

Original article

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## THE ASPECTS OF URBAN PORTRAITURE IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Natalya S. Olizko<sup>1</sup>, Mariia S. Zhurkova<sup>2</sup>✉

<sup>1,2</sup> Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia

<sup>1</sup> olizko@yandex.ru, ORCID 0000-0001-6241-6093

<sup>2</sup> krasina87@inbox.ru✉, ORCID 0000-0001-9050-3434

**Abstract.** The mass media play an important role in shaping the urban portrait nowadays, the media representation of the city creates a holistic image of the surrounding reality in the mind of the citizen, which contributes to its successful functioning, but at the same time inevitably imposes certain clichés. The analysis was carried out on the materials of media texts, which relate the news of Chelyabinsk city (Russia), it allowed to formulate the most distinctive features of urban portraiture in South Ural media discourse. Media representation of the city of Chelyabinsk was analyzed on the materials of Facebook social network. The materials of the news resources of Facebook which reveal the news and events of Chelyabinsk city mostly appeal to the problems of the city development, infrastructures, crime rates and environmental hazards. The negative aspects of the city media portrait are mitigated by introduction of humoristic posts, posts devoted to important historical events or athletic feats of the citizens. A tendency is to illustrate textual information content that can cause dissatisfaction among recipients with visual content that does not correspond to the message subject and distracts the recipient's attention. The creation of a city portrait is largely aimed at getting a positive response from the audience, the display of realities is softened in some cases, some messages bear traces of the expression of a subjective assessment of the sender.

**Keywords:** media, urban portraiture, city, linguistics, discourse

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## ОСОБЕННОСТИ ГОРОДСКОГО ПОРТРЕТИРОВАНИЯ В МЕДИДИСКУРСЕ

Наталья Сергеевна Олизко<sup>1</sup>, Мария Сергеевна Журкова<sup>2</sup>✉

<sup>1,2</sup> Челябинский Государственный Университет, Челябинск, Россия

<sup>1</sup> olizko@yandex.ru, ORCID 0000-0001-6241-6093

<sup>2</sup> krasina87@inbox.ru✉, ORCID 0000-0001-9050-3434

**Аннотация.** Средства массовой информации играют важную роль в формировании городского портрета в наши дни, медийная репрезентация города создает в сознании горожанина целостный образ окружающей его реальности, что способствует его успешному функционированию, но в то же время неизбежно навязывает определенные клише. Анализ был проведен на материалах медиатекстов, посвященных новостным событиям города Челябинска, результаты позволили сформулировать наиболее отличительные черты городского портрета в южноуральском медиадискурсе. Медийная репрезентация города Челябинска была проанализирована по материалам социальной сети Facebook. Как показал материал новостного ресурса “Наш Челябинск” (Facebook), основными темами, формирующими городской портрет Челябинска являются проблемы развития города, инфраструктуры, уровня преступности и экологические угрозы. Негативные аспекты медийного портрета города смягчаются введением юмористических постов, постов, посвященных историческим событиям или спортивным подвигам горожан. Наблюдается тенденция иллюстрации информационного контента, способного вызвать недовольство у реципиентов, визуальным контентом, не

соотносящимся с сообщением по тематике и отвлекающим внимание получателя. Создание городского портрета во многом направлено на получение положительного отклика у аудитории, отображение реалий в некоторых случаях смягчается, некоторые сообщения несут следы выражения субъективной оценки от правителя.

**Ключевые слова:** медиа, городское портретирование, город, лингвистика, дискурс

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## Introduction

Urban studies allow comprehending the specifics of a diverse heterogeneous environment and giving its scientific analysis. Sociological studies of such a phenomenon as urban space are plenty, the most prominent of them [8; 11; 14; 16] provide an overview of the main problems of the urban environment and trends analysis. The research in the main aspects of representation of urban environment in media discourse has also been the subject of numerous studies [1; 6; 9; 12; 13].

Media resources certainly interact with the environment: they are, on the one hand, under the influence of a number of social factors, but on the other hand, can be influential and initiate some social processes. This goes further, as the algorithms aimed “to enable predictive analytics of urban data” and thus “effectively allowing city administrators to use open data to generate patterns, use them for decision making, and better direct limited government resources” are being developed [10. P. 1]. The idea of social media giving “insights into citizens’ activities and attitudes” seems an up-to-date approach as social media nowadays “become an informative source for e-government and allow to design targeted urban planning decisions minimizing resources and increasing civil participation” [15]. It allows to see that in modern world media discourse is able not only to reflect the most significant city problems, but to help disposing of them as well.

Mass media play an important role in urban portraiture formation nowadays, as “the conditions of information redundancy and the transience of information flows, in the context of difference between the information learned in the process of primary socialization and received from the modern masses, forces a person to experience difficulties in constructing stereotyped images. As a result, he automatically retransmits those social clichés that the media offered him” [3. P. 140—141].

Thus, media representation of the city creates in the mind of a citizen an integral image of the reality

he is surrounded by, which facilitates his successful functioning, but at the same time inevitably imposes certain clichés.

## The purpose and the material of the research

The purpose of this study is to build a model of an urban portraiture of Chelyabinsk employing the material of media news resources. The resulting model will allow to determine which aspects of the city’s life have greater effect on formation of Chelyabinsk portraiture. The research focuses on the techniques of providing information, applied by the developers of the site in order to gain the attention of recipients and their appraisal and mitigate negative traits in the city portrait. The city is “the center of the political, economic, and cultural life of the vast masses of the population, which is forming special ways of self-realization and self-affirmation of the individual in labor, family, household, and leisure activities” [3. P. 4]. The data of the news webpage “Our Chelyabinsk” in Facebook [5] serves as research material. “Our Chelyabinsk” is an official city community that unites more than 200.000 active citizens. The community posts current city news, weather forecast, historical news and information on cultural events in the city.

## Research methods

The use of a complex analysis combining quantitative and qualitative pragmalinguistic and linguocognitive methods and techniques allows identifying effective ways of presenting media information in social networks at both verbal and non-verbal levels. The content presented on the page of the media news resource “Our Chelyabinsk” in form of text, videos, images, reviews, comments, forms the portraiture of the city and reveals the attitude of Chelyabinsk residents to the events in the city.

The content analysis method applied in the study allows converting the information presented on the web page into quantitative indicators through statistical calculation of verbal and non-verbal units. The first

stage of analysis aims at formulating the main themes of posts and grouping the material according to these themes. After a list of relevant topics has been determined through an application of statistical calculation, the analysis advances to its second stage when articles united by one topic are examined with the help of SEO analysis, which enables identification of keywords in contexts [7]. The search and grouping of post is carried through hashtags or metadata tags used in social networks. The most relevant topics of the news website “Our Chelyabinsk” are represented by the following hashtags: #ourchelyabinsk\_economy&business, #ourchelyabinsk\_ecology&weather, #ourchelyabinsk\_ainsouthural, #ourchelyabinsk\_politics&power, #ourchelyabinsk\_incidents, #ourchelyabinsk\_ourhistory, #ourchelyabinsk\_events&food, #ourchelyabinsk\_society&people, #ourchelyabinsk\_photo, #ourchelyabinsk\_sport&fitness.

### Content analysis of quantitative indicators

The analysis of quantitative indicators for the period of June 2017 — June 2021 provides that the urban portraiture of Chelyabinsk by media resource “Our Chelyabinsk” is characterized by appealing primarily to the city problems on such levels as develop-

ment, infrastructures, criminal incidents, historical facts and environmental problems. These aspects reflect the main characteristics of the city, which can be seen as stereotyped clichés offered by the media. An average citizen would characterize Chelyabinsk as a steadily growing city due to the amount of construction sites and newly-built blocks of flats, but at the same time as the city with high crime rates and ecological problems, the last appearing due to the abundance of complete facilities within the city boundaries.

The numbers show that out of the analyzed 2904 news posts, 20,4 % of the messages are devoted to general topics, indicated by the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_ainsouthural (592 posts); 17,9 % of the posts are about crime and incidents, they correspond to the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_incidents, (517 posts); 16,7 % of the messages contain information on the environmental problems and weather in the city, they are marked with the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_ecology&weather (486 posts). These groups of news reports form the core of the site structure. The next topic in the list — social issues (#ourchelyabinsk\_society&people) is represented with lower amount of posts — only 8,4 % of the total number (243 posts). The data on all the topics is provided in the table below.

**The main topics, forming Chelyabinsk urban portraiture according to the data of “Our Chelyabinsk” news resource (Facebook)**

Topic	Hashtag	Amount of posts	Percentage
General thematics	#ourchelyabinsk_ainsouthural	592	20,4 %
Crime	#ourchelyabinsk_incidents	517	17,9
Ecology, weather	#ourchelyabinsk_ecology&weather	486	16,7
Social issues	#ourchelyabinsk_society&people	243	8,4
History of the city	#ourchelyabinsk_ourhistory	231	7,9
Athletic feats	#ourchelyabinsk_sport&fitness	201	6,9
Photo	#ourchelyabinsk_photo	198	6.8
Where to go and what to eat	#ourchelyabinsk_events&food	193	6.6
City state structures	#ourchelyabinsk_politics&power	156	5.4
City enterprise	#ourchelyabinsk_economy&business	87	3.6

It should be noted that if until 2018 the news published in “Our Chelyabinsk” covered mainly the social problems of the city, but since 2018 the events on the regional level were also involved. Due to added territory represented in the news, most of the community’s hashtags were changed. Thus the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_urbanmilieu was replaced with the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_ainsouthural, and the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_politics was replaced with the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_politics&power. At the same time, the tags #ourchelyabinsk\_incidents, #ourchelyabinsk\_ourhistory, #ourchelyabinsk\_

events&food remained unchanged over the past years. Such resistance to changes reveals the significance of the content indicated by these tags, its sufficient amount, which makes its unification with other topics unnecessary.

### SEO analysis of contexts

The analysis on the lexical level proves to be more efficient in researches of urban social-group dialect as it is more dependent on the geographic factor. The research conducted by T. I. Erofeeva showed, that “the stratum “place of birth” turned out to be essential for

the lexical level and insignificant for the syntactic and suprasegmental levels” [2. P. 95-96]. For the purposes of this research the SEO analysis [7] of lexical and semantic levels of the verbal material was implemented.

The analysis of messages united by one topic with SEO — semantic analysis of the text, enables to assess the quality and relevance of posts on the basis of the words and phrases contained in them. The program automatically highlights the semantic core of the text and determines the frequency of keywords in it. Leaning upon the data received on the previous stage of analysis, we determined that one of the most frequent hashtags is #ourchelyabinsk\_insouthural. As was already mentioned, since 2018 both urban and regional news were posted under this hashtag, however the city problems still remain the priority (73 %). SEO-analysis of posts of the period of June 2017 — June 2021, united by the hashtags #ourchelyabinsk\_urbanmilieu and #ourchelyabinsk\_insouthural, indicates the following priority aspects for residents of Chelyabinsk — the economic development of the city and the development and functioning of urban infrastructures, represented by keywords: “repair”, “construction”, “funding”, “development”, “transport”, “road”. In the period of March 2020 — June 2021 a rapid growth of news reports with the keywords: “pandemic”, “coronavirus”, “vaccination”, “medicine” was revealed. The overwhelming majority of these posts indicate changes in the rules of public behavior in the city and changes in the sphere of medicine on urban level.

The city is presented as a complex, structured system that functions according to certain rules, norms, and aims at the welfare of citizens and general development. This is manifested through the lexemes “repair”, “construction”, “funding”, “development”, “transport”, “road”, which indicate activity within the city — new houses are being built, financing is being carried out, transport is working, and roads are being repaired. Reports, for example, of dilapidated houses or holes in the roads, street children or attacks by stray dogs are practically not found.

The lexemes “pandemic”, “coronavirus”, “vaccination”, “medicine” reveal the attempt to neutralize possible panic in society, they indicate that despite the large number of people infected with coronavirus, the government at the municipal level is making significant efforts to improve the medical services provided, to vaccinate the citizens and improve working conditions and salaries of medical personnel. Negative aspects in this type of posts are practically not covered.

Thus, the key lexemes described above aim at indicating stability and constant development of the urban environment, they are designed to create a positive image of the city, even if in some aspects this image diverges from reality.

The analysis of lexemes in texts united by the hashtag #ourchelyabinsk\_incidents turned out to be not as indicative as the analysis of the previous group of texts. Among the key lexemes, we distinguished the following: “incident”, “tragedy”, “fraudster”, “death”, “lethal”. Despite the fact that most of these lexemes are very traditional for such news column, the lexeme “tragedy” should be noted separately. The use of this particular lexeme is intended to express empathy and grief on behalf of the public to all possible recipients of the text. The news is presented not as horrifying and thus making readers think they live in inappropriate conditions, but as sad and thought-provoking. It shall also be noted that in the course of the analysis many reports of criminal events were detected, in which citizens were considered to bring the crime on themselves. For example, one of the reports was devoted to the tragic death of a seven-year-old boy who drowned in a lake [5]. Providing that the news is dreadful some empathy is shown, but at the same time it is indicated that the boy drowned in a place where swimming was not allowed, thus his parents were to be blamed for not looking after their child properly and not explaining him the restriction rules. Users’ comments under the news post revealed much aggression and general negativity towards the parents of the child, but none towards the lack of proper fencing or signs. Another report was of the death of a biker who tried to escape from the police [5]. The number of reports of tragic accidents, in which citizens themselves are partly to be blamed, prevails in the community. We believe that this technique of providing information is intended to make citizens think about their behavior and lifestyle, and sometimes even shift the blame for the accident. It should as well be noted that the news resource does not publish materials about unsolved crimes, kidnappings, serious murders and increasing rates of juvenile delinquency.

Thus, we see that for a favorable urban portraiture, media resources use fairly transparent techniques of material selection. As a result, most of the posts devoted to the urban news are designed to make a positive impression about the city. Such posts alternate with neutral ones but negative ones appear rarely. It should also be mentioned that a significant (up to 30 %) number of posts have an entertaining character, they will be discussed below.

### Meaning construction at non-verbal level

The analysis of keywords allows characterizing media text in aspect of effectiveness of choice of language units aimed at drawing attention of a certain target audience. The keywords distinguished in the previous step are mainly aimed at the generation aged 25 years and older; these are people who are interested in the political and economic life of the city and not indifferent to its problems. In recent years, there has been noticed an increase in number of news posts which aim at creating a comic, humorous effect. We believe that these changes are introduced to attract the attention of a younger target audience — aged from 18 to 25 years. As is known, the construction of meanings at the non-verbal level is especially relevant for the younger generation, which is distinguished by clip thinking — perception of the world through short bright images. Such type of thinking is formed under the influence of the Internet, computer games, television, and even some modern literature. Clip thinking is an underlying principle of a cliché worldview, when a person perceives the world as a series of almost unconnected parts, facts or events. “Clip thinking hinders analytical abilities, since the images that remain in thoughts only for a short period of time, almost immediately disappear being replaced by the new ones” [4. P. 67].

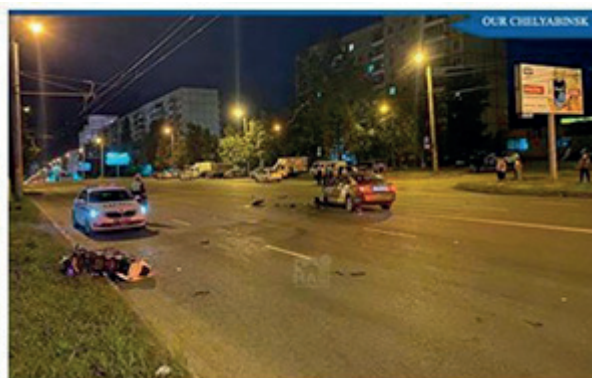
Video or visual (graphic) content, if not or only partially connected with the subject of the message, turns into information noise, thus reading the news creates the illusion of awareness of the state of events, while, in fact it accomplishes mostly an entertaining function. The recipient perceives a number of individual facts that are not to be linked a common chain of events. The media format forces the brain to make a fundamental error of understanding, some events are considered related even if they have a temporary affinity rather than an actual connection.

Using this line of reasoning it is the non-verbal content that attracts the attention of recipients, especially those who belong to the age group of 18-25 years. The combination of verbal and non-verbal content has long been practiced in news media resources, and performs important functions. In its first function, non-verbal content illustrates the verbal part. It coincides in thematic aspect with textual part reflecting its meaning, forming the visual constituent and strengthening the impact of the news on the addressee. It is beneficial for the resource due to the fact that it highlights the web site’s serious attitude and responsibility towards the material they provide the audience with. Thus, the news resource is gaining more trust from the audience. Second function — entertain-

ing, helps to distract recipients from tragic news. To facilitate it posts with hypothetically disturbing information are necessarily followed by bright pictures of the city or posts of a humorous nature. Thirdly, the inclusion of a non-verbal message that does not or partially illustrates the news serves to obscure a verbal message. In such case, the nonverbal content does not necessarily coincide with the verbal one, a partial match is enough. This way the recipient extracts from the news post some information like: “I read something about vaccination, I don’t remember exactly what, but the picture was funny.” A partial match is applicable when the news needs to be published, but it is very likely to cause irritation or dissatisfaction among readers.

The picture below is an example of a news post where a non-verbal component performs the first function. This picture illustrates the accident with the biker who crashed trying to escape from the police. The picture fully corresponds to the situation, described in the verbal part of the message.

*A biker crashed trying to escape from the police.  
(<https://nashchelyabinsk.ru/post/avariia-proizoshla-vchera-24-iiunia-v-2345-na-ulit/>)*



The picture below is an example of a news post where a non-verbal component performs the third function which is to obscure a verbal message that contains information on mandatory vaccination in the Bryansk region. The article provides the following data: in the Bryansk region, mandatory vaccination was introduced for certain groups of the population. In the Chelyabinsk region there is no mandatory vaccination yet but residents themselves set records: “this week, about 10 thousand people were vaccinated with the first component, with the second component — 2 thousand. For comparison, about 3-4 thousand were vaccinated earlier in the day” [5].

The news of mandatory vaccination in other region indicates that with high probability the same will happen in Chelyabinsk. Obviously, mandatory vaccination is not be treated favorably by all categories of

citizens, by which reason the news post is accompanied by the picture of a humorous nature. In the picture a well-known actor and a comedian Sergei Svetlakov is viewing TV news programmes at his leisure time and making fun of news report on coronavirus infection. The character is notoriously famous in Russia and represents a quick-witted and humorous average lower-class citizen.

**Mandatory vaccination in the Bryansk region**  
(<https://www.facebook.com/nashchelyabinsk/photos/a.631516793620236/3731877073584177/>)

I STILL CAN'T GET IT. HOW COME IN  
12 SEASONS OF "BATTLE OF  
PSYCHICS" NO ONE SAID A SINGLE  
WORD ABOUT CORONAVIRUS?



The picture is distracting the readers' attention from the disturbing news, for that reason, we assume, it is not even of the same topic with the verbal element of the post — the verbal part is devoted to mandatory vaccination while the non-verbal element is about "Battle of Psychics" show and its being framed, because no one of participants really had the power of prediction.

In the latter case, the actualization of the humorous component can be considered as a desire to mitigate the discontent of the city residents who are the recipients of this message and to form a general positive attitude both to the news resource "Our Chelyabinsk" and to events at the municipal level.

### Conclusion

Summing up, we highlight once again that the mental-linguistic structures of content used to construct

meaning on social network pages are analyzed in this research within the framework of pragmalinguistic and linguocognitive approaches. The pragmalinguistic approach allows distinguishing the purpose of the message, studying the intentions of the addresser and means selected by him to influence the addressee of the media text. The linguo-cognitive approach is aimed at identifying complex mental connections between the unit of language, the meaning of a word and the visual sign that represents it. The identification of the construction of this three-leveled system makes it possible to define the most effective models for the construction of media texts aimed at portraying urban reality.

The analysis carried reveals a tendency for media resources to attract the attention of target audiences of various age groups to events covered at the municipal level. This can contribute to the formation of an active social position among young residents of Chelyabinsk and the desire to participate in the political and economic life of the city. Mass media influences a person, organizing his reality, influencing his ideas. Not always the reality, which is provided by media corresponds with what is happening in the real world. It is obvious, that media forms such urban portraiture, that will be agreeable and non-disturbing if possible, this way media gains the attention of recipients and their appraisal.

Media portrait of a city designed in social networks largely influences the image of the city in the public consciousness. Public media, including social networks, construct a system of symbols that contribute to formation of citizens' identity and socio-cultural integration, define a sense of community. The news resource "Our Chelyabinsk" is characterized by the formation of an urban portrait through an appeal to the problems of the city at the level of development and functioning of infrastructures, criminal incidents, environmental problems and historical facts. The tendency to mitigate the negative reaction of readers and distract their attention by introducing an extralinguistic component only partially related to the subject of the message and occasionally of a humorous character is revealed.

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### Information about the authors

**Natalya S. Olizko** — Doctor of Philological Sciences, Professor, Head of the Department of English Language.

**Mariia S. Zhurkova** — Candidate of Philological Sciences, Senior Lecturer of the Department of English Language.

### Информация об авторах

**Н. С. Олизько** — доктор филологических наук, профессор, заведующая кафедрой английского языка.

**М. С. Журкова** — кандидат филологических наук, старший преподаватель кафедры английского языка.

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