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Algorithmically Mediated Nostalgia through Recordings of Post-Communist Parties on TikTok and Instagram

Abstract

Among numerous capabilities, social media platforms have also enabled users to remix and repurpose analog videos through their features. This remediated media is further propelled by the platforms' algorithmic systems, thus enhancing their visibility among users who, as affective publics, can interact with it and further remediate it. This paper discusses how the nostalgic discourse takes shape on Instagram and TikTok around remediated analog videos of parties and celebrations during the 1990s in Romania and how the platform affordances and the algorithmic imaginary of the affective publics influence the nostalgic discourse. The exploratory study utilizes a mixed method – combining digital ethnography, discourse analysis, and digital humanities – the research identifies a double-folded nostalgia, which is impacted by the interplay between each platform's specific affordances and the imagined rules and styles of the platforms, imagined by their users.

Keywords: platform affordances, nostalgia, social media, algorithmic imaginary, remediation

Introduction

This explorative study discusses how social media platforms affordances contribute to the generation and distribution of nostalgia toward past celebrations and, at the same time, toward non-digital media. Under scrutiny here are the remixes of analog recordings from post-communist Romanian events or celebrations, which become nostalgia vehicles on Instagram and TikTok, two social media platforms predominantly oriented towards visual content.

Two primary characteristics of new media, as described by Manovich (2002) are modularity and variability. These characteristics refer to the capacity of new media to be continually reused, modified, and to remain unfixed or unstable. Due to their technical capabilities, new media can convey multiple layers of meaning, with each layer introduced and solidified through editing actions. Extending this to more contemporary media forms, the same definition applies to the visual social media culture (Leaver et al., 2020), which places significant emphasis on the visual component. Both the modularity of content and its capacity to be

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remixed play crucial roles in the rising popularity of social media posts. As van Dijck (2013) posits, social media platforms are the spaces where “utterances previously expressed offhandedly are now released into a public domain where they can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects” (p. 6). These platforms serve as hubs for generating, consuming, or disseminating visual culture but also as fertile grounds for cultural remixes. This is made possible by their unique affordances, which span from photographic filters to algorithmic systems influencing content distribution. In addition, these platforms carve out spaces for affective manifestations (Papacharissi, 2015) in response to a spectrum of past and current events or situations.

Grounding my argument on Bucher and Helmond’s (2018) notion of platform specificity with regard to media affordances, which will be further explained, I posit that both Instagram and TikTok play a crucial role in augmenting the nostalgic constructs of these video remixes, particularly for what Papacharissi (2015) terms the *affective publics* – who participate, through affective engagement, in the algorithmically enhanced nostalgia. The nostalgia under consideration is both remediated and highlighted by the operational dynamics of algorithmic systems of the social media platforms. This visibility is further accentuated by platform-specific factors – such as the adoption of hashtags, filters, and emojis – which users employ, influenced by their distinct algorithmic imaginaries. The outcome is a nuanced, *double-folded nostalgia* that targets not only the experiences but also the encompassing technology and the medium.

In the next section, the operative concepts of the study – such as nostalgia, platform affordances, remediation, algorithmic imaginary, and double-folded nostalgia – will be defined and discussed through cultural, affect, and critical algorithm studies perspectives. By bridging theories and concepts from these fields, the paper addresses how the nostalgic discourse takes shape across social media platforms, emphasizing TikTok and Instagram and why these two platforms are essential for the discussion.

Affective Publics and Platform Affordances. The Algorithmic Imaginary

In coining the affective publics, Papacharissi (2015) further elaborated the concept of *networked publics* which defines the publics reshaped by networked technologies and encapsulates both the space and the collectives resulting from the interactions between individuals, technologies, and activities (Boyd, 2010). Papacharissi (2015, p. 8) elucidates how social media can “activate latent ties crucial to the mobilization of networked publics.” Consequently, these platforms encourage the flow of affective engagement with posts and shared experiences, including nostalgic experiences towards particular moments, which will be further defined and explored.

Unlike traditional media such as television or the conventional World Wide Web, which (can) encourage manifestations of nostalgia – social media platforms amplify the presence of nostalgic content through inherent platform mechanisms. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) emphasized that one of the most important factors in platform dynamics is the mechanism of personalization, which algorithmically identifies user preferences based on their activities and further predicts future trends. As the same authors argue, one of the most important factors in platform dynamics is the mechanism of personalization, which algorithmically identifies user preferences based on their activities and further predicts future trends. Consequently,

content centered around nostalgia, akin to other content categories, gains visibility due to of these personalization mechanisms, amplifying the prospective virality of posts.

Yet, personalization is not the only determinant affecting the mediation and distribution of such content. Bucher and Helmond (2018, p. 249-250) develop a platform-sensitive approach, emphasizing “the specificity of platforms as socio-technological environments.” As the authors explain, each platform involves a set of specific characteristics that influence its users’ experiences, and users also influence the platform itself. Drawing from their perspective, I define the *affordances* as the collection of infrastructural models, business models, algorithmic systems, user interfaces, features, and the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017) of the people using them (a concept further discussed in this paper). These affordances shape individual experiences on social media, inclusive of nostalgic encounters. Social media’s platforms business strategies aim at sustaining user engagement. The signals of engagement (Bucher, 2012) – be it clicks, likes, shares, comments, or view durations – guide the algorithmic systems about a post’s potential for popularity, enhancing its recommendation likelihood. Furthermore, the user interfaces are embedded with symbols that encourage engagement with the content, through their buttons (such as the “like” or “share buttons”, or other features that offer a personalized experience for the user (such as the “recommended for you” sections). This environment, built to encourage individuals to interact with the content and trained for detection and prediction, paves the way for the commodification and dissemination of nostalgia.

The affordances and specificities influence not only user inclinations or motivations to engage but also the emergent visual cultures. As Manovich (2017) posited, simply asking what Instagram is is not enough, “but we can ask a different question: what is it in the context of media history” (p. 11). Following Manovich’s line, Instagram has undoubtedly impacted the aesthetics and cultural trends of online visual content. Reinforcing Manovich’s statement, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020) argue that Instagram represents an emblematic medium for understanding how visual social media cultures develop, “an icon and avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures, whether on Instagram itself or through the many ways the material world has sought to become “Insta-worthy” in redesigning practices, cultural institutions and material spaces (p. 21). Instagram’s features – image and video editing tools or post formats – are instrumental in forging these “Insta-worthy” paradigms. Instagram and its most powerful competitor, TikTok (Milmo & Hern, 2022), generate media history by offering not only the space but also instruments for meaning-making and shaping visual cultural forms.

Features of platforms, such as short video capabilities, foster new visual genres that may spread across various media; the short-form video, for instance, has been integrated into advertising (Montenegro, 2021). Though Instagram’s video capabilities – like reels, the video format of Instagram – are sought to have been inspired by TikTok’s models and success (Ghafary, 2020), both platforms exhibit similarities in platform affordances. Given their similar video formats, the same videos can be seamlessly distributed on both platforms, and reposted from one platform to another. Therefore, if Instagram serves as a lens to decode visual cultures pertinent to social media, incorporating TikTok becomes critical for a holistic understanding of how video remixes have facilitated the creation of nostalgic discourse as a cultural practice.

Another concept, central for this study, is that of *algorithmic imaginary*, introduced by Bucher (2017). Through ethnographic and phenomenological research with Facebook users, Bucher explored perceptions of how algorithmic systems operate and the resultant impact on

user experiences. A significant observation of her investigation was the fact that these user experiences reciprocally influence algorithmic systems, with users behaving in a certain way based on their perceived understanding of algorithmic rules. As Gillespie (2014) highlights, the relationship between algorithmic systems and users is bi-directional:

If users fail or refuse to fit that tool into their practices, to make it meaningful, that algorithm will fail. This means we must consider not their ‘effect’ on people, but a multidimensional entanglement between algorithms put into practice and the social tactics of users who take them up. (p. 183)

A visible practice of adhering to perceived rules can be observed at influencers (or Internet celebrities), who often create content based on trends already validated on a platform, in a quest to become further recommended in the feed, thus viral (Abidin, 2021; Duffy & Sawey, 2021).

The Remediation of Nostalgia

Furthermore, the practice observed on various platforms provides insights into the users’ behavior, such as preferences and ties to other contacts, also known as a part of their past “meaningful interaction” metric; all this data is further *afforded* to advertisers. Data on nostalgic content or manifestations becomes translatable into personalization rules and content recommendations. Although nostalgia can be discussed through various disciplines, this study narrows its focus to the entanglement between cultural practices and social media affordances, to those subjective interpretations of past *versus* present as reflected on the newsfeeds. Further regarded as a circulating emotion (Ahmed, 2014), nostalgia on TikTok and Instagram represents a social and cultural practice (Hochschild, 1983; Stewart, 1988; Ahmed, 2014) that changes meaning based on contexts, medium, or events. Stewart (1988) suggests that reflects the standpoint of the speaker:

Nostalgia, like the economy it runs with, is everywhere. But it is a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context-it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present. In positing a “once was” in relation to a “how” it creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life (p. 227).

The framework used to discern differences between then and now is thus subjective and influenced by various factors, that fall beyond the scope of this article. However, this study operates on the definition of nostalgia as a “subjective state which harbors the largely unexamined belief that things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier) (more civilized) (more exciting) then than now” (Davis, 1979, p. 18). This subjective state is visible on social media through the users’ engagement with the content, which is often infused with affect (Papacharissi, 2015). Engagement metrics on social media platforms therefore can quantify nostalgia, aiming to make it predictable (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021). The emotive actants (Stark, 2019) – elements intensifying human feelings within digitally mediated experiences – can also encourage the expression of nostalgia and also transform it into a measurable, predictable object on social media. Social media platforms enhance nostalgia through their emotive actants, which range from emojis, captions, stickers, filters in the same way they intensify other affective manifestations (Stark, 2020).

A notable consequence of social media platforms is their role in amplifying sentiments towards older media forms, especially analog photography, and video production. This interest was also reflected by the popular usage of filters that add analog aspect to the images on

Instagram (Caoduro, 2014). Furthermore, the analog recordings as media objects were also discussed as elements of nostalgia. Analog media is frequently discussed as an element of nostalgia; as Schrey (2014) observes, media can become an object of nostalgia: “media can itself become an object of nostalgic sentiment” (p. 29).

The concept of remediation is pivotal when discussing the entanglement between nostalgia and the (new) media. Remediation had been considered a characteristic of new media, together with hypermediacy and immediacy, and “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, 273). Through the double logic of remediation, Bolter and Grusin claimed, newer media continue to contain and represent older ones. As video recordings are reused and redistributed on social media, remediation turns nostalgia into a common language for the communities on social media and for the affective publics involved in conversions of shared nostalgia. However, oftentimes the use of nostalgic discourse can also be accounted as a commodification for commercial purposes. This is a common practice where social media users are encouraged to share nostalgic experiences, thus generating engagement and popularity on groups or pages that are business-driven (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020). This falls under the logic of the platform mechanisms, where the business models rely on the user engagement (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

The relation between then and now through a nostalgic discourse, where the past is represented by the time right after the fall of communism, has been studied by scholars in Poland, who discussed it through the lenses of commodification, “is a relatively strong and vivid phenomenon that refers also to generations that have not experienced the times (or experienced them with less intensity) to which they refer in their cultural and communication practices” (Jezinski, & Lukasz, 2016). The authors maintain that the popularity of the nostalgic discourse embedded into communication from the present times can also be analyzed as a response to the apparition of fast technologies, as a form of yearning for more controllable technologies.

To illustrate how the affective publics who engage in the nostalgic discourse on Instagram and TikTok express their feelings both for the times and for the used technologies and media, I introduce the concept of *double-folded nostalgia*. For the cases explored in this paper, it is a nostalgia for the analog technologies (of music players and video recordings) and a nostalgia for the parties held at home or in public spaces during 1990s or early 2000s.

Within digital affect culture – which is “shaped by the social sharing of culturally and discursively constructed emotions” (Döveling et al., 2018), nostalgia on social media fosters social identification between the people who engage in the shared discourse and a sense of belonging to the events depicted on the shared videos. Thus, the personal and collective blend both in terms of how the nostalgic experience and discourse happen: although the feeling is personal, through digital affect culture, the affective manifestations become shared and a motif of belonging. The subsequent section delves into how these core characteristics of digital affect cultures apply to the nostalgic discourse, further remediated and enhanced through the platform affordances of TikTok and Instagram. To effectively navigate the nuances of nostalgic discourse in this discussion, I introduce the concept of a *nostalgic universe*. This encompasses the narratives presented in the posts and the accompanying comments.

Methodology

This exploratory study, which paves the way for broader future research, contributes to the existing literature on social media and affect. It highlights how TikTok and Instagram's platform-specific affordances, together with the users' algorithmic imaginary, remediate and enhance nostalgia manifested through posts and comments. This research complements ongoing efforts in critical algorithms studies and cultural studies, focusing on the cultural implications of opaque recommender systems driven by algorithmic functionalities. Given the non-transparent nature of these functionalities as used by many social media platforms, there arises a pressing need for novel research models that utilize multi-disciplinary theories and methodologies. Consequently, I propose a methodological framework that emphasizes the role of ethnographical and discourse analysis approaches. These techniques are vital in dissecting how cultural and affective practices are modeled by platform affordances, as well as the algorithmic imaginary. By spotlighting media that has been adapted across two distinct platforms, this study emphasizes how each platform's specific characteristics determine differences and similarities in the shared nostalgic discourse.

The following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How do individuals respond to social media remixed videos of parties from the 1990s in Romania?

RQ2: How do the social media affordances impact the remediation and popularization of this type of video?

The objective of this study is to explore how the nostalgia around post-communist celebrations unfolds on Instagram and TikTok and is enhanced by their affordances. For this matter, I propose a mixed-method approach grounded in digital ethnography, digital humanities, and discourse analysis. Platforms, being automated socio-technical environments (Alvaro, 2014), demand extended and combined research methods due to their intricate mechanics and limitations related to data retrieval and algorithms' transparency. The study of platforms and cultural production has been approached over the past years through traditional methods, such as semi-structured interviews or discourse analysis; however, experimental methods, based on online community immersion, have also been required by the challenges triggered by new technologies (Nieborg et al., 2020).

Guided by Saver's (2019) assertion around study of algorithms, "if we want to know algorithms, we may need to live with them" (p. 420), this paper integrates ethnographic approaches. I lean on the conceptualizations by Abidin and de Seta (2020), who describe digital ethnography as "ethnographic research on, through, and about digital media" (p. 6). A combination of immersion, observation, and semi-structured interviews is utilized to explore the intertwining of nostalgic discourse and specific platform affordances. The following exploration echoes Bucher's (2017) method of researching the algorithmic imaginary through ethnographic research, by narratively highlighting the steps and limitations of accessing and defining the corpus, as well as the ethical challenges of working with affective practices on social media. This approach highlights how the platform limitations contribute to the process of adapting and modeling the methods. In alignment with Bucher's ethical stance, I have chosen to paraphrase and translate comment components instead of referencing the original posts, a choice further detailed in the limitations chapter.

This study debuted with the digital ethnographical approach, particularly through immersion in online communities and participative observation spanning 2021 and early 2022. This timeline coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, a phase when Romanians, like many worldwide, faced restrictions on social gatherings. A surge in posts featuring past images or recordings, often paired with nostalgic captions or comments, was observed. A commonly observed sentiment was nostalgia for unrestricted social events. In addition to these posts, videos that remixed analog and digital or videos with contemporary music also emerged, this time triggering humor and curiosity about the details in the recording. The following step involved a more in-depth immersion – by engaging with the posts myself, so the recommender systems of the platforms would show more similar posts in my feed – with the videos of parties and celebrations, remixed in various formats on social media. This methodology facilitated understanding how analog recordings were adapted, leveraging specific platform affordances, and identifying prevalent hashtags in captions.

A primary observation was that most of the recordings were dated to the 1990s or the beginning of the 2000s. This led to the decision to focus exclusively on this period for two pivotal reasons. Firstly, this timeframe coincided with the period when analog cameras were still more popular than digital ones in Romania as digital cameras. Secondly, during the 1980s' communist regime, camcorders were a rarity in Romanian households, hence the scarcity of recordings from that time. I can infer that that might be a possible explanation for the popularity of this timeframe being remixed/remediated, but the data is incomplete to draw such a conclusion.

The second part of the ethnographic inquiry was performed in May and June 2022, targeting posts from 2020 to 2022 that mirrored the earlier identified trend. Posts were retrieved using queries such as “*revelion anii 90*” (New Year's Eve during the “90s”), “*petrecere anii 90*” (party during the ‘90s), “*anii 90*” (the ‘90s) on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, directly into their search field. Facebook did not offer significant results, except for a few pages dedicated to childhood in the ‘90s. Instagram does not offer a permissive discovery option, listing limited relevant results. However, the manual search – by using the search input of the app – led to discovering several posts and even accounts dedicated to 90s nostalgia in Romania. These pages posted video fragments from the leading television channels or international food products that appeared shortly after the fall of communism. All the other results showed personal photographs from that time. These pages did not contain remixes on analog recordings, but regular cuts from larger materials, which I did not include in the analysis. Notably, a page named *Latifundiar* had 14 posts fitting the criteria, which have been selected for the discussion. Additionally, I performed an unstructured interview with the creator of the page, for more insights on the engagement and reactions of the fans of the page. On TikTok, while several accounts showcased remixed 90s party recordings, the majority were mere reposts, leading to a selection of only four posts for comprehensive analysis.

Furthermore, the selected posts underwent a two-step analytical process. Initially, they were examined via distant and close reading, tactics prevalent in digital humanities. Subsequently, discourse analysis was employed. As Underwood (2016) posits in his discussion on distant reading, it is not merely a quantitative technique but rather augments qualitative inquiries: “the change we are experiencing is precisely that quantitative and qualitative evidence are becoming easier to combine, blurring disciplinary boundaries”. Distant reading was utilized to underline recurring patterns in comments and posts, focusing on emotive actants like emojis, specific hashtags emblematic of the algorithmic imaginary, and recurring topics. This was further enhanced by close reading to identify the constructions that contained the

previously identified terms. This analysis was leveraged through *Voyant Tools* (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2023), a web-based reading and analysis environment for digital texts. For a deeper analysis, discourse analysis was employed at a post level.

The comments were extracted with the help of two free online tools. The comments from 14 posts from *Latifundiar's* Instagram page which followed the style explored in this paper were extracted with the help of the free, open-source tool *Instaloader* (Graf, 2022). The corpus included 158 comments that contained 1298 words. For each of the four TikTok posts, I separately extracted their comments with the *TkcommentsExport* Chrome add-on (ninja blue, 2023). This resulted in a total of 157 comments and 672 words.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The analysis was impacted by various technical constraints concerning corpus discovery and extraction. Both Instagram and TikTok's search functionalities – requiring manual input of words or expressions – do not yield comprehensive results. An alternative to access social media data is through their Application Programming Interface (API), a programmatic system facilitating software communication and data exchange. Instagram began implementing stricter limitations on its API access after the Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018, aiming to address concerns about user privacy and data misuse. This, however, affected researchers' capacity to automatically obtain and analyze data related to social media experiences, prompting broader discussions on data transparency and the workings of algorithmic systems. This situation was considered a milestone in the world of social media research (Constine, 2018) and named APIcalypse (Bruns, 2019). To maintain the same approach to accessing the posts from both platforms – that of emulating the experience of a regular user – the TikTok posts were discovered through manual search (and not API) as well.

Regarding demographic information, acquiring data on the commentators' country or age on a large scale proved impossible due to platform privacy regulations. From comment analysis, it was inferred that all commentators either were Romanian or spoke Romanian; several comments also indicated some individuals were born after the date of the recordings. Yet, this remains an observation rather than concrete demographic data.

Moreover, the *TkcommentsExport* Chrome add-on permits the free export of only 100 comments per post, affecting the extraction process for a post with 160 comments and its subsequent analysis using *Voyant Tools*. For data protection reasons, neither usernames nor their comments were incorporated into the research. Although these videos were publicly available when accessed, using them without the consent of those depicted is ethically problematic. Consequently, I chose to only paraphrase the comments and the content of the posts, which is multimedia: firstly, it is visual (the images or the recordings), secondly, textual (the text added through video editing on the videos), and thirdly, aural (the music). The names of the TikTok posts are not disclosed either, for the same reasons. In light of the ethical guidelines expressed by Highfield and Leaver in analyzing social media content, I consider that although the expressions of nostalgia on these posts might seem mundane, they should be tackled with care: “for researchers, even in banal circumstances, the legality of everyday practices often needs to be taken into account when designing studies and considering ethical implications” (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 54).

Being an exploratory study, this paper only reflects a segment of the entire phenomenon, opening the path to future discussions and research projects both in terms of methodology and corpus. Therefore, the following analysis focuses on the discursive patterns of nostalgic discourse surfaced throughout the posts and comments through Instagram and TikTok's affordances which are further discussed in the following section.

Discussion. Remediation of Nostalgia through Platform-Specific Affordances

Through the mixed-method approach, several discourse patterns have been identified both through visual and textual content throughout the nostalgic universe of the selected corpus, highlighting differences between the two platforms in terms of social media affordances. As defined in the theoretical section, the analysis follows Bolter and Grusin's definition of remediation as an integration of older media into newer media. For the selected posts, remediation occurs by repurposing analog recordings into video posts. This transformation is evident in TikTok's utilization of video capabilities, whereas on Instagram, the emphasis is on merely posting and promoting through the platform's features. Remediation entails not just editing and uploading videos previously in analog format but also leveraging platform-specific affordances, which serve as emotive actants to amplify nostalgia.

All videos in this discussion, as elements of new media, have the potential for remixing and reuse. Though initially in analog, they transitioned to digital before becoming social media posts. In private dialogues through phone calls, Instagram Direct Messages, and WhatsApp with the *Latifundiar* account creator – anonymous on Instagram – it was revealed that many of their video sources were from YouTube. There, the videos already had multiple views and likes. However, they were typically posted without edits, unlike their versions on TikTok or Instagram. Notably, videos from the TikTok analysis were also found on YouTube with comments echoing similar nostalgia and regrets about not having the same fun today, mostly comparing then versus now with a sense of bitterness.

Originally, the *Latifundiar* page featured remixes of classical paintings or movie scenes juxtaposed with current Romanian scenes or situations, which became increasingly popular. They gained significant traction. According to the creator, some of them were reported by Instagram users and removed by the platform due to sensitive issues in the images. At the beginning of 2021, the account first posted video remixes of analog recordings of parties, where they had replaced the original music with techno music. Observing the popularity, expressed through likes, comments and direct messages, the creator continued posting similar posts.

However, some were flagged by Instagram users and subsequently removed due to controversial content. In early 2021, the account started posting video remixes of analog recordings from parties, overlaying the original music with techno tracks. Observing the increase in popularity, evident from likes, comments, and direct messages, the creator consistently produced similar content. The creator's observation about what could become a trend thus becomes a marker of the algorithmic imaginary, hence reinforcing the remediation of nostalgic posts on the platform. *Latifundar* also noted reposts of their videos on TikTok without credit. Yet, as Niederer and Colombo (2019) assert, the recirculation is rather a strong point of the digital visual culture than a threat. The recirculation – or *viralization* (Wasik, 2013) – is a confirmation of the popularity of a post or a trend, as it gets validated by people's attention.

One of the videos *Latifundiar* has remixed is also one of the TikTok posts in this case study, capturing a nightclub party. Notably, the original sound for this video was replaced by a different song across both platforms. However, audience reactions to the video varied between the platforms. On Instagram, the post received four comments, whereas on TikTok, it attracted approximately 150. Interestingly, another video from the set of four analyzed on TikTok had also made appearances elsewhere, edited similarly and eliciting comparable comments, mostly observations regarding the apparent happiness of individuals from that era.

Once a recording of this nature is uploaded to TikTok, it often becomes the foundation for numerous remixes, each taking a unique approach, this being one of the primary characteristics of TikTok. Revisiting the disparity in the numbers of comments between the platforms for the identical original video, I consider that neither the medium nor the accompanying song are primary influencers of the response. Instead, the differences can be attributed to the specific platform affordances facilitating the remediation process. Factors such as video editing functionalities, inclusive of filters, captions, and hashtags play a pivotal role in shaping the engagement patterns of the audience. On TikTok and Instagram, video editing varied. The TikTok videos tended to be edited through filters and overlaid text which transmitted a message on the main topic of the post, and the sound was only rarely changed. Despite TikTok's popular use is that of remixing recordings with sounds from the app's sound gallery, in this case, most of the videos kept the original sound. I argue that this is because the sound itself triggered nostalgia. In contrast, Instagram lacked captions or overlaid texts, with sound substitution being the primary modification – which was a key concept of the *Latifundiar* posts.

For a detailed understanding of how editing affordances enhanced the nostalgic discourse, examining the four posts is essential. The first TikTok post showcased a New Year's Eve home party, remixed with textual overlays a different background sound. The superimposed text indicated the time (1990s New Year's Eve) and posed a question about the name of the song: *Lambada* or *The Penguin*, a newer song often played during parties or weddings in Romania. These edits were performed through TikTok's facile video edit options. The second post displayed another New Year's Eve home party, with the original sound from the recording, documenting a real conversation between the guests. The message added on top of the video through pointed out the moment (New Year's Eve) and a few iconic elements of the time, such as an old TV or porcelain decorative objects. The third post showcased a 1990s wedding with original music by a live band, overlaid with a text stating "wedding in the '90s, simplicity and respect", and a "party" sticker. Lastly, the fourth video showed a nightclub party, with a superimposed text that dated it to the '90s, an animated sticker with the word "party", and symbols such as a cassette tape. The sound, also a popular song in Romania by that time, was not the original track, but a song from TikTok's music gallery.

In all four cases, TikTok's affordances helped to resurface older analog videos, which activated nostalgia for the viewers. The platform features that provided editing options, such as adding texts or stickers on top of the videos, changing the sound, or the possibility to add multiple captions, created a new social media genre composed of old and new media. These elements become emotive actants enhancing nostalgia. Furthermore, the captions accompanying the post also act as emotive actants. Formulated by the people who created the posts and inspired by the rules of popularity dictated by their algorithmic imaginary, the captions mainly stated the moment of the party, like "New Year's Eve" and included various hashtags. Only one caption tagged multiple people – another common practice aimed at triggering the attention of those who might engage more with the post, thus increasing the visibility.

Hashtags can play a significant role in shaping the nostalgic discourse around various posts. As social media affordances, they contribute to the post's success, by informing about the topic both the algorithmic systems and the people who encounter the post. Furthermore, they link a network of posts on the same topic, enhancing its accessibility and potential popularity. As originally intended (Black, 2018), a hashtag collects all other posts that include it, which encourages platform users to click on it. The TikTok posts utilized hashtags that indicated the time of recording, such as #anii90 (the '90s) and #revelion (New Year's Eve), the occasion like #Petrecere (party) and #Nunta (wedding), and the location with #Romania. They also employed expressions steering the discourse towards the viewer, like #remember, #foryou, and #generatiacucheialagat^{li}. These hashtags provide another layer of information to the visual remix by instantly notifying a user scrolling through the feed about the video's major subject. They also act as markers of nostalgia, informing TikTok's recommender systems about trending topics that may be further recommended. Consequently, the same hashtags appear in multiple posts; for instance, #revelion, #foryou, and #anii90 were featured in three of the four posts.

From a broader perspective, all these interventions to the original videos that contribute to the remediation of the nostalgic media, from the edits to the captions, are influenced by the algorithmic imaginary. The visual styles, the discourses in the captions and the act of re-circulating this type of video are influenced by what the users believe to be fit with the platform in terms of popularity and format.

A Double-Folded Nostalgia

Following the understanding of nostalgia as a then *versus* now framework, two main directions have prevailed across the reactions of the commentators – both on Instagram and TikTok – and the posts. Namely, a nostalgia toward the depicted times and the affective states embedded within, which were more positive than in the present, and a nostalgia toward technology, which was less mediated and more in line with a simple, happier life.

The *Voyant Tools* corpus analysis performed across all comments showed the frequency of expressions or visual symbols that can be interpreted as affective reactions. This allowed a deeper examination through discourse analysis of the identified topics. The distant reading of the TikTok comments – a total of 158 comments and 1298 terms – revealed that the most frequent terms were the smiling face with three hearts emoji, which repeated 78 times, the word “vremuri” (times), which repeated 30 times – mostly on construction with “ce vremuri” (what a time), or “ce vremuri frumoase” (what a beautiful time). Furthermore, the face with tears of joy also appeared 32 times, followed by the pleading face emoji which was repeated 23 times. Other recurrent expressions were related to the word “times” or constructions about being happy or how happy the times were. The use of emojis complements the affective discourse of the text, emphasizing the nostalgia.

Regarding other discursive patterns revealed through close reading, several topics surfaced. Some of the people referred to the years following communism as “the beginning of the end” reinforcing that life got worse ever since. Furthermore, other people reflected on how they were happy back then but did not realize it at that moment, while others evoked short memories of going to clubs or gatherings. The nostalgia for the time was often linked to the inability to go to similar parties due to COVID-19. People also humorously discussed the clothing

of the people in the videos, sharing that they also wore similar pieces. Fewer comments shared that they did not live back then, but there is a nostalgic element that they relate to.

Moreover, the nostalgia for the less mediated technology was expressed by individuals in a comparison between how people interacted today and their behavior back then, blaming technology and mediated communication for the lack of authenticity or joy. They mentioned the Internet or Facebook as causes of weaker connections and interactions, a person even stating, “no Internet, no drugs, everything was better”. The cassette recorder was often mentioned, triggering memories about how people used to roll the tape with the help of a pen, or what usually happened when a cassette tape would get broken, often using laughing emojis. The *Voyant Tools* corpus analysis, performed on 158 comments and 672 words, revealed that the most recurrent terms were: face with tears of joy emoji (20); id (17); the rolling on floor laughing emoji (13), the red heart emoji (11), *id* (17), *track* (9). The mentions of other Instagram users also occurred frequently: 46 individuals tagged their friends and three of them tagged the page creator (the implications and significations of tagging other people will be discussed in the next section). Differently from the TikTok comments, the analysis in this case did not reveal significant repetitive expressions.

However, the close reading surfaced several common themes. The conversation established through the comments mostly tended toward a comical kind of nostalgia, with jokes that attempted to draw parallels between the two different time periods, some of them directly pointing out that back then people used to have more fun. The overarching theme across these expressions was a humorous metaphor between present, familiar elements (such as popular festivals, clubs) and past situations. For instance, a person described one of the scenes in the videos as being from the 1997 edition of the *Sunwaves* festival, while another person joked that the video showed their parents in *Guesthouse*ⁱ. Others pushed the comparison further by rhetorically asking what it would be like if the other people in the future would watch recordings from today’s parties. One might consider this to be a type of remix inspired by the remixing of the videos: similarly, to how the creator blended video and audio from different periods of times, the people who commented on the posts mixed information and cultural signals from the past and the present.

In contrast to the TikTok comments, people did not share nostalgia about having directly participated in the parties similar to the ones in the recording. Instead, they positioned themselves as observers and critics of those parties, mainly in a humorous tone. The blending between “then” through the visual and “now” through the sound enabled the viewers to express a different type of nostalgia – one more centered on humor than the wistfulness of past experiences. The jokes and the imagined situations suggest that many commentators might not have been born during the time depicted in the footage. Hence, they related more to the modern music than the historical visuals. Nevertheless, the shared nostalgic discourse still manifested through identifying with the party community. While on TikTok, the sense of belonging manifested for the community of individuals who were young adults or adults in the beginning of the ’90s and had similar memories, here it coagulates around similar experiences from the present and fascination or amusement about how people partied in the past.

Regarding the nostalgic discourse around the medium or the technology, numerous comments complimented the concept of these videos or congratulated the creator for their editing skills. Songs, either from the present or from the past (techno or pop music), were frequently mentioned, and various people inquired about the names. When asked about the reactions received for this post type, the creator also recalled that most people asked for the *track ID* (a common phrasing for techno music identification) through direct messages or

comments. Even though the author never replied to the comments or messages of the people, this type of comment existed in each of the 14 posts, often triggering conversations or debates among the commentators who tried to guess the song. Similarly to the TikTok comments, the music triggered affective manifestations. In both cases, the double-folded nostalgia was enabled by the strong correlation between past and present, manifested in both experiences and medium.

The Algorithmic Affordances Enhancing Nostalgia

In alignment with Bucher and Helmond's (2018) platform-sensitive methodology, it is imperative to examine not only the algorithmic influences on user experiences but also how individual actions reciprocally affect these algorithms. As the authors articulate, "by clicking and liking, end-users fuel the algorithms, which in turn generate the information flows fed back to end-users. Simultaneously, these clicks and likes pique the interest of developers, researchers, and advertisers." (p.249). Both on Instagram and TikTok, there were clear indications of how the algorithmic imaginary or simply the interaction with posts influenced the popularization of the examined posts. As individuals perceive what is popular on a platform and what receives engagement, they may adopt specific platform affordances in their content creation. Furthermore, user engagement with a post – the likes, the comments – influences the platform in deciding what is popular and deserves to be further recommended to other people.

Though the mechanisms of virality on social media and the precise determinants of a post's popularity are beyond the scope of this discussion, it's essential to highlight certain markers of the algorithmic imaginary. I argue that these markers play a pivotal role in algorithmic content recommendations, thereby enhancing the nostalgic discourse to other users as well. As Abidin (2021) observes, the ways in which the videos were edited, remixed, or captioned apply a specific style, usually popular across a platform:

TikTok users and internet celebrity aspirants do not always conscientiously maintain a single singular coherent persona or style, but instead are actively and very quickly adapting from the latest trends and viral practices on TikTok, to attempt varieties of styles—across hashtags, keywords, filters, audio memes, narrative memes—to aim for the For You Page, or the "golden ticket" that would allow one to gain an immense number of followers overnight. (p. 79)

In alignment with Abidin's observations, the posts examined in this case deployed various strategies. For instance, repurposing existing videos through a new visual or audio edit is a widespread cultural practice on TikTok. A video that replaces an original sound with a track from TikTok's gallery, for example, becomes discoverable across the platform. Visual stickers, when applied via TikTok's editing tools, can also serve as cues for algorithmic recommendations, enhancing user engagement. As the stickers might capture the attention and inform the viewer about the topic of the video, the chances of the viewers to spending time and engaging with the post are higher. The analyzed video that contained a text, asking what song was it, applied an unspoken rule of engagement: this would encourage people to respond, amplifying user interaction and the post's visibility (Smith, 2020). Although this was never an official rule communicated by platforms, it was a recurring advice in the digital marketing space (Zote, 2023) for generating more engagement with social media posts.

The same logic applies to the caption that mentioned several TikTok users who, by receiving a notification about the mention, would interact with the post. The use of hashtags in cap-

tions further fuels algorithmic distribution by informing recommender systems about content themes. As examined in the previous section, all four posts used hashtags, some of them clearly expressing the scope of the post: #viral, #foryou. Even though the TikTok algorithm has been the subject of speculation and discussion for a considerable amount of time (Hern, 2022), user engagement undeniably influences content visibility within newsfeeds (Klug et al., 2021). Due to this aspect, platform users are even more compelled to apply the standards to their own content that they consider to be most successful. Differently from TikTok's videos, the selected videos from Instagram did not use any of these strategies. By simply posting the videos with no caption or additional textual interventions, the creator enabled a style that was easily recognized. Some of the commentators even mentioned, in the lastly posted videos, that they were eagerly waiting for more posts of that style.

Moreover, engagements such as likes and comments, especially those tagging other users, enhance a post's visibility. The posts on Instagram and TikTok received several comments and a significant part of them contained mentions (or tags) of other people, which increases their visibility and signals of popularity. As the *Latifundiar* page creator explained in the interview, they received numerous direct messages from the fans of the page, which may also be considered a factor of interest for the page in the algorithmic assessment of what is popular and what is not. In terms of likes, all selected posts showed significant engagement: the TikTok videos ranged between 40 and almost 2000 likes, while each of the Instagram posts reached around 1000 likes.

While the recommender systems mechanisms of TikTok and Instagram are not public or fully transparent, one cannot make strong correlations between markers of engagement, styles, or practices and the popularity of the posts. However, the perceived rules of what the algorithms may consider worthy of further recommendations were visible in how the posts were created. Furthermore, the signals of engagement, such as likes, comments, tags, or direct messages, also were present and can be considered factors that contributed to the popularization of the posts, thus the enhancement of the nostalgic discourse.

Final Remarks and Future Research

In conclusion, this exploratory study investigated the nostalgic discourse surrounding Instagram and TikTok posts that remediated videos of post-communist celebrations in Romania through platform affordances and algorithmic imaginary. The remediation of analog videos into social media posts was enabled by the platform-specific affordances (from editing features to the use of hashtags inspired by perceived rules of platform visibility) and also became part of an extensive media recirculation process, amplifying the reach of the nostalgic discourse.

The findings pointed toward a double-folded nostalgia that referenced both the historical periods and the technology and medium itself. Adhering to a then *versus* now comparison, the affective publics demonstrated nostalgic reactions towards various elements – the remediation process, significant historical events, music, and even metaphorically intertwined elements from both past and present, often through the lens of humor. While distinct differences in the nostalgic discourse on Instagram and TikTok were observed – such as potential generational differences of the publics or overall sentiments – both platforms, as hubs of digital affect cultures, cultivated identification, a sense of belonging, and a shared nostalgic discourse for the engaged (networked) publics. The platforms' algorithmic systems, which are in turn

shaped by user interactions with content and the platforms themselves, played a pivotal role in propagating this discourse.

Contributing to the ongoing, multi-disciplinary work of studying social media platforms and affect, the study introduces a novel perspective for delving into the somewhat elusive algorithmic systems of social media, alongside their influence on cultural and affective practices. Employing a combination of traditional methodologies like digital ethnography and discourse analysis, augmented with tools from the digital humanities, the research discovered and explored the interplays between social media platform affordances and users' algorithmic imaginaries, especially in the context of remediation of analog content and the reinforcement of nostalgic discourse.

Yet, the study encountered certain limitations, particularly in relation to corpus selection, mainly due to the technical constraints of the platforms. Challenges arose in data discovery and extraction due to restricted API access and scarce search functions. Additionally, obtaining comprehensive demographic, age, or extensive engagement information related to the posts was not possible at this moment. Nonetheless, this research serves as a foundational exploration of a wider phenomenon, and its insights can pave the way for future inquiries. Additional studies might delve deeper into nuances like how the virality differs in terms of depicted celebration in the video (for example, club parties versus home parties), or how different publics react to the nostalgic discourse in terms of their relation with technologies and medium.

Note

i The expression can be translated to “the generation who holds the key to their neck” and refers to the children from the communist era and shortly after the fall of it, who often kept the key to their apartments hanging on a chain or a shoelace. The expression itself is embedded with nostalgia and used in stories about the games people played back then and the memories of the communities around apartment buildings. The *Sunwaves* festival is a Romanian techno music festival first introduced in 2007 and Guesthouse is a techno music club launched around 2010 in Bucharest.

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