ACADEMIC REVIEW

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of the dissertation submitted by **Professor Desislava Lyubomirova Boshnakova, PhD**, for the award of the academic degree Doctor of Sciences (DSc) in Professional Field 3.5, Social Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Public Communications – Public Relations)

Professor Desislava Boshnakova presents an extensive and ambitious scholarly work entitled "Christmas Communication: The Resilience of Values – From Classic Campaigns to Digital Transformation." The significance of the subject derives, first, from the global scale of Christmas celebrations: of the world's 195 countries, only 36 do not recognise Christmas as an official holiday. Second, its organisation and celebration at the end of every calendar year constitute a powerful impetus for mobilisation and activity across the global economy, involving businesses and manufacturers and their brands; the vast community of communication and information specialists, programmers and computer experts; non-governmental, voluntary and charitable organisations and religious communities; and every family and individual. Third, the distinctive and enduring nature of the "Christmas spirit", even in the digital age, makes Christmas not merely a "perfect communication virus" (p. 8), but also an occasion for an annual reassessment of the values it has promoted throughout its history. It is therefore an important subject for academic inquiry and for conclusions with both scholarly and practical implications. The originality of this study, against the background of numerous existing publications, lies in its focus on the communicative dimensions, distinctive features and evolution of Christmas as a global meta-campaign, and on its future through the end of the twenty-first century.

As the author observes, "The topical relevance of the subject is connected with the unprecedented speed at which technologies are transforming and globalising our social and cultural rituals. In the new environment of contemporary life … Christmas demonstrates astonishing vitality. It does not merely survive in the new media – it conquers them" (p. 8). Professor Boshnakova chooses to investigate the "paradox of the holiday's inherent resilience" and clearly articulates her central research thesis: "Christmas communication is a unique, self-organising communicative organism capable of preserving authentic human values at the very heart of the most aggressive commercial machine" (p. 7). The principal research objectives are formulated accordingly, addressing the origins and evolution of Christmas, consumer psychology, the sensory components of festive communication, its transformation, Bulgarian particularities and future projections.

The wealth of factual evidence, extensive bibliography and the author's analyses support the conclusion that the research was conducted independently and does not replicate her earlier doctoral dissertation, "Forms of Influencing and Changing Public Attitudes through the Mass Media", defended in 2006.

In this work, Professor Boshnakova demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of the origins and entire development of Christmas: from pagan ritual to intimate family celebration, its establishment as a global communication phenomenon, its transformation in today's digital age and the futuristic scenarios concerning its development through the end of this century. As she herself notes, she has long been interested in Christmas communication and has closely followed its contemporary manifestations. Her bibliography encompasses scholarship from a wide range of disciplines: communication, public relations, journalism, literature, history, anthropology, neuroaesthetics, geography, folklore studies, cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, psychology, marketing, neuromarketing, neurodesign, management, statistics, artificial intelligence and others. These sources are employed purposefully in support of her research thesis.

References are cited accurately and in accordance with bibliographic standards. For completeness, I would note that one of the first communication scholars to respond to the attention economy, as early as 1991, was Professor Stephan Russ-Mohl. He published a series of articles on the subject and, in 2004, formulated his market model of relations between journalism and public relations under normal conditions and in crises. According to this model, within the attention economy, public relations practitioners and journalists exchange not goods and services for money, but information for attention. The relationship between the two fields can thus be characterised as business-to-business, a proposition also borne out in Christmas communication.

The theoretical model of Christmas as a global "meta-campaign" provides the foundation for an analysis of communication campaigns at successive stages in the worldwide expansion of the celebration, with particular emphasis on the resilience of values.

In undertaking this deconstruction, Professor Boshnakova faces the challenge of analysing how communication translates the magic of the "Christmas spirit" and the myth of the holiday into consumer behaviour, thereby turning the intangible into the tangible. She concludes that Christmas is a "living, self-regulating communication system" that successfully adapts its continual renewal to developments in information and communication technologies and to the dynamics of global change.

Among the strengths of Professor Boshnakova's work, I would emphasise the multifaceted presentation of every period and component of Christmas communication. Its structure is carefully "orchestrated", progressively constructing a complex communicative portrait of the holiday through its various dimensions and defining characteristics.

The discussion begins, appropriately, with the creation of the central figure of the Christmas myth and his successive transformations at the hands of his creators: from the

ascetic image of Saint Nicholas to the genial, life-loving Santa Claus depicted by the gifted artist Sundblom. To fulfil his mission, the kindly old man travels from the North Pole across the world in his reindeer-drawn sleigh, bringing miracles and gifts to young and old alike. Coca-Cola's contribution here is undeniable; the author also refers to what historian Stephen Nissenbaum describes as the "Americanisation of Christmas" in the nineteenth century (p. 87).

The next facet introduces the consumer's emotional landscape. Influenced by advertising campaigns, brand surprises and the magic of the festive atmosphere, consumers seek to satisfy subconscious desires, behaving with "loyalty beyond reason" at the intersection of marketing and neuroscience.

Festive shopping produces mountains of gifts – wrapped in shiny paper, desired, dreamed of and eagerly anticipated, but sometimes … unnecessary. Today, gifts have become a "distinctive language of communication" and a "code through which we speak the language of emotions, but also of social relationships, belonging and moral expectations" (p. 64).

To help us choose the most desirable presents, companies and their brands enter the scene. Having mastered the art of storytelling, they spend months preparing communication strategies based on periodic research into the habits and preferences of their target audiences. During the festive season, they seek to devise the most compelling and persuasive Christmas campaigns with imagination and boldness. Among their greatest achievements is undoubtedly the transformation of Santa Claus into a brand mascot – a global "lovemark".

The architecture of the great event then encompasses the "orchestration" of the Christmas atmosphere through its unmistakable sonic branding: uplifting hymns, the enchanting melody of "Silent Night" and countless performances by hundreds of classical singers and popular-music groups, among which the irresistible Christmas ballads of Mariah Carey and Michael Bublé stand out.

Whereas the visual code of Christmas Eve was once associated with the warmth of the domestic hearth and candles lit on the table and Christmas tree, the contemporary communicative image of Christmas is inconceivable without cities adorned with glittering garlands and captivating shop windows, enormous illuminated trees and Christmas markets. The aromas of mulled wine, cinnamon biscuits and gingerbread draw consumers in, creating the sensory branding of Christmas magic.

The "Christmas symphony" grows ever more powerful as its enchantment spreads through numerous information channels. Another facet traces the fascinating history of the Christmas card, first introduced in 1843 and popularised among the European elite during the 1840s by Britain's Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert. Following its industrial-scale production, it began its journey around the world and became a vehicle for direct marketing. Christmas-themed postage stamps, the first of which was issued in

Canada in 1898, spread from 1907 alongside charitable Christmas seals distributed by the Red Cross and became collectors' items. UNICEF Christmas cards also deserve attention: distributed worldwide since 1949, they became a powerful means of supporting UNICEF initiatives through original artwork by major artists such as Picasso, Matisse and Chagall.

Christmas communication acquired new qualities and a broader reach when it entered the programming of radio, cinema and television. Through their distinctive technologies, narratives and scripts, these media not only accelerated the "orchestration" of the great event but also introduced a new aesthetic into its preparation, organisation and celebration. They became new "global hearths", transforming Christmas magic into vivid spectacles marked by collective emotions and individual interpretations, without which Christmas would never be the same. Significantly, the "top ten" Christmas films continue to attract vast audiences year after year through their human warmth and visual qualities, attesting to viewers' enduring longing for homecoming, comfort, shared memories, emotions and hopes for the future. Even among generations growing up in a digital environment characterised by social networks, platformisation and algorithms, Christmas displays remarkable resilience, becoming an "open-source ecosystem" in which communication is decentralised across Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok and Reddit.

Further facets explore markets that base their projects and festive initiatives on the "attention economy", create special events such as Black Friday to maximise sales, and mobilise charity and generosity in all their forms. The activities of numerous non-governmental, voluntary and religious organisations and communities are also important in this respect. Iconic Christmas campaigns by prominent brands, notably Coca-Cola and John Lewis, suggest that the crucial question is no longer "what we sell" but "how we make consumers feel" through our products and how we enable them to experience Christmas as a meaningful and unforgettable occasion. The selected charitable campaigns analysed in the work, from the United Kingdom, France, the United States and elsewhere, some linked to different artistic fields, demonstrate the boundless possibilities of doing good when participants embrace it as a supreme moral duty.

Alongside the splendour of Christmas shop windows and markets, however, the holiday's darker side emerges. Excessive shopping results in countless returned gifts; thousands of metres of wrapping paper become overwhelming waste; and festive pressures frequently lead to frustration. The next facet therefore introduces the Grinch – Santa Claus's shadow – who maintains an ironic distance from the Christmas frenzy, rebels against the reckless waste of resources and calls for greater rationality in consumer behaviour.

Of particular interest here is Professor Boshnakova's conceptualisation of "adeloK" (the Bulgarian word for Christmas, "Koleda", read backwards) as an archetype of resistance. In her account, this "is not merely a linguistic game, but a methodological instrument of deconstruction. Reading Christmas 'backwards' means beginning with the final outcome: the mountains of torn wrapping paper on 26 December, the credit-card statements in January and the emotional exhaustion of festive burnout" (p. 395). In practice, the Grinch

becomes the voice of conscience, seeking, even in the digital age, to restore the true meaning and values of the holiday: family, love, togetherness, sharing, kindness and humanity.

But how is Christmas celebrated in Bulgaria? Here the facets become especially colourful and distinctive as Professor Boshnakova enters the territory of overlapping cultural layers. To distinguish them and continue her exploration of the resilience of values, she places three important emphases in her analysis. The first concerns Orthodox ritual in the traditional celebration of the Nativity beside the family hearth, where the ceremonial Christmas log, the badnik, burns. An odd number of dishes, each with considerable social and emotional significance, are arranged on a table strewn with straw. They are carefully prepared by the whole family in the hope that, on this holy night, every member will receive God's blessing of health, good fortune and prosperity.

The author's second emphasis is the ideological transformation of the holiday during Bulgaria's socialist period (1944–1989), when Christmas was an ordinary working day. Under state-sponsored anti-religious policies and the strong influence of the Soviet model, Grandfather Frost (Dyado Mraz), who had appeared in Bulgarian literature as early as 1910, "froze out" the holiday's principal influencer, Santa Claus, together with his miracles and myths. Priority shifted to collective New Year celebrations, at which work collectives reviewed the achievements of the previous year and rewarded exemplary workers. Newspapers, radio, television and cinema directed attention towards the folklore traditions of Christmas Eve while shifting the focus of festivities towards New Year. This is evidenced by the 512 references to Grandfather Frost identified and extracted by Professor Boshnakova from the Communist Party newspaper Rabotnichesko Delo during the socialist period, as well as by Georgi Markov's essay "Santa Claus and Grandfather Frost", broadcast by Deutsche Welle in the 1970s, which exposed the falsity of festive communication under socialism.

The third emphasis concerns the period following the changes to Bulgaria's festive calendar, when a parliamentary decision of 20 December 1990 made Christmas an official public holiday and Christmas Eve, with its moral values, "returned" to Bulgarian life. The author captures a distinctive duality in the celebration: "This is a battle for authenticity, in which Bulgaria turns the holiday into a mirror of its own fragmented yet resilient identity, wavering between tradition and the digital future" (p. 441).

The changes brought about by the rapid penetration of modern technologies into Christmas celebrations, and their influence on the ways in which active digital users celebrate, are evident. To verify these changes, Professor Boshnakova conducted a standardised online survey of 1,155 respondents belonging to the "digital tribe", living in the capital, smaller towns and villages. Differences in responses by gender, place of residence, participation in festive activities and other factors are to be expected. Nevertheless, the words most frequently associated with Christmas are family, love, warmth, cosiness, shared joy, happiness and peace. The younger generation participates in family Christmas Eve

celebrations with its own “lifestyle project”, has its own musical soundtrack, listens to influencers from the “Christmas for Everyone” association, follows Christmas advertising adapted for the Bulgarian market, and shares its emotions, experiences and hopes concerning family, love and generosity primarily through digital communication on social networks and in Facebook groups. To borrow Ivaylo Dichev’s apt expression, this is how we now “report” to the digital community that we are good Bulgarians, observe tradition and seek to renew it in the spirit of the times.

To highlight the Christmas dimensions of Bulgarian philanthropy, Professor Boshnakova selects the “Bulgarian Christmas” campaign for analysis. On the one hand, she emphasises the indisputably positive tangible results of this annual campaign, held under the patronage of the President of the Republic, which uses donations from organisations and individual citizens to support children and young people requiring medical treatment. On the other hand, she points to the state healthcare system’s abdication of responsibility for addressing the problems of these children and young people, as well as those of older people suffering from age-related illnesses, through the mechanisms of public administration and the continuous specialised care that healthcare professionals are obliged to provide.

The final facets of Christmas celebration introduce its algorithmic future through scenarios exploring the resilience of Christmas communication from 2026 to 2100 and even beyond the digital age. In this hypothetical future, communication takes place not between human beings but between avatars. Professor Boshnakova examines whether authentic Christmas emotion will survive until the end of the present century by drawing on three leading artificial-intelligence systems – Gemini, ChatGPT and Seek – and posing questions about the distant future of the holiday from a child’s perspective. She introduces a new method, termed “ZIIlog”, by conducting a simultaneous role-play simulation across three independent platforms.

The following excerpts illustrate the responses obtained:

“Santa Claus’s beard will be half snow and half quantum dust.”

“Scented nanocapsules will release the smell of pine.”

“Algorithms will be the new candles, but they will shine only when someone lights them with a human hand.”

“The soul of Christmas lies not in objects but in the feeling they evoke.”

“The soul is lost only when we cease to care.”

“Vulnerability remains unhacked.”

Remarkably, in the child’s eyes, “Santa Claus evolves from a ‘deliverer of objects’ into a ‘Global Connectivity Operator’ who maintains the neural bridges between hearts” (p. 518). Equally remarkable is the prospect that, in a future “synchronised reality”, relatives and friends separated by thousands of kilometres will celebrate together and share their

emotions more honestly than people gathered around Christmas tables today, who often conceal their feelings for a variety of social or emotional reasons. In this future, "human emotions have been transformed into a paid software product, while empathy has been delegated to automated happiness-management systems".

Yet if, at the moment of technology's greatest triumph, the network goes dark, Christmas has the opportunity to be reborn amid the collapse and return to its analogue existence. The final facets of Christmas communication offer a clear explanation of how this extraordinary miracle becomes possible. Christmas triumphs once again because it invariably succeeds in stimulating and preserving what is human in humanity, making it resilient in the face of every challenge posed by time.

Professor Boshnakova bases her study on a theoretically substantiated and elaborated model of Christmas as a meta-campaign. I have already noted the diversity of scholarly sources from different disciplines on page 2 of this review. The study draws on numerous theories, concepts and models developed by scholars whose enumeration would occupy several pages. I shall mention only a few: philosopher of information Luciano Floridi, who introduced the concept of the "infosphere" to describe the new environment of contemporary life (p. 8 et seq.); anthropologist and semiotician Claude Lévi-Strauss and his concept of the "floating signifier" in magical thinking (p. 85); sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard and his concepts of "hyperreality" and "simulacrum" (p. 168); Russell Belk and his conception of Santa Claus in terms of "deity, consumption and parental influence" (p. 84); and digital-marketing specialist Joe Federer, who focuses on the intersection of psychology, including Freud's concepts of ego, superego and id, sociology and consumer behaviour on digital platforms, among others.

The research methodology and methods selected by Professor Boshnakova are appropriate to the study's ambitious aims and objectives. She rightly adopts an interdisciplinary approach as the most effective means of interpreting the wide-ranging subject of Christmas. The methods employed are notably diverse.

In addition to reviewing specialist literature, she frequently draws on statistical data, such as NASA information on Christmas lights in her discussion of lighting-based branding, or data from NORAD Tracks Santa on Santa Claus's Christmas Eve route. In 1955, a printing error directed curious children in Colorado Springs, eagerly awaiting their Christmas gifts, to the headquarters of the Continental Air Defense Command (p. 217). Ever since, its personnel have helped millions of children in more than 100 countries track Santa's journey around the world each year.

The study includes a rich collection of case studies of communication campaigns conducted by leading global brands, international organisations such as UNICEF, charities and others. Campaigns by public institutions are also of interest, such as an initiative by the United Kingdom's Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) to support the inclusion of people with hearing impairments at Christmas dinners. By introducing hosts

in advance to twelve signs from sign language, the campaign transforms interaction into an engaging and enjoyable activity (p. 375).

Professor Boshnakova also analyses sociological research findings and rankings to draw attention to Christmas campaigns rated highly for their effectiveness. One example is the ranking of the ten most impactful Christmas campaigns of all time, compiled through a large-scale online vote by the respected platform The Drum. It has an annual audience of 11.5 million, 69% of whom are senior executives with final decision-making authority, while 65% of its community consists of representatives of leading brands, agencies and media organisations. It is therefore unsurprising that the platform enjoys well-deserved authority and ranks first among marketing publishers in the United Kingdom and second in Europe (p. 312).

I have already discussed the analysis of references to Grandfather Frost in Rabotnichesko Delo. The author's empirical survey of 1,155 unique respondents, exploring the real emotions of Bulgaria's "digital tribe" in relation to Christmas communication and presented in tabular form in Appendix 1, likewise serves to substantiate her conclusions about the particularities of Christmas Eve and Christmas celebrations resulting from the interaction of diverse cultural layers.

Professor Boshnakova actively exploits the possibilities of artificial intelligence to enrich her scholarly text. Its most comprehensive application, however, is in the futuristic scenarios concerning Christmas communication at the end of the century, presented in Appendix 2. Both the similarities and the differences between the positions expressed by the three leading AI systems, each examining different aspects of the hypothetical future, are of considerable interest.

All this demonstrates that the author employs a variety of methods effectively and appropriately to substantiate her position and fulfil the objectives she has set herself.

I concur with the theoretical and applied scholarly contributions identified by Professor Boshnakova in her work. The reliability of the empirical material is supported by the citation of its sources and authors. The author's personal contribution to the preparation of the work is beyond doubt. The dissertation abstract accurately reflects the research undertaken and the results obtained.

According to her curriculum vitae, Professor Boshnakova's publications comprise two articles in Bulgarian and one in English in refereed journals ("Citted European Journal of Communication"), together with two studies in English and five in Bulgarian in non-refereed publications. She has authored a chapter in a collective monograph. Her articles have been cited in eight Bulgarian and two English-language academic publications.

I have the following comments and suggestions regarding Professor Boshnakova's substantial and wide-ranging work:

1. The author's theoretical and applied scholarly contributions should be presented in the conclusion rather than the introduction of the dissertation.

2. Since the author has adapted Maslow's seven-level hierarchy of needs to Christmas, it would be more accurate to call it the "Christmas Tree Based on Maslow's Hierarchy" rather than "Maslow's Christmas Tree" (p. 50).

3. In the analysis of Christmas in Bulgaria, I would include church music and, in particular, traditional Christmas carolling songs and Christmas Eve blessings in the soundtrack, as an important and distinctive element of Christmas communication in our country. The contribution of Bulgarian National Television (BNT) to the Christmas atmosphere during the socialist period also merits greater attention.

4. Given the many authors of theories, concepts and models cited by Professor Boshnakova, an index of names at the end of the work would be useful.

5. In organising the impressive bibliography of more than 800 titles, the sections should distinguish works in Cyrillic and Latin scripts (rather than using English-language headings only), while scholarly articles should be separated from media publications and grouped in their own section.

I have known Desislava Boshnakova personally since the mid-1990s, when we worked together to establish Bulgaria's first professional organisation for public relations specialists, the Bulgarian Public Relations Society. Her 1999 translation of Cutlip, Center and Broom's widely used American textbook Effective Public Relations proved extremely valuable to students and practitioners in the newly established academic discipline of Public Relations in Bulgaria. Among Professor Boshnakova's personal qualities, I would highlight her communication skills, initiative, creativity, organisational abilities and extensive experience publishing specialist literature on public communication through the publishing house she manages, ROI Communication.

In conclusion, I confidently recommend that the esteemed academic jury approve Professor Desislava Boshnakova's dissertation and award her the academic degree of Doctor of Sciences (DSc).

Sofia, 15 October 2026

Reviewer:

Professor Minka Zlateva, PhD