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Internet in Social Reality of Russian Youth: Potential Risks and Opportunities

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to an empirical analysis of the role of the Internet in the everyday reality of Russian youth. The author notes that the unusual speed of the Internet spread in the life of Russian society made the circumstances of growing up of modern young Russians very specific. In fact, they became the first generation of Russian ``digital natives''. Growing up in the conditions of the rapid spread of the Internet in society, many of them are used to perceiving the Internet as a natural and inalienable attribute of everyday reality. The author uses materials of secondary data analysis and the data of his sociological research among Russian youth to determine the role of the Internet in the social reality of youth and to find out the possible risks and opportunities that it can create. The empirical basis of the study is a questionnaire survey conducted by the author in 2018 among the youth of the city of Ekaterinburg, Russia. The key conclusion of the article is that the Internet is deeply integrated into the social reality of modern Russian youth. The growing importance of the Internet in life is a source of a number of risks, which include the formation of Internet addiction, increasing the vulnerability of young people to destructive content and the formation of a communicative gap between representatives of different generations. The Internet can also be used to broadcast information to a youth audience, to organize cooperation among young people, to popularize good practices and for other purposes.

Keywords: youth, Russian youth, Internet, ``digital natives'', Russian society

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1. Introduction

The role of the Internet in the social reality of modern young Russians has become one of the most popular vectors of modern sociological research. Questions about role of the Internet in the social life of young Russians are regularly discussed at numerous seminars and conferences. And research in the field of the influence of the Internet on different views and vectors of behavior of Russian youth annually receive grants from scientific foundations. Perhaps a significant interest of Russian sociology in this area is due to an important analytical contradiction. On the one hand, it is obvious that the importance of the Internet in the life of modern Russian youth is growing: recent studies show that majority of young Russians currently use the Internet regularly and spend at

least several hours on it every day. But, on the other hand, there are not many clear and detailed analytical models that can describe the possible changes that may occur in the attitude and behavior of young people due to the growing role of the Internet in their lives. Scientific intuition leads many sociologists to think that such changes are possible: the complexity of the social functions of the Internet suggests that increasing its role in the lives of young people can stimulate transformations in their consciousness and behavior. But what specific transformations can occur in the consciousness and behavior of youth under its influence? What risks create the increasing importance of the Internet in the life of modern Russian youth? And what opportunities can it provide for working with a youth audience? This article addresses these complex issues. Using materials of secondary data analysis and the data of our own sociological research, we will focus on the specific role of the Internet in the life of modern young Russians in order to clarify its impact on their consciousness and behavior and the possible consequences of this influence.

2. The First ``Digital Natives" of Russian Society

First of all, it is essential to make an important clarification. Questions and discussions about the peculiarities of the Internet behavior of Russian youth do not arise due to the fact that modern young Russians demonstrate unusual activity in using the Internet. Recent studies by foreign scientists confirm that there is nothing unique in this habit of Russian youth. The scientific works of foreign sociologists show that young people in the USA and Europe also use the Internet very actively [1] and often tend to perceive it as the main source of information [2]. Moreover, some authors even mention specific cases of using the Internet to control the attitude and behavior of young people. For example, recent studies show that the Internet and social media can be a very useful resource for civic education [3] and for popularization of a healthy lifestyle among young people [4]. So, perhaps, we can say that in fact there is nothing strange or unusual in the fact that Russian youth is very active in using the Internet. Young people around the world are equally active in using the Internet, and foreign researches have already begun to look for ways to make practical use of their activities.

The problem is that this specific youth activity is unusual and new to Russian society. The Internet has become an important part of Russia's social reality faster than it was in the USA or Europe. The remarkable speed of its penetration into the life of Russian society was noted by both Russian sociologists [5] and foreign researchers [6]. Statistical and sociological data confirm that this process was extremely fast. In the early 2000s,

the share of active Internet users in Russia was estimated at only 3-4% of the total population of the country [7]. According to sociological studies, this proportion remained stable over the entire period of the 2000s and began to increase only after 2009. The growth rate of the number of Internet users has been impressive. Already in 2011 or 2012 [5, 174] more than half of Russians began to use the Internet more or less regularly. Today, in 2018-2019, the percentage of active Internet users in Russia is estimated to be much higher: studies show that 84% of the country's citizens use it regularly [8], and at least 70% do it every day [9]. What does this mean for understanding the role of the Internet in the social reality of modern Russian youth? Well, in fact, this means that the circumstances of growing up of modern Russian youth were significantly different from the context of socialization of previous generations. Modern young Russians have become the first generation of Russian youth, which grew up in conditions of intensive (and progressive) penetration of the Internet into various spheres of society.

In fact, we can describe modern young Russians as the first ``digital natives'' of Russian society. This concept was offered by the sociologist M. Prensky to describe people who grew up in the conditions of the total spread of information technology in society and have become familiar with the use of such technologies from the first years of their lives. M. Prensky supposed that the attitudes and behavior of ``digital natives'' can have remarkable specifics. The nature of this specific is due to the fact that ``digital natives'' are getting used to the Internet as an important attribute of social reality from the first years of their lives. ``Digital natives'' do not use the Internet only as a simple communication tool. It becomes one of the central elements of their life [10]. Despite the fact that before there were certain discussions about the validity and accuracy of the concept of ``digital natives'' [11], it has become popular in the social sciences and has often been mentioned in some sociological studies [12]. And this concept is relevant for the description of modern young Russians. Young people under the age of 24 grew up at a time when information technology was turning into a very important part of the life of Russian society. Unlike previous generations, they did not master such technologies at a conscious age. They are used to using such technologies since childhood. Thus, we can confidently call such young people ``digital natives''. And it seems obvious that discussions about the peculiarities of the Internet behavior of Russian youth arise because they became the first ``digital natives'' of Russian society. These ``digital natives'' are a new phenomenon for the social sciences, so it is quite difficult to find a clear explanation of their attitudes and behavior without special diagnostics.

Now the social sciences can only conclude that the Internet plays a very important role in the life of these ``digital natives''. For example, we can say that they start using

the Internet very early. The data of the ``Children's Runet'' special survey, prepared with the support of the Ministry of Digital Development, Telecommunications and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation, indicate that Russian children and adolescents begin to use the Internet as early as 4-5 years old and by 8-11 years three quarters of them have their own personal device for this [13]. In addition, young Russians use the Internet more actively than other generations. We have already mentioned that the average percentage of Internet users in Russia is about 80%. Among young people under 24, this percentage is as close as possible to 100% [14]. Another important fact is that the Internet helps many young people in solving a variety of everyday tasks and problems. Recent studies show that 77% of Russians aged 18 to24 are used to using the Internet for banking [15], 90% tend to use it to read social networks [16], and 34% prefer to spend free time in it [17]. So, it is obvious that the Internet is integrated into the social reality of Russian youth, and its role in this reality can be extremely important. Empirical evidence confirms that these young people can truly be described the generation of ``digital natives''. But what can we say about the impact of the Internet on youth attitudes and behavior? Do we have reason to believe that such youth activity on the Internet can stimulate changes in these attitudes and behavior? The main problem is that we do not have a clear answer to this question.

Some Russian researchers believe that the intense presence of young people on the Internet changes their consciousness and behavior, and they consider this a source of serious social risks. These studies mention certain risks for young people: involvement in criminal communities [18], popularization of deviant behavior [19], and inclusion in extremist groups [20]. We agree that identifying and assessing such risks is an important scientific task. And even more than that - in our previous studies we ourselves dealt with relevant issues [21]. However, it is unclear how serious these risks are. Are there any peculiarities in the consciousness and behavior of the first Russian ``digital natives'' that pose these risks? And if these features exist, are they only sources of risk? Perhaps they open up some managerial opportunities? It is difficult to answer these confusing questions without empirical analysis. So, in the next part of the article, we will focus on an empirical analysis of the problem.

3. Research Method

In 2019, we conducted a sociological research to clarify these issues. The study was carried out in the second half of 2019 in Ekaterinburg, Russia. The main objective of this

study was to diagnose modern patterns of behavior of Russian youth on the Internet and factors that may affect these patterns.

The survey was conducted among young people aged 14 to 24 years. Representatives of this particular age group were specifically selected for the study. In 2012, when the Internet began to receive mass distribution in Russia, representatives of this age group were from 8 to 18 years old. That is, in fact, people of this age group represent the first generation of Russian ``digital natives'' more accurately than any other. So, we decided to focus on the analysis of representatives of this age group.

The total number of respondents was 314. They were selected using a simple quota sample, which was based on the criteria of age, gender and area of residence. The quota sampling model was calculated on the basis of information on the gender and age structure of the population of Ekaterinburg at the beginning of 2018.

4. Results and Discussions

The analysis allows us to draw a number of remarkable conclusions about the characteristics of the consciousness and behavior of young people. These findings not only confirm that the young people analyzed can be described as ``digital natives'', but also provide a chance to clarify the risks and opportunities for the Internet to influence their social reality.

First of all, the Internet is familiar to young people and is perceived by them as an inalienable attribute of life. The vast majority of young people who participated in the study call themselves active Internet users (96.5% of respondents describe themselves in this way). Moreover, most of them do not like the idea of temporary losing access to the Internet. Such a situation will not be a problem for only a few of them (31.0%). Everyone else says that it will be difficult for them to cope with such a situation. Probably, their answers to these questions can even be considered as an indirect sign of the formation of Internet addiction. But we believe that such an assessment is too premature. Addiction is a pathological and stable condition [22], and its existence should be based on a strong system of arguments. Therefore, we cannot be sure that this is a dependency. However, these answers show the intensive integration of the Internet into the social reality of young people. Even if they do not have Internet addiction in the exact meaning of this term, they are used to using it actively and constantly, so many of them are really hard to imagine their life without it. The Internet is an extremely important part of their lives.

The second important conclusion is that the Internet is integrated into the social reality of youth. Young people use the Internet very intensively and in many ways. The

analysis showed that the average time they spend on the Internet exceeds 3 hours every day. The purpose of their stay on the Internet cannot be reduced to any one dominant background. The survey showed that the vast majority of young people use the Internet to search for information (90.7%), maintain contacts with friends (85.4%), consume media content (82.9%), read news (67.2%). And the time they spend on various resources confirms that they have many reasons for using the Internet. At least 64.6% of them spend at least 3 hours a day on social networks, 43.2% spend on educational and scientific sites, and 41.2% spend on gaming. The high intensity and pronounced versatility of the use of the Internet in the youth environment make it possible to talk about its clear integration into the everyday social reality that surrounds young people. In fact, the survey data show that the Internet is not just a means of working with information for young people, but a kind of habitat that provides opportunities for solving practical problems, entertainment, communication and for other needs and tasks.

The third trend identified during the study is that most young people are open to creating new social interactions and collaboration on the Internet. Most of them do not see problems in actively communicating with many people on the Internet. They are ready to chat with completely new people on the Internet. Only 25.7% of respondents completely exclude the possibility of communicating with strangers on the Internet. The remaining respondents named different conditions under which they allow themselves to enter into such communication with strangers, but they still do not exclude the possibility of such communication. In fact, this information shows that the Internet for them is not only one of the tools to maintain existing social contacts, but also an environment for the formation of new contacts. The motivation for forming these contacts is diverse: the answers show that such motivation can be based on emotions, pragmatic interest, and even simple curiosity. But it is crucial that the willingness to chat with strangers on the Internet is the norm for most young people.

The fourth important conclusion is that communication between young people tends to shift toward the Internet. The fact is that the Internet is becoming one of the important (or even the most important) communication platforms for representatives of Russian youth. During the preparation of the study, we intuitively assumed that a high activity in the use of the Internet favors a shift in the balance of everyday communication among young people in the Internet. This idea seemed clear: if young people are more used to looking for information and having fun on the Internet, then they may also prefer to use it to communication with friends. To check if this is true, we used a combination of two related questions in the questionnaire: ``*Please rate how often you communicate with friends on the Internet''* and ``*How often do you prefer to meet friends to talk to them*

outside the Internet''. The blurred category of ``how often'' was used by us purposefully: during the survey it was important to understand not the actual frequency of communication, but the assessment of this frequency by young people. Summarizing and combining the respondents' answers to the questions posed, we developed our own typology of young people that characterizes their options predispositions to communication on the Internet or beyond: ``*Secretive people''* (talk a little with friends both on the Internet and not only); ``*Virtual people''* (mostly communicate with friends via the Internet, rarely communicate with friends offline); ``*Communicative people''* (mostly communicate with friends via the Internet, but also often communicate offline); ``*Traditional people''* (prefer offline communication with friends, rarely use the Internet for this communication).

The distribution of respondents between these segments looks indicative. Few people prefer to communicate on the Internet: only 7.5% of respondents belong to ``Virtual people''. But at the same time, it is also difficult to say that traditional forms of communication prevail over the Internet. Most of the respondents were in the ``Secretive people'' segment (43.9%). All the rest are divided between ``Traditional people'' (23.5%) and ``Communicative people'' (25.1%). And these answers allow us to draw at least two conclusions. On the one hand, communication on the Internet and beyond represents alternatives for most young people: a relatively small number in the group of ``Communicative people'' indicates that only a few young people can combine these forms of communication, while others prefer to choose between them. And on the other hand, a large number of people in the ``Secretive people'' segment demonstrate that avoiding intensive communication on the Internet does not guarantee that young people prefer offline communication. Many of them avoid communication both on the Internet and offline. In other words, one cannot say now that the Internet has replaced offline communication in the lives of young people. But the likelihood of such a replacement in the future looks rather high.

Another conclusion that we can draw after the analysis of the sociological data is the fact that there are no significant differences between respondents with different combinations of social and demographic parameters. Of course, there are some particular differences in the answers of men and women and young people from different districts of the city. But procedures of the factor analysis and the correlation analysis show that these differences do not have strong statistical significance. These differences represent only small and local variations of answers on particular questions and their importance is low. Thus, it can be concluded that young people have a common culture of using the Internet, and this culture does not depend on gender, quality of life, area of residence or any other social or demographic factors. Of course, so far this is only a hypothesis. But

we believe that the absence of significant statistical differences between respondents with different combinations of social and demographic parameters is an important fact that may indicate the existence of such a common culture.

Summarizing these single conclusions, we can note that the Internet is organically integrated into the everyday social reality of modern Russian youth. Our own data and the results obtained by other researchers show that today's young Russians are significantly more active and versatile in their use of the Internet than representatives of other generations. Probably, we can even say that the Internet for young people is not just a technical tool to maintain social ties or receive information, but it is turning into a kind of ``environment'' of their life. Young Russians use the Internet much more often than representatives of other age groups, and use it for many purposes: they search information, communicate and have fun. The analysis showed that most representatives of modern Russian youth cannot be called purely dependent on the Internet, as those who seek to enter the network at any cost are a clear minority. Similarly, one cannot say that most young people moved their communication only to the Internet, having forgotten about other, more traditional forms of communication. In other words, their responses do not show signs of Internet addiction or excess virtualization of communication, but it is clearly visible that the Internet has become absolutely familiar for young people and even a basis of their social reality.

Such a strong integration of the Internet into the everyday reality of modern Russian youth provides a rich ground for reflection on the potential risks associated with the deep immersion of young people in the virtual space. Of course, the description and assessment of such risks have an arbitrary character. At the moment, we can say that the Internet is extremely intensively integrated into the daily life of modern Russian youth. So, any discussion of the long-term consequences of this situation lies in a hypothetical plane, and we can assume what problems may arise due to the integration of the Internet in the daily lives of young people, but it will only be possible to reasonably judge the validity of such assumptions over time. Nevertheless, even despite some conventions, a description of such risks, in our opinion, is possible. Current scientific literature describes several serious problems that are often associated with the integration of the Internet into the social reality of young people. Each of these risks, in our opinion, can significantly increase due to the fact that the Internet has become such an integral part of the everyday reality of modern Russian youth.

- The first risk is the formation of Internet addiction. We have noted above that right now we should not talk about the formed Internet addiction of Russian youth. But in our opinion, such development is possible in the future and even

likely. Some researchers note that the nature of communication on the Internet is very specific: exchange of information happens very quickly and is dominated by emotionally bright and simple content [23]. This informational content is simple and provides more pleasure than any other form of information. So, the extensive use of such content can transform into a pathological habit. And this is not only a logical hypothesis. Recent research has shown a direct relationship between the intensity of time that a young person spends on the Internet and the formation of Internet addiction: the more time, the more distinct the formation of addiction [24, 176]. Considering this effect, we believe that the risk of the formation of Internet addiction among modern Russian youth in the current circumstances is quite high.

• The second risk is the formation of vulnerability of young people to the destructive content that the Internet broadcasts. Such vulnerability was mentioned by many researchers [25]. The obvious root of this is the high speed and unpredictability of information flows in the Internet. The Internet is convenient for the rapid and large-scale dissemination of any information: getting into the virtual space it instantly becomes available to a huge number of users. And it is obvious that the Internet can be a useful tool for broadcasting of extremely different kinds of information. It can be easily used to spread negative of illegal information: extremist materials, illegal content, ``hate speech'' and others. The high activity of young people using the Internet makes them one of the potential recipients for replicating such content. And even though the effectiveness of the impact of such content on the moods and behavioral tendencies of young people needs to be studied separately, the probability of this impact in the current conditions seems rather high.

• The third risk is the formation of the communicative gap between representatives of different generations. The communication inside the Internet has a significant feature. Russian researchers mention that such communication is based on a specific series of symbols and on a specific rhetoric [26, 196]. Moreover, the Internet creates special problems that are important for users and absolutely unclear for outsiders: for example, cyberbullying or cybervandalism. Older generations of Russians are not completely eliminated from the Internet, but still they are less active than young people. Therefore, it is important to understand that the high intensity of immersion of young people in virtual space leads to the formation of special moods, concerns and even a peculiar language that may not be known or understood by representatives of other generations. The increased activity of youth in using the Internet makes this risk obviously strong.

So, we can mention at least three risks associated with the deep immersion of young people in the Internet: formation of Internet addiction, rise of vulnerability of young people to the destructive content and formation of the communicative gap between representatives of different generations. Of course, this list can hardly be considered exhaustive. However, in our opinion, these risks look serious and in any case they should be the subject of a full-fledged research.

At the same time, the deep integration of the Internet into the social reality of youth can create not only risks, but also important managerial opportunities. In our opinion, these opportunities are created by the same mass spread of the Internet among young people, which also creates the risks mentioned above. The extremely high proportion of Internet users among youth makes it a convenient tool for quickly replicating any information with almost one hundred percent coverage of the youth audience. Their willingness to actively communicate on the Internet (even with strangers) turns it into a convenient tool for the development of youth cooperation and even youth movements. The multifaceted integration of the Internet into the social reality of youth creates a rich ground for the analysis of youth sentiments and requests: understanding the behavior of young people on certain Internet resources provides an opportunity to make conclusions about their needs and habits. Finally, the high activity of young people in using the Internet helps use it to popularize various social practices of good habits and behavior. For example, in our previous articles we described a case of using the Internet and social media to popularize healthy lifestyle among youth [27]. But we believe that it is also possible to popularize other good habits and practices. The deep integration of the Internet into the social reality of Russian youth opens up significant opportunities for this.

Of course, it is important to understand that the reasoning about such risks and opportunities is rather hypothetical. Modern Russian youth remains the first generation of Russian ``digital natives'', and we have to admit that we still cannot understand and predict many features of this unusual generation. So, the list of mentioned risks and opportunities and issues about their importance requires a strong scientific discussion. And of course, there is an option to describe such risks and opportunities in another way. However, it looks obvious that the high activity of modern Russian youth who use the Internet can have relatively long-term social consequences. And in our opinion, the described risks and opportunities can be considered such potential consequences.

5. Conclusion

The main idea of this article was related to our attempt to trace the features of the integration of the Internet into the everyday life of modern Russian youth and understand the potential risks and possibilities of such integration. The analysis showed that the rapid and intensive penetration of the Internet into the life of Russian society really affected the characteristics of the mood and behavior of today's young Russians. In fact, they became the first generation of Russian ``digital natives''. They grew up in the conditions of the total spread of the Internet in the life of Russian society. So, now most of them are used to using the Internet very actively and cannot even imagine their life without it. They are more active in using the Internet than the older generation: they use the Internet more often, spend more time in it and with its help solve many problems. In fact, the Internet has become a kind of foundation for the social reality of Russian youth. Most of them cannot be described as people with Internet addiction, but it's quite difficult for them to imagine their life without the Internet.

One of the consequences of such intensive integration of the Internet into the social reality of Russian youth is the emergence of several social risks. Our study allows us to conclude that there are at least three of these risks: the formation of Internet addiction, increasing the vulnerability of youth to destructive content and the formation of a communicative gap between representatives of different generations. But at the same time, the deep integration of the Internet into the social reality of young Russians also provides opportunities for working with a youth audience. The Internet can be used to broadcast information to a youth audience, to organize cooperation among young people, to popularize good practices and for many other purposes. The modern role of the Internet in the social reality of modern Russian youth makes it a useful tool for solving such problems.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that we refrain from final and too ambitious conclusions. In our article, we wanted to trace the role of the Internet in the life of modern Russian youth and show that its important status in the social reality of young Russians can be a source of both serious risks and important opportunities. Obviously, a deeper understanding of such risks and opportunities requires further study. And we will be happy to invite colleagues to discuss and further research in this area.

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