Socio-Communicative Space of Formation of Modern Russian Youth’s Sexual Culture

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Abstract. The article examines and reconstructs the socio-communicative space of the formation of sexual attitudes and behavior patterns of modern Russian youth. The empirical bases of the paper are results of the focused interviews with experts (N=10) in the field of sexuality and sexual development, in-depth interviews with representatives of Russian youth (N=21), and online focus groups (N=6). The sexual culture and behavior of Russian youth is formed under the influence of many factors (individual experience, primary and secondary agents of socialization), as well as through a variety of socio-cultural mechanisms (self-development, institutionalized forms of education). The Internet and new media create specific socio-communicative space for the formation of the sexual culture of society, especially modern youth. It is both one of the main information and communication interactive knowledge resources on sexual life, as well as space for experimenting, romantic practices.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Russian youth belongs to a generation whose values and behaviors were formed in the specific economic, political and socio-cultural conditions of the late 20th century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Serious institutional and cultural transformations in various spheres of life (cultural globalization, reorganization of the country's politics and economy, etc.) contributed to the differentiation of life styles of the population, the emergence and spread of new patterns of everyday interactions, including in intimate relationships. Young people, as noted by many researchers, rely on other patterns and values, respectively, reproduces new patterns of behavior in erotic and romantic relationships. Due to the specifics of the political and economic, social and cultural context of the formation of various generations and social groups, they have their own differences, contradictions, conflict situations, challenges and tasks of sexual evolution. Constantly, researchers noted the “delay” in the development of behavioral and discursive changes in Russia over time in comparison with most Western countries [1]. Particular attention in the study of the conditions and factors in the formation of the sexual culture of modern Russian youth should be given to social agents, namely socio-communicative resources, the specifics of the information environment of sexual education and youth development.

The development of information technology and the information society has facilitated the transfer of sexual and sexual relations to the virtual space, which has led to the emergence of both new opportunities (cybersex, dating sites) and new dangers and risks [2, 3]. New, developing means of communication are of key importance for the formation of the sexual culture of youth, as an information resource, including interactive ones (social networks, media), and as a space for building sexual relations, maintaining intimate relationships in an era of high mobility, and gaining personal experience. The purpose of the article is to consider and reconstruct the socio-communicative space of the formation of sexual attitudes and behavior patterns of modern Russian youth, which involves the identification of information and communication sources, social agents of erotic and emotional socialization and education, as well as determining the role of modern information technologies, especially the Internet, in this process.

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2. Methods

The article is based on the results obtained in the survey conducted by the author: expert focused interviews with Russian and foreign scientists and professionals involved in the study of the sexuality of modern youth (N=10); in-depth interviews with representatives of Russian student youth in St. Petersburg; the online survey with Russian youth on popular social networks (online focus groups N=6). The sampling unit is a youth stratum, which has a relatively small intra-group dispersion (in terms of life experience, personal material well-being, education, nature of activity). Using an in-depth interview method, 21 informants, 11 boys and 10 girls, aged 18 to 25 years old, students from various universities of St. Petersburg, levels of educational programs (bachelors, undergraduates, specialists) and specialties were interviewed. The sample was constructed using the “snowball” method. The analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted with the use of Atlas.ti program software for working with qualitative data. The discourse analysis method was used to interpret the data.

3. Results

One of the central issues remains the question of the sources of the formation of knowledge and skills, ideas and patterns of behavior in the field of sexual and erotic, emotional relations. Teenagers and young people name the following sources: media, print art and specialized materials, information on the Internet, which can be obtained not only in the form of articles and notes, but through communication on social networks and forums. Their significance is different for modern youth [4]. The most important is communication about sexual and sexual life with the inner circle, family members. Personal experience is recognized as indispensable, but the influence of specialists (teachers, medical workers) is very limited. The former often fail to cope with educational tasks, while the latter mainly focus on biological sex issues. It should be noted that the structure of sources in the modern generation has changed. It should also be noted that the young generation aged 18-24 is much more active in using the Internet to search for information of interest.

Informants, as a rule, are representatives of age cohorts from 18 to 25 years old, noted that the family (nuclear family) as the primary agent of socialization did not fulfill the function of targeted sexual socialization. Respondents did not notice cases of initiative on the part of parents to deeply, comprehensively discuss issues of sexuality during their adulthood (childhood, adolescence). This is largely due to those perceptions and the context in which their own “parental” sexual culture developed (the period of Soviet power, the late Soviet period), in which the idea that gender, eroticism is private, their public discussions, especially with children, are taboo or something indecent, unacceptable. Informants who had experience in contacting a mother or a father with questions about sexual life did not always find a response.

The Internet is virtually indispensable and the only (in addition to interpersonal communication with friends, acquaintances) means of obtaining knowledge and information. Its attractiveness is also enhanced by the possibility of a more or less anonymous public expression of interest and discussion of this topic. In fact, the development of sexual culture in this context involves the knowledge of technological aspects enshrined in society schemes for attracting attention and building romantic and sexual relations with the opposite sex.

In addition to specialized literature (mainly sexology or popular science), to learn about the physiological aspect of sexual relations, primarily the techniques of sex, young people look to pornographic materials (especially video materials). This motive is typical of boys and girls, but girls first turned to pornography for this purpose, usually at a later age. For educational purposes, pornography is estimated in more than half of cases as an inefficient information resource. According to informants, pornography demonstrates only a schematic process of sexual contact aimed at arousing its consumer,
therefore it is impossible to understand and learn the erotic (aesthetic), sensual, intimate and bodily side of sexual relations that precede, as well as find expression, in the process of sexual contact. Erotic cinema, as well as mass entertainment films about sex (mainly foreign-made), to a greater degree, as young people believe, are useful for exploring this topic, developing their own sexuality.

Institutionalized forms of sexual education (lessons in schools, university courses, consultations of medical workers, social and educational projects of non-profit and youth organizations) during the training of informants in secondary and higher education institutions were either short-term and addressed only on issues of sex differences, reproduction, health and contraception, or completely absent. In interviews with students and online focus groups, they repeatedly noted the importance of measures aimed at the formation of knowledge not only (and sometimes not so much) about sexual and reproductive behavior, but also on the development of ideas about the body of a person, on the discussion of physical, spiritual, intellectual intimacy.

Thus, the sexual culture and behavior of Russian youth is formed under the influence of many factors (individual experience, primary and secondary agents of socialization), as well as through a variety of sociocultural mechanisms (self-development, institutionalized forms of education, carnivalization, social communication and interaction). According to our study, young people most actively use the cultural and informational (special literature, media, films, social networks) and social (acquaintances, friends, peers, sexual partners) resources for the development of their sexuality. At the same time, young people feel the need to create an accessible and adequate expert system of sexual education.

Experts in the interviews named among the main agents and mechanisms of the formation of the sexual culture of youth the following:

- traditional media
- commercial advertising, social, pharmacological advertising
- experts, such as psychotherapists and sexologists, medical institutions
- educational institutions, programs
- sexual education of youth
- Internet
- social media
- mechanism of socialization and resocialization
- pornography
- church, religious norms
- family
- friends

The media plays an important role in shaping the sexual culture of youth. But studying the influence of the media on various social groups of young people is rather difficult. Some experts note the more significant influence of the media on girls than on boys, especially in the field of standards of bodily attractiveness, sexuality, this is largely due to the prevailing of Russian gender and sexual culture. An important source of knowledge and ideas about sexuality in the opinion of experts in the modern information world is not only the Internet, where you can get acquainted with a variety of materials on the issue of sexual relations, but in particular social media (social networks, blogs, LiveJournal, etc.), where, apparently, a new reference group may arise that affects sexual behavior, strategies and attitudes, and youth knowledge. Pornography, widely available on the Internet, is considered by some experts as an auxiliary material that extends the physiological and technical boundaries of sexual relations, while performing the function of a sexual stimulant. According to experts, more research is needed on the impact of pornography on the formation of the sexual culture of youth, relationship models and sexual scripts.
The lack of knowledge on sexual matters, in particular contraceptive, is compensated by social and pharmacological advertising. Sexologists, psychotherapists, according to a number of experts, can also take part in the formation of a system of sexual values, the adjustment of sexual behavior in order to successfully integrate into society. However, it seems that their role is very limited, because in their opinion, the flow of young people coming in on sexual matters is not so great. More often, questions of sexuality come up during discussions of other aspects of life. The above lists make you think about the development of proper level of implementation of such channels of information and communication, the content of knowledge and ideas that they transmit, contributing to the formation of sexual culture of youth.

The content of sexuality education remains controversial. According to the polls and online focus groups, the most demanded questions, areas in the field of sexual education among young people are: “the moral side of early sexual relations”, “means and methods of preventing sexually transmitted deseases”, and “contraception”. However, these surveys are very limited in answer options. Most likely, it was built not on the basis of, not based on real wishes and needs expressed by young people and adolescents themselves, but on the basis of a more traditional view adopted by experts (adults) on the necessary and existing content of sex education courses. In our interviews and some other studies [5], young people talk about a lack of information, knowledge about the methods and specifics of building relationships with a partner (“psychology of relationships between the sexes”), as well as about sexual techniques and skills of sexual intercourse (how to get and give pleasure), sexual anatomy. This information should also be the subject of discussion in sex education classes, although it is difficult to discuss the question of who should implement it—parents, school, special institutions.

Experts in our interviews noted the importance of sexual education, enlightenment of the population as a whole, and especially youth. Institutionalized sexual education of youth will contribute to solving various social problems in society: from the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, sexual health problems of men and women, demographics. Sexual freedom also has its negative aspects—a variety of risks that can be dealt with only by being well informed. Sexual socialization occurs most actively in the period of youth, however, sociocultural, political and economic transformations in society, changes in life styles and statuses, and the social environment of an individual can also affect his/her sexual resocialization. A striking example is the changes of the last 30 years, which not only formed the standards and values of the young generation that are different from the Soviet era, but also changed the sexual strategies and attitudes of people who entered into adulthood in this time. The formation of various attitudes and ideas is largely relying on the resources provided by the sociocultural environment for various groups of young people. The task of sex education is understood quite widely: it is not only knowledge, awareness of the various aspects of sexual life (contraception, reproductions, etc.), but also the assimilation of various patterns of sexual behavior, relationships that affect not only the physiological side of the issue—sexual scripts. Sexual education of youth is not completely institutionalized in Russian society, which is associated by experts as the prevalence of conservative ideology in the political and legal discourse and the course on sexuality, supported and promoted by the Orthodox Church. The development of the sexual culture of domestic youth is associated, according to the expert, with overcoming the “sexual infantilism of young people”, as well as the development of the general spiritual culture of the population. Thus, sexual education can include quite a variety of points: from acquiring technical skills of sexual intercourse, knowledge of the psychological, physiological aspects of sexuality to mastering models, patterns of sexual behavior, attitudes and values. The lack of a sexual education system for youth is compensated by various reference groups (friends, social media, media) participation in the formation of the sexual culture of young people. In general, the problem of youth’s sexual education, in our opinion, is possible to solve by developing a rational, reflective approach to one’s own sexual life, such aspects as psycho-emotional closeness, intimacy, eroticism, and physicality. The most debatable issue in the
practice of introducing, institutionalizing sexual education remains the need to correlate sexual values with moral, religious and other values and norms of society, its various social groups, so that there are no conflicts. Experts talk with caution about the acceptable methods and forms of presenting such sensitive information.

4. Conclusion

Mass media and the Internet are an important socio-communicative space, which is one of the crucial importance for the formation of the sexual culture of society, especially modern youth. In addition to the traditional function of generating and transmitting patterns, models and norms of sexual behavior, information and knowledge regarding the sphere of intimacy, they demonstrate the diversity of parties and styles of sexual life, the media and the internet as the main communication channels are involved in the formation of the sexual agenda of society and public opinion. However, many modern media, especially the Internet, due to its technological capabilities, giving the “user” the opportunity for interactive participation, make the process of forming a sexual culture more independent and reflective for young people and other social groups.

Current trends and differences in attitudes and values towards sex, sexuality and gender demonstrate the diversity of types of sexual culture and youth’s sexual scripts at present. However, at the same time, we can say that a historically specific regime of types of sexual culture of the population, including youth, is forming, (re)configuring. On the whole, the contemporary culture of Russian youth is pro-sexual and the liberal trend is quite strong in it.

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