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Eco-activism in social networks and consumption practices of megalopolises' residents

KEYWORDS

eco-activism;
social networks;
consumption practices;
sustainable development;
conscious consumption;
post-industrial society;
post-materialistic values

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The increasing role of ecology in citizens' daily occurrence is becoming a factor in changing consumer behavior. More and more people are interested in the eco-agenda, added to thematic communities in social networks, and guided by the self-restraint principles.

Materials and Methods. Mixed data collection paradigm applied during the study. It includes analysis of both primary and secondary information. Primary information was collected using three methods: content analysis, online survey (quantitative strategy), and semi-formal interview (qualitative strategy). We applied both mathematical data processing and frame analysis of statements, as well as analysis of materials in the public domain. Residents of Russian megalopolises have become key objects; for collecting primary information – Ekaterinburg, for secondary information – Moscow and St. Petersburg, residents of Russia.

Research results and discussion. Social networks with specific forms of user interaction have a mobilizing ability. Signing petitions, and mass cleaning of the surrounding area is not a rare phenomenon. The study analyzes the frames of active, moderate, and passive users of social networks. There is a difference in the level of inclusion of environmental practices in daily consumption for each of them. High mobility from passive users' group to the moderate group was revealed. This is reflected in consumer practices such as refusing to buy, from plastic bags to personal cars.

Conclusions. The study demonstrated the correlation between changing consumer values and their interest in focusing on green practices.

Novgorodtseva, A. N., & Piankova M. P. (2020). Eco-activism in social networks and consumption practices of megalopolises' residents. *Economic consultant*, 31 (3), 81–92. doi: 10.46224/ecoc.2020.3.5

FOR CITATION

INTRODUCTION

Due to the growing publications and news feeds full of local environmental problems and climate changes, the concept of "ecological boomerang" is becoming more and more relevant [1]. According to U. Beck, all this is the result of centuries-old human expansion into the biosphere and the natural world around him. Nobel prize laureate Yuan Tseh Lee, opening the XVII Congress of the International Sociological Association in 2010, noted: if population growth and the amount of energy consumed per capita continues at the same rate, the resources available on the planet will soon simply not be able to cover the growing needs of the Earth's population [2]. Today more companies are forced to invest more and more efforts and resources to restore the environment.

The focus of international organizations on solving environmental problems and attempts to take into account the current needs of states and corporations is obvious. This solution was the concept of sustainable development. Activities within the framework of the latter are formulated in the UN Declaration on "Sustainable Development Goals from 2015 to 2030" [3]. It includes 17 formulated goals, combining 3 key fields of interaction within society: economic, social, and ecological. Within the framework of sustainable development, measures are being implemented aimed at optimal use of limited resources and the use of eco-friendly – natural, energy, and material-saving technologies [4]. The preservation of the stability of social and cultural systems and ensuring the integrity of biological and physical natural systems are also emphasized. Following the general concept, the concept of sustainability is transferred to narrower industry concepts (such as, for example, sustainable fashion, etc.). Nature is socialized, man is dependent on it, and the formation of ecological consciousness and the motivation of eco-activism is a necessary condition for its further sustainable development.

Thus, on the one hand, this problem can be considered at the level of production management ("from above"). But due to the slow pace of changes in production technology, the changes are not obvious, especially for ordinary people, the growing dissatisfaction with the lack of ways and results of reducing the burden on the environment, on the other hand, the awareness and activity of individuals or communities increases ("from below»). New forms of environmental activity are being formed, including in the form of spontaneous cleaning of territories and at the level of conscious or controlled consumption.

At the same time, from the point of view of forming and developing public opinion, it is important to note that the increase in production volumes, the job creation and the struggle for consumer markets has also led to an increase in education and material well-being of citizens. This, in turn, was the impetus for rethinking the concept of "ecological lifestyle". We can talk about its new configuration, the variety of stylistic repertoire of actors, as well as their new form of inclusion in the information field of the ecological agenda with various practices of environmental activism. Internet interaction in social networks is becoming such a new field, creating the opportunity for the inclusion of a large number of resources, including the users'

attention and their involvement in eco-activism. User engagement becomes a key resource of the post-information society.

At the turn of the 1980s, W. Catton and R. Dunlap outlined the principles of the "New ecological paradigm", which states that nature is a socially significant force [5]. O. N. Yanitsky notes that "ecological culture is not exotic, but an ethical system, that opposes the ethics of consumer society" [6]. Thus, social, and individual activities within the framework of the new ecological culture should be reproduced at the level of institutions, including market institutions. The necessary structural elements are government structures, business communities (shops, brands), non-governmental organizations, mass media, and many others.

Due to the R. Inglehart's concept and the hypothesis of "objective problems and subjective values" [7], it is obvious that the desire to take responsibility for the environment by individual citizens is associated with two different factors: external and internal. A. E. Geger and S. A. Geger also write about this, pointing out that "first of all, residents of regions where there are objective environmental problems, as well as residents of megalopolises, carriers of post-materialistic values, are included in eco-active activity" [8].

MATERIALS AND RESEARCH METHODS

A mixed data collection paradigm was applied during the study, which includes analysis of both primary and secondary information. Primary information was collected using three methods: content analysis, online survey (quantitative strategy), and semi-formal interview (qualitative strategy). The content analysis of social networks "Vkontakte" and "Instagram" was carried out in the context of the analysis of existing communities actively included in the eco-agenda, study of participants' accounts. Then an online survey was conducted. The sample consisted of 204 respondents – residents of Ekaterinburg at the age of 16–35, selected on the basis of the criterion for using the social network "Instagram" at least once a week, the presence of eco-content in the feed. The "snowball" method was used as the selection method. There were also 22 (11 girls and 11 boys) semi-formal interviews with users, who have different experiences of involvement in the eco-agenda.

The study was conducted from March 24 to April 30, 2020. The quantitative data array was processed using the "Vortex" program, and the interview database was processed using the "Nvivo" program and frame analysis.

An appeal was made to the secondary data of VCIOM, analytical articles, and expert opinion that are in the public domain.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS

The phenomenon of eco-activism is multi-layered and consists of a complex of environmental values, decision-making methods, and activities of individual and collective actors in accordance with ethical and legal norms.

P. O. Ermolaeva notes the fine line between pro-environmental behavior and environmental activism. Eco-activism in the researcher's understanding is a more "concentrated" manifestation of environmental behavior. Environmental activism is not so much a preventive, individual practices, but a conscious effort (activity) to produce public initiative acts. The purpose of which is to influence social and environmental policy in the region [9]. N. N. Sedova, analyzing the phenomenon of civil activism, identifies groups of "activists", "sympathizers", "alienated". This division is based on the criteria of inclusion in active political and non-political social practices, as well as on the readiness to support social movements [10]. There are also two conditional forms of participation: "active", involving participation in actions, dissemination of information, struggle for solving problems, and "parade", involving "quiet" irregular participation, such as signing petitions and participating in votes. There is also a broader approach to defining the core of activism, taking into account the scale and nature of the impact of digital communications on civil and political activism. P. Norris characterizes the role of online activism in the theory of the virtuous circle. It is noted that the use of mass media will contribute to the activation of those involved, rather than to the mobilization of new participants in the political process [11]. According to experts, the institutionalization of eco-activism in Russia is implemented in the environmental protection activities of public organizations, which is mainly carried out in the form of environmental protest [12].

Eco-activism is realized in various types of social activity: political, economic, cognitive, etc. Within the latter, social knowledge is produced, but the process of its production is more a practice than a theorization, and its result is not so much the "facts" of an objective dimension, but the result of agreements and consensus [13]. It is also worth taking into account the variety of implemented forms and practices, as well as the degree of entrenchment of activism in the everyday life of its participants. The uniform intensity of practices, as well as the breadth of dissemination, indicate the formation of stable groups that consistently support activity, having a predictable nature of actions. In turn, the localization of practices in certain areas and in certain social groups indicates the random, unstable nature of activism, its unpredictability.

Let us consider examples of practices. Old waste recycling practices are returning and new ones are emerging (for example, in Yekaterinburg, there are monthly separate waste collection campaigns "New Acropolis", "Clean Yekaterinburg", waste collection stations "Mega shopping center" are being created, "ecotaxi" is functioning, etc.) and reuse of things, extending their lifespan (flea markets, swaps, garage sales, charity shops, second-hand stores and rag fairs). These practices, entrenched in environmental consciousness, demonstrate transition from activism to the routine of environmental behavior, making it part of the lifestyle and environmental culture.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the annual international research "We are social", as of January 2020, the Internet penetration rate in Russia is 81% of the population – 118 million people have access to it. At the same time, the domestic audience of social networks is 48% – that is, 70 million people. According to statistics, on average, a Russian user spends 6 hours 38 minutes on the Internet daily. This is almost 100 days a year per person and 40% of the waking time [14]. The Internet has so permeated our daily practices that "we almost don't think about the Internet – we rather think with the Internet" [15].

The user mobilization property is one of the key properties of Internet interaction. J. Earl and K. Kimport [16] describe the mobilizing role of the Internet in the context of three situations. The first situation: The Internet provides great opportunities for media coverage of protest activities and interaction with traditional media. The second situation: it is easier to organize a social movement online, because the dissemination of practices and information about how to act is more effective. The third situation: using online media, you can minimize the role of traditional media, which means it is easier to contact a wide audience directly, reducing the number of intermediaries.

I. A. Bronnikov emphasizes the mobilization role of the Internet in the manifestation of eco-activism, identifying eight categories of Internet initiatives [17]:

1. "Complaints" services, appeals to the authorities on pressing problems (rosyama.ru, quels.ru, gosuslugi.ru, etc).
2. Submitting online petitions (change.org, activism.com). Online petitions are noted as practices with controversial results, but they ensure the gradual involvement of citizens in communication on socially significant issues. Calls for signing online petitions are also common within online environmental movements, for example, they are often used at "Greenpeace" sites.
3. Fundraising services (kickstarter.com, indiegogo.com, boomerang.dk). They involve a circle of people who are not directly participating in social movements, but who want to contribute to solving problems.
4. Crowdsourcing services (online maps for separate waste collection – recyclemap.ru, ecofront.ru – a map created to combat littering and unauthorized landfills).
5. Services for coordination of civil activities, resource mobilization (lizaalert.org – people search service, <https://nasiliu.net> – crisis center for violence victims, recovers.org – the help center for disasters victims, etc.).
6. Discussion services are platforms for gathering opinions on certain issues. Since 2013, the Internet resource "Russian Public Initiative" has been launched. Such Internet platforms are increasingly used in the practice of state and municipal administration.
7. Citizen journalism or user generated content (URG). Information and communication systems of a semi-professional and amateur character within the Internet interaction [18].

8. Electronic referendum platforms. The implementation of Internet technologies in the system of electronic referendums solves the following tasks: involvement of the general public (especially young people aged 18–24) to the discussed problems; reducing the cost of organizing and conducting events; prompt feedback; legitimization of power decisions.

In Russia, an illustrative example is the experience of the Moscow Government, which in 2015 managed to attract more than 1 million residents of the capital to participate in solving urban problems using the "Active citizen" app (ag.mos.ru). 580 votes on city initiatives were held in the app: selection of places for planting green spaces, measures to improve the work of healthcare institutions, launch of new urban transport routes, etc. 250 decisions of the city authorities were made based on the Moscow citizens' opinion [19].

Let us consider the features of online interaction in social networks.

In the social network Vkontakte we can find three main formats of communities. First, communities of general environmental issues. These communities can highlight the eco-agenda in the following ways: as a demonstration of natural resources, landscape features, rare species of animals to news on the eco-agenda. Issues of ecological spirituality and creation of new ecological ideologies are covered. Ekaterinburg's social network communities often do not have close network connections with other environmental organizations and very few international connections. Because they are mostly apolitical, their relations with the authorities are neutral or distant. At the same time, commercial projects are possible on these platforms (for example, advertising campaigns, etc.). The largest coverage is represented in the group "Ecology of Russia" – 421 871 community members, the main array of such communities lies in the range 10 000 – 20 000 participants.

Second, communities of environmental organizations and movements. The specificity of these communities is their relative institutionalization and the possibility of access to international environmental issues (climate change, biodiversity, sustainable development). There is a high probability that these organizations will be opponents or critics of local and regional authorities who oppose the existing state environmental policy. Their leaders are often naturalists and other scientists. The most noticeable among such organizations is "Greenpeace of Russia", community coverage in "Vkontakte" – 164 214 participants. The strategy of this organization's presence in Internet interaction is a full-fledged media with many projects, presence on all platforms, and daily posting of news and articles. A slightly smaller player is the "Separate collection" movement, specializing in the topic of separate waste collection – 75 771 participants. However, the majority of such communities have up to 10 000 members.

Third, regional communities concerned about the state of the environment. As a rule, these are initiative groups, quite informal, without an office and paid staff. Activists tend to focus on issues of local concern, such as cleanliness and safety of recreational areas, environmental awareness of citizens. It is based on local resources for the implementation of its activities. Although some groups sometimes receive small grants, they generally try to exist without financial resources, surviving on the enthusiasm and volunteerism of their members or through local donations. Obviously, the coverage of regional (local) communities has some limits in

the form of a general population of the locality whose interests it represents. In Ekaterinburg, all communities are limited to participation of up to 10 000 people.

In the social network Instagram, there are other forms of online interaction: accounts of certain bloggers; resources on environmental education; stores, offering environmental products.

Bloggers provide expert opinion on the current situation. The account name may include an eco-marker that identifies the profile orientation. As a rule, accounts dedicated to the eco-agenda have markers of belonging to eco-activism. This can be the name of the profile, a description of the activity in the profile header, or the presence of certain rubrics with hashtags (for example, # ecolara). The coverage of these profiles can vary greatly, often also depending on the blogger's experience (easyeco.tips – 602 000, tashatale – 115 000, yuliakurkuma – 10 000).

Profile accounts take the position of social movements and organizations, but profile magazines on eco-topics are also possible. News services and media covering the values of an ecological lifestyle, as well as problems related to the situation in the country and the world act here as broad-topic accounts. The coverage of these accounts can also be high in the sphere of global media projects, in addition to "Instagram", actively broadcast on TV (natgeo – 137 000 000, bbsrussian – 260 000, unicef – 5 500 000). Of the "partisan" resources, the projects with the largest coverage are: ecogolik – 82,400,000, theblueprint.ru – 50 100 000, villagemsk – 95 900. The next level is the level of regional initiatives and projects (zws_school – "zero waste" school – 4 747, biozavrproject – eco-taxi in Ekaterinburg – 4 734, vesh.dobra – clothing recycling project in Chelyabinsk – 2 083).

Accounts of stores with mass-market goods are highlighted, the concept of which is an eco-friendly lifestyle, sustainable development and specialized stores of eco-goods, natural cosmetics, and farm products. As a content strategy, such stores often choose educational activities (form the need for goods), acting as magazines about an eco-friendly lifestyle with tips and informational posts. General stores: nike – 112 000 000, hm – 35 200 000, cocacola – 2 700 000. Profile stores: neoplastic – 44 800, noplasticitsfantastic – 38 800, priroda_shop – 11 700.

Such a broad media representation of environmental issues also affects the conscious search for information by citizens. There are three main groups of citizens: active, moderate, and passive.

The position of an active participant in eco-activism can be declared as "interested and acting". The interest focuses on the themes of globality and awareness that we have mentioned, but it may specialize in specific niches (for example, sustainable fashion, veganism, etc.).

The broadcast of values, knowledge and lifestyle of an activist involves vigorous activity, for example, handing over clothes for recycling, opening your own second-hand store, speaking at events as a speaker on creating a conscious wardrobe, introducing eco-habits in everyday life, participating in promotions, etc. This unity of online and offline activity ensures the harmonious development of all aspects of the activist's activity, as well as provides him with

material for publications and experience to confirm the expert status. The activist "programs" his networks: he creates a network of rubrics to construct the meanings of his blog, and also generates micro-frames and mobilization frames aimed at strengthening engagement within the Internet interaction. The individual's identity merges with the identity of an activist and an expert (this can be seen by the activist's markers – usually signatures in social networks), becomes an important aspect of life and permeates all spheres of activist's interaction.

Figure 1 Semantic map of a moderately involved informant in eco-activism

The position of a moderately involved user in eco-activism can be declared as "interested and trying to implement some practices" (the semantic map of the moderately involved is shown in fig. 1). Interest continues to focus on mentioned themes of globality and awareness, but it can spread and flow from one to the other. Moderately involved in eco-activism users do not form the identities of the eco-movement – they are at a stage when the eco-agenda is included in an extensive list of interests. This, on the one hand, allows them not to focus on narrow issues, and, on the other, to be receptive to new ideas.

The position of a passively involved user in eco-activism can be declared as "interested, but not reflexed" (the semantic map of the passively involved is shown in fig. 2). At this stage, the user can already share many values and practices of activism (philosophy of balance, minimalism, consumption reduction, resource saving practices), but do not reflect their belonging to the movement and do not mark themselves as part of it. "Entry points" to passive

engagement can be broad themes of eco-activism, such as conscious consumption and sustainable development. The emergence of this direction is associated with a sharp increase in the social base of environmental activism in recent years.

There is a shift in emphasis from ideology and a sense of duty ("you must save the planet") to rational choice and a sense of self-care "you deserve it", "any contribution is important". The construction of the "any contribution is important" frame, as well as the confirmation of the rationality of choosing an eco-friendly lifestyle, makes it possible to recruit a mass of passively involved people, who share the values of the movement and gradually move towards more intensive engagement strategies.

Figure 2 Semantic map of a passively involved informant in eco-activism

According to the results of the survey conducted among residents of the Russian megalopolis Ekaterinburg, it is obvious that the topic of conscious consumption (76%) is primarily concerned (fig. 3) among other environmental problems

The evidence for changing values and influencing consumer behavior is numerous. Research shows a reduction in purchases of plastic bags. According to VCIOM data, 27% of Russians repeatedly use plastic bags, without buying new ones, to protect nature, while 85% are ready

to completely refuse to buy plastic bags (data from 05.06.2019) [20]. The purchase of personal vehicles is reduced. Thus, according to the results of the VCIOM research (August 18, 2020), the share of people who believe that in order to combat climate change, everyone needs to significantly reduce the consumption of various resources (for example, fly less by plane, abandon plastic and personal vehicles, not eat meat and dairy products and the like) was 19% in Russia, and 23% in Moscow and St. Petersburg [21]. It is obvious that this topic is more relevant for residents of megalopolises and they are ready to change their consumer practices towards their restrictions.

Figure 3 Topics of interest in the field of ecology

CONCLUSIONS

Active information influence through social networks forms the concept of "eco-guilt" or "eco-shame" [22] among the population of megalopolises, which is expressed in the desire to control consumption practices. Surveys conducted by VCIOM and other public opinion research centers show that more and more Russians are concerned about the environmental situation in the country, region, and place of permanent residence. And the practices of changing consumption are also obvious, in favor of models of "simple life", "downshifting", "voluntary simplicity" [23], etc.

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Accepted: Jun 27, 2020 | Published: Sep 1, 2020

Available: <https://statecounsellor.wordpress.com/032020-2/>