

Analysis of Self-Presentation Models of Social Networks Users: Intergenerational Differences

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Current paper presents results of a automated content analysis of 1801 personal pages of social network VKontakte users. It shows that age significantly affects online self-presentation: the largest amount of data in the profile is disclosed by users 20-40 years old; the least – by young people 14-19 years old. Theoretically, the work is based on the theory of life stages expanding its application to the explanation of the social behavior of users at social networks. Besides, the work shows that in general the amount of personal data disclosed in profiles is decreasing gradually in different years of registration. It means either it takes time to complete a profile or recently registered users prefer anonymity. Second version is more likely since young people (14-17 years old) and adults (over 40 years old) are currently providing growth of the VKontakte, who as our study proves are the most anonymous groups of users. The paper contributes to the study of factors that influence self-disclosure and self-presentation in a social network profile.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social networks have become an important tool for maintaining connections and building relationships, both friendly and professional. Creating an online image is a necessary element of entering and staying in the Internet space. To make new acquaintances, gain popularity and increase trust of other people one needs to be able to present themselves: create the right image and demonstrate their values. One of the easiest and most convenient ways to create an online image today is to fill out a profile in a social network. By publishing basic personal data, uploading photos, audio- and video-recordings a person creates an online image that allows them to realize personal goals for which a person has registered. These tasks can include communicative, consumer (content consumption) or commercial (advertising, buying, and selling) ones [3, 5, 28].

However, while staying at social networks users leave digital traces, reveal personal data, and they are also exposed to various online threats. The abovementioned raises many concerns and requires close attention and study. Understanding mechanisms of online behavior and patterns of an online social networks space can help us to know the ways to make surfing the Internet more convenient and safer. It will also help to explain changes happening to people and society today.

Many fundamental personal and interpersonal processes deeply studied in the offline environment have changed significantly once went online. Self-disclosure and self-presentation, which have traditionally been considered as two strategies of social behavior in the social sciences, have acquired a few new features in the digital era, so reconsideration of these definitions is required. How does online self-presentation work, how much personal data do users disclose and what do these processes depend on – these are questions that we need to answer now.

From our point of view, question of the impact of various factors on the amount of personal data disclosed by users in the profile is very interesting. For example, influence of the time spent on the network as well as age of the user on his self-disclosure in the profile. However, previous studies have shown conflicting results.

Some studies state young people are less concerned about their online privacy [6, 15], and even knowing such risks they continue to disclose personal information online regularly [23].

On the other hand, numerous studies state the opposite: young adults prefer staying anonymous [24] as they tend to have a higher level of awareness of specific technical structure of communication processes at social networks, and they are better aware of risks related to online-revelation.

From our point of view, a date of account registration has a significant impact on the quantity of personal data to be revealed. This fact is not studied enough however, bringing it to one of the most up-to-date research subjects.

Domestic literature analysis shows lack of interdisciplinary studies of self-disclosure at social networks with respect to social and demographic parameters. A lot of studies only took limited size samples; also, analysis of profiles of limited age groups was conducted [30]. It can be said that an expansion of empirical base studies regarding online self-presentation, self-disclosure and privacy with regard to age issue is getting more and more demanded.

We took the *VKontakte* social network as a research subject as one of the most popular on the territory of Russia and the CIS. Our research goal is to analyze the impact of age characteristics, as well as the date of registration on the disclosure of personal data in the profile.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Self-disclosure and self-presentation at social networks*

Issues of online self-disclosure and self-presentation are at high interest for both do-mestic and foreign scientists nowadays [4, 8, 9, 10, 26, 27, 33].

Self-presentation studies date back to ideas of Erving Goffman who first described oneself representation at social environment through a theatre metaphor [11]. His concept states an individual acting in two ways: «front stage» and «back stage».

Acting at front stage, one represents an idealized version of themselves according to a specific social role, eg: a proper narrator, a listener, etc [13]. While pursuing dif-ferent goals one discloses certain data and demonstrates certain behavior to maintain desired image in public. This is self-presentation as we understand it, i.e., a process of building-up a certain impression of oneself [16] or creation a desired image of oneself which does not always correspond to an actual one.

Along with the front stage, back stage actions exist. These are truly and actual sets, feelings, and thoughts of an individual that one can share with public through confes-sions or nonvoluntary demonstration. Backstage represents a true self of an individu-al. For the current research, we do not take into consideration the backstage. We are only interested in information that one intentionally reveals as his personal data at social network to create a personal image.

A theatre concept of E. Coffman coincides with an online-background with the ca-veat that self-presentation at asynchronous communication, for example at social network personal page, looks more like a static art exhibition rather than real-time artist's performance [13]. Moreover, at online-background a scope of persons to impress according to an author's plan goes unpredictable as online privacy borders are much less stable that those offline. Due to a context collapse, a peculiarity of social networks, self-presentation prepared for a certain audience might go beyond privacy borders and catch an eye of an audience it was not intended for.

Not every user plays around with his online-image. For example, at social networks and dating sites people often try to build up a realistic copy of themselves, which being not the case at game sites. Thus, 74% of Facebook surveyed user state their profiles being a truly digital copy of themselves; another 3% state their profiles look alike their personality [5]. Here we face self-disclosure process.

Self-disclosure is determined by many scientists as a process of informing other individuals about oneself [14]. One of the very first concepts describing self-disclosure is a social penetration theory elaborated by Altman & Taylor [2]. It explains self-disclosure through communication in pair: relations between two individu-als develop throughout they reveal step by step close information to each other. Info disclosure enhances empathy and eliminates information uncertainty, meaning self-disclosure is an essential part of building a relationship.

However, an era of social networks brought up a fact that classic concepts of self-disclosure do not explain its features anymore. Common mechanisms of mutual disclosure in pair are impossible to be used for group disclosure. Thus, revelations of personal data at social network, i.e., self-disclosure in public, significantly differ from disclosures face-to-face or in personal messages. As social networks appear, it be-came obvious that partners do not need to know each other for years and to disclose personal info step by step, it is enough to singly visit a profile to get all necessary information and to decide on further communication. Self-disclosure of this one-to-many type is called broadcasting type [3].

To summarize, self-disclosure and self-presentation in online terms are directed on elimination of information uncertainty. They are necessary strategies of social behavior. Herewith, both processes in terms of online one-to-many communication have changed and received new features that need to be studied. Further we look closer to some parameters that may influence the disclosure of social network profile data.

B. *Users age*

It is noteworthy that a dark side of self-disclosure is loss of privacy. This is seen in early research of self-disclosure [2] and in era of internet is reflected in a privacy calculus theory. According to this theory, while deciding to disclose information peo-ple consciously evaluate the benefits and risks of disclosing data. And the main risk associated with self-disclosure, or rather an unspoken price communication partners pay during self-disclosure is loss of privacy.

According to a social exchange theory, the more benefits user expects from discolo-sure the more likely they are to disclose information about themselves [19]. Thus, in social life people are constantly looking for a balance between the desired level of privacy and self-disclosure assessing the risks and benefits eg. for online situation, experimenting with online self-presentation, privacy settings, and quantity of friends.

However, we assume that at different ages this balance may be different. On the one hand, users of different ages may have different communicational needs [32]. Thus, according to Erickson's theory of life stages supplemented by Arnett's devel-opments, each life period can be connected to specific needs and desires in terms of social activity [32]. Herewith, users of different ages may have very different internet skills.

Moreover, as Sandra Petronio states in her theory of Communication privacy management, people change their boundaries of privacy with age (boundaries of privacy in this case is a balance between disclosure and privacy or the line that separates the disclosed data from the undisclosed) [25]. For example, in cases when a person needs help they have to change their privacy boundaries making them more or less permeable. It also happens in infancy: while a child remains dependent and helpless its boundaries of privacy remain unformed but with age and with becoming more independent a young person begins to look for more and more ways to defend their territorial and psychological independence along with a right for privacy and personal space. That's why in puberty boundaries of privacy become denser. Thus, the idea of privacy changes, and boundaries of privacy change

accordingly. For example, at certain age a person perceives some information as no longer private.

Thus, we formulate a first hypothesis of our study:

Amount of information disclosed in a profile of the social network VKontakte de-pends on the age of a user.

C. Users age Date of user registration

Previous foreign studies have proven that the frequency of Facebook use is also positively associated with user's self-discovery [1, 7], and this relationship is further enhanced by social rewards, such as a social capital that people gain through social interactions on SNS [30].

We did not find any similar studies that examined behavior of Russian users. However, we can assume that the registration time will be inversely related to the amount of disclosed data in a profile.

Let us formulate a second hypothesis of the study:

- Amount of information disclosed in a profile of the social network VKontakte de-pends on the date of registration of an account.

III. METHODS

A. Procedures

During our research we collected characteristics of users' profiles. However, due to the Rules on personal data handling we elaborated an instrument for data anonymization: only ID number was left with no name/surname linked to it. We used the following encryption when storing the data: we evaluated availability of certain information without its value thus storing only 1 or 0 value in our database; in case a value was a numerical one, e.g. quantity of friends/subscriptions, then a numeral was stored. This approach provides for anonymous data collection and handling of users of social networks.

To collect data, we used a standard range of tools including a narrative parser which is a public service for data collection, and an API VK – based service. It resulted into a compilation of encrypted data of main users' characteristics without storing their personal information.

Eventually our sample consists of 1801 accounts of active users of the abovementioned social network VKontakte. 56% of pages are identified as male, and 44% as female. 853 accounts (47% of the sample) contain information regarding age. According to these data the sample consists of users of 14-72 years old ($M=30.27$, $SD=16$).

B. Measures

Self-disclosure

We measured level of user's self-disclosure as per following categories specified in a profile: full name, city of residence, phone number, etc. Our object of interest is the general level of self-disclosure, which includes all types of information available in the user profile, as well as the contents of individual components of the user profile in the social network.

We grouped similar categories and divided them into the following semantic sections which reflect a degree of self-disclosure in different areas of life (these semantic blocks were identified and used by us during previous studies) [31]:

1. Section *Statistics*

- Number of friends
- Number of subscribers
- Number of photos
- Number of photo albums
- Number of video recordings
- Number of audio recordings
- Number of groups
- Number of subscriptions

2. Section *Social and demographic information*

- Full name (first name, last name, nickname, maiden name, patronymic)
- Geography of residence (country, city, hometown)
- Age (full years, date of birth)
- Marital status (marital status, link to a partner, partner's first name, partner's last name)
- Professional activity (activity, current employment, company, group of work, position, year when employment started, year when employment ended)
- Contact information (website, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Skype*, home phone)
- Higher education (university, year of graduation, faculty, department, form of education, degree)
- Secondary education (school, year of school start, year of graduation, class, type of school)

3. Section *Values and ideas*

- Interests (interests, music, movies, TV shows, books, games, quotes, about yourself)
- Values (political opinion, religion/philosophy, inspiration, core values in people, core values in life, smoking, alcohol)

4. Section *Personal boundaries*

Profile's transparency (ability for visitors to send personal messages to a user, write on a wall, add friends). Thus, in this work self-disclosure was measured by 19 categories of information, grouped into the four semantic sections.

Furthermore, we selected 3 general characteristics:

- Total level of self-disclosure uniting all available profile info,
- Total level of statistics disclosure,
- Total level of social and demographic information including sections 2,3,4.

Registration date

Based on ideas of E.I. Golovakh and A.A. Kronik about life changes of a person over a five-year period [12], we firstly

divided our sample by the date of registration of accounts into three intervals, 5 years each:

- 1st stage of registration (2007-2011) – 447 (25%) users,
- 2nd stage of registration (2012-2016) – 814 (45%) users,
- 3rd stage of registration (2017-2021) – 540 (30%) users.

Age group

Secondly, we selected users with the age specified (853 users), then divided the sample into 4 age groups:

- 1 age group (juvenile period) – 14-19 years old (198 subjects; 23%),
- 2 age group (first period of maturity) – 20-30 years old (361 subjects; 42%),
- 3 age group (second period of maturity) – 30-40 years old (150 subjects; 18%),
- 4 age group (third period of maturity) – 40-60 years old (144 subjects; 17%).

Such division coincides with data by Brand Analytics as per age breakdown of the *Vkontakte* users [31].

C. Statistical data analysis

To evaluate statistical data, we used criteria by Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS with cor-rection Lilliefors) and Shapiro Wilk. Since the initial analysis revealed, the data structure does not correspond to the law of normal distribution, to identify differences in the degree of self-disclosure between selected user groups (by age and date of registration) we used criterion by Kruskal-Wallis. Using this nonparametric criterion, we tested the hypothesis of the influence of the user’s age and the date of registration on the dependent variables which were different categories of data in the profile of the subjects (Tables I, II).

We also used a Spearman correlation coefficient to identify reliably significant relationships between variables, such as the user’s age and registration date, and semantic sections of user profile data at social networks. The statistical significance was established at the level of $p < 0.05$. A software package the Statistica 10.0 was used for the analysis in this study.

IV. RESULTS

A. Registration date

Using a Kruskal-Wallis criterion we revealed reliably important differences in the variances for all semantic self-presentation sections. The data obtained is presented in the table below.

TABLE I. DIFFERENCES IN THE AMOUNT OF DATA DISCLOSED IN A PROFILE DEPENDING ON THE REGISTRATION DATE (n=1801).

	Year of account registration			Kruskal-Wallis test	P-level
	2007-2011 (Mean Rank)	2012-2016 (Mean Rank)	2017-2021 (Mean Rank)		
Total level of self-disclosure uniting all available profile info.	1054,787	895,308	782,278	67,42	0,001

Total level of statistics disclosure	1000,487	941,094	758,209	62,80	0,001
Total level of social and demographic information	1167,469	761,196	891,165	179,77	0,001
Number of friends	1008,36	921,98	780,50	56,25	0,0001
Number of subscribers	1073,60	923,39	724,38	131,68	0,0001
Number of photos	965,67	939,72	789,09	42,01	0,0001
Number of ph. albums	999,80	908,84	807,41	90,60	0,0000
Number of videos	1031,08	902,08	791,70	99,46	0,0001
Number of audio files	946,92	913,87	843,59	21,80	0,0000
Number of groups	845,28	929,84	903,65	11,36	0,0034
Number of subscriptions	911,91	935,17	840,45	12,56	0,0019
Full name	963,81	888,40	867,99	75,66	0,0001
Geogr. of residence	1172,91	864,13	731,50	217,27	0,0001
Age	695,25	767,23	1272,96	489,26	0,0001
Marital status	983,17	908,66	821,44	70,09	0,0001
Profes. activity	1101,16	816,56	862,60	182,17	0,0001
Contact details	955,74	884,57	880,46	31,32	0,0001
Higher education	1044,24	844,32	867,87	122,21	0,0001
Secondary education	1057,19	882,88	799,03	147,87	0,0001
Interests	979,48	881,32	865,70	93,13	0,0001
Values	978,52	883,01	863,94	77,90	0,0000
Profile openness	1101,72	848,06	814,66	142,63	0,0001

Based on the results, we summarize:

1. Users registered at the first stage (2007-2011) are significantly more likely to self-disclose and post information about friends, subscribers, photos, photo albums, video- and audio-recordings, basic personal information about the full name, information about territorial affiliation, marital status and their partner, information about professional activities, contact details, information about higher education, information about school education, interests, values, and their profiles are more often open for interaction.
2. Users registered in the second stage (2012-2016) are reliably more often to disclose information about quantity of groups and subscriptions in their profiles.
3. Users registered in the third stage (2017-2021) are reliably more often to disclose information about their age in their profiles.

We can say that in general over time users limit the amount of open information about themselves at social network as confirmed by correlation analysis. Using a Spearman correlation coefficient, we identified reliably important negative correlations of the registration date with all components of self-presentation and general indicators of self-disclosure. Namely:

- Total level of self-disclosure $r = -0,19; p \leq 0,05$
- Total level of statistics disclosure $r = -0,18; p \leq 0,05$
- Total level of social and demographic information $r = -0,18; p \leq 0,05$

This means the later a user registers, the lower is the level of self-disclosure of all 3 types.

B. Age of social network users

There were identified following valid differences in variances of the 12 semantic sections of self-presentation in the profile (data shown in the table below)

TABLE II. DIFFERENCES IN THE AMOUNT OF DISCLOSED DATA IN THE PROFILE (VALUE № ID) DEPENDING ON THE AGE OF USERS (n=853)

	Age group (years old)				Kruskal -Wallis test	P-level
	14-19 (Mean Rank)	20-30 (Mean Rank)	30-40 (Mean Rank)	40-60 (Mean Rank)		
№ ID subject	547,46	382,07	372,39	430,90	66,74	0,0001
Total level of soc. and demogr. info	347,88	447,36	477,86	431,77	30,80	0,0001
Number of subscribers	365,68	465,81	450,57	411,43	23,56	0,0000
Number of photos	383,59	446,36	448,94	415,30	11,15	0,0109
Number of photo albums	396,18	437,82	440,68	428,01	12,10	0,0071
Number of videos	395,32	440,33	428,40	435,70	8,80	0,0321
Number of groups	388,25	436,70	428,30	454,61	9,61	0,0222
Number of subscriptions	432,30	445,12	424,27	377,14	8,72	0,0333
Full name	415,50	424,95	432,56	442,16	13,69	0,0034
Geogr. of residence	339,11	446,67	471,64	452,05	40,50	0,0000
Marital status	391,89	424,69	455,83	451,03	18,68	0,0003
Contact details	394,43	447,12	430,71	417,48	24,53	0,0001
Higher education	385,94	437,46	452,60	430,57	21,67	0,0001
Interests	410,57	436,39	436,01	416,66	11,22	0,0106

Let us consider each age period and describe self-presentation typical for each age group.

1. Users of the 1st age group (14-19 years old) registered reliably later at VKontakte that can be seen when studying ID. The higher is ID number, the later a user was registered. Reliably, young users have higher ID, this also being the case for elderly group. They publish less information about themselves than all other groups, that may indicate both lack of interest in using this social network, as well as lack of views; this idea needs further verification.

2. In the 2nd age group (20-30 years old) reliably more information about the quantity of subscribers, videos, subscriptions, as well as additional information for communication in other social networks and interests is published, which corresponds to the main tasks of this age period in search for social interaction and formation of close friendly and intimate contacts.

3. Users of the 3rd age group (30-40 years old) reliably more often post information about the quantity of photos and photo albums, information about territorial affiliation, information about marital status, information about higher education. As we can assume, this is due to the fact that users of this age group have more resources to demonstrate their social status and use this social platform for self-presentation to a greater extent than other users, which corresponds to the needs of this age group in creative self-realization.

4. Users of the 4th age group (40-60 years old) reliably more often post additional personal information about their full name (nickname, maiden name, patronymic), and also reliably more often provide information about the quantity of groups they are members of. It is worth noting, like users of age group 1 (14-19 years old), they were registered reliably later than users of 20-40 years old, which can also affect the content of profiles at social network.

A Spearman correlation coefficient also shows reliably significant positive correlation between age and level of social and demographic information ($r = -0,16$; $p \leq 0,05$). We can state that the older users are, the less they disclose and publish social and demographic parameters, thus proving the comparison analysis results.

V. DISCUSSION

The aim of this work was to study the interrelation between self-presentation components of VKontakte users and two significant parameters: the age and the date of registration. The results show us that both factors have a statistically significant effect on most components of self-presentation. We have also discovered reliable differences of self-presentation depending on user's age. The highest level of disclosure of personal data in the profile is specific for 20-40 years old users. Young (14-19 years old) and mature (40-60 years old) users have a fairly high level of profile privacy. Probably, this is due to the age-related tasks of each period, being proved by a research of [1]. Our data however contradicts to a research by Lee et. who points out that dependence between the privacy concerns and the age is not linear but can be rather described as a U-shaped curve. Thus meaning, users over 40 years old are less concerned of their privacy which is more the case for those who are 20-30 years old [20]. We need to study this issue further.

We have also found out that accounts registered at the early stage of the social network existence are more likely to have more personal user's data which generally coincides with data [1], [7], [27] and needs to be studied further.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

In the future we plan to expand our research by increasing the quantity of samples considering different age groups represented at the VKontakte, and to use quality psychological methods for deeper analysis of profiles of mature and elderly users.

We find it interesting to expand our research by including profiles of other social networks to see the self-disclosure of all media space.

We also would like to compare profiles of the VKontakte and Facebook to reveal culturally driven peculiarities of self-disclosure.

As a perspective, we also plan to fulfill analysis and handling of users' photos via Microsoft Azure technology in order to choose main object of a profile picture. Current research is however dedicated to publicly accessible main characteristics only.

VII. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study expands the understanding of self-disclosure and self-presentation of a social network profile. It combined several theoretical paradigms and the factors that can influence data disclosure were empirically tested.

The results of the study confirm Erickson life cycle theory concepts supplemented by the life stages of Arnett and show that the age of users affects the online self-presentation. We have confirmed that differences in social needs at different life stages can also be traced in the behavior of users at social networks. This became obvious at finding differences during building up an online image.

The results prove that users of the 1st and the 2nd age groups (20-30 and 30-40 years old) reliably publish more information regarding their lives and obviously are less concerned about privacy issues. Users of the youngest and oldest age (14-19 and 40-60 years old) show lowest level of self-disclosure. This result coincides with a theory by Communication privacy management which states that privacy borders do transform with age [25]. Studying the reasons of the high level of privacy inside these groups can become a subject for further research.

In addition, our work shows that time also plays certain role for the disclosure. Users who registered at an early existence stage of the *Vkontakte* reveal more personal data, than those who registered later.

And, lastly, social networks like *Vkontakte* offer great opportunities for self-expression, as well as for social interaction and realization of various goals. They are like exhibition halls and libraries storing user-generated digital images of an individual with their data. Issues of using of this information in honest and dishonest ways become more up-to-date in the present moment. Each action at social network including excessive and/or careless data disclosure can be accompanied by risks: breach, data theft, fraud, harassing based on the personal data. Studying the personal data disclosure at social networks can form the basis for developing of Safety rules for users of social networks with regard to the age of a user.

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