

Social media discourse among youth in Russia: Between Western hegemonic ambitions and struggle for traditional values¹

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Abstract

Due to the development of digital media and communication technologies, media culture has penetrated deeply into the daily practices of people around the world. However, regardless of globalization and other megatrends of our time, national values and priorities remain significant in the media space of each state. The purpose of this study was to analyze the publications of the most popular online communities among young people on the Russian social networking platforms Telegram and VK. In total, 1,134 publications posted in 2022 were studied. That was the period after the special military operation in Ukraine started, and in the midst of the Western countries' economic sanctions

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imposition. The research method was content analysis and discourse analysis, which involved studying the content of the presented metanarratives, as well as their interpretation. Analyzing youth digital media culture, we can note its strong ideological overtones, reflecting the ideas, views and values that are enshrined in official documents and the public consciousness of Russians. Metanarratives serve the state strategic mission of the youth patriotic education.

Keywords

Metanarrative, discourse, ideology, hegemony, Russia.

Introduction

Russia is home to 39,089,719 people under the age of 23³, i.e. those born in 2000 and later, which represents almost 27% of all Russians, confirming the important place of Generation Z in the statistical portrait of the country. This generation, born in the digital age, is directly involved in the reproduction of youth media culture as we know it. Scholars offer different time frames for naming Generation Z most often referring to the wide period from 1997 to 2012. For the purposes of this study we refer to Generation Z as those born after 2000.

Having studied the motives for media consumption of Russian youth just a few years ago, we found that the crucial needs of this generation were self-actualization and socialization in the media and communication space, which they have not separated from the social space, since the realization of personality and the formation of the identity of a 'media hominem' has a hybrid, i.e. both social and media nature (Dunas, & Vartanov, 2020). Media consumption of young Russians in terms of the use of gadgets, platforms, social networks, messengers, and video content was in line with global trends in the media market and was represented by such global giants as Apple, Alphabet, Netflix, and others.

In 2022, the status quo has changed dramatically. Some of the media companies were recognized as extremist and blocked, which happened to Instagram⁴ and Facebook⁵, once so familiar to Russian users, whose audience has shrunk 2.3-2.5 times in the year since the sanctions were imposed⁶. Other companies were unable to ensure the ability to pay for their services due to economic sanctions against Russian banks or defiantly left, 'canceled' Russian

³ <https://rosstat.gov.ru/compendium/document/13284>

⁴ Belongs to Meta company, banned at the territory of the Russian Federation.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/24/11/2023/655f33fa9a794725f7d58b28

users, as in the case of Netflix and part of Google services. The third remained, but their products turned out to be too expensive for young people, which, for example, caused iPhone sales to drop by 48%⁷.

Researchers cite various characteristics describing the collective sentiments of young people who have been ‘canceled’ by Western brands, leading to one most clear-cut idea: Russian youth have been taken out of their comfort zone (Karlova, Myasoutov, 2023: 1212; Lobodenko et al, 2022). On the one hand, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia paradoxically did not transform information consumption of young people significantly, as they quickly found alternative channels and sources of receiving familiar content, switching to unblocking access through VPN services or viewing content on pirate sites.

On the other hand, modern media culture under sanctions has taken the direction towards de-globalization, de-Americanization, nationalization and support for domestic producers of information goods and services, which resulted from the turn of media policy towards giving priority to national values in the legal regulation of the media sphere (Vartanova, & Dunas 2022, 2023). New geopolitical challenges revealed the relevance of patriotic education of youth, which had no chance to remain outside the content of youth media, and thus the discourse of these digital communities.

Concern about the social attitudes of young Russians in the new geopolitical realities has raised the issues of measuring the parameters of youth media culture in the conditions of transformation for the Russian academic community, including the authors of this study. Among them, the key issues are the correlation between its global and national nature, the worldview of Russian youth as carriers of hegemonic ‘Western’ or ideological state-patriotic values, and the description of the existing Russian media space as a discourse that reflects the values, meanings, and ideas presented in the media content that young people consume daily.

Theoretical framework of the study: Media discourse as a product of social culture

Continuing the political economy tradition of media studies, according to which media discourse reflects the socio-cultural values or ideological postulates of both the nation-state and rival countries, as well as the private interests of specific elite groups representing political or economic power in society, we move away from an understanding of ideology close to Gramsci’s theory of

⁷ <https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/483509-spros-na-iphone-v-rossii-upal-zagod-pocti-vdvoe>

hegemony, who viewed it solely as a tool for manipulating the masses. We adhere to the understanding of ideology peculiar to the modern normative sociological tradition that's we consider ideology as a complex of the most widespread ideas in society, which unequivocally correspond to the interests of the ruling groups and elites but primarily represent the views of common sense (Giddens, & Satton, 2019: 222). Following more the tradition of Michael Foucault rather than Karl Marx, we believe that ideology is in some way synonymous with social discourse and discursive practices rather than with the cultural reproduction of the ruling class views. At the same time, we associate the hegemony of the West primarily with the effects of globalization, which turned out to be not so much global as centrifugal: from the global West to the global East, from the global North to the global South (Thussu, 2009; Vartanova, & Gladkova 2020), and actually took the form of 'Americanization' as a process of imposing views and values through American products of mass culture and media.

In our study, we draw on Shi-xu's definition of discourse, in which the research focus is not only on the acts of linguistic communication, but also on the context, the social, cultural and historical environment in which communicative acts take place (Shi-xu, 2022a: 20). Within this approach we use the concept of metanarrative, by which we understand a comprehensive frame that is above a specific narrative, constructed in a particular socio-cultural context and consisting of a set of narratives that form, among other things, basic attitudes, human understanding of 'right' and 'wrong' (Lyotard, 1998; Trotsuk, 2023). In the formation process, metanarratives rely on a stereotyped and abstracted cultural code correlated with the dominant value system and state ideology, society's value system, norms of morality, and other culturally significant determinants of the macro-context.

Finally, studies of national discourse cannot be imagined outside the study of cultural codes. The dissimilar experiences of the 'West' and 'East' countries lead to different value orientations, which is why Western scholars often describe the cultures of Asia, Africa and Latin America as backward or dictatorial without taking into account the religious and historical aspects of the formation of social order in them (Shi-xu, 2022a: 49). Thus, the West is more characterized by the values of individualism (Freire, 1985; Shi-xu, 2009, 2022b), while Eastern cultures value modesty and collectivism, striving for harmonious coexistence with society and nature (Shi-xu, 2022a: 50).

Intercultural differences of civilizations are explained by the confrontation of traditional values with secular-rational values and survival values with self-expression values (Inglehart, & Welzel, 2011). The first pair of values shows

the role of the state, religion, and family in the society. The second pair of values shows the degree of individualism and self-expression, the civil society development level, economic development, security, tolerance.

Russia traditionally combines features of several civilizations at once: Eastern Christian (Orthodox) and Afro-Muslim. In many respects, the complexity of defining the place of Russia and Russian national media discourse in particular is due to the multi-religious composition of the population, the historically high importance of the role of the state, as well as the values of collectivism that date back to the pre-Soviet era, and the radical post-Soviet transformation manifested in the liberalization of the economy and lifestyle (Oleshko, Mukhina, & Malik, 2023). The Russian media system has been comprehensively developed in works that explain its specificity outside the Western world (Vartanova, 2012).

Hypothesis and research questions

The first hypothesis (H1) is that under the conditions of economic sanctions, geopolitical challenges, and the ‘cancelation’ of Russians, the dominant metanarratives in social media consumed by young people will be aimed at the consolidation of society and primarily related to the values of patriotism. At the same time, we realized that Russian youth, having recently been part of the global media world, were reproducing a new form of patriotism that would be viable under current conditions. It is obvious that such stereotyped watchwords as ‘awareness of duty to the Motherland’ or ‘selfless service to the country’ have ceased to have the same life-defining significance for modern young people that they had before. This condition is caused by globalization, cosmopolitanism, urbanization, mediatization, and other transformational processes characteristic of nation-states to which young people are particularly susceptible. That is why the concept of so-called ‘new patriotism’ gains importance as a search for relevant tools to increase the patriotic sentiments of citizens, reformatting ‘non-working’ structures (Remarchuk, 2014; Mohov, 2019).

The first research question (RQ1) concerns the dominant metanarratives in the discourse of youth communities in social media under new geopolitical conditions. Thus, RQ1 can be formulated as follows: what metanarratives related to traditional values of Russian society are represented in the agenda of youth communities in social media?

The second hypothesis (H2) is that contemporary Russian youth media culture keeps in touch with the global agenda, referring to world-famous events and heroes, reproducing the lifestyle of young people beyond territorial boundaries, cancel culture, and political guidelines, since globalization as an

influential process of modernity was launched long ago and obviously cannot stop overnight.

The second research question (RQ2) centers around the context or packaging of crucial metanarratives, i.e., it reveals belonging to a cultural code: either national, determined by state ideology, or global, determined by Western hegemony. Thus, RQ2 can be formulated as follows: do metanarratives in the social media of youth communities refer to national or global culture?

Empirical study: Metanarrative analysis of the top Russian youth social media communities

At the first stage of our study, we formed a sample of three communities on the VK platform and three Telegram channels that had the highest engagement rate and the largest number of Generation Z representatives among subscribers⁸. A standard random week from June 20 to 26, 2022 was selected as a chronological framework for the study.

At the second stage, a content analysis of 1134 publications of the sampled communities and channels was conducted, including: *Topor 1 +* (163 publications), *NE MORGENSTERN* (164 publications), *Krovavaya Barynya* (142 publications), *Leonardo Daivinchik* (96 publications), *Rifmy i Panchi* (283 publications), and *Ovsyanka, Sir!* (286 publications). Narrativization, i.e., creating a narrative about each of the 1,134 publications, and compiling a list of topics related to the publication, was carried out. Finally, media narratives were codified by metanarratives. As a result, 26 ‘reflections’ of metanarratives were identified in the studied media texts of social media (see *Table 1*).

Table 1

List of identified metanarrative ‘reflections’

Metanarrative reflected in media	Metanarrative type	Number	%
Russia is a strong country that defends its sovereignty. Its strength is based on the strong leader, stable ruble, law, order and security	Political metanarratives	404	21,7%
Family and having kids is a great happiness in life	Traditional values	140	7,5%

⁸ According to TGstat (<https://tgstat.ru/>) and Mediascope (<https://mediascope.net/>) for Telegram, and Brand Analytics (<https://brandanalytics.ru/>) as well as VK inner statistics for vk.com platform (accessed 15 January 2024).

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Russia is surrounded by enemies. The enemies are primarily the United States and the West. China is not an enemy, but should be treated with caution. Belarus is a friend	Political metanarratives	134	7,2%
Russia has a rich culture, both historically and modernly	Political metanarratives	111	6,0%
Contemporary popular culture is global. Russian youth are familiar with top American bloggers and celebrities, movies and music, as well as global brands	'Unsafe' metanarratives	106	5,7%
There are problem areas in Russia: corruption in the regions, imperfect legislation, dishonest businessmen	'Unsafe' metanarratives	98	5,3%
Russia has a rich history that must be remembered. First of all, it is necessary to keep the memory of the Great Patriotic War alive	Political metanarratives	96	5,2%
A low ranker is often in trouble: whether a big business profits from him or a natural cataclysm occurs. A low ranker needs the protection of the state and the society	Traditional values	92	5,0%
Rap or hip-hop is the most progressive music trend in Russia today, represented by talented musicians and bloggers	'Unsafe' metanarratives	91	4,9%
Childhood as a period of a person's life evokes warm associations	Traditional values	81	4,4%
Nature and animal life are fascinating and captivating in their beauty	Youth lifestyle	81	4,4%
It is always important to remain a decent person in relations with people: to be respectful, to preserve dignity, to be a reliable friend	Traditional values	71	3,8%
The passing of a person is a great sorrow, but the dead live on in our memory	Traditional values	68	3,7%
It is important to lead a healthy lifestyle, which includes active recreation, sports, proper nutrition, abstinence from alcohol and drugs	Youth lifestyle	54	2,9%
Alcohol consumption and smoking are acceptable. Especially on holidays	'Unsafe' metanarratives	49	2,6%
Outstanding athletes are people worth admiring	Traditional values	36	1,9%
The current government in Ukraine is an enemy of Russia, but this does not apply to Ukrainians as a people who remain brotherly to Russians	Political metanarratives	26	1,4%

Bloggers remind us that anyone can achieve success, fame and money	'Unsafe' metanarratives	23	1,2%
Domestic abuse is unacceptable	'Unsafe' metanarratives	21	1,1%
Speaking your mind publicly and being able to freely say whatever you think is important	'Unsafe' metanarratives	20	1,1%
Traditional patriarchal values have become obsolete	'Unsafe' metanarratives	17	0,9%
Cryptocurrencies won't do any good	Political metanarratives	10	0,5%
Education, self-development and progress are important both for the individual and for society as a whole	Youth lifestyle	9	0,5%
Perfect democracy does not exist in the West	Political metanarratives	8	0,4%
Foreign agents remain a significant part of Russian cultural and public sphere	'Unsafe' metanarratives	6	0,3%
Elders must be respected	Traditional values	6	0,3%
Total:		1,858	

Source: Authors, 2024

Political metanarratives. This group included metanarratives, which, relying on the current information agenda, ensured the influence of crucial ideological and value concepts on the comprehension of actual political processes both in the country and in the world, constitutionalizing the main postulates of ideology for mass consciousness, which is generally characteristic of political ideologies (Potseluev, & Konstantinov 2012). Political metanarratives demonstrate the most vivid example of how ideology realizes itself through the organization of conceptual schemes, building a system of interactions between routine processes and the value structure of the Russian state. The most common thesis was 'Russia is a strong country that defends its sovereignty. Its strength is based on the strong leader, stable ruble, law, order and security' found in 21.7% of the publications studied. The metanarrative combined several narratives simultaneously, including quotes from the Russian President Vladimir Putin, economic news, as well as direct references to the overriding metanarrative representing patriotism as a key value of Russian society. In addition, it is referential to the cultural code of a strong state, which corresponds to the type of civilizations where traditional values are inherent.

Another common political metanarrative is ‘Russia is surrounded by enemies. Its enemies are primarily the United States and the West. China is not an enemy, but should be treated with caution. Belarus is a friend’. It was formulated by the research group on the basis of a set of media narratives, the topics of which were reduced to information about Russia’s foreign policy.

A significant share of media narratives confirming this metanarrative was formed by publications devoted to the economic sanctions imposed by foreign countries against Russia, which directly affected the rights and interests of the Russian consumer. Thus, the economic agenda was highlighted through the prism of the personal interests of citizens, which corresponds to the ‘human rights and freedoms’ value which were infringed by the cancel culture. Among other things, the issue of Russia’s economic security has been embedded in the broader context of civilizational confrontation, which is reflected in the cultural code about Russia’s unique path and its opposition to both the West and the East.

The dichotomy ‘friend or foe’ has become one of the characteristic feature of ideological influence (Potseluev, & Konstantinov, 2012: 210) contributing to the formation of necessary views. In this context, it is especially important to take into account the fact that today’s youth have no experience of global civilizational confrontation (Karlova, & Myasutov, 2023: 1211). The metanarrative ‘Perfect democracy does not exist in the West’, which is almost identical but still more subtle in its emphasis, exposes the problems of Western countries related to their political structure.

As a result of narrativization, another political thesis has acquired the following expression: ‘Russia has a rich history that must be remembered. First of all, it is necessary to keep the memory of the Great Patriotic War alive’.

The metanarrative works through cultural and historical memory as tools for the consolidation of society on the basis of a common historical past. Involvement in a common cultural value which is the Great Patriotic War is one of the foundations of national identity and national community.

We correlate with it the metanarrative ‘Russia has a rich culture, both historically and modernly’, which emphasizes Russia’s cultural heritage of the past and present, which is considered part of the world heritage.

Traditional values. This group of metanarratives focused on describing the significance of family and childbearing in human life. Celebrities and bloggers from both Russian and global popular culture were used as examples.

The metanarrative ‘Elders must be respected’, realized by the example of both domestic and foreign heroes, turned out to be widespread. Respect for

elders is an important norm of morality and ethics in many cultures around the world, but it is predominantly characteristic of Eastern culture, which again brings the issue of Russia's civilizational path into focus.

The important metanarratives in the Traditional values group were 'A low ranker is often in trouble: weather a big business profits from him or a natural cataclysm occurs. A low ranker needs the protection of the state and society', 'Childhood as a period of a person's life evokes warm associations', 'It is always important to remain a decent person in relations with people: to be respectful, to preserve dignity, to be a reliable friend'.

The first metanarrative describes a social category called 'the low ranker' which refers to a well-known cultural code in Russian literature based on the biography of an ordinary citizen, an everyday person who often becomes a victim of circumstances. The second metanarrative tells about a person in the context of childhood as a special age period. Similar to the metanarrative about the Great Patriotic War, it engages memory but not so much historical as personal, realizing the effect of nostalgia for the past. In this way a sweet memory of the childhood period is constructed forming a deep patriotic feeling which is what nostalgia is. The third metanarrative emphasizes the moral qualities of a person, describing him or her as 'decent' directing attention to the traditional norms of morality and ethics in many cultures.

All the metanarratives of the group under study place a person in a continuum of life journey, on which he or she has to face adversity, worthy moral ideals, personal circumstances, and the public sphere. Thus, different aspects of life and behavior of people in traditional societies are subjected to narrativization.

Youth lifestyle. This group reflects the current conditions of Russian youth against the backdrop of experiencing a new coronavirus pandemic, social uncertainty, and the crucial military, economic, and social upheavals of recent years. In the conditions of decreasing predictability, confidence in the future, and the possibility of realizing long-term life plans, a tendency to change axiological signs has been noted in Russian youth culture (Lisovsky, 1998: 99; Karlova, & Myasoutov, 2023: 1209). The 'desired present culture' (Karlova, & Myasoutov, 2022) already formed and based on the Western-type consumption cult due to its unsustainability has led to the unrealized aspirations of young people, which is reflected in the youngsters' social attitudes.

It should be noted that the metanarratives of this group create a very extensive comfort zone for modern youth, in which various practices of social life of young people from healthy lifestyle and sports to petting animals and self-development find a place. These practices allow young people to distance

themselves from existential experiences and accept a new image of political reality based on the images of the virtual environment (Karlova, & Myasoutov, 2023: 1220).

It is important to note that lifestyle metanarratives have been categorized into this group very conditionally. In any case, regardless of the group, many metanarratives are aimed at involving young people in the practices of new Russian patriotism and acceptance of Russia's new geopolitical role at the international arena. At the same time, these metanarratives combine narratives expressing values and beliefs that are considered important and positive in society: free speech, healthy lifestyle, environmental awareness, and the value of education and self-development. Political culture is built on the basis of positive rather than negative patterns which ensures its unconditional acceptance and sustainability in the long term.

'Unsafe' metanarratives. This group included those metanarratives that contradict the cultural code, other metanarratives, or even entire groups of metanarratives. In our view, these metanarratives have the potential to provoke risks of doublethink, i.e. a type of speech activity in which opposing points of view coexist simultaneously. For instance, the metanarrative about the imperfection of governance in Russia's regions may potentially contradict the idea of a strong leader and his centralized power or form a judgment about the lack of integrity and system in the political structure.

Although the metanarrative about the permissibility of alcohol can be confirmed by an appropriate cultural code, especially prevalent in vernacular and, what is more, popular culture implementing the stereotype about the heroization of Russian drunkenness, it still contradicts the healthy lifestyle concept.

Excessive attention to foreign agents, coverage of their creative activities in a positive way, their inclusion in the daily information agenda offset the very status of a foreign agent as a person publicly censured for foreign influence. The same is true for the popularization of hip-hop culture that exists as a result of the globalization of American show business.

The thesis about the uselessness of men, which has become one of the most widespread in feminist discourse, is directly related to overcoming the systematic domination of men over women in various spheres of life. And it is precisely this thesis that has become the content reflecting the anti-patriarchal discourse.

Conclusion

As the research showed, the metanarratives presented in the agenda of youth communities in social media are related to the traditional values of the

Russian society. These are patriotism, family and loyalty, economic stability and prosperity of Russia, historical memory of the exploits of the Russian people. All of them are reflected in the analyzed metanarratives, which confirmed H1. There is an obvious focus on ideology as a system of the most important, fundamental for the country ideas, views and values as the main content important for broadcasting to young people. The formation of media discourse metanarratives takes place in accordance with the dominant ideological discourse.

However, the mainstreaming of traditional Russian values takes place through cultural forms atypical for the Russian soil, which generally confirms H2. The agenda of youth social media consists of topics relevant to Russian society, which also correspond to the cultural codes of the global world. They are also 'wrapped up' in a global pop-cultural form but remain understandable and close to Russia's generation Z. Global content is refracted through Russian-language rap and hip-hop music or the idle lifestyle of Russian bloggers, ironized, and integrated into the visual discourse of modernity through a semiotic form relevant to young people widely known as the meme.

It is probably more correct to speak of consensus as the basic reference construct of a multi-component digital media culture. Jürgen Habermas developed a theory of communicative action, recognizing its heart as consensus based on discussion and argumentation, which is the core of communicative rationality. Habermas recognized the possibility of distorted communication that would negatively affect the social system (Habermas, 1989). Jeffrey Alexander's analysis of the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006) recognizes the possible exceptions inherent in the binary discourses that structure civil society. Some alien to the Russian cultural tradition forms such as rap as a genre of music, dark humor in a communication field, and global celebrities as opinion leaders, underwent repositioning, as the argumentation that fills the communicative action led to the versatility and inclusion of these phenomena in the national context, ending up as a subject of consensus.

One such tool is memory, which in the case of the communities under study turns out to be effective in constructing not only epic myths of past greatness, but also the image of childhood, the cultivation of heroes and attributes of the recent past. Such a reassembly evokes a nostalgia effect and comfortably connects the Russian Generation Z with the historical consciousness of the Russian people, since the depth of historical memory in the case of a young person is not a matter of principle. National identity is constructed through favorable images of the past, which serves to integrate the young Russian into the country's culture, its media discourse, history and territory.

A significant amount of the studied communities' content has a nostalgic subject matter. Nostalgia-appealing content demonstrates maximum audience engagement. Administrators of the social media communities under study skilfully manage the group memory of readers, while discussions and exchange of nostalgic memories in comments create a local, closed group memory, reminiscent of an 'information bubble' and an 'echo chamber' (Salikhova et al, 2022).

Thus, the analyzed social media communities' editorial policy based on consensus building, the formation of 'new patriotism', and the nostalgia effect is probably a deliberate discursive strategy of youth civic and patriotic education. Such policies promote the acceptance of contradictory social experiences encoded in the global world symbolic system that young people understand. Generation Z's media consumption promotes socialization through comprehension and assimilation of social experience in all its complexity, as well as self-actualization through a variety of related media practices, including listening to music, participating in discussions, and making friends.

As the analysis has shown, the online communities under study form not so much associations as unity among Russians of Generation Z or 'digital youth'. This perceived commonality is based on the traditional spiritual values of the Russian people, packaged or wrapped in forms not always typical of Russian cultural tradition, but understandable and consensually approved.

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