

# Genesis of Ethical Norms in the Digital Environment as a Factor of Personality Anomie of Generation Z

Irina Tolstikova<sup>1</sup> [0000-0003-2804-7102], Olga Ignatjeva<sup>2</sup> [0000-0002-1658-6427],  
Konstantin Kondratenko<sup>2</sup> [0000-0002-9145-5435], Alexander Pletnev<sup>3</sup> [0000-0002-5966-988X]

<sup>1</sup> ITMO University, Kronverksky pr., 49, St. Petersburg 197101, Russia

<sup>2</sup> St. Petersburg State University, Universitetskaya emb., 7–9, St. Petersburg 199034, Russia

<sup>3</sup> Saint Petersburg University of Internal Affairs Ministry, Str. Pilyutova, 1,  
St. Petersburg 198206, Russia

tolstikova\_irina@mail.ru, olga7919@mail.ru,  
kondratenkoks@inbox.ru, venger.vin@rambler.ru

**Abstract.** The socialization of Generation Z takes place in the digital space. Digital socialization provides a special way of constructing the world of life and a specific way of acquiring ethical values among these young people. Socialization in the digital environment also promotes an anomie. The development of anomie in Generation Z leads to deviant behavior, which is manifested in unmotivated aggression, insulting other participants of communication in the digital environment. Along with anomie and deviation, Generation Z digital socialization is also characterized by opposite trends of institutionalization of the ethics of digital interaction. The practices of unethical behavior stimulate the emergence of discussions on the Internet about the limits of permissible and unacceptable behavior. This spontaneous discourse of digital ethics is extremely interesting from theoretical and practical points of view. Based on the natural ideas of individuals about ethical norms, it is possible to formulate a code of ethical conduct in the digital space. Such a code would not be coercive, but the very fact of its existence would have an impact on the behavior of individuals. The features of Generation Z that have been studied can be extremely useful for improving education. Understanding the specifics of these young people's world will allow them to develop more interesting courses and teaching methods. Knowledge of the genesis of ethical norms in the digital environment will allow effective translation of social constructive norms of behavior, ethical values into the young people communication.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, norms, ethics, anomie, digital environment.

## Introduction

In an era of intense ultramodernity, an increasing proportion of interpersonal interaction occur in the digital environment, which in turn has a significant impact on the socialization of the younger generation. In this relation, it is very interesting to study the genesis of ethical norms in Generation Z under the influence of the digital environment. Ever since Durkheim, sociology theorists have paid attention to the existence of a crisis

of normative-value regulation in society - anomie. With the appearance of the new generation, the issue the correlation between the processes of emergence of new ethical norms and the erosion of existing ones was sharply actualized, since Generation Z is the first fully digital generation.

The methods of theoretical synthesis and reconceptualization are suggested to study this research issue. The method of concept reconstruction has a huge heuristic potential by applying classical sociological concepts to explain fundamentally new social phenomena [1, p.68]. The aim of this research is to reveal the essence and peculiarities of the process of constructing social norms in the life world of generation Z and the reasons for the anomaly in the behavior of representatives of this generation. The study is both theoretical and empirical in nature. The epistemological orientation of the research is interpretation. Nominalism and constructivism are the ontological orientations of the research. The research is conducted within the framework of an inductive strategy.

The research question is to reveal features of construction of social norms in the life world of representatives of generation Z, and also factors of occurrence of anomaly as a result of phygital interaction. The main problem of the study is the difficulty of assessing the processes of transformation of ethical values in the new socio-cultural and digital reality, as well as the specificity of deviant behavior of generation Z. The authors of the study believe that the ethical component of the digital space can be regulated through an ethical code of conduct on the Internet, as well as new practices of the educational process of young generations.

## 1 Literature Review

In order to study the genesis of ethical norms in Generation Z, it is necessary to understand the peculiarities of this generation. The studies devoted to the study of generations are based on the works of Howe and Strauss [2, p. 97], who proposed a classification of generations and justified the thesis that each generation has certain cultural differences. Expanded studies of generational issues are represented by the widely recognized studies of D. Tapscott [3], M. Prensky [4], M. Bauerlein [5], N. Carr [6], [7], G. Small & G. Vorgan [8], D. Stillman [9], and others. In particular, the term "network generation" (NET-generation or N-generation) is associated with D. Tapscott, who described the profile of the network generation in "Growing up in the digital age: the emergence of the network generation" and "Growing up in the digital age: how the network generation changes your world" [3]; the problems of the digital generation genesis are discussed in the book by J. Palfrey & W. Hasser "Digital Origin: understanding the first generation of digital natives" [10]. These publications are based on a series of sociological studies revealing activity, desire for creativity and innovation, as well as propensity for Internet addiction, acts of aggression, harassment, ignoring copyright and non-critical acceptance of information. The development of Howe and Strauss theory has led to the emergence of synonymous names for the same generations. Thus, the Millennium Generation was named the Next Generation, N-geners, Selfi Generation and the second "Generation Y", which now has a basic citation index. Subsequently, this classification of generations has been supplemented by generation Z

or centennials, number generation, phygital-generation, etc. By different estimates [11, p. 3350] it refers to people born from 1995 - 1996 to 2004-2010. Originally in Tulgan's book Z representatives were defined as the second wave of millennials [12, p.5], but after its publication in the USA TODAY newspaper "High-maintenance Generation Z heads to work" in 2012, generation Z became a separate phenomenon. The publication [13] of the results of the marketing research of generation Z conducted by the company Sparks and Honey in 2014 contributed to the wide spread of this termin. As synonyms for the concept of "Generation Z" in scientific and professional literature can be used the concepts "iGen" and "Post-Millennials". The suitability of Western classifications of generations for studying Russian society is confirmed by actual empirical studies [14], [15]. Moreover, Generation Z, which, thanks to the Internet, was socialized under the constant influence of the Western continent, more than any other generation is similar to their Western counterparts. Within the framework of the generational theme Phygital is defined as the key characteristic of the generation Z, which not only does not see the difference between virtual and real, but also does not think of itself outside the phygital environment, hence its new name - phygital-generation. This civilizational content makes studying the features of this generation even more interesting and allows us to extrapolate our conclusions to other countries to a certain extent. Summarizing, the SPOD-world, which is a stable, predictable, simple and certain world: the world that existed before Generation Z was replaced by VUCA-world. VUCA is an acronym for instability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The world of VUCA is a world in which the tasks of forecasting are difficult to implement; it is the world of Generation Z.

## 2 Theoretical Grounding and Methodology

The research has two levels that are theoretical and empirical. On the higher level authors worked in the social constructivism paradigm (P.Berger, T.Luckmann) with the use of phenomenological analysis, grounded theory and reconceptualization. Here we used the epistemological orientations of interpretativism. On the lower level of the research authors used ethnomethodology of H.Garfinkel for the study of the life world of generation Z. We conducted a focus-group for the study general opinion of the generation Y about the generation Z. The sample for the focus group was directed and consisted of nine people from generation Y who were postgraduate students of social science faculties of Saint Petersburg State University. On the last stage in the accordance with the research design we made a survey that allows to reveal the value system of generation Z, their peculiarities in the social norm construction and features of anomie with their possible reasons. The lower limit of the birth for generation Z was chosen as the year 2000 in the accordance with the specifics of our country development. The questionnaire involved working with a random sample of 300 first year students from several St. Petersburg universities.

The majority of the sample of 300 respondents were teenagers aged 18 years (56%), the gender distribution of the sample was as follows: 45% of the respondents were female and 55% were male. This proportion of sample is in accordance with the gender

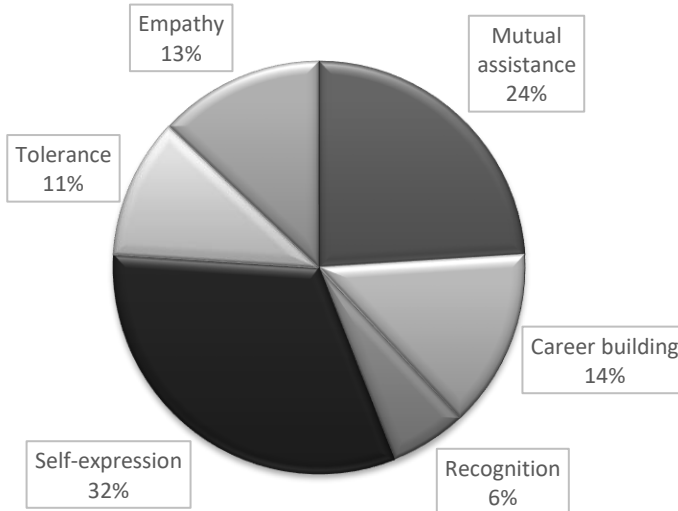
structure of Russian inhabitants in the age from 15 to 30 years old [16]. The data of the survey were processing with the aid of frequency analysis with the use of the statistical package SPSS. The questionnaire can be seen upon this link<sup>1</sup>

The study limitations were associated with the specific features of the object. It is difficult to separate the specific factors affecting the entire generation from the specific factors of the youth. There are concerns that specific factors of youth may be mistaken for specific factors of generation Z, and these limitations were understood.

### 3 Generation Z Social Construction Activity and Anomie

The features of Generation Z are largely due to the special structure of their life world. The younger people are, the less they tend to separate the events of the real and virtual world. The constant exchange of information between young people causes a constant empathy with each other's life events. This generates a feeling of being a participant in the event, even if participation in the event consisted only in the perception of information about it from the Internet. This unique and not characteristic for older generations phenomenon of forming coexistence forces the representatives of Generation Z to form their own communities and weakly contact the representatives of older generations.

The questionnaire survey we conducted among the students of the first year of Saint-Petersburg universities (representatives of generation Z) allowed us to reveal the following system of values at them (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Generation Z value system

<sup>1</sup> [https://vk.com/doc928026\\_552607993?hash=4b39f01ee44f78c6f4&dl=99495814197a7c36bd](https://vk.com/doc928026_552607993?hash=4b39f01ee44f78c6f4&dl=99495814197a7c36bd)

In order to detect the generation Z value system, the data was encoded on the basis of one (yes), zero (no). The unit was assigned to the value, selected first from the set of six proposed values. Thus, of the 302 responses, the following scale of values was obtained for representatives of generation Z: self-expression (32%), mutual assistance (24%), career building (14%), empathy (13%), tolerance (11%), recognition (6%). This construction was tested on a random sample of twenty respondents (five freshmen from each of the four universities participating in the study). A thorough recalculation of the data, with a ranking of the value system of each of the twenty participants, allowed us to build a value profile for the average representative of the digital generation, which completely coincided with the value profile obtained through binary coding. Our empirical results confirmed the prevail of individualistic orientation in the value system like in the generation Z of the western world, however we revealed high score for collectivistic orientation (mutual assistance and tolerance) that are connected with the peculiarities of the Russian culture.

In addition to the survey, focus groups with Generation Y representatives were also conducted during the survey to explore the values of Generation Z. The main value of Generation Z was said by informants to be self-expression. Another important value of this generation is freedom, which is understood in a negative sense as disclaimer of responsibility under conditions of anonymity. Representatives of Generation Y consider Generation Z to be individualists, although representatives of Generation Z themselves paid much attention to collectivist values according to the survey results. According to the informants' opinion, Generation Z values their time, they are practical and able to react quickly to changes in economic and social life.

Representatives of Generation Z grew up in an information and communication environment, and therefore have good skills of searching and processing information since childhood. Comparative sociological data show that both Russian and Western youth are aware of the concept of fake and are critical of the official media [17]. The same skills also affect their attitude towards education, since they see no point in memorizing facts that can be easily found by google. Since the search for information on the Internet is quick, dynamic and easily accessible, it generates a negative attitude among young people towards formal educational institutions. From their point of view, there is little point in recording in the academic classroom information that can be easily found on their own if necessary. At the same time, Generation Z values training courses that provide specific skills to start earning right away, here and now. The features of the life world of Generation Z that we have identified contribute to the fact that emotional and visual content of the Internet is much more important for them than for representatives of previous generations. This is clearly demonstrated by the abundant use of smiles, emoji and other graphic tools in social networks that express an emotional attitude. Content text on the Internet is often accompanied by images, sometimes music, which creates a kind of holistic, synesthetic picture.

In general, the construction of the meaning of the world of life for Generation Z is a collaborative process that runs simultaneously in the real and virtual worlds. In essence, "a key feature of the new generation is that they do not see the difference between online and offline life. The emergence of this feature of Generation Z is due to the phenomenon of a new kind of interaction, which unites the physical and virtual worlds,

it is defined as phygital-interaction"[18, p.34]. This feature is of great interest, because it distinguishes generation Z from all previous generations. Another no less interesting feature is that the joint construction of meanings in the digital space takes the form of text and it opens fundamentally new opportunities for researchers. First of all, it concerns ethnomethodology, which studies daily routine interaction [19, p. 82]. From the ethnomethodological point of view, the Internet becomes an extremely promising opportunity to study everyday life, since in this case the influence of a researcher on the research results is completely excluded. For our study, it is of interest to construct on the Internet the concepts of ethical and unethical, which are the basis for social practices.

The Internet becomes a space for transmitting values and experiences from one individual to another. As a result, the personality of Generation Z is more flexible and multifaceted than that of the older generations. A member of Generation Z defines himself ad hoc rather than once and for all unequivocally. The boundaries of his personality may change depending on the influence of the social environment and circumstances.

An extremely important factor strongly influencing the socialization of generation Z is the phenomenon of digital inequality. It is a question of demonstrating not only traditional stratification in the digital environment, but also fundamentally new phenomena. The digital divide is also manifested in young people's possession of expensive digital technology. For example, on social networks, icons may indicate that a user has entered or sent messages from Apple's top-end technology. However, the most destructive form of digital inequality is the broadcast of symbolic consumption practices in the digital environment. Symbolic consumption implies the acquisition of expensive, unnecessary, but emphasizing the status of the owner of things. This pattern of consumption turns even the wealthy individual into a permanently needy, super poor person [20, p.24]. Digital space is actively used by generation Z to demonstrate status consumption. Even after visiting a good restaurant, the individual, with the supernova poor's mind, will probably take a picture of the food and put the picture in Instagram. Without a public demonstration of consumption, eating from his point of view becomes a waste of money. The constant display of symbolic consumption by the most successful members of Generation Z causes the less fortunate to feel irritated and unfair. As a result, a sense of digital inequality causes aggression among young people and this problem is directly linked to ethical issues.

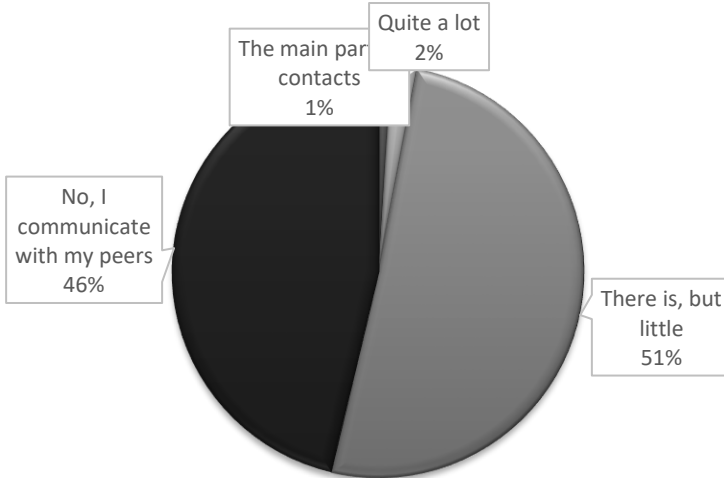
The focus of the study group with Generation Y representatives to study the construction of Generation Z values confirms the huge role of status consumption in the life world of Generation Z. The informants describe the representatives of Generation Z as people "with a bunch of all sorts of devices, with vapes and dressed in prestigious brands". The whole appearance of Generation Z testifies to the people around them about their ability to consume expensive and fashionable things, to lead an active and sporting life.

The status consumption of Generation Z is directly related to their main value - self-expression. It is the ability to express oneself in the digital space that contributes to the increasing role of symbolic consumption for Generation Z.

The result of the socialization of Generation Z in digital space is their best suitability for life in modern society. While previous generations have had to master the digital

environment and its regularities, the Z representatives were born in it and feel "like a fish in water". Mark Prensky successfully conceptualized this phenomenon by calling Generation Z "digital natives"[4, p.1]. The best adaptation of these young people is not only to master digital technology and know the language of the digital society, but also to better adapt to the modern economy, which is characterized by instability, the spread of remote work practices, rapid changes in trends, as well as the need to constantly monitor the huge flows of information.

The perfect adaptation of Generation Z to modern society also raises new ethical challenges. To the traditional conflict of fathers and children is added what can be called the paradox of awareness. While throughout history the younger generations have received knowledge from the elders, Generation Z itself is able to tell the elders a lot about the features of digital society and modern economy. As Tapscott, a researcher of digital socialization, noted, "For the first time in history, children are more capable, knowledgeable and literate than their parents in the field of innovations that play a central role in society. This is achieved through the use of digital media, which the "online generation" will continue to develop and incorporate into the culture of society as a whole. Baby boomers are left behind. Now these children are learning, playing, communicating, working and building social relationships differently from their parents. They are the driving force behind the social transformation to come." [3, p.2]. This paradoxical situation leads to a strong intergenerational gap, and as a result, Generation Z prefers to communicate in their environment.



**Fig. 2.** Conversation partners over 40 years old

The results of the survey (Fig. 2) confirm the theoretical conclusions that better knowledge of digital technologies and special behavior practices on the Internet of Generation Z contribute to the intergenerational gap, alienation of Generation Z from previous generations.

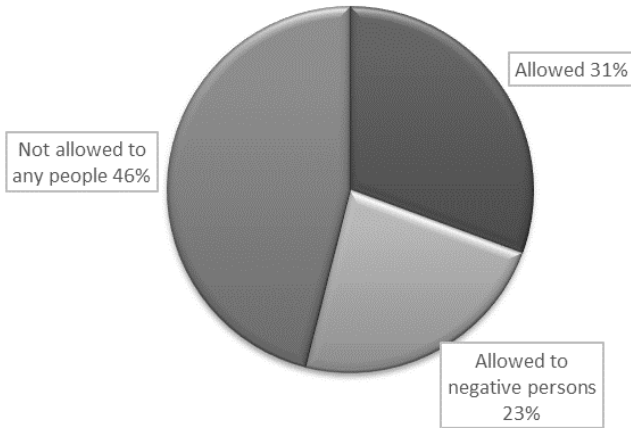
Such compartmentalization of Generation Z makes it difficult for them to assimilate generally accepted norms and values, including ethical ones. It should be noted that the older generation has always been apt to criticize the young and their new fashion. In the case of Generation Z, this tendency is even stronger, as digital technologies have generated many specific features of their behavior. Excessive criticism of young people can be found even in scientific publications. A large part of scientific articles about the digital generation is devoted to clip thinking, young people's misadaptation and other negative phenomena. This situation was well described by Lythcott-Haims, who was Dean of Stanford University and conducted a large-scale study of Generation Z: "We see the negative in the fact that they do not go out into the street, can not look people in the eye, do not make an effort to call on the phone. There are many disadvantages of this generation that social media show us, but there are also obvious advantages" [21, p. 196].

The opposite trend hindering the genesis of social norms is the development of a value and normative crisis - anomie. Beginning from the end of the 20th century, numerous cross-cultural studies testify to the growth of its level [13], [22], which leads to the weakening of normative regulation and inconsistency of normative requirements themselves. Although empirical studies of the anomie began as early as in the 19th century, the period of the end of the 20th century - the beginning of the 21st century was the time when interest in the anomie revived. At present, we can state not only an increase in the level of anomie, but also its qualitative change. The presence of anomie in society has become the norm for the sociological community, as well as deviant behavior and increased crime rate caused by it. Young people are always the most exposed to the state of anomie because they have not yet formed strong values. For our study, the anomie resulting from the digital environment is of most interest.

A feature of communication in the digital environment is the instantaneous transmission of information to any part of the world, resulting in free communication between representatives of all cultures. However, it must be borne in mind that different cultures have different, and sometimes mutually exclusive, values. This leads to the fact that the socializing representative of Generation Z is influenced by the values of several cultures, and this may lead to value disorientation - anomie.

The question about the peculiarities of the anomie arising under the influence of digital communication has not been studied and has the characteristics of real scientific novelty. In addition, in the Russian literature, when considering the anomie it is studied only as a social phenomenon and does not take into account the personal aspects of the anomie. Robert Agnew has substantiated that on the level of personality anomie is not just a reflection of social process, but an independent, multidimensional, socio-psychological phenomenon, which can be caused by different reasons [23]. In this sense, anomie is first and foremost a crisis of the individual. Anomie in Generation Z leads to difficulties in socialization and deviant behavior [24]. The interrelation of deviation and anomie, which was justified by Durkheim, in Generation Z manifests itself in the development of deviant practices. The most revealing of these is the practice of "hate", where an identified user is subjected to harassment and insults by anonymous users.

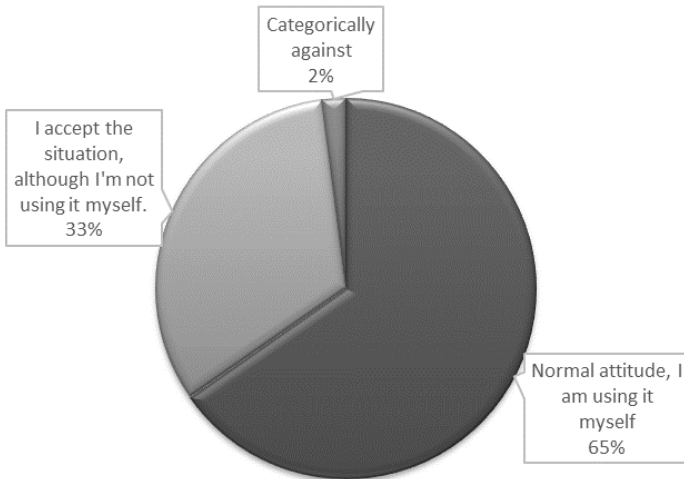




**Fig. 3.** Generation Z to network trolling ratio

The results of the answer to the question (Fig. 3) about the acceptability of trolling in the network indicate a wide spread anomie among Generation Z, which also leads to the type of deviation such as trolling. When interpreting this data, it should also be taken into account that some respondents tend to give socially acceptable answers so as not to show themselves in a negative light.

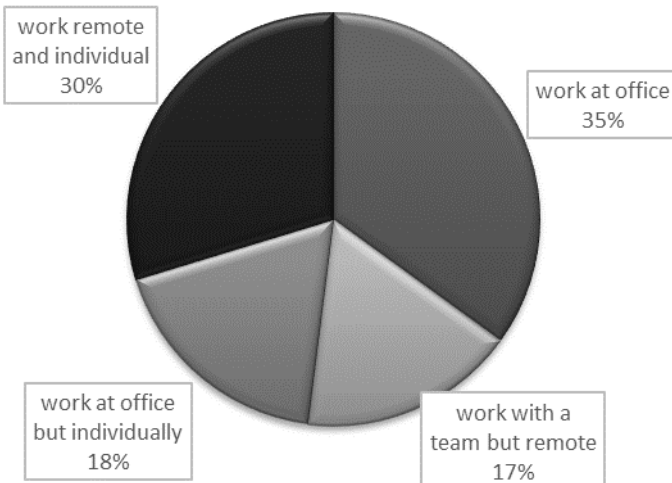
Hate practices have become part of the culture of Internet communication and are perceived by Generation Z as an option for normal behavior. However, part of the users condemns such practices, which leads to spontaneous discussion of acceptable and ethically unacceptable behavioral options. Users who insist on the inadmissibility of hates, especially anonymous ones, propose to observe the same rules on the Internet as in real communication and believe that anonymous insults are the result of psychological problems of the offending people.



**Fig. 4.** The attitude to obscene vocabulary among representatives of Generation Z

The results of the answer to the question about the acceptability of obscene language in communication (Fig. 4) show a large spread of anomia and deviation. The foul language as an element of culture is completely borrowed by generation Z from the previous generations, and its frequency of use is a consequence of the anomie in the environment of generation Z.

The growth of the anomie follows from the progressive world trend of individualism [25]. People today can provide for themselves, which leads to a decrease in interest in collective values, marriage, the desire to work in the office, etc.. In post-communist countries the world tendency of individualism is superimposed on the indicators of distrust, fear of being used by others and conviction that people care only about themselves, which are annually recorded by the "European social research". Finally, the individualistic trend is consolidated in a rapidly growing digitalization. Generation Z, as can be seen from the plot (Fig. 5), is as ready to work individually and remotely as it is in the office.



**Fig. 5.** Preferred forms of work in generation Z

Spontaneous discussions that arise in the digital space when discussing permissible behavior patterns are the natural basis for creating an ethical code of conduct on the Internet. The obvious advantage of such a code is that it is not created artificially, but on the contrary, is the result of generalization of real existing social practices. Of course, a code of ethics is not a law, and it is not binding. But the very existence of such a document will definitely influence the behavior of individuals in the digital space.

The proposed strategy of building digital ethics from the bottom, from the micro level of social interaction, is extremely relevant today. In fact, "modern society is at the initial stage of understanding virtual reality" [26, p. 172]. The unification of the world into a single digital space not only poses new ethical challenges, but is also capable of "becoming a starting point in the search for common ethical principles based on the preservation, interpretation and application of the peculiarities of individual cultures" [27, p.221]. A single digital space essentially means the formation of a single world

culture. This culture is based on the use of English language and includes common universal cultural elements: memes, smiles, special notions and so on.

## Discussion, Conclusion and Outlook

As "digital natives", members of Generation Z not only transmit the norms and values of the Internet space and socio-cultural reality, but also change the process of value and normative construction themselves. The "new individualists" are also prone to new forms of anomie - deviations approved by the digital community (hit, trolling, etc.). However, it should be noted that the gap in communication between Generation Z and older generations in Russia can also be explained by the civilizational shift, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of a specific socio-cultural space.

This civilizational shift may have changed not only values, but also the space-time dimension. Values based on the experience of the past or the perspective of the future, it is believed, push the society towards joint action and unification; in turn, individualistic attitudes speak about the readiness to live "without the past and the future", here and now. Specific forms of deviant behavior of Generation Z only confirm this thesis, since they are based on the pleasure and approval of the Internet audience. The growth of consumer opportunities only reinforces these trends.

Socialization in the digital environment has formed a specific way of constructing the world of life for Generation Z, where virtual interaction is perceived as well as real. The presented results are interesting both for theory, as they reveal unexplored features of Generation Z, and for practice, as they can serve as a basis for developing effective educational programs. Effective learning programs can not only interest young people in knowledge and facilitate learning, but can also create and incorporate ethical values and practices of ethical interaction in virtual spaces. Non-formal, non-institutionalized educational communities have great potential in improving education. The most effective model of building education for generation Z is a real virtual joint construction of knowledge based on the Socratic method. An important part of this education will be the transmission of ethical values to the younger generation. Taking into account the role of ethical values in the construction of education will not only lead to more ethical practices of behavior among Generation Z, but will also contribute to overcoming the anomie. Reducing the level of anomie can very significantly reduce the number of deviant and criminal behavior.

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