

## DEVIANT SUBCULTURAL ACTIVITY OF THE YOUTH: FROM STREET GROUPINGS TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

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**Abstract:** The conducted study is devoted to the development of youth subcultural activity in Russia. Based on a secondary analysis of the materials of previous studies, as well as their own empirical data, the features of the development of deviant subcultures have been revealed starting from the mid-1980s up to the present time on the example of one of the regions of Russia - the Republic of Tatarstan. The study used a quantitative and qualitative methodology for sociological research - a mass survey of the youth of the Republic of Tatarstan (N=800 people), focus groups with active Internet users, and the analysis of social networks. Interpretation of the obtained results made it possible to formulate a number of conclusions that indicate that the traditional forms of youth subcultures in the information society are transformed into solidarity, existing in a greater degree in virtual rather than real space. At the same time, virtual communities, just like real subcultures in their day, can have a pronounced deviant and delinquent character and harm not only the individual, but also the health and even the lives of young members of these communities.

**Keywords:** Subculture, post-subculture, youth, generation, generation conflict, virtual community, postmodernism, information society

### 1 Introduction

Youth subcultures, since the mid-twenties, have been considered by researchers, representatives of the public, as one of the factors of generation conflict, therefore the analysis of the activity of youth subcultures in Tatarstan, their role in society, the social consequences of functioning and the impact on adolescents and young people have become the object of our study.

When we talk about such a phenomenon as a youth subculture, then, as a rule, the image of teenagers and youth, carelessly or deliberately defiantly dressed, unkempt, staggering in the doorways or entrances loudly singing and playing guitars, drinking alcohol, smoking and strongly cursing, grazing passers-by, or wandering unremittingly down the street. And yet, in addition to an unattractive appearance, they have something special, which should be better understood. Over the past half century, the world of youth subcultures has captured about a thousand different phenomena and trends, including hippies, punks, metalheads, rappers, anarchists, football fans, gangsters, skinheads, skaters, traceurs, emo-kids and many others. In Russia, in addition, there were own street youth subcultures, virtually unparalleled in the world. First and foremost, we are talking about street groups called "gopnik", which were openly deviant and even delinquent in nature and covered a significant proportion of young people from the mid-1980s until the late 1990s. Moreover, the Republic of Tatarstan became one of the regions of Russia, where this phenomenon had the greatest degree of spread and even received the nominal name "Kazan phenomenon" (according to the name of the capital of the republic - Kazan).

In this regard, tracing the dynamics of the development of deviant subcultural activity of Russian youth (on the example of the Republic of Tatarstan) over the past two decades appears to be interesting.

### 2 Methods

The study of the specifics of youth subcultures in sociology was actively developing in the 60s-70s of the XX century within the framework of the subcultural approach, which actually acted as an alternative to the structural and functional approach in the analysis of youth. From the point of view of the adherents of this approach, the main error of the structural functionalists was that the young people were treated as a homogeneous mass that did not have class dimensions; it assumed the same life and problems experienced by youth.

Representatives of the subcultural approach drew attention to the deviant behavior of various youth groups; they proceeded from the proposition that class affiliation plays a key role in the socialization of the younger generation, being associated with social stratification and the degree of access to material goods (Maksimova, 2002).

A. Cohen revealed the compensatory function of the adolescent group in relation to the social origin of the students: the working class teenagers were included in the "anti-school" groups - criminal subcultures, in order to develop alternative forms of self-affirmation. Adolescents from the middle class were more often united in "pro-school" - law-abiding groups. This behavior is caused by the inequality of the life chances of the descendants of the working class and the middle class, according to Cohen (Cohen A., 1955).

P. Willmot (1971) analyzed the styles of leisure activity available to young people of different social strata of society, and came to the conclusion that they reflect the contradictions and disagreements of class society.

Ph. Cohen (1972) interpreted various youth styles as "group adaptation", a compromise between two opposite needs: the need to reproduce and express autonomy from parents and the need to maintain a parental way of life. According to Ph. Cohen, the "hidden function" of youth subcultures is the expression and resolution, albeit "on a magical level", of contradictions that persist in a latent form in the parent culture.

S. Cohen (1972) believed that youth subcultures are a factor in the manifestation of the conflict between generations, as they contain symbols of the younger generation designed to express and resolve the contradictions hidden in the parent culture. In fact, subcultures are an "imaginary" solution to the problem of generations, an attempt by young people to explain in this way the real relationship with the older generation. At the same time, the media, according to S. Cohen, exaggerate the danger of various youth groups and provoke the emergence of moral panics in society. As a result of moral panic, youth subcultures are stigmatized as delinquent, and all their subsequent actions are perceived through the prism of a certain label given.

A milestone work of the subcultural approach in the sociology of the youth was the collective monograph "Resistance through Rituals. Youth subcultures in post-war Britain" (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). In the authors' opinion, subcultural movements for all their diversity are similar in their ritual resistance to the dominant culture. For the youth of the working class it is a socially alien culture, and for middle-class youth it is an obsolete, "bourgeoisized" mass culture, leading to the decline of society as a whole.

Kazan sociologists A. Salagaev, N. Fatkullin, R. Bulatov, A. Shesler, L. Ageeva (Ageeva, 1991; Bulatov, Shesler, 1994; Islamshina, Maksimova, Salagaev, 1997) were one of the first researchers who applied this approach to the analysis of post-Soviet Russian youth and analyzed the "Kazan phenomenon" -

criminal groups of teenagers, actively developed in the mid-1980s.

Thus, within the framework of the subcultural approach, youth subcultures are treated mainly as deviant delinquent communities that carry a certain threat to society. At the same time, attention is focused on generation contradictions. Subcultures offer young people (primarily from disadvantaged social strata) a symbolic resistance to oppression, an alternative way of life, a cultural space, which can help them resolve the contradictions that have arisen.

Like many social phenomena, subcultures, it is peculiar to pass the stages of development from rise to collapse. In the modern period of postmodernism, many sociologists and culturologists talk about the stage of decline and even death of youth subcultures as such. At the same time, they state the fact of their transformation into post-subculture, community, solidarity, including virtual ones. Accordingly, the methodology, which is expedient for analyzing these phenomena, also changes.

The use of the term "subculture" as applied to postmodern discourse is very conditional and contradictory. Subculture is a system of values, attitudes, behaviors that stand out from the dominant culture in society and, as a rule, oppose it. Postmodernism is characterized by the absence of a dominant culture as such. Therefore, the postmodernist situation can be characterized as a crisis of the youth subcultural movement in its modernist interpretation. The new reality gave birth to other ways of self-expression of youth, characterized by an increasing degree of individualization, the concentration of a young man on his own style rather than on group solidarity. That is why in the West in the late XX century a post-subcultural approach began to develop in the study of the socio-cultural activity of young people. Sociologists within the framework of this approach have intensified the discussion about what can be replaced by the term "subcultures": "channels", "networks", "strategies", "scenes", "neo-tribes", "club cultures", "rave cultures", "cyberpunk", etc. Some sociologists occupy radical positions and even speak about the disappearance of subcultures. In general, the majority of authors agree with the characterization of youth post-subcultures as a postmodern phenomenon (Muggleton, Weinzierl, 2003: 6).

D. Muggleton in his work "Inside the subculture" presented a set of typical features of the subcultures of modernism and postmodernism:

- the modernism subcultures are characterized by group identity; stylistic homogeneity; strictly fixed boundaries of the subculture; maintenance of homogeneity of the subculture; high degree of commitment; constant stable composition of the subculture; low rates of subcultural mobility; pressure on beliefs and values; character of the political gesture of resistance; anti-media sentiment; and the real space of the communicative process within the subculture.
- the postmodernism subcultures (post-subcultures) include another set of characteristic features: fragmented character; stylistic diversity; weakly fixed unstable boundaries of the subculture; low degree of adherence of members to their subculture, impermanence, variability in belonging to subculture; high rates of subcultural mobility; attractiveness of style and image; an apolitical character; positive attitude to the media and interaction with them; and the predominance of virtual space in youth activities (Muggleton, 2000: 52).

In our opinion, it is the methodology of post-subcultural studies that helps to comprehend the features of the formation and functioning of youth subcultures in a postmodernist situation.

Youth post-subcultures are dynamic, cyclically developing, hedonically directed subcultural phenomena, most often associated with virtual space. The main principles of their functioning are the absence of social and class differences

among participants and the adherence of youth to the correlation of participation and individual freedom. The distinctive functions of post-subcultures are the functions of leisure (compensatory, recreational, communicative functions of leisure); function of stimulating the creative activity of young people; function to minimize the anxiety of young people in a risk society with a cult of individualism and consumption; and functions of restoration of forces, removal of emotional tension in conditions of a hyper-rational way of life, accelerated rhythms of people's lives. However, as we will show later, there are also deviantly oriented youth solidarities actively spreading in virtual space in the current situation.

Based on the methodology of subcultural and post-subcultural approaches, the research team, with the participation of the authors of the paper, carried out a study of the development of Russian youth subcultural activity and identified the peculiarities of the development of deviant subcultures since the mid-1980s up to the present time on the example of the region of Russia - the Republic of Tatarstan. The research was carried out within the framework of the project "The Role of Information and Network Technologies in the Formation of Ethno-Confessional Tolerance / Intolerance of the Young Generation of the Republic of Tatarstan" (RFBR grant, contract No.17-46-160490) in 2017. The study used a quantitative and qualitative methodology for sociological research – a mass survey of the youth of the Republic of Tatarstan (N=800 people, aged 16 to 30 years), focus groups with active Internet users, and the analysis of social networks.

### 3 Results

Tatarstan and its capital, Kazan became one of the most notable regions of post-Soviet Russia in terms of subcultural activity in the 1980s and 1990s. The media and scientific literature even invented such a term as the "Kazan phenomenon", designed to characterize aggressive street groups that combined a significant mass of urban youth. This subculture had a pronounced deviant character. The forerunner of the formation of this subculture was the delinquent group Tiap-Liap, formed in the first half of the 1970s, the main part of which were low-skilled young workers of the Teplokontrol plant. This gang was engaged in assaults, robbery, and patronage among corrupt officials.

The Tiap-Liap gang later became the basis for youth street gangs called "gopniks". The typical external attributes of the gopniks were: a short haircut, so that during the fight it was impossible to grasp the hair, the athletic build - gopniks actively trained in the basement gyms with self-made equipment that appeared at that time. In many such groups, alcohol and smoking were banned, and physical reprisals could be used for this.

As one of the major Russian researchers of the "Kazan phenomenon" A. Salagaev noted, the peculiarity of Russian territorial delinquent groups in comparison with the western ones is, firstly, that they are easily distinguishable from other teenage microcultures existing in Russia, primarily due to their territorial attachment and high delinquent activity. Secondly, Russian groups are ethnically heterogeneous and their existence is not directly related to interregional migration. The backbone of a gang, as a rule, is the indigenous inhabitants of a certain territory, who know their district and members of the local community well. Thirdly, research has revealed the connection between teenage groups of the "Kazan type" and organized crime: their members form a young reserve, whose representatives will later become members of certain adult criminal groups. In addition, these groups, unlike the western deviant subcultures, represent and reproduce prison norms and values. They are also distinguished by their intolerance towards representatives of other youth cultures, sexism and aversion to drug use (Salagaev, Shashkin, 2004: 52).

The "Kazan type" groups had a strict separation of functions (leader, cashier, gunsmith, etc.), rigorous age stratification, permanent social ties self-reproduced due to the recruitment of

new members and raising of funds into the group's common money fund (Salagaev, Shashkin, 2004: 53).

The main reasons for the wide spread of the deviant subculture of the gopniks, both in Kazan and in other cities of Russia, were, first of all, the economic instability of the post-Soviet period, the disintegration of the moral system of values in society, and the weakening of the functions of social control. All these factors together contributed to the involvement of a large number of young people from different social strata in criminal street groups.

By the end of the 1990s, as the economic situation in the country stabilized and the institutions of socialization and law and order gained ground, the emphasis in youth activism gradually began

to shift from violence and the dogma of physical strength to luxury and money, the development of consumerism.

In fact, by the end of the 20th century, as in the global situation, in Russia, traditional youth subcultures, described by representatives of the subcultural approach, were transformed into rather heterogeneous and diffuse youth movements, solidarities, post-subcultures. This trend is exacerbated largely due to the general spread of digital technologies and virtualization of all spheres of society. This is evidenced by the results of our sociological research.

Thus, in the course of a mass poll, the respondents gave the following answers to the question about their personal participation or the participation of their friends in subcultural movements (Table 1).

Table 1. Experience of participation in subcultures

Answers	% of respondents
Yes, I am (used to be) a representative of the subculture	1.2%
I am not a representative of the subculture, but there are representatives of subcultures among my relatives and friends	2.8%
No, I am not a representative of the subculture and don't know such people	89.7%
Other variants	0.1%
Hard to answer	6.1%
Total surveyed	100%

The above data show that the overwhelming majority of respondents (89.7%) are not representatives of youth subcultures, have no experience of being in subcultures, and don't know any friends from the subcultural environment. This is confirmed by the fact that the phenomenon of youth subcultures is not widespread on the territory of the republic, even though more than 80% of the young people surveyed are residents of large cities (Kazan, Naberezhnye Chelny, Nizhnekamsk).

Only 1.2% of respondents are representatives of subcultures. Those who responded in this way are mostly represented by the youngest age category of 16 to 24 years old (55.6%). The same regularity can be traced in the answer about the friends representing youth subcultures.

As for the gender-based responses, it was found that there were more men among the youth subcultures that recognized themselves as participants (more than 60%). This confirms the idea of a post-Soviet boom in the development of youth subcultures, with the proliferation of delinquent youth communities, where which girls do not take such active part as boys and young men do. These results can also be explained by the fact that traditionally the society (not only Russian) is more tolerant of participation in youth subcultures of boys than girls. In this regard, some girls with experience of subcultural activity could hide their participation in such associations, or they preferred not to call such activity a participation in the youth subculture.

According to respondents' answers, the most widespread youth activities are subcultures structured based on music trends and interests: rockers, including heavy rock fans, punks, metalheads, rappers (including hip-hop), rastamans. Skinheads and nazis (right-wing ones) are named among the subcultures of the political orientation, the "Young Guard" variant can be referred to the same answers, although, based on the definition of youth subcultures as created by youth for themselves – the political movement "Young Guard" cannot be fully attributed to such youth communities. Respondents also named subcultures such as goths, hippies, anime, emo, bikers. The practice of self-designation of various forms of youth activity by subculture is widespread. So, the volunteer movement, the "children's order of mercy", "animal protection" are named as subcultures. Sexual orientation - gays – were also attributed to a subculture (only by one person). The generalizing answers were used too - "nifers", "informals", "all sorts of informal associations", "we are different, but now there are no subcultures". The last answer illustrates the lack of a rigid framework in the delimitation of youth subcultures, the growth of the trend towards integration and unification of representatives of various movements at present, but at the same time, to the separation of themselves from the rest of society.

To study the opinion of the youth of the Republic of Tatarstan on the benefits or harms of youth subcultures, the following question was asked: "If to speak in general, do informal youth associations, subcultures bring mostly benefits or harm?" The answers, differentiated by age of the respondents, are presented below.

Table 2. Distribution of respondents' opinions on the social consequences of the functioning of youth subcultures

Answers	16-25 years	26-30 years
Mainly benefit	26.1%	30.4%
Rather benefit than harm	31.9%	24.4%
Rather harm than benefit	21.3%	15.8%
Mainly harm	11.7%	19.0%
Hard to answer	9.0%	10.4%
Total	100.0 %	100.0 %

Based on the data presented in the table, we can conclude about the ambivalence of the assessment of youth subcultures by the respondents. Young people find it difficult to give an unambiguous assessment of the harm or benefit of youth subcultures, although the number of respondents who believe that subcultures are useful still exceeds the number of respondents that subcultures are harmful. It should also be noted that youth subcultures are a multifaceted phenomenon represented in various ways (from communities on musical

Table 3. The influence of subcultures on adolescents and youth<sup>1</sup>

Answers	Response rate
Negative impact on the psyche, including the development of suicidal tendencies (suicide attempts)	39.3%
Alcohol and drug abuse	27.9%
Conflicts and fights between representatives of different subcultures	32.8%
Subcultures provoke conflicts between youth and older generations	17.6%
Subcultures are a way of self-expression, association by interests	27.2%
Subcultures themselves do not pose any threat to both youth and society; they make our life more interesting, brighter	4.5%
Subcultures help adolescents and young people "find themselves" and thereby reduce tension between the generations	9.0%
Almost every teenager undergoes the experience of a particular subculture and then becomes a "normal" adult	20.0%

As data in the table show, the answer implying the negative impact of subcultures on the psyche of young people and adolescents, including the development of suicidal tendencies, comes first in the frequency of the responses. We believe that the reason for this assessment is the activation of virtual communities in Russian social networks, associated with provoking young people to suicidal behavior.

In the Russian media, there is now a moral panic about the sharp jump in the statistics of child suicides, which, according to law enforcement agencies, are related to the activities of the virtual community "Blue Whale".

A sharp increase in the number of reports on child suicides in February 2017 was recorded by the Russian Center for Internet Technologies. The community attracts teenagers with its mystery, a forbidden playing. Activity in the virtual "game" begins after the publication of the potential participant on his personal page messages with a hashtag #синийкитяначинаюигру. After this, the "curator" of the game communicates with the user, usually from an account that cannot be identified and tracked. He explains the rules:

- don't tell anyone about this game;
- always carry out my task, whatever it is;
- for failure to fulfill any task, you will be excluded from the game forever, and terrible consequences await you.

<sup>1</sup> The question was not of an alternative nature, and the respondents could choose up to 3 variants of answers; therefore the sum of answers exceeds 100%

interests to delinquent groupings), therefore it was rather difficult for the respondents to make an unambiguous assessment for the benefit or harm of the whole set of subcultures.

However, characterizing the impact of subcultures on youth and adolescents, the respondents were inclined to choose negative characteristics, which indicates the perception of subcultures precisely as deviant activity (see Table 3).

Next, the curator gives tasks; there are usually 50 of them - one for each day.

There is a typical list of tasks. Tasks are most often associated with inflicting bodily harm on oneself ("cut f57 on your arm"), whales ("draw a whale on a leaf") and fear ("watching the terrible videos all day"). To perform some tasks, the player must climb to the roof of the skyscrapers. Tasks 30 to 49 are: "You wake up every day at 4:20, watch a video, listen to music, and every day you do one cut on your hand, talking to the whale".

Another are non-typical tasks; for example, "curators" offer some users to run across the road in front of the car and shoot it on video (this kind of entertainment was called "run or die" among teenagers). But in any situation, the last task is a real suicide. If the user decides to leave the game, the "curator" promises to come to his house and kill his parents. Teenagers, after such a serious long-term emotional and physiological impact on them are unable to control their actions and do the last task of the "curator".

Such virtual communities are not exclusively a Russian phenomenon. The "blue whales" are spoken throughout the post-Soviet space, as well as in Western countries. The "blue whale" or "blue whale game" takes 1st place among the requests in the Google search system not only in Russia. This has turned into a kind of very dangerous trend.

The former subcultures in many ways flow into such extremes, which are clearly deviant. So, the relatively harmless former subculture of emo has been transformed into a virtual community "chelkastye", which must commit an imitation of suicide with its recording on a video camera and survive. This should be broadcast throughout the network. We believe that such deviant activity in a virtual environment, which is detrimental to the personality and even the lives of adolescents, requires serious research and toughening control by the older generation.

#### 4 Summary

Thus, at the present time, the sphere of subcultural youth activity shows a tendency to move away from classical forms of solidarity in the real world to virtual communities, whose activities cause not less, but even greater damage to the personality of adolescents. In the information society, virtual reality has become a familiar environment for the existence of children from an early age. Generations whose active socialization takes place in the digital environment as a social environment due to the ubiquitous spread of digital technologies are characterized by different authors as "digital generation", "network generation", and "digital natives" (Maksimova, 2014). According to the characteristic given by M. Prensky, digital native people are "people who were born during the digital revolution and, therefore, have been under the influence of

digital technologies from the very moment of their birth" (Prensky, 2001).

Representatives of the digital generation as consumers of virtual culture acquire special psychological characteristics of the so-called virtual personality. The digital environment has created fundamentally new conditions for the social identification, self-expression and lifestyle of young people, which have a dual character. On the one hand, it fundamentally changed the ratio of the private and public spheres of human life, which in turn led to the formation of new ways of identifying the individual: there is an increasing degree of individualization, the concentration of young people on their own style of life. On the other hand, communication in virtual reality provided young people with the opportunity to form their own individual style in the private sphere, which is largely predetermined by tastes and styles from the outside. On the one hand, the features of virtual reality multiply increase the freedom of the individual, freedom of creativity, self-expression. But, on the other hand, virtual deviant communities, especially in adolescence, can damage the developing personality, health and even the lives of adolescents.

## 5 Conclusion

The processes of youth solidarity in the Internet space are spontaneous in general. Here a very young person faces the choice of the option of existence, the interlocutors, the amount of presence. In the social network, youth undergoes the processes of assimilation of social roles, patterns of behavior, cultural norms and values.

In such conditions, it becomes urgent to determine the range of opportunities and consequences of the impact of virtual communities on young people. In this case, the main issue is the evaluation of social networks as a media environment, which, on the one hand, allows for personal growth and the formation of solidarity, and, on the other hand, leads to the identification problems and various forms of deviation.

We consider it inefficient to combat these newest forms of deviant youth activity in the information society, however, it is necessary to inform young people about the negative consequences of participating in such subcultures in order to protect them from fatal mistakes. The older generations and public authorities should pay more attention to the impact of information technology on the youth environment. It is necessary to protect young people from negative information and create a positive Internet space for young people. Therefore, this problem needs further analysis, including with the use of qualitative research methods - in-depth interviews, analysis of the content of users' publicly available pages, etc.

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