

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Social Networks as an Infrastructure of Interpersonal Communication: Transformation and Diffusion of Communication Frames (Tomsk Students' Case)

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**Abstract.** This article analyses the transformation of the communicative culture of virtual interpersonal relations and the virtual identity of the youth audience in social media space. The empirical base of the project is the field research of virtual interpersonal communications of student youth in Tomsk universities. Thus, this study has a pronounced regional specificity. The authors have used semi-formalized interviews and focus groups in offline and online formats on virtual social media sites. The main methodological method is the reinterpretation and transposition of theoretical conceptual schemes from the traditional offline communication to network communications. This allowed to identify the key frames of organising interpersonal communications in the social network space. In accordance with the hypothesis, the social media, as a new communicative infrastructure of interpersonal communications, becomes a carrier platform for two types of interpersonal communications—interpersonal strong close ties (as in a private communication organization) and interpersonal weak ties (as in semi-public communication). Based on analytics and the conducted qualitative research, the authors have come to the following conclusions: social platforms in relation to close interpersonal relationships do not change their structure and organization. Yet, they provide new opportunities for logistics (planning and alignment) of relations, management of communications (in terms of regulating the impression of oneself, the level of involvement, synchronization of contacts and access), and removing risks and uncertainty (greater transparency and ease of entry/exit). Weak network ties (in the format of semi-public communications) are masked as “quasi-close” relationships, and their participants use them for the purposes of self-presentation and acquisition of social capital among their acquaintances and other people. The authors see the further prospect of research of virtual interpersonal communications in the analysis of changes in the balance of communication modes under the influence of network platforms. Additionally, a further thorough study requires the transfer of interpersonal “frames” and patterns of relations into the sphere of professional and business communication, actively implemented in networked semi-public communications.

**Keywords:** interpersonal communication, social networks, everyday sociology, culture of network communications, frames.

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### **INTRODUCTION: THE NETWORK EXPANSION INTO THE COMMUNICATIVE SPACE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION FRAMES**

The emergence of social networks and the spread of virtual communication leads to convergence and internal transformation of the communication order. Social-network communication and network platforms, which have arisen originally due to the needs of space-time optimization of interpersonal communication and time management of communications, expanded in a short time into all spheres of professional communication. That includes journalism (blogging), marketing and advertising (SMM), as well as science and education (crowdsourcing and MOOC-training). Such a fundamental cultural shift of both business and interpersonal communications towards their symbiosis in virtual-network communication requires a socio-psychological description and conceptual interpretation from the perspective of communication sciences. The cognitive style and communicative order of virtual social network communications provoke the formation of a new online subculture of relations, communication, and professional activity, as a phenomenon of semi-public communication.

### **ANALYSIS OF VIRTUAL INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS OF THE DIGITAL GENERATION (REVIEW OF APPROACHES)**

This article analyses the transformation of interpersonal communications under the influence of social networks and the expansion of patterns and frames of interpersonal communication into the professional and business sphere. The basis for the research includes the study on the organization of interpersonal communication of the digital generation of students (preliminary results of the study are presented in the collection of articles [5]).

The authors **aim** to describe the organization of interpersonal communication modes of the digital generation and the transformation of the usual communicative identities of interpersonal communication in the virtual space of social networks, paying attention to the pronounced regional features.

**The object of study** is the student youth of Tomsk. Considered the oldest educational centre in Siberia, Tomsk officially received the title of the student capital of Russia in 2015. Thus, the scientific and educational complex plays an important role in the city formation. The level of digital competence, knowledge of ICT, and social-networking technologies of Tomsk students is one of the highest in Russia.

The research focuses on interpersonal online communications of typical representatives of the network generation—the students of Tomsk universities with a high level of digital competence (the “digital natives”). This requires such high-quality research methods, as semi-formalized interviews and focus groups both off-and online. To partially transfer the research to the online format, the following research areas have been formed for conducting interviews and focus groups: “Friending, liking, trolling: research” [13] (number of followers—64 people) and “Friending, virt, trolling, and liking: research” [12]. This was followed by several semi-formalized interviews, a focus group, and a sociological survey with the students of Tomsk universities with high digital competence. The interviews included such topics as “How do I submit myself in social networks: the convergence/divergence of my real ‘self’ and my image online”; “How to establish and maintain communication in a social network: the best receptions, tricks, and resources”. The focus group touched such themes as “Real me—virtual me”, “Communication in social networks: virtual surfing”, “Ways to establish and maintain a virtual contact in networks of flirting, friendship, and business”. The sociological survey sampled more than 100 respondents. All these events aimed to identify the preferred channels of maintaining interpersonal relationships (Fig. 1). The study involved students from several Tomsk universities in various areas of training, mainly postgraduates (Tomsk State University, Tomsk Polytechnic University, and Tomsk State Pedagogical University). Recruiting of participants was based on the principle of accessibility, self-reflection ability, and high digital competence.

When analysing online interpersonal communications, we rely on the theory of interpersonal interaction, developed earlier in relation to the non-virtual context of relations: the concept of describing the level of involvement in interpersonal relations by M. Granovetter and the conceptual apparatus of the sociology of everyday life. Analytical tools include reinterpretation and transposition of conceptual schemes of the theory of “interaction orders” and Erving Goffman’s frames from traditional offline communication onto network communications.

Many researchers have paid attention to the problem of “reassembling” interpersonal relationships in the space of virtual communication. Within the framework of the world studies of virtual communication, it is possible to single out a rather wide and diverse direction in the studies of virtual relations and interpersonal communications. The research literature (which analyses the impact of social networks on social relationships) contains a whole line of research about the impact of social media on interpersonal relations, the educational and extra-curricular activities of students of colleges and students of different countries (Studies on the Usage of Social Networking Sites among College Students). Lim Keol and E. B. Meier (2012) [9] in their study of Korean students adapting to the learning process in the United States, sought to answer two key questions: 1) how foreign students use social networks and 2) how they assess the impact of social networks on their emotional and academic adaptation. The results of the study clearly show that Korean students benefited from the use of social networking sites: virtual interaction helped to reduce their stress level in the new Western culture. This was facilitated

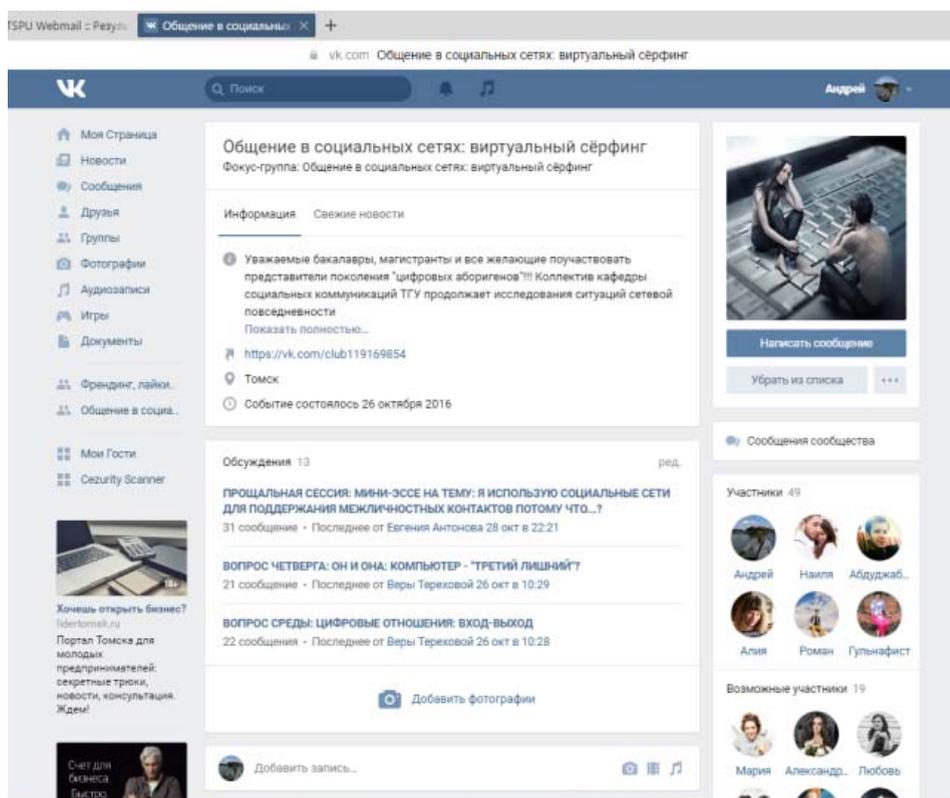
by the opportunity to virtually connect and “feed” on communication with their parents and friends in South Korea.

American researchers Peluchefte and Karl (2008) [11] surveyed students in the Midwest (USA) to find out the motives for using social networking sites and the users’ perception of the relevance of the information they published. Respondents, as a rule, strongly agreed that they felt comfortable when communicating with their friends, classmates, and family through networks. However, they were rather neutral to virtual visits and access to their profiles by employers and strangers.

The Internet environment provokes any user for creative and performative activities related to self-presentation to others in various chat rooms, forums, blogs, and social networks. Frindt and Keller [4] identify a set of factors affecting the self-presentation and identification on the Web: 1) the experience of interaction with the computer and mediated computer communication; 2) presence and anonymity of the audience; 3) degree of user’s self-awareness; 4) identification with a social group/category of computer users (social identity).

Critical approaches to assessing internet communications as a tool for reducing authentic interpersonal communication, are extremely common in the Western

Fig. 1. The page interface of the virtual focus-group with the Tomsk high school students “Dialogue in Social Networks: Virtual Surfing”



tradition. According to Berlinger (2000) “[longing for] ‘virtual’ life experiences can deprive us of the sensory awareness and human contact we need for our physical, psychological and social well-being” [2]. The more time a user spends on the Internet, the less time he or she spends on an authentic relationship. R. Kraut, M. Patterson et al. (1998) found that the frequent use of social networking sites leads to cyclical psychological deviations [10].

The generation Y (born in 1980–2000) seems to lose the skills of real social interaction and basically communicate through messengers. It is almost impossible to find people who would not walk without mobile devices in their hands. Wellman and his colleagues (2006) describe “families after family” who interact with their devices more than with each other [15]. Some researchers point out that excessive use of the internet and social networks can limit the proper development of interpersonal skills [16].

The most developed and grounded criticism of new communication technologies in terms of their negative impact on interpersonal communication and the erosion of personal relationships is given by the American researcher Sherri Turkle in her book *Alone together*. She notes that the strength of modern IT and communication technologies lies in the fact that they, like the snake tempter, offer seductive solutions where people feel their human vulnerability: “We’d rather text than talk” [14, p. 15]. Then Turkle notes that virtual communications trade in hope, offering a simulation of communication in place of stoic loneliness: “People talk about Web access on their Blackberries as ‘the place for hope’ in life, the place where loneliness can be defeated. A woman in her late sixties describes her new iPhone: ‘It’s like having a little Times Square in my pocketbook. All lights. All the people I could meet.’ People are lonely. The network is seductive. But if we are always on, we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude” [14, p. 16]. Turkle emphasizes the compulsively intrusive nature of the network behaviour of modern youth and adolescents. In general, the method of quasi-synchronous continual communication via smartphones, is gradually becoming (according to S. Turkle) an authorized social norm, although in the previous century, it would yet look like a pathology.

#### **TRANSPOSING THE FRAMES OF SOCIOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE ON THE NETWORK COMMUNICATION: REINTERPRETING E. GOFFMAN**

In the framework of our analysis, operationalization and decomposition of strong interpersonal relationships (such as love, friendship, and partly hostility) are relevant in terms of communicative interaction and exchange. In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter started a discussion on the nature of strong ties in his article *The Strength of Weak Ties* [8]. He supposed that the differences in the proximity between people can be measured through the combination of time spent, emotional intensity of communication, intimacy/disclosure (of mutual trust), and reciprocal services, which collectively characterize the strength of the connection [8]. Granovetter defines the key characteristics of interpersonal communications as strong ties, which distinguish them from depersonalized role-playing public communication. This includes 1)

commitment to have more time and emotional costs for communicating with a person, 2) determination to disclose oneself and trust somebody, as well as 3) a communicative non-equivalent (in contrast to commercial) service exchange. Granovetter argues that the power of interpersonal relations is a derivative of our readiness to engagement, self-disclosure, and expenses in relationships.

In *Reading, Writing, Relationships: The Impact of Social Network Sites on Relationships and Well-Being* [3], Moira Burke proposes to use the cohesive force model in virtual relationships. This model is based on the analysis of proximity parameters, identified by Granovetter. M. Burke considers not only active interaction in networks as an important parameter of interpersonal relations, but also passive monitoring of events and friends' activities. In her work, Burke asks two key questions: "How to measure the level of proximity of relationships?" and "Do social networks replace strong social ties with weaker ones?" She describes, how virtual relationships change over time: social network activity is simultaneously a reflection of relationships maintained in other spaces that fit into their common ecology, and a tool for their cultivation. Burke identifies three aspects of the analysis of the use of social networks in terms of building social relations. The first aspect is the analysis of communicative actions on social networking sites, including one-to-one communication with friends, passive consumption of friends' news feeds, and sharing personal news with a wider audience. The second aspect is the consideration of comparative advantages for the individual and the social functions of strong and weak social ties. Finally, the third aspect is monitoring the impact of social networks on psychological state and general well-being, depending on the differences in users' individual characteristics (contexts of communication, development of communication skills in social networks, and external life circumstances).

As a fundamental methodological platform for analysing the transformation of frames of interpersonal communication in the virtual space of social networks, we chose the general approach and epistemological schemes of E. Goffman's sociology of everyday life [7].

In the paradigm of the "sociology of everyday life" by Erving Goffman, the key concepts are the "order of interaction" (the title of Goffman's last paper) as a set of explicit and latent rules governing interactive interactions and frames as forms of actors' interpretation of a non-literal meaning in interaction, some background knowledge or conditions of entry into communication<sup>1</sup>.

In everyday interactions (from the perspective of the sociology of everyday life), it is possible to distinguish three strictly discrete "orders of interaction" (or communication modes) and the corresponding communication relations. First, that includes *close interpersonal relations* and *private communications (strong ties of love and friendship, kinship)*. Secondly (and in opposition to the previous ones), *institutional*

<sup>1</sup> A. Schütz speaks in a similar sense of the cognitive style of various "life worlds" (everyday life, science, religion, art, game, etc.), dictating a certain interpretation of the situation and the algorithm of actions in accordance with the rules/norms of the "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt in German).

*and functional relationships and public depersonalized communications*, unrelated to the class of interpersonal communications. Thirdly, in between these poles, there are *semi-public interactions with non-closely related people* (acquaintances, friends, comrades, and neighbours), expressed in weaker social ties.

The first two polar modes of communication are built on the basis of opposite patterns of actors' behaviour. Closer private-intimate communications (strong ties) suggest a) a higher level of involvement in relationships, informality, and personalization, as well as b) readiness for high communication costs and mutual self-disclosure as a guarantee of trust and proximity of relationships. Public impersonal communications within the framework of institutional and role relations are based on weaker involvement, formalization, role depersonification, and a focus on optimizing communication costs and personal closeness.

The situation of semi-public communications<sup>1</sup> [3, p. 60] with the non-loosely related people can be characterized by an average (between the extremes of close or depersonalized relations) level of involvement in the relationship, the establishment of partners in communication for self-presentation as a guarantee of building “bridges” of trust, and the format of “semi-public” communication.

In his famous later works, E. Goffman analyses primarily semi-public communications, using a conceptual series of notions forming in his mental scheme the “order of interaction” [1]<sup>2</sup>.

This kind of semi-public communication incorporates a pronounced component of the dramatic performance and self-presentation with the goal of impressing, because the participants in such situation are not in close interpersonal relations (which presupposes greater transparency for each other and the lack of a hidden “second plan” and “behind the scenes”). At the same time, these relations are not as regulated in their behaviour, as in the case of public formalized institutionalized communication, where the personal characteristics of an individual performing a social role, do not matter.

Another key feature of this kind of communication is the focus on achieving “solidarity trust”, since it is initially absent in similar situations of risk and uncertainty of interaction with unfamiliar or unfamiliar people, and it requires constant reproduction. The two afore-mentioned principles of this semi-public communication—the drama performance and the intention to achieve the trust—dictate the logical unfolding of the entire conceptual series of the Goffman's notion of the “order of interaction”.

Below we will try to apply the analytics of the Goffman research approach to constructing the “order of interaction”, transposing and reinterpreting it to the situation of social-network semi-public communication.

<sup>1</sup> M. Burke refers to semi-public communications on Facebook comments, likes, posts that are visible to other users and are aimed at increasing the strength of communication.

<sup>2</sup> Further in our analysis and transposition of Goffman's concepts, we rely on an exhaustive “analysis” of the conceptual apparatus of the concept of the “order of interaction” (as far as it is possible to speak about an integral and logical conceptual apparatus relating to E. Goffman and his metaphorical language,), as given in G. S. Batygin's article.

According to Goffman, performance is “that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at the length without offense, and looked to for engaging behaviour, by persons in an ‘audience’ role” [6, p. 124]. G. S. Batygin notes in his analysis of Goffman’s concept, that for the performances to be successful, an individual should maintain active “*front*” with the appropriate *stage props*—e. g., a bar for a lawyer to speak at, or a doctor’s white coat, having a face expression most suitable for the situation, and discovering the role settings among others [1: 15]. These concepts of dramatic performance and “front”, in our opinion, have a direct analogy with the concepts of “virtual self-presentation” and “filling the account” within the framework of social network communications. Virtual self-presentation via a personal account or public profiles of a social network, as well as the dramatic performance in the situation of semi-public communication of acquaintances (e. g., on a secular offline party), involves conscious efforts to impress others (in virtual communication—the “friends” or followers) and build their public identity through special stage receptions (or stage props in E. Goffman’s terminology). Social networks provide certain “stage props” for that in the form of registering their own account, which includes choosing an avatar, photo and video materials, stating personal values, beliefs, interests, hobbies, and role models on their public profiles, publishing their own or republishing other people’s materials and comments in the news feed. The network communication provides many more opportunities for dramatic performance and “management of impressions” about oneself than any other situation of offline communication.

E. Goffman uses other no less important (though less defined by the dramatic setting) and logically interconnected terms of organizing semi-public communication, such as “involvement”, “accessibility”, and “civil inattention”. Goffman talks about the existence of several “contours of involvement” (as a “delicate balance” between excessive unilateral involvement and self-control) with participation in any situation and ranking by participants in communicating the dominant and additional engagements.

The modern digital generation is characterised by multitasking, asynchronised virtual communications (i. e. simultaneous co-presence in several virtual communications without active participation in each of them separately) and conscious management of the level of involvement through the choice of communication formats (offline meeting, phone talks, instant messaging, asynchronous communication in social networks, and exchange of emoticons among others). The level of involvement within the social-network communication transforms into a problem that requires special efforts to be solved. In the field of network promotion, that leads to a whole new professional direction in the framework of SMM—community management—and regular measurements of the level of SMA (social media activity), i. e., the level of involvement.

Goffman characterises the next coherent concept (“accessibility”), on the one hand, as a general openness to contact and, on the other hand, as an intentional act of orientation towards introduction-contact, or “ratification”—the consent to enter

it. Availability is determined by various types of regulations on the “entrance” to the communication, which are called greetings (military greeting, bow, curtsy, “patting on the shoulder,” etc.).

In the space of social networks, accessibility for communication as an information marker can be analytically distinguished in three dimensions: 1) as a synchronous presence in the network and, accordingly, the ability to contact at a given time (in some networks, e. g., VKontakte, and in most messengers, such synchronous presence of a potential communication partner is marked with certain icons); 2) as mutual “friending”, which facilitates the possibility of situational contact and supposes a higher level of mutual access in virtual communication (as noted by respondents who participated in our studies, the nomination of a “friend” greatly facilitates the first contact, and many users, when making the first contact, start with an invitation to “friendship”); 3) the exchange of various kinds of virtual attention signs (likes, emoticons, “winks”) as a way to “knock” and begin start an actual virtual contact. Another feature of social networks is that a user has the technical ability to regulate their levels of availability, as well as their personal information for different types of users even without their explicit network notification.

The phenomenon of “civil inattention” (introduced by E. Goffman) at the level of social-network communication also implies the analytical allocation of three dimensions: 1) passive monitoring and non-interference in numerous discourses and comments, as well as battles, unleashing in public profiles (news feeds); 2) avoiding communication with people who are not “friends”, with passive monitoring of their discourse without extreme need; and, finally, 3) an intention not to disturb ones “friends” without serious reasons.

Let us turn to virtual transformations of such a key feature of interpersonal communication in the format of weak ties, as the focus on achieving “solidarity trust”.

According to E. Goffman, overcoming distrust and uncertainty of expectations in offline semi-public communication requires anchoring frames, or the routinisation of everyday experience [6]. According to G. S. Batygin, people habitually identify which is which and who is who because of the following “anchors”: *bracketing devices, roles, resource continuity, unconnectedness*, and the *generally accepted notion of “what we are all like”* [1, p. 20]

One of the key tools for “fixing” frames in relation to the situation of social-network communication is a user’s personal account. Usually authorized via phone number or email, in the terminology of Goffman, it provides a “generally accepted idea of person” by introduction with the account’s content and analysis of its archives and profile information. However, this is not the only warrant of trust in virtual communication. Other Goffman’s concepts of “anchors” can be reinterpreted in relation to the network space and used accordingly. The concepts of “bracketing devices” and communicative “roles” contribute to determining the situation and the direction of the flow of communication in the social space of communication same as offline. As external “bracketing devices” within the social network communication, one may consider the types of platforms or content types of public

relations in networks that specify the formats of communication, “bracketing” them from the general flow of communications (e. g., sharing compliments between virtual fans, professional-business communication, following the idol, friendly “chit-chat” in direct messages). As internal brackets that precede or terminate communication, the discursive network practices usually include likes, emoticons or expressions like “Ok”, meaning a lack of time for the interlocutor and his/her unwillingness to continue the conversation.

The participants “accepting” the communicative roles of “virtual fan”, “friend”, “follower”, or “troll” in social network communication also brings more certainty into the organisation of network communications and helps to avoid communicative risks. Network communication “roles” are no exact “copies” or duplication of offline communicative roles; rather, they are “quasi-close” relationships and “quasi-close” communicative roles. As in, an online “friend” is not identical to a real friend, and a “troll”—to a real enemy or an ill-wisher.

Goffman’s “resource continuity”, as a way of “anchoring” the situation of communication regarding social network space, can be interpreted primarily as the archivability of all social and network events and communications, as well as the ability to access these archives. Such a principled irreversibility of all actions in the network, on the one hand, does not allow to start communication “from scratch”, but, on the other hand, it allows greatly reducing its risks.

The concept of *unconnectedness* can be interpreted at once in three senses: 1) as an opportunity to “bracket [something] out of the virtual communication” (text messaging in particular) all physical negative communicative features or disturbances (pauses, protracted, stuttering, etc.); 2) as an opportunity for a thorough revision of text messages and elimination of all randomly superfluous ones; and 3) as an opportunity for the subsequent removal and editing of ones’ profiles, comments, and direct messages.

In general, regarding social and network communication, we can say that the functionality and the format of communications on network platforms reveal wider opportunities compared to offline communication in terms of

- *logistics* (planning and alignment) of relations;
- *management* (regarding the regulation of one’s impression, the level of involvement, synchronization, and access) of communications;
- *removal of risks and uncertainty* in the organization of semi-public network communications.

E. Goffman’ approach of “sociology of everyday life” represents the analysis of the interpersonal interactions organisation in the “order of interaction” through the use of various “keys” (or “frames”) to interpreting and defining situations of communication, which allows it to create new opportunities. On the one hand, it describes in detail the “framing” of virtual communication in networks through the allocation of the numerous “frames” of interaction analysed above. On the other hand, it determines the fundamental differences in relation to offline interpersonal communication in the organisation, mechanisms, and “setting” of the process of “framing” of interaction in the situation of social-network communication.

### TRANSFORMATION OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION FRAMES: THE VIEW OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE DIGITAL GENERATION (THE CASE OF TOMSK STUDENTS)

The study's **hypothesis** supposes that social media, acting as a new communicative infrastructure of interpersonal communications, becomes a carrier platform for two dissimilar types: 1) interpersonal close strong ties in the format of a private communication organization (via messengers and direct messages) and 2) interpersonal weak ties in the format of semi-public communication (on public profiles, in comments, in social publics or groups).

Based on the reinterpretation of Goffman's approach, the assumptions (though requiring further verification) have been formulated that social platforms as a new communication infrastructure 1) facilitate the transformation of closer and stronger ties, preserving the space of intimate private communication due to privacy settings and the availability of communication formats in instant messengers and direct messages; 2) expand the space of semi-public communications into a virtual environment, scale weak ties and promote their transformation into social capital; 3) transpose the "frames" of semi-public communication and weaker ties to the space of professional and business communication, which also partially moves to the network environment.

Based on network analytics and monitoring, as well high-quality field research with students (the representatives of the digital generation), several **conclusions** can be drawn. With regard to close interpersonal relationships, social platforms provide new opportunities for logistics (planning and alignment) of relations, communication management (in terms of regulating the impression of oneself, the level of involvement, synchronization of contacts and access), and removing risks and uncertainty (greater transparency of relations and easier entry and exit). With regard to the infrastructural support of weaker ties in the format of semi-public communications, they mimic the format of "quasi-close" relationships in networks. The participants use them for the purposes of self-presentation, acquisition, and scaling of social capital among familiar and professional people.

The verification of assumptions about the transformation of modes of communication and communicative relationships in a network environment allows to identify several transformations of interpersonal virtual communication of the digital generation.

First, the communication options and the communicative infrastructure of various network platforms aim at

- 1) simplification and simultaneous expansion of the opportunities for users' drama performance and self-presentation in the framework of weak ties (or the tying of stronger relations at the initial stage) in virtual semi-public communication; it is assisted by the appropriate technological "stage props" (an avatar, status, account registration, public profile, comments, likes, shares, etc.);
- 2) maximum involvement and activation of communication partners with the use of various technological, communicative, and gaming drivers of semi-private

- and private communication, as well as new opportunities for monitoring relationships, events, and other updates that occur with “friends”<sup>1</sup>;
- 3) users’ acquisition of the control over their involvement and the availability/unavailability of the communication partner based on privacy settings and choice of communication forms (be it emotional and symbolic, or emoticons, text, auditory, or audio-visual);
  - 4) “easiness” of relations and economy of time, space, and emotional costs in private interpersonal and semi-public communication<sup>2</sup>;
  - 5) psychological “anchoring” of communication partners due to the authentication of a person in the account and “guaranteeing” the reputation of the communicative participants through their archived history of relations and communication.

Secondly, we can already speak today about the communicative culture of the self-presentation and drama performance of the digital generation that is developing in the youth environment, expressed in the desire to obtain practical competencies in the field of “controlling one’s impressions”. “Digital natives” network behaviour shows the hyper reflexivity of their virtual identity and the idealisation of their virtual image. They actively use the means of virtual social symbols to build their image, the reception of a dynamic permanent update of their image as a way to remind themselves. Moreover, they actively use the hyperbolised opportunities, provided by social platforms, to conceal social “stigma” and to emphasise their merits. Digital generation consciously target (focus) their branding messages depending on the type of target audiences (e. g., their parents, friends, partners, potential employers, and teachers) and the type of social platforms (Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram among many others).

Thirdly, the transfer to the social platforms of close interpersonal relations, without changing either the structure or the consistent algorithm of “entering”/“exiting” the relationship, brings completely new opportunities for management, greater manageability, and transparency into their organisation. When finding a partner and “entering” the relations, the social-networking opportunities of self-presentation and dramatic performance make communication partners more “transparent” to each other and simplify the contact reached. The possibilities for permanent messaging via instant messengers and social platforms allow to achieve interactivity and quasi-synchronism of close interpersonal contact, while avoiding space-time coordination, and resource-intensive offline meetings. Social platforms provide a simplified form of “exit” from the relationship by removing somebody from the “friend list” or, more painlessly, limiting someone’s access to the account and the information available there.

Fourthly, it is important to note that on social platforms, a whole class of relations is maintained, which we have designated as “quasi-friendly”. This includes rela-

<sup>1</sup> Never (until the emergence of social networks) were people aware the lives of their loved and close ones, as today, thanks to the news feeds and status updates.

<sup>2</sup> This raises concerns about the preservation of authenticity of relations and their devaluation due to a reduction in investments in their development by the participants.

tionship with familiar people and acquaintances, within the framework of not private, but semi-public communications, who, nevertheless, bear titles of “friends” on network platforms.

The presence of a “quasi-close” nomination in relation to weaker ties of the partnership and companionship masks the fact, which confirms our original hypothesis. Namely, in reality, social networks act as platforms and a communication infrastructure for maintaining two different types of relations and modes of communication: a) close stronger ties of love, friendship, and kinship, as well as b) close weaker ties of acquaintances. Both types of relations can be labelled with the same nominations (i. e. “friends” or “followers”), yet simultaneously, they are clearly differentiated by the network users.

### **THE PERSPECTIVES OF TRANSFERRING PATTERNS OF NETWORK COMMUNICATION ONTO PROFESSIONAL AND BUSINESS SPHERES OF COMMUNICATION**

In the network space, there is a kind of diffusion and convergence of modes of communication and types of relations, when weaker ties are nominated as “quasi-close”. At the same time, in order to maintain weaker ties, “frames” and patterns of organisation of semi-public communications enter the environment of professional and business communications with its outgoing orientation towards status-role relations and public discourse.

The authors see the further perspective of the research of virtual interpersonal communications in the direction of analysing the change in the balance of communication modes under the influence of network platforms. This facilitates the transformation of interpersonal communications in the format of weaker social ties from the peripheral marginal phenomenon into one of the leading types of communication. Social networks act as a platform and an extremely effective communicative infrastructure for organising primarily semi-public communications in the format of weaker ties.

Such a “social invention” of a carrier communication infrastructure in the form of social platforms changes the balance of communication modes. Interpersonal communications in the format of weaker social ties turn from a peripheral marginal phenomenon (which was “in the sidelines”) into one of the leading types of communication. Moreover, they transfer their “frames” and patterns into the sphere of professional and business public communication.

Professional and business communication, in turn, is forced to move to network platforms. Since this is the “territory” of interpersonal communication, the impersonal practices of traditional non-targeted advertising and depersonalized PR do not work here.

Weaker social ties in the network environment suddenly transform into an important social capital and the organizing frame of professional-network communication. This changes the ethics and etiquette of professional and business communication on social media platforms.

The consequences of the partial transfer of professional and business communication types onto the space of semi-public communications on social platforms require further studying.

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