of scholarship on nostalgia and trauma of the 1990s is contrasted by their intense instrumentalization. The traumatic aspects of *likhie devianostye*, in particular the loss of the superpower status and economic decline, are intensively used in the rhetoric of the Kremlin (Malinova 2018) and other political actors, e.g., the Communist Party (Malinova 2020), to mobilize public support. Simultaneously, nostalgia about “the most free, the most remarkable” (Medvedev 2019) period of the Russian history is used to oppose the authorities’ attempts to strengthen control over the public sphere. Such opposition involves the use of platforms to organize mnemonic flash mobs, such as “#my90s” (Merzliakova 2020), where Russian citizens share their personal experiences that often contradict the narrative of the 1990s as a time of misery and geopolitical weakness.

The intense exploitation of the feeling of rupture associated with the first post-Soviet decade is also observed in the context of Russian commerce. Similar to the Soviet nostalgia, which was used to promote multiple commercial brands (Kusimova and Schmidt 2016), the 1990s increasingly become an influential factor in promoting different kinds of services/goods, in particular the ones related to post-Soviet popular culture that intensively developed in the 1990s (Merzliakova 2020). The effects of this commodification of the 1990s nostalgia, however, remain rather unclear as well as the way commodification interacts with narratives of the first post-Soviet decade thriving on online platforms.

Capturing (counter-)narratives of the 1990s

For implementing the study, I looked at Instagram posts with the #90ые (‘the 1990s’) hashtag. The choice of the hashtag was made based on the examination of the search queries corresponding to different terms associated with the post-

Soviet transition (e.g., #девяностые, #лихие90е, #90е, #ностальгия). The choice of the #90ые is attributed to three reasons. First, this hashtag was less emotionally predefined than some other popular options (e.g., ‘the rowdy 1990s’). Second, compared to other queries, it provided a more diverse composition of results addressing various aspects of the post-Soviet transition. Finally, the corpus size for #90ые (less than 20 thousand Instagram posts) made it easier to retrieve, in particular considering data retrieval limitations enforced by Instagram.

The posts with the chosen hashtag were crawled using Phantombuster’s automated programming interface (API) for Instagram. Phantombuster is a commercial company specializing in cloud-based marketing APIs which can be used for retrieving data from different platforms. The resulting dataset included 10, 221 Instagram posts published between 2012 and 2019. From this dataset, a random sample of 222 posts with the equal number of posts sampled for each year⁴ was selected. Then, the sampled posts were manually examined and classified using the inductive coding approach (Thomas 2006).

The classification included three coding schemas and was conducted by a single coder. The first schema – affective attachment to the past – included three options: 1) *nostalgic*: posts that expressed nostalgic feelings in relation to the past; 2) *traumatic*: posts that referred to individual/collective trauma associated with the past; 3) *non-affective*: posts that did not express any clear emotional attachment to the past.

The second coding schema – the mnemonic function – included five memory-related functions performed by the Instagram posts: 1) *abstract nostalgia*: posts expressing nostalgic feeling in general terms and without a clear attachment to the 1990s; 2) *specific nostalgia*: posts expressing nostalgic feelings in relation to the specific aspects of the period; 3) *commercialized nostalgia*: posts utilizing nostalgic feelings for promoting specific products and commercial goals; 4) *showcasing*: posts showcasing aspects of the period without expressing an emotional attachment to them; and 5) *cultural referencing*: posts appropriating aspects of the 1990s as a form of cultural reference for today, but without a clear emotional attachment to the past. For trauma-related posts, no differentiation between specific functions was introduced because of the small number of such posts.

The final coding schema – objects of memory – classified aspects of the 1990s which were referenced on Instagram. In those cases when a post could be attributed to several different categories, the choice was made according to the image’s focus as well as verbal cues (e.g., the image description). The following options were used: 1) *economics*: posts referring to the economic situation in the 1990s; 2)

⁴ For each year from 2013 to 2019 a random sample of 30 posts was generated. For 2012, all 12 posts retrieved for this year were used.

food: posts discussing different food products; 3) *games*: posts referring to specific games or toys; 4) *lifestyle*: posts referencing specific features of 1990s life or distinct subcultures; 5) *location*: posts describing specific locations; 6) *mass media*: posts discussing mass media (e.g., TV channels); 7) *people*: posts referring to certain people (e.g., family members); 8) *popular culture*: posts referring to specific cultural products (e.g., popular songs); 9) *politics*: posts referring to political matters; 10) *technology*: posts referring to specific gadgets and vehicles (e.g., cars).

Between nostalgia, trauma, and showcasing: The mnemonic functions of the ‘90ыe’

Nostalgic timelines: The rise of the ‘90ыe’ on Instagram

I started the analysis by examining the use of #90ыe on Instagram. Figure 1 shows that the hashtag became intensively used in 2014 and since then shows a growing trend. Despite several “memory marathons” dealing with the 1990s in 2015 and 2018 (Merzliakova 2020, Maksimova 2016), there are no peaks of hashtag use during these two years. The absence of such peaks might suggest that either the marathons did not make a substantial difference for the overall dynamics of engaging with the 1990s on Instagram or they did not involve the hashtags used for data collection.

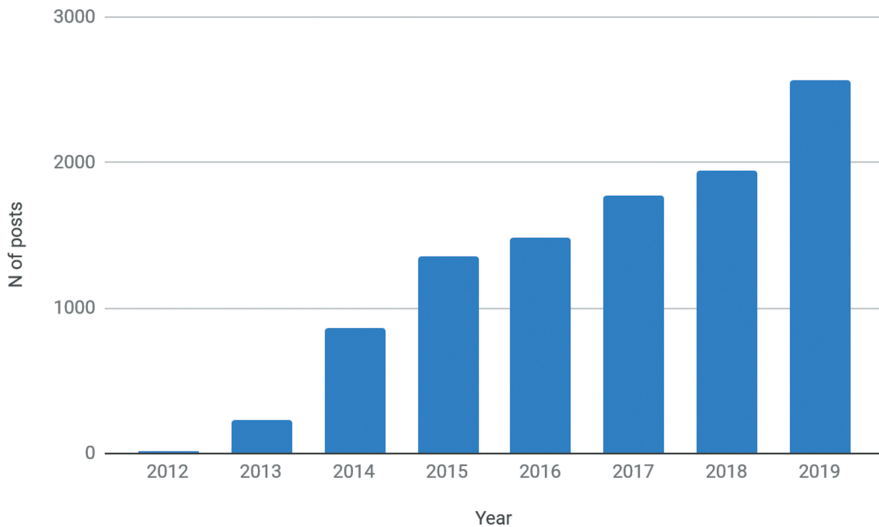


Figure 1: The use of 90ыe hashtag on Instagram.

However, it is important to take into consideration that older Instagram posts are more likely to get deleted, which can influence the distribution shown.

It is also important to emphasize once more that Figure 1 shows the distribution of only the posts with 90ые hashtag and not all the posts dealing with the 1990s on Instagram. Some of the 1990s-related posts did not necessarily include the hashtag, in particular as it takes time for the hashtag to become adopted. Furthermore, the examination of the use of #90ые should also take into consideration the overall dynamics of Instagram use in the region. According to Brand Analytics data, in the winter of 2014–2015, the number of active Instagram users in Russia was 2.6 millions (Brand Analytics 2015), whereas in the winter of 2015–2016 the number increased to 10.6 millions (Brand Analytics 2016), followed by 23.7 millions in autumn 2018 (Brand Analytics 2018). At the same time, the trend of growth is not necessarily linear as shown by data for the summer of 2017, when the number of active users dropped to 7.1 million (Brand Analytics 2017) compared to 10.6 million in 2016. Under these circumstances (and considering the often fragmentary reporting on the number of Instagram users in Russia), it is difficult to normalize the growth in the use of #90ые by the overall increase in the number of Instagram users in the region, in particular considering that the hashtag might not necessarily be used only by users from Russia.

One particular observation concerning the timeline of the use of #90ые is that it started to be intensively used from 2014. Such timing can be attributed to the growing online presence of the first post-Soviet generation for which the 1990s are associated with childhood memories that can stimulate yearning for “a return to an ideal childhood” (Kalinina 2016, 7). From this point of view, the growing interest towards the 1990s on Instagram can be viewed as a form of reflective nostalgia, defined by Boym (2001) as a more individualized and fragmentary form of nostalgia that differentiates it from restorative nostalgia which deals with collective recollections of the past and desires to revive it.

At the same time, the particular timing can also be related to the changes in the Russian public sphere following the beginning of Russia’s war against Ukraine (Mazur 2015). Under the conditions of the growing confrontation with the West and the intensification of the neo-authoritarian tendencies, including the increased use of mnemonic narratives for strategic purposes (Gaufman 2017, Makhortykh, Lyebyedyev and Kravtsov 2021), invocation of the 1990s memories can be viewed as a form of protest aiming to draw attention to the changes in the political sphere. The choice of the post-Soviet transition as a reference of such protest can be explained by the fact that it signifies a period of political freedom; it can also be a counter-reaction to the instrumentalization of the 1990s by the Kremlin for the sake of mobilizing public support towards its aggressive political course.

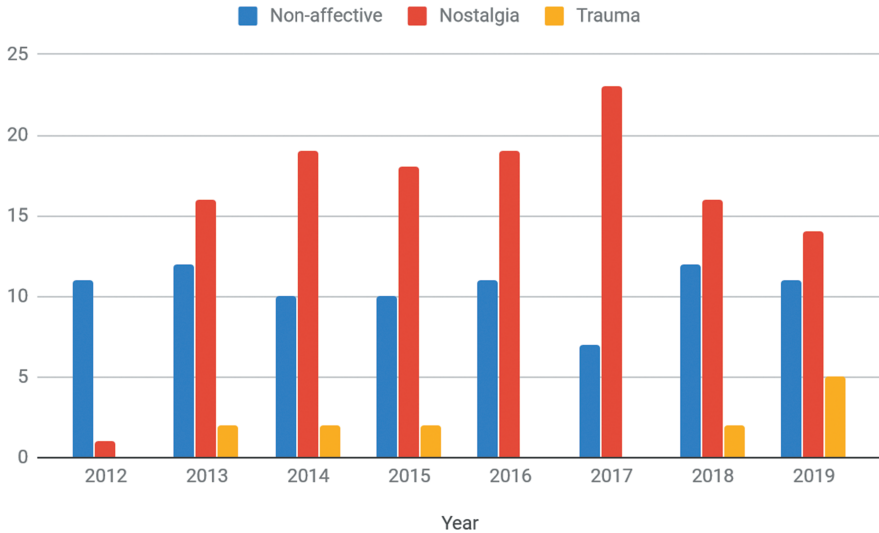


Figure 2: The dynamics of posts with emotional attachment to the past (sample).

Following the examination of the dynamics of the use of #90ые, I examined specific memory functions of the content with the hashtag. Figure 2 shows that the majority of examined Instagram posts deal with nostalgic and non-affective references to the past with the former being prevalent during the whole period with a single exception of 2012. By contrast, references to trauma occur rather sporadically and appear just in a few posts during the period of observation. A small increase of trauma-related content in 2019 is attributed to the A.U.E⁵ Instagram campaign that used references to the 1990s to promote the movement.

Finally, I looked at the distribution of posts with specific mnemonic functions. Despite the rather small sample size, Figure 3 still provides interesting insights into the changing function of nostalgic and non-affective posts.⁶ For instance, the figure points out the prevalence of the showcasing function in the first few years of the use of #90ые on the platform. This gradual rediscovery of the 1990s on Instagram is then followed by the growing use of memories about the period for cultural reference. The intensification of using 1990s for creative re-interpretation of the present from 2016 is also accompanied by the rise of commercialized nostalgia and the adoption of 1990s for advertising events and products.

⁵ A.U.E. is an acronym for Arestantskii Ustav Edin (Convict's Codex is Universal), an informal organization of Russian criminals, mainly consisting of children and teenage members.

⁶ The figure does not include trauma-related posts due to the small number of these posts, which does not allow for differentiating between their various functions.

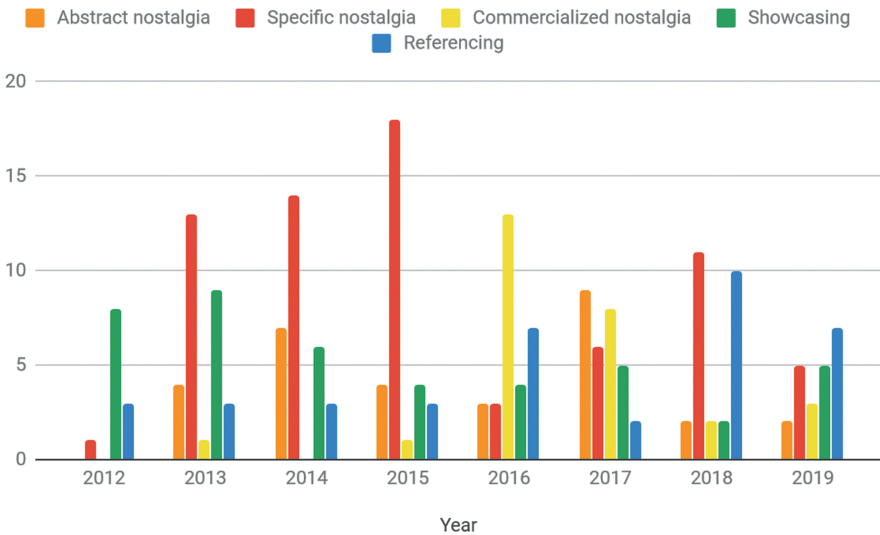


Figure 3: The dynamics of posts with specific mnemonic functions (sample).

Abstract, specific, and commercialized: Nostalgia for the 1990s

The above-mentioned focus on the positive and neutral attachment to the 1990s can be viewed as a form of resistance to the hegemonic narrative of *‘likhie devianostye’* sponsored by the Russian state (Malinova 2018). However, the examination of nostalgic posts suggests that very few of them focus on political aspects of the 1990s, such as the higher level of personal and societal freedom (Medvedev 2019). Similar to “memory marathons” on Facebook (Maksimova 2016), most nostalgic content on Instagram did not include direct political messages and did not compare the 1990s to the current political situation.

The absence of such explicit comparisons can be attributed to the usual focus of nostalgic content on more intimate and biographical aspects of the past. However, in the post-Soviet context, where references to the past are often used for interpreting and commenting on the present (e.g. Rutten et al., 2013), such absence is surprising. It is particularly astonishing in the case of references to the 1990s for which, as shown by Zavadski (in this volume), the the process of challenging hegemonic narratives of the post-Soviet transition often goes hand in hand with the challenging of the political status quo.

Instead, a large number of posts express a yearning for childhood and teenage years. These abstract nostalgic feelings that are also prevalent in the case of

Facebook (Maksimova 2016) do not seem to be explicitly related to the economic and cultural realities of the post-Soviet transition, but refer to the time when the Instagram users were younger than they are now. This specific form of nostalgia that looks back to the earlier days of one's life can be related both to the concepts of reflective nostalgia (Boym 2001) and of personal nostalgia (Holak, Matveev, and Havlena 2007). In this context, the use of #90ые will not differ much from #80ые (“the 1980s”) or #70ые (“the 1970s”) or any other hashtag denoting a specific time period, which a certain part of the platform's population recalls as the time of being innocent and careless.

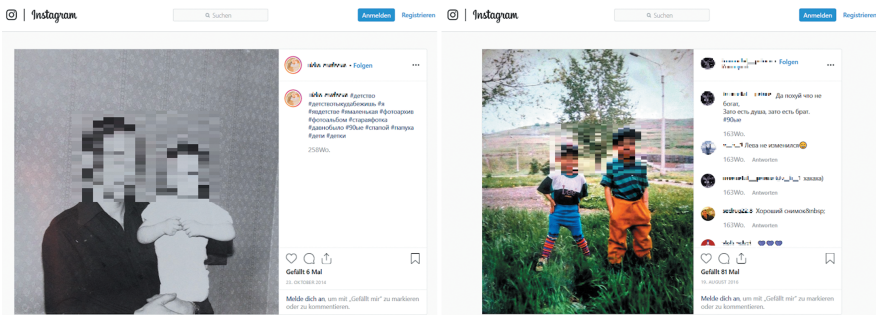


Figure 4: Instagram content and abstract nostalgia. Here and for the subsequent figures the faces and account names are blurred on purpose as an additional safeguard for users' privacy.

Two examples of the use of Instagram as a means of expressing personal nostalgia are shown on Figure 4. The image on the left shows a typical family photo featuring a father and a daughter. The daughter, now an Instagram blogger, posted the photo together with several hashtags “#childhood, #childhoodwhereareyou, #iaminchildhood, #iamsmall, #photoarchive, #photoalbum, #old-photo, #itwaslongtimeago, #90ые, #withdad, #daddy, #children, #kids.” The image on the right is also a family photo showing two brothers standing in tall grass. The signature says “It does not matter that you are poor, but you have a soul and you have a brother: 90ые.”

These images highlight one particular difference between nostalgic posts on Instagram and the ones produced during the Facebook mnemonic marathons. Unlike Facebook, where women predominantly presented themselves as “sexually appealing objects” (Maksimova 2016, 409) and men posted content of themselves working and studying, Instagram users publish content about their early childhood. This distinction can be related to Instagram's audience in Russia being younger than on Facebook (Pokrop 2019) and supports the earlier suggestion that the use of 1990s content can be related to Instagram users reaching maturity and starting feeling

nostalgic about their earlier years, but not necessarily connecting their nostalgia to specific political features of the post-Soviet transition.

In terms of sex distribution on Instagram., men were substantially more present compared to women. Such an unequal distribution is observed only for abstract nostalgia- and trauma-related content with other 1990s–related posts being distributed more equally between sexes. While a similar observation is reported by Maximova (2016) for Facebook, it is hard to explain considering the prevalence of female users on Russian Instagram (Pokrop 2019). At the same time, recent studies in cognitive psychology (Kim and Yim 2018) suggest that while sex has little effect on the nostalgic feelings among younger individuals, there is a substantial difference between older males and females with the former being more eager to engage with content stimulating nostalgic feelings.

Compared to abstract nostalgia, Instagram content with nostalgic references to specific aspects of the 1990s occurs more frequently. Usually, these references concern cultural products associated with the period, in particular pop music (e.g., Laskovyi Mai and Ruki Vverh groups). Again, the political realities of the period are not referenced at all with a single exception of a post describing clashes between punks and police during the concert of Grazhdanskaya Oborona and noting that it was a glorious time. The absence of political or commercial references behind this category of content aligns it with the notion of aesthetic nostalgia, namely a revered attitude towards the culture from the past that focuses on its preservation for the sake of its aesthetic value (Volčič 2007).

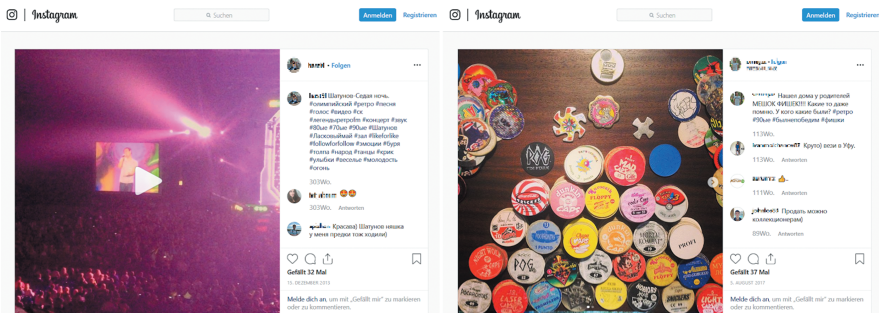


Figure 5: Instagram content and specific nostalgia.

Figure 5 shows two examples of specific nostalgia. The first shows a post referring to a performance of Yuri Shatunov, a front man of Laskovyi Mai pop group. The video showing the performance is signed as ‘Shatunov – Sedaia Noch.’ #Olimpiiskii #retro #song #voice #video #sk #legendsofretrofm #sound #80s #70s #90ые #Shatunov #LaskovyiMai #hall #liketolike #followtofollow #emotions #storm #crowd #peo-

ple #dance #shout #smiles #joy #youth #fire”. Another image refers to a popular game from the 1990s. The signature says “I found A SACK OF TOKENS at the parent’s house!!!! I even remember some of them. Which one did you have? #retro #90ые #iwasundefeatable #tokens.”

A related category of content also focuses on specific objects associated with the 1990s, but instead of expressing appreciation, it uses nostalgic feelings for commercial purposes. A number of examined Instagram posts evoke nostalgia to promote certain events (e.g., musical performances) or to sell specific products. Such instrumental use of sentimental feelings is not a new phenomenon and can be viewed as a form of escapist or utopian nostalgia (Volčič 2007) that focuses on commodified narratives of the past and employs them to attract the attention of prospective customers.

Similar to Yugonostalgia (Volčič 2007), such utopian references to the past are often involved in the marketing of popular culture (e.g., 1990s music bands). In some cases, the sellers explicitly appeal to the generation of the 1990s, inviting its members to dive into the memories and dance to your favorite hits or asking if oldies are ready to play the legendary games. In other cases (e.g., the advertisement campaign of the Nora shop specializing in second-hand clothes), the emphasis was made on the vintage nature of items from the 1990s without any additional means of nostalgia activation.

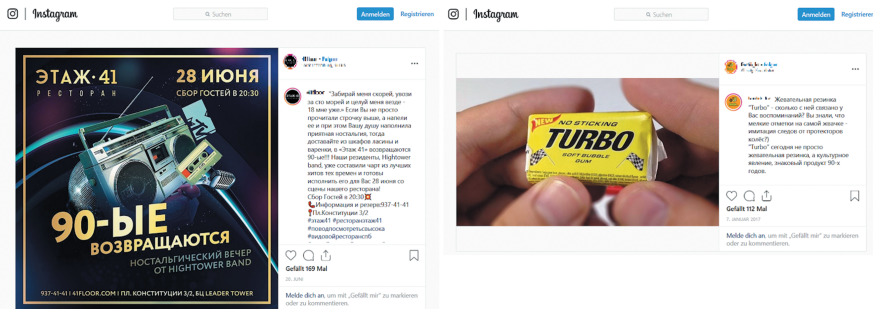


Figure 6: Instagram content and commercialized nostalgia.

Figure 6 offers two examples of commercialized nostalgia. One is an image advertising “a nostalgic evening from the Hightower Band” taking place in a restaurant in Saint-Petersburg. The image of a retro phone and a cassette player is accompanied with a description that draws upon the knowledge of the 1990s popular culture:

“Take me fast, take me beyond one hundred seas, and kiss me everywhere, I am already eighteen.” If you did not just read the line above, but sing it and your soul is filled with a pleasant nostalgia, then get your jeans and leggings out of your wardrobes, the 90s come back to Floor 41. Our residents, the Hightower Band, have already made the chart of the best hits of those times and are ready to perform for you on June 28 on the stage of our restaurant!

The second advertisement shows a similarly intense reliance on memories of the 1990s. Published by a Kazakh enterprise known as “a shop of unusual presents,” it promotes an iconic chewing gum, Turbo, which was popular in post-Soviet countries. The description of the image states:

Turbo chewing gum – how many of your memories are related to it? Did you know that small marks on the gum itself imitate the traces of car wheels? Today Turbo is not just a chewing gum, but a cultural phenomenon, an iconic product from the 90s. One plate of Turbo is enough to transport you to the world of childhood and the inserted image will bring you great mood! There are 100 chewing plates in one block.

Altogether, these observations highlight two points concerning interactions with nostalgia on Instagram. First, there are few references to politics in the narrow sense of the term (e.g., contrasting political freedoms of the 1990s with the current situation in Russia). Yet, the promotion of narratives that are different from the hegemonic narrative of the post-Soviet transition as a grim warning for the miserable consequences of the regime change can by itself be viewed as political. By constructing a different story of the 1990s that revolves around childhood memories, Instagram users oppose the state-sponsored narrative of the period, albeit in a different way than the usual interpretations of the notion of countermemory presume.⁷

The intense use of nostalgia for the 1990s for commercial purposes adds to this complexity. By relying on the references to the first post-Soviet decade for generating feelings of utopian nostalgia (Volčič 2007) to promote certain products, Instagram focuses on the positive aspects of the first post-Soviet decade and presents it as a time period with its own merit. By doing so, Russian companies relying on the use of nostalgia as part of their marketing strategies also to a certain degree challenge the negativist narrative of the 1990s by presenting the period as the one that is worth yearning for.

⁷ Often, countermemory is associated with narratives that provide a comprehensive alternative to the dominant narrative. See, for instance, Foucault 2003.

Black-and-white past: Trauma of the 1990s

The posts referring to the post-Soviet trauma are distinguished both by their scarcity and explicit references to the socioeconomic realities of the 1990s. Unlike the nostalgic references, which can often be applied to other periods, posts dealing with trauma are more specific and highlight particular traumatic aspects of the time. In particular, they refer to the poverty and the high level of crime which characterized the first post-Soviet decade. An interesting visual aspect of such posts is their tendency to use black-and-white images as contrasted to the almost exclusively colorful images used for nostalgic and non-affective posts.

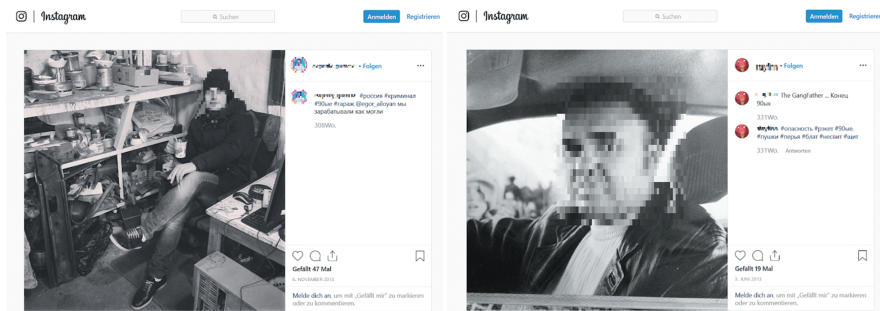


Figure 7: Instagram content and trauma.

Figure 7 shows two examples of trauma-focused posts. The first one shows an image of a trading post signed as “#russia, #criminal, #90ye, #garage – we earned money in all the ways we could.” The second one is an image of a driver (potentially, a reference to the ‘bombilas,’ the illegal cab drivers from the 1990s) signed as “The Gang Father . . . late 90s #danger, #raket, #90ye, #guns, #knives, #blat, #nesvit, #shield.” Judging by the text descriptions, both images are of autobiographical kind and belong to the users who posted them.

The above-mentioned posts can be read in different ways. One potential reading is that these posts reiterate popular stereotypes of tough experiences during the 1990s for the purpose of self-aggrandizement. However, they can also be treated as a socially acceptable form of communicating trauma, in particular considering the “remasculinization” (Riabov and Riabova 2014) of Russia during Putin’s presidential terms. Earlier research (e.g., Erwin 2022) demonstrated that hegemonic masculinity has substantial implications for conveying traumatic experiences, especially by males, and some of these implications might include inability to speak about trauma directly and the tendency to hide traumatic experiences behind the use of memories for bragging.

Besides the black-and-white stylistics and references to economic hardships, both images show men, which is another common feature of trauma-related posts. This observation aligns with the findings by Maksimova (2016), who compared content produced by male and female users on Facebook and found that male users focus more often on the traumatic aspects of the post-Soviet transition. One possible explanation of such discrepancy is related to the different perceptions of nostalgia: women seem to be focusing on their individual perceptions of the past (i.e., reflective nostalgia) while men concentrate on the collective views on the period (i.e., restorative nostalgia).

Another feature of the trauma-related content is its alignment with the hegemonic narrative of the 1990s as a time of misery. Such an alignment is not necessarily explicit: none of the posts expresses support for the Russian authorities or focuses on geopolitical aspects of the transition that are the key elements of the above-mentioned hegemonic interpretation (Malinina 2020). Yet, by presenting the 1990s through the prism of genuine experiences of economic hardships and crime, these posts can also reinforce the state-sponsored story of the *likhie devianostye*. Even in the case of rather anti-state posts (e.g., the ones associated with the A.U.E self-promotion campaign referring to the 1990s as the time when state apparatus was less capable of controlling organized crime), the depressing image of the decade can lend credibility to the hegemonic narrative instrumentalized by the Kremlin, in particular considering the above-mentioned narrative being deliberately broad and Instagram posts often being too concise to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the period. This observation highlights that hegemonic memory narratives do not necessarily have to be reinforced via organized top-down campaigns, but can also be strengthened by the pluralization of the mnemonic sphere.

Showcasing and referencing: Non-affective references to the 1990s

The final type of the 1990s-related content on Instagram did not have a strong affective attachment to the past unlike the posts mediating nostalgia and trauma. These more neutral cultural expressions usually perform one of the two mnemonic functions: showcasing the past or appropriating certain elements of it as a form of cultural reference.

The showcasing posts are usually devoted to a specific material or cultural product coming from the post-Soviet transition period. These products vary from cars used during the 1990s to iconic drinks to popular music groups and movies. A few exceptions also include showcasing a specific episode from the past such as

a New Year celebration with the family. In all these cases, however, the presentation is devoid of emotional cues which would allow identifying any affective attachment to the showcased object.

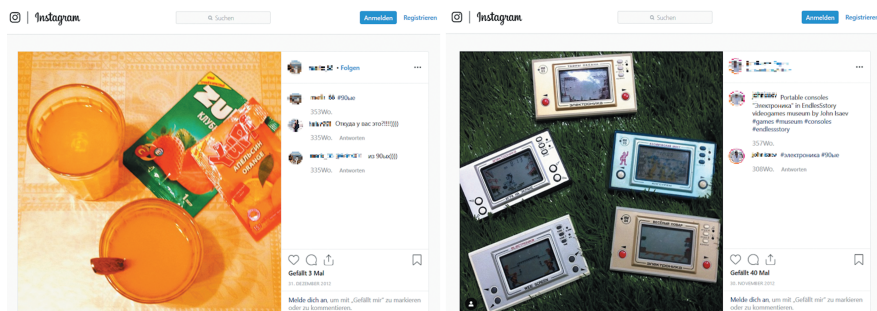


Figure 8: Instagram content and showcasing.

Figure 8 offers two examples of Instagram posts performing a showcasing function. The one on the left shows the images of two iconic juices – Zuka and Yupi – which became available to Russian citizens in the 1990s. The image is accompanied only with the 90ыe hashtag that does not allow to identify any affective attachment. Similar lack of distinct sentiment towards the portrayed subject is observed for another post which shows portable console videogames. The image is accompanied with a signature “Portable consoles ‘Elektronika’ in EndlessStory videogames museum by John Isaev #games #museum #consoles #endlessstory #electronics #90ы.e.”

Except for the lack of emotional attachment, showcasing posts share multiple similarities with specific nostalgia which in its turn aligns with the notion of aesthetic nostalgia (Volčič 2007). Like aesthetic nostalgia, showcasing presents artifacts of the 1990s for the sake of preserving their authenticity; however, in the absence of statements elaborating on how users feel about the items, it is hardly possible to judge whether these artifacts are cherished or despised. Another, albeit significantly less common, function of the non-affective posts relates to the appropriation of recognizable elements from the 1990s as a form of cultural reference to the post-Soviet transition. The majority of appropriated elements reference the lifestyle of the transition period using particular types of clothes associated with it.

Figure 9 shows two examples of such cultural references. The first features a selfie made by a young man dressed in a crimson suit with the signature “Hello, bandits.” The selfie refers to a stereotypical image of the New Russians, a post-Soviet business elite who acquired their wealth using illegal market operations and who were identifiable by rather tasteless wardrobe choices (including, among others,



Figure 9: Instagram content and cultural referencing.

iconic crimson suits). A similar way of appropriating the past is shown on the second image with three teenagers in sport suits and a signature “Hello from the 90s #90ые #swag #adidas #puma #montana #sport #oldschool.” Similar to the previous post, the image refers to the stereotypes associated with young males involved in petty crime during the 1990s (also known as the *gopniki*).

One distinct feature of using 1990s as a cultural reference is it being similarly appealing for male and female users on Instagram (as contrasted by the higher presence of males for other categories of 1990s-related content). At the same time, the type of references used by sexes varies substantially. For men, the common source of reference are criminals, whose high visibility is viewed as one of the features of the 1990s. In the case of women, there is no distinct attachment to a specific group used as a reference; instead, women just reused the style of clothing popular at the time, in particular for partying.

Games, lifestyle, and economics: The 1990s memorabilia

In the last part of the analysis, I examined how memory of the 1990s is represented via specific objects. Figure 10 shows that posts referring to the lifestyle of the first post-Soviet decade are particularly frequent on Instagram. Most of these references concern the distinct style of clothing common to the period, in particular the growing adoption of the new Western elements. Some posts also refer to the low standards of life and the rise of crime, which also became part of the lifestyle during this time. Such references, however, remain rare, so the distinct cultural (life)style which formed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union remains a major visual association for the post-Soviet transition on Instagram.

The reasons for such popularity of lifestyle content can be explained by its close relationship with the teenage years, a period which together with childhood

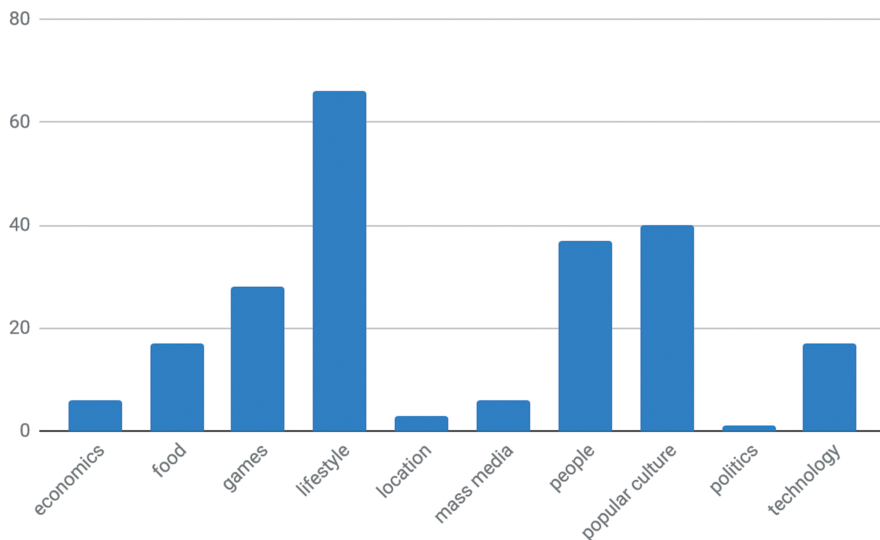


Figure 10: Distribution of memory objects (sample).

is essential for nostalgic feelings. Similar to the toys, which are another common object of post-post-Soviet nostalgia (Duijn 2019), images of the parties and creative use of clothing trigger memories of youth that coincided with the first post-Soviet decade and reflect an idealized perception of the time. Unlike toys, however, lifestyle perceptions are more focused on the feelings of freedom and independence associated both with the youth and the post-Soviet transition.

Two other types of memory objects commonly found on Instagram are images of people (e.g., relatives and friends) from the 1990s and references towards popular culture (e.g., music and movies). In the latter case, references to the musical groups such as Laskovyi Mai and Ruki Vverh are particularly frequent. Other common objects include material products of the post-Soviet time, in particular toys and technological gadgets. In the case of gadgets, the majority of references are focused on cars and sound recording devices, whereas toys vary from computer games (e.g., *Tiberium Sun*) to analogue games involving tokens and chewing gum inserts.

The least frequently referenced objects are the ones related to politics and economics. Only one post included an object directly related to politics, namely a video interview of Boris Netmstov from the time of him serving as a governor of the Nizhny Novgorod oblast. A few objects related to economics include price tags from the 1990s and images from trade markets.

Following the examination of the general distribution of memory objects, I looked at their distribution among the posts with specific mnemonic functions. Figure 11 shows that some functions relied on a few categories of objects, such as people (in the case of abstract nostalgia) and lifestyle (in the case of trauma focusing on the poverty and crime-related lifestyle). A slightly broader selection of objects is found in the case of commercialized nostalgia and cultural referencing content. While lifestyle-related objects are prevalent in these two cases, being used as a means of advertisement or commentary, popular culture objects and games are also referenced relatively frequently.

The most varied selection of memory objects is observed in the case of specific nostalgia and showcasing. Popular culture and games are two particularly common categories of objects referenced in these two cases. Unlike other categories, references to lifestyle and people are quite rare for these two functions which focus on material traces of the past. For the same reason, references to food and gadgets occurred here more frequently.

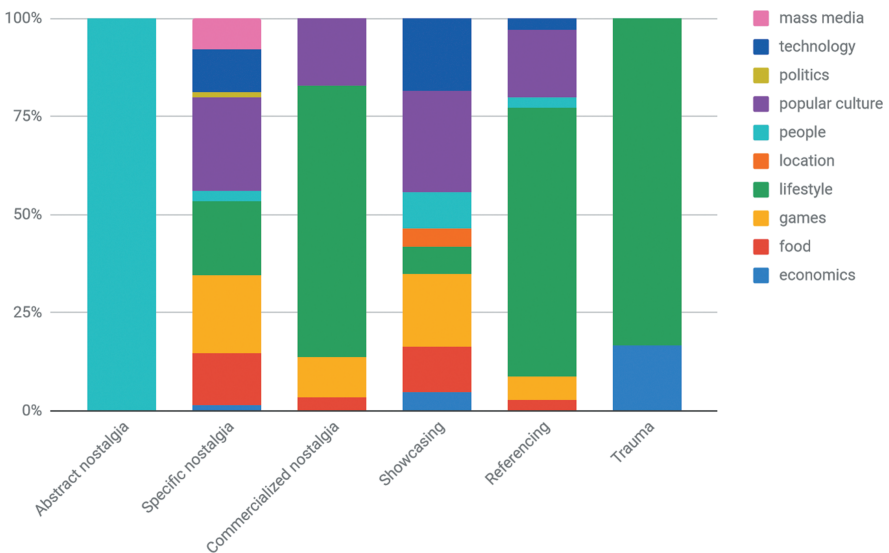


Figure 11: Distribution of memory objects per function (sample).

Finally, I examined how the distribution of posts referencing specific memory objects changed over time. Figure 12 shows that in many cases the presence of objects varied significantly, but references to some categories were more consistent. The objects which were referred to quite consistently include games, elements of popular culture, and people. This consistency can suggest that these categories cause

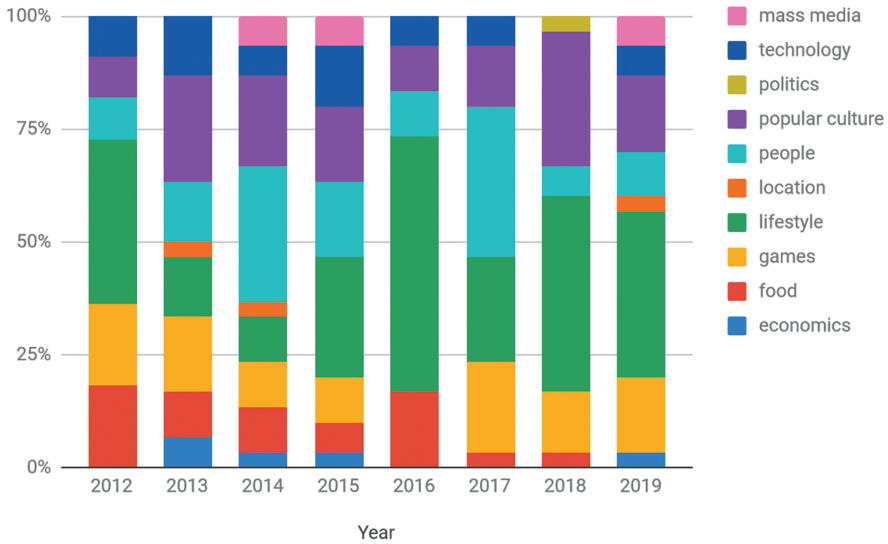


Figure 12: Distribution of memory objects per year (sample).

particularly strong attachments to the past which is also supported by observations on the relationship between specific objects and nostalgia as well as trauma (Shevchenko 2009, Duijn 2019).

More variation was observed in the case of references to technology-related objects, food, and lifestyle items. References to the former two categories occurred more frequently from 2012 till 2016 (the period when the showcasing function prevailed), whereas posts referring to lifestyle became more prominent from 2016, when the objects from the 1990s became increasingly used as a cultural reference. Unlike the more consistently used objects, these three categories seem to be referred to in a more situational way.

Conclusions

The analysis of Instagram content points to the increasing number of references to the first post-Soviet decade on the platform since 2012. Such an increase can have multiple reasons, varying from the first post-Soviet generation reaching maturity to the profound changes in the Russian public sphere following the growing hostilities with the West since the annexation of Crimea and beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. The latter events in particular signify a dramatic rupture

with Russia's post-1991 attempts to advance cooperation with the West and the growth of authoritarian tendencies in Russian domestic politics.

My observations indicate that Instagram is primarily used for showcasing cultural products associated with the 1990s and expressing a yearning towards childhood and teenage years that coincided with the post-Soviet transition, whereas nostalgia about the freer political and economic environment is mostly absent from the sample of platform content analyzed in this study. Despite the absence of explicit political statements, however, nostalgic content on Instagram can still be seen as a form of challenging the hegemonic narrative of the 1990s as a time of misery and hardships. The expressions of trauma occur rarely and usually focus on the economic insecurity and the rise of crime during the period. Such a low visibility of trauma can be attributed to the unwillingness of users to publicize painful episodes of the past, in particular as only publicly available data was used for implementing the study. Another interesting aspect is that trauma-related content features primarily men and is mainly published by male users.

Another aspect of mediating memories of the 1990s is their intense commercialization. While commodification of affective attachment to the past is a well-known phenomenon (Volčič 2007), my analysis suggests that digitization of memory can accelerate this process by facilitating the use of nostalgia as a form of promotion by both individual vendors and larger companies. The commercial uses of nostalgia further complicate interactions between state-sponsored and alternative narratives of the 1990s by highlighting how profit-driven presentation of the decade as a desired past can turn into a political message. These observations align with Boele's (2019) call for a more nuanced view of nostalgia's role in contemporary Russia and stress the importance of a broader understanding of the political uses of memory.

The analysis also points out a number of possible directions for further study. The use of memories of the 1990s as a cultural reference and the different ways in which specific user groups (e.g., males and females) engage with various types of mnemonic content is one question which deserves more attention. Another interesting direction for future research is the use of 1990s memories for commercial purposes and self-promotion and its relationship with hegemonic memory narratives such as the one of the *likhie devianostye*.

Finally, some limitations of the current analysis should also be mentioned. Despite its popularity in Russia before the 2022 invasion in Ukraine, Instagram is just one of many online platforms which are used for remediating and reinterpreting memories of the 1990s. It is also the platform with a rather distinct audience, at least in the case of Russia – i.e., predominantly female, young people with relatively high income (Gaitbaeva 2020) – which has implications for how it is used to engage with the past. Further research can benefit not only from a com-

parison between Instagram and other platforms used for engaging with memories of the 1990s (e.g., TikTok; Makhortykh 2021), but also a more in-depth discussion of the role of a medium in this process. Similarly, only a single hashtag was used to collect the data, whereas the pre-data collection examination of the platform's content pointed to the presence of multiple hashtags that can be related to the period of the post-Soviet transition.

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