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Independent and Popular?
Russian Youth Videos in the Age of Globalisation

1. Introduction

According to Google, in 2015 the most popular YouTube video in the Russian Federation was a clip entitled 'Winnie the Pooh and the Bees'. (Allok & Anfilova 2015).[1] It received over 28 million views; however it did not feature the characters from the famous children's book. Instead the video features a group of teenage girls, dressed in black-and-orange-striped leotards, performing a sexually-charged twerk dance at the seasonal show of the local dance school 'Kredo' in Orenburg. The video was uploaded on 12 April 2015 by an anonymous user and the footage was taken by a member of the audience on a digital camera or personal mobile phone. In less than two weeks, this video was followed by another viral video featuring a twerk by Russian dancers who chose the World War II memorial Malaia Zemlia in the city of Novorossiisk as the backdrop for their performance. Both videos caused a heated public discussion about female behaviour and adolescent education; at the same time they placed the dance style which is extremely fashionable among Russian youth at the centre of this public discussion. Simultaneously, the videos became breaking news in international media who focussed on the penalties imposed on the dance schools and dancers involved. The school in Orenburg was temporarily closed, twerk classes removed from the schedule and a criminal investigation opened with charges of indecent exposure of underage children. Charges of hooliganism were brought against the young women from Novorossiisk and two of them were jailed for 10–15 days.

The topic of online videos and youth popular culture opens up a possibility for the re-examination of cultural globalisation as a mediated everyday practice (e.g. Christensen et al. 2011: 3-4). The twerk scandal foregrounds the kind of cultural consumption of mobile technology that takes place on the periphery of cultural production, away from the production centres of international popular culture, but which is transmitted through global channels of communication, namely YouTube, potentially to a global audience. When these types of videos travel from everyday cultural production and consumption into a wider national and international realm, they strike a nerve that is important to that particular time and place in history. Viral YouTube videos are highly ephemeral phenomena but at the same time they have the ability to reveal cultural practices and discursive formations of a more lasting character. The twerk scandal here is an example of a gendered 'moral panic' caused by the representation of young female sexuality and the assumed unregulated use of different cultural codes and communication technologies (see, Renold & Ringrose 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013). Therefore, the twerk scandal, as an example of global cultural phenomenon which has local origins, invites a gender sensitive perspective on the analysis of popular culture and globalisation in Russia which at the same time is relevant to other contexts. For instance, Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose note that 'the ways in which the girl figure continues to be colonized, exploited, abused and commodified have perhaps intensified' in the global cultural market while there is 'little analysis of how girls themselves make meaning and negotiate the media in their everyday lives' (2013: 248-9).

My objective is to discuss young women's agency in cultural globalisation as it has emerged in the process of production and perception of internet videos in contemporary Russia. Both national and international media attention to the twerk videos has reinforced the media stereotype of Russian women as being subjected to a patriarchal, punishing state's cultural, political and reproductive pressures, placing these stereotypes on the arena of global information streams and feedback loops. The fact that both videos emerged from Russian provinces further emphasizes the marginal position of these dancing young women in relation to the centres of discursive and cultural power. At the same time, the twerk case affirms the fact that there are young Russian women who actively and independently produce online content from the standpoint of their own motivations and cultural knowledge. For example, the video shot in Novorossiisk was initially produced as promotional material for the dance school in which some of the women performing on the video work as dance teachers.

The twerk case also shows that the exchange of opinions around viral videos usually presents almost exclusively the point of view of everyone else but the performers themselves. Therefore, the gender sensitive approach to online video culture encourages me to widen the scope of existing research by exploring some lesser-known productions and search for those avenues of information sharing where alternative interpretations can be accessed more effectively. This research context, I assert, opens up a new perspective for the scrutiny of the centre-periphery dynamics of online popular culture. It helps to unpack the widespread practice by established media of utilizing user-generated internet content to create news stories on timely issues. It also allows me to suggest that memes and other online genres can be removed from their original context of global popular culture in order to downplay the seriousness of social problems evoked in these products.

My major argument concerning the centre-periphery dynamics of globalisation is that cultural globalisation has emphasised the role of the Russian public as consumers and users of new, internationally expanding media platforms and technologies. I maintain that an important factor in this development has been the arrival of global entertainment television on Russian state channels in the early 1990s, particularly the international-format series, which quickly became extremely popular (see, for example, Borenstein 2008). Albert Moran defines television formats as 'a cultural technology which governs the flow of program ideas across time and space' (2004: 266). In this chapter, by examining a number of Russian online communication networks, I wish to highlight the practice of cultural borrowing and re-contextualization of international format-based popular culture. How can we account for certain internet phenomena through formatted popular culture? How do formats as important technologies of global popular culture govern the flow of cultural ideas in the multidimensional environment of internet communication?

The Russian-speaking internet—the Runet—has evolved into one of the most powerful segments of the world wide web (see, for example, Gorham, Lunde & Paulsen 2014). By the gradual legitimization of the internet as an important cultural form of the 'computer era', online social networks, where much of the user-generated content is distributed, are now regarded by many scholars as the 'natural habitat', especially of young 'diginatives'. For example, Henry Jenkins has argued that in the age of digital communication there is 'an increased centrality of teens and youth to the global circulation of media' (2006b: 154). Previous research on Russian digital culture has addressed the importance of user-generated content for such global youth cultural phenomena as Harry Potter fan fiction (Samutina 2013) and performative political protest in the post-broadcast era (Strukov 2013). However, the Russophone internet has not yet been thoroughly analysed from the perspective of content sharing as an everyday practice which produces conflicting media realities and sites of agency.

Unlike other scholars who have concentrated on audience activity and amateur online media on the Runet (see, for example, Chapman 2014; Samutina 2013; Strukov 2013;), I do not self-evidently regard these practices as sites of subversion which aim to challenge the existing power structure. Instead, I am interested in investigating the ways in which globalized forms of popular culture are used in the negotiations of youth and female agency on different levels of Russian online communication. Correspondingly, my aim is to discuss cultural globalisation in light of different types of media phenomena that originate in amateur and/or semi-professional video productions produced as part of Russian youth's everyday popular culture. I enquire about the kinds of cultural agency which are retrieved from global cultural models and about how international cultural models are perceived and circulated in the Russian digital media environment.

2. Data and methods

My analysis focuses on two case studies. The first is the twerk controversy. More specifically, I investigate how the scandal figured in the accumulating newsfeeds of digital media, how amateur culture emerges in digital newsfeeds, and how twerk is defined in relation to global television and youth culture. The second case study analyses one of the most successful but less-known Russian amateur video productions, the drama series *Stervochki* [The Little Bitches] which was created by a group of high-school students from the provincial town of Pervoural'sk. The word 'stervochki' is the plural diminutive form of 'sterva', which loosely translates as 'a bitch' or 'a shrew' and is often used derogatively to refer to an assertive and manipulative

female. This type of female agency emerged in Russian popular culture in the 1990s and has become a hyperbolic manifestation of a 'new' female type, a symbolic practice for unpacking the late-Soviet gender order in the new social and economic setting of post-Soviet capitalism (Salmenniemi & Ratilainen 2014). On the one hand, 'sterva' serves as a pejorative representation of a 'westernized' woman who enslaves men sexually (*à la* Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City* played by Kim Cattrall).[2] On the other, 'sterva' presents a mixture of post-feminist gender ideology and glamour culture thereby capturing post-Soviet consumer and class fantasies (Salmenniemi & Ratilainen 2014): a female type who is supposed to be active and independent but who uses her sexual appeal in order to climb the social ladder.[3]

My research materials comprise various information streams published on the micro blogging platform Twitter, on the image and video sharing platform Instagram and on VKontakte, which is the most popular social media platform among Russian-speaking internet users. These streams can be divided into three different sets of data. Firstly, I analyse internet media content and user comments shared on Twitter with the Cyrillic hashtags 'twerk' and 'twerking' (from April through December 2015). Secondly, I analyse the information streams marked with the Cyrillic hashtag 'stervochki', which are found both on Twitter and on Instagram (ca. 500 Instagram posts and tweets). Finally, my research data includes *Stervochki*'s fan profile on VKontakte. With nearly 30,000 followers, this site represents a medium sized online fan community. Somewhat similar but more popular fan profiles on Vkontakte are, for instance, the site for Russian-speaking Harry Potter fans with ca. 463,000 followers and the fan profile of the Norwegian youth series Skam [Shame] with ca. 232,000 followers. My estimation is, however, that in the context of currently ongoing, non-commercial and independent DIY productions, *Stervochki*'s fan base is one of the largest in Russia. Together, these social media gather, organise and store publications produced by different types of news outlets (national, regional and local) and different types of contributors (professional journalists, bloggers and citizen commentators). This multifaceted set of research materials allows me to examine a wide range of information channels which supply diverse publications from multiple sources which are organised into streams and are then appropriated for different discursive and creative uses.

I employ qualitative analysis of selected digital media content in order to map different information flows on the Runet and to reveal different contextualisation strategies (Jenkins 2006b: 152). My analysis draws on the research of Russian televisual culture and the so-called do-it-yourself (DIY) production of culture which has become more mainstream with the evolvement of web 2.0 and mobile technologies (Ratto & Boler 2014: 3). I maintain that online distribution of amateur cultural productions has reshaped the forms of interaction between global cultural streams and local audiences within the 'post-broadcast' and 'networked' media environment (Castells 2011; Prior 2006). This means that global popular culture, facilitated by international commercial conglomerates, is perceived on the local level and re-distributed through online networks to new audiences. In this process, global images and meanings are 'de-contextualised and re-contextualised at the sites of consumption' (Jenkins 2006b: 154). With this approach I follow Henry Jenkins's argumentation, as he writes that 'the new information space [of the digital age] involves multiple and unstable forms of re-contextualization' (2006b: 140) emerging with the increased grass-roots audience participation in the production and evaluation of cultural knowledge.

I begin my discussion with an overview of post-Soviet media convergence which serves as an important analytical framework for my analysis. In this section, I also review the term 'user-generated content' in light of my case studies. I then proceed to analyse the patriotic re-contextualisation of twerk as a means for discursive marginalization of female cultural agency. In the last section, I discuss the amateur online series *Stervochki* as an example of renegotiations of popular culture's gender stereotyping, youth cultural agency and global identity building, before moving to conclusions.

3. Networked media and changing television culture in Russia

The cases in question have occurred at the intersection of different media channels, or what has been labelled as media convergence and is characteristic of digital communicative environment. Henry Jenkins views media convergence not only as a technological process but also 'a paradigm shift across multiple media

channels, toward the increased interdependence of communication systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and towards ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture' (2006a: 243). I consider the interaction and interdependence between television and internet, especially in its social media, or 'web 2.0' phase, as the most crucial point of media convergence that offers insights into several tensions in the contemporary Russian cultural field. Here televisual popular culture continues to function as a significant cultural background while the internet represents the ongoing global change of mass communication and the newest media technology which is particularly appealing to the younger generation of media users. The interaction between global cultural streams and local audiences, however, had been developing for a long time through the international trade of format licenses, particularly central to entertainment television (Moran 2004). As related to post-Soviet Russia, international formats represent the transformation of televisual culture that took root in perestroika reforms and culminated in the 1990s – a process which includes such changes as the abolishment of censorship, privatisation of media ownership and westernisation of popular culture. Format-based programming continues to be the dominant form of television content also in the 2000s. Several scholars argue that international formats have changed the Russian audience's expectations concerning televisual programming (Prokhorova 2010; Hutchings & Rulyova 2009; Heller 2003). Moreover, global television programmes have introduced a new national grand narrative 'between the past of the chaotic 1990s and the more glorious future' which has been particularly important to Putin's presidency (Klioutchkine 2005). In this chapter I scrutinise formatted television in the new context of networked online communication and DIY-youth culture.

Russian televisual culture in the internet age is a good example of the simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of cultural change. As the dominant mass medium and, as some critics claim, the most trusted source of information among certain types of audiences in Russia, television represents everyday life and social stability (Hutchings & Tolz 2015). At the same time, the national television infrastructure is undergoing a fundamental reform in response to the global 'digital revolution' of communication (Strukov & Zvereva 2014; Vyrkovski & Makeenko 2014). For example, Elena Vartanova remarks that as the internet currently offers the most important distribution channel for new televisual content, the types of global programming strategies which are not tied to a certain television channel but to a digital database, become increasingly important to media producers (2014: 19).

On the one hand, the broadcasting structure of Russian national television has become increasingly centralized in the 2000s. This means that local television channels have suffered from resource cuts and become increasingly dependent on the Moscow-based national television and radio company All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company[4] (Hutchings & Rulyova 2009; Strukov & Zvereva 2014). On the other, the internet has given birth to a great number of independent television networks such as TV Rain. In addition, Russian television currently exists within the 'global info-sphere', in which international channels and global networks are available through cable, satellite and on the internet (Hutchings & Rulyova 2009: 3, 11; Strukov & Zvereva 2014). This means that changing technology and overlapping telecommunication services characterize the television consumption of the internet age as, for example, Stanislav Kholkin, general producer of the local ETV channel in Yekaterinburg puts it: 'at the end of the single cord, you have your cable television, internet and telephone' (Strukov 2014: 302). We can continue his idea by saying that it is important to have also the tools for creating and distributing new media content at the end of the 'single cord' on the same device. It is well-known that smart phones and tablet computers enable their users to record texts, images and audio as well as to edit and to share self-made content with others through the internet. In Russia, as in other developed countries, this type of content has long exceeded the content produced under the auspices of the state.

It has been argued that in the age of media convergence, people consume, produce and distribute media with personal technology in a variety of individualized ways (e.g. Jenkins 2006a). The simultaneity and interconnectedness of media producers and media users through personal technology has also urged media scholars to reconceptualise the very notion of audience by breaking it into different categories depending on the type of internet activity. In the current media environment, digital content can be divided into:

(a) edited content, mainly produced by traditional media and established media outlets;

(b) user-generated content, produced by individuals the majority of whom are not affiliated with any media outlet;

(c) the bulk of information streams on the internet which consists of edited content, shared on social media platforms as user-distributed content; and

(d) people who engage with digital media in a particularly active manner by commenting on edited materials or even re-modelling the existing content for their own use, i.e. co-producers or prosumers (Rajagopalan 2013; Matikainen & Villi 2015).

User-distribution and prosumption of digital media bring together different and sometimes conflicting topics and opinions on a single platform. Both edited and user-generated content combine and create information streams marked with key words, or hashtags. This means that digital media which exist as a type of database are in the constant process of reconstruction and reorganisation into new information streams according to the 'logic of the algorithm' (Manovich 2002: 222). However, it is not only the programmed algorithm of the service provider but also the amount and volume of user participation on a specific online platform that determine the informational weight and visibility of an individual publication. For example, by following the information streams on Twitter, marked with the Cyrillic hashtag 'twerk' during my research period in 2015, one cannot help noticing that the discussion on this topic in Russian online media is mainly concentrated around a few topics. They include different new dance trends and the role of dance in Russian culture and society, youth education in the fields of extracurricular activities and schooling, and national issues of moral politics, of which the latter is the most prominent.

Another form of prosumption of digital media is the activity of online fan communities, in which (a) people use media content as raw material for their own creative work; (b) media consumption involves significant emotional investments; and (c) interaction with other consumers of the same media plays an important role (see Wilson 2011; Jenkins 2006a & 2006b). Although fan communities constitute a small minority of all internet users, their interactive relationship with media based on 'collective intelligence' (Levy 1994 ctd in Jenkins 2006a) and peer support may signal a larger-scale media change in the Russian Federation and elsewhere. For example, in the introduction to their edited volume Vlad Strukov and Vera Zvereva outline socio-cultural consequences of digitization of television and note that '[b]y the increase of real competition, television producers treat the viewer as an equal and make programmes as if "for themselves"' (2014, xxxv).

The information streams around *Stervochki* are based on this type of prosumption. The online activity of both the producers and viewers of the series creates an 'interpretive community', a context and strategy for preserving and maintaining a common cultural resource which is shared in digital communication environment (see Fish 1984: 14). Digital media become an everyday social practice through which people create and reproduce different cultural readings in an interactive, playful and creative process (de Certeau 1984; Jenkins 2006b). For example, the viewers of *Stervochki* contribute to the online fan community by sharing lines from the series as text comments, circulating screenshots and video clips and creating their own fan art collages. In this process of fan-based recreating of the series on social networking sites, certain scenes, characters and motifs from the original story emerge as the most significant, thus creating an air of a cult production around *Stervochki*.

IMAGE 1. Collection of *Stervochki* posters and fan art on the Vkontakte page of the series. Visual participation is an important part of fan activity. Source: https://vk.com/stervochki_tv.

4. The patriotic re-contextualization of twerk

The word 'twerk' was included in the Oxford Dictionary in June 2015: a twerk is a '[d]ance to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance' (Oxford Dictionaries). Internationally, twerk was adopted from African American[5] hip-hop and ~~street~~ social dance subculture to mainstream music television and videos and eventually found its way to training programmes in

local gyms and dance schools all over the world. In previous scholarship it is commonly mentioned that twerking was brought into mainstream by the U.S. teen idol Miley Cyrys who adopted twerking to be an important part of her image transformation from a Disney child actor into a sexually matured pop artist (Gaunt 2015). She performed twerk at the MTV VMAs in August 2013, which led to an internet sensation and prompted a lot of scandalous media discourse around different meanings of her act. Relative to hip hop and American music video industry, twerking is connected to hyper-sexualized representations of black women's bodies and therefore Cyrus and other white stars who show twerking as a way to their sexual empowerment have propelled critical commentary on cultural appropriation and 'white consumption of black sexuality' in popular culture (Campbell 2004, hooks 1992). In this context, it is the lack of a relationship with the black community which marks Cyrus's and others' twerk performances as cultural appropriation. With new digital technologies and distribution channels cultural practices that come from a background of complicated race and sexual politics are easily replicated and adopted uncritically and ahistorically to new contexts (Baskerwille 2014, Campbell 2004). This can be the case with the global circulation of twerk videos and it needs further research in a transnational setting.[6]

Twitter and Instagram show that Russia is part of the global twerking trend, with many dancers and dance teachers sharing snapshots of their everyday twerk practice. In the context of Russian canonical understanding of culture twerk represents an exotic 'other' as for a long time only classical genres such as ballet, folk dance and ballroom dance were included in the state cultural system. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that in the number of news stories from the federal and local press commenting on the events in Orenburg and Novorossiisk and shared by Russian Twitter users, twerk is above all labelled as a 'scandalous' and 'provocative' dance (e.g. Makarsky 2015). By way of its rising fame in both international and national cultural spheres, as the popular lifestyle magazine *Afisha* writes, 'twerk has become the most popular dance in Russia' (Makarsky 2015). I argue that the Orenburg twerk performance and to some extent the other 'scandalous' twerk videos by Russian dancers follow the example of the international, professionally produced media precedent by offering their locally produced amateur or semi-professional interpretations. My case also shows that in the digital age local productions have a chance to emerge as a global phenomenon with millions of views in just a few days. This is due to the feedback loop between Cyrus's performance at the annual MTV gala and its glocalised version at the final concert of a Russian provincial dance school, which suggests that Russian (digital) culture is fully connected to the global one.[7]

In the Orenburg case, charges against the dancers were eventually dropped as the investigation committee announced that it had not found any proof of illegal preparation of indecent materials displaying underage children. During the process, the committee had consulted with professional choreographers who confirmed that all dance moves in the act were in line with the moves of 'the international twerk style' and therefore they must not be seen as including any pornographic or erotic elements. It is interesting to notice how global aesthetics is used here to defend local transgressors against accusations of public display of sexuality.

The state interventions did not prevent new twerk scandals from emerging. By the end of 2015, several other twerk videos of and by young women recorded at iconic locations and shared through social networking sites became hot topics in Russian media. These include, for example, videos showing twerk dances in Red Square in Moscow, in front of the Russian Bridge [Russkii most] in Vladivostok, and at another World War II memorial in the small city of Potchep in the Briansk district. In addition, it is worth mentioning that among the twerk videos discussed by Russian media through the discourse of scandal was one produced by young male cadets, also from Novorossiisk. They performed a twerk-like-dance in front of a T-34 tank while pretending to be washing it, wearing only underwear. Although the video had been uploaded on YouTube already in 2011, the local prosecutor started to investigate it in May 2015, only after it was associated with the other, more recent twerk cases (Bortnikov 2015; Life #novosti 2015). When reporting on these events, different federal and local news outlets articulated quite consistently that national monuments are not suitable backgrounds for this 'unusual' [neobychnyi] and 'explicit' [otkrovennyi] dance, and that those who make the videos apparently lack patriotic education (Federal press 2015; Zvezda 2015). In other words, the state administration's initial critical response to the twerk video had an impact on how subsequent Russian media discourse was structured. For

example, according to Sergei Ivanov, who worked as the Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration at the time of the scandals, performing a twerk in front of a war memorial is to be seen as 'improper and unethical' (Novikova 2015).

IMAGE 2. Screengrab of a news article published on the regional news site Nasha Gazeta Yekaterinburg [Our newspaper Yekaterinburg] 25 May 2015 about a twerk performance at the monumental Russian Bridge in Vladivostok. The bridge was built in preparation for the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference held in Vladivostok 2012. Source: ngzt.ru.

At the same time, this negative discourse drew media attention to local dance schools. For example, on 5 May 2015, the online newsletter In-the-Know [V-kurse] in the Perm' district published a short article summarizing the ongoing twerk scandal and also advertising twerk lessons for those aged eighteen and older at a local dance school (V-kurse 2015). This news article rehearses the official stance by referring to twerk as 'scandalous', however it ends with a more balanced statement: 'twerk is based on traditional African movements, which concentrate first and foremost on the buttocks, hips and stomach' (V-kurse 2015). This definition, re-contextualising twerk as having 'traditional African movements' and adding a further technical description, allows for a different approach and implicitly places twerk in the framework of transnational cultural models, techniques and formats.

The Orenburg performance should thus be considered from the perspective of international television and cultural formats, which combine global models with locally established cultural symbols and frames of interpretation. However, with the Orenburg video, this glocal re-contextualisation caused a lot of confusion among a number of media commentators. For example, the dancers' routine alluded to Winnie the Pooh and their costumes—black and orange leotards—evoked the ribbon of Saint George which has been used under Putin as a symbol of state patriotism. The show took place on the stage of the local Palace of Culture which is an institution established under Stalin for the support of workers' recreation and education.[8] For example, a host of the online talk-show #heshteg, on the Tiumen-based media outlet *Vsluh.ru*, remarks that the venue and the presence of friends and parents 'create a sense of permissiveness (…) as if this is how it should be'[9] (Vsluh.tv 2015). The implicit message of this statement is that there is a cultural mismatch between the twerk performed by the young girls on the Orenburg stage and the twerk perceived by media commentators. It seems like the local, familiarized and historically significant setting of the House of Culture as the context of audience reception overshadows the number of elements taken from the global context of international television and dance culture, which apparently was the context in which this performance was initially created. This might also be the reason why the importance of international television and video sharing culture for the everyday life of the Russian youth was by and large left out of view when presenting the twerk cases in media. In the above quote, the talk show host suggests that the familiar surroundings can potentially generate overly approving interpretations of twerk dancing. However, the majority of media comments with a disproportioned focus on the symbols and meanings deriving from the national cultural context and the simultaneous dispelling of the global context help reproduce a judgmental attitude towards twerk.

The difference is apparent in how the performances have been interpreted by the state officials which reveals the conservative turn in Russian politics and social life with its emphasis on state-funded patriotism. That year, 2015, the Russian Federation celebrated an important historical event—the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Victory in the Great Patriotic War, which is seen as a distinct part of World War II. In the same year the Russian administration also celebrated the anniversary of a more recent geopolitical 'achievement'—the 'incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation', which is the official Russian label for the annexation of Crimea. It is possible that those who made and published the videos did not intend them to be political provocations; however, in the context of the existing cultural, political and military hegemony they were interpreted as contravening the official stance. The fact that they instantly became extremely popular with

Runet users suggests that the users responded to their transgressive nature. In other words, some of the twerk dancers were 'poaching' (de Certeau 1988) on the patriotic media discourse when making videos against the backdrop of local war memorials and other national monuments. These easily recognizable and symbolically charged backdrops anchor the videos to the dominant media discourse at once distinguishing them from the number of other DIY dance videos taped in the everyday context of bedrooms, gyms and dance studios. Similarly, by describing the young women as 'immoral and dissolute', media commentators 'poached' on the already-existing scandalous currency of twerk which provided media outlets with a much desired visibility in online newsfeeds.

The twerk scandal demonstrates the politicization of Russian popular culture/discourse at various levels of production and consumption of media. By linking the Orenburg twerk to Pussy Riot's performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, some social media commentators suggested that the videos should be viewed as a protest and provocation in spite of the fact that none of the videos contains any explicit anti-government messages. For example, a Twitter user draws together the discussions around twerk in December 2015: 'Looks like the highest form of youth protest in Russian Federation is #twerk, preferably at a war memorial. Yes! Go on in the same spirit!' (Twitter, 9.12.2015). The paranoid politicisation of Russian culture was evident in some conspiracy theories. In both edited (e.g. the tabloid *Komsomolskaia Pravda*) and user-generated media (e.g. *LiveJournal*) there have been speculations that the Orenburg video was deliberately uploaded as an anti-Russian provocation by an anonymous user less than a month before the Victory Day celebration in May. These media outlets supplied digital traces—who shared video, when and how—to develop their conspiracy theories: they claimed that the opposition leader and political blogger Aleksei Navalnyi was one of the first people to share the video on Twitter and therefore the Orenburg video was an anti-government statement.

In this process of re-contextualization of twerk within politicized and patriotic discourse, young women are positioned as dependent on professionals in the education sector—the local school and centres for extra-curricular activities—as well as on the 'uncontrollable' forces of global popular culture. Some media outlets claimed that there was 'total anarchy' in the area of children's extracurricular education and an 'incompetent manner of introducing children to new material', which has eventually resulted in a 'low-quality performance' and '*faux pas* costume choice' (MariMedia 2015). Consequently, the young women in the twerk videos were perceived as being separate from the messages delivered by audio-visual online interpretations of their performance. In conclusion, the news media discourse circulating through content-sharing platforms points to the lack of structure and state control as one of the most significant reasons behind the emergence of the scandalous twerk performances. Simultaneously, it understates the link between cultural adaptation of music video programmes to the curricula of local dance schools, commodification of patriotic symbols, and the widespread everyday practice of posting self-made videos on social networking sites. In this discourse the adaptation of international models is not perceived as a creative process or part of Russian youth culture and those who do it—here the young girls—are, through an aggressive process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization, discursively deprived of agency.

5. Amateur series Stervochki *and prosumption of global television*

The amateur television series *Stervochki* exemplifies how adapting global television culture in amateur videos can bring local-level success and reinforce youth agency in the networked digital media environment. In 2011 film director Il'ia Vershchagin was seventeen years old when he and his friends started to make *Stervochki* without any budget or special equipment. Vershchagin's friends, who also had no previous experience in making videos, play all characters in the series. At first, the series was shot with a mobile phone but it was replaced eventually with a high-definition digital camera. Over the course of the project, the quality of image and sound improved significantly with an almost professional standard of production in the latest season. In addition to the series, the *Stervochki* crew launched a full-length film *The Bitches: the Lady's Secret* [Stervochki: Taina ledi] in 2014. So far four full seasons of *Stervochki* have been produced: they contain forty 10–20 minute-long episodes; and the fifth season is currently in the making. The most popular episodes have between

200,000 and 450,000 views and the total number of views on the series' YouTube channel is almost four million (as of September 2016).[10] During seasons, new episodes appear once a week, usually on Saturdays, and the last episode of each season has premiered at special screenings in local film theatres in Yekaterinburg, St. Petersburg, Moscow and several other Russian cities.

Any delays in the release of new episodes are actively discussed on social media by the series fans. Fan activity is an important part of the production because the producers use crowd sourcing to create and fund the project. For example, when they work on the script they ask fans to contribute their ideas on how to develop the storyline and sometimes even ask help with finding certain locations and props for specific scenes. These inquiries have produced a large number of texts available online that can be classified as fan fiction (see Samutina 2013). In addition, these exchanges create a strong sense of community and co-creativity among the viewers /fans. One fan, for example comments: 'The second season… guys, do you feel how they really listened to our suggestions? As a result, we are writing the new screenplay for our favourite series together with the director. As we requested, there is more bitching [stervoznost'], drugs, complex intrigues and daunting criminal episodes' (VKontakte, 2 Nov 2011).

Stervochki's plotline adheres closely to the conventions of American and Latin American daytime television soap opera that became extremely popular on Russian television in the 1990s and early 2000s. The main storyline depicts the adventures of three young female swindlers, Liza, Marina and Kira, whose goal in life is to achieve a glamorous lifestyle by any means. Glamour consumption thematically frames the whole series and features as its central ideology. This is expressed through the opening theme, the pop song entitled 'Beauty' [Krasota] by Nastenka Ovchinnikova. The lyrics include the phrase 'blonde girls walk on streets made of diamonds/ crystals shine in their hair/ like on the covers of magazines like in images', and continues, 'they know, you have all become glamorous'.[11] Despite its almost non-existent budget, *Stervochki* conveys a distanced or even abstract representation of glamorous Russia, which connects to the mainstream popular media mainly through several 'symbolic cues' (Bormann 1985), that is, references to well-known themes and motifs of other representations of glamour in Russian popular culture. For instance, the series is filmed in shabby 1960s apartment buildings, and it shows muddy courtyards and grey streets of provincial Russia but between scenes, the camera often focuses on the Sberbank office building in the centre of Pervoural'sk in order to emphasise the power of money in the lives of the heroes. Furthermore, the actors' clothes and makeup have not been provided by expensive designer brands but at the same time the characters are repetitiously involved in conspicuous consumption. They, for example, drink Chateau Cheval Blanc, order cheesecake through home delivery and book trips to exotic tourist resorts. With the help of these repetitive elements, the viewers are obliged to co-create an impression of global glamour and luxury lifestyle in their own minds, relying on their previous cultural knowledge of glamour as 'byproduct of consumption culture (…) manifested in the availability of products imported from abroad' (Goscilo & Strukov 2010: 2, 6).[12]

The overt gender stereotyping suggested in the series title creates an important 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss 1982) as the producers of *Stervochki* utilize the post-feminist stereotype as a starting point. The storyline and the fans' ideas for future episodes reveal a feminized form of Machiavellianism, that is, an imaginative way of manipulating others by using intimate (sexual) relations for personal gain. Moreover, I argue that 'stervoznost'' as one of the core themes of the series pinpoints the importance of popular culture. *Stervochki* thus shows how young people are socialized into their future roles as citizens of the Russian Federation working in a global context, that is, in how they constitute 'a self from overlapping, sometimes contradictory possibilities' and symbolic resources (Bloustien 2003: 250). Gerry Bloustien notes that in youth everyday life, the 'engagement with popular culture (…), is a complex dialectic activity, one that oscillates repeatedly between total engagement and a balancing, knowing distanciation' (2003: 34). Following this idea, I propose that the female hero of the series—*sterva*—is a rough approximation of what mainstream television drama in particular and popular imagery in general offer to post-Soviet cultural youth consumers today.

The amateur video series and especially the fans' demands for even more outrageous plotlines than they've previously seen speaks for Russian young internet users' willingness to challenge and extend the symbolic boundaries of the existing cultural reserve (Bloustien 2003: 35). The fan interaction on social media further shows that the symbolic boundaries of *Stervochki* are extended beyond gender stereotypes and into

areas that emphasize the online audiences', that is, prosumers', agency as related to global consumption and online video culture.

IMAGE 3. A banner advertising Stervochki's fourth season published on the Vkontakte page of the series. The text at the bottom says 'Night is the time of secrets'. Source: https://vk.com/stervochki_tv.

The amateur quality thereby invites the viewer to imagine and participate. This happens in various ways, and sometimes the fans wish to describe their viewer's experience by pointing to the lack of actual glamour in the series. A Twitter user, for example, comments: 'Today I am going to dive deep into the world of provincial glamour, filled with violence and fraud' (Twitter, 31 December 2013) while another commentator remarks: 'A chick walks along the streets of Shit-ville [Mukhosransk] in high heels to awesome music' (Twitter, 29 July 2013). These comments obviously emphasise the steep contrast which exists between the implied glamour (epitomized by the diamond-covered streets of the theme song) and the actual environment that appears in the series footage.

Thus the fans use the series to reflect on themselves, the reality of glamour consumption and community in their own lives. On Twitter and especially on the image-sharing platform Instagram, which are often hyperlinked, the members of the *Stervochki* fan community actively and creatively interact with the series producers and among themselves by posting written comments, photographs, video clips, fan art collages, all marked by hashtags. The online activity of the fans usually takes place while watching the series at home or waiting for another episode to appear. Consequently, the overall representation of the fan community can be characterised through an accentuated description of everyday life, which obtains meaning especially through visual representation of private spaces and activities. However, the series *Stervochki* is at the centre of this imaging and self-imaging: the series appears as the central visual element on television or, more likely, on the computer screen and the young viewers and their private spaces develop around it. Mobile technology makes this space flexibly available for media use, as the computer is located in the living room, in the kitchen, on the table, or in one's bedroom.

Media technology also makes the domestic everyday space a performative space. *Stervochki*'s fans use this space as a canvas on which they project mainly two kinds of self-images. Firstly, either fragmented or whole self-portraits (selfies) showing a cheerful, supportive and even affectionate attitude towards the series (thumbs up, for example). Secondly, images of everyday items—meals, drinks and branded goods—which are arranged in the style of still-life painting and which often allude to the consumption patterns of the characters in the series. All these photographs and comments together create a composite image in which affectionate everyday media use is combined with the private consumption of everyday food and drink and, more importantly, with consumer fantasies, brand consciousness and consumer trends that circulate across post-Soviet popular media, thus creating an overwhelming collage of contemporaneity.

These images of affectionate television/video watching merge with various quality evaluations. Quality is at once a central and complex category when it comes to amateur productions and the comments by *Stervochki*'s fans express a persisting effort to apply different verbal tools and techniques of evaluating the amateur quality of the beloved and community-constituting series. One of these techniques is irony which is created by using two opposite registers in one phrase, i.e., by combining a strongly negative expression with a superlative qualifier. For example, in the fans' comments, *Stervochki* is often called a 'wild series' [dikii serial] and 'ingenious crap' [genial'noe der'mo]. Another popular method of evaluating the series ironically is by using exaggerated, hyperbolic expressions, such as 'the coolest series of all humankind' [samyi krutoi serial chelovechestva]. These types of evaluations seem to appreciate the camp value of the series and they also express deeper insights. For instance, one viewer had used screengrabs of his/her mobile phone to share the following opinion:

> The series is full of different colours of emotions, overflow of passion, mystery and surprises. Each episode is like a new glimpse of fresh air. As

> people cannot live without water, food and oxygen, it is equally impossible to live without this cult series *Stervochki*!! The series simply does not have any flaws. The screenwriter has meticulously thought through every detail and the actors' work is mind-blowing. (Twitter, 4 February 2015)

The comment goes on to describe the feelings that arise upon watching the series, the things it has taught this particular viewer and how it can generally make life better. In the end, the commentator points out that thanks to the series s/he has developed 'a sense of beauty, style and taste that corresponds to elite life!' Although this appears ironic due to its hyperbolic use of different expressions, the statement also conveys a genuine feeling of exhilaration towards the series and its producers.

Consequently, the online community of *Stervochki* expresses both excitement and criticism of the series with the help of the ironic double-register. On the one hand, the viewers point out the most obvious thing about *Stervochki* which is its amateur quality and by so doing implicitly compare it to professionally produced drama on television and film. On the other, the viewers clearly identify with the producers' enthusiasm to make and distribute homemade videos and admire their courage to expose these videos to the uncensored criticism of the online audience. Consequently, instead of evaluating the technological and dramaturgical quality of the series, the online community evaluates *Stervochki* by measuring the degree to which they can identify with the producers' point of view, in other words how well the viewers and fans of the series, as ordinary school kids from the Russian provinces, can imagine themselves in the place of the amateur actors and screenwriters and self-trained users of digital technology. My analysis shows that the prosumption of mobile media is integrated seamlessly within the structures of the everyday life of *Stervochki* fans. Participation in the online sharing of comments and images enables the *Stervochki* fans a role of an informed specialist in the field of online amateur video culture.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented an analysis of cultural globalisation through the case of Russian online amateur videos. I have argued that the internet combines several traditional and new forms of media and therefore it is vitally important to take media convergence, multimodal communication and hyperlinked, multiplatform publication practices into consideration when examining a Russian perspective on cultural globalisation. Commercial television formats, licensed and administrated by big media conglomerates are one of the most significant technologies of globalisation, spreading cultural ideas and narratives to new audiences all over the world. International format television is an important cultural background for different types of youth amateur productions that now circulate on social networking sites in the form of DIY YouTube videos. In the age of digital communication, global popular culture is increasingly apt to reach new locations through peer communities, moving from one internet user to another. Based on these arguments, my chapter has shown how online amateur media gives a new form and meaning to ideas and stories originating in global popular and televisual culture in contemporary Russia.

The selected cases illuminate the role of online popular culture in cultural globalisation simultaneously revealing the new realities of cultural production in Russia today. The two cases reveal the technological, social and cultural aspects of online communication in the global era. They also indicate the tensions between Russian cultural self-perception and global feedback loops seen in the context of digital communication infrastructure and popular culture. Although very different from one another, my case studies represent different types of online phenomena that are both typical of the current digital age. The twerk case accounts for a sudden, fast-evolving and easily-forgotten online scandal which has reached a global audience, caused a public outcry and affected those who were directly involved in the performance and the making of the video. The second case involves a long-term multimedia project with an emphasis on production and strategic distribution to a niche online audience. Twerk dancing, which was originally adapted to youth performances

and videos from global television (esp. Miley Cyrus's VMA performance), is given new meanings through patriotic re-contextualisation whereas *Stervochki* and its fan base create 'a culture within culture', an online subculture strongly influenced by the patterns of international-format drama series. In other words, the twerk scandal is produced and reproduced through the marginalisation of global television and girls' popular culture while *Stervochki*'s popularity relies on prosumption of the global televisual culture and active negotiation between conflicting representations of femininity.

Consequently, the two cases showcase gender stereotyping in Russian media and culture; they also question youth and female agency. My analysis of the twerk scandal demonstrates the marginalization of global trends and their influence on Russian culture also easily results in pejorative attitudes to youth everyday culture and everyday use of the internet. Instead, twerk has been discursively re-framed within mainstream patriotic discourse, and thus young girls performing in the videos were singlehandedly perceived as behaving in an 'unpatriotic' manner. The media perception of the twerk videos thus confirms the gender polarization of Russian public discourse which now extends to the area of online social networks as well. Simultaneously, it encourages one to inquire about the role of young women in cultural globalisation outside media scandals.

Online participatory culture increases young internet users' opportunities to develop their media literacy in the context of global popular culture. My analysis of *Stervochki*, which here represents a less well-known video production, thus diversifies our understanding of online popular culture especially from the viewpoint of youth and female agency. In my analysis, I have emphasized how various materials on the series' VKontakte profile open up the production process and make it available for the participation of fans and viewers. This has an impact on *Stervochki*'s overall representation of gender as the young female actors who play stereotyped roles of *stervas* on the videos, actively take part in the writing, producing and promoting of the series. Due their status as the main stars of the series, the interaction between the fans and the female actors becomes one of the most crucial elements of *Stervochki*'s fan community. In other words, an online drama series that heavily draws on popular cultures' gender stereotypes provides young girls with agency as part of a creative online community. Through its female characters, the series also portrays *glamour* as an important everyday practice thus reflecting contemporary Russia as a society of consumers and a society striving to be included in the world economy of symbolic consumption of international brands and brand conscious taste.

In my analysis of both cases, I have highlighted the importance of an ongoing process of defining quality as one of the central markers of any cultural production. Various digital publications and platforms analysed in this chapter organize the distribution of information into accumulating, open-ended information streams. They enable a number of different frameworks of interpretation to combine and overlap in a more fundamental way than before the internet age. The larger questions that remain to be studied more closely include the following: Do these frameworks constitute a new 'grand narrative' of Russian cultural self-perception in the era of globalisation? Do the digital media confirm or break the division of a singular Russia into 'multiple Russias' which exist in parallel, disconnected realities? Digital media can be seen as offering a better access to some of these realities but what kind of tools do they offer to gain mutual understanding between them?

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[2] *Sex and the City* is an American TV series of international acclaim based on the book by Candace Bushnell. It ran for six seasons on HBO channel from 1998 until 2004. It describes friendship between four women living in Manhattan New York. The female protagonists are portrayed as professionally successful and sexually promiscuous, which makes the series one of the key postfeminist texts of the turn of the 21th century.

[3] The gender representation of *Stervochki* is analysed in more detail in Katila & Ratilainen 2016. On post-feminist discourse in Russian popular literature, see Salmenniemi & Adamson 2014. On postfeminism on Anglophone television see Gill 2007.

[4] [Vserosiiskaia gosudarstvennaia televzionnaia i radioveshchatel'naia kompaniia]

[5] The roots of twerking are in the global black culture. Elements of twerking can be found in several African traditional dances as well as in the bounce dance tradition of North American South, especially New Orleans and Atlanta (Gaunt 2015).

[6] I'm grateful to undergraduate students at Howard University Nia Blasingame, Maiya Hackett, Nia Jacobs and Erika Ladd for sharing their views on twerking and its role in the U.S. popular culture.

[7] Twerk appeared not only in small Russian provincial dance studios but also on Russian prime time television. At the time when the twerk scandal was at its peak (April-May 2015), the show Dance [Tantsy] just finished its first season on the national cable channel TNT. Dance belongs to the group of format-based reality talent shows which bring amateur and professional dancers from all over Russia to perform in front of a jury of celebrity-choreographers with the aim of winning the grand prix of 53,600 $ (three million roubles). The show premiered in August 2014 and in September 2016 it was already in its third season. The show targets young individuals and its entertaining format is open to the sexiest trends in contemporary dance. For example, the show's opening theme includes short excerpts of twerk and pole dance amongst other dance styles that the audience may expect to see over the course of the season.

[8] Since Stalin's time Palaces of Culture have housed a range of cultural activities from theatre to folk concerts to dance performances to literary clubs. Usually built in the 'imperskii' style of the Stalin era and occupying a central location, they represented the Soviet mass culture and aimed at 'stabilising the ideological order' thorough enlightened leisure (Habeck 2011: 5). To date, local Palaces of Culture remain important venues for concerts and performances in both small towns and larger cities (Donahoe & Habeck 2011).

[9] [sozdaetsia takoe oshchushchenie dozvolennosti, vrodi by eto tak i dolzhno byt']

[10] It is likely that *Stervochki*'s viewership is on the level of popular tv serials broadcast on national channels. In early 2000s, the ratings of the most popular tv series, such as *Moia prekrasnia niania*, *Ne rodis' krasivoi* and *Brigada* were as high as in the 30% (Prokhorova 2011). In today's changed media environment, the most popular television programs receive significantly lower ratings.

[11] Po dorozhke iz almaza/ khodiat devushki blondinki/ vo volosakh sverkaiut strazy/ kak s oblozhki, kak s kartinki/ (…) znaiut, stali vse glamurnymi.

[12] For a more detailed analysis of *Stervochki*'s content and especially the role of glamour in it, see Katila & Ratilainen 2016.