

Self-representation through social network status messages: Psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and gender aspects

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The article reveals the issues of expanded understanding of self-presentation viewed as an integral component of any communicative act, as the socio-cultural behaviour, and also as a means of controlling the impression a person makes on others in the process of interaction. As communication through social networks is becoming an increasingly common element of modern culture, it is thus becoming an increasingly important means of self-representation. By looking into people's status messages on social networks one can identify the main cultural aspects used in the process of their self-presentation. By analysing status messages posted on social networks, the study reveals the approaches to self-presentation used by people of different age and sex groups. The article presents an analysis of gender and age characteristics of the use of self-presentation tactics and reveals differences in the choice of topics for the status messages.

KEYWORDS: *self-representation, personal identity, virtual identity, virtual communication, social network, status message*



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1. INTRODUCTION

A social network is an online service or site through which people create and maintain interpersonal relationships: this is where web-based and mobile technologies are applied to turn communication into an interactive dialogue. What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they give voice to individuals and communities, uniting people and providing them with a platform for self-expression (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). One of the tools making this possible are status messages which are messages posted by users on their personal pages and intended to serve as descriptors unravelling people's mood, attitudes, viewpoints, thoughts and personal values – both current and generally adhered to – and allowing them to con-

struct their own image of self.

This research aims to classify and describe the intentional, meaningful component of status messages available in the open access social network Vkontakte, which is an object of the research. We selected some popular quotes posted by users of Vkontakte on their personal pages and proceeded from the assumption that such quotes incorporated into status messages convey some abstract ideas through a typified generalisation of real phenomena and objects, and are part of people's self-representation 'routines' on social networks.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before discussing visual, written and quantitative kinds of self-representation in social media, it is imperative to closely consider the term 'repre-

sensation'. Twentieth century linguistics, with influential scholars such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, supported semiotic apprehension of representation as a system of signs, i.e. sounds, words, images or objects that come into place instead of a concept or an object (Martí, 2017), as in the word *tree* is a sign that refers to an actual tree.

In a world riddled with global flows of wealth, power and images, the search for identity, regardless collective or individual, attributed or constructed, a source of social meaning becomes a fundamental issue (Castells, 2004). English philosopher and physician John Locke distinguished identity of substances from personal identity: the former covers matter and its organisation, while the latter is specific to humanity and consists of a person's consciousness of being that person, even despite physical changes that may affect them (Newman, 2015). The technical function of distinguishing an individual by means of an oral or graphic representation pertains to the problem of identity of substances. Personal identity will be discussed below with respect to the reflexive dimension of self-representation. The problem of identity is amplified by the postmodern scenario, which leads to the eclecticism of both the socio-cultural space, and the individual proper. According to Noonan (2019), at the level of the natural historical process, a personality manifests itself only by the features that this personality can be objectified in. Current changes in a socio-cultural context lead to the transformation of the forms of such objectification of a personality and strengthening of an external way of its formation. Many indicators determine the degree of penetration of information technologies and their significant impact on internal structures (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2010).

Technological innovations create the basis for the implementation of the strategy of identity search through joining a variety of network (virtual) communities, which acquire the properties of social groups. Thus, Internet communities are one of the types of communities as a set of 'invisible' human connections, implemented through a rather

tangible communication network (Massa, 2017, p. 959). The specificity of Internet communities has to do with the fact that communication takes place not in a direct way, but through technological means. Such a virtual community is a plexus of personal communicative activity of people, ways and tools of interaction, a set of symbolic means. People have a strong desire to fit into groups; they build a personal and individualised identity to align themselves with other social relations (Baym, 2015). Social media platforms empower individuals by enabling them to better control the process of social disclosure.

Virtual identity is obviously associated with self-presentation and self-determination of a personality. Modern Internet technologies open up opportunities for a vivid manifestation of a personality and variability of self-presentation means. While a number of researchers believe that Internet environment is fraught with the dangers of shifting identity, levelling a personality of the individual and formation of an unrealistic image of self (Gal et al., 2016; Spears & Postmes, 2015), the findings of recent experimental studies on social networks, refute the existence of an alternative personality as such. It may lead to the conclusion that a personality tends to authenticity and self-actualisation both in real life and in virtual space. Attractive electronic tools of self-presentation, such as avatars, nicknames, status messages and other content on social networks, allow users to easily and freely design symbols that reflect the real identity of their personality. That is, virtual environment is not a space for building a virtual identity, but a means of creating a virtual shell of the real identity (Back et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012).

Davis (2012) argues that social networking sites provide means of self-expression for users but by having these outlets of expression, create an issue of balancing multiple selves and their respective audiences. Social networks create a space where users feel freer to express themselves online and provides them with chances to work through certain issues they might be dealing with in their daily lives (Davis, 2012, p. 643).

Thus, social representations are about processes of collective meaning-making resulting in – to some extent – common cognitions, which allows to produce social bonds uniting societies, organisations and groups. It sets focus on phenomena that become a subject to debate, strong feelings, conflicts and ideological struggle, and changes the collective thinking in society.

The penetration of the Internet into all spheres of human existence is an inevitable and fast-flowing process. People are attracted by a wide variety of applications of the technology – to run business, to expand horizons, to play games, to communicate. Another motive – self-affirmation – has also been in the picture for a long time. One of the key tools for self-affirmation are status messages posted on social networks, which can be viewed as life mottos of a variable and short-lived value, although it allows an outsider to immediately assess the personality behind such a message. The motto of life is a principle of behaviour formulated in a concise form or a call to action. It is important for the inner self-motivation of a person. Sometimes it serves as a ready-made solution for the choice of behaviour in a difficult and not conducive to long reflections life situation. Life principles, issued in the status of any social network, can rather be called a person's view of life, an attempt to approach ethical maxims and dreaming, than a real standard of behaviour.

Through communication, social representations are anchored repeatedly in other social representations. This is a kind of cultural assimilation by which new social representations are incorporated into the well-known ones simultaneously as the latter ones are transformed by the new ones. Gradually then the unfamiliar ideas become well-known and part of the collective frames of references of a society (Thorne et al., 2015). In short, anchoring means that new ideas or phenomena are re-related to a well-known phenomenon or a context.

Status messages have a long history. Popular sources for status messages with a high citation index include aphoristic Roman, Greek and biblical sayings, such as *Wise who knows what is neces-*

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sary, and not much (Aeschylus), *Gratitude quickly grows old* (Aristotle), or *Fate gives nothing to eternal property*. These have survived centuries, passed down from generation to generation as verbal legacies or moral maxims. In the middle ages, the mottoes of knights were placed under the shield and served either as a memory of the glorious exploits of a person, or as an incentive to them, as in *It is better to die than to be disgraced* (Francis the First, Duke of Britain). Similarly, almost every noble family in the Russian Empire acquired its own coat of arms and a motto. Thus, the Sheremetyevs chose as their motto the Latin saying *God preserves everything* and the Russian saying *I hold out by the power of the highest*.

With the advent of printing press and the development of literature, sayings of philosophers, poets, prose writers, scientists and public figures increasingly fall in the category of moral principles, standard maxims. This trend holds to this day; only the list of aphorisms and sayings is now replenished, in addition to everything else, by memes – images or videos that are spread widely on the Internet, often altered by Internet users for humorous effect.

Depending on the content and form, it is possible to distinguish semantic groups of values, expressed in different ways in life mottos: professional, gender, age, marital status, etc. This study will focus on gender-age groups. A social network user who chooses a particular status message from a variety of aphorisms, celebrity quotes, or memes identifies himself/herself with it, which falls to some extent under the concept of an association. Metaphorically speaking, an association (in psychology and psycholinguistics) is a connection of the conscious with the unconscious, a kind of a

transition zone from one process to another. Thinking until some particular point presents nothing else, but associations, initially elementary, linked to particular external objects, and only then a whole chain of associations. The interweaving of a language units association is so complex and infinite (like our consciousness itself) that it cannot be subjected to the most sophisticated and qualitative analysis (Whorf & Veretennikov, 2016, p. 221).

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

One of the most important assessments of the sampling procedure validity is representativeness, as a feature that ensures the reliability and authenticity of the information obtained during the study concerned with a particular subject. This study uses the method of convenience sampling of Internet users of the social network V Kontakte, who posted status messages on their page. The most common audience of respondents are students of educational institutions, whose age varies from 17 to 21. Researchers agree that by this age, the formation of the linguistic ability is mostly completed (Owens, 2016). The key point, of importance directly for our research, is the postulate that a person's linguistic ability, its combinatorial capabilities, as a rule, remain unchanged throughout life (Chater et al., 2016).

Thus, qualitative representation of the results of the experiment is achieved by the optimal choice of respondents, based on the variability of age groups, in this case, on the division of Internet audience into two age categories from 25 to 40 years and 40+ and following the gender principle. In turn, in determining the quantitative component of the analysed material, we were guided by one of the basic rules adopted in psycholinguistics, according to which the most relevant data are obtained with the participation of 60 recipients in the experiment (Fernández et al., 2018) – the sample size in this study was 100 units of analysed Internet accounts.

Classification studies are aimed at the organisation and presentation in a foreseeable form of large arrays of empirical material, as well as at the

theoretical construction of models and identification of their compliance with this material. We considered it expedient to distribute the material for the study per thematic fields. Anchoring may also take place at more basic thematic levels by the use of underlying categories of meaning, antinomies such as life/death or culture/nature etc., or by the use of metaphors. Based on the analysis of the content component of the status messages, three thematic fields were identified – Friendship, Love, and Philosophy.

Thus, we attempted to build the so-called mental map of a respondent, which gave us, in turn, the opportunity to reflect the individual's idea of reality in a synthetic form – as it is reflected in the texts of their status messages. A mental map clearly demonstrates the layer of content associated with the expression of the author's attitude to the described objects and the author's description of the interaction of these objects with each other. The following analysis of the content of each thematic field shows the messages forming this particular field. The analysis assumes quantitative comparison, and allocation (if there are strong grounds for this) of indicators of substantial, national and cultural originality. All conditional reactions, i.e. quotes, were divided into three thematic fields – Friendship, Philosophy, and Love.

4. STUDY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the first stage of the study we compared the share of mottos in status messages within the thematic fields in question (Table 1). The biggest share comprises philosophic mottos, meaning that the most popular mottos are those concerned with the philosophical view on life, people, world, etc.

As to the gender aspect, women are more concerned with such concepts as love and philosophy, while most of the mottos chosen by men refer to the concepts of friendship and philosophy. This is one of the major differences in terms of the gender aspect.

As to the age aspect, people aged 40+ are mostly interested in philosophical issues and choose mottos that help them express their view on life.

Table 1

Distribution of mottos in status messages within the thematic fields of Friendship, Philosophy and Love per gender, age and frequency of occurrence

AGE AND GENDER GROUP	THEMATIC FIELD AND NUMBER/PERCENTAGE OF MOTTOS	PERCENTAGE OF OCCURRENCE
FRIENDSHIP		
M 25-40	2 16,6%	
F 25-40	5 41,66%	12%
M 40+	4 33,33%	
F 40 +	1 8,33%	
LOVE		
M 25-40	4 18,18%	
F 25-40	14 63,63%	22%
M 40+	3 13,63%	
F 40+	1 4,54%	
PHILOSOPHY		
M 25-40	11 16,66%	
F 25-40	11 16,66%	66%
M 40+	16 24,24%	
F 40 +	18 27,27%	

Table 2

Thematic field 'Philosophy'

	BIBLE QUOTES	LATIN QUOTES	MOVIE QUOTES	BOOKS AND SONGS QUOTES	CELEBRITY QUOTES	FALK WISDOM
M 25-40	1	1	1	1	3	4
F 25-40	1		1	1	3	6
M 40+	1	1		4	6	4
F 40 +	1	1	1	5	6	4

Further on we consider the distribution of mottos within each thematic filed with due consideration of age and gender aspects.

Thematic field 'Philosophy' is represented by the most solid scope of reactions (Table 2). The most frequent reactions occur in both age groups and they are rather evenly ranked between gender groups. Of note is the high frequency of reactions related to the categories of folk wisdom and celebrity quotes. Also of note is the fact that a greater percentage of the presented mottos in both age categories (25-40 and 40+) can be somehow associated with the philosophical category of fate, doom and predestination, as in *Count your blessings*, or *When the pinch comes, you remember the old shoe*, or *Do your best, and let fate do the rest*. The theme of fate and predestination is one of the key concepts in the Russian linguistic view of the world. According to Wierzbicka (2016), the meaningful definition of 'destiny' in the Russian language can be described as a free end in a tangled ball of wool and pulling it, we will be able to untangle a whole 'tangle' (a complex of associations) connected with attitudes, values and expectations embodied not only in words, but also in proverbs 'connected with fate', in set expressions and grammatical constructions, such as impersonal dative-infinitive constructions, very characteristic of the Russian syntax, to numerous proverbs, etc. Notably, while the 25-40-age audience of both sexes prefers positive fate-related messages (e.g. *Better be sure than sorry*, or *You are the master of your destiny*), the 40+ male subjects are more inclined towards pessimistic or neutral-coloured messages (e.g. *Wonder lasts but nine days*, or *Hope for the best, prepare for the worst*), and the preferences of the female audience most commonly reflect a proactive approach to life (e.g. *What does not kill you, makes you stronger*, or *Nothing ventured – nothing gained*).

The percentage of mottos falling into the category of books and songs quotes (mostly from classical literature and popular lyrics) in the age groups of 25-40 and 40+ indicates the second ranking by frequency and is approximately the same.

Statements making up the category of movie quotes are few, and are presented mainly among the reactions given by those in the 25-40 age category (*My mama always said life was like a box of chocolates: you never know what you're gonna get*, or *May the Force be with you*).

'Friendship' turned out least presented in the sample of the study (Table 3). Folk wisdom and quotes from books and songs as the prevailing source of quotations in this field (equal number). In this case, it is not only proverbs and sayings, rather, the sayings of an author who is now unknown, whose verbalised thought was widely spread thanks to the accuracy and semantic capacity of the phrase. In our sample there was not a single quote from the Bible or quoted Latin saying connected with the concept of Friendship. Perhaps the following assumption can serve as an explanation: in the Bible, the sermons of the saints are mainly focused on the education of a human soul through connection with God, following his commandments, humility before the will of God. As for the Latin sayings that have reached us through the centuries, a large proportion of them refers to philosophy (e.g. *Through hardships to the stars*, or *All that is mine, I carry with me*), and philosophers are more inclined to reflect on the world order, on the spiritual and intellectual development of a human being (personality). In addition, a large part of Latin sayings that reached us from the Ancient Rome, refers to the statements of the Roman emperors, who notionally didn't need friendship, because they put retaining power by any means at the forefront (e.g. *Money does not stink*).

Quotes about friendship were the least popular among the randomly selected respondents – about 14% of the total number, which might be reflective of the spreading inclination towards individualism and greater accentuation of personal rights and freedoms, as opposed to the declining status and decreasing value of collectivism within the society. Values of individualism have indeed infiltrated the global culture, blurring the notion of friendship as it was once perceived. Fromm (Fromm & Anderson, 2017) was among the first to point out that the individualisation of personality

Table 3

Thematic field 'Friendship'

	BIBLE QUOTES	LATIN QUOTES	MOVIE QUOTES	BOOKS AND SONGS QUOTES	CELEBRITY QUOTES	FALK WISDOM
M 25-40					1	1
F 25-40			1	3		
M 40+				2		2
F 40 +						1

Table 4

Thematic field 'Love'

	BIBLE QUOTES	LATIN QUOTES	MOVIE QUOTES	BOOKS AND SONGS QUOTES	CELEBRITY QUOTES	FALK WISDOM
M 25-40				1	1	2
F 25-40	3		1	5	3	2
M 40+				1	1	1
F 40 +						1

within a society has two tendencies. On the one hand, people are aware of themselves as independent social doers who act independently of traditional social structures, such as communities, groups, clans, etc. On the other hand, there is a weakening of social ties that have been formed for centuries and were based on the principle of mutual assistance. Perhaps we are witnessing these trends that stem from globalisation processes and the blurring of lines.

Moving on to the next thematic field – Love – its quantitative composition slightly exceeds the Friendship field (22% vs 14%) (Table 4). Remarkably, women aged 40+ are much less willing to choose quotes and statements about love and friendship as an element of self-presentation, while men aged 40+ show a much greater inclination to using friendship quotes. This may have to do with the need to appreciate army friends, who most often become very close people akin to family

members. In addition, women aged 40+ are more concerned with the problems of life, the future of their children and grandchildren. In some cases, they also have to make efforts to preserve their marriage.

The opposite is observed among women aged 25-40, who are more inclined to use love quotes than the rest of the respondents in other categories. A stereotype of the need for marriage as a sign of female solvency is firmly entrenched in the female mentality. Marriage is inextricably linked with romantic relationships, so the issues of love and marriage occupy the minds of women aged 25-40 years, given the current trend to shift the age of marriage towards a later time. In men of the same age frame, youth is sacrificed in favour of career growth and professional development. In addition, men do not tend to openly talk about their feelings, and in fact on social networks, as a rule, their user profile and content are open for all.

5. CONCLUSION

The theory of social representations directs attention to social and cultural thinking of a society, how new social cognitions or representations of reality are pushed forward and the old ones transformed through communication. The theory demystifies the question of where the representations come from: they are related to real changes in the material and symbolic world (technological changes, scientific achievements, etc.), and at the same time – to the already existing bodies of social representations in social life, in the media and elsewhere within the society.

Social media are one of the saturated interactive technologies surrounding us today (Goggin & Hjorth, 2014). To identify how activities and habits are produced, defined and shaped by technology, self-disclosure is to be viewed as the interaction and interplay between the users and the platform. Social network platforms are engineered so as to invite yet discipline their users into particular roles and modes of behaviour.

People use self-presentation to construct an identity for themselves. Most people have a certain ideal image of the person they would like to be. It is not enough merely to act like that person or to convince oneself that one resembles that person. Identity requires social validation; one way to do this is to have a motto that reflects your personal view on life. People create versions of themselves when they go out in public or on social media in order to craft an image of themselves, and they work hard to maintain that image define the way other see them.

Various kinds of sayings and quotes become a source for self-presentation embodied in people's

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status messages posted on social networks. Of all the above, the most popular are folk wisdom quotes, memes, books and celebrity quotes. Quotes from religious texts and Latin sayings are much less popular, which can be explained by the general level of education of the population and the degree of applicability of such quotes to the everyday life. Besides, not everyone can understand their allegorical meaning.

With regard to gender and age characteristics, respondents aged 25-40 are slightly more inclined to consider life through the prism of philosophical thoughts, although, in general, all informants, regardless of gender, were closer to the philosophical background of statements and quotes, especially those coming from the depths of folk art, songs, books and famous people. Perhaps the reason should be sought in the fact that with age a person becomes more pragmatic, self-confident, while youth is a period of idealising, striving for maximalism and cultivating hopes.

If presentation and representation of the self is at the heart of life in the digital culture, this practice requires scholarly attention from multiple perspectives. This would also seem to suggest that we need to compare ideas concerning the issue from scholars of diverse traditions to compare in addition to gender-age group aspect cultural peculiarities in approaches to self-representation.

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