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**The Use and Perception of Social Network Sites by Young Adults in  
Russia**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the use and perception of social network sites (SNSs) in Russia by young adults. This type of social media is extremely popular nowadays. The social networking audience in Russia had the highest engagement among other countries in 2009 and 2010. SNSs in Russia are experiencing an astonishing growth nowadays which is an important indicator of the development of a network society, or information society in the country. This research was carried out with the help of qualitative methods including 14 personal interviews with open-ended questions among young adult users of the Russian SNSs, aged 22-28, who obtained a degree in or are students in higher institutions. The interviews were conducted in Russian, transcribed, and finally their descriptive summaries were translated into English. It was discovered that the patterns of use of SNSs by respondents have changed over time in regard to time and attitude. Face-to-face communication was found to be affected by communication on SNSs. Respondents were aware of privacy issues and addiction to SNSs but indicated a low concern for these issues. It was discovered as well that Russian SNSs provide new uses and gratifications for those that use them due to some special services and features and the way in which users employ them. SNSs in Russia have been integrated to a great extent into daily lives of users as they imply various benefits for users and can be utilized for both personal and business purposes. Further detailed research can be conducted for each sphere of these findings, such as problems of privacy and addiction, connection of privacy issues and changes in perception of SNSs, various uses of SNSs including innovative ones such as opportunities of learning and self-education on SNSs.

**Keywords:** social media, social network sites, information society, network society, use, perception, young adults.

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## **1. Introduction and Thesis Statement**

Social media in all its variety is experiencing a rise in popularity nowadays and is an essential part of both individual and business life. Collaborative projects like wikis and social bookmarking applications, social network sites like Facebook and Myspace, photo and video sharing communities like YouTube and Flickr, virtual game worlds like “World of Warcraft”, virtual social worlds like Second Life, and blogs are all well-known examples of social media throughout the world. Social network sites (SNSs) are integrated into the lives of millions of people: the number of Facebook users, the largest SNS, is more than 845 million monthly active users and 483 million daily active users as of December, 2011. Although Facebook is an American company, more than 80% of monthly users are outside of the U.S. and Canada (Newsroom Facebook, 2012).

However, according to the data of comScore, a globally recognized Internet marketing research company, it was Russia that had the world’s most engaged social networking audience in 2009 and 2010 and occupied the second place in this category in 2011. Russian social network sites users spent an average of 6.6, 9.8 and 10.3 hours monthly in 2009, 2010 and 2011 respectively whereas average hours spent online worldwide were 3.7 and 4.5 in 2009 and 2010 respectively (comScore, 2009, 2010, 2011).

SNSs allow an enormous amount of users worldwide “to support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks” or to “ help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities” by means of private messaging, expressing themselves in profiles, and sharing photo, video or other types of content (Boyd, n.d.). They attract the attention of scholastic and business researchers because of their ease of use and affordability and hence popularity. SNSs in Russia are clearly a significant object for studies as well. It should be mentioned that the most popular SNS in Russia is not the world-beloved Facebook but vk.com (also known as vkontakte.ru) which is similar to Facebook in design and functionality and has more than 120 million registered users and 36 million daily users (Vkontakte About page, n.d.).

While Facebook and its audience as well some other international SNSs have been the objects of a substantial amount of scholarly work, vk.com and the Russian SNSs audience have not garnered much attention except for Russia’s Internet situation which has been studied quite thoroughly (Alexanyan K.

“The Runet – lost in translation”, Vartanova, E. “The Russian Network Society”, *Internet v Rossii* Volume 33 Vesna 2011). The aspects which have been studied for Facebook and other big SNSs in an international context include: privacy issues (Debatin et al. “Facebook and Online Privacy: Attitudes, Behaviors, and Unintended Consequences”), changes in attitude and practices over some period of use (Lampe et al. “Changes in Use and Perception of Facebook”), social information uses (Wohn et al.), motivation and uses (Adam N. Joinson “Motives and Uses of Facebook”), uses and gratification theory in connection to SNSs (Urista et al. “Explaining Why Young Adults Use MySpace and Facebook Through Uses and Gratifications Theory”) and many others. That is why I consider it essential to study SNSs in Russia, their audiences, and they way the audience uses them.

In my work I will study how vk.com and some other SNSs are exploited by young adult Russian users who have been registered there at least one year and thus can be called experienced users. I will conduct research based on fourteen qualitative interviewees carried out in the Russian language and later, in the process of analysis, translated into the English language. I will take a look at how the notions of information society, globalization, and domestication are intertwined together. Then I will study the current situation of the information, or network society in Russia, which is obviously developing very actively at the moment, paying particular attention to the condition of Internet in the country. I will examine the concepts of social media and SNS and take a look at the most important SNSs in Russia, including a short history. I will also give a brief description of vk.com, the main Russian SNS. Then I will describe the methods of my research, present the results, and conclude with a discussion and recommendations.

## **2. Development of the Network society, or Information Society in Russia**

Development of the information society in Russia creates the necessary prerequisites not only for SNSs to be accepted in everyday practices by more and more citizens but for overall technical progress and improvement in quality of life for all the citizens whether they live in a megalopolis in the central part of the country or in a village in Siberia.

Today, most scholars agree that the current society can be named as information society, which is also interchangeable with network society. The main attributes of an information society are that the information is the main resource and that the organization is based on a network structure. Although scholars cannot agree on one name, both “information society” and “network society” share the exact same attributes. Moreover, there is much discussion on the global patterns of the network society and how it is accepted by local cultures, resulting in differences from place to place. Thus, one can see the significance of studying the network society and the variety of its domesticated models. In this chapter, I will provide some central definitions and then will take a look at the origins of the network society including historical and economic factors as well its current state in Russia. To understand better its peculiarities and the difficulties it faces, I will analyze three speeches of the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev. These speeches are devoted to the development of the information society in Russia and are accessible from the internet – the president’s own blog, [www.kremlin.org](http://www.kremlin.org), which in itself is an example of the self-evident development of the Russian network society. Because the development of social network sites cannot be achieved without the development of the network society and in particular the expansion of the Internet sector, the study of social network sites is inextricably connected to the study of information/network society.

### **2.1. “Information society” or “network society”**

“Information society” is the term mostly used by media as Castells states in his book “The information society and the welfare state: the Finnish model” while he prefers to use “network society” for the same concept (Castells, Himanen, 2002, 2). Of course some scholars would underline the difference in

the meaning between these two terms, but to my mind it is of no big importance. I prefer to use the term “network society” though later it will be seen that Russian President uses the first name in his speeches.

As Castells defines it, “the network society itself is, in fact, the social structure which is characteristic of what people had been calling for years the information society or post-industrial society” (Castells, 2001, 4). By social structure he understands “the organizational arrangements of humans in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture” (Castells, 2004, 3). Castells considers the terms “post-industrial society” and “information society” too descriptive and not providing the substance. The concrete definition of a network society by Castells is “a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks. So it's not just about networks or social networks, because social networks have been very old forms of social organization. It's about social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies” (Castells, 2001, 4). Castells suggest that it is not only technology which characterizes modern network societies but also cultural, economical and political factors. Religion, cultural background, political organizations, and social status all contribute to the network society’s form. These factors influence societies in different ways. And for van Dijk, it is information that forms the substance of contemporary society while networks shape the organizational forms and (infra)structures of this society (“Network society. Wikipedia”, n.d.).

Van Dijk defines the network society as “a form of society increasingly organizing its relationships in media networks gradually replacing or complementing the social networks of face-to-face communication. This means that social and media networks are shaping the prime mode of organization and most important structures of modern society. They are not the whole substance of society, as they are in the exaggeration of Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998)” (Van Dijk, 1999, 220-223). He stresses the importance of “bodies, minds, rules and resources of all kinds” as society consists of individuals, pairs, groups and organizations (Ibid.).

The concepts described by Jan van Dijk, Manuel Castells and others can be seen in modern technology. Social network sites are noticeable examples of these concepts integrated into our lives. They provide the opportunities for people around the globe to communicate with the help of digital



means, thus making face-to-face contact unnecessary for communication. Other good examples of the integration of the concepts are various instant messaging services, live journals and blogs.

When analyzing the concept of network society through the lens of globalization, I should mention that Castells et al. consider digital networks as global because they have no limits in their capacities to reconfigure themselves. That is why social structures which are based on digital networks are also global and thus the network society is a global society by definition. But not all the people are part of these networks though all of them are affected by the processes of the global networks which include vital activities shaping and controlling human life such as financial markets, transnational production, management, and the distribution of goods and services; science and technology; communication media, culture, art, and sports; and international institutions managing the global economy and intergovernmental relations, etc (Castells, Held and McGrew, Volkmer, Stiglitz, Juris, as cited in Castells, 2004, 22). Though social structure is global, human experience is local in cultural and territorial terms (Borja and Castells, as cited in Castells, 2004, p.23). Castells also talk about the fragmentation of societies (defined either by the current boundaries of nation-states or the cultural boundaries of their historical identities) as “a structural feature of the network society”, not as a sign of their gradual incorporation. He explains that the capacity of the networking process allows the programs governing the networks to search and include what they find is valuable for them and to pass by the unnecessary, unvaluable people, activities and territories. This is called the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion (Castells, 2004, 23).

In terms of communication, the network society can be characterized as “a culture organized and integrated by a diversified system of electronic media, including the Internet. Cultural expression of all kinds are enclosed and shaped by this interlinked, electronic hypertext, formed by television, radio, print media, film, video, art, and Internet communication in the so called “multimedia system” (Croteau and Hoynes, as cited in Castells, 2004, 30). Media in the network society contain great diversity of communication channels. What I would like to indicate is that media do not only contribute to a global, unified culture; various social groups and cultures are included and addressed. So the media system’s attributes are not only global business concentration but also “diversification of audience (including cultural diversification)”, “technological versatility and channel multiplicity” and “the growing autonomy of an audience that is equipped with the Internet” (Castells, 2004, 30).

According to Volkmer, media replaces the public space and it certainly affects politics (Volkmer, as cited in Castells, 2004, 30).

When one talks about any society, culture should be taken into account. Global culture follows economic globalization and is quite often thought to be a danger for national and local cultures. Cultural diversity should be protected, most experts agree, while other values such as human rights should be universally promoted. According to Tremblay, in the nation state democratic life is impossible without culture and society. In order to achieve true democracy country “must care about its cultural and communication system in order to guarantee equality in access to information and the possibility of expression”. But he simultaneously mentions that cultures should make contact with other cultures to preserve their dynamism, their vitality, and to ensure cultural development (Mansell, 2002).

## **2.2. Domestication**

While talking about globalization, one cannot omit talking about its “dichotomy” counterpart – domestication. It is an especially remarkable topic in connection to the network society. I am going to examine how the global trends and policies are integrated into the Russian society, i.e. “domesticated” in the conditions of the nation state with its specific features and demands. First I will describe domestication and its relation to globalization.

The concept of domestication itself comes from anthropology and refers to the taming a wild animal, later it was used in consumption studies. Lately it was widely used in information and communication technologies studies and involved more than just simple “taming” of new technology or gadget but also its effect on “the symbolic and material status of the new elements themselves”. The interest of domestication studies is “the meeting of old routines and new technology by relating the potential of technology to the context of its use and to its determination by forces in the widest political, social and cultural environment” (Silverstone, as cited in Alasuutari, 2009, 1). As the result of the process of domestication, a new element is perceived as natural and domestic. The concept of domestication is broadly used when talking about global trends and policies. It implies adjustment of the organization of

the accepting side and naturalization of the products of domestication in local space. It is also believed that not only does the adoption of the external model takes place but it is also modified due to the influence of local peculiarities, thus making them different from the model itself. Local actors are also essential in this process. One of the problems connected to domestication is the fact that some of the powerful countries or global players seem to be more influential on other countries and can make them follow their policies (Alasuutari, 2009, 2).

As Alasuutari states, notwithstanding the origins of the domestication concept, it is of particular use in the creation and harmonization of global trends. “The framework stresses that external models are never just adopted; when turned into actual practices and incorporated with local conditions, their meaning and consequences are different from the original blueprint. Second, the concept stresses and focuses on the role of local actors in adapting to global trends” (Alasuutari, 2009). One can also suggest that the process of domestication differs from nation to nation and from culture to culture as all nations and cultures differ from each other.

Domestication is tightly connected with the concepts of place and space. Here I would like to mention that the nation state is more than a single place, it is likely to be translocal absorbing different features of its neighbours (Ritzer, Thompson & Zeynep, as cited in Alasuutari, 2009, 3). That is why it is important to study the processes of domestication of global trends and policies adopted in nation-states, their modifications, details of adjustment, factors of influence and the outcomes of these processes. Nevertheless, one should take into account the possibility of a “hybrid world culture” in which domestication and changes in the nation-states lead to the disappearance of all national features. Of course this statement is quite contradictory. As Alasuutari says, it comes from the belief that all local, national cultures are absolutely unique and original. However, he argues that the world consist of independent units, called nation-states, which are in fact “like replicas of each other” and the integration of new models does not definitely mean the destruction of uniqueness lying in the previous, local models. Moreover, the states refusing the global policies can suffer in global competition. The cultural and regional differences can be explained by “complex human interaction in different geographical settings within which life-worlds take their continuously changing shape” (Alasuutari, 2009, 5).

### **2.3. Network society in Russia, its foundation and progress**

Now let us take a look at the situation with the network society in Russia, how it began and how it is currently developing, its peculiarities and what perspectives it has nowadays. Elena Vartanova, in her article “The Russian network society” describes the foundation of the network society in Russia with relevance to economic and historic events after the collapse of Soviet Union. She also describes the development of the Runet, the Russian Internet.

In Russia, the notion of “network society” was quite hard to define because “the collapse of USSR led to a total change of intellectual paradigms and posed many new questions, especially in the field of social research” (Vartanova, as cited in Castells, 2004, 84). Russia has always been observed by scientists in the light of the influences of conflicting traditions and phenomena, for example, east and west, capitalism and socialism, democracy and authoritarianism, national and global, and so on. As Vartanova says, in Russia nowadays the network society presents a valuable notion as it helps to analyze “continuous internal changes” with from a new perspective due to the global setting and thus all the above cited economic, political, and cultural changes are highlighted. It also helps to understand the complexity of modern Russian society. Among the main difficulties Vartanova names “centralization of state governance and surveillance dictated by the size, economic inconsistencies, multi-dimensional structure, multi-ethnicity of Russian society and the decentralizing tendencies of the country, brought on by the logic of contemporary economic life and technological development” (Ibid., 85).

I find Vartanova’s idea interesting because the national peculiarities of hierarchical societal communication also influence the definition of network society in Russia. Thanks to informal and unofficial networks which were widespread in the Soviet Union, “the traditions of flexible social relations”, “the superiority of interpersonal contacts over established social links”, Russians are open to adapting the “new corporate and social mentality” of a network society (Ibid., 85).

However, the country met certain difficulties on its way to globalization by the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Vartanova, some of them were connected to the transitions in the economy caused by the outdated structure based on the natural resource sector and in particular the export of oil and gas. National industrial production deteriorated and the GDP was uncertain. All of this led to mass

poverty and inequality in the society, disappointment in politics, moral depression, and social escapism. While the economy from the industrial empire turned into oil and gas supplier, elite became involved in the “globalized economy” and made use of the benefits of information and communication global technologies. Nevertheless, despite the low level of average technological development and difficulties in economy, the level of educational and intellectual potential among employees was quite high. (Ibid., 86).

I would like to mention here the phenomenon of “brain drain” during the early post-Soviet years when a lot of intellectuals, higher education personnel, scientists and promising students immigrated to other countries which provided a better quality of life and work. Radically declining living standards, new employment patterns where many were forced combined low paid professional activity with additional menial jobs, the decline of health care and pension systems, the decline of state-supported education, and poorly financed social and cultural institutions were the attributes of that epoch. Nonetheless, people believed that the developing spheres of telecommunications and new media, in particular the mobile and internet industries would be the essential part of future progress and would benefit the society from both a social and a political standpoint. When talking about the positive effect of the adaption of global changes by Russian society, Vartanova describes it as the “fragmented globalization” phenomenon because those changes mostly affected urban educated population, “young rich professionals and middle class intellectuals”. These same people became the core of the Russian network society (Ibid., 87).

The Internet is a key factor in the evaluation of the level of development of the network society, as Vartanova argues. The Runet, the Russian-language sector of the Internet, has significantly grown since its foundation in Soviet Union as a scientific and academic network. For instance, from 1993 till 1997 the amount of users doubled each year. In 1996, 85% of all the Russian users were Moscow residents. So at the beginning of 2000, the Internet was still unevenly spread. In 2002, only about 34% of users lived outside of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg (the so-called Russian “capitals”). The typical user, according to Vartanova, was an educated and/or high income man of 20-35 years old working as an official, businessman, journalist, politician, or a student. The maximum number of users in 1998 was 1.1 mln, 9.2 in 2000 and in 2002 it was 18 mln, whereas the number of frequent users grew from 0.2 to 5.0 and 8 mln respectively (Ibid., 87, 88).

Vartanova also discusses in her article the reasons for the stunted growth of the network society in Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Firstly, the information technology sector remained insignificant. There were also such technical problems as distance and technical backwardness (the telecommunications structure lagged behind because of the continued usage of copper cable), the monopoly position of Rostelecom and so on. However, at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Russian information technology sector experienced substantial growth. Mobile telephony also grew successfully: spread of cell phones improved communication and created a competitive market, thus giving Russians more mobility and independence in everyday life. (Ibid., 91-92).

In her article, Elena Vartanova discussed the network society during the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union when Russian society and all its spheres had to adjust to the new order. Time passed and the economy as well as technology reached the point where they could develop beyond the survival mode. As mentioned above, the Internet is an indicator of the progress of the network society. So let us take a look at the Internet expansion in Russia a few years later in 2009. Karina Alexanyan examines the Runet “webscape”:

First, the RuNet remains an elite and stratified medium dominated by urban and educated users. National Internet penetration is growing rapidly, but it remains at about one-third of the population. Second, those who do use the Internet do so relatively frequently and, most significantly, pay attention to different sources of information than their less-wired peers. Finally, the categories of social media – personal, public, blog, online journal, social networking site, community, friend, reader etc. – have emerged with distinct and various definitions, features and parameters in Russia. These categories are a result of social, historical, technological and cultural elements that are specific to Russia. (Alexanyan, 2009, 2)

According to Alexanyan, Internet penetration in Russia is only about 33% but majority of the frequent Internet users who go online at least once per week reaches 80% and 55% of users go online every day. The author stresses that in the period from 2002 to 2009 the percentage of Internet users increased dramatically: from around 5% to around 30% in the areas outside of Moscow and from 27% to 60% in the capital itself. The author also believes that Russia’s Internet penetration at 33% can be compared to Brazil’s which has 29% penetration. Looking at it from a socio-economic demographic point of view, Russia does not differ much from other countries: the higher the income and education, the higher the Internet access and usage (Alexanyan, 2009, 2).

According to FOM (Fond Obschestvennoe Mnenie) – Public Opinion Fund research which is compiled 1-2 times a year, the number of Internet users in Russia grew from a monthly users audience of 8% (8.9 mln users of 18 or more years old age), a weekly users audience of 6% (6.4 mln users) and a daily users audience of 3% (3.2 mln users) in the spring of 2003 to respectively 46% (52.9 mln users), 42% (49.1 mln users) and 33% (38.6 mln users) in the spring of 2011.

It is also important to look at the division of Internet users by regions. The Central Region which includes Moscow and the Moscow region currently has the highest number – 28% of Russia’s Internet-using population, or 15.2 mln users. The North-West region including Saint-Petersburg has only 6.6 mln users or 12% of Russia’s Internet-using population. The smallest number of users is in Far East region with only 2.3 mln users or 5% of the amount of all the users in Russia (which is 50.2 mln people). In comparison to the Internet penetration in other countries in the world, Russia takes 9<sup>th</sup> place with 46% of the population after Great Britain with 83%, Australia with 80%, and Germany with 79% (“Internet in Russia”, 2011, 1-12).

ComScore, “a leader in measuring the digital world”, released an Overview of European Internet Usage in September 2011 which shows that 373.4 million unique visitors went online in September 2011 for an average of 26.4 hours per person. According to the overview, “Russia overtook Germany as the market with the highest number of unique visitors online” with 50,810 of total unique visitors in September, 2011, and 22.4 hrs average hours online per visitor and 2,439 average pages per visitor (“comScore Releases”, 2011).

#### **2.4. Russia’s Former President and the Development of Information Society in Russia**

An outstanding example of an active Internet user is the former Russian president himself. Dmitry Medvedev was the first president who had a blog which was frequently commented on and who watched the governmental website [www.kremlin.org](http://www.kremlin.org) to be constantly updated with videos of his statements and speeches from his meetings with various committees, the meetings’ transcripts and all other types of information, thus making it available for common Internet-using citizens. President Dmitry Medvedev was actively introducing development programs of the information society in the

country and of the Internet in particular, as well as the modernization and technological development of Russia's economy. I would like to take a look at some of the transcripts of the former Russian president's speeches to demonstrate what the government planned to do or was doing at the time of the development of the information society in the country and what the president thought of the Internet and the SNSs' role in it.

Firstly, let me say a few words about the former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Dmitry Anatolyevich Medvedev (born on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September in 1965) was the third President of Russia, inaugurated on May, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008. He won the presidential election held on March, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008 with about 70% of the popular vote. Previously Medvedev had been appointed First Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian government on November, 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Formerly Vladimir Putin's chief of presidential staff, he was also the Chairman of Gazprom's board of directors, a post he had held, for the second time, since 2000. Medvedev's candidacy was selected by then President Vladimir Putin. On December, 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007, he was informally endorsed as a candidate for the forthcoming presidential elections by the largest Russian political party, United Russia, as well as several pro-presidential parties, and later officially endorsed by United Russia on December, 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007. A technocrat and political appointee, Medvedev had never held elective office before 2008. An apparently mild-mannered person, Dmitry Medvedev is considered to be a moderate liberal pragmatic, an able administrator and a loyalist of Putin. He is also known as a leader of "the clan of St.Petersburg lawyers", one of the political groups that formed around Vladimir Putin during his presidency.

#### **2.4.1. Opening Remarks of the Commission for Modernization and Technological Development of Russia's Economy**

In the October 28, 2009 speech called "Opening Remarks of the Commission for Modernization and Technological Development of Russia's Economy", which was held on in Fryazino in the Moscow Region, Medvedev discusses plans and tasks that the Russian economy faces on its way of development and modernization. In the previous meeting, the Commission agreed on the amounts and sources of financing and the allocation of extra funds when necessary, keeping in mind the economic difficulties juxtaposed with the fact that modernization and innovation programmes are one of the



Commission's priorities. The main topics of this meeting were the projects in the telecommunications and space exploration sectors. Medvedev stresses that "the level of development in the telecommunications sector is one of the most important indicators of an innovative economy", that access to telecommunications services is crucial and for a country's competitiveness and business development, and that access to the services has a definite impact on the quality of life.

Among the tasks the president names the "rapid development of technology that will ensure world standards of speed and quality of data transmission". This rapid development will also help to improve the grid systems and super computers as well as the modernization of information services sector. Medvedev does not forget to mention the "unique geographic situation of the country and its immense size" which may demand sometimes more than mainline communication channels such as wireless networks and satellite communications. Another detail which grabs one's attention is the statistic on the speed of the Internet connection which differs significantly between Russia and Europe and especially with Japan (average 512 kilobits per second, 10-20 megabits and 60 megabits per second respectively).

The second task is the modernization of outdated telephone stations which will enable modern interactive services and high-quality services. Here Medvedev recalls the positive results in mobile communications development in latest years: now there are 140 users for every 100 000 people in the country which puts Russia in 16<sup>th</sup> place in the world. The third task is the extension of digital television and radio broadcasting throughout the entire country. The goal is to provide every citizen with 24 digital TV channels by 2015 as well as access to other interactive multimedia services. The next task is the development of the frequency range for which the construction of new-generation satellites is of great importance. The final task is to make final decision on the GLONASS system's development. GLONASS is the alternative to the USA's Global Positioning System (GPS) which was founded in the USSR in 1976 and which is now operated for the Russian government by the Russian Space Forces. It will enable monitoring of "technologically complex facilities to prevent damage, minimize the impact of emergency situations, and carry out cartographic work, including navigation and land cadastre services" which today are quite slow. As one can see from this speech, Russia faces a variety of challenges on the road to the modernization and development of the economy which will ultimately contribute to the development of the society in general.

## **2.4.2. Speech at Joint Session of the State Council and the Council for the Development of the Information Society**

Let us take a look at the Speech at Joint Session of the State Council and the Council for the Development of the Information Society which took place in the Kremlin in Moscow on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009.

The main subject of this discussion was the information society in Russia and encouraging the use of information technology in the governmental sector in particular. Medvedev stresses that he is personally dedicated to the subject. We also find out that in accordance with national Information Society Development Strategy, the government is planning the provision of all without exception state electronic services by 2015. He underlines that strategic information technology is one of the greatest national development priorities. As an example of the goals he mentions [www.gosuslugi.ru](http://www.gosuslugi.ru), the state services internet portal, which to date mostly provides citizens with information but does not offer the electronic provision of the services. He also underlines that the process of transition will take a long time and “it is essential to keep on schedule”.

In this speech Medvedev presents the tasks what the Councils are facing. The first task is to set common policy for the transition to the provision of online services. He mentions incompatible products, systems, and databases which State agencies are using which makes the exchange of information between agencies problematic. The second task is to continue developing the legal and regulatory framework as the current one with old procedures requiring paper documents does not meet current demands now. Third, there is a huge need for a “special set of measures to overcome the digital gap between the different regions”. As I already mentioned about the current Internet reach in the country, there is a large difference in access to Internet from region to region and also “in the quality of communication channels, and therefore the speed of data transfer”. Broadband Internet is expensive though some regions have made progress with it. Here the president gives the statistics which I mentioned previously while talking about the gap between the Moscow Region and other regions with regard to the number of Internet users. The last task is the shortage of qualified personnel with required specialized skills. The large number of regions having such a shortage (two thirds) of qualified IT specialists and Russia’s place in the global IT industry rating (38<sup>th</sup> place) gives a complete

understanding of the need to improve this sphere. Once again Medvedev stresses that the transition to electronic services is one of Russia's crucial needs and not an "exotic notion". He hopes that it will be achieved in 5-6 years, a time frame which takes into account the country's size and difficulties.

### **2.4.3. A New Recording on Dmitry Medvedev's Blog: On Internet Development in Russia**

As I already mentioned Dmitry Medvedev was the first Russian president who constantly updated his blog. Because it is a videoblog, it is fun and attractive for users to follow. It can be found at <http://www.blog.kremlin.ru> or <http://blog-medvedev.livejournal.com/>. As a user, he was aware of the problems the common Internet user faces, which is why it is clear he knew what he was talking about quite well. I would like to take a look at one of his blog entries called "A New Recording on Dmitry Medvedev's Blog: On Internet Development in Russia" which was uploaded on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009 in Moscow. The president was confident that the Internet sector will overcome the problems and create new jobs as well as new projects which will help the economy of the country in general. In my opinion, these words of hope make the speech very life-asserting.

Medvedev points out the results that the Internet achieved over recent years: it has developed into "a full-fledged self-regulated system that has a substantial influence in all different areas of our lives". Additionally, "social networks and blogs have become centerpieces in this system". He also talks about the problem of Internet governance which demands a great deal of work. Here one sees that Russia also agrees that the rules of governance should be created by all countries together: "there should be international rules drawn up through collective effort". Even more importantly, the Internet should remain a "common environment" free from copyright violation, xenophobia, terrorism and other illegal activities. The main task for Russia is the provision of the "right conditions for maximum access to Internet services" which is complicated due to the size of the Russian Federation. It is important to understand that the area of the Russian Federation is 17,075,400 square kilometers, making it the largest country in the world with a population of almost 140 million people.

The next task is the one which the president discussed in the speech I have already mentioned - the "openness and readiness to provide various state services through the Internet" which requires a lot of

work. Medvedev observes that some state institutions have already created good websites, and one of the prominent examples of electronic government in action is in Tatarstan. Moreover, he stresses that state institutions should follow “systematic work effort” instead of creating isolated examples. At the end, Medvedev talks about his blog which became an important part of the Live Journal community and enabled followers to respond to the comments on the recordings.

While in 2009 the president was talking about the general tasks which Russia must accomplish in order to be on the way to more modern and developed economy as well as an extensive information society with widespread Internet and access to the electronic government, in 2011 he focuses on more particular tasks such as certain SNSs and search engines in Russia.

In his speech at the Meeting with Russian and International Experts in Media Innovation from June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011, he stresses the importance of vkontakte.ru, main SNS in Russia: “I really like vkontakte.ru and facebook, and other good social networks. I think the role vkontakte has played in Russia is obvious. I will not assess the extent of borrowing certain ideas, because that is very ungrateful business, and as even my modest legal experience shows can rarely be proved. But the fact that the network vkontakte has developed in Russia has clearly partly blocked the growth of facebook’s popularity in our country. Perhaps if this resource had not appeared, facebook’s development would have been somewhat different” (“Meeting with Russian”, 2011).

Medvedev also says that Google as a search engine is not so popular in Russia in comparison to other countries and he considers it a “good thing” that Russia has its own search engines which are widely used: “I think if we have our own engines they cannot be ignored, given that Google, for example, already has a presence virtually everywhere in the world and only a few countries are trying to create their own products”.

The other fact that I would like to bring up is that Medvedev himself registered his profile in vkontakte.ru during the meeting with his supporters from among the Internet community which took place on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011, he explains it thus: “The authorities should in general seek supporters in the Internet community in order to make government modern and relevant. Without such supporters a gap is likely to grow between the authorities and a large part of the population. This is something we must avoid. I try in this sense to set an example.” (“Dmitry Medvedev met”, 2011).

In this chapter I have studied the definitions of the network society and the information society introduced by Manuell Castells and Jan van Dijk, which, in my opinion, are complementary. I have examined how the concept of globalization is applied to the concept of network society and came to conclusion that the network society is a global society by definition. The network society is, however, developing at a different pace in each country and the process of transition took various times due to different economic factors as well as historic and cultural events. The process of domestication is unique in each case and requires thorough research.

In Russia, the process of establishing a network society began in quite complicated conditions due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the forced changes in every sphere of life. As Vartanova says, it led to “fragmented globalization” and affected mostly an educated urban population who became the core of the network society in Russia. This is also indicated by the fact that Runet continues to be available mostly to a limited part of the population, and the figures cited by Vartanova (the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century) and Alexanyan (2009) are good examples.

Nevertheless, despite such disappointing numbers, the Russian government is actively planning how to improve the current state of the information society. In the presidential speeches, one can see that a well-thought out program is already being set in motion in Russia. It includes modernization and the technological development of the telecommunications sector: improvement of the speed and quality of data transmission, modernization of outdated telephone stations, extension of digital television and radio broadcasting, and the GLONASS system’s development. The tasks of the State Council and the Council for the Development of the Information Society include setting a common policy for the transition to provision of online services, the development of a legal and regulatory framework, the closing of the digital gap between the different regions, and providing a solution to the shortage of qualified personnel with specialized skills. Among the tasks that the Russian Internet sector need to take care of is the provision of equal access to Internet services and to various digital state services. These tasks are quite demanding and require intense work due to Russia’s national peculiarities and specific difficulties of the country such as its immense size and its territorial problems, the impact of the global financial crisis, and so on. The domestication of the global model is a complex process and requires significant effort from the government of Russia, officials of various ranks, and the general population.

### 3. Social Media

Before talking about SNSs, it is necessary to define the greater notion of which they are a part. SNSs are an example of social media. There are various definitions of social media. According to Wikipedia, “The term social media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue.” (Wikipedia, n.d.). Lon Safko in his book “The Social Media Bible: Tactics, Tools, and Strategies for Business Success” talks about social media from a business standpoint: “The application of the terminology *social media* in this book is about how we can use all these technologies effectively to reach out and connect with other humans, create a relationship, build trust and be there when the people in those relationship are ready to purchase our product offering” (Safko, 2010, 4).

Kaplan and Haenlein in their article “Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media” define social media by explaining the difference between Web 2.0, User Generated Content, and social media itself. Web 2.0, as they put it, is a new way of using the World Wide Web in which users are allowed to modify content and applications which were created and published by individuals. According to the authors, Web 1.0 is characterized by personal webpages, Encyclopedia Britannica Online, and the idea of content publishing while Web 2.0 is characterized by wikis, blogs, and collaborative projects. Web 2.0 in a technical sense does not differ drastically from the World Wide Web but requires “a set of basic functionalities” which includes Adobe Flash, “RSS (Really Simple Syndication, a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content, such as blog entries or news headlines, in a standardized format), and AJAX (Asynchronous Java Script, a technique to retrieve data from web servers asynchronously, allowing the update of web content without interfering with the display and behavior of the whole page)”.

User Generated Content, according to the authors, can be described as “the sum of all the ways in which people make use of social media” (Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010, 61). According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, User Generated Content should meet the following conditions: it should be published on a publicly accessible website or on a SNS accessible by some group of people, show some creative effort, and be created outside of professional routines and practices, i.e. not for work or for gaining profit (OECD, 2007 as cited in Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010, 61).

Having defined Web 2.0 and User Generated Content, Kaplan&Haenlein come to the following definition of social media: “Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010, 61).

Another concept which I would like to examine is Media Studies 2.0, which will contribute to the understanding of social media since implies studies of social media in addition to traditional media studies. David Gauntlett makes an outline of the new media studies comparing it with traditional media studies which he calls Media Studies 1.0. Among the main differences are:

- replacement of the fetishisation of “expert” readings of pop culture with focus on everyday meanings formed by audience members;
- focus on traditional media is replaced or joined by the interest in independent media projects;
- spotlight from Western media has shifted to international dimensions;
- the acceptance of the fact that Internet and new digital media have fundamentally changed people’s perception of all media;
- innovative methods of research are welcomed giving way to people’s creativity.

(Gauntlett, 2007).

Besides defining social media I consider it necessary to take into account the classification of social media by Kaplan & Haenlein in order to see how SNSs are situated among them. Kaplan & Haenlein’s categorization is based on theories in the field of media research (social presence and media richness) and social processes (self-presentation and self-disclosure). Intimacy (interpersonal or mediated) and immediacy of the medium (asynchronous or synchronous) influence social presence while the media richness theory considers that “the goal of any communication is the resolution of ambiguity and the reduction of uncertainty”, and the more richness media possess, the more effective it is (Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010, 61). Self-presentation implies that people, while socially interacting, want to control the impressions they make on others. Self-disclosure is “conscious or unconscious disclosure of personal information”. The authors form a table containing various types of social media in accordance

with a high or low degree of self-presentation/self-disclosure and a low, medium, or high degree of social presence/media richness. The results of this table are summarized below.

Collaborative projects, the type of social media having a low degree in both factors, “enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users and are, in this sense, probably the most democratic manifestation of UGC”, as Kaplan&Haenlein state (Ibid., 62). Examples of such collaborative projects are wikis and social bookmarking applications.

Blogs are high in self-presentation/self-disclosure and low in social presence/media richness. Blogs, which represent the earliest form of Social Media, are special types of websites that usually display date-stamped entries in reverse chronological order (OECD, 2007 as cited in Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010, 63). The authors also think that blogs are similar to personal webpages in that they can take any form, from a diary type to specializing in a certain area of owner’s interest.

Content communities, which are low in self-presentation/self-disclosure and medium in social presence/media richness, help people share media content which can be text, photos, videos or Powerpoint presentations. Examples of content communities include Bookcrossing, Flickr, YouTube, and Slideshare.

SNSs are high in self-presentation/self-disclosure and medium in social presence/media richness. The definition the authors give is: “Social networking sites are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other” (Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010, 63).

Virtual game worlds are low in self-presentation/self-disclosure and high in social presence/media richness. In a virtual game world, a user can create a personalized avatar in a three-dimensional environment and interact with other users in that virtual environment. Kaplan and Haenlein call them the “ultimate manifestation of social media” because of their high level of social presence and media richness. This type of virtual worlds limits users self-presentation and self-disclosure as they set strict rules for players. One example of a virtual game worlds is the massively popular multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) “World of Warcraft” (Ibid., 64).

Virtual social worlds are the highest in both self-presentation/self-disclosure and social presence/media richness. Users or inhabitants of such worlds have more freedom in behavior and their virtual life is



similar to their real lives. Kaplan and Haenlein call Second Life application, founded and managed by the San Francisco-based company Linden Research Inc., the most prominent virtual social world.

Thus, SNSs are an example of social media, high in self-presentation/self-disclosure and medium in social presence/media richness. Now let us take a look at the background information of SNSs, their history, examples of them and their attributes.

### **3.1.Social Network Sites, definition, history and some characteristics**

I consider it necessary to define social networks as a notion. A social network is a “social structure made of nodes, which are generally individuals or organizations” (Webopedia, n.d.). They are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as values, visions, ideas, financial exchange, friendship, sexual relationships, kinship, dislike, conflict or business. Social network analysis views social relationships in terms of nodes and ties. Nodes are individual actors within the networks, and ties are the relationships between the actors. The resulting graph-based structures are often very complex. There can be many kinds of ties between the nodes. Research on social networks (from Durkheim to modern sociologists) has shown that social networks operate on many levels, from families up to the level of nations, and play a critical role in determining the way problems are solved, organizations are run, and the degree to which individuals succeed in achieving their goals. In its simplest form, a social network is a map of all the relevant ties between the nodes under study.

Now, with the increased influence of the Internet on all spheres of people’s lives, it is certain that human interaction is also under the Internet’s influence. According to Slevin, who examines the three types of interaction distinguished by Thompson, the Internet changes interactional and organizational characteristics no matter whether it is face-to-face (the simplest and most common type involving individuals who are co-present and share a time-space reference system), mediated (involving individuals orienting themselves onto specific others) or mediated quasi-interaction (involving communication oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients). All the types of interaction can be found on the Internet (Slevin, 2000, 79). Moreover, it has become common for social networks to find their reflection in the online world. One can easily become a node of one or

more of the online social networks. Since their appearance, social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo have attracted millions of users. Users have integrated these sites into their daily practices. To date, there are hundreds of SNSs with various technological possibilities and supporting a wide range of interests and practices. As Boyd says, key technological features of SNSs are more or less the same, but the main difference is the culture which appears in different SNSs. As Boyd states, “most sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities. Some sites cater to diverse audiences, while others attract people based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious, or nationality-based identities. Sites also vary in the extent to which they incorporate new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo- and video-sharing” (Boyd, n.d.).

Social network sites can be defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, n.d.). The nature and organization of these connections may vary from site to site. While we use the term "social network site" to describe this phenomenon, the term "social networking sites" also appears in public discourse, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. Boyd suggests not to employ the term "networking" because "networking" stresses the initiation of a relationship, frequently between unfamiliar persons. She emphasizes the fact that social network sites' uniqueness isn't that “they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to create and make visible their social networks” (Ibid., n.d.). On many of the large SNSs, members are not just "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead, most of them communicate with people who are already a part of their social networks existing in real life. This is why Boyd prefers to label them "social network sites."

### *History of Social Network Sites*

Let's take a brief look at history of SNSs and the main features of the most popular ones. According to Boyd, the first recognizable social network site was launched in 1997. SixDegrees.com allowed users

to create profiles, list their friends and in 1998, surf their friends' lists. Each of these features existed separately in some form before SixDegrees. Firstly, the feature of "profile" had already been implemented on some dating sites and on many community sites. "Friend lists" also had existed before in AIM and ICQ, although they were visible only to the owners of the accounts. The website Classmates.com allowed people to connect with their high school or college friends and to surf the networks of others who also joined, but users could not create profiles or list Friends until several years later. SixDegrees was the first to unite these features. SixDegrees' main advantage was the possibility for people to connect with and send messages to others. Despite that SixDegrees attracted millions of users, in 2000 it was closed due to its failure to become a profitable business. Perhaps SixDegrees was merely ahead of its time. From 1997 to 2001, the number of SNSs began to grow considerably as support for various combinations of profiles and publicly articulated friends lists became available. As O. Wasow says, AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente allowed users to create personal, professional, and dating profiles—users could identify friends on their personal profiles without seeking approval for those connections (as cited in Boyd, 2007, 5). Likewise, shortly after its launch in 1999, LiveJournal listed one-directional connections on user pages. The next wave of SNSs began when Ryze.com was launched in 2001 to help people empower their business networks. Similar sites such as Tribe.net, LinkedIn, and Friendster were tightly intertwined with Ryze both personally and professionally. The companies thought that their products could exist without competing. However, Ryze never achieved mass popularity, Tribe.net grew to attract a passionate user niche, LinkedIn became a powerful business service, and Friendster became very popular. Nowadays, more than 400 SNSs exist and all are based on sharing similar interests, activities, race or religious identities, and so on. The most popular of these are Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, Friendster, hi5, Orkut, PerfSpot, Yahoo! 360, Zorpia and Netlog ("Websites Product Comparisons", 2009).

*"Persistence", "searchability", "replicability" and "invisible audiences" as characteristics of SNSs*

In her article "Social Network Sites: Public, Private, or What?", Danah Boyd describes how teenagers use SNSs, but I argue that her research can also be applied to a person of any age. In communities all over the world, teenagers join SNSs and create a profile to represent themselves digitally. They create

a profile that expresses how they see themselves with the use of text, images, video, audio, links, quizzes, and surveys. These profiles are woven together into a large web through “Friends” lists. This collection of “Friends” is not only a list of close ties (or what is normally thought of as 'friends'), but the lists allow participants to articulate their imagined audience, or whom they see as a part of their world within the site.

One of the properties of mediated publics, environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology, mentioned by Boyd is “searchability”. She applies “searchability” to parents’ searching for their childrens’ hangout places and so on. Again I would say that this is applicable to adults as well. By following a person’s status updates, uploaded photos, and messages posted on friends’ walls, anyone can trace a person’s location (of course with some luck and time). According to some news items on the Internet and TV, “searchability” is how Russian bailiffs search for debtors (“Bailiffs search”, 2009).

“Persistence” is another property of mediated publics which basically means the words you write in SNSs can be preserved for a long time, and which is good for asynchronous communication but can compromise a person with words written, for example, at 15 years of age.

The third property of mediated publics is “replicability”, the possibility to copy the conversation and use it for malignant purposes. Because conversations can be copied and reused it is difficult to determine if the content was manipulated.

The last property is “invisible audiences”. As Boyd says, “in mediated publics, not only are lurkers invisible, but persistence, searchability, and replicability introduce audiences that were never present at the time when the expression was created” (Boyd, 2007).

### **3.2. Social Network Sites in Russia**

Now let us describe the peculiarities of social networks in Russia which, as stated above, are experiencing its astounding growth at the moment.

When looking at the social networking audience in Russia, one can see astonishing statistics. According to comScore, Inc., a leader in measuring the digital world, and their study of the social networking category in Russia in 2009, “the Russian social networking audience had the highest engagement among the 40 individual countries reported by comScore, with an average of 6.6 hours and 1,307 pages consumed per visitor” (per month). The second is Brazil with 6.3 hours, followed by Canada (5.6 hours), Puerto Rico (5.3 hours) and Spain (5.3 hours). “Of the 31.9 million people who accessed the Internet in Russia in April, 18.9 million visited at least one social networking site, representing a reach of 59 percent of the total online population. The most popular of these sites was Russian-based Vkontakte.ru with 14.3 million visitors, followed by Odnoklassniki.ru (7.8 million visitors), Mail.ru – My World (6.3 million visitors) and Fotostrana.ru (1.6 million visitors). Facebook.com attracted 616,000 Russian visitors, up 277 percent versus year ago.” (comScore, 2009).

“Social networking has become a popular online pastime not only in mature Internet markets like North America, but also in developing, high-growth Internet markets such as Russia,” said Mike Read, SVP & managing director, comScore Europe. “In a country as geographically large as Russia, social networking represents a way of connecting people from one corner of the country to the other. The highly engaged behavior of social networkers in Russia offers significant opportunity for marketers and advertisers seeking to reach these audiences.” (comScore, 2009).

In 2010, comScore published a new press release according to which Russia still had the most engaged social network audience in the world. In August, 2010, 34.5 million Russian internet users (74.5 percent of Russia’s online population) visited a SNS at least once. Russians spent more time online than any other country in social networking – 9.8 average hours per visitor (while 4.5 hours is worldwide average) and 34,545 unique users visited social networking sites. Second was Israel with 9.2 hours per visitor and Turkey with 7.6 hours.

The most visited SNS in Russia was vkontakte.ru (vk.com) with 27.8 mln visitors while odnoklassniki.ru had 16.7 mln visitors. Facebook.com came in fifth despite its “strong leadership position both worldwide and in the majority of individual Internet markets”. Nevertheless, its audience in Russia grew by 376% in 2010. As Mike Read, SVP & managing director of comScore Europe said, “It is very exciting to watch the developments of the continuously strong-growing Russian internet market, where many Russian-based companies still outnumber global players...The substantial growth

in the Russian social media sector provides a sizeable advertising opportunity and reflects the importance of online connectivity for the Russian population” (“Russia Has Most”, 2010).

However, in 2011, Russia gave up her top position as having the most engaged social networking audience in the world. According to comScore’s study conducted in April, 2011, Russian users spent an average of 10.3 hours on SNSs, while Israel had the highest social networking engagement with 10.7 average hours. The third was Argentina with 8.4 average hours per visitor. (“comScore Releases Overview”, 2011).

The history of Russian SNSs is not so vast. Moikrug.ru (“moi krug” can be translated as “my circle”) started its history on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005. The site is aimed at the initiation of business contacts and has several “circles” of relatives, friends and friends of friends. My.mail.ru (Мой мир@mail.ru), translated as “my world@mail.ru”, one of the biggest mail services in Russia, was started on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007 and today has more than 27 mln users of Mail.ru and 75.6 mln visitors in the Mail.ru Group audience. (Mail.Ru Group., n.d.).

Odnoklassniki.ru is the second-most visited SNS in Russia. It is called a clone of Classmates.com and was founded on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Despite its popularity today odnoklassniki.ru has several disadvantages such as charging for additional services and the limited functionality of any profile created in October, 2008 or later unless the user sends charged smses. There are also many kinds of SNSs in Russia for drivers and connoisseurs of cars, future moms, dog owners, fishing or cooking enthusiasts, special interest groups such as those interested in medicine, cinema or reading and so on.

### **3.3. Vk.com (vkontakte.ru)**

Now let’s take a closer look at the most popular SNS in Russia. Vkontakte.ru (internationally branded as vk.com and also known as VK) is the most popular SNS not only in Russia, but also in Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. “Vkontakte” (“В КОНТАКТЕ”) translates to “in contact” or “in touch”. It is considered to be Russia’s version of Facebook. Ostrow mentions the site in his list of “Copycats: Top 10 International Facebook Clones” putting it in the same row with StudiVZ and Xiaonei (Ostrow, 2007). It was launched in September 2006 and initially was a social network for students and graduates

of Russian universities. Students could register there only with an invitation and with their real names. Just several months later the registration became free for everyone and remained free of charge until 2011.

Now and since 2011, in order to reduce the number of spammers, scammers and bots, and thus to get rid of “ongoing legal troubles and smeared image”, registration on vkontakte.ru is available only with the invitation from a person who is already registered on vkontakte.ru. The limit of invitations is strict - only three per person, and they can be made only with the help of a mobile phone number, not through email. “One of the most controversial methods employed in their fight for a clean cyberspace was closing down registration. Fighting cybercrime is often like fighting a hydra - for any pirate copy deleted dozens more will appear, for any spammer or bot account blocked dozens more will be registered. Thus they decided to pull the plug and make the network invite-only” (Lekarev, 2011).

Currently, Vkontakte is available in 70 languages (English, Russian, almost all European languages, Chinese, some languages of ethnic minorities populating Russia, and 2 strange ones imitating the pre-revolutional Russian language style as well as the Soviet Union’s language style). According to Wikipedia, “because of its design and functionality, Vkontakte is often claimed to be a clone of Facebook, accommodating not only a similar concept, but also a comparable business model. However, its incorporation of other features makes it more like YouTube, Pandora, and MySpace rolled into one, with an interface highly reminiscent of Facebook” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Because Facebook.com is the most popular SNS in the world and vkontakte.ru is often claimed to be modeled on it that is why I would like to make some comparisons between the two sites. In contrast with Facebook’s “self-presentation”, VK stresses communication with interesting people or keeping in touch with friends and family as well as the expression of opinions while Facebook paid attention to the technological side and privacy issues in 2010 and became very laconic in 2012.

As VKontakte’s “About” page states, “VK is a social networking site that helps people express their opinions and find an audience. You can communicate with a broad community of interesting people or keep in touch with friends and family. The aim of VK is to remain the fastest, most modern and aesthetically pleasing means of communicating on the Internet” (VK About page, 2012).

This is how Facebook’s “About” page looked in 2010:

“Founded in February 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment. Facebook is a part of millions of people’s lives all around the world. Facebook is a privately-held company and is headquartered in Palo Alto, Calif” (Facebook press room, 2010).

And this is how the current Facebook’s “About” page looks:

*“Mission*

Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.

*Company Overview*

Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet” (Facebook About page, 2012).

Let us see what vkontakte.ru says about its Audience on the About page:

“VK is the most visited resource on the Russian Internet (TNS Gallup).

The site has more than half of the CIS internet traffic (Liveinternet).

Over 120 million users are registered on the site.

Over 36 000 000 users log on to the site every day (Liveinternet).

More than 3 000 000 000 pages are opened daily (Liveinternet).

Around 70% of users live in Russia.

25% of users are from Moscow, and 12% are from Saint Petersburg (Liveinternet).

60% of users are over 25 years old (TNS Gallup)”.

(VKontakte About page, 2011)



Vkontakte.ru is developing rapidly and is constantly implementing new features and possibilities. As Peter Lekarev mentions in his article, according to unnamed sources, vkontakte.ru's management is interested in IPO (Initial Public Offering) and now is discussing this with investment banks. Lekarev says, "The network's move to the .com domain is now all the more understandable. With the Russian-language market saturated and expected growth possible only due to newly-connected Internet users, the company had to make a move to secure a long-term expansion strategy. And looks like the only way to accumulate new users without starting a new business of providing Internet access is to conquer new markets." (Lekarev, 2011).

Registration, though limited, is free on VK, and it is also free to use the site. But it is interesting to note how the company can afford its staff, the constant development process, and so on. As Ilya Perekopskyi, the vice president of VK, explains in his interview, 60% of VK's income comes from targeted advertisements and 40% from applications. He also states that VK does not forbid political advertisement but bans any advertisement of tobacco or alcohol products (Lekarev, 2011).

### *Features*

The main features of VK are the same as on Facebook. The difference is that most of them have the attachment "my" in the name ("My Messages", "My Notes", etc). The start page is the Profile page while in Facebook it is the New Feed page. After creating a profile, a user can articulate their friends list and make their profile public or semipublic to certain users (friends). There exists a Messaging service, a Publisher, and a News Feed. However, the News Feed does not include updates if some of the user's friends commented on other friend's posts, photos, notes, etc. unless the user themselves had previously commented on them. The Wall in VK has the same function. Status updates and postings of the pictures, videos or links by the profile owner are possible in VK, but after some recently implemented innovations, they can be seen by all the users. To my mind this is a violation of users privacy. On Facebook a user can choose who can see their posts on their wall: all the users of the SNS, the user's friends or some groups of friends, or even certain friend(s) only. Also in VK there is a rating system: previously while adding personal or background information or by sending paid mobile messages the user earned certain number of percents which they could later use for "buying" virtual

gifts and “giving” them to friends. “My Notes” acquired the same possibilities as “Notes” in Facebook: user can tag friends, attach videos and links to their notes and they now can be found as part of posts on the Wall. “My Photos”, “My Events”, and “My Groups” are the same as in Facebook. Thanks to “My Bookmarks”, the user can bookmark any other user (not only those in their friends list), group, or event in order to gain faster access to them at another time.

One of the essential differences between VK and Facebook is VK’s enormous database containing audio- and videofiles. As there is certainly a lack of copyright control in VK, any registered user has free access to these and may not only upload, listen and watch, but a user can also successfully download these files free of charge with the help of some additional programs. This makes VK even more appealing to users. New features are added to the website from time to time such as "Questions" which answers the questions that was asked by user in any area of their interests, “Advertisements” (free of charge classified ads which any user can submit), and "Applications", containing Flash API based games, tools, chat rooms etc. It is interesting as well that VK.com has several daughter projects including “В Кадре” vkadre.ru which is similar to Youtube and a business social network site “В Штате” vshtate.ru. Vshtate.ru is a quite famous business SNS in Russia with over 2,700,000 registered users and 12,000 represented companies.

Another VK’s peculiarity is that groups which a user can join are quite often of a commercial character. I should mention that the number of commercial groups aimed at not just promotion but also at selling and offering their services via VK is quite high, whereas at other SNSs, companies usually have paid commercial advertisements placed on the user’s profile page. It is not clear if the admins or owners of these groups pay any taxes or any fee to the administration of the site. Even without starting a new group, a user can transform their profile into an advertisement page with contact information and photos of what they sell or offer (whereas in Facebook companies mostly have commercial advertisement on the right side of a user’s profile page). All these features make social networking practices and thus the online culture in Russia different from most other places.

As one can see from this description of VK’s main features, its international growth, and its policies, a SNS can vary from other SNSs in its development and targeted audiences even if the SNS was originally a clone of a different SNS. V Kontakte.ru is a successful “clone” of Facebook with later adjustments according to national interests and peculiarities. As a matter of fact, VK now greatly differs from Facebook due to its audio and video database without any limitations or copyrights; its

daughter projects (also could be called clones of other bigger sites); the opportunity for users to publish free advertisements as well as organize commercial groups free of charge; and some other small specific features. These examples show that vkontakte.ru is a perfect example of a SNSs' ongoing domestication as there are constantly new features being added or new policies being introduced by the administration of the website.

#### 4. Methodology

My research was based on a qualitative interviews of a group of young adults who live in Saint-Petersburg, Russia or who originally come from there. The interviews were conducted in the autumn of, 2010 in Saint-Petersburg, Russia, and Tampere, Finland. There were a total of 14 respondents. The questions concerning various aspects of the SNSs usage were meant to build a picture of a typical vkontakte.ru user since vkontakte.ru is currently the most popular SNS in Russia.

For my research I used several sources of literature, two of which are the most important to my mind. These are two editions of the same book that contain some variations. First is “InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing” by Steinar Kvale, 1996, and second is “Doing Interviews” by Steinar Kvale, 2007. I also used “Mass Communication Theory” by Denis McQuail for the purpose of studying the theory and research traditions of audiences.

According to McQuail, three audience research traditions – structural, behavioral and cultural - have their own different aims, data and methods (McQuail, 1994). In my research I do not use the two first research traditions. I am not interested so much in the social-demographic structure of the SNSs audience in Russia, though in my work I examine data on Internet penetration around the country and the SNS users’ activity in comparison to other countries. I should mention that there seems to be a limited amount of research on the structure of the SNSs audience and more specific aspects of it, such as geographical peculiarities. Such research is important because as I have mentioned above, the penetration of the Internet in Russia is not evenly distributed, and this can affect the SNSs audience.

In my case, I consider it to be appropriate to use social-cultural tradition: I try to understand the choices which the interviewees make in the use of vkontakte.ru and other SNSs and the meaning of vkontakte.ru and other SNSs to them in the context of their everyday lives, taking into account the social and cultural contexts with the help of qualitative research methods.

My type of audience is the audience reached, or users of SNSs or in particular the users of vkontakte.ru. I decided that it is more useful to interview the audience with some experience, i.e., users which have been registered in vkontakte.ru and other SNSs for a period of time. The first users of vkontakte.ru were registered at the end of 2006. At that time, registration was limited to students of Saint-Petersburg

State University because the founder of vkontakte.ru, Pavel Durov, was a student of that university at that moment and the site was a study project. Several months later, registration was available for most of the students of other universities and higher education institutions in Saint-Petersburg. Therefore the first users of vkontakte.ru were students at the moment of their registration. For example, I registered in vkontakte.ru in spring, 2007, when I was in the last year of university in Russia. Because of vkontakte.ru's background, I feel that it is reasonable to do research on users in their twenties. In my research audience, most of the users registered on vkontakte.ru within the first two years of its existence. By the time of my interviews, others had been using vkontakte.ru for at least one year. Because of their experience on this site or other SNSs, the interviewees can be called experienced users of SNSs which have become, to a certain degree, part of their lives.

There are total of 14 respondents aged 22-28 years with 9 females and 5 males. They are all citizens of Russia, all of them come from Saint-Petersburg: they either were born there, graduated from high school there, or studied at a higher education institution in Saint-Petersburg at the time of interviews. When the interviews were conducted, 12 of them lived in the city while 2 others lived in Finland where they studied or worked.

The group consisted of young adults. They were informed about the purposes of the interview as well as the topic of my research in general. They gave their consent for me to use their personal data such as age, name, and type of occupation. A detailed list of the interviewees can be found in the Appendices.

Because several interviewees have the same name, I used the name and the age of the interviewee to make a distinction between them in my analysis of the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in Saint-Petersburg, Russia, and Tampere, Finland. The interviews consisted of conversations with the interviewees on the topics of SNSs, the Internet and their usage of them, based on the same questionnaire. In the interviews, I tried not only to receive the answers to the questions but to let the interviewees describe SNSs and their role in their lives, to reflect on them as a part of their lives, and to add any comments they thought appropriate. Therefore, the interviews were both standardized and open-ended. In the event that an interviewee could not understand a question, I tried to paraphrase it or give personal examples or help in some other way for better understanding.

I compiled a questionnaire based on the research topic while keeping in mind that there might be some additional conversation such as specifying, following-up, probing, etc. required if an interviewee

needed clarification (Kvale, 1996, 133-135). The interview questionnaire consisted of about 30 primary questions which had some explanative, alternative or specifying sub-questions which were used depending on the situation. All of the questions were divided into 5 broader categories: identity, practices, use value and benefits, meaning, and future. A list of the interview questions can be found in the Appendices.

After I made the list of the questions and decided which program I should use for the recording of the interviews (which was called FREE Hi-Q Recorder), I conducted a trial interview. I then conducted the actual interviews in the same order as the interviewees appear on the list.

As most of the interviewees were people I knew personally in some way or another, it was easy to prepare for and conduct the interviews. Certainly some drawbacks in such cases can be found based on subjectivity and bias, but I think that in my field of research, knowing the interviewees helped me. I could be aware of the personal characteristics of the interviewees and therefore attempted to vary the tempo of the interview, to vary the kind of language used, or to apply some additional questions depending on the circumstances.

Each interview took from 30 minutes up to 1.5 hours. The average interview lasted 45-60 minutes. All the interviews were carried out in the Russian language. I later personally manually transcribed the interviews in Russian.

After translating the interviews into English, I started writing the descriptive summaries of each category of the interview. In order to do so, I used condensation of meaning, categorization and interpretation of meaning, and ad-hoc methods for generating meaning which are described by Kvale in his approaches to interview analysis (Kvale, 1996, 187-204). I organized the transcribed interviews, omitted unnecessary repetitions or figures of speech, and omitted other irrelevant data. I tried as well to categorize all the data while interpreting the meaning which interviewees applied to their words without being subjective. It was quite demanding because not only I needed to clarify what the respondents said on a certain topic or paraphrase it, but I also needed to classify and group the information retrieved from conversations into categories.

Further, after having organized, clarified and interpreted this descriptive chapter, I analyzed the main findings that I discovered in the interviews, which can be found in the discussion chapter. After analyzing the interviews themselves, I compared the findings from my interviews to the existing

research. But as that existing research was mostly dedicated to foreign SNSs, I had to make conclusions regarding the SNSs in Russia and to find regularities in the findings as well as the exceptions by attaching significance to the themes and patterns I observed.

## 5. Analysis of the Interviews. Results

### 5.1. Identity

In this chapter I want to discuss the identity of the interviewees as SNSs users, i.e. how they became users, when and how they found out about the SNSs which they use now, what attracted them, and how they define themselves as users.

First and the most important result is that most of the interviewees use [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru) ([vk.com](http://vk.com)) as their primary SNS. By the primary SNS I mean the one which they use most often, on a regular basis, or prefer over other SNSs. Among other Russian SNSs, 5 out of 14 interviewees name [Odnoklassniki.ru](http://odnoklassniki.ru) where they were also registered but which some of them stopped using it as they didn't like the system the site is based on or simply didn't like the interface. Some of interviewees are also registered on or have heard of other Russian SNSs like [MoiMir](http://moi.mir.ru) at [mail.ru](http://mail.ru), a popular mail service and search engine.

Most of respondents joined certain SNSs thanks to friends' or acquaintances' advice. One of them received an email invitation to join [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru). But in most cases, of course, the news about an innovative means to keep in touch with friends spread very quickly and thus the users themselves became the most convincing advertisement for this SNS.

A few interviewees admitted that they joined the SNSs just to see what they look like or because they wanted to follow the latest fad: "Everyone was registering there, so I did too" says Irina, 28 y.o. Or for example, Anna, 22 y.o., admitted she had joined [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru) as she thought it is a necessity of modern life though she did not realize all of its benefits at that time: "I did it [registered] because I understood, it is like having my own email account which has already become essential for me".

Most of respondents cannot name one certain reason for joining SNSs. As I mentioned above, some of them followed friends' or somebody else's advice to see what a SNS is, or their initial aim was to find friends, either lost or current ones, as they were told that they could do this with the help of SNSs. Veronika mentions that she was graduating from university at that time. The news about [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru) spread very fast among her university friends and they expected it to be a means of staying in touch later: "It was something new, interesting. Everyone was graduating, leaving. We thought that we



would communicate, call, and message each other. That is why vkontakte.ru was an option for further communication”.

Almost all of them said that they liked vkontakte.ru from the very first log in although there were some users who confessed that they did not like or did not understand the purpose of joining such a site at first. They say that they understood the value of using a SNS later after using the site a bit and discovering the various affordances of this SNS.

More than a half of the interviewees (8 out of 14) are also registered on Facebook and use it from time to time. They joined it either due to the advice of foreign friends whom they met on holiday or while studying abroad or to observe lives of friends who left to live or study abroad. Those who live in Russia use Facebook as an additional SNS to vkontakte.ru, but those who live abroad, for example Stas and Timur who both work in Finland, and tend to use it more than or with the same frequency as vkontakte.ru.

Some of the interviewees perceive a distinction between SNSs on a regional basis. Some interviewees said that Vkontakte.ru, in their opinion, is the SNS used all over Russia, while some support the point of view that it is more like Saint-Petersburg's SNS while Odnoklassniki.ru is more the Muscovites' SNS. Facebook is considered to be the international SNS or the SNS for those who are “abroad”.

Most of the users have been registered on vkontakte.ru since 2007 after it opened free registration for all students, some registered in 2008, and only a few registered there later in 2009. All can be called experienced SNSs users.

In most cases, the respondents liked the SNSs and continued using them after registration. Only few said that they continued using it just to follow the fashion or were infrequent users who do not use most of the options that the SNSs offer.

One of the respondents, Irina, 28 y.o., has been using dating sites as well as vkontakte.ru and MoiMir. She used the dating sites more often before but is now disappointed in both the simple dating sites and the “privileged” ones where a registration fee is regarded. As Irina assumes, the difficulty of communication on dating sites is that one does not know the person they are communicating with and this can be disturbing, the moral content may be inappropriate, and there can be a lack of common topics for discussion. The communication at vkontakte.ru is much better for her as she knows all her

Friends in person. It should be mentioned as well that she does not use vkontakte.ru or MoiMir as dating sites.

One of the interesting examples of becoming a member of a SNS is a case where a respondent joined LiveJournal only for her studies. The teacher told the students to register in LJ and upload their home works to their profiles. As Natalia states, “The teacher, an old man in his 80s, was crazy about LJ. It looked like he was trying to earn some more ratings. And he added all his groups of students to his Friends’ list in LJ. So he had more than 1000 “friends” there”. After completing this course the respondent stopped using this SNS.

The interviewees mentioned several similar reasons for why they stopped using or lessened the frequency of use of the SNSs such as Odnoklassniki.ru where they had registered previously but continued using vkontakte.ru. They said that they joined other SNSs either out of interest or because the search system there, for example in Odnoklassniki, was better while in vkontakte.ru at that time the search system was based only on higher education institutions. As Elena explains it, “In Odnoklassniki one could find their schoolmates. The search system was more interesting, and there was a wish to find other people. And now it is possible in vkontakte.ru as well”. Some of them joined those SNSs as they had friends who were registered only there. Most of respondents point out technical inconveniences of Odnoklassniki or Moi Mir at mail.ru consisting of user-unfriendly and elaborate interfaces which need special attention to learn to use it. For example, Anna, 26, calls Odnoklassniki.ru “cumbersome” or “bulky” in its interface. Several respondents mentioned another disadvantage of Odnoklassniki.ru which is that the user can see a list of users who visited his or her profile, i.e. there is no privacy in this aspect. The most mentioned drawback of Odnoklassniki besides this lack of confidentiality is the commercialization of the website. After some time, even registration became paid and one needs to pay to upload more pictures than the limit states. Some interviewees, for instance Diana, states that Odnoklassniki.ru and Moi Mir are used more by older generations. That is why she registered her on Odnoklassniki.ru even despite the fact that there was a registration fee at that time.

Among the reasons for joining SNSs there are few which differ from general reasons. Oksana registered in vkontakte.ru because university friends were sharing news about studies, homework tasks, and other study material. Another interviewee, Irina, 25 y.o., joined vkontakte.ru in order to communicate with a specific friend. Afterwards she liked other affordances of SNSs among which there was communication with other university friends and the following of updates in their lives.

There is also a case when an interviewee, Stas, was first using Odnoklassniki.ru as his main SNS. Later, because of the numerous technical advantages, Stas switched to vkontakte.ru and then after moving abroad, started using Facebook more frequently as he made more foreign friends. He continues to use vkontakte.ru but quite seldom.

In this chapter, one can see the main reasons why users joined SNSs. One of these main reasons is the pursuit of communication either with a particular person, with former class- or university mates, sometimes with people with whom the respondents had lost contact, or with people with whom they were still in touch. The second main reason is the wish to get to know one of the latest fads. Joining was the respondents' own decision or triggered by advice from a friend. Some of them liked SNSs from the very first log in while some realized their importance (or the advantages of SNSs as they call it) later. The interviewees admit to registering on several SNSs: besides vkontakte.ru (vk.com) which is currently the largest SNS in Russia, they also registered on MoiMir at mail.ru or Odnoklassniki.ru. Most of them started using vkontakte.ru more often than the other SNSs or even completely stopped using the others as they found some disadvantages in using them such as Odnoklassniki.ru's commercialization. There were also some impersonal reasons for joining some of the other SNSs such as for studies-related purposes. Another interesting fact is that the respondents who use both vkontakte.ru and facebook.com have different reasons for them. This is related to the country in which they currently live and whether they have foreign friends.

## 5.2. Practices

When talking about the practices of or the use SNSs, it is essential to understand their initial habits and practices when they had just registered and their later habits and practices after being a SNSs user for some period. In my study this period varies from 1 year to more than 3 years.

It is interesting to notice that there are two main tendencies in this aspect. The first predictable aspect is that interviewees spent more time online after they registered and in the first months of their SNSs experience.

This can be explained by their interest in their new “toy” which was a new means of communication and a completely unusual media. First, it took time for them to become acquainted with the SNS’s system, its interface, and its main working principles of work. As the website was continually developing, users had to learn new options. Second, they were quite excited to find their friends and to add them to their Friends’ list, check new friends’ profiles and pictures, communicate with them, and to upload their own pictures and personal information. And now, these users spend less time in SNSs as they became bored. Nickolai, 27 y.o., describes it that he “lost interest” after he had found most of his friends. “All personal information remains the same, only a bit gets edited”, “I cannot see the benefit of vkontakte.ru anymore”, says Nikita. Another interviewee, Veronika, says that now she has “other interests”, “work takes much time and there is no opportunity to spend a lot of time in vkontakte.ru”, and also mentions negative experiences due to spam and the hacking of her profile. These negative experiences may be the motive to spend less time online.

Irina, 25 y.o., who joined vkontakte.ru later than most of others, in the autumn of 2009, says that by that time “all her friends were on vkontakte.ru”. She wanted to know about their lives as she had not seen or heard from most of her friends for 2 years since university graduation. It took her a long time to carefully check the profile of each new added friend because she wanted to know what had happened in their lives. To gather this information, she looked at the friends’ Walls, uploaded pictures, and other information available on their profiles.

It should be mentioned that these respondents used to spend more time on SNSs despite the fact that the technical opportunities offered by the websites were quite undeveloped at that time in comparison

with now. For instance, in vkontakte.ru, there were no Audio and Video services until the summer of 2007. Also, there were no such services as Ads, Game Apps and so on, which means that hypothetically users are expected to spend more time online on SNS nowadays. This is particularly true for vkontakte.ru due to its numerous affordances. Accordingly, Nikita mentions “I log in there [vkontakte.ru] more seldom, despite all the novelties and innovations”.

This group of users spent more time on SNSs at first, varying from spending a few minutes to a few hours logged in every day. Sometimes the respondents logged in twice or several times per day. Those who spent several hours online every day said that mostly they were logged into vkontakte.ru but that they were not actively using it all the time. It was opened in the background and they checked it from time to time while studying or using other sites.

Some of them logged into SNSs only at home, but some used SNSs both at home and at work. Veronika says that she spent “a lot of time in the evenings, during the day” and “at work they even closed access to it”. Vkontakte.ru was banned in their office several years ago, in 2007-2008, as the employees spent too much time on the site which was disturbing their work performance. Due to this limitation at work, people tried to log in onto vkontakte.ru through the so called “mirror sites”.

Now they confess that they use vkontakte.ru as well as the other SNSs less often. Some continue using a SNS several times a week but spend less time online than before. Irina, 28 y.o., is indicative of those who changed their patterns of SNSs use from everyday to once in two weeks or even once per month like Veronika. Others now make it a habit to check their profiles at least once a week.

Now let us examine the opposite tendency. There are respondents, who outnumber the first category, and who started their experience on SNSs by spending less time online but who now admit to logging in and spending more time in SNSs.

The reasons which they mention for increased usage are the facts that they did not know about all of the possibilities of SNSs or they just simply could not realize its use. For example, Anna, 22, says that she did not use SNSs often (once or twice a week) until she went to her home town on holidays where vkontakte.ru turned out to be essential means of communication with friends who stayed in St.-Petersburg. After this, she started using vkontakte.ru more often, and her usage increased even more

when she studied for a semester abroad because she “could not communicate with those people who stayed in Russia in any other way”. Timur also realized the benefits of using vkontakte.ru after he left to study abroad but for a longer period when it became the only way to stay in touch with Russian friends.

According to Oksana, another reason for using vkontakte.ru more than she initially did is because she simply became addicted to it. Nonetheless, she can explain her addiction to this SNS by the changes in her life: she started working. Having less free time for face-to-face communication with friends, she spends time on vkontakte.ru messaging them instead.

Some interviewees think that they started using vkontakte.ru more because there are now more friends registered there as well as more technical affordances. For instance, Elena initially logged into vkontakte.ru 2-3 times a week, but now because she has more friends online and because the interface is now more developed, she logs in every day and stays online from morning till night, both at home and at work.

Another respondent connects her increased usage of SNSs with a change in activities and in the priorities of their use. Anna, 26 y.o., was logging into vkontakte.ru everyday just to check Friends’ updates and to read and reply to messages, but now she uses it for work purposes (searching for vacancies, art-agencies, etc.) and thus has to spend up to several hours online every day.

Quite often the amount of time a user spends on SNSs can depend on their life situation at the time. Students tend to have more free time which they prefer to spend online. The unemployed can afford the same: “I can connect the increased amount of time of using Vkontakte.ru and Facebook at the moment only with that there is no work now and nothing to do. That is why you start wasting time in vkontakte.ru in order to ‘kill’ it”, says Timur.

Some users spend more time in SNSs just because they use a particular service or function more than before: for example, they frequently listen to music and prefer vkontakte’s audio database to other sites such as Natalia and Nickolai, 22 y.o., do.

I should also mention that the increase or decrease of time spent in SNSs is not related to the amount of time interviewees have been using them. One can state neither that users who joined SNSs a long time ago tend to lose interest and spend less time online nor vice versa. There is the example of Irina, 25

y.o., who registered in vkontakte.ru later than the others, but now spends less time there because she has less free time now. She says that she does not need time to get acquainted with friends' profiles or the SNS itself.

What concerns the time which interviewees of this tendency group used to spend and spend now in SNSs, one can see the significantly increased time spans. For instance, Anna, 22 y.o., logged in once or twice a week for short time after registration in a SNS, later she did it several times a week and spent online on SNS from 0.5 hr to 2 hrs, and now spends several hours every day online up to 5 hrs maximum. Diana is a similar case and she started from logging into SNSs several times a week for short time spans but later got used to be online on SNSs all the time when she has access to Internet: the entire working day as well as at home. Most of the interviewees who spend several hours online almost every day say that they keep their profile open but are not intensively using the site that entire time. Timur explains why he spends 3-4 hrs a day on SNSs: "Especially it takes much time when you write to somebody you have not seen for long time. You describe what has happened in your life lately. Sometimes it takes up to 1.5 hrs to describe everything and explain".

I should also say that those interviewees who are employed spend their free time on SNSs, but more at the weekend (Irina, 25 y.o., Irina, 28 y.o.). Those who have access to SNSs at work try to use them less at home (Natalia). Moreover, interviewees who live alone realize that they have more free time which they can spend on SNSs unlike those living in a family.

So let us examine what the respondents usually do when logged into their profiles on SNSs, what they prefer, and what tend to ignore. It is obvious that there are several primary activities and services which most of users prefer but there are particular preferences depending on user's personal characteristics, occupation, experience, life situation, age, social status and so on.

The activity that nearly all the interviewees are engaged in is following the News Feed, i.e. keeping an eye on Friends' updates. This is passive in nature but helps them to feel involved in Friends' lives and in the news in general.

Several respondents mentioned that at the beginning, one of their main activities was searching for friends and adding them to their Friends' lists as well as checking the friends' profiles to find out what

had happened to them since they had last seen each other. At the moment, most of the respondents agree that have already found the majority of their friends online and that this aspect is not so important now.

Another important activity is communication with Friends, mostly by means of messaging them. This is actually the idea on which SNSs are based. Only Irina, 25 y.o., mentions commenting on Friends' statuses or on other kinds of posts, though it is certain that many of the respondents use this feature and just do not pay attention to it as a type of activity. Nikita says that he prefers Skype to the messaging service in *vkontakte.ru*, while Stas uses messaging as an email service although messaging offers the possibility of communicating in real time online.

The next popular features in *vkontakte.ru* which interviewees make use of are the Audio and Video services. As I have already mentioned, *vkontakte.ru*'s audio and video databases are huge with many new items uploaded every day. Additionally, new features and options are added from time to time, such as the ability to sort the user's own songs and tracks into albums which makes its use easier or the ability to embed videos from such websites as YouTube or Rutube. However, due to technical problems usually connected to the low speed of Internet access, some users cannot watch videos. Some users do not just listen to the music in *vkontakte.ru* but also with the help of special programs, download it from this SNS to their own computers. Only a couple of respondents (Irina, 28 y.o., Anna, 26 y.o.) upload videos or audio on regular basis. This activity generally helps them with their work as dance teachers.

Respondents also use *vkontakte.ru* for the search of various information, both for personal and for work purposes. Some search for the job opportunities (vacancies of dance teachers for example) or for information on dance events and workshops (Irina, 28 y.o., Anna, 26 y.o.). Some search for guides of certain languages to hire for their companies (Diana), some search for tutors and for private services such as a manicurist (Natalia) or a dog trainer (Nickolai, 27). Searches can be made with the help of Groups, People, Events or other features such as Advertisements.

Quite a few of the interviewees like uploading photos to *vkontakte.ru* though few of them say that they do it regularly. Some of them uploaded photos more often at the beginning of their SNSs experience when the uploading of photos was popular and when everyone was trying to present themselves in their profiles and to attract their friends' attention. Irina, 25 y.o., relates that she does not upload any



personal pictures as she thinks she has “nothing to boast with”. When she does upload photos, they are of her friends or acquaintances and she deletes them after they copy them. Irina says that her reluctance to upload photos is connected to her job as a school teacher. She wants to keep her profile hidden from her students because the students like to add teachers to their Friends’ lists which would disturb her privacy.

Most of interviewees do not show signs of active participation in Groups. However, they joined several Groups soon after registering in [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru) and some even admit that they joined a large number of groups just for the sake of being a member of certain groups but not to profit from the opportunities they offer. A few interviewees have been administrating groups for work purposes. A few have also been actively using Groups for studies or for personal interests. Oksana explains how she benefits from Groups: “Well, in Groups one can see discussions of some books. Or if there are some questions, or one wants to share, discuss something, they can go to special Groups, check other people’s opinion”.

It is interesting to note that only one interviewee played Game Applications and that that was in the past. However, most of interviewees say that a lot of their Friends like and play such applications very often. Several interviewees, like Anna, 26 y.o., and Irina, 28 y.o., congratulate Friends with the help of special applications by posting cards or gifts on Friends’ Walls. A couple of respondents use applications based on psychological tests.

The function of creating Events is used very seldom among the interviewees. In [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru), the Events function is used mostly for work purposes while in Facebook, one respondent creates Events to organize personal parties. Two users (Nickolai, 27 y.o., and Veronika) said they like the Birthday Reminder Feature which helps them not to miss their friends’ birthdays and to remember to congratulate Friends. One respondent mentioned the Notes feature by means of which she and her friend posted poems and thus learned the works of famous poets such as Brodsky. Another respondent actively uses Facebook Chat.

Only one interviewee mentions surfing [vkontakte.ru](http://vkontakte.ru) - checking not only Friends’ profiles but other users’ profiles, various Groups and Events. This usually takes her from several minutes to a couple of hours (Anya, 22). I believe that other interviewees also occasionally surf the SNSs but not for a long enough time to mention it.

There is also an interesting example of how elaborate the features of vkontakte.ru are. One of the respondents has a friend who has no Friends in his list. He registered in the SNS only to benefit from its numerous services, but not for communication.

In this chapter, I described two tendencies which can be found among the patterns of use of SNSs. There are users who spent a lot of time online when they started using SNSs but have now decreased the amount of time they spend on SNSs despite the fact that the SNSs improved their interface or added new features. To the contrary, the other group of users has over time changed their opinion of SNSs or habits and now spends more time on them than when they had just registered at the beginning of their SNSs experience. This fact can be explained for various reasons but the time of registration on a SNS is not one of the factors, i.e., it cannot be said that the users who have been registered the longest tend to become less active over time or vice versa. Obviously, usage is directly directed to the current occupation of the interviewee: students or the unemployed spend more time online in general and on SNSs in particular while the employed have less free time and use SNSs more often during the weekend. However, usage also depends on the job itself as some of the respondents use vkontakte.ru to search for job-related information or content and thus spend more time there. Some of the users “lost interest” and logged into SNSs less often. Some, to the contrary, found themselves more addicted to SNSs and increased their usage of them. Therefore, it is difficult to define a particular algorithm as to why users change their patterns of SNSs use; the reasons are specific for each case.

The most popular activities in SNSs and in vkontakte.ru in particular, are the following: the News Feed and Friends’ updates (most frequently users check this passively without commenting or communicating directly with Friends); messaging which can be used as chat (live communication), or messaging used as email. It is also popular among the users to listen to music or to the radio online on vkontakte.ru and to watch videos, movies or series. Users also like to upload pictures or to view Friends’ photo albums. Some use vkontakte.ru to find the information or other material, either for work or for entertainment purposes.

### 5.3. User Values, Benefits. Positive and Negative Aspects

Many users benefit and produce pleasure from SNSs which I would call advantages of SNSs or “positive aspects”. And as usual when there are advantages, there can be some disadvantages or “negative aspects” as well. So in analyzing this category I examine the positive and negative aspects of SNSs which the interviewees encounter in their everyday experience of SNSs’ use.

#### *Positive aspects*

The main advantage of SNSs, which is also their initial purpose, is communication. Almost all the respondents name communication among the main benefits. As one of them, Nickolai, 22, puts it, it is “the opportunity to communicate at any time if both people are online”. As several respondents say, SNSs are of especially great help with Friends whom they cannot meet in person because those people live in other cities or countries. Similarly, SNSs help when respondents just do not have the time or opportunity to meet in person even when they do live in the same city as their friends. And as some respondents confess, even when they meet with their friends in person, they combine personal contact with communication online.

In addition, it should be noted that some respondents prefer to use the messaging service as an email service (Stas), while others value the possibility of communicating in an online environment in Chat in Facebook (Elena) or with the Fast Messages service in vkontakte.ru (Anna, 26).

In our modern hectic world where people constantly move from city to city, change mobile phone numbers, and no longer tend to use home phones, there are few effective ways to find lost contacts, childhood friends, or friends in other cities, former classmates, or university group and course mates. SNSs are one of the most effective ways in modern times. With a developed search system based not only on university and year of graduation (as it was at the beginning when the site was newly founded) but school, location, places of work, marital status, places where a person spent a holiday, or prefers to spend free time, vkontakte.ru is of great assistance in finding people.

Moreover, SNSs promote informal communication with colleagues and, according to Diana, can help to become close with old friends after moving back to one’s hometown. They also are a great way to stay in touch with old friends and acquaintances as all the interviewees claim or to develop

relationships with new ones as it was with Stas, Timur, and Anna, 22, when they went abroad to study and registered on Facebook.

Though some respondents think that Skype offers a nice opportunity to communicate, most prefer Vkontakte.ru as it has variety of features making communication more vivid such as uploading pictures while in Skype one has to send them to the interlocutor. It also should be noted that the interviewees agree that the high speed of communication is what makes SNSs outstanding (Anya, 22, Irina, 25).

I would also like to quote Timur, who says that SNSs “shorten the distances, and bring new dimension to life as you can connect to somebody in Japan in 2 minutes and that person already replies to you with the information you requested or with anything you want with such an ease and availability. The world is really compressed several times”. He also thinks that SNSs give an easy access to communication with close ones. Additionally, Stas finds that SSNSs have the advantage of communication with a lot of different people at once. For example, he can keep in touch with his former flatmates who returned to their home countries after studying in Finland where they had met.

Some interviewees have personal comments on communication in vkontakte.ru. For instance, Elena believes that “online people meet easily because shy people feel more relaxed”. Anna, 26, also says that communication in vkontakte.ru promotes relaxation as well as liberation but leads to a “lack of liveliness”. Moreover, it gives her the “feeling of being connected to another world”. She also thinks that communication in SNSs is similar to forums but is more appealing because of visualization, i.e. profile pictures of users. As for Nikita, communication in SNSs is more valuable for the older generation. For example, he says that for his father, it is more important to find old friends and that is of course easier for him to communicate there than in Skype or other messenger programs. As for himself, Nikita has had what he calls the “wow effect” from vkontakte.ru previously but now just follows friends’ updates and socializes with them without paying attention to all the improvements and new features.

As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter when talking about the interviewees’ practices within SNSs, the search is very important. It can be a search for information for work purposes, a good example of which is with dance teachers Irina, 28, and Anna, 26, who find not only information about clients and dance studios, but also about workshops, competitions, dance videos, and music they can

use for their lessons. When searching for personal information, the SNS search is convenient as it is fast and locally based as Oksana and Veronika observe.

Another essential benefit of vkontakte.ru and most other SNSs is that their service is free of charge. As one can note from the interviewees' comments above, another Russian SNS, Odnoklassniki.ru, lost a lot of users because of its commercialization: paid registration and fees for other features which are free of charge in vkontakte.ru and Facebook. Moreover, vkontakte.ru possesses another advantage – its accessibility, which makes it easy to use even for school students who learn its main working principles in minutes, as Timur believes.

What makes vkontakte.ru special as a SNS is the unique combination of the features it offers: messaging, audio and video, advertisements, pictures, groups and so on. As Diana says “vkontakte.ru has everything in one place”. Or as Oksana says, “vkontakte.ru has the same features that other sites or programs may have but what makes it convenient is the amount of users, i.e. everyone is here”.

Another advantage of both vkontakte.ru and Facebook is the opportunity to create events, either for work as the dance teachers Irina, 28, and Anna, 26, do, organizing dance studios' concerts or other meetings in vkontakte.ru, or for fun as some interviewees do. For example, Stas organizes parties with the help of Facebook.

One of the most popular benefits of vkontakte.ru is its enormous audio and video databases. Now that the video database can embed videos from other video hosting sites such as YouTube, vimeo, and others, the number of videos is even larger. The search system is quite developed. As some users say, one can find almost any song or any movie or the latest episode of a tv series there. Like the search for information, music and videos can be used either for work or entertainment purposes. Nickolai, 22, also mentions that the quality of videos in vkontakte.ru is now not inferior to other sites of the same nature, although previously there was no such an option as HD video quality on this SNS.

Nonetheless there are users who do not benefit from these services. One reason may be that low speed internet makes watching video as well listening to audio sometimes impossible. Another reason is that some users prefer using other sites which specialize in audio or video and think that these services are not special for vkontakte.ru as the site was founded for the purposes of communication among students and graduates (Veronika, Nickolai, 27).

Moreover, there are plenty of individual benefits which are referred to by a few or even only one interviewee. Despite the low number of users who mention them, they are important in drawing a general picture of the positive and negative aspects of SNSs.

Although there are special dating sites as mentioned by one of the interviewees above, some users prefer to use vkontakte.ru to meet new people or even to find dates. None of the interviewees admitted doing this but several mentioned that they have friends or acquaintances who use vkontakte.ru for this purpose. As Anna, 26, says, some of her friends “have settled their personal life” with the help of vkontakte.ru. In my opinion, this is another advantage of vkontakte.ru which seems to have a tendency to expand its opportunities.

Another advantage which SNSs provide is the ability to get the latest news from Friends’ status updates, posted links, Notes and so on. It is also true for popular trends, fads and fashion in music, videos and all other aspects of life. As Irina, 25, thinks, this concerns not only “following updates on a local but also on a global level”. According to Elena, it is also convenient to find travel information and tips in various Groups’ discussions or from friends’ posting of photos from holidays. Anna, 26, generally summarizes that SNSs expand “informational richness, information horizon”. It also provides the “opportunity to get more information than from some untrustworthy sources” thinks Anna, 22. She added some organizations to her Friends’ list to gather information on events and so on.

Among other advantages of vkontakte.ru which the interviewees talked about is the possibility to use it for business or commercial purposes. For example, Nickolai, 27, and his companion have a company selling natural health care goods and food and their company has a group in vkontakte.ru through which they advertise to entice more buyers as well as to find places for rent, etc. Here I would like to mention that through the search system in this SNS, it is easy to find target groups and audiences who would be interested in goods or services which a company or a person offers. The variety of people of different age groups and economic statuses makes it possible for almost any product to find its customers. As Nickolai, 22, states, “the essence of vkontakte.ru is its “field” of so many people... very convenient and usable field”. This united “field” connects people for solving problems and for communication”.

Besides the use of SNSs in commercial companies or creative jobs, they can also be used for other professions: for Oksana, vkontakte.ru was the tool for monitoring students when she previously she

worked as social tutor/teacher. She still follows their updates to know if everything is fine with the students.

Another particular and practical benefit, according to Irina, 25, in vkontakte.ru is that is easy to find a person who holds the same views. With these people she can discuss topics of interest, invite them to certain groups, or just go to the theater with them. She also thinks it is a reliable way for communication as one cannot keep track of the phone numbers of all one's former university friends or acquaintances. Moreover, not everyone has Skype account. And as I have mentioned before, it is simple to remember whom to wish a happy birthday with the help of the Birthday Reminder as Veronika and Nickolai, 27, think. Vkontakte.ru is not only good for maintaining contacts with friends, but it also "gives positive emotions", says Irina.

Among the advantages of SNSs Elena names communication with speakers of foreign languages. She says that she has used a SNS to improve her English and that is almost the only way to practice foreign languages while in Russia. Furthermore, besides practicing, vkontakte.ru gives opportunities to learn new languages in Groups where users share links, audio and video material, experiences, and discuss various aspects of learning. Anna, 26, learns Arabic in this way. This is also applicable to various subjects, hobbies, religions and any kind of political movement as it helps to find like-minded people sharing the same interests and views. As Anna, 26, also says, in Groups or in people's profiles she can see the creativity of people within dance sphere, such as what kind of costumes and dances they create. Creativity in other spheres is also evident and on the SNS, she finds her inspiration.

### *Negative Aspects*

After describing all the numerous positive aspects of SNSs which the respondents discussed, let us take a look at the negative aspects.

Among the main problems associated with SNSs most interviewees name addiction. However, I should note that only a few of them admit to being addicted although most of them complain about spending too much time on SNSs or just more time than they think they should spend on SNSs.

Another problem is “unwanted friends” – colleagues, bosses or acquaintances which a user feels forced to add to their Friends list in order to not appear impolite. Some users prefer to have only a limited number of close friends and relatives as Friends on SNSs.

The other troubles are connected to privacy in SNSs. Most interviewees are aware that even privacy settings cannot guarantee the safety of personal information on SNSs, in particular on vkonakte.ru. Respondents who have education in computer science, software development or a similar sphere, for example Anna, 26, Natalia, and Stas can even explain why it is not safe since they know the main working principles of such sites. The information that users upload can be hacked and obtained by bad-minded people or even by criminals which not only gives a lack of confidence in using the SNS as Veronika and Nickolai, 27, mention, but also may lead to friends deleting the hacked Friend from their Friends’ list as they do not like to receive so much spam from them (this is the most often scenario). It can also lead to burglaries when criminals find information about users not being home due to insufficient privacy settings, as Nickolai, 27, thinks because he has heard of such incidents. It is also sometimes possible to find out the location of a certain person by means of various applications in Facebook, thinks Stas, and it can be considered a way of controlling person’s life.

Furthermore, there have been cases of illegal use of users’ pictures in advertisements which have even been brought to court, which Stas mentions. Sometimes pictures are used to create fake accounts or to show a person in an unpleasant manner in order to mock or bully them. Natalia mentions an example of an acquaintance whose daughter was bullied in such a way by classmates.

It is also possible to receive messages of an unpleasant or offensive character from strangers in vkontakte.ru, states Anna, 22. Lack of confidence in safety of the information or pictures uploaded can make people refuse to share pictures of weddings or of their children, says Veronika. In my opinion, it is this restriction of communication which prevents one from using SNSs to the full.

Other disadvantages mentioned by the respondents are related to communication. Some respondents think that quality of communication deteriorates as people prefer to stay online and chat or surf SNSs instead of meeting in person. According to Veronika, she “realized with time that it is easier for her to open vkontakte.ru instead of calling or meeting friends”. Oksana supports this opinion saying that some of her friends are lazy and in the case of bad weather, they say “let’s stay home and communicate online” instead of walking somewhere.



Timur thinks SNSs can lead to misunderstanding for people in relationships, for example, “because of pictures that include you which somebody else uploaded and which your girlfriend can misinterpret”. Anna, 22, talks about misunderstandings with friends who can misinterpret statuses, while Elena thinks that Friends can get offended by misinterpreted comments. She also thinks that one can create a “distorted image” of a person when judging only by pictures, comments, or profile information without direct communication.

Veronika believes that SNSs can affect communication in the following ways: in messages, people can sound more negative than over the phone or in person. Also, they tend to be more logical in their messages while in real life, communication and emotions are more important. Irina, 25, also mentions the fact that SNSs deprive people of non-verbal communication such as gestures, mimics and facial emotions. This makes the image of the interlocutor incomplete. Oksana remembers previous times, for instance her childhood, when everyone could socialize without “mediators” which seems impossible nowadays with vkontakte.ru. Irina, 28, thinks that because SNSs help to spread fads, they are a reason for the “degradation of the Russian language and culture”. Among other examples, she names punctuation which is sometimes completely absent in some users’ messages, simple phrases, and “smileys” which makes the language poorer. She mentions that this is true for the Internet in general and not only for vkontakte.ru.

Some respondents think that despite all their positive sides, on SNSs they only “kill time” instead of doing something useful like reading a book. They also think that the youth spend too much time online. As Nikita puts it, “vkontakte.ru kills half of the youth” and most of teens waste time in vkontakte.ru while “they could simply go out to breathe fresh air, or read a clever book”. Several interviewees share the opinion that children and teens should not have access to pornography which can be found on vkontakte.ru by any user. Some also agree that they should not be exposed to the swear words which adults use in discussions in Groups or in their profiles.

This chapter describes the user-observed benefits and profits, as well the problems of use or disadvantages of SNSs. One of the most important benefits of SNSs use is communication: one example being when people live far apart and thus SNSs become one of the few ways to communicate. Another example is with people whom the respondents see regularly but SNSs still help them to become closer. People can find old lost contacts or maintain current ones. Communication with foreign friends on SNS is often the only free alternative or one of the most interesting ways to practice foreign

languages. Communication via SNSs, as well as via the Internet, brings a new dimension to communication: “shorten distances” or help people to feel more relaxed. But at the same time, there are negative aspects of SNSs: more and more people prefer online communication to real, personal communication.

Among the service-related benefits, the opportunity to search for information on a SNS is different from on a search engine because on SNSs, users have more personal information and opinions on a given topic as well as advice and find more location-related data. Users also have opportunities to use the audio and video databases in vkontakte.ru which also include the databases of other sites or services through embedded players on vkontakte.ru (vimeo, youtube). It is also possible to use vkontakte.ru for business or work purposes: to find a target audience or to place advertisements.

The most common disadvantages or cons of vkontakte.ru and other SNSs are: addiction to SNSs although most respondents do not admit having it (and it is difficult to determine addiction, as a matter of fact); privacy issues; “unwanted” friends; and problems with communication.

#### **5.4. Meaning of Internet and Social Network Sites**

In this chapter I will study the meaning and the level of importance of the Internet and social network sites, vkontakte.ru particularly, in the lives of the interviewees.

As almost every interviewee admits, the Internet plays an important role in their lives. Some call its role essential; some just consider it to be a part of modern welfare or “civilization’s blessings” and take it for granted. Besides spending time on SNSs, with the help of the Internet, respondents look for jobs at job search sites, check the employer company’s website to get a general idea about the company, they book and buy tickets online, they check the events in the city, they download music and movies online, they buy various goods online, and so on. They also communicate online by means of such programmes as Skype, ISQ and other kinds of messenger programmes, forums, etc.

But of course the main use of Internet consists in the search for information. What kind of information may differ greatly. For instance, Natalia, Diana, and Nikita find information online which they need

for their work. Natasha also communicates with colleagues by means of internal chat programs, and of course many others use email both for work and personal purposes. For the purposes of looking for information, search engines are in high demand. Most prefer them to the search system in vkontakte.ru though for some respondents, for example Anna, 26, it is easier to find the information about dance studios or contests in Saint-Petersburg on vkontakte.ru because it offers location-based search. Or as Irina, 28, says, for her it is more convenient to receive invitations to Groups and Events instead of spending time looking for them by herself.

Some of the respondents say that they usually do not use any kind of print media or TV as they can find news on the Internet. They also do not need maps, dictionaries, or the commercial advertisement in newspapers since they easily substitute all of these with Internet resources. Some respondents, for instance Nikita, like playing online games like MMORPG World of Warcraft.

Thus, the interviewees name the following purposes for which they use Internet: entertainment, business or professional, education, and information. For business the Internet is used to search for clients, places to rent, and collaborating organizations, says Nickolai, 27. Even though the Internet makes the search for educational information easier and brings more opportunities and entertainment to the learning process, some interviewees, for example Oksana, thinks that the quality of knowledge deteriorates as people make less effort to gain it. They thus do not remember it well, but this perhaps is compensated by the availability of and speed of access to the knowledge.

It should be mentioned that according to the interviewees, although they think that the Internet is so necessary to the life of a modern person, they do not think that they have an addiction to the Internet.

The Internet affects people's lives in different ways. As Anna, 26, thinks, because of Internet, the attitude to information has changed. People are becoming more developed from an informational aspect but are lazier because it is easy to find the needed data in just a few minutes. That is why people also have different attitude towards time. She also assumes that due to the Internet, communication among people is changing: "on the Internet people become more relaxed, [while] in real life they are more reserved". Moreover, the Internet affects not only private but also business life.

Oksana believes that the Internet affects human communication. She believes that previously, people could meet and socialize without the Internet's help but now they have become addicted either to the Internet itself or to SNSs: "Actually I remember my childhood when there was no such access to the

Internet and it was not developed. And there was live communication. Now Internet addiction is beginning as well as SNSs addiction. Especially it affects modern teenagers. Virtual communication replaces a real one". She also shares the point of view that on the Internet, people change their behavior, have fewer complexes, can hide their inner world, and create a different image. They believe that this can make communication somehow better. Natalia believes that the Internet facilitates everyday life but that to avoid any problems, "everything should be within reasonable limits".

Most interviewees agree that SNSs play an important role in their lives. Diana thinks SNSs help her to stay in touch with friends despite the amount of time wasted online. Moreover, they can help when moving back to one's home country: "There I found friends with whom I hadn't talked for a long time. One girl I added became my close friend. Another girl helped me a lot when I moved back. I love vkontakte.ru. I owe a lot to it." She also assumes that SNSs can assist in defining the relationships: "And if you do not pay attention to people, they will not care about you. It was one of the reasons I left Facebook. While you keep messaging them, while you live in the same society, you feel them. And I left and felt that I became estranged. Facebook showed who my real friends are and who are not".

Several respondents could say with confidence that SNSs bring more positive aspects than negative ones into their lives. "Unconditionally they bring more positive. It's new information, some pleasant messages from friends, even music and movies. Even interesting status updates can put you in a good mood", says Anna, 22. Stas shares Anya's point of view, and he uses SNSs intensively to communicate with friends, former flatmates, and organize meetings. This intense usage of SNSs bring more positive aspects into his life and he does not face their negative sides. Among most useful and positive, Anna, 26, mentions finding her students and friends on vkontakte.ru as well as the possibility to see the creative ideas and processes implemented by other dancers.

Only one respondent says that SNSs bring more negativity than positivity to his life. Nickolai, 22, after consideration, says that the positive aspects of SNSs overweigh the negative ones in his situation: "It is connected with addiction, desire to spend more time in SNSs. Because it is easy, SNSs are an easy way of communication. Communication by mean of text is a plus point for me. It is convenient for me but I need to go forward, up and communicate in real life. Personal communication gives more than the text one".

The rest of the interviewees cannot say for sure if SNSs bring more positivity or negativity to their lives. I should note that some interviewees' overall attitude toward SNSs can be described as negative but yet they say that SNSs bring more positivity to them. For instance, Veronika explains her point of view by saying that she uses them only for necessary purposes and that everyone can find something for their tastes and needs in SNSs, especially in vkontakte.ru.

Others can draw various examples of the positive and negative sides of SNSs from their lives. Even Nickolai, 27, who finds a lot of disadvantages in using SNSs assumes that in general, for him, SNSs have more pros since at least he can congratulate friends on their birthdays.

Timur considers SNSs as a very useful tool. However, besides all advantages connected with access to friends' information and communication with them, there are disadvantages in this easy access to personal information which can limit personal freedom. Oksana cannot characterize her attitude to SNSs because she perceives them as an integral part of her life and therefore their role in her life is neutral. Elena also cannot decide if SNSs bring more positive than negative aspects to her life: she likes what communication in SNSs can give her, but sometimes it becomes more important than meeting in person, walking with friend or simply "enjoying the view of the city".

Another important question is if SNSs affect communication in a positive or negative way. As one can see from the interviewees' answers, this question is quite complicated. There are few interviewees who assume that SNSs do not affect real life communication and they at least mention that it is true in their case. One of the only examples is Anna, 26, who says that "one does not interfere with the other" when talking about both types of communication. Or Anna, 22, who says that it is not a problem for her as she always prefers real-life communication.

Some interviewees agree that communication in SNSs has a bad influence on personal communication. However, they add this is their own opinion and it may be not true for other users: "Despite that I use it, I think they affect bad. Though there are as many opinions as people. There are some people who are not self-assured, they "open up" in SNSs, try to socialize, meet, and in real life they cannot do it", thinks Elena. Veronika believes that SNSs also have a bad effect on the development of communication skills, especially in teenagers: "Kids from 10 years of age stay in vkontakte.ru, they do not understand standard communication – in the street, by phone, in person. Because not only phrases

are important, but also our gestures, mimics, it is all important in communication”. Irina, 28, thinks that because of SNSs, the quality of communication is deteriorating.

There is a group of respondents who consider SNSs’ effect on real communication dubious. They think that SNSs enable easier communication with friends abroad or at a distance or with those friends that they do not have the opportunity to meet due to other reasons. Among positive effects, they mention time efficiency, the opportunity to socialize with more people, the speed of communication, and the possibility to form an image of a new acquaintance faster. Among the negative aspects, they mention the lack of live communication and superficiality of interaction. In total, the main negative effect is the replacement of real communication with a virtual one.

Timur believes that SNSs in Europe (Facebook in particular) have a different effect on communication than in Russia (vkontakte.ru). Facebook, in his opinion, is a “powerful tool for people to get closer and organize some groups, companies”. But “in vkontakte.ru, people, mostly out of curiosity visit somebody’s profile. To check what this person is doing, where they have been, but they do not become closer friends”. In general he thinks that SNSs, like mobile phones, make life easier and that both are “what is given”.

Nickolai, 22, dwells upon the way SNSs affect the quality of communication and debate skills. He thinks that only personal communication develops such skills, but at the same time, in order to be able to express oneself, one occasionally needs to be distant from other people and disturbing factors. Nevertheless he cannot say for sure if this should be considered a plus or a minus.

Without SNSs, the communication would be more difficult, thinks Diana: “When you work, there is not much time to go somewhere, at least you message somebody. And without it some part of contacts would disappear. I would not like that”. Anna, 26, would be upset if SNSs did not exist in her life as it would affect her work as a dance teacher and her social life in a negative way. She would be forced to spend more time searching for information, posting advertisements for her dance studio, and calling all the friends that she can message on SNSs. She also believes that despite all their negative effects, people register in SNSs in order to seek communication, to share their lives, and follow friends’ updates and lives (even if themselves do not post information). “And nowadays when there is little time for everything, it is a good solution”, Anna, 26, says. Timur admits that without SNSs, it

would be uncomfortable for him to communicate by means of email and thinks that SNSs are a new step in technology development.

There are several interviewees who say that they would be disappointed if SNSs disappeared from their lives but that with some time, they would get used to it and it would not be a big problem for them. Some of them say that in such a case, they could replace SNSs with email, Skype, phone calls, and other messaging and chat programs as well as other websites where they could listen to music or watch videos. Of course, this would be not as time efficient as using SNSs.

Concerning addiction, Elena admits she has “addiction to a certain point and would like to spend less time in SNSs” as she lacks real-life communication. Nickolai, 22, also thinks that he has a “partial addiction” though he is not sure if it can be called this. Either way he agrees that he has some over-use problems. Oksana confesses that she has an addiction to vkontakte.ru but this does not bother her very much. There are also respondents who do not think that they have an addiction to SNSs even though they admit that they cannot imagine their lives without them and that they spend several hours online every day. I believe that the respondents view addiction as a highly negative and humiliating notion, therefore they plainly do not like to admit they have it. However, it also depends on the definition of addiction and in which conditions it can be recognized.

Vkontakte.ru has many unique features, and Lena mentions the fact that vkontakte.ru was the first of its kind and that it became so popular because regular people became an advertisement for it by advising their friends to join. The number of users is high which also makes vkontakte.ru attractive in and of itself. Among the attributes of SNSs in general, Timur names ease, availability of information, and convenience. This all makes SNSs easy to use by any teenager.

In this chapter, I examined what kind of role the Internet and SNSs play in the lives of the interviewees. Some of them agree on the importance of the Internet while others take it for granted. Nevertheless, all agree that they use the Internet for information, education, entertainment, business, or professional aims. Most of them prefer the Internet to other media. Some of the respondents think that the Internet affects not only communication between people, but also the way people perceive information and thus appraise it such as for educational purposes.

Most of the interviewees agree that SNSs bring more positivity than negativity to their lives. Some consider them a very useful tool of communication but others are worried about its dubious effects on

it. One of the users says that SNSs bring more negativity into his life though he admits his desire to continue using them. Perhaps this is due to his addiction to SNSs which he would like to cure. One of the users also supposes that the use of SNSs in Russia and in Europe differs and he observed this distinction when living abroad. Users agree that it would be difficult for them now to live without SNSs. Though it could be possible, it would now be more time consuming and more difficult to substitute SNSs with other media, services or programs.



## 5.5. Future

In this chapter I will analyze how the respondents see themselves using SNSs in the future, what they believe the future of SNSs might be, if they would agree to pay for their services, and which changes they would make to SNSs if they had such an opportunity.

Most interviewees think that SNSs will always be in existence and that they will never stop using them. They assume that it might be possible for SNSs to charge for services in the future: “As a lot of people now cannot imagine their lives without SNSs, I think that in some time, they will transfer to a commercial basis. It seems so. When people get used to some conveniences and then get deprived of them, they are ready to pay”, says Natalia. Veronika shares her opinion: “On principle nowadays, we pay money for everything we need. So if vkontakte.ru will provide good quality service, I am ready to pay”.

Several interviewees think that the amount of users will grow thanks to new users in younger generations and that SNSs will develop both in quality and in quantity as the society and technologies constantly develop. They will integrate some new features which are typical for other programs and websites such as the video call option in Skype. They suppose that because SNSs, and vkontakte.ru in particular, are so popular, there will always be people who would like to earn some money by improving and implementing new services and features on them. As Veronika says, “I guess vkontakte.ru brings a lot of money. As we are in Russia, and here people like to make money, in any way, with anything”.

Nevertheless, there are some users who are not sure that the popularity or number of users of SNSs will grow with time. They believe that the SNSs boom can fail. On the other hand, there are interviewees who think that with the development of mobile technologies, more people will use SNSs everywhere and “check in” at various places (as they do now in Facebook) so that everyone will be able to know the locations of other users. This will promote “total access to information” and “people always want to know where their husbands or children are”, says Timur. Elena supposes that SNSs will spread everywhere and it will be possible that all spheres of people’s lives will somehow be connected to SNSs. For example, as she puts it, even “weddings will take place in vkontakte.ru”. Veronika shares this idea and considers it possible for the employment process to be transferred online to SNSs.

Interviewees suppose that they will use SNSs in the same way that they use them now and that perhaps they will use new services and options if they appear. Diana says that with time, she narrowed down her circle of communication and tries to use SNSs less frequently now. She hopes that this tendency will continue in the future. Veronika assumes that the way she will use SNSs will depend on the quality of service and the amount of spam and advertisement in vkontakte.ru. Some of the interviewees who are students at the moment or who live alone think that when working or having family, they will lessen the amount of time they spend online on SNSs. Some respondents hope that they will use SNSs less in the future as they agree that they now have some addiction to them and they consume a lot of time. Several interviewees say that their use of SNSs will change depending on the new services and opportunities that the SNSs will provide. As Anna, 26, states, her future use of SNSs may change as her interest areas and social group change.

The majority of respondents cannot immediately say what they would change in SNSs if there was such an opportunity. Some would lessen the rapid development such as the transformation of the Wall into a kind of “Microblog” which combines status updates and the Wall together. There are many other changes, which users have been facing in vkontakte.ru, and the users do not agree with all of them. Several respondents would greatly prefer for vkontakte.ru to delete advertisements and to provide better security and anti-spam settings. Elena would remove unnecessary applications and options like Advertisements, Opinions, and Gifts from vkontakte.ru as she considers them useless.

When talking about the future with people of this age group (22 – 28 years old), it is necessary to discuss the matter of offspring. Particularly what attitude the interviewees have about their future children’s use of SNSs. Like many other respondents, Natalia considers it possible for her children to use SNSs but only after a certain age which she cannot define at the moment. Among the reasons why Diana thinks SNSs are helpful for children are entertainment, studying, and the opportunity to improve foreign language skills while communicating with foreign friends.

Nickolai, 27, would not mind if his children used vkontakte.ru but he assumes that his children will decide for themselves if they would like to use SNSs or not. Nevertheless, he will limit their access to some groups in vkontakte.ru as well as to some outside websites. Veronika believes that it is necessary for children who use SNSs to also foster live communication. Accordingly, the use of SNSs should be within reasonable limits. Limited time use is also mentioned by Irina, 25.

Some interviewees mention a fad which they considers ridiculous or inappropriate in which parents create profiles for their newly born babies and upload their photos and update statuses on their behalf. As Timur says, “The fact that they have an alter-ego in virtual space is imposed on kids”. According to the respondents, some of the negative points regarding children in vkontakte.ru are the presence of porn videos and the aggressiveness which they can find in comments or Groups’ discussions. Diana supposes that parents must be prepared for this and she believes that “kids should be brought up so that they know what is good and what is bad and then they could use SNSs”. A few other interviewees also consider it important to help children form a system of values and before letting them use vkontakte.ru with some restrictions. As Nickolai, 22, thinks, children should have the freedom to use SNSs but if they have problems with it, he will definitely interfere to help them.

Another essential topic is if SNSs mean so much to the respondents that they are willing to pay for their services. Several interviewees cannot say for sure if they would agree to use a paid SNS and think that it would depend on the amount of the fee. If it is affordable for them, they would continue to use SNSs. As Nickolai, 27, explains, he would prefer to pay a service fee than to see the advertisements all around the profiles in vkontakte.ru, spam in personal messages and invitations to groups. But again his decision on continued use of vkontakte.ru would depend on the amount of the fee. Veronika says that it will depend on the type of fee: as she uses vkontakte.ru once a week or even more seldom, she would agree to pay a fee-per-visit but not a monthly fee as this would be disadvantageous for her. The method of payment is also important: internet banking or other Internet-based systems would be preferable to a visit to a bank, as both Veronika and Anna, 22, admit.

There are several respondents who on principle would stop using SNSs in the case that their services became fee-based. For instance, Nikita thinks that SNSs are not worth paying for and that he would be able to replace the services that vkontakte.ru is combining in one place with various services or programs. And Nickolai, 22, would be glad to give up SNSs if they were not free of charge. He assumes that he would gain more advantages than he would lose.

In this chapter, one can see what the respondents think the future of SNS will be and how they think they will use them in the future. Most of the respondents agree that SNSs will exist in the future and that with time they will develop and perhaps implement new features. They think that the number of users will grow thanks to new users in the next generations. There are a few respondents who believe that the SNS boom will disappear with time. Most of the respondents would accept paying to use

vkontakte.ru as SNSs have become an essential part of their lives. Some of them would especially agree to pay if the services which vkontakte.ru provides were improved and there were no spam or advertisements. Some of the interviewees would like to decrease their time spent online on SNSs and some suppose they will make this change when they have a family or when their employment situation changes. Most of the interviewees say that they will allow their children to use SNSs but with certain conditions such as age and usage limits.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1. Time and Attitude**

In my research, I tried to understand how the time spent in SNSs has changed with time and if there is a tendency that the longer a user has been registered on a SNS, the more time they spend time there. I also tried to understand how the attitude toward SNSs has changed during a period of use and if SNSs gained more trust from users over time.

I found two interesting general tendencies regarding vkontakte.ru and other SNSs' change of use by the interviewees as well as in the interviewees' attitude toward them.

Firstly, some users initially spent a lot of time in SNSs but after a period of time, they started using it less, logged in more seldomly, or decreased the amount of time that they were logged in during one session on a SNS. Contradictorily, other users have spent more and more time on vkontakte.ru with the time after they registered there. This second trend seems quite logical because most trends, phenomena or practices are likely to attract more followers as time passes and as they are developed or are spread further.

Secondly, attitudes towards SNSs seem to change with time. Though most of the interviewees express a positive attitude toward SNSs in general, there are some users whose perception of SNSs changed to be more negative after they have been registered in SNSs for a while.

Other research has also found certain changes in the use of SNSs over relatively long periods of time. Cliff Lampe, Nicole B. Ellison, and Charles Steinfield talk about the changes of use and perception of Facebook.com by its users. Research was conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2008 among undergraduate students at Michigan State University. Authors found that despite certain innovations in Facebook's interface, features and privacy control options, the use of the SNS remained consistent. Most of the users did not use it to meet new people online and they continued this abstinence; they used and continued using the SNS only to keep in touch with old friends. The authors also describe various reasons for changes in the use of Facebook which the participants themselves name. Some of them say that previously, Facebook was a novelty and that they spent a lot of time online searching for friends to add and checking friends' profiles. Some agree that later, they started spending more time not in

searching for friends, but in updating profiles by posting new photos or simply by concentrating on communication with friends who they are close with in real life. There were also respondents who used Facebook less over time because they found it overwhelming to follow the numerous friends' updates or follow and understand all new features in the SNS.

Participants also frequently reported a positive attitude to the SNS and say that it became a part of their everyday lives to a great degree. Among the negative effects of Facebook in their lives, the respondents mentioned fights with partners, too much time spent online on SNSs, and "becoming preoccupied with one's profile and online self-presentation". Nevertheless, the majority felt that they received positive information from the SNS and found that it became more useful and important to their lives over time (Lampe et al., 2008, 726).

As I have already described in the presentation of results of the interviews, the Russian users of vkontakte.ru also changed their usage of the SNS over time. However, they did not drastically change their habit of communicating with people whom they met offline. Only one of the respondents said that he used to add everyone who wanted to be his friend despite the fact that he had never met those people in his life. Now he has changed this habit.

Most of the interviewees say that they have found and added most of the people they wanted to add to their Friends' lists and now communicate with them online. Some of them now spend less time in vkontakte.ru due to this reason, or as they put it "they lost interest" in it.

Some of the respondents have changed their SNSs usage due to a change of occupation (they started working or became unemployed). This is fairly self-evident but underlines the "social" need that a SNS can fulfill: the unemployed can increase their usage of SNSs and thus have more social contact and SNSs can help work-colleagues to develop informal communication or even to become friends.

Some respondents who changed working spheres, like Anna, 26, who went from engineer to dance teacher, found it more useful as a teacher to search for information and content in vkontakte.ru. However, there is a group of interviewees who changed their use of vkontakte.ru due to some other reasons. One is Anna, 22, who discovered new features of the SNS and now spends more time online. Another is Veronika who now uses vkontakte.ru very seldom, only once or twice a month to check if she has any messages but she does not update her profile at all because she lost her confidence in this SNS after her account was hacked by spammers.

I have not encountered cases where interviewees used SNSs more seldom just because more features have appeared making it difficult to keep it up with as in Lampe et al.'s findings

The attitude to vkontakte.ru changed with time but not drastically. Most of the users feel that it brings more positivity into their lives than negativity; they find it more and more useful. Though, like in Lampe et al.'s findings, there are some problems which the interviewees have come across including hacked profiles. There are also indications of a loss of trust: respondents have heard stories of hacked profiles or fake accounts and some even have experienced problems connected with a "lost identity" or disturbed privacy in SNSs. This will be discussed more thoroughly in the Privacy chapter. It seems that the users who were directly affected by privacy issues have changed their attitudes towards SNSs because negative experience cause negative attitudes.

Thus, one can see that the respondents have changed their usage and perception of vkontakte.ru or other SNSs for various reasons including changes in their lives or changes in the SNS. One cannot predict which category a user will belong to – the group of members who use SNSs less frequently over time or the group of users who use SNSs more – just by taking into account the duration of their SNS membership. A lot more factors need to be taken into account including a change in life situation or life style, a change in the respondent's type of work, a change in the place of residence, and the personal experience of SNSs. Also the attitude toward a SNS is quite often dependent on the experience which users have had on that site: a negative experience causes a person to pay more attention to privacy issues or to change their usage habits on SNSs. All of these factors contribute to the way in which SNSs are used. Moreover, they constitute the needs which users satisfy with the help of SNSs.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that most of the users have integrated SNSs into their lives to a greater degree with time which can not only be manifested by the change in usage time spans from several minutes to several hours weekly (or in some cases daily), but also by their perception of SNSs as an essential part of their lives and especially by the degree to which online and offline communication begin to be interdependent or interchangeable.

## 6.2. Communication

I also used the interviews to delve into the quality of communication on SNSs. Obviously, SNSs' initial purpose is the promotion of communication and interaction among users. Of course, online communication on SNSs is different from offline communication. Apparently, SNSs affect interpersonal communication. The interviewees admit that they have witnessed it and present various opinions on it.

SNSs give the opportunity to interact at almost any time with the condition that both participants have access to SNSs. SNSs make interaction independent of time and space. The interviewees discuss the potential that this independency can bring in the future: the possibility of the use of SNSs in the employment processes or their further penetration in the everyday lives of users (for example marriage ceremonies online). They also discuss the current effects of this phenomenon on their lives.

There are several respondents who suppose that the influence of SNSs is neutral for them due to the fact that they combine both online and offline communication successfully. This could also signify that SNSs have become an integral component of users' lives to such a degree that they simply do not distinguish it from the other media that they use.

There are some interviewees who believe that SNSs have had a negative effect on their personal communication: either in their lives or in others' lives. One of the interviewees believes that this can be especially true for teenagers and that SNSs hinder the development of their communication skills. Among the negative effects, the interviewees name the lack or replacement of real life, face-to-face communication by the communication in SNSs; the negative effect of SNSs on debate skills; and superficiality of communication. Others just say that there is a negative effect on the quality of communication though they cannot specify the reasons.

It should be mentioned that in the history of media, it has been much discussed how each new type of media affects human life and communication in particular. The research did not always shed a positive light on the new media. For instance, Neil Postman in his book "Amusing ourselves to death" examines modern media in a more critical manner. He argues that mass communications media, for example television, fail to share serious ideas and replaces the informative function with an



entertaining one. He also said in his speech on technological change that “the printing press annihilated the oral tradition; telegraphy annihilated space; television has humiliated the word; the computer, perhaps, will degrade community life” (Postman, n.d.)

Most of the interviewees could not come to a conclusion and call the effects uncertain. They admit the advantages that SNSs bring to communication: SNSs make communication easier, especially with those friends or relatives whom they cannot meet in person on regular basis; SNSs make communication faster and more efficient; and SNSs make communication cheaper as most services are free.

Some of the interviewees say that SNSs help them to maintain more contacts, even though most of those are not close contacts. SNSs help to find people, sometimes even without knowing any contact information and then to stay in touch. Communication for work purposes can be affected as well as they help to promote informal interaction. One of the respondents thinks that SNSs are good evidence that people want to communicate, share personal information, or at least to be involved in other people’s lives. Nowadays, even this simple desire for interaction becomes more problematic due to our constant lack of time. For some respondents, SNSs are used for communication with close ones, relatives or friends, but for others, they are used for reaching a large circle of distant friends or relatives.

Besides negative effects on the quality of communication itself as mentioned above, interviewees mention some positive effects. Among them is the opportunity for shy people or people with problems with face-to-face communication to be free of their complexes and problems and to feel comfortable to interact. Perhaps this is why vkontakte.ru is sometimes used as a dating site. However, the “liveliness” or “vivacity” of communication is lost online and it cannot completely substitute for real life communication.

It should also be mentioned that some interviewees say that with time they changed their attitude to communication in vkontakte.ru: they either decreased the amount of friends with whom they communicate regularly or login to the SNS more seldom and instead prefer live communication. Vkontakte.ru also helped one of the respondents to find lost old contacts after moving back to Russia, to get help from acquaintances, and to find a new friendship among old classmates.

Ellison et al., (2009) found that in terms of communication, SNSs help to manage a large network of weak ties, to discover information about others and thus to keep communication with them, and to mobilize action. In this work, the use of SNSs for mobilizing action was not mentioned. In general, it is true that “social network sites are changing the way we form and maintain our relationships with others, with demonstrable benefits” (Ellison et al., 2009).

Ellison et al. (2011) name initiating (“aimed at meeting strangers” in a SNS), maintaining (which is most common), and “social information-seeking” as distinct modes of SNS interaction. In this work, the interviewees mentioned all of these although “initializing” and “social information-seeking” were not as popular as “maintaining”.

I have found that the effects of SNSs on communication are controversial. However, most of the interviewees admit the positive influence of SNSs on their lives as they at least facilitate the process of communication, already one of the modern world’s greatest advantages.

### **6.3. Privacy**

Another issue I studied in my research is privacy on SNSs. Privacy has been much discussed in SNSs studies. SNSs are aimed at the efficient sharing of information by users, but there are always risks connected with personal information. “Privacy is a sense of control over information, the context where sharing takes place, and the audience who can gain access. Information is not private because no one knows it; it is private because the knowing is limited and controlled. In most scenarios, the limitations are often more social than structural”, says Danah Boyd (Boyd, 2008, 6).

The authors of “Imagined Communities. Awareness, Information Sharing, and Privacy on the Facebook” say that a “relative majority” of the respondents in their research was aware of the visibility of their profiles on Facebook and seemed to be able to control the information which they themselves share. However, the authors found an inconsistency between privacy concerns and the actual information the users revealed (Acquisti&Gross, 2006).

It was also found in the research of privacy that more users prefer to have a private profile, i.e. the one to which only friends have access; that women are more likely to have a private profile than a public one; and that users who have higher level of online activity are also likely to have a private profile (Lewis et al., 2008, 79).

Debatin et al. discovered that even though users understand privacy settings in Facebook and use them, they still can misunderstand what they exactly imply. Benefits of SNSs are more important than the privacy risks they bring. Users are more likely to ascribe the risks to privacy to others than to themselves unless they have experienced an “invasion of privacy” (Debatin et al., 2009, 100).

The previous study also shows that with time, users have become more aware of privacy issues and have started controlling their privacy settings as well as their behavior online. (Lampe et al., 2008)

For the most part, my research findings support the previous research. Users state that they know how to use the privacy settings on vkontakte.ru or on other SNSs and they use them. In general, after being registered on SNSs for a while, users became more aware of the privacy issues. Some of the respondents are aware that privacy settings can sometimes be of no help against hackers and that SNSs do not protect users' information completely. One respondent admits that it was not so long ago that he changed his profile settings to private and previously added everyone who sent a Friend request to his Friends' list. A few interviewees have experienced spam attacks when their profiles were hacked and now pay extra attention not only to privacy settings but also to all the information or content they share on vkontakte.ru. Those with hacked accounts now limit their online sharing to a minimum.

Besides a negative experience with privacy violations on vkontakte.ru, there are other reasons that users limit the information they share with others on a SNS. For instance, one of the interviewees works as a teacher in a secondary school and tries to limit her profile updates because students can use that information and misinterpret it. This can be valid not only for teacher-student relations but to relations among colleagues or between a manager and their subordinates. Users feel forced to “unwanted friends” because of a sense of duty. “Unwanted friends” affect users' privacy because they have to filter or hide certain information from relatives, bosses, colleagues and so on.

Some of the interviewees have also heard stories about the risks that the careless sharing of information can lead to such as burglaries based on personal and contact information or the illegal use of users' photos and information for nefarious purposes (advertising, creation of a fake account, etc).

Even if the risks are not serious, they still imply that the users' lives are controlled by SNSs in some ways because other users (not necessarily friends) can deduce the information they need by judging photos or other personal information updated on profiles. This is a very controversial matter to my mind because users who are willing to share their lives with their friends should be constantly reminded not to post anything provocative or distasteful on their profiles. If a person fails to limit private information or to use the appropriate privacy settings, they can expose their lives or their friends' lives to risk.

Because of this risk, privacy on SNSs is widely discussed in research and users are aware of problems connected to it. They now use the privacy settings more deliberately than before. However, it seems that most of the interviewees have only heard of or discussed privacy issues but do not fully recognize the dimensions of the problem when applied to reality. Those who have experienced privacy problems have changed their attitude and their manner of use of *vkontakte.ru* whereas others were not strongly influenced by the examples which they have only heard about but have not personally experienced. This may be possibly explained by the fact that users tend to trust SNSs because of their relationships with the other users, i.e. their friends, whereas risks seem to be vague and rather abstract and belong to the technical aspects of the SNSs.

#### **6.4. Addiction**

Addiction to SNSs is a relatively new concept. Internet addiction is a broader notion and appeared earlier than addiction to SNSs. Internet addiction has been widely discussed both by media experts and in the fields of medicine and psychology since the 1990s. Social network addiction came into existence after the appearance of the first significant SNSs Myspace and Facebook.

Addiction to the Internet or Internet abuse can have various forms and effects: new forms of existing disorders including sexual and gambling disorders can become Internet-enabled. However, a lot of users have the so-called generalized form of "Internet abuse", where they "prefer socially interactive aspects of the Internet". People who are lonely, socially anxious, or lack self-presentational skills tend to prefer online communication to a face-to face one (Morahan-Martin, 2006, 99).

Internet addiction and social network addiction are interrelated. Nowadays, both of them have been recognized as psychological disorders. Various websites can contain lists of “symptoms” of social network addiction such as constant checking of a social network account, even sometimes at night, the feeling of anxiety when the checking of an account is not possible, and a large number of friends on SNSs, most of whom users do not know in real life.

I have found in my study that addiction is named among the problems which SNSs cause (which are also called “negative aspects” of SNSs). More noticeable is the fact that very few openly admit that they are addicted to vkontakte.ru. Nevertheless, a lot of interviewees complain that they spend too much time on SNSs. It is difficult to define whether the amount of time spent online is acceptable since it always depends on the situation, which activities the user is engaged in, whether it is for work or other practical reasons, or just a waste of time.

Despite that some interviewees mention their addiction to SNSs to a certain point, only one of them thinks that it has a really serious negative effect on his life. He says that in general, SNSs bring more negativity than positivity in his life exactly because of his addiction to them. Others say that their addiction does not bother them very much. Some of interviewees do not admit their addiction but confess that they cannot imagine their lives without SNSs and they are used to spend several hours daily online.

Generally, none of the interviewees mentioned any serious problems caused by their social network addiction. The main troubles it causes are a large amount of time spent on vkontakte.ru and a possible effect on face-to-face communication. The reason for this may be that the term “addiction” seems threatening or humiliating so interviewees do not like to call themselves addicted. Probably, some of them do not notice that they spend too much time on SNSs and that it negatively affects their lives until serious difficulties arise.

Another possible explanation for why the interviewees do not think they have an addiction to vkontakte.ru is that they are not really addicted or are addicted to a lesser degree than foreign Facebook addicts. Some interviewees have a habit of checking their SNS’ accounts on a daily basis and spend several hours online, but they do not check them when they wake up at night or before they get up from bed in the morning or on the bus as addiction is described in a study by the consumer electronics shopping site Retrovo: “Thirty-four per cent of the respondents said they would check their

social networking accounts first thing in the morning, before switching on the TV. About 30 per cent of those surveyed said they check or update their Facebook/Twitter accounts whenever they wake up in the night” (“People's addiction”, 2010). This can be explained by the fact that the amount of users with round-the-clock mobile internet access in Russia is smaller than in other countries.

## **6.5. Benefits**

In my study I examined why interviewees use SNSs and how they benefit from their uses of SNSs and if this differs from benefits from media in general. When talking about benefits from media, one should take into account uses and gratifications theory which states that mass media satisfies the following categories of needs: cognitive, effective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension release needs (West et al., 2010, 392-401). SNSs as a social media satisfy those needs. Or looking at the theory closer, one can see that the following motives and satisfactions are applied to SNSs:

- Getting information and advice
- Reducing personal insecurity
- Learning about society and the world
- Finding support for one’s own values
- Gaining insight into one’s own life
- Experiencing empathy with problems of others
- Having a basis for social contact
- Having a substitute for social contact
- Feeling connected with others
- Escaping from problems and worries
- Gaining entry into an imaginary world
- Filling time
- Experiencing emotional release
- Acquiring a structure for daily routine

(McQuail, 1994, 320)

When applying uses and gratifications theory to SNSs, new gratifications of use have been found in Facebook groups: socializing, entertainment, self-seeking (search and maintaining of personal status), and information (Park et al., 2009, 729-33). The gratifications from Internet use which motivate users' behaviors include "web searching, the acquisition of information, the ability to engage in interpersonal communication, and socialization" (Stafford and Gonier, as cited in Urista, 2004).

Wohn et al. found new social information uses of SNSs: information seeking, event coordination, establishing a common ground which is possible due to "the ability to broadcast to both general and specific audiences, the ability to connect with immediate and extended networks, and the synchronous and asynchronous characteristics of various communication channels" (Wohn et al., 2011). The organization of events can be done both with the help of a special Facebook feature and through personal status updates or through groups. Establishing a common ground implies connecting with other users with common interests through information shared on SNSs.

Urista et al. discovered that reasons for users to satisfy their needs on SNSs include: "1) efficient communication, 2) convenient communication, 3) curiosity about others, 4) popularity, and 5) relationship formation and reinforcement" (Urista et al., n.d., 221).

Joinson found that "keeping in touch" as both use and gratification consists of a surveillance function and a self-presentation tool as well as a social capital building gratification. Facebook is used to build and maintain ties with distant friends and contacts (Joinson, 2008).

All of the above mentioned uses and gratifications (relevant to media in general, Internet and SNSs) were discovered in my study. Interviewees also mentioned additional benefits of vkontakte.ru including that it is free of charge, that users can communicate at any time, that other users can be in any place in the world, and that vkontakte.ru as a SNS provides "more vivid communication" due to its particular services than other messenger programs. Interviewees noticed that SNSs help them to strengthen existing close ties (contacts with friends, relatives, family) and to maintain weak ties (keep up with acquaintances, colleagues, etc). Search of information was also among the usage benefits of SNSs which the respondents named. Vkontakte.ru's search was called "more trustworthy" because of users' trust of friends and other contacts. The content gratification of vkontakte.ru is noticeable due to the audio and video databases with a developed search system and high definition options.

Interviewees say that one of the benefits of vkontakte.ru is the fact that all services and functions are collected together and this saves time and creates more opportunities for use, whereas other SNSs such as Facebook cannot boast the features of online movies and of a collection of tv series. It is also remarkable that interviewees give examples of finding romantic dates on vkontakte.ru. An interesting advantage of this SNS is that it helps to distribute news and promote trends and fads among users even when a user considers this to be a negative aspect of SNS usage.

Another specific use of vkontakte.ru is for business and commerce. Groups or public pages are used not only for advertisements and the promotion of products and services but for the direct sale of them. Moreover, businessmen exploit vkontakte.ru to search for their target audience. This is possible due to a developed search system of users which includes locations, interests, and demographic data. As one of the interviewees says, vkontakte.ru is a big “field” with a lot of users and hence opportunities.

It is also possible to use SNSs, vkontakte.ru in particular, for work purposes. Thus one of the respondents monitored their students profiles and updates which they felt was essential to the job of a social pedagogue. Others use SNSs to search for information or content which they apply to their work. Another interesting benefit is the opportunity for learning or self-education (with the help of groups, discussions, and other various materials) or for practicing foreign languages with native speakers. A general acquisition of positive emotions can also be mentioned among the benefits that users gain from using SNSs.

Thus, one can note that besides the previously studied and discussed uses and gratifications of media in general, the Internet, and other SNSs (in particular of Facebook), there are some new uses and gratifications of SNSs which are inherent to vkontakte.ru due to some of its services and features. These uses and gratifications can be the reason that users spend more time on the SNS and to integrate it to a greater degree into their lives.



## **7. Conclusions and Recommendations**

In my work I have studied SNSs in Russia and the particularities of their use by young adults as well as their perception of SNSs. I have looked at the development of the information, or of the network society in modern Russia as well as Russia's progress toward globalization including the current state of Internet distribution and what the government plans to do to improve the situation. I have examined SNSs as a division of social media and looked at the biggest SNSs in Russia, especially the most popular one which is vkontakte.ru.

The conducted research consisted of 14 qualitative interviews with Russian young adult users of SNSs. The interviews were carried out in Russian and were later translated into English in the process of analysis. I have found that respondents prefer vkontakte.ru to other SNSs and that they have been registered there for more than one year and thus can be called experienced users. Mostly, they joined SNSs due to friends' advice and did so to maintain communication, to satisfy their curiosity, or to further their studies. The main practices which interviewees mentioned were keeping in touch with friends passively by following News Feeds or actively by messaging, making use of the audio and video databases, searching for information, and uploading photos. However, participation in Groups' and the use of game applications was not popular. Respondents named vkontakte.ru's main advantages including easy and free communication, the minimization of psychological difficulties, and a reliable localized search function for information, people, the creation of events, and generally an "informational richness" and "positive emotions". Among the disadvantages they mentioned addiction; privacy issues such as spam, hacked accounts, fake accounts created with illegally used data from other users; and the effect of SNSs on real life communication. In general, the interviewees agreed that the Internet plays an important role in their lives and they considered SNSs to be a useful tool for communication. However, they doubt if SNSs have only a positive effect on communication. Most of the respondents see themselves using SNSs in the future as well as hypothetically allowing their children to do so. However, not all of them would use SNSs on a paid basis.

I have discovered that with time, interviewees have changed their use and perception of vkontakte.ru or other SNSs because of changes in their lives, careers, or in the SNSs themselves or due to some experiences related to them. It was found that SNSs strongly affect face-to-face communication, and

those effects are controversial despite that interviewees commonly agree that SNSs have a positive influence on their lives. Addiction and privacy matters were associated with negative effects of SNSs. These were widely discussed by the users but are not considered to be essential obstacles. Interviewees do not want to admit or cannot define addiction to SNSs even though they agree that the amount of hours they spend online exceeds their expectations. Privacy issues seem to be more relevant in the case of a direct negative experience. Respondents name benefits of vkontakte.ru including the concentration in one resource of many services and features which otherwise would require users to employ several programs, media, and services. Another interesting find was that this SNS promotes the distribution of fads and fashions as well as news. It was found that vkontakte.ru is widely used for business and commercial purposes such as advertising and the direct sale both by companies and individuals and that a complex search system assists in finding target audiences. SNSs were also used for work purposes by individuals who search for work-related materials or by pedagogues who monitor students. SNSs were also mentioned to be used for learning and self-education as well as the practice of foreign languages.

This work represents a qualitative research of the use of SNSs and vkontakte.ru in particular by Russian young adults. This study assists in understanding the recent success of SNSs in Russia. Specific patterns of use and perception by experienced users give insight to the organization and nature of Russian or international SNSs. The interaction and influence of communication on SNSs on real life communication has been a topic of research in many countries and it is useful to know the opinion of Russian users. The problem of addiction to SNSs in Russia could be essential since according to statistics, the Russian social networking audience had the highest engagement in the world in 2009 and 2010 and is still among the leaders. This aspect has not yet been discussed. Privacy settings in vkontakte.ru are less developed in comparison to Facebook, thus privacy concerns can differ which in its turn can result in different attitudes of users to the whole process of socializing online. Russian users derive particular benefits from SNSs that is one of the factors contributing to the success of social networking in the country.

Future research on all the areas of findings could be conducted, for instance, on the addiction of Russian users to SNSs which could become a serious problem in the future but today is considered to be insignificant. A detailed study on changes of use and perception by experienced users would probably shed light on how and with which success and failures SNSs are integrated into lives of users.

It would be also interesting to examine the correlation between privacy issues and a change of attitude, in particular the loss of trust in SNSs and the ways to avoid such issues. A study on the benefits specific to Russian users could bring new opportunities of use to SNSs, for example, self-education and learning on SNSs.

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## 10. Appendices

### 10.1. List of interviewees

- 1) Natalia, 23 years old, engineer, user of vkontakte.ru and facebook.com;
- 2) Diana, 26 years old, tour agency worker, user of vkontakte.ru and facebook.com;
- 3) Anna, 26 years old, dance teacher, user of vkontakte.ru and facebook.com, and odnoklassniki.ru;
- 4) Irina, 28 years old, dance teacher, user of vkontakte.ru and MoiMir at mail.ru and some dating sites;
- 5) Oksana, 23 years old, half time student, beauty salon worker, user of vkontakte.ru;
- 6) Elena, 23 years old, accountant, user of vkontakte.ru and facebook.com;
- 7) Nikita, 23 years old, administrative worker, user of vkontakte.ru;
- 8) Nikolai, 22 years old, full time student, user of vkontakte.ru;
- 9) Irina, 25 years old, school teacher, user of vkontakte.ru;
- 10) Nikolai, 27 years old, businessman, user of vkontakte.ru;
- 11) Veronika, 25 years old, assistant of director of polygraph company, user of vkontakte.ru;
- 12) Anna, 22 years old, full time student, user of vkontakte.ru and facebook.com;
- 13) Stanislav (Stas), 26 years old, software programmer, user of vkontakte.ru and facebook.com;
- 14) Timur, 25 years old, unemployed, user of vkontakte.ru and facebook.com.

## 10.2.List of interview questions

1

Do you use social network sites (SNSs)?

Which SNSs?

How long have you been using them? Could you please tell the approximate date (time) of becoming a member of each of them?

How did you find out about SNSs? Why did you decide to become a member?

What attracted you in them?

Did you register in other SNSs since the time you first started using them? Why? Why not?

Did you stop using some of them? Why?

How often did you use SNSs at that time?

2

What about now? Has anything changed? Why?

How much time do you spend on social networking sites on average per day/week/month?

What do you usually use them for? What do you spend more time on? Messaging? Following Friends' updates (News Feed)? Updating your own profile? Uploading pictures/videos? Listening to music?

Anything else?

Do you use them at home/work/anywhere with mobile?

Which applications/features do you like most? Why?

Which don't you like? Why?

3

What are the benefits of SNSs? What can you get from them that you can't get from other websites, media? Or is there something you can get from them for free unlike other sources? Do they bring something special in your life? Anything new?

How important are SNSs in your life?

What would you call positive about SNSs?

What do you think about privacy issues? Do you have any fears/ concerns that your personal information can be obtained by others?

According to your privacy settings which part of it can be viewed only by your Friends? And which can be viewed by certain groups of Friends? Which part - by any member of SNS?

Besides possible privacy problems can you think of other SNSs' disadvantages? Has social networking ever created problems in your life? Which?

Do advantages overweight disadvantages? Do SNSs bring more positivity than negativity in your life?

Do you agree/disagree that using SNSs affect offline communication with friends/colleagues/relatives? How?

Does Internet take significant part in your everyday life? What do you use it for? How does Internet affect people's lives to your mind?

What do you suggest could happen to SNSs in future? Would you allow your kids use them?

Could you suppose what other people think of SNSs? Why do you consider they use them?

How much time do you think your friends/colleagues spend time in SNSs?

What would you change/improve in SNSs?

What would you like to add about SNSs? Any comments? Questions?