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PHENOMENON OF MEDIACULTURE IN THE MODERN SOCIETY: FROM PERSONAL INTERPRETATION TO COMMERCIALIZATION

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Abstract

Mediaculture as a special type of culture in the informational epoch, being a set of informational-communicative means, a system for transmitting and perceiving information, is a dynamic phenomenon. There appears the notion of transmedia – the new cultural practices of consumers and the specific experience of perceiving modern mass media, conjugated with the possibility and desire of a consumer of cultural product to complement the initial discourses and interpret them in one's own way. A serial is the most demanded product of mediaculture. The research objective is to analyze the phenomenon of mediaculture in the modern society by the example of a serial "Game of Thrones". The authors analyze transformation of direct consumption of the serial in personal interpretations and the features of using the characters of this "universe" in communication campaigns of businesses in post-Soviet territory. Besides, the authors assess the efficiency of an advertisement based on the story arcs of the television version of "A Song of Ice and Fire" by George R. R. Martin.

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1. Introduction

Mediaculture has become an object of comprehensive research and an indispensable part of the modern public life, which is characterized as “post-industrial society”, “epoch of post-modernism”, “informational epoch”. The modern culture studies approaches are in unison in the opinion that mediaculture is of interdisciplinary character, as it comprises both the well-established principles of transmitting and perceiving information by the mass communication subjects, the eagerness and ability of a person to adapt to technological innovations in the media sphere, and the ability to create and understand the more and more complicated mediatexts. As technological, political and social changes evolved, the media theories which played an important role in interpreting “media” as the key element of mediaculture were the social, philosophical, and linguistic ones.

In the early 2000-s, the need to assess the new media appeared. Working on the problem of media convergence, Jenkins (2006) was one of the first to introduce the notion of “transmedia storytelling” and offers a number of examples when the common plot, the story is transmitted by various mediaplatforms, each of them using its own features and capabilities, be it a book, a serial, or a computer game. McAdams (2014) explained that the key criterion for extinguishing the “transmedia storytelling” is the use of various platforms. In this case, information published on a website only will not belong to transmedia, even it includes a text, a video, and interactive graphics.

In general, such narratives refer not only to fiction, in which there are actually no limits for creating additional characters, plots, or locations. There are already several documentary projects, which also fit into the transmedia concept. For example, an Australian documentary serial *Go Back to Where You Came From* or *1968.DIGITAL* project.

The possibility to jointly participate in the creation of cultural products is emphasized in the theory of participatory culture. Its specific features were defined by the above-mentioned H. Jenkins and not only him. For example, Delwiche and Jacobs Henderson (2012) described it as the main characteristic of digital culture, when the distinction between the author and the consumer is erased, as anyone may take part in the process of creation. In general, popular culture is rich with transmedia storytelling – the adaptation of narrative universes from one medium to another – and although much work has attended to audience uses and gratifications of discrete media, little is known about audience motivations for shifting from one medium to another (Banks & Wasserman, 2019).

Transmedia is a relatively new, specifically socio-cultural phenomenon. One of the manifestations of this phenomenon is a serial. It is a phenomenon complex in both its revelation and socio-cultural consequences, which, on the one hand, is kindred to cinematographic art, inheriting its techniques and aesthetic means; on the other hand, it works in a specific format, is transformed according to the television industry initiatives, while pursuing the same advertisement-commercial goals. As they can be viewed on a screen, in television and digital formats, serials got the status in the social life comparable with other mass media. The most recent media of the 20th century have significantly broadened the global, comprehensively universal possibilities for communication. A serial is one of the most important new media forms, from the viewpoint of expressing the visible, the imaginary, and the virtual (Vatulina, 2016). Moreover, today the series became a source of additional revenues due to the use of recognizable images and storylines out of the screen.

2. Problem Statement

Since George R. R. Martin published “A Game of Thrones”, the first novel of the epic fantasy trilogy, in 1996, and especially after its television adaptation as an HBO serial, this work has been an object of close attention of specialists in various fields: literary and cinema critics (Carroll, 2018), historians, political scientists (a conclusion was made that even political opponents may use one and the same pop-cultural material for promoting different political programs (Milkoreit, 2019); analogies between the process of Daenerys Targaryen’s ascent to power and forming the Podemos political party in Spain as an example of opposition between the traditional powers and the new wave of politicians (Virino & Ortega, 2018); it was recommended to use the long-term game modeling based of the popular TV show “Game of Thrones” to study various topics, like international relation and adjacent spheres (Young et al. 2018)), culture experts (questioning of 240 respondents showed correlation between the presence of sex and violence and the spectators’ attitude to the serial (Rojas-Lamorena, 2018); conclusions were made about the role of specially created language systems and the subtitles in the serial original for consolidating the characteristic of a people and its culture, and for developing links between series (Iberg, 2018)).

Thus, a serial as a new product of mediaculture, interpreted as modern researchers as transmedia, is a multifaceted notion demanding further comprehensive studies. The authors concentrate on the issue of commercialization of media culture in general and “The Game of Thrones” series in particular.

3. Research Questions

The study raised the following questions.

- What is the role of the personal interpretation of the series in forming the overall perception of this transmedia sample?
- How can media culture be used in communication campaigns?
- What elements of transmedia (characters, storyline, catch phrases) have the greatest potential for commercialization?
- What economic and informational effects have been achieved by using the images and themes of “The Game of Thrones” series in TV advertising (by the example of MTS mobile operator)?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze the potential of “The Game of Thrones” series as a phenomenon of modern media culture from the viewpoint of achieving informational and economic effects.

5. Research Methods

The following methods were used: descriptive methods using systematization techniques, content analysis, questioning.

To achieve the set goal, we analyzed the use of characters from the “Game of Thrones” serial in communication campaigns of business structures (Russia, Belarus & Ukraine).

Based on interpreting memes in social networks as carriers of socio-cultural information, which retain in themselves information about the initial cultural phenomenon which served as their source, we analyzed the most popular memes in the Russian-language segment of Instagram, related to the “Game of Thrones” serial. As a unit of content-analysis, we selected phrases “Winter is coming” and “The North remembers” from the serial; the search was performed by analyzing publications with the relevant hashtags.

To reveal the correlation between the plot of an advertisement using the characters of the “Game of Thrones” serial (advertisement of MTS company) and the communicative efficiency of this advertisement, we performed questioning. Respondents were selected by the method of quota sampling, when the total population is divided into classes in compliance with the chosen rules. Selection of the specific objects for research is imposed on the interviewer, but so that the sample proportions in terms of the studied indicators correspond to the studied sample. The technique is based on the assumption that the distribution of the controlled attributes in the sample ensures representativeness of the group and the analyzed indicators.

5.1. “Game of Thrones” as a product of mediaculture in personal interpretations of communicators

Some media-channels do not only create the opportunity for the spectators to watch serials, but may also expand their influence onto certain active groups of the audience, which create their own symbolic products based on the serials and participate in further development the plots. A number of Western researchers focused on the “Game of Thrones” serial potential as transmedia, for example, due to the eager activity of its fandom (Klastrup & Tosca, 2014); in particular, they identify the new roles played by the users during their interaction with the television websites (Mar Guerrero, 2014). Personal interpretation and use of the experience of watching the “Game of Thrones” serial was embodied in a relatively new type of text in fandom communities – “Unofficial Culinary Book”, which is a bright example of mutual penetration of the real and the imaginary worlds (Magladry, 2018). Alhayek (2017) thoroughly analyzed the specific features of perceiving the serial in the Arabic world, based on analyzing text messages and interviews with administrators of the webpage GoT-UAE in Facebook (240 000 participants). Matthews (2018) analyzed the fans’ interpretations of the novel “A Song of Fire and Ice” and the “Game of Thrones” television version, including disputes over “historical accuracy” in Tumblr.

Analysis by Milkoreit (2019) demonstrates openness of the GOT pop-cultural artifact for interpretations: in 55 political comments published from 2013 till 2016, she found unique interpretations of the serial, including parallels between the “Game of Thrones” narration and the policy of climate change in the real world. The use of the term “transmedia” in relation to the “Game of Thrones” can be justified by the appearance of After the Thrones (AtT) TV-show, an official aftershow, which discusses in detail the recently broadcasted series of the “Game of Thrones” (Lynch, 2018).

As for the Russian-speaking audience, the specific variant of interpreting the serial sound trek is a reel of blogger K. Nechayev, who improvises about using the trek as an introduction for the Russian singer O. Gazmanov’s performances or for “Chip ’n Dale: Rescue Rangers” cartoon serial, while a blog about a food retailer in Yandex Zen platform illustrates the life of the retailer’s personnel by a shot from the “Game of Thrones” (Arya stained with blood). The shot is accompanied by a caption that it depicts the condition “when you go home from an overnight inven9tory”.

Social networks often serve as an example of media platform in the modern society. We collected empirical data from one of the most popular platforms – Instagram. Publications were selected by hashtags, as “a hashtag is a kind of a meme, because a particular hashtag may be spread by most of the users and be aimed at achieving a certain goal” (Kovalevich & Korsakova, 2018, p.121).

Analysis of the Russian-speaking segment of Instagram by the most popular hashtags related to the serial confirms the trend of using screen culture in various spheres of everyday life.

5.2. Using the hashtag #зимаблизко [#winteriscoming] (the hashtag marked 571 467 publications in the Russian segment of Instagram)

Most of the posts are related directly to the fans of the “Game of Thrones” serial, and commercialization is manifested, first of all, in attracting the fans’ attention for promoting the goods and services, like ordering a backpack of House Stark at armadilbags #старки [#starks] #зимаблизко [#winteriscoming] #winteriscoming #winterhascome #starks #wolf #got #gameofthrones.

Then, the meme is spread to a broader range of goods and services, not directly related to the serial; for example, introducing a new menu in a cafe: #ЗимаБлизко [#winteriscoming] #мороженоенальчик [#icescreamnalchik] #нальчикмороженое [#nalchikicescream].

As a result, the users actively create a new cultural practice, which has no direct links with the serial content but is linked with the meaning of the phrase “winter is coming” as a call to get ready beforehand. For example, the author of the following post draws attention to the problem of renovating a school in Yesilskiy region: #Есильскийрайон [#Yesilskiyregion] #Явленка [#Yavlenka] #СКО [#SKO] #Школа [#School] #ЗимаБлизко [#WinterIsComing] #Мороз [#Frost] #Позолотин [#Pozolotin]; legioner_alexsey #зимаблизко [#winteriscoming] writes: “The sun is shining and a small summer rain is spattering, and it seems that winter and #хоккей [#hockey] are far away. But it is not so. As early as in August, training on ice will begin. And one should be well prepared for them, that is why in June trainings “on the ground” begin. Winter outerwear: selling and manufacturing... #новинки [#brandnew] #зимаблизко [#winteriscoming] #тапочкисмехом [#furshoes; Tourist services: Book tours ADVANTAGEOUSLY now! Early booking for winter is opened! #travelplease #путешествуйтеснами [#travelwithus] #зимаблизко [#winteriscoming].

The hashtag #северпомнит [#thenorthremembers] marked 3 457 publications in the Russian-speaking segment of Instagram. Most of the publications feature extracts from the serial, although there are personal interpretations as well, like a commercial message (cafe_anderson_kz The North remembers! And you? Do you remember that we offer a delicious granola with raspberries? There is a small and a large one. In all AnderSons of Almaty #гранола [#granola] #алматы [#almaty] #андерсон [#anderson] #кондитерская [#confectioner’s] #северпомнит [#thenorthremembers]; terra_flowerhouse_sar the North remembers, and you remember that it is Teachers’ Day tomorrow... We are not the North, but we do remember #TERRАлюбимработатьручками [#TERRАwlovehandwork] #thenorthremembers #gameofthrones ...#деньучителя [#teacher’sday] #букетучителю [#bouquetforateacher]), as well as personal messages (a capture of a photo, obviously, of a departure of a friend: kravchuk_svetlana We are going to miss our now #южной [#southern] lady; @helenvogue #северпомнит [#thenorthremembers];

Happy birthday! I had not a spare minute, but the North remembers =) iz.feo That is beautiful! That is great... #северпомнит [#thenorthremembers] #gameofthrones #happybirthday #др [#birthday]...).

Apparently, the active use of these memes (hashtags) is intended to cause certain associations in the audience, through which a new mediareality is created.

5.3. Analysis of the experience of using the “Game of Thrones” characters in communication campaigns

The products of modern mediaculture acquire such popularity that they become unique phenomena capable of influencing large groups of people, first of all, fandoms. Researchers note that the commercialization potential of this mediaculture phenomenon was implemented in the form of cinema tourism in Northern Ireland (Tzanelli, 2016). Another research develops the issue of changing the perception of Belfast as an industrial region to a tourist one (Celik Rappas, 2019). The “Game of Thrones” characters are used to promote commercial goods and services in various sectors. At that, undoubtedly, one may not allow violations of legislation and copyright and should have a license for using the elements taken from the serial and the initial source.

Analysis of the practice of promoting businesses in the post-Soviet territory shows that some communication campaigns use reminiscences, recognizable images, and music of the serial to attract attention to their main business. For example, advertisement of the “Perekrestok” retailer uses over 10 popular culture memes, including characters resembling Tyrion Lannister and Jon Snow, to whom the reel’s main character – a reporter – addresses with a question, immediately interrupting him with the words “You know nothing, Jon Snow”.

KAN AVTO automobile sales network played up the plot when the characters resembling Daenerys, Drogo, Tyrion and Bran try to find a dragon in Kazan, but finally choose a speedier vehicle – a car. In a short promotion reel of Unistroy Developer Company one may see a dragon carrying apartment keys to Jon Snow. In a graphic Internet advertisement of a Ukrainian division of Ashan, the company logo, a small bird, is sitting on the Iron Throne. An advertisement of the ATB Ukrainian food retailer includes an actress E. Clarke as a cashier asking the buyers if they watched a new series.

The phrase “Winter is coming” from the serial is catching even after transformation. For example, a talk-show on a Russian TV channel, devoted to the analysis of political processes in Ukraine, was broadcasted under the slogan “Election is coming”... An announcement and invitation to the International Communications Forum contain a more evasive phrase “Winter is not coming yet, but Baltic Weekend is”.

Some companies use this mediaculture product to create unique products. For example, a service for delivering ready-made food Delivery Club and a company “Kitchen in your region” launched a joint menu themed on the “Game of Thrones”: “Mushrooms for Halfman”, “Cocktail behind the Wall”, etc. A network of Minsk pizzerias “Pizza Tempo” during the 7th series implemented the project “Food of Thrones” – each pizzeria was decorated with the symbols of one of the Great Houses. A Moscow credit bank and a historical magazine “Dilettante” published a special collection issue “The Iron Bank Against the Iron Throne” (the Throne prototype is placed on the cover), telling about an imaginary bank whose support influenced the struggle for the Iron Throne and about the actual “fathers” of the modern banking system – the Templars, the Rothschilds, the Ryabushinskiys. The Donetsk cold-store facility “Winter” launched a new brand of

ice-cream devoted to the “Game of Thrones”: the product line Game of Ice Cream (the name is written in recognizable script), six kinds of packing bear coats of arms of the noble Houses of Westeros, and the seventh – the Night King.

Sometimes one may see a combination of both approaches: the 2GIS reference system made a digital map of Westeros and Essos, with all sites known from the serial. To involve the users and demonstrate all features of the main 2GIS map, this game project allows commenting, which the fans eagerly used, humorously recounting the facts from the “Game of Thrones” universe tied to the geographical locations.

Thus, by the example of the “Game of Thrones” serial we may see that modern mediaculture possesses a large potential for spreading ideas from television to communication campaigns of goods and services not directly related to the TV project.

5.4. Influence of mediaculture images on communicative efficiency of advertisement

To determine the Influence of mediaculture images on communicative efficiency of advertisement, we carried out questioning. The research object was a commercial of MTS cell phone operator, which in parody form employs the recognizable images and plots from “Game of Thrones”. The commercial is aimed at promoting an MTS TV service.

We selected respondents by the quota sampling technique, when the total population is divided into classes according to the chosen attributes (in this case – age groups). We questioned 287 people, including people younger than 18 y.o. – 3%, 18 to 21 y.o. – 51%, 22 to 25 y.o. – 20%, 26 to 35 y.o. – 20%, 36 to 59 y.o. – 4.5%, older than 60 y.o. – 1.5%. Women constituted 63% of the respondents, men – 37%.

We supposed that perception of the commercial with media-images would depend on the respondent’s involvement, their awareness of the content and on their attitude to the analyzed piece. According to the research, 6.5% of the respondents read the book, 44% watched the serial, 47% just heard about it, 8% know nothing about it.

The second group of questions was aimed at identifying the respondents who had seen the commercial before (there were 52% of such) and the level of recalling the plot of the commercial and the object advertized, without seeing the reel. As a result, 60% of the respondents recalled the plot more or less accurately, and 81% of them mentioned the actor who played the main character in the commercial – Dmitry Nagiev. However, the object advertized – the MTS TV service – was recalled only by 15.5% of the respondents, while the rest of them gave wrong answers to the question “What was advertized in the reel?”.

After watching the reel, the respondents assessed the quality of the commercial by choosing one indicator from the pair (boring–interesting, sad–funny, hard to memorize–easy to memorize, annoying–pleasant, meaningless–informative, flickering–calm, confusing–convincing, tasteless–stylish, unnoticeable–bright). Most of the characteristics appeared to be positive – interesting (70%), funny (89%), easy to memorize (58%), pleasant (65%), stylish (75%), bright (79%). At the same time, the respondents marked the negative properties of the commercial – meaningless (62%), flickering (60%), confusing (55%). However, we think that in the live-action, especially parody, advertisement, the confused plot and the rapid change of the picture may additionally attract attention of spectator, involving them into active watching.

6. Findings

Analysis of individual publications of Instagram users showed a variety of personality interpretations of popular phrases from the serial, for example, an individual interpretation of the House Stark logo “Winter is coming”, while the initial meaning of this message is partially preserved.

Often, advertising campaigns employ the plots and images most popular at the moment, in order to match the informational agenda and attract attention to their own goods and/or services. Thus, the “Game of Thrones” content may become the basis for advertising both food retailers and automobile sales centers or developers. However, such campaigns may be effective at the initial stage only (attracting attention), while the sales may be influenced by other factors, like the quality of the goods/service. Our research confirmed that: despite the high recognizability and memorizability of the commercial using the “Game of Thrones” images and its positive assessment, the respondents’ reactions did not reflect the economic efficiency of the advertisement message.

In general, the respondents liked the commercial with images of the series. It was assessed positively by 51% of the respondents. 70% of the respondents marked that they would pay attention to this reel inside an advertisement block. That is undoubtedly an indicator of high communicative efficiency.

However, although the majority of the respondents liked the commercial, only 1.4% expressed the desire to use the service of the advertiser, while 9% of them consider that possibility. 64% of the respondents were not interested in the service. If we consider the desire to use the brand in people who knew the content of the piece, who just heard about it, and who had no information about it, we may see the following trend. Those who know nothing about “Game of Thrones” did not think about the object advertised as well (39% of the respondents in this subgroup). Those who read the book were more inclined to actively reject the service offered (79%), in contrast to those who watched the film, who appeared to be more loyal to the advertiser (14%). Those who just heard about the piece but are not directly familiar with it showed intermediate values of indicators. At the same time, the attitude to the brand per se, in general, remained unchanged (86%) or improved (12%).

Thus, one may speak about communicative efficiency of advertisement using recognizable images, while the advertiser company failed to achieve effective commercialization of the content.

7. Conclusion

A person builds the acts of mediaculture consumption into various moments of their life. More and more often, the images translated through the products of serial mediaculture, like the structure of the society, social roles, values and norms, are transmitted by other communication means. Screen images become a part of our reality, penetrating into various spheres of our life. Then, these images become the basis for further media superstructures, prolonging the process of interaction. They arouse certain associations in our mind, forming some opinion about the “finished” product. We associate our interlocutors and their features with what we have transmitted from media environment into our everyday life. Thus, our communicative field becomes the space for images, which serve as a kind of mediators for communication, even beyond the initial context.

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