

Artículo de investigación

Factography And Content Analysis of Fiction: The Meaning of Media Images and Their Values for The Russian Youth

Фактография и содержательный анализ вымысла: медиаобразы и их ценности для российской молодежи

Factografía y análisis informativo de la ficción: imágenes de los medios y sus valores para la juventud rusa

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Methodology used in this research originates from the method of participant observation common for ethnography. From 2006 to 2017, the system of images ingrained in the consciousness of young people underwent nearly a full “reboot”. It can be argued that by 2017, the general international value system had been defined. The research has shown that fictional characters exist along with real images of media people and objects of the socio-cultural environment. The totally unexpected and surprising feature of this connection is the blurring borders between fictional and real objects. Specific data are presented in this article to support this idea. The main conclusions are as follows: it has been found that the border between the norm and deviation is fading, and limitless tolerance is gradually becoming a value.

Аннотация

Методика исследования ведет свое начало от включенных наблюдений этнографических методов. С 2006 по 2017 года зафиксирована почти полная «перезагрузка» образной системы молодежи. В 2017 году общую молодежную интернациональную ценностную повестку дня можно считать сформированной. Исследование показало, вымышленные персонажи соседствуют с реальными образами медийных личностей и объектами окружающей социально-культурной действительности. Совершенно неожиданной гранью и удивительной особенностью этой связи является размывание границы между объектами вымысла и реальности. Представлены конкретные данные. Существенные выводы: влияние рекламы и коммуникаций брендов весьма невелико. Выявлено, что исчезает граница между нормой и девиантностью,

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Keywords: Internet, social media, media, Russia, values, fictional character, Internet meme, aesthetic assessment, social mythology.

безграничная толерантность постепенно становится ценностью.

Ключевые слова: Интернет, социальные медиа, медиа, Россия, ценности, вымышленное существо, интернет-мем, эстетическая оценка, социальная мифология

Resumen

La metodología utilizada en esta investigación se origina en el método de observación participante común para la etnografía. Desde 2006 hasta 2017, el sistema de imágenes arraigado en la conciencia de los jóvenes experimentó casi un "reinicio completo". Se puede argumentar que para 2018, se había definido el sistema general de valores internacionales. La investigación ha demostrado que existen personajes de ficción junto con imágenes reales de la gente de los medios y objetos del entorno sociocultural. La característica totalmente inesperada y sorprendente de esta conexión son los bordes borrosos entre objetos reales y ficticios. Los datos específicos se presentan en este artículo para apoyar esta idea. Las principales conclusiones son las siguientes: se ha encontrado que el límite entre la norma y la desviación se está desvaneciendo, y la tolerancia ilimitada se está convirtiendo gradualmente en un valor.

Palabras clave: Internet, redes sociales, medios de comunicación, Rusia, valores, personajes de ficción, meme de Internet, evaluación estética, mitología social.

Introduction

Researchers believe that the process of global penetration of the Internet into social life entered its active phase at the beginning of the 2000s. Another turning point that provided loyalty of the youth to information technologies was the growing popularity and availability of mobile communications. In the first decade of the 21st century, mobile phones worked their way from devices used for phone connections as such to multitask "pocket computers" — smartphones.

Nowadays, the Internet is the most dynamically developing information exchange environment in the history of humankind. The problem of impact it has on young people is observed not only in Russia (Vyrovvtseva E.V. 2018).

F. Martin, C. Wang, T. Petty, W. Wang and P. Wilkins (Martin et al., 2018) conducted research in this sphere. They interviewed 593 secondary school students on the subject of digital footprints and the problems they faced on social networking sites. According to the results, 17% of the respondents started using these websites at the age of nine or younger, 40% had accepted friend requests from people they did not know, and 40% said that their parents had not controlled their usage of social networks since that requires knowledge about cybersecurity. The interviewed secondary school students reported that the most common reasons for using social networking sites were communication with their friends, exchange of photos and finding out what others

were up to. They indicated Instagram (27%), SnapChat (25%) and YouTube (25%) as the most frequently used social networking sites.

Changes in the perception and selection of information are caused not by the Internet in general, but by social media. The period when the research took place was unique — from 2006 to 2012, Russia faced an expansion of new media (first, it involved YouTube video hosting platform; later, following Facebook, in 2010, Vkontakte introduced microblogging mode). This process was accompanied by a qualitative upgrade of hardware platforms from mobile phones to smartphones and transition to 3G mobile networks. Within one year, from 2009 to 2010, large-scale expansion of social media took place. During this very period of time, the capacity of communication channels grew so much that it became possible to watch English-language TV series on the screen of a smartphone, exchange links to dynamic content and create funny photo collages. Our research has produced convincing evidence that the above-mentioned combination of hardware factors has had a great influence on the viewing content and, as a result, on the values shared by young people. As soon as by 2012, the time spent by Russian young people in social media had reached over 8 hours per day, which is the highest level in the world (while the international average figure is 5.9 hours a day).

In terms of the aspect under examination, the period from 2006 to 2017 was influenced by a few significant key factors. In its turn, it became one of the main reasons behind the nearly full “reboot”, which happened from 2006 to 2012 to the system of images ingrained in the consciousness of young people. For example, in 2012, the Russian Internet was poor in emotions: only 6% of the Russian-language websites contained different variants of laughter and 15% featured smiles represented by emoticons. It should be mentioned that positive emoticons were 2.5 times more common than sad ones. Words with a positive meaning are twice as common as negative ones; the main factographical findings are given below. In 2017, the so-called “stickers” gained even higher popularity.

The aim of this research was to identify the changes or shifts in the value paradigm of young people and establish their connection with the changes in the system of images presented in the Russian media over the last six years (and, in terms of some significant aspects — over the last fifteen years). According to researchers who study the Arab world, even in Arab countries, where customs and mentality transform very slowly, some changes are taking place (Akhatshina, & Nikonov, 2017).

The research underlying this article interprets the gaps in the continuum of social data and selects the most important aspects of the media noise produced by the information society. It describes a set of images that characterize values of quite a successful stratum of the Russian youth, namely students of socio-humanitarian departments of Russian universities as of 2017.

This research is focused on the data that can be observed in reality — the content of surface layers of consciousness at the level of ideas ingrained in the minds of students of humanitarian departments who study in St. Petersburg but represent many Russian regions. The research is devoted to the spontaneous recollection of images formed under the influence of the information environment (“fictional characters”), i.e. to the top of the mind level. Similar research is conducted in related sciences in other Russian universities (Ivanishcheva, & Bolgova, 2018).

Due to the sphere of their future work (journalism, social and commercial communications), our respondents will have a great influence on society. At the same time, in the light of democratic changes in the system of

entering Russian universities using regional results of the Unified State Exam (EGE), the community of university students represents a broad sample of young people from all over Russia. This is qualitative and pilot research with regard to the general population of the Russian youth aged 18–23, but, at the same time, it is also of quantitative nature if we consider young intellectuals studying at socio-humanitarian departments of universities in St. Petersburg.

Fictional characters (or images — these terms are synonymic here) are understood as emotionally significant (significant for the respondent) animate objects of shared reality spontaneously recalled without prompting within the whole range of their manifestations (beliefs, values, appearance, speech patterns, behavior, abilities, lifestyle, etc.). More often than not, fictional characters are actually objects represented in various media rather than figments of personal imagination or ideas relating to internal reality, which is not shared by other people. It is the emotional significance, voluntary choice of an image from the list and formal parameters of the result of its description that make such format of presentation extremely informative for conducting research. In this respect, the format of their description is close to the presentation of media content. Similar topics have already been discussed both in Russian and foreign science over recent years (Labush, & Nikonov, 2017, Tsupko, 2018).

Literature overview

The key aspects of traditional functioning of electronic and print media have been thoroughly studied by classic authors in sociological and political papers, where the role of building the structure of media foundation in the modern society is emphasized. Current sociologists (Shelonaev, 2013) further develop this vision.

Researchers have studied symbolic functions of imagination that support not only mass communications, cultural structures and constants, but also large-scale continental platforms. Advertising and PR research devoted to modern social mythological aspects of media functioning is built on the classical foundation.

Results of a whole range of modern media and social media studies, as well as a review and analysis of the main methods used in these studies, are presented in the book by R. Schroeder (Schroeder, 2018).

Results of sociological analysis of the media space concept, where it is considered as a specific part of social space, are presented in the work by S.I. Shelonaev (Shelonaev, 2012). The following fields of media space have been singled out: the field of production information, the field of economy, the field of journalism, and the field of information consumers. The article contains the results of theoretical analysis of social actions taken by subjects of social communication in the media space (Shelonaev, 2013). Reputation regulators include individual narrative and the image of an individual. Reputation in the media space can be defined as a stable social idea illustrating a subject of mass communications activity at the biological, personal, social and transcendental levels in group consciousness. The aim of building a positive reputation in the media space is to gain the trust of the audience to the subject of activity in the sphere of mass communications. Social actions in the media space vary depending on reputation regulators.

Empirical and conceptual evidence is provided to support the fact that in order to achieve good results in the sphere of modern social communications and successful TV and web series, the project should be able to integrate modern mythology with the humanities, media format, modern art and folklore. With regard to characters, this idea implies total abolition of conceptual borders between fiction and reality (McCombs, & Shaw, 1972).

However, in spite of understanding the significance of social media in the process of incorporation of myths popular among young people into reality in Russia (Filatova et al., 2017; Ulyanovskiy et al., 2016), in Eurasia, there have been no full-scale studies devoted to the role of digital media hostings in spreading the social myth about fictional characters, though some steps in this direction have been taken. Researchers have tested out the American sociological approach to the analysis of myth-making in the consumer society suggested by Fischer (Fischer, 2005); besides, results of studies on the issue of transformation of social myth in consumer society conducted by Ritzer are used as an empirical foundation (Ritzer, 2005). Content analysis is being actively employed as an effective instrument, which implies the identification of semantic fields relevant to young people with higher education in humanities and social studies, including analysis conducted via visual interpretation of drawings. The content analysis allows researchers to combine studies of both textual and visual data. In the course of research into the

perception of various images, including media ones, by students, visual response methods described in the paper by T. Constantino have been used (Constantino et al., 2014). This paper explores visual response methods as a representation of student learning in a college-level interdisciplinary curriculum integrating art and engineering. The visual response methods, specifically visual journals and postcards, are examples of authentic assessment and alternative data collection methods embedded in a mixed-methods (qualitative dominant) practitioner research case study. The researchers focus on different means for analyzing these visual responses (e.g., through hermeneutic analysis, document analysis, and narrative analysis) and deliberate the contribution of diverse analysis methods to the researchers' understanding of students' experiences of interdisciplinarity within the course they are teaching.

Revealing the content of subconsciousness and repressed areas of consciousness, i.e. receiving information by in-depth and systematic methods, has already received adequate attention. In the book by D. Miller and J. Sinanan, the main trends towards visualization of social media content are examined through analysis of accounts of English-speaking young people (Miller, & Sinanan, 2017). Methods and results of research into the interaction between students, schoolchildren and social media are presented in the paper by F. Martin (Martin et al., 2018).

The book by J. Salter, A. Lazar and D. Karlan "The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived" (Karlan et al., 2006) describes fictional characters who, in the authors' opinion, have had the biggest impact on the life of Americans. This book contains an essay about each character and their influence, whether good or bad.

The article by A.D. Knochel, which has largely determined the context of studies of the perception of modern media, is also connected with the topic under examination (Knochel, 2013).

Art education faces significant curricular challenges through the confluence of two contributing innovations that are transforming learning in the art classroom: networked digital technologies and shifts in curricular focus to a visual culture pedagogy. These shifts present forms of visual research in student's learning that may involve crowdsourcing a community of users, analysis of the social practice of tagging, or assembling image collections that allow students to engage in understanding visually.

Visuality, as a central construct of critical thinking in visual culture, assembles social constructions of images that are often invisible to understand the performativity of visual culture in constructing our social worlds.

One of the possible methods for researching such problems is the grounded theory methodology (GTM), application of which with the use of latest advances is described in the paper by G. Mey and M. Dietrich (Mey, & Dietrich, 2017). Qualitative social and cultural research is increasingly engaging with visual data. Starting from the premise “all is data” in GTM, the authors propose a general framework to realize a visual grounded theory methodology (VGTM). Referring to exploratory visual methods based on objective hermeneutics, the documentary method, and segment analysis, as well as existing GTM discourses, the authors discuss how this text-centered procedure can be applied to visual data. The authors focus on the (re)formulation of procedural steps (such as making an inventory, segmentation and coding, memo writing, and sampling strategies), and the examination of images in relation to GTM logic.

By 2014, approaches to qualitative assessment of both fictional constructs lying on the surface and the basic concepts existing in the consciousness of population of particular territories had been developed in Russia. Transformation of basic meanings and verification of all values against the capitalization criterion had a great influence on the transformation of values shared by young people that took place from 2006 to 2017.

Methods

These materials present the results of the third wave of a multi-year (2006, 2012, 2017) stereotypical pilot research, which is qualitative in terms of the general population of the Russian youth, and quantitative with regard to young intellectuals studying at socio-humanitarian departments of universities in St. Petersburg, devoted to the contents of consciousness of educated young people aged 17–23. The name of the research is “Fictional characters of the mass media epoch. Russia, 21st century”.

38 authors of texts and 19 illustrators aged 19–22 took part in the project in 2017. An essential requirement for participants was higher education in social studies or humanities from corresponding departments of universities. The selection procedure involved an objective selection of creative talented young people meeting the criteria of this project. At the first

stage, the young people recalled fictional characters over a few group meetings (their total duration was at least four hours). As a result of these recollections, a list of 271 characters was formed. At the next stage, the respondents chose specific images to describe or draw them, so the chosen image had to motivate the author to do some additional work and spend their own time. It implies a certain degree of liking for these images or interest in them. It is the emotional significance, voluntary choice of an image from the list and formal parameters of the result of its description that make such format of presentation extremely informative for conducting research. In this respect, the format of their description is close to the presentation of media content. Young people described the most popular images, which they were able to recall. The choice was made from the entire volume of immediate knowledge possessed by young people with a background in the humanities.

Methods of research included a survey and focused interview in the course of compiling the list of images and projective technique to reveal the contents of consciousness in the form of further textual and graphic representation.

The analysis procedure implied that the analyst understood the object of analysis axiomatically and deeply and spoke the same language. The latter allows accepting interpretations of young researchers as relevant to the opinions of young people with the background in the social studies and humanities.

The conclusion about positive or negative nature of certain characters was based on the semantics used by the respondents of the primary research in their assessment of the secondary research relying on the analysis of descriptions of images under examination.

Results and Discussion: Genesis, dynamics and factography of the value platform of young people with higher education in the social studies or humanities.

Research data are classified into the following sections: “Formal analysis and statistics” and “Content analysis and interpretations”. The “Formal analysis and statistics” section contains the following rubrics: “supply channel”, “image categories” and “biological species”. As for the “Content analysis and interpretations” section, it contains such rubrics as “psychological deviation”, “physical norm”, “heroes”, “love and friendship”. The research data are presented further in the order described above.

Out of the entirety of data found in the course of the research, we will point out the following trends:

Formal analysis and statistics.

In the “supply channel” category

1. The “advertisement/brands” source is sparse. A few characters became popular due to advertising on Russian television.
2. The highest share in the “modern folklore/computers/memes” source belongs to Internet memes (64%). The second most popular component of this category is stickers (12%). Some memes become even more popular when they transform into stickers.
3. The “classic folklore told by word of mouth” source has virtually disappeared. Humor, jokes and funny stories are now spread via the Internet rather than by oral communication. 75% of the source is represented by characters of Russian folk tales. It is noteworthy that this category includes two states — “love” and “freedom” as common values in modern society.
4. “Other” sources have also been identified. They include groups, which have not been mentioned before: “games”, “art objects”, “show people” and “public figures”. The origins of game characters prove that such pastime as playing computer games is still widespread among young people. Some games have been adapted into films, which reinforced them in young people’s consciousness.
5. A new interesting group emerged — “art objects”. St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg (the most popular tourist attraction), which is a subject of public discussions, is perceived as a living creature or character due to the fact that it is the center of attention across different groups of people. The interests of this object are protected and defended. In 2017, it was one of the most popular items on the public agenda in Russia.
6. “Show people” include miscellaneous characters from different sources. Young people pay attention to the most influential political figures of our time — Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

In the “image” category

1. Young people are not losing touch with reality: fictional characters exist along

with real images of media people and objects of the socio-cultural environment. The totally unexpected and surprising feature of this connection is the blurring borders between fictional and real objects, and one example of this trend is the classification of Donald Trump as a fictional character.

In the “biological species” category (natural or biological identity of the character)

1. High popularity of virtual images of collective nature widely presented in the “Others” category results from the fact that they reflect the agenda relevant to the respondents, which is formed by media space within the rhizome character (French Rhizome) of communication (McCombs, & Shaw, 1972) and affect everyone’s interests. As a rule, it happens not due to their visual embodiment, but because of their internal content/generated content/discourse directly related to the up-to-date agenda. Within this model, the fields of literature, journalism and science are subfields of the symbolic reproduction field (Shelonaev, 2013).
2. From 2012 to 2017, some heroes represented by people, mostly those who possessed extraordinary abilities and skills, moved to the “fantasy characters” category because the perception of this parameter by young people changed.

Content analysis and interpretations

Psychological and behavioral deviations of the characters featured in the modern media

1. Obviously, the number of characters with various deviations increased significantly in 2017. It became six times higher than in 2006 and three times higher than in 2012. It can be explained by the tolerant attitude of respondents to people with alternative ways of thinking, which suggests successful results achieved by social policies in this respect.
2. The number of characters addicted to alcohol or drugs is falling dramatically. As it has been mentioned before, the attitude of society to alcohol and drugs is becoming more neutral. It is not that consumption thereof has become socially acceptable, but at least it is not perceived as negatively as earlier. While in 2012, the rising attention to the consumption of psychoactive drugs could be accounted for

by the emotions and euphoria resulting from their usage, nowadays, these emotions have outgrown their novelty, and addiction to psychoactive drugs is displaced by other addictions.

3. It should be noted that the share of characters whose behavior can be described as deviant has dropped to a certain degree. Most probably, it happened in light of the significant growth of the share of characters with an inclination to provocative behavior, which will be mentioned in the next paragraph.
4. More than a quarter of all characters with deviations identified in 2017 belong to the group of characters with an inclination to provocative behavior. Besides, apart from fictional characters, this group includes real people who have already turned into memes.

Among them, there are the following people:

Big Russian Boss, also known as Igor Lavrov — a Russian rap performer, host of a self-named show on his YouTube channel;

Diana Shurygina — a girl who became famous after a scandal connected with her rape in Ulyanovsk, Russia; after her story caused a public outcry, Diana became a frequent guest at such talk shows as “Let Them Talk” and “In Fact”;

Dmitriy Nagiev — a Russian actor, musician, singer, showman, TV and radio host;

Sergey Shnurov — a Russian rock musician, film actor, TV host and artist, front man of the groups “Leningrad” and “Rubl”;

Donald Trump — President of the USA;

Lana Del Rey — an American singer and songwriter.

Nowadays, provocative behavior goes beyond the traditional spheres of art and show business and starts to manifest itself both among ordinary people who have entered the media space (such as Diana Shurygina) and in the world of politics (Donald Trump). It can be connected with the following reasons: first, provocative behavior is often considered an indicator of changes in the public consciousness and striving for self-identification through some form of scandalous behavior. Second, the density of information flow in 2017 exceeded the threshold of attention and interest. Thus, in the pursuit of attracting attention, the increase in the emotional intensity of activities conducted to achieve it is inevitable.

The actions of a media actor who behaves provocatively may seem immoral and

unaesthetic, but what is crucially important here is that young audiences value the courage that is necessary to behave like that. Quite often, the followers of a media provocator pick up such behavioral pattern, and later not only does it cease to appear provocative, but it penetrates the boundaries of the norm by upsetting the boundaries of previous norms. It indicates that the boundary between psychological and behavioral deviations, on the one hand, and provocative behavior as a consciously chosen behavior strategy, on the other hand, is erased. It is a separate problem, which requires additional scientific research. As provocative behavior enters the world of politics, one can speak of extension of the scale of this phenomenon at the state level. It should be noted that the mechanism of this effect is spread through the media space, which is now at the institutionalization stage, rather than through hierarchical media.

5. In 2017, a number of characters with various obsessions emerged (for instance, tidiness). “Tidiness” is the term used by the respondents of the survey who, in the authors’ opinion, are inclined to use diagnostic categories. One can use the term “neurotic disorder” and view such characters as neurotics. However, an obsession is usually caused by some compulsive idea, such as “It is all Russia’s fault!”.

Since such ideas can be numerous, the number of obsessions is also infinite. At the same time, new types of obsessions (the term used by the respondents), or neurotic disorders (the term used by us), appear, while standard, “conventional” forms of obsession, such as obsession with “supreme beings” or “manias”, become a thing of the past.

6. Characters are becoming more “multi-faceted” and “complex”. Characters that have only one deviation are becoming much less common. If someone is just an alcoholic, a drug addict or insane, it is not considered to be original any more. It is highly likely that the reason for this is that modern young people treat consumption of alcohol or psychoactive drugs neutrally, as something that is becoming a part of everyday life. In order to gain significance for the respondent, the character has to possess numerous and various deviations, preferably interconnected between each other.

Besides, sexual deviations that were popular in 2012 are either not mentioned at all or fall into the category of provocative behavior.

7. Antiheroes with deviations are either as popular as heroes or even become more popular than heroes. Displays of anger and acts of cruelty are presented and perceived as something funny and thus are rarely condemned. Quite often violence is condoned, and its initiator stirs up sympathy. Most probably, it is connected with the current trend towards breaking stereotypes and fighting against pinning labels on people. Respondents do not feel like giving extreme evaluations of reality any more, and the range of their tolerance can embrace anything, including violence. Besides, the attitude to violence has been influenced by the fact that this phenomenon has been virtually excluded from real life and now exists only in the media or some other imaginary space. Therefore, the violence of a media character becomes not more than their marker, which does not correspond to any phenomena in real life. Trust to the content created by a subject of media space is determined by the attitude to its author (Shelonaev, 2012).

Having finished the examination of the features typical of fictional characters, we will make some generalizations. Besides, it should be mentioned how conclusions about value orientations are made. This process does not imply just recalling some characters — it involves assessment of their qualities and relationships between them from the perspective of the analyst who exists within this value context.

Conclusions

The “advertisement/brands” category is represented only by eight images in the final list of characters, which account for only 3% of the total number of characters. (100% are represented by 271 images). Thus, the general share of characters from the sphere of branding and advertising (and, apparently, their significance correlating with this indicator) reduced from 9% in 2012 to 3% in 2017. Advertising is ceasing to shape interest, opinions and behavior patterns of the young audience.

The research has shown that young people are not losing touch with reality: fictional characters exist along with real images of media people and

objects of the socio-cultural environment. The totally unexpected and surprising feature of this connection is the blurring borders between fictional and real objects. Meanwhile, research data confirm that the “borderline” phenomenon between fiction and reality, i.e. the “classic folklore told by word of mouth”, has virtually disappeared. Humor, jokes and funny stories are now spread via the Internet rather than by oral communication. Socially significant images are perceived by respondents through the lens of social networks, but many characters are perceived as an image that originated from different sources. Young people are also familiar with complex contradictory heroes from classic works of literature.

Participants of the research have started to express their thoughts and feelings visually with the help of stickers and memes, which are actually coded carriers of particular emotions. This category does not include the “advertisement/brands” source since it is quite sparse. The identified trend proves that the organization of advertising activity with due regard for such strategies is the right move. Now, it is not the advertising character who becomes the object of recollections; on the contrary, a media character, fictional or real, becomes an advertising personality. Moreover, the success of an advertising campaign will directly depend on how value orientations of such character featured in a commercial correlate with expectations of the target audience. This research can be used by scientists studying and constructing the information strategy called noopolitics (Nikonov, 2013; Nikonov et al., 2018).

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Further research avenues

To a large extent, “westernization” of images suggested by participants of the research and development of common international agenda has happened due to the Internet, which is a global network, and later — as a result of the impact of Western TV series on the target audience.

Soon we will see how this trend will overlap with the growth of the “Soviet” concept in terms of

resulting superposition. Corresponding charts and tables can be developed by analyzing the attitudes of the VK social network users. On this website, which is the most popular network in Russia and other former Soviet countries, the attitude prevails that Facebook is an agent of the US Department of State.

It appears important to conduct further studies based on our hypothesis that the “injections” of values shared by artistic images of the most popular English-language TV series for youth have shaped internal tolerance of aggression against the traditional values of inviolability of the human body as a component of the value platform of young people. This process started six to eight years ago by consistent shifting and filling of the basic binary thinking oppositions.

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