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SOCIAL NETWORKING CULTURE: STRUCTURAL AND DYNAMIC ASPECTS

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Abstract

The paper deals with the study of structural and dynamic characteristics of modern social networking culture. The author shows that social media sites provide a significant potential for a variety of social activities. The space of social networks is steadily becoming a new habitat for a modern human. The most important implication entailed by the expansion of social media is the development of social networking culture that is deemed in the study as a set of sustainable norms, values, activities, etc. To analyze the structural and dynamic aspects of social networking culture, the author uses an original method that implies the construction of a structural and functional framework. The framework is based on the allocation of key functions of social networking culture, levels of its analysis. Main functional characteristics of social networking culture include the formation of a special cultural environment, the creation of network communities. The levels of analysis involve value-normative, pragmatic and denotative. The value-normative level determines the ontology of the socio-cultural content of social networking culture. It reflects a value-normative framework and standards for achieving goals pursued. The pragmatic level determines the dynamic development and functioning of social networking culture. The denotative level of social networking culture is determined by the direct content of functional activity. Thus, the author, based on the structural and functional framework that provides for an analysis of social networking structure, concludes that social networking culture as a sophisticated phenomenon of modern social and communicative reality is polydiscoursive and multimodal.

Keywords: Social networks, social networking culture, communication, discourse, cultural environment.

1. Introduction

In modern society, new forms of social cultures and relations are being cultivated, along with the development of social norms governing the creation and consumption of cultural products. Furthermore, scientific and technological progress has a great impact on the process of cultural development, which leads to the emergence of a commercial cultural industry, and, as a result, the necessity to fill in various cultural gaps. The dehumanizing nature of commercial cultural institutions of the early and mid 20th century, as well as practices and products they engendered, all have drawn enough criticism (Marcuse, 1994; Ortega y Gasset, 2016). At a later time, another determinant for fundamentally new phenomena in the cultural sphere was the wide spread of information and communication technologies, which tailored postindustrial or information society. These phenomena have become the object of a number of studies (Rashkoff, 2003; Castells, 2004) that, however, do not entirely feature just the sort of cultural artifacts that emerged due to WEB 2.0 Internet-based applications. The studies of social media as such, like WEB 2.0 (Rheingold, 2002; Stutzman, 2006; Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Campbell, 2010; Marwick, 2010; Sanches, 2010; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012; Shalimov, 2013; Efimov, 2015), as a rule, do not sufficiently address their most important cultural characteristics.

2. Problem Statement

Modern WEB 2.0 applications, particularly social media sites, provide vast opportunities for a variety of activities. Social networking is a peculiar environment for a modern individual, which determines the vectors of their self-identity and self-fulfillment. An obvious impact of social media expansion is the established institution of social networking culture. It is mainly a culture of real-life interactions on the Internet, but it is reflected beyond the media, as well, space in mixing a media language and everyday language, in developing new forms of identity, in distributing various artistic outputs and much more.

We define social networking culture as a set of sustainable norms, values, practices, patterns of social network communication, as well as resulting artistic outputs. It should be noted that some scientists study the general online context of networking culture formation, but their research is mainly geared at the architecture of a new virtual culture (Manovich, 2017) or the transformation of culture in terms of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006), which only partially coincides with the problem area of the present research.

3. Research Questions

Social networking culture is accessible and easy to understand, therefore it is a communicative everyday culture promoted by many users of social media; Internet users are producers, intermediaries and consumers of social media. The spread of social media, as well as the promotion of socially significant artifacts leads to the consolidation of social networks in the sociocultural practices of users and the public consciousness (mainly in ritual and mythological forms). Being permanently reproduced and self-updated, the social networking culture, yet, has not become to a full extent the object of socio-humanitarian reflection and, therefore, needs to be addressed. The study of social networking culture acquires a particular importance due to the need to update microsociological issues of everyday interactions and practices that have a new expression in social networks.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study is defined as a comprehensive structural and functional analysis of social networking culture, which involves building a special framework of social networking culture and identifying its most important structural and dynamic aspects.

5. Research Methods

The study relies on the general scientific methods including analysis and synthesis, deduction, induction, a systematic approach, whereby the author can conduct a comprehensive study of the declared object in a whole variety of its features and functional characteristics.

6. Findings

Being an integral discursive entity, social networking culture, despite a wide variety of constituent elements, is characterized by the dialectic unity of the structure as a set of existing conditions and networked real practices, and related informational and communicative products. In addition, social networking culture, in its most general form equal to the knowledge produced in social media sites, can be performative, i.e. contributing to the production of social reality or affecting communication parties, for example, technology, cultural artifacts, and representative, i.e. reflecting the reality, for example, scientific knowledge and personal opinion.

Let us further designate the most significant properties and functional characteristics of social networking culture:

1) the establishment of a specific cultural space;

2) the creation of network communities and the formation of new forms of sociality;

3) the formation of a specific discourse that is in a complex relationship with the dominant discourse and is attributed to the development of a certain public opinion and life-purpose attitudes.

Social networking culture can thus be interpreted through a structural and functional framework. The framework includes the levels of analysis (value-normative, pragmatic, denotative) and functions (the establishment of cultural space, the formation of network sociality and the formation of a specific discourse), Table 01.

Table 01. Structural and functional framework of social networking culture

Levels of analysis	Functions		
	Establishment of cultural space	**Formation of network sociality**	**Formation of a specific discourse**
Value-normative	Ideologemes and myths of mass-produced culture of social networks	Networking community patterns	Opposing values of official paradigm and popular culture

Pragmatic	Creation, distribution and consumption of social media outputs	Networking – building network links with other community members	Artistic, ideological protest
Denotative	Tangible artefacts of social networking culture: memes, pranks, demotivators, comics, advices	Community activities, online flash mobs, etc., sharing, challenging, streaming, games and augmented and virtual reality	Affirmative and nihilistic texts that undermine the credibility of official discourse

It is then worth dwelling with the contents of the above framework.

The value-normative level determines the ontology of the socio-cultural content of social networking culture. It reflects a value-normative framework and standards for achieving the goals pursued. It is values that serve as the basis for specifying social networking culture in the general context of digital discourse.

The cultural space at the value-normative level contains myths and ideologemes of mass-produced culture in social media. Such myths and ideologemes span a wide range of social, political, cultural and other topics. They can be fundamentally different in their functional orientation and direct content. For example, sustainable social myths related to the achievement of success in life can be determined by completely different socio-cultural patterns. However, it is not the direct content that is crucial, but the overall dependency on the characteristics of social media, inter alia, a significant audience range, replicability of information, reliance on reference images and meanings.

Network sociality at the value-normative level is regulated and determined by sustainable patterns for creating network communities. Communities are basically established on the basis of shared interests, goals, values, as well as sociocultural practices implemented in the process of achieving these goals (Grimov, 2013, 2017). It is symptomatic that participation in a network community is more and more just a status marker, a way to get the necessary information or content, despite the actual disunity of a community, the lack of close ties between its members, poor coordination of joint activities, especially in the online sphere (the only exception is civil political communities). Accordingly, communities can represent only interest groups built on a simultaneous digital presence of users in one setting, otherwise than their actual community in a social dimension. It should be noted that community values determine its format and degree of openness. Communities that tend to claim a special, elite status or promote socially-unacceptable (and sometimes illegal) behaviors are closed.

The creation of a specific discourse at the value-normative level implies the elaboration of strategies and practices that are counter-discursive with respect to the official paradigm and the prevailing popular culture. Values, norms and patterns of social networking culture set against the official (in all its diversity) discourse. The demarcation of two discursive spaces is most vividly traced in modern mass media, when official state media are confronted in the information field by unofficial, network media ("citizen journalism"). The information agenda of these types of media, as well as their communicative models and ways of generating messages, are fundamentally different. Meanwhile, there is an increased overlapping of the above media types, their convergence and intervention of one discursive strategies in other.

The distinction between the two discourses is most clearly seen at the pragmatic level.

The function aimed at the establishment of cultural space at the pragmatic level is represented by the activities towards the creation, distribution, promotion and consuming of immediate artifacts of social networking culture; these practices jointly support social media and contribute to the update of its artifacts. Different degrees of involvement in the creation, distribution and consuming of social networking outputs can justify the different status of users (guest, moderator, community member, administrator), as well as the existing institutional, cognitive, technological, informational and other filters and access restrictions. Different status characteristics of users contribute to a new model of social stratification in social networks.

Network sociality at the pragmatic level is provided by networking. Networking is recognized as the process of development and establishment of network connections and relationships within a social media site. Networking involves not only the development of social relations with other users and communities, but also the development and expansion of an individual's virtual living space, including through the placement of content as a form of existential self-legitimation. In other words, this is about creating connections and relationships with various material and information objects and artifacts that reach out to the user to build a material-semiotic network. Social networking culture functions owing to networking to be an important condition and meaningful context. Generally, networking focuses on the dynamic, procedural shaping of a network of relationships but rather that they merely record static indicators of socially constructive and cognitive activity of users.

The pragmatic level in the formation of a specific discourse manifests itself in artistic and ideological protest against the dominant official discourse. This protest is aimed at undermining the foundations of the official paradigm and ousting it both from social media and from the cultural and information space in general. The specific discourse is underpinned by the demarcation practices of artistic and ideological protest.

In general, the pragmatic level determines the dynamic development and functioning of social networking culture.

The denotative level of social networking culture is determined by the direct content of functional activity.

The cultural space of social networking culture at this level is represented by the following artifacts and products, namely: memes, viral videos, pranks, demotivators, comics, advices, etc. These outputs originate in social media but can also exist beyond it. Products of social networking culture function both directly within social media and on the designated platforms like photo and video hosting. In principle, all outputs of social networking culture, regardless of their format and genre affiliation, can also contribute to addressing marketing challenges, promoting and capitalizing one or another resource. As an example, the memes *Zhdun* ('the Awaiter'), *Uporoty Fox* ('Stoned Fox') that spread across social networks and facilitated the promotion of other goods and services in social media.

At the denotative level, practical activity boils down to technologies and the latest socio-cultural practices that contribute to the development and functioning of social networking culture. These include:

- challenges, i.e. online calls for a group of friends or members of the network who subsequently in a chain-like-way get familiar with the published material;

- sharing as a form of content distribution. Sharing can be considered as the basis of the discursive continuity of social media;

- games and virtual and augmented reality (for example, Pokemon Go) that serve as the embodiment of the online and offline convergence;

- online and derived forms of social and cultural practices in social networks: streaming, stories, selfie, emoji, etc.

At the substantive level, a specific discourse is represented by two types of precedent texts to which all outputs of social networking culture are reduced. These texts are affirmative and nihilistic. Affirmative texts can be called motivating or affirming. They serve as a means of overcoming the existential human anxieties, emphasize the loyalty of personal choices, appealing to the need to perform certain actions, call for changes and personal advancements. Nihilistic texts, being mainly humorous, go beyond the limits of humorous discourse and form certain socio-cultural values, patterns and attitudes. These settings are characterized by the most skeptical attitude towards official discourses and narratives.

Generally speaking, both types of texts within social networking culture primarily refer to precedent texts and have a deconstructive effect on the totality of the dominant discourse, as illustrated by the well-known thesis of Jean-François Lyotard on the collapse of metanarratives (Lyotard, 1998).

The concepts of 'myth' and 'ritual' that are of great importance in sociology and cultural studies when analyzing cultural texts and codes of the widest scope (ranging from the forms of primitive thinking to postmodern art) are also particularly significant when analyzing forms of social networking culture. The heuristic nature of these concepts is determined by their broad applicability to various aspects and parameters that render the presence of an individual in social media. The ritual in social media is explicated in standard, repetitive communicative acts that structure the digital culture of everyday life and related practices. These communicative acts reproduce the networking social structure and therefore have a great symbolic meaning. They encompass standard, netiquette-related, communicative remarks, community entry practices, reproduced distinction between 'own' and 'foreign' cultural codes. Rituals can be either geared towards the production of artifacts of social networking culture or enter it as a direct structural element.

Being one of the integral meta-forms of popular culture, the myth is also widely represented in social networks. Myths can be singled out as certain standard 'aposiopesis figures' (a priori forms, practices, patterns of achieving shared communicative goals, but not always subjected to critical analysis), as well as myths as a set of socially significant and widespread ideas (mythologems) about social life as a whole – created and reproduced in social networks.

7.   Conclusion

All in all, social networking culture as a complex phenomenon of modern social and communicative environment can be considered through a structural and functional framework that provides for an analysis of social networking structure, as well as its functional characteristics. The heuristic nature of this approach is due to the possibility of specifying immediate structural and dynamic cross-sections of social networking culture that can be viewed as polydiscoursive and multimodal. However, the author proposed just the draft of the object under study. The issue of the dynamic connection of social networking culture with the more

general context of digital sociality still remains debatable; empirical verification of the model delineated in the paper is also necessary, which should be the object of further research

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