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CONTENT INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE FORMATION OF THE AUDIENCE INTOLERANCE

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Abstract

The article considers the question of the social intolerance which is partially formed due to the social network content, because it plays a significant role in setting the ideological principles and norms. The material of the research included the results of sociological survey of the users of the social network VKontakte (N=406), living on the territory of the Russian Federation. The respondents were offered to evaluate various mems and demotivators with intolerant content (for example, humour concerning age, gender or race peculiarities etc.). After the survey we found out that half of all the respondents think that all the topics, concerning intolerant questions, are not acceptable for jokes. So, we may speak about the constant growth of tolerant people, though the percent of intolerant respondents is still high. Not all the topics are seriously accepted by society, but the basic problematic subjects (sexism, homophobia, racism) do not produce a significantly bright positive feed-back in comparison with the last years. One of the vectors to solve the problem of the tolerance level-up of the Russian citizens is the knowledge of the problem of media safety which may help to create the mechanisms of the audience defense from the negative content.

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1. Introduction

The problem of tolerance as the question of interaction between different categories of population as well as between single humans, having different appearance, views and social status, exists as long as the society exists. Mass media play an important role in the formation of both ideological principles and norms of society in general and the world view of each person. A special place in the general informational flow is occupied with the question of tolerance, which is constantly reflected in mass media. Since Internet appeared, the topic of tolerance has accepted a new vector of development, because online background, differing from traditional mass media, offers new opportunities, connected with active and mutual communication between its users. Internet, and social media particularly, allows expressing own opinion, finding people who are identical in some way. The global net is the platform which equals the opportunities of representatives of different categories of population, without paying attention to their territorial location, physical abilities, level of education, age etc.

On the other hand, Internet, and social networks in particular, are practically uncontrolled platforms, where there are risks of spreading both intolerant content and intolerant communicative behaviour of some users towards other users. The editorial policy and responsibility to the governmental structures, legislative authorities, dictate special restrictions on discussion of these themes in professional mass media. It does not exclude the appearance of intolerance, ways of submission of such topics etc. This “filter” is practically absent in social media.

Tolerance comes from the Latin word “tolerantia” which means voluntary patience, feelings of suffering connected with something unpleasant and cruel (The term dictionary, 2019).

“Declaration of principles of tolerance”, approved at the General Conference of UNESCO in 1995, November 16, says that tolerance means respect, acceptance and correct understanding of rich variety of the world cultures, forms of self-expression and personal individual actions (Declaration of principles of tolerance, 2019). We may notice that protecting the rights of minorities a person does not become one of them himself.

Melnichuk (2018) suggests considering tolerance in two aspects: firstly, it is understood as the relation and corresponds to the word “patience”, and secondly, it is understood as activity, behaviour and corresponds to the word “non-violence”.

The opposite is the notion “intolerance” which means the rejection of differences which cause hatred or dislike. In some way this notion is synonymous to xenophobia (fear and disgust of everything strange, unusual, and different). On the whole, the opposite tolerance may be called discrimination.

Lektorsky (1997) clarifies that an intolerant personality is characterized with the rejection of a different culture, traditions, values, behavioural and communicative models, way of life. Such people do not want to acknowledge the fear of different people because they do not want to show their weakness. Intolerance is the disrespect to habits and believes of other people. Intolerance may mean unjust treatment due to the religious believes, gender differences or clothes and haircut. Intolerance does not accept differences and is one of the foundations for racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and discrimination. It may often lead to violence (New philosophical encyclopedia, 2001). Such behavioural reactions and communicative models are not simply transferred from real life to Internet, but they have all the opportunities to form the intolerant background.

Within the study of the problem of tolerance online there are various scientific approaches. One of the main approaches is the communicative tolerance. Gruzkova, Sofinskaya, and Parfenov (2015) speak about the necessity to develop the general competences connected with the positive experience of proper discussion organization (i.e. with the purpose of development of tolerance), use of existing skills of creation of net communities.

Another linguist Selyutin (2006) describes the communicative tolerance as the positive communicative relations between people, which help to create the correct professional and social atmosphere, and distinguishes various indicators of communicative tolerance, such as words with positive connotations, phraseological units and others.

Narchuk (2017) continues studying the subject of tolerance directly in social networks and states two kinds of positive relations of users to each other: “active” tolerance is expressed through statements, in which users correctly express the cooperation with communicators, and “passive” communicative tolerance is expressed with “likes”.

The Ukrainian scientist Khyzhniak (2008) draws the conclusion about the necessity of creation of tolerant space in social networks with the following characteristic features: efficiency due to mutual trust and common identity; high degree of net unity; presence of fixed channels of communication; mutual responsibility of net participants to follow the principles of tolerance. The tolerance in social networks, in the scientist’s opinion, is the key factor in formation of his tolerant social behaviour.

Also, the question of tolerance in Internet is studied by Russian and Western researchers in the focus of media safety.

The Western colleagues, studying the problem of intolerant relations online, draw the conclusion about the necessity of single unique approaches in every segment of the audience.

For example, Wasserman (2018) studies the risks of Internet use by people with limited intellectual abilities because they face disrespectful treatment. The researcher thinks that the situation can be changed due to individual safety settings and confidentiality, not due to the supervision of medical personnel or relatives.

Researchers Lu and Yu (2018) studied the influence of Internet on moral and social intolerance. Using the data of World Values Study 2010-2014 they made the multi-level analyses of 48 841 respondents in 33 countries. The results showed the controversial results. First, intolerance is enhanced by the Internet penetration as a context but is reduced by the individual use of the Internet as a medium. Second, the effects of the Internet penetration are counteracted by the Internet participation, which builds up a robust democracy that functions to buffer the informational impacts of the Internet.

An acute and poorly studied topic is the problem of tolerance in demotivators, which are posted in Internet, and in social networks in particular. The researchers prove the influence of demotivators on the formation of intolerant attitude to some categories of population, hatred firing etc. (Gibadullina, 2013).

Also, the problems and potential of tolerance in Internet were actively studied by a number of the Russian scientists (for example, Yurkov, 2012; Malafeev, 2016; Telebaev, 2017; Khairullina, Asadullina, Korovkina, Sadretdinova, & Shaikhislamov, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

Social media as resources, which have the least degree of control and the absence of an editor responsible for the content, lose the so-called “ethic filter” in these questions. Thus, in social media one can often meet the intolerant content which may not only make a negative influence on the formation of ideological principles of the society, but, as a result, lead to the law violation and the audience responsibility. Lately a special attention has been paid to the cases of administrative and criminal responsibility for posting and reposting different context in social media, particularly for the spread of intolerant information.

There are various communities and publics in the social network VKontakte, in which the users may express their opinion and demonstrate their looks. Some of the groups have a potentially intolerant character and call for hatred. The subscribers there deal with conscious discrimination of various social minorities with cyber bullying. We notice the tendency that the majority of such communities use the prefix “anti” or prepositions “without” and “against” in their names (“Anti feminism and LGBT”, “Orthodox Christian against tolerance”, “Against Jews and Americans”, “Byelorussia without gays” etc.). In many of them the number of subscribers varies from a few hundreds until several millions of people.

But today we may find the appearance of unobvious intolerance even in humour and entertaining publics which have a wider audience. Subscribers, scrolling through the post, even do not think about the sense, which lies within the discriminating posts. It is connected with their accommodation to stereotyped jokes that may hurt the feelings of the object. So, being stimulated with the idea that there is nothing amoral in discrimination, these people keep on being intolerant. This content is often characterized by moderators as black humour, because it is cynical and, in some moments, amoral. In the course of our research we analyzed such communities in VKontakte.

3. Research Questions

The research is focused to solve the following problems:

- 1) What intolerant topics, in respondents’ opinion, are nowadays the least important and not worthy paying attention?
- 2) Discrimination of what social groups and minorities is not supported by the audience of social media?
- 3) How tolerant are the users of social networks to the representatives of different social categories?
- 4) How do social networks, the resource VKontakte in particular, influence the degree of tolerance of community representatives?
- 5) How did the level of tolerance change in the Russian society?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to find the basic problems of the appearance of intolerance in the context of social networks by the example of the social network VKontakte as the most popular resource among the Russian segment of the audience.

5. Research Methods

Within our research we applied the method of survey in the form of the sociological survey of the audience. The respondents were the users of the social network VKontakte, male and female; the average age is 18-25. The total answers are N=406. The survey included 24 questions.

6. Findings

The survey includes three blocks: the general information about the respondent, his evaluation of images and the attitude to “black humour”. For the second block we selected 19 mems from various communities with the topics like: sexism (gender stereotypes and female discrimination), lookism (appearance discrimination), ablism (discrimination of incapacabilities), religious disrespect, ageism (age discrimination), homophobia and racism. Also, we added some images mocking at the tolerant society (the USA in particular).

The hypothesis of the research is that the number of intolerant users of the social network VKontakte prevails over the tolerant ones by 20% because posts of the discriminating character in these communities receive a clearly expressed approval from the audience in the form of likes and comments.

The survey did not contain the reference to the purpose, it was conducted anonymously, and the questions were constructed to cause the audience trust which would allow them to express their opinion sincerely (for example, “Would you like this mem?”, “Look at the pic, is it funny?” etc.).

The survey involved 406 people, 303 out of them are women, 100 are men, and three people who did not mention their gender. The majority of the respondents were people of 18-22 in the category of “students”. It is necessary to notice that the age limit of the survey is 18+. The survey was posted online, the respondents were chosen with the method of random sample. These data help us state the basic thesis clearing the problem.

People do not mind the appearance discrimination. The contemporary society does not support the idea of body-positive (accepting your appearance with some disadvantages). The statement: “I tell you that: if you have no beautiful appearance, nobody wants to know how beautiful your soul is” was supported 299 of the interviewed. The desire to reach the ideal standards does not decrease, in spite of various ways: introduction of plus-size or non-standard beauty models in the fashion industry, including those with noticeable birthmarks. The society keeps holding to the human appearance as a priority, forgetting about his personality (abilities, knowledge, personal qualities, character etc.).

The audience encourages gender stereotypes. A part of the interviewed women sees the problem in sexism, the other part, on the contrary, supports their own diminishing. It is necessary to notice that mems mocking at women are not generally supported by the audience. For example, certain disapproval was caused by a mem about sexism. The picture is divided into four squares, the first has a sign: “I cooked your dinner, prepared the bath. Please, eat and wash yourself, I will be waiting in the bedroom”. On the right of the sign there is a picture of a young woman with the words below: “You wasted all the salary on drinks with friends in the bar, fool. No more beer and sex for you” and on the opposite side there is a picture of a punching bag. 71.9% of the interviewed (292 respondents) refused to like the picture, and 2.7% (11 respondents) supported the idea. The overall majority (299 respondents) agreed with the sign “It is

important that a man had money, not Instagram for relations”. So, one of the main gender stereotypes that a man must earn much money (“to be the earner”) is completely supported.

Jokes over religion are taken mostly positively. For example, the picture of a church building with a sign: “The main business center in Russia” seemed funny to 32.5% of the interviewed (132 respondents). The variant “rather yes” was chosen by 23.2%, and only 44.2% (180 respondents) responded negatively. This reaction is probably caused by the fact that a number of people, supporting any confession, are reducing in contemporary society.

The reaction on mems, containing homophobia, is mostly ambiguous. One of the images contained a sort of illustrated timeline, depicting different changes in contemporary subculture. The picture is divided into six sectors: the first one tells that the informal movement was popular in 2009, then emo was popular in 2010, “vanillas” were popular in 2011, sport was in trend in 2012. A man, depicted below, asks: “What will be popular in 5912?” The answer is the word “g*yw*ad”. Only 6.7% of the interviewed would post this mem on their pages. 3.4% would make a repost, the answer “rather not” was chosen by 14.8%. The absolutely negative variant was chosen by 75.1% (305) people to show they disagree with the author of the mem. Though it is necessary to notice that the last question offered the respondents to choose topics acceptable for jokes, and 29.6% (120 respondents) chose “Mocking at homosexuals”. So, a part of the interviewed was not honest enough choosing the conflicting answers. Probably, some of them did not think thoroughly while choosing.

The reaction to the jokes, containing racism, is also contradictory. On the one hand, people criticize the clear discrimination (comparison of “white” and “black”), but on the other hand they march against the tolerance to Afro-Americans. For example, the mem about the game designer Chuchel who changed the colour of his character’s skin (initially black, finally orange) because he was called a racist, is supported with the image of a child climbing over the laser rays with a phrase “F*ck, I should not offend anyone” and a sign “How the white people live in the 21st century”. 54% (219 respondents) agreed with this mem because they think that today society became “overtolerant” and see no problem of racism in many things. Also 178 respondents (43.9%) believed that the Hollywood adaptation of “Archipelag GULAG” is absurd because the actors included Afro-Americans.

The problem of ageism is still unobvious for people. Mems, mocking at people of younger or older age, are accepted negatively. 242 (59.1%) reacted negatively in case of mean irony over older people, and 244 (60.1%) did not like the humour about the problems of school age children. Though 38.7% of the interviewed marked in the final question that mocking at school children is acceptable. This contradiction is caused by the fact that some people do not think the problem is intolerant, because in general they are not aware of such term as “ageism”. Or they thought that mocking at school children is nothing to be compared with jokes over people with serious illnesses.

There is an opinion, supported by some of the interviewed (15.5%) that humour does not need restrictions, each topic may be laughed at. Here the moral ethic question appears: Why do offensive amoral jokes cause positive reaction of some people? There is a supposition that such a reaction is caused by the desire to look better against other people, to improve the self-esteem. It is necessary to notice though, that a large percent of people expresses their attitude to black humour as “sometimes we may laugh at something, but sometimes it is too much” (55.4%).

As the result, 41.9% think that all the topics concerning intolerance are not acceptable for jokes. So we may speak about the continuous appearance of tolerant people, though the percent of intolerant respondents is still high. Not all the topics are seriously accepted by society, but the basic problems (sexism, homophobia, racism) do not cause a clearly positive reaction in comparison with the last years. There is the social progress index, a combined index of the international research project The Social Progress Imperative, which measures the social growth (including the aspects of tolerance) in the world. According to its statistic, we may follow the progress of Russia in the general list. After 2014 Russia took the 80th position among the countries (Social Progress index, 2019), and continuously growing it occupied the 60th position after 2018 (2018 Social Progress index, 2019).

7. Conclusion

Summing up our work we may draw the main conclusions:

1) Fatshaming (mocking at the size of a person) and lookism are rarely accepted as the problems by respondents. Sometimes people who have the appearance complexes, start bullying others because they think that everyone must fall into the standards of the accepted beauty.

2) Sexism and gender stereotypes are often criticized if they are clear, when women are compared with animals (dogs, pigs, chickens). Mocking at feminism often falls into this category. In such cases we may speak about the appearance of new prejudices, misinforming the audience, which is incompetent in this topic.

3) Religious humour is accepted positively, especially about Christians and Islam. Probably the image of the Orthodox church is not trusted by respondents because of the past ironic jokes and anecdotes about church officers, and the cultural breach between Muslims seems inevitable for people. But the users fear the law when making jokes on this topic.

4) Ambiguous attitude is noticed to the question of homophobes. On the one hand, the respondents are clearly against discrimination of people with different sexual orientation. But they do not notice anything bad to tell a mean joke over LGBT+ community.

5) The results of the survey showed that the majority of respondents understand that racism is the discrimination, but they do not want to be intolerant towards people of other races. In spite of that, they think that today society pays too much attention to this problem. For example, blackface for most people is not something abusive, and introduction of too many Afro-American actors causes dislike.

6) Age stereotypes are frequently met in communities of the social network VKontakte. In most cases these are inoffensive mems on the topic “children of millennium will not understand”, accompanied by photos of some old thing of the past. Usually such a “nostalgia” concerns the 90s in Russia and the period of the USSR. These pictures have a subtle mock at the younger generation who became stereotypically “lost”.

7) In general jokes in black humour style are supported by the majority of the interviewed 70.9% (288 people), and the most popular intolerant theme for mems is ageism (38.7%) mentioned in the question as “a bias towards people of younger or older age”. The most amoral reason for laughter is the answer “Mocking at people with serious illnesses” (ablism), which was chosen by only 13.5% (55 respondents).

8) More than a half of the interviewed, 82.7% (336 people) being subscribers of the humouristic communities can distinguish the intolerant content and criticize such posts. This tells about the ability of independent thinking. The number of respondents, thinking that mems of discriminating character are funny and acceptable, are twice fewer than the tolerant interviewed.

So, the content of social networks, especially the resource VKontakte, really influences the formation of intolerance among the audience. Many intolerant questions appear in mems, demotivators, GIF-pictures and other content so often that users perceive them as prosiness. The knowledge of problems of media safety from the point of view of intolerance may help to create the mechanisms of the defense of the audience.

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