Self-Presentation on Social Networks: Features of Virtual Image Formation Depending on Age

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Abstract—**The paper analyzes the relationship between the formation of a virtual image and the level of development of Internet culture of social networks through the example of studying profiles on VKontakte social network. Internet culture of social networks is referred to as a system of values, norms, traditions and technologies that regulate the interaction of users of virtual social network with each other, with moderators and with oneself. Self-presentation is considered as a process of constructing a simulacrum that does not have an original existing in reality. Based on J. Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, a model for development of self-presentation as a result of assimilation of Internet culture of social networks, which reflects different levels of its development, is proposed. The study showed that the level of assimilation of Internet culture of social networks depends on the age of the user. The higher the level of assimilation of Internet culture of social networks, the higher the possibilities of self-presentation made to achieve personal and professionally significant goals.**

Keywords—Internet culture; virtual social networks; self-presentation; virtual image; simulacrum; age groups.

I. Introduction

The most common Internet communication tools in the modern world are social networks, which are virtual platforms for searching, maintaining and developing social contacts. According to the survey conducted in December 2017 by the analytical center Levada Center, the share of Russian users of social networks aged 18 years and older in a representative All-Russian sample was 59%. The most popular resources are

The Internet has become an integral part of modern society. Virtual social networks have deeply penetrated our daily life and imprint the image and quality of life, behavior, appearance, character of communication, etc. People spend a lot of time networking to achieve various goals. Social networks provide an opportunity to obtain and share information and the results of activities, discuss problems, join like-minded people, expand personal and professional contacts, maintain social intercourse, receive support from "friends" (subscribers), leave comments, create a "tribune" and so on.

Formation of new communication environment and its penetration into social processes have actualized the study of the issues related to Internet culture of social networks. This phenomenon in science is still poorly understood that indicates its complexity and dynamism.

In this paper, we assume that Internet culture consists of a set of subcultures that have both characteristics common of Internet culture and unique features. Virtual social networks exhibit characteristics that imprint the specifics of Internet culture of social networks. Internet culture of social networks is treated as a system of values, norms, traditions and technologies governing the interaction of virtual social network users with each other, with the moderators and with themselves.

E.S. Lyashenko described the principles of modern Internet culture, which, in our opinion, are also typical of Internet culture of social networks: editability; video clipping; an increased number of messages, mostly short, replaced by symbols; multiplied number of texts, photos, videos and other information; ready-to-use data [2].

Interaction on virtual social networks is based on self-presentation of each user. Users create personal profiles in networks, which consist of the following main blocks: a nickname (an individual username that identifies him in networks); avatar (a visual display of the user's image); photo, audio and video albums; profile (socio-demographic, status of the user, his interests, hobbies and other personal information); status (information block that shows the user's current mood; indicator of the current state); comments; presentation of his work results; friends; communities, etc. A personal profile on social networks is information about the user that he selected and posted online to form his virtual image.

Describing the process and result of virtual image construction, researchers identify its properties [3]: simulated physicality; formed identity; efficiency and interactivity of communication; creativity; anonymity; plurality; the possibility of automated activity. These properties of the virtual image are interconnected and complement each other, giving an individual the opportunity and conditions for self-presentation on social networks.

This paper, based on a semiotic approach, considers the Internet as a secondary modeling system in which models of the world or its individual fragments are built [4]. Virtual reality implies replacement of real things and actions with images – simulations [5].

An individual on social networks performs self-presentation to construct his virtual image – simulacrum – a semiotic sign, a "sign of the sign" that does not have an

original existing in reality [6], which may be close to the real image or completely differ from it. Simulacrum includes unconscious components since self-presentation is not completely controlled by an individual. The possibilities of social networks help the user go beyond the framework imposed by social norms or by him in real life. This is enhanced by the following basic characteristics of virtual communication: accessibility, relative security, autonomy, selectivity, distance, anonymity, relative freedom of actions, etc.

An individual uses a virtual image to present the features of his virtual identity. This is a way of self-expression of the user in networks with some embellishment of individual qualities, features, capabilities, abilities and achievements, and silence about others. An individual himself determines what and when to post, what kind of image to use and what accents to put. The virtual world suggests submitting oneself most advantageously to gain loyalty from significant others in order to maintain a certain level of self-respect and self-esteem.

According to J. Baudrillard, a simulacrum is created through 4 stages of image abstraction [6]:

Stage 1 – formation of a class of copies (reflection of basic reality);

Stage 2 – creation of functional analogies (deeper transformation of reality and creation of its "mask");

Stage 3 – design of the semiotic sign, the simulacrum base (substitution and concealment of reality);

Stage 4 – emergence of an autonomous simulacrum – "sign of the sign" (complete loss of touch with reality).

Based on J. Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, we have built a model for development of self-presentation through mastering Internet culture of social networks, which reflects different levels of development: initial ("Prototype"), medium ("Functional"), advanced: user ("Personalia") and professional ("Master") (Fig. 1).
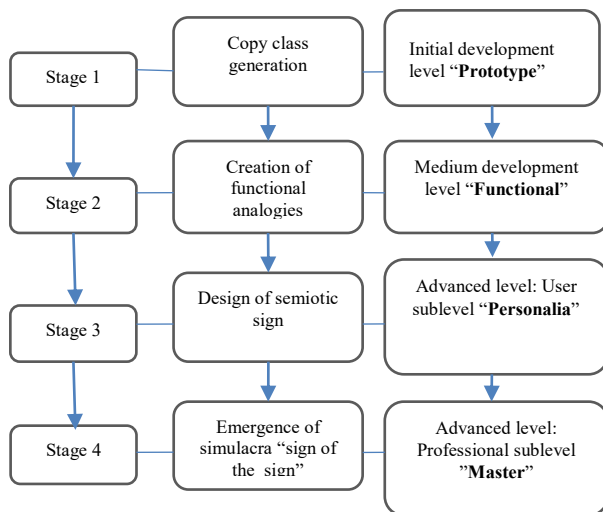

Fig. 1. Model of self-presentation development as a result of assimilation of Internet culture of social networks.

The initial level of mastering Internet culture of social networks ("Prototype") is characterized by a superficial acquaintance with the social network; indistinct construction of personal image, ill-designed self-presentation; excessive availability of personal information; low degree of information conversion; initial communication network building (a small number of "friends" and contacts); insufficient updating of interests and hobbies (a small number of groups, photo and video files); low density of filling and monotony of the "wall" content; lack of professional interests displayed.

The medium level of development of Internet culture of social networks ("Functional") shows more pronounced quantitative and substantial characteristics of increased social experience in the use of social networks. All the components of social network development have been mastered, but not yet used to increase an individual's social capital (either personally or professionally). In average professional self-realization, a common mistake is made when forming a personal image: a profile created is clearly focused on professional goals with no complete and diverse information presented. Excessive emphasis on business goals makes the audience feel that they want to use it for enrichment – this form of self-presentation is not strategically successful.

The advanced level of mastering Internet culture of social networks consists of two sublevels: the user level ("Personalia") and the professional level ("Master"). In general, the advanced level demonstrates successful use of all social network tools to improve personal status in the informal community and to promote an individual in his professional activities and careers. At the highest level of mastering Internet culture of social networks ("Master"), social networking tools are used for professional purposes to promote the image of a public person, the profile of social networks becomes a true simulacrum, when a group of professional PR people, not an individual is engaged in further promotion. In this case, when being engaged in a dialogue with a public person, one cannot be sure of who answers him – an individual himself or his representatives.

The availability, large-scale involvement and publicity of virtual communication make the study of self-presentation of individuals on social networks relevant. Participants of virtual communication have ample opportunities to construct their image. In the study, we assume that self-presentation (simulacrum design) depends on the level of Internet culture on social networks; its indicators differ depending on age.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research of information and network structures started before the development of modern communication tools. Theoretical and methodological foundations for studying an increased role of information and communication technologies were laid in the theories of the information and post-industrial society by D. Bell, E. Toffler, F. Webster and others.

In the studies by N. Luman, M. Castells, M. McLuhan and A. Touraine, electronic communication tools are considered to be most important for orienting an individual in the environment, the basis for interaction of people in society. Thus, the core of M. McLuhan's philosophical concept is the

method and type of communication. Communication technology is a decisive factor in the formation of historical types of social systems [7]. M. Castells, the founder of the network society theory, concludes that globalization and computerization processes are speeding up causing radical changes in society: global financial crises, transformation of the work structure and format, growth of multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, and emergence of new forms of communication. Social networks are becoming an indispensable element of everyday life that impact vatious spheres of life of millions of people. The space of flows, interactivity of the subject, displacement of symbolic exchange into virtual environment and timelessness are the material basis of new culture of the network society [8].

With the advent of the first forms of online communication, the Internet has changed the way people communicate. The issues related to the study of network culture, Internet culture and culture on the Internet are being updated. To date, there is no unified approach to this phenomenon. If the concept of "network culture" is sufficiently elaborated and considered in a number of studies by E.A. Berdnik, I.V. Lysak, L.V. Nurgaliyeva, T. Terranova and other researchers, little attention has been paid so far to the concept of Internet culture (M. Castells, D. Porter, E.S. Lyashenko, O.N. Fablinova, etc.). Network culture is considered broader than Internet culture. And the concepts of "Internet culture" and "Culture of the Internet" are typically identified. M. Castells believes that culture of the Internet is a collective construction (a set of values and beliefs) that affects the activities of the Internet producers-users. In the structure of Internet culture, he identifies four main components: technomericocratic culture, culture of hackers, culture of the virtual community and culture of entrepreneurs [9].

As virtual social networks developed and spread, they became an object of research from the beginning of the 2000s. More and more interest is manifested in different characteristics of communication participants, in the motifs for the use of social networks, network interactions and self-presentation [10]. The founders of the study to investigate the features of self-perception and self-presentation during interpersonal interaction were G. Blumer, I. Hoffman, J. G. Mead and C. Kuli.

V. Friedte and T. Keller consider self-presentation to be the most important prerequisite to start and control communication with other people in computer-mediated communication [11].

When studying the Internet as a space for self-presentation and self-identification, researchers use intrinsic characteristics of the Internet as a product of information computer technologies. Attempts are being made to identify the constructive potential of the Internet space and create an adequate culture of its use [12].

Studying the effect of informatization on an individual, researchers were primarily more interested in the possibilities of creating a virtual personality. Based on such "postmodern" characteristics of the Internet space and social networks, such as anonymity, hypertextuality and multiplicity, the researchers substantiated the idea that in virtual reality an individual creates an alternative image of his "Self", which is small and sometimes differs from a real person. The result is a created image endowed with certain characteristics which an individual may not possess [13]. The online environment disposes and creates conditions for "editing oneself" and for experiments with "constructing and reconstructing one's Self" [14, 15]. Today, there are researchers who assume that people become public and spread personalinformation being aware that other users can take control over it, and that this information can harm their reputation. Therefore, people tend to more faithfully describe themselves in profile [16]. Within the framework of this approach, social networks are considered as a condition of personality visualization, its representation through creation of the most favorable "Self-image", but not an alternative identity [3, p. 63]. Studies show that it is more comfortable for people to express their "true Self" in the virtual space, on social networks [17].

This paper presents an attempt to scientifically explore self-presentation on online social networks based on Baudrillard's concept of simulacra. J. Baudrillard used this concept to interpret the realities of the world and displaced it from ontology and semiology (J. Bataille, J. Deleuze, P. Klossovsky, and others). He viewed postmodernism as an era of total simulation, when reality turns into a model. People interact not with reality, but with hyper-reality, and they perceive it more realistically. Simulation is "generation of the hyperreal" that results in simulacrum – a copy, a representation of what does not really exist. J. Baudrillard focused on sociocultural aspects of simulacra, which acquire an ambiguous and no longer true character of the reflection of reality. Reality is substituted and constructed. Simulacrum is always a construct [6].

III. METHOD AND CALCULATION

To identify the degree of Internet culture development on social networks by users of different age groups, we conducted a content analysis of profiles ("pages") on VKontakte to study the models of self-presentation of youth and adults. Vkontakte social network was used as an empirical base, since it is the most popular network in Russia [1Levada].

The study was conducted in two stages: the first one – in April 2016 (approbation of the research methodology, description of the case); the second one – in March 2018 (verification and testing of the methodology, identification of indicator dynamics).

The total number of profiles analyzed on VKontakte social network was 620. At each stage, an age filter was used to randomly select 310 profiles: 70 profiles of young people aged from 14 to 18, from 19 to 24, and from 25 to 30, and 100 profiles of adults aged 31 and older.

In the coding matrix of the content analysis, we determined the following criteria (units of analysis) of assimilation of Internet culture on social networks: "name" (nickname); "experience" (amount of time spent on the Internet); "visual image" (avatar and photos); "personal information" (placement of personal data, contact information, the status on the page, reference to professional activities); "social activity" (number of friends, communities); "cognitive

activity" (number of videos, audio recordings, messages on the "wall").

Nicknames are usually less subject to changes, even in the image construction. Public people who create profiles on social networks for personal branding are primarily identified by name or pseudonym. Content analysis by the criterion of "name" performed in 2016 and 2018 showed similar results. People of virtually every age group use their real name and surname, pseudonym, or nickname that sounds similar to the real name. In contrast to the older generation group, young people aged 25–30 years tend to use their real name with minor variations. In 2016, young people aged 19–24 years were found to use fictitious names more actively. In 2018, it was shown that fictitious names became more popular among young people aged 14–18 years. The situation with fictitious names of "adults" is different: in 2016, no fictitious names were observed in the "adults" under study, whereas in 2018, some people of this age group used fictitious names. Since we cannot clearly distinguish "fake" names from real ones, only the names which are obviously fictional can be taken into account, for example, "Napoleon".

The "experience" of being present on social networks cannot be an unambiguously objective characteristic since one can have simultaneously several profiles or close a profile and open another one. In addition, we analyze profiles on VKontakte social network, whereas a person could have been in another network for a long time, could have gained experience there, and then open a profile on VKontakte social network. For the purposes of the study, we can ignore these facts. According to the "experience" criterion, the indicators significantly vary in stages and age groups. The study conducted in April 2016 showed that young people (among all selected age groups) spent much more time on VKontakte social network than "adults", but more than a third of the selected profiles (36%) had "experience" from 1 to 3 years; 25% – from 3 to 6 years; 20% – less than 1 year (people aged 14–18 years); 11% – from 6 to 9 years; 7% – from 9 to 12 years; 1% – more than 12 years. Among all the selected age groups of young people, the group aged 14–18 years exhibited the smallest "experience" of social networking, and the group of 25–30 years old people had the richest "experience". Almost half of the "adults" (46%) had profiles on VKontakte social network from 1 to 3 years; 25% – less than 1 year; 15% – from 3 to 6 years; 10% – from 6 to 9 years; 3% – from 9 to 12 years; 1% – more than 12 years.

In 2018, the study results showed that 6–9 year "experience" on social networks is the most common in both young people and adults. Interestingly, in 2018 there was not a single user of 14–18 years old who was registered for less than a year. Consideration of young people yielded the following results: "experience" of less than 1 year – 1%; from 1 to 3 years – 4%; from 3 to 6 years – 32%; from 6 to 9 years – 60%; from 9 to 12 years – 2%; more than 12 years – 1%. "Adults" with the "experience" of less than 1 year made up 2%; from 1 to 3 years – 13%; from 3 to 6 years – 21%; from 6 to 9 years old – 52%; from 9 to 12 years – 11%; more than 12 years – 1%. In 2018, the "experience" indicators increased significantly for both groups, but both studies suggest that the experience on VKontakte social network is higher in young

people from 14 to 30 years than that in "adults". At the same time, in the youth groups of 19–24 years and 25–30 years, the "experience" is much greater. The group of people aged 25–30 years was the most "experienced" in both studies.

Self-presentation on social networks is visualized through an avatar and photos in albums and on the "wall". A variety of iconographic documents can be used as avatars: an empty window, an abstract or associative picture, a cartoon, a photograph (simple, artistic, selfie, child, group, or a photo showing group affiliation and social significance of this group or event).

The avatar format noticeably varies by both age groups and stages of research. If compared with adults, young people more often use creative avatars of various formats. Adults mainly take a regular photo, group photo or photo of children. This group is more likely to use photos of their children and grandchildren or family photos, rather than individual photos. Young people rarely use children photos. Since they try to show themselves more mature, they actively use artistic photographs, or photographs processed with the help of special programs. At the same time, adults with increased experience on social networks and young people aged 25–30 years quite actively use abstract pictures that do not provide an objective image of the user. In 2016, selfies prevailed in all age groups of young people, whereas in 2018 young people aged 25–30 years prefer other images, not photos. According to the 2016 data: young people use selfies as avatars – 44%; group photos – 21%; artistic photos – 18%; abstract pictures – 8%; other images –9%. Adults use group photos as avatars – 49%; artistic photos – 20%; selfies – 19%; other images – 11%; abstract pictures – 1%.

A slightly different picture can be observed in 2018. Young people use avatars in the form of: selfies – 40%; artistic photos – 33%; group photos – 12%; abstract pictures – 11%; other images – 4%. Adults use artistic photos as avatars – 38%; group photos – 35%; abstract pictures – 19%; selfies – 14%; other images – 5%. Thus, the following trends were determined for avatars in both groups: the popularity of selfies and group photographs is found to go down, and the use of

The greatest number of photos is added by young people aged 25–30 years (1,024 photos in 2016; 3,329 photos in 2018). People aged 14–18 and 19–24 years add a roughly equal number of photos, but slightly less than those aged 25–30 years, with an average of 170 photos per web page. The smallest number of photos is observed in the profile of adults (an average of 40 photos in 2016; 56 photos in 2018). The tendency to add photos is increasing in all youth groups, while in the group of adults it remains at the same level. In terms of the photo content, there is also a noticeable difference between different age groups: adults often upload family photos; youth at the age of 25–30 years upload personal and official photos, as well as pictures that are not relevant to the user (nature photos, abstract pictures, paintings, etc.). Young people aged 19–24 years actively use artistic photos, staged photos, photos from parties and events. Young people aged 14–18 years share less personal and group photos, but personal ones still prevail.

Social networks are insecure resources used to easily share personal information. The studies of 2016 and 2018 show a

similar pattern: young people are less likely to publish personal information on social networks, or publish this information selectively for specific purpose (earnings, organizing activities). At the same time, adults with little experience of using social networks share more personal information. In the section "information about yourself", adults indicate their professional activity and provide contact and family information to a greater extent (49%). About 20% of young people aged 14–18 years use various statuses (Fig. 2).
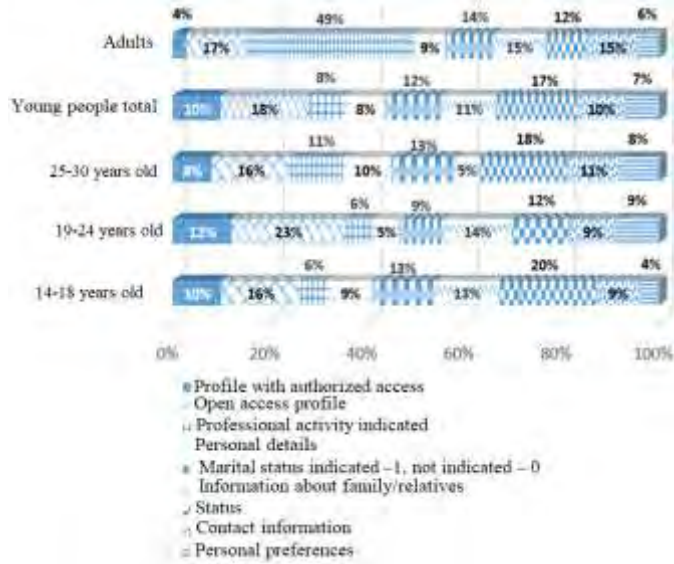

Fig. 2. The nature of personal information on the social network profile (content analysis, a total of 310 profiles, 2018).

The problem of protecting information and restricting access to the profile is obviously important for both age groups (10% in 2016 and 21% in 2018), but it is more relevant to young people. For comparison, adults close profiles less frequently: 4% in 2016 and 10% in 2018.

The section "personal information" also includes different statuses that characterize a person's credo or current mood through informative phrases or quotations, which can be used as an additional personality characteristic. Young people use statuses more often than adults. Interestingly, the 2018 study revealed a 3-fold increase in the use of statuses by young people aged 14–18 years if compared with the 2016 study (young people aged 14–18 years were the most active in using statuses in the 2016 study). Other indicators of the section "personal information" do not show significant changes in both studies.

We determined "social activity" of users by the number of contacts ("friends") in the network and the number of groups/communities the user joined. The 2016 and 2018 studies showed an increased number of friends in all the groups analyzed. Young people add friends more actively than adults. A group of people aged 25–30 years takes the first place in the number of "friends", and young people aged 19–24 years dominate in the number of communities. Adults have the smallest number of communities (Table I).

TABLE I. SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE ACTIVITY OF USERS ON THE SOCIAL NETWORK PROFILE (CONTENT ANALYSIS, A TOTAL OF 620 PROFILES, 2016 AND 2018)

Analysis category by year	Average number of messages on the profile wall by age groups				
	14–18 years	19–24 years	25–30 years	youth, total	31 years and older
Number of friends, 2016	87	111	161	120	60
Number of friends, 2018	227	410	677	438	87
Number of groups, 2016	100	227	70	132	28
Number of groups, 2018	95	278	84	152	36
Number of messages on the "wall", 2016	206	499	472	392	167
Number of messages on the "wall", 2018	103	712	678	388	201
Number of audio recordings, 2016	144	127	280	184	41
Number of audio recordings, 2018	180	107	363	216	59
Number of video recordings, 2016	163	217	140	173	23
Number of video recordings, 2018	184	347	207	246	45

The study of "cognitive activity" of users on the social network profile considered the intensity of reposts and messages on open access "walls", and the number of audio and video recordings. Young people in all age groups show significant activity, several times exceeding that in adults (Table I).

IV. CONCLUSION

Virtual social networks provide a variety of self-presentation options. Everyone can become part of the network and interact there through the construction of a virtual image (simulacrum) that cannot be authentic to a real person.

The content analysis of the profiles of young and adult users on VKontakte social network enabled us to determine the most active and competent users of the social network – youth groups aged 19–24 years and 25–30 years. The lowest rates for assimilation of Internet culture of social networks are noted for adults: they often use family photos on their pages and indicate marital status, provide information about their professional activities, personal data, preferences, hobbies, but add little audio and video recordings and other content. The communities indicated for this group are more informative than entertaining. Young people use social networks more deliberately, better protect personal information and more often construct images in accordance with the desired goals (friendship, love, business, search for partners, etc.).

The approach proposed in this paper allows representation of the study results in accordance with the developed classification (Fig. 1). Adults are found at the first stage of semiotic image formation ("Prototype") and "imitate their realistic image" in most of the selected quantitative and informative indicators. The second stage of abstraction of the

Internet image ("Functional") features people aged 14–18 years: young people are actively developing social networks, asserting themselves, expanding new experience and "adding" a realistic image due to capabilities of social networking tools. In terms of experience, the third stage ("Personalia") involves people aged 19–24 years and 25–30 years. The fourth stage ("Master") may also be occupied by users aged 25–30 years, both more competent in terms of social networking and more developed in terms of social intelligence due to age. Public people from the group of adults promoting their personal brand on social networks also belong to this stage. In this case, moderators of the personal page are representatives of the same group of young people 25–30 years old.

The study confirmed the hypothesis that not all users can control the development of individual simulacrum characteristics. Self-presentation (designing simulacrum) depends on the level of assimilation of Internet culture of social networks, which indicators differ depending on age. Young people aged 25–30 years exhibit the highest rates in adoption of social networks in terms of both the activity and the achievement of social and professional goals and objectives. This group more actively forms the models of self-presentation "Personalia" and "Master" facilitating the advanced level of social networking. The higher the level of development of the Internet culture of social networks, the more possibilities of self-presentation are available for achieving personal and professionally significant goals using social networking tools.

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