

Following the Trace in Fashion: From Zhivago Look to Slavic Core



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Abstract Fashion is closely interconnected with traditional and digital media and the latter is widely known for setting and dissemination trends and making them viral. For example, TikTok set a trend for fur which climaxed in the winter 2023 and will probably stay in fashion longer with posts hashtagged #slaviccore, #slavicgirl, #slavicgirlcore, #slavicbimbo, or #slavicbimbogirl, where women promote the style of being dressed in furs. This cultural trend referring to Slavic people and the nostalgia for the 1990s and early 2000s is worth studying and discussing from semiotic and historical perspectives. An earlier boost in the popularity of fur in the West, initiated by the media, can be witnessed with the US release of *Doctor Zhivago* in 1965. The hashtag #zhivagolook is still circulating on Instagram. This article describes these two cases and interprets them referring to Derrida's concept of "trace" and Schoenberg's concept of "developing variation" based on visual content analysis. We conclude that the current trend can be considered as a fashion reiteration with a recognizable trace, which is varied and thematically regenerated.

Keywords Slavic core · Slavic bimbo · Zhivago look · Trace by Derrida · Index by Pierce · Fur · TikTok · Instagram · Fashion · Media

1 Introduction

Fashion is interconnected with both traditional and digital media: it gets inspiration from the media, for example from visual aspects of cinematography, songs, digital social media in general, and fashion influencers, in particular; conversely, fashion trends are embodied in the media: fashion films, awards ceremonies, fashion magazines, digital social media, etc. Instagram and TikTok have enormous visual potency

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in disseminating fashion images which is facilitated and enhanced by hashtags with a number of affordances for spreading digital fashion content (making the post visible, searchable, retrievable, referencing itself, allowing for creating communities, promoting interactions, etc.) [1–3].

Verbally a hashtag should be attractive, memorable, and create viral opportunities. Such digital potency in fashion appears to be the suffix “core,” which has substituted the notion of trend or style and can be referred to some fashion aesthetics, for example, Barbiecore inspired by Barbie Doll, normcore meaning casual clothing not to stand out or minimalism, Kidcore—nostalgic fashion of the 90s and others [4]. All these digital fashion trends present fashion aesthetics based on visual categorization and emotional engagement. The term “aesthetics” describes an online community on digital social platforms with preserved visual coherence. López (2023) also argues that millennials, who were born between 1982 and 1994, and Generation Z, who were born between 1995 and 2010, are attracted by nostalgia for the past due to social instability and the uncertainty of the future [5].

It proves the claim by Crepax and Liu (2024) about the considerable affectionate and emotional part of fashion, where aesthetics, including nostalgic aesthetics, are attractive while communicating with possible consumers [6].

Slavic core is one of these digital fashion trends designed to influence online followers emotionally on the visual and sound levels, posting women dressed in slavic outwear, mostly fur coats and hats referring to the 1990s when Russia experienced a boom in fur consumption. The previous western trend for furs initiated by the traditional media was after the release of the film “Doctor Zhivago” in 1965. Nowadays both “Zhivago look” and “Slavic core” or “Slavic bimbo” tags with images can be found on Instagram, TikTok, and other digital visual platforms.

This paper compares these two cases of global media-inspired popularity for fur on the basis of visual content analysis describing people/actors (1), clothes (2), and context surrounding objects (3) with a sampling of 100 video reels and images on TikTok and Instagram retrieved by tags “Slavic core,” “Slavic bimbo,” “Slavic girl,” and 30 images on Instagram retrieved by tags “Zhivago look,” “Dr. Zhivago look.”

2 Literature Review

Fashion is a multifaceted phenomenon, which serves as a medium which can communicate societal and cultural values influencing consumer behavior and perceptions.

According to Lehnert [7], fashion as a cultural practice allows us to trace symbolic interactions between people and fashion artifacts. Fashion is connected to culture and aesthetic preferences. It is a cultural semiotic system in its broad sense. It can be “read” or interpreted, however, it is not constrained to interpretation only. Fashion practices give free space to construct different meanings like in Pierce’s (1958) multiple interpretations [8] or Barthes’ (1968) creative semiosis [9]. Lehnert states that fashion is a dynamic process that constantly reproduces itself and not

only reflects cultures but mostly promotes them. This dynamic process of fashion is materialized in artifacts and manifests itself in cultural practices [7].

Traditionally, fashion and communication are closely intertwined as, firstly, fashion in its essence has great communicative capacity and, secondly, it is dictated by advertising and marketing as consumers should recognize brands and be informed about current trends [8].

Fashion and cinema coexist and develop together since clothing plays a significant role in character descriptions and personality portrayals in films. Fashion houses contribute with designing clothes and creating unique fashion storytelling, akin to cult films. Examples include Givenchy's little black dress tailor-made for Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* or Giorgio Armani's clothing for Richard Gere in *American Gigolo*. Today's fashion films are enhancing the potency of fashion imagery and creating new brand experiences for online shoppers. They do this by combining modern Internet logic with traditional cinematographic language to create new worlds for fashion businesses [10, [11]. Fashion films shift the focus from viewers as buyers and make them an audience [12], implying the aesthetic nature of cinematography in contrast to fashion commercials and online videos in social media.

In the new digital environment, fashion and social media such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok have become closely interconnected. Fashion trends are communicated directly to people by the means of short videos or posts and get an immediate response from the audience. In this respect, not only are wider audiences aware of new trends, but users can also provide instant feedback and collaborate with influencers. Thus, social media have democratized communication as users can now participate in fashion discourse on a different level. Another distinctive feature of social media in creating trends is the ability to spread and evolve brands quickly and efficiently by the virtue of hashtags, challenges, and viral movements [13]. Similarly, digital social media are gaining popularity due to their accessibility and immediacy, which means that users can get acquainted with the latest trends, styles, and fashion inspirations with a click [14].

TikTok is a digital platform popular mainly with young users, in particular, the representatives of Gen Z and teenagers [15]. TikTok is effective for quick trend creation and their further dissemination, making them viral through short entertaining videos which are liked, shared, and commented on. Trends can be taken up by a large number of users and become viral due to an influencer or a celebrity posting an outfit or fashion style, attracting the attention of millions of users.

Instagram is an image-sharing service which is aimed at instant communication of trends and visual information [16], providing a rapid diffusion of trends. According to Ha et al. (2017), Instagram has reshaped the fashion industry through the hashtag function and consumer-generated content [17]. On this platform fashion trends and values are communicated to people through the posts of fashion bloggers and influencers. Luxury items are sold as lifestyles on Instagram, meaning that the digital platform is utilized by luxury brands to spread the ideas of exclusivity and a wealthy lifestyle [18]. The internet has become a complex tool for "meta-mediation,"

where people create imaginary worlds which they identify themselves with. Proliferation of closed imaginaries leads to new trends appearing [19, p. 75].

3 Methodology

The research is qualitative in its nature. Its objectives are to describe the trend for fur and aesthetics such as “Zhivago look” and “Slavic core.” First, general data about these two aesthetics are gathered with a brief historical overview. Then, sampling is performed: images with the tag of “Slavic core,” “Slavic bimbo,” “Slavic girl” and “Zhivago look” or “Dr. Zhivago look” are randomly gathered from two platforms, Instagram and TikTok (total 130 images), where people are dressed in fur. The dates for sampling are the following: Dr. Zhivago aesthetic: April 2014–December 2022 and Slavic core aesthetic: November 2023–December 2024. Countries of posts are specified where possible to see the general spread of the trends. Third, subject matter, according to Barrett [20], or visual elements such as people, clothes, and context surrounding objects are described. The analysis discusses how these elements contribute to the general stylistics, the meaning of the expressed aesthetics, and what values are incorporated into them. Identifying and characterizing people, things, locations, or events in an image is a helpful first step in descriptive analysis [21]. By analyzing images and speculating on nonverbal messages different aesthetic values can be outlined and the connection between the trends can be traced. Formal analysis techniques are used: compare and contrast, and interpretation. The semiotic theory of Derrida’s trace and Schoenberg’s concept of “developing variation” are discussed with regard to these two aesthetics. This content interpretive analysis contributes to research of aesthetics.

4 Results

4.1 *The “Zhivago Look” Aesthetic*

According to Devan (2018), the term “Zhivago look” first appeared after the premiere of the American movie “Doctor Zhivago” in December 1965 [22]. Based on Boris Pasternak’s book, this David Lean-directed movie featured elaborate costumes by Phyllis Dalton [23]. Fashion trends at the time were swiftly impacted by the looks portrayed in the movie, which were distinguished by fur-trimmed coats and hats.

Christian Dior designer Marc Bohan was inspired by the movie and used it in his autumn 1966 collection, which included features reminiscent of the characters’ clothing [24]. Later, Yves Saint Laurent in 1976 created an autumn–winter haute couture collection “Opéra—Les Ballets Russes” inspired by the “Zhivago look” and

Russian winter fur outwear [25, 26]. The “Zhivago look” became popular as a result of this influence and can still be found on Instagram with reference to the main actors such as Julie Christie, Omar Sheriff, and Geraldine Chaplin. The “Zhivago look” emerged as a major fashion icon in the late 1960s and beyond, impacting numerous designers and continuing to be discussed decades later.

Julie Christie, who plays Lara, wears a dark fur beret which has become synonymous with the “Zhivago look” and shows practical elegance and femininity. Tonya’s white and pink fur outfits emphasize luxury and femininity. The fur-trimmed collars and oversized coats reflected the fashion of that time and served as a cornerstone for the fashion history.

Instagram “Zhivago look” images are personal photos of mostly American or British women, rarely men and children. Sometimes pictures of pets wrapped up in faux fur were posted with the hashtag #Zhivagolook. The prototypical element of all the pictures is a fur hat, sometimes fur-trimmed coats or jackets can be observed.

4.2 The “Slavic Core” Aesthetic

Although the Slavic girls’ fashion was initially noticed by TikTokers in 2021, the trend took a fresh turn and climaxed in the winter 2023 with the boost of videos with the hashtags #slaviccure, #slavicgirl, #slavicbimbo, and #russianbimbo to Katya Lel’s 1990s track “My Marmeladny.” The song has onomatopoeic sounds “mwah-mwah” imitating kisses, and “uh-uh” and “dzhaga-dzaga” imitating sex. This sexually implied content in the song could have triggered sensual stimulus and aroused pleasurable responses in people’s senses, which contributed to its virality (the third place on Spotify). This digital social trend, which started outside Russia, triggered fur fashion trend dissemination of faux fur in Russia in physical stores by different fast fashion brands, for instance Love Republic, Lime, Sela, and Oodji, which is evidence of the direct influence of digital social media on purchasing demand.

It should be noted that although “Slavic” refers to all Eastern European countries, Russia is a representative of this trend due to climatic conditions, where wearing fur is in most cases first regarded as a necessity, then gives aesthetic pleasure to the look.

Fashion of the 1990s due to the period of Glasnost and Perestroika changed previous Soviet uniformity and scarcity for capitalist creativity, bright-colored leggings, short skirts, long boots, and fur clothes. Capitalist items dominated the mass market, while the Perestroika creative class opposed both socialism and capitalist homogeneities, as evidenced by haphazard and disorderly flea-market findings [27].

In the 1990s and 2000s, in Russia a fur coat or a fur hat could be referred to as an indispensable garment, it emphasized the high status of a successful lady. Buying a fur coat was considered to be an obligatory thing, though not everyone could afford it [28]. Different shopping tours were organized, for example to Greece or Turkey, to buy numerous fur items [29]. The government tried to control this to prevent

massive resale and profiteering. Since not everyone could afford natural fur coats, a fur hat was a minimum [30], people were proud of them and wore them even inside.

Fur hats have many names in the Russian language, which linguistically and cognitively prove the importance of this accessory: either toponymic names like *sibirka* (Siberia—a famous cold region of Russia), *kubanka* (Kuban—part of Russia; *kubanka* or *papakha*, originally a headdress of the Kuban Cossacks, usually a black *karakul* hat [31, 32]. Another name for a fur hat is *boyarka*, named after a title “boyars”—a ruling elite of Eastern Europe, large landowners belonging to the upper stratum of the ruling class [33]; or a proper name, *Barbara* (after Barbara Brylska—a polish actress who wore this kind of hat in the film “The Irony of Fate” of 1975, which is traditionally shown on New Year’s Eve).

The “Slavic core” aesthetic shows a beautiful and well-groomed woman who wants to stand out and look impeccable despite the hardships of the 1990s and turbulent events in our time [34]. The term “Slavic bimbo” could have different interpretations. “Bimbo” has changed its meaning: it originates from the Italian word *bimbo*, which means “a little (baby) boy” or “a young (male) child” (the feminine variant is *bimba*). This term, which was first used in the United States as early as 1919, was slang for a stupid guy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *bimbo* is often an attractive or glamorous young woman. Later chiefly: a young woman, who is regarded as sexually attractive, but unintelligent or frivolous (usually considered derogatory and offensive). However, nowadays it can have another meaning of looking beautiful but being intelligent at the same time. The idea itself has been reinterpreted by contemporary influencers, who assert that it is possible to be successful, intelligent, and attractive at the same time [35].

A fur coat and a large fur hat known as a *boyarka* are two important components of the attire of a “typical Slavic woman” of either vintage natural fur or modern faux fur. The images highlight high-heeled boots, short skirts, fancy bags, sunglasses bearing luxury brand logos, and extravagant gold jewelry that the women are wearing. Other objects include bouquets of flowers, guns, cigarettes, a bottle of champagne or vodka, caviar, Red Square as a background, snowy streets, snowy scenery with mountains, or some attributes of the 1990s such as a carpet on the wall—all prototypical features of a Slavic image. The gangster themes emphasize the 1990s. The images in the reels are staged to attract the attention of online users, to get a response—a comment or to encourage a similar video reel or image posting. The trend’s aesthetic is influenced by the fashion of wealthy Eastern European women of the 1990s and 2000s. The movement #SlavicGirl is a contrast to the trend of “quiet luxury.” Modern “Slavic bimbos” are dressed mostly in faux fur or vintage fur coats. The trend is associated with conscious consumption in fashion or sustainability both environmental and ethical. The make-up is bright and standing out, usually the cheeks are pinky blushed and women are wearing red lipstick, which was considered fashionable and sex appealing among slavic women.

The spread of “Slavic core” is obvious with Russia and Poland pioneering this trend. However, the results of the investigation on Instagram and TikTok have shown that this trend is ubiquitous and worldwide (See Fig. 1).

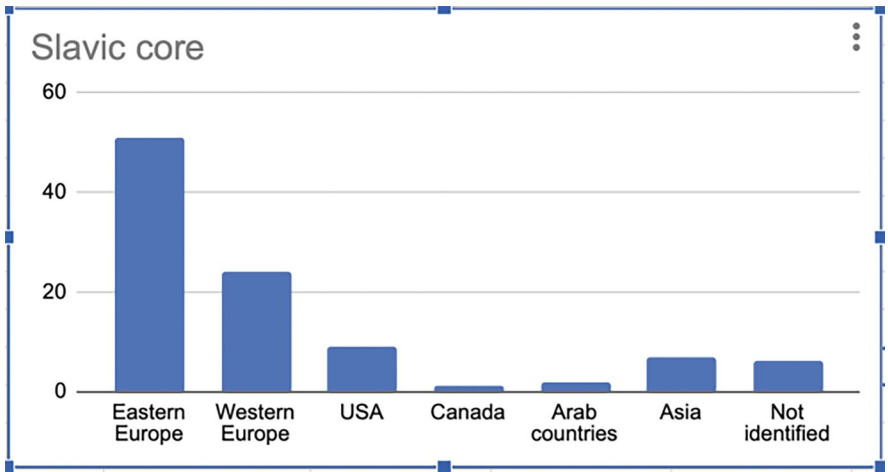


Fig. 1 Slavic core distribution

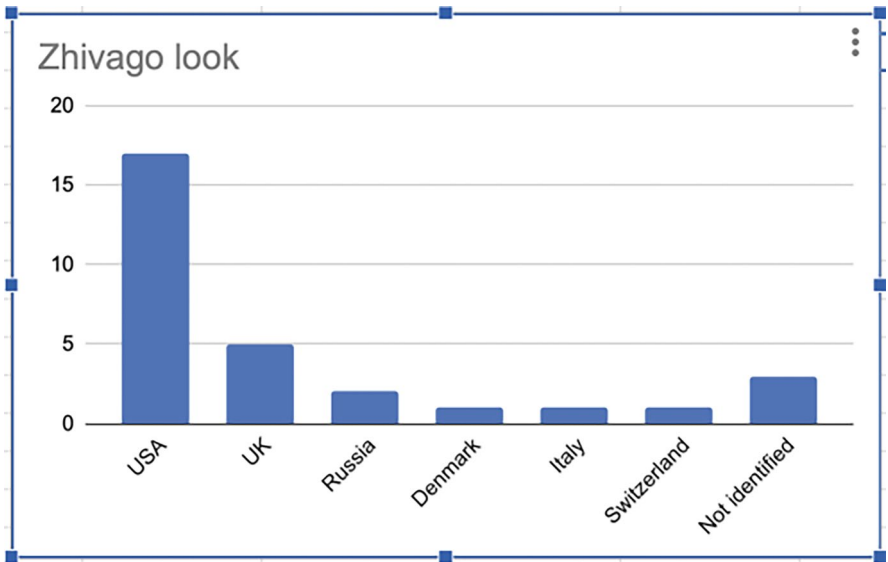


Fig. 2 Zhivago look distribution

Unlike “Slavic core,” “Zhivago look” is less widespread and distributed primarily in the USA and UK, which is illustrated by the bar chart below (see Fig. 2). It can be explained by the fact that the movie “Doctor Zhivago,” from which this term originates, was created 60 years ago and might be less popular now.

Below is the comparative table of two trends which describes people, clothes, and surrounding objects as a context (see Table 1).

Table 1 A descriptive subject matter table of two trends

Aesthetic (Platform)	People	Clothes	Objects as a context
Zhivago look (Instagram).	Close-up shots or selfies. Middle-aged women mostly from the USA and UK, pictures are not staged, from real life. Besides women there are pictures of a middle-aged American man, Russian children and pets (cats and dogs).	A fur hat is in each shot and it is in the center of attention as a symbol of the trend. A fur coat can be rarely observed, some accessories are used (bags, gloves, jewelry, glasses, a big scarf).	The images are in the car, at the grocery store, inside the house or apartment, the background is not in the focus. The focus is on the person in fur.
Slavic core (TikTok and Instagram).	Staged shots, mostly medium and long shots. A young woman or a few young women staged for reels or a picture (from different mostly east European countries).	Red accent in clothes. Both long and short faux fur coats or vintage fur coats. A scarf on the head or a fur hat, long high-heeled boots (white in most cases), short skirts, big sunglasses, jewelry, luxury bags, mittens, or gloves.	The objects are of two kinds: (1) luxury accessories/objects such as bouquets of flowers, champagne, red caviar or (2) reminiscence of the 1990s: a carpet on the wall, cigarettes or alcohol drinks and guns. The reels are taken in the street, ideally with snow, with Red Square or skyscrapers of Moscow City in the background, mountains or winter scenery, in the metro, inside the apartment or a department store.

Semiotically speaking, Dr. Zhivago aesthetic indexically refers to the American film, and in most cases to Julie Christie, in particular, with a classy fur style where cultural identification is implied, while “Slavic core” is an index of apparent cultural identification to Slavic community with particular location features or objects.

Close-up shots and selfies of “Zhivago look” are not staged, the images are of common people usually wearing a fur hat hashtagged correspondingly, they refer to the film while “Slavic core’s” images are intentionally designed for repetition, to follow one another in posting these images with the desire to be in fashion, create a community, and spread this trend of wearing fur.

The surrounding objects of “Zhivago look” are of no importance or represent common everyday reality while in “Slavic core” aesthetic surrounding objects create different stylistics: low (criminal of the 1990s), high (luxury) and in both cases cultural (showing prototypical landmarks of Moscow, winter scenery, or other objects associated with Slavic culture).

5 Discussion

The survey reveals that fashion for fur can be referred to as a “long run secular trend spanning decades and centuries” [36, p. 116]. The two cases have shown that the trend for fur is inspired by traditional and digital social media.

The “Zhivago look” triggered by the 1965 Hollywood film “*Dr Zhivago*” can still be traced on Instagram. Despite being a western trend, it refers implicitly to a Russian identity showcasing this style of wearing fur garments, fur hats, in particular. A fur hat symbolizes this trend and serves as an index, according to Pierce’s semiotic theory since there is a direct relationship between the trend “Zhivago look” and a fur hat which makes this style recognizable. Mostly worn by middle-aged American and European women, it has a lady-like feminine stylistics. This trend is disseminated on Instagram since the target audience is older than on TikTok, whose users are less familiar with the “Zhivago look.”

“Slavic core” brought about mainly by TikTok is a reiteration of the previous trend with a different target audience, Zoomers, and different stylistics of the trend which is twofold. First, it shows low gangster-like stylistics of the 1990s. Modern generations are characterized by a nostalgic mood which explains the connection to the 1990s in reels. Second, it is stylistically high-luxury and chic “nouveau riche Russian.” The latter is transmitted mainly on Instagram since this platform is directed to promoting luxury lifestyles or a “dream formula,” an ideal image to strive for. According to Featherstone (2007), “consumer culture uses images, signs, and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires, and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfillment” [37, p. 56].

We consider “Slavic core” not as a totally new trend but as a thematically different trend for fur traced in the “Zhivago look,” which maintains its main essence since similar fur items are worn with a similar design. According to Derrida’s philosophical and literary deconstructionist concept, a trace is the correlation of the enigmatic relationship of outside and inside and the present to something else in the past that can be difficult to capture [38]. Trace in fashion, according to Gill (2016), can be interpreted as follows: behind the present design or a finished fashion product there are a lot of practices and concealed elements or background elements which influence the emergence of the garment [39, pp., 320, 321]. In fashion, the obvious value of the trace is the interpretive act of tracing elements of meaning, for example to establish and decode notions of conventional clothing design and use. Trace in the context of this research is an unseen interpretive element of the present phenomenon, such as “Slavic core,” which can be constructed on the basis of past similar trends, not only of the 1990s but also earlier, such as the “Zhivago look.” The cultural and identity background is the same—Slavic and/or Russian winter clothing style.

Moreover, from a semiotic perspective, Derrida argues that meaning is not fully present, it is constructed through relationships. Meanings of the fashion trends are not stable either. Fashion trends are open for reinterpretation and the meaning can shift: fashion for fur items inspired by the film is reinterpreted nowadays with

different meanings where a Slavic bimbo can be, on the one hand, a frivolous and silly girl of the 1990s, or, on the other hand, a luxury and intelligent lady.

Schoenberg's concept of "developing variations" in music has a similar semiotic idea that everything created in the present is an altered past. He confirms constant transformations and the absence of fixed forms. Fashion is also known for developing variations based on past experiences: trend cycles and fashion reiteration [36, 40, 41]. In the case of "Slavic core," its connection to the past "Zhivago look" is not obvious or not seen directly, that is why we refer to it as a "trace."

In both trends there are several common values: a luxury seasonal style, Slavic identity, nostalgia, and sustainability. Fur garments add attraction, femininity, and luxury accent and refer to both winter weather conditions and Eastern European people's culture of wearing fur. Both trends are affective since they rely on nostalgic feelings of pleasure and recognition: "Slavic Core" refers to the 1990s while "Zhivago Look" refers to the film's characters. The use of faux fur or vintage fur proves the importance of fashion sustainability value.

6 Conclusion

The relationship between media and fashion plays a pivotal role in shaping trends, consumer behavior, and brand interactions. The survey describes the two trends "Zhivago look" and "Slavic core" originated from the media. It confirms their affective and nostalgic influence on consumers, reference to Slavic identity, and fashion sustainability proliferation. "Slavic core" points not only to the 1990s with the boom on fur but also some traces of "Zhivago look" can be followed. Semiotically, both trends act as indices since there is a connection between signifiers ("Zhivago look" and "Slavic core") and signified (fur garments). Slavic core is a reiteration of fur trends in fashion cycles with variable changes in design and different nostalgic references. It has become viral due to its visual attractiveness, nostalgia, affectionate part, and incorporation of luxury life.

This descriptive research contributes to better understanding of social media influence on fashion, exemplified with the "Slavic core" digital movement in fashion which has become viral among online users and consumers creating demand for fur.

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