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LIFE MODELS OF YOUTH IN THE SPACE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS: RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The article presents the study of the life models of youth (as fragments of a life scenario realized by a person in concrete life spheres), presented in the Internet space. The topicality of the research is related with the strengthening of the intragenerational translation of life models and values on the Internet and the need to study the factors of building a life path by young people in new sociocultural conditions. The sample included 100 personal pages of the Russian social network Vkontakte users living in a megalopolis and small town (average age 23.63 ± 1.21). Methods: content analysis, comparative analysis. On average, the predominance of passive types of activity through the selection of viewed content was identified. The content concerned with a life models was more often related to the sphere of relations, a little less often – with a self-development and professional spheres. Analysis of the "status" and comments allows allocating indicators of life models (active or passive, based on a "contribution" to a life or desire for a comfort, and etc.). Significant differences associated with the place of residence and genders were revealed: with similar media activity, communicative activity is higher in the metropolis; the amount of content about relationships and closeness with a parent family is greater in a small town; the topics of the uploaded content in the professional sphere vary depending on the city and the gender. The impact of Internet content and the intragenerational transmission on life models in the professional sphere can be traced.

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1. Introduction

Ten years ago a digital space was considered as something special and separated from reality. Nowadays it is a part of our everyday life. Researchers are increasingly talking about the emergence of a united living space, the simultaneous existence of a person in real (offline) and digital (online) spaces, their mutual influence and penetration into each other (Drozdova, 2018; Guseltseva, 2019; Schukina, 2019; etc.). The development of social networks, blogs and other forms of online interaction, involving a virtual presentation and “life” of a real person on the Internet (posting information, photos, reports from real life, establishing professional relations, etc.), led to the fact that inclusion in Internet communication mediates a significant range of interests and areas of user activity. Despite the apparent interpenetration and formation of a united life space on-line and on-life, they are traditionally studied as separate areas of human life that affect each other. Herewith, the accent is done on the difference of these human “worlds” then now, at our look, not less of interest represents their unity.

In modern changing reality one of the urgent scientific and social problems is the studying of how young people build their life paths in new sociocultural conditions. Intergenerational (from parents to children) transmission is still playing an important role in formation of a life principles and behavioral patterns (Kostromina et al., 2018a). However, changes in society, and, above all, the involvement of the young generation in the reality of everyday life in the digital space, the increased translation of life values and behaviors between peers on the Internet, are no less important. What is the ratio of intergenerational (vertical) and intragenerational (horizontal) transmission of life landmarks, if it differs in different spheres of life - all these are issues that today require careful study.

2. Problem Statement

Recently, a fairly large number of studies of youth content in social networks and other Internet resources have been carried out. It makes possible to obtain data concerning a frequency and types of online activity, a popularity of certain resources, etc. For example, the interests of young people were studied by content analysis of personal pages and subscriptions to communities in five popular social networks in Russia: VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (Lisenkova & Melnikova, 2017). Differences in the content and publication activity in the categories “Work”, “Friends”, “Free time”, “Personal” in self-presentations on the Instagram social network of high-status and low-status users were found (Belinskaya & Gavrichenko, 2018). In some works, significant differences in the content of motivation, identity, and attitude to electronic media between residents of megacities and small cities are noted (Ayanyan & Martsinkovskaya, 2016). However, considering the Internet space as a significant “life space” of young people, in which their activity unfolds, allows us to raise deeper research questions that reflect a manifestation of personality subjectivity. In particular, our study was aimed at finding indicators of the activity of young people in the digital environment, reflecting their life values, planning their lives, the degree of independence in building a life scenario.

The concept of a life scenario in a modern interpretation is a construct reflecting the subject position of a person, his/her “authorship” in relation to his/her own life (Grishina et al., 2019, pp. 331-382). But a “life scenario” is a multidimensional concept that creates difficulties in its empirical study. To specify it

we proposed the concept of “life models”, which are scenario fragments implementing in concrete spheres of human life (professional sphere, sphere of close relations and self-development and leisure sphere). The life model is described through a person life space, which content and included characteristics are determined by person needs (this is close to the ideas of Levin (1935)). Empirically, it can be studied: (1) through a system of beliefs and cognitive attitudes related to a concrete sphere of an individual’s life and, accordingly, determining his/her activity in this area (a cognitive component); (2) through experiencing the significance of this life sphere for a person and attitude to it (an affective component); (3) through a person activity and responsibility in this area (a behavioral component) (Kostromina et al., 2018b). Empirical verification of the proposed concept shows its validity and heuristic value, makes it possible to obtain a description of the selected parameters in each sphere and to distinguish different variants of youth life models that differ in the degree of activity, involvement in life, closeness with the parent family, etc. (Kostromina et al., 2019).

3. Research Questions

What methodic tools are relevant for identifying the preferred content and types of activity of young people in the Internet space in order to identify indicators of life models in three life spheres (educational and professional sphere; relations, leisure and self-development)?

Does the preferred content and parameters of life models in youth groups differ depending on gender and place of residence (metropolis and small town)?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the characteristics of youth’s life models through analysis of the content that young people are interested in and share on the Internet, as well as identifying the degree of its potential impact on the construction of life scenario by youth.

The subject of the analysis is the personal pages of users. It is due to the fact that the personal page, as well as the blog, actually acts as a platform for the formation of a virtual identity of a person, and a potential resource for his/her variability and adaptability (Asmolov & Asmolov, 2009). Thus, it becomes possible to fix the multiplicity of personal manifestations, to analyze the versatility and inconsistency of the personality, in contrast to the usual social roles and socially desirable attitudes that users demonstrate in real life.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Study Sample

The sample includes 100 personal pages of users of the VKontakte social network (as the most popular among young people in Russia). The selection was carried out randomly using the Excel Data Analysis package. The criterion for including the user's personal page in the selection was at least 10 posts in the personal “wall” over the past six months. The average age of users is 23.63 ± 1.21 ; 50% of women, 50% of men. 50% of young people are residents of a metropolis (St. Petersburg; population is more than 5

million people), 50% of young people are residents of a small city (Novouralsk, Sverdlovsk region of Russia; population is 95 thousand people). The study was conducted in November, 2019.

5.2. Content analysis of personal pages of social network users

An original semantic lattice-type matrix was developed for analysis. The categorical basis of it are: empirical referents of life models in the spheres of professional activity, relationships, leisure and self-development, revealing a content, significance for young people and degree of their activity in each sphere. The units of content analysis in a text is a sentence or part of a complex sentence; in a visual content - a photo, a video or a symbolic image, which mentions (reflects) selected categories posted by users on a personal page.

The following categories and subcategories of analysis were identified:

(1) *socio-demographic data*: gender, age, city of residence, marital status, occupation, education / institution; (2) *quantitative indicators of user activity*: a) the number of “friends” (users who see all the updates to each other’s pages); b) the number of subscribers (users who are interested in a content of the author of the page and can view and comment on it in accordance with the privacy settings); c) the number of communities the page owner is subscribed to; d) the number of photos, video and audio recordings posted by the author for open viewing; (3) *type of user activity*: own user post; repost; a comment; emotional background (textual and/or expressed by a symbol). For visual content the type of image (photo, video, symbol, etc.) was additionally noted; (4) *qualitative characteristics related to the analyzed life spheres*: a) the professional / educational-professional sphere - request for consultation; job search; “stories” about current work / training; significant events; own achievements / projects; promotion of own services (paid), etc.; b) the sphere of close relations (friendship, love; matrimonial / family; parent-child relationships) - the need for relationships / search for a partner, current “stories”, problems, events, emotional assessment, etc.; c) the sphere of self-development and leisure - preferred activities and hobbies (not related to professional activities); self-education; self-development; Qualitative personal characteristics of the user: the wording “status”, answers to questions from the questionnaire “Your worldview?”, “The main thing in life?”, “The main thing in people?” etc.

The matrix received a positive expert assessment and was verified by testing empirical indicators of the “life model” construct (Kostromina et al., 2019).

Mathematical analysis of the data including descriptive comparative analysis, was performed by using the IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 package.

6. Findings

6.1. Analysis of communicative activity of young people on the social network VKontakte

On the average in all users’ subgroups a communication activity is very high: the number of “friends” (average is 960), subscribers (average is 9566), and communities (average is 190) varies from several units to several tens of thousands, which makes it impossible to rely on traditional statistical indicators. Although the most of “friends” and subscribers on the network have never communicated in reality (Soldatova et al., 2013) and communities are often nominal, it is important that their messages, calls and evaluations appear in the user's news feed, i.e. young people are in a joint information field. The use of

the Kruskal-Wallis criterion showed significant differences between groups of young men and women from different cities: users from the metropolis have significantly more friends ($H=9.51$; $p=0.023$), and especially subscribers ($H=60.85$; $p=0,000$) than among residents of a small city, and accordingly, the information flow in which they are included is more volume. Differences in the number of communities, videos, and photographs were not significant; the amount of laid out audio content is significantly larger in the group of men from a small city ($H=13.409$; $p=0.004$). Personal pages of users have a lot of content that is not strictly related to highlighted indicators of life models (for example, entertainment, lottery announcements, etc.), but due to the large volume and repeatability, we can talk about their indirect influence on the ideas of young people about what is important in life, and how to achieve this.

Among the types of activity on social networks, the most frequent are “reading posts” (72%) and “sending interesting posts to friends” (repost) (56%). The most eye-catching and viewed are photo, video posts, and textual “stories”. Refusal of unacceptable or non-shared views is carried out by blocking them or leaving the communities, and support and acceptance of a posted information is done through “likes” and reposts. There are the mechanisms for selecting material that not only attracts attention, but is also close to youth interests, ideas and values, and therefore it has a potential to influence their life models.

6.2. Analysis of young people network pages in the frame of the construct of a “life model”

In total, 3186 semantic units (among them 1133 textual and 2053 visual) related to life spheres were identified in the personal pages of users: educational and professional activities (426 mentions), the sphere of relations (1172), and the sphere of self-development and conduct leisure (1588).

6.2.1. Sphere of professional / educational and professional activities

On average, on a social network, young people most often share their professional achievements; current professional “stories”, significant professional events; they are less likely to seek advice and promote their professional services (the data presented are sums of text and visual posts). However, significant differences were found between the groups (Fig. 01). A special group consists of young men of the metropolis (about half of them indicated that they had moved to St. Petersburg relatively recently for professional growth and career) mentions professional activities and events much more often than all other groups. Young men of a small town devote the smallest amount of content on their page to the field of work; within this topic, the most important thing for them is their professional achievements, success. Young women from the metropolis devote most of their personal page to significant professional events, in second place are the current “stories”, while young women from a small city more often seek advice and offer professional services.

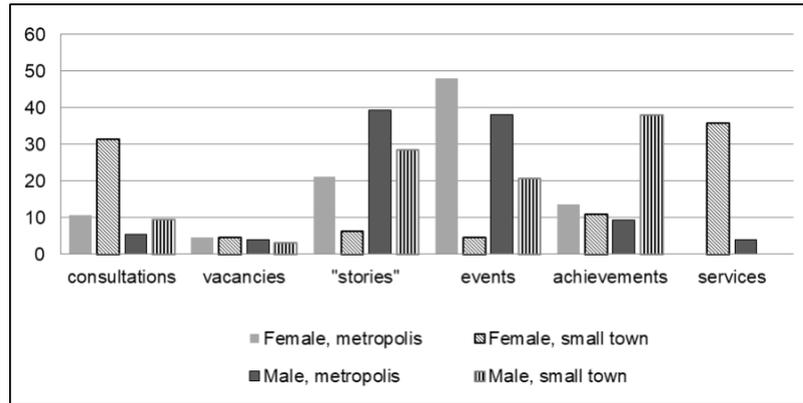


Figure 01. Frequency of mentioning types of activity in a professional sphere, depending on gender and place of residence (%)

At the same time, a significant scatter of individual data in all groups confirms an important fact for us: the heterogeneity of the youth group as a whole, the existence of different variants of life scenarios despite gender and city of residence.

6.2.2. Sphere of relationship

The comparative amount of mentions (in total text and images) reflecting the needs for friendship, love, matrimonial, and parental relations, as well as proximity to a parental family and a “feeling of the family circle” are presented in Fig. 02.

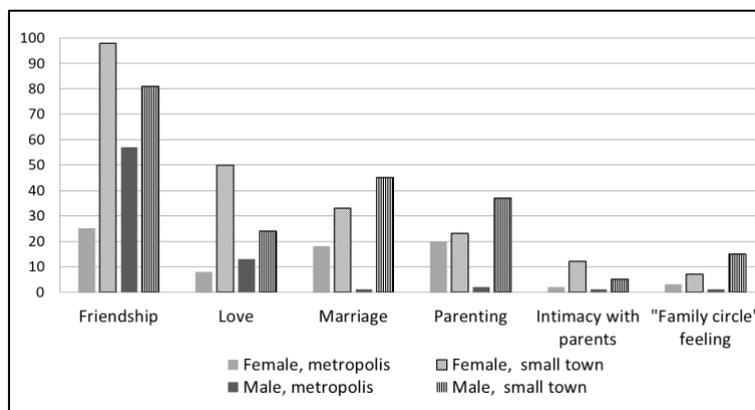


Figure 02. Frequency of mentioning indicators of needs in close relationships, depending on gender and place of residence (%)

On average, most of posts and reposts (total in text and images) are devoted to meetings with friends; in second place - love relationships and marriage with almost the same frequency; the vast majority of messages are accompanied by emotions of joy, happiness, admiration, etc. About 11% of users in each group are married, and it is they who fill the personal page with mentions of children and parenting. In general, young people demonstrate the importance of interpersonal communication, a commitment to traditional views concerned creating a family. At the same time, pronounced differences between the groups should be noted: both women and men living in a small town significantly more often demonstrate a desire

for creating a family, having children, relying on the support of parents and the importance of feeling “family circle” than, respectively, young women and men in the metropolis ($p = 0.003$).

6.2.3. Sphere of self-development and leisure

Content analysis showed that users mainly describe the "subject" areas of leisure: the largest amount is occupied by posts on hobbies, creative activities (27.5%), travel (13.9%), and entertainment (11.1%); social topics - society (11.5%), politics (6.1%), ecology (5.6%), hometown (4.5%) and pets (5.4%). The desire for self-development, life position and other indicators of a life model were mentioned more often in the context of discussing life success, and in those sections of a personal page where users place the “status”, answer questionnaire, formulate life principles, for example, “The main thing in people is courage and perseverance” (Activity) or “Who does not want - seeks reasons. Who wants is looking for opportunities” (“Contribution” to life). The vast majority of statements had a positive orientation (the desire to create a family, the need to make efforts for a success, etc.), and only 2.1% of the total volume of statements had a “negative” character (for example, the desire to have relationships with many partners, to spend time in pleasure, because “little depends” on the efforts of a person, etc.). This does not mean that only those young people who post them have alternative values, but rather, due to the fact that such statements are not very accepted in society. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that such "alternative" statements about the life scenario are more often belong to the inhabitants of the metropolis and are practically absent in a small city where a person is in a narrow circle.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the content relevant to the concept of “life models” showed that all studying spheres are presented both textually and visually. The professional sphere is more often represented in texts (although usually they are illustrated by photos and videos), the sphere of relations is more often represented by visual posts, which makes it difficult to recognize the essence of the message; the sphere of self-development is more often represented visually in “subject” activities in free time, whereas meaningful indicators of the life model (activity, involvement, perseverance, faith in oneself) are “scattered” across the page in a text format, and are present in the “status”, answers to the questionnaire, comments. This allows making a proposal of a bigger mindfulness manifested in a "verbal format» of representations related to the professional sphere. The sphere of relations and self-development are less cognitively defined, metaphorically and visually represented, that, possible, reflects their greater uncertainty and emotionality.

There were identified the differences in the content of users' personal pages depending primarily on their place of residence. This is manifested in a greater number of current contacts (and, accordingly, the breadth of the information field in which young people exist) in the metropolis, and in the differences in the volume of content related to different life spheres (for example: the most mentions of professional activity are found in the metropolis, in the small city there are more references to the sphere of personal relations and emotional support of the parental family; the sphere of self-development and leisure did not differ significantly). Gender-related differences were also revealed: for example, young men in a metropolis more often describe significant professional events, young women in a megalopolis describe professional events and current activities, young women in a small town more often write about services aimed at city

residents. Relationship of data obtained as a result of the content analysis of social network, with “life indicators” confirms the thesis of the need to study a united living space of human being by using a common research language.

It should be noted that the presented data reflect the trends obtained in this sample and cannot be automatically transferred to the entire population, however, they give reason to talk about: the difference in life models presented on the Internet resources among young people living in metropolis and small town; the variability of life models of youth groups living in the same city, that expressed in significant individual differences in many indicators; features of the presentation of life models, determined by the norms and interface of a social network (in this case, Vkontakte), while other social networks are more likely to position as networks of successful (e.g. Instagram) or business people (e.g. Facebook), and have other features which may be reflected in the content of personal pages relevant to the definition of “life model”.

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