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## **The Role of the Phenomena “Fanfiction” in Making Country Brand**

*Key words: image, country brand, fanfiction, fanfic, fic-writer.*

*Annotation: During the past 20 years Belarus has experienced lots of changes in social relations, politics, economy that involved decreasing of attention to Belarusian’s image. In Belarus image problems has become a topic of debates among media scholars just in the last five years. In last decades the role of the Internet increased. This provide valuable insight about how to use the World Wide Web in making successful image of the country and the less studied web-phenomenon fanfiction in improvement of the country brand.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is perhaps no greater priority among governments than developing, projecting, and maintaining positive image of their countries, theirs products and services. Perfect country brand has become increasingly essential to the longevity and popularity of products and services of this country in today’s marketplace. Although much research conducted by European and American scholars has covered the theoretical aspects of brand image, little has focused on the actual techniques used to create successful brand image of the country and the criteria by which country brand should be judged. A brilliant image can strengthen a country’s authority and help it bounce back from attacks – an idea termed the “hallo effect”. Positive brand images persuade customers to buy products of the country (1).

An extensive body of research has demonstrated the importance of the online image of the country. Some studies have found that the youth is the main target audience of the World Wide Web. This confirm the importance of fanfiction made online by youth and for youth in forming country brand. Some scholars support the idea that fanfiction is just a linguistic phenomena (2). Others assert that fanfiction is a about policy and is able to illustrate the development of the country image as well as media do.

Although the previous findings are not altogether consistent, a careful review of the literature revealed that a special attention in making positive image of the country should be given to young audience. Many scholars have founded youth to be the most receptive audience, the specific of this audience is that it is free from the stereotypes (3).

Fanfic is genre of mass-literature, which is created by a fan of a popular art (a book, a movie, a serial, a comic book, etc.), using the idea of the scenery and/or the characters of an original work of art. It’s created mostly for reading by the other fans. Fanfic can be a

sequel/prequel of the famous book, “crossover” of some books, it can use “alternative universe”. Sequel describes the fan’s variant of the continuation of the famous story, prequel is a variant of the beginning of the story, crossover is a combination of some stories, using alternative universe the author let him/herself significant discrepancies with the original. The original book/movie/serial, which is a base for making fanfics, is called “the canon”.

Nowadays people argue if fan-fiction is a literature or not. Some people agree fanfic is a genre of literature. Another think it’s just a work for scribbles. I’ll not represent it as a type of literature, but as a kind of public journalism.

The first fanfics appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The community of Sherlock Holmes lovers united those people who couldn’t imagine their life without Sherlock’s adventures. It was the first fandom in the modern interpretation of this word. Konan Doyle’s fans wrote their own variants of the book and that were the first fanfics.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of fanfiction’s popularity was caused by the serial “Star Track” in 1967. The serial was shown during a year and during a year fic-writers were making up their own stories about the main heroes: Crack and Spock. In 1974 the magazine “Grup” published the first fanfic in the genre called “slash” which describes romantic relations between the characters of the same sex – Crack & Spock in that variant. Since that time “slash” became the most popular genre in the fan-fiction. The famous book “Scarlett” by A. Ripley is also a fanfic, where the canon is the book “Gone with the Wind” by M. Mitchell. In 2007, a Japanese researcher of F. Dostoevsky books, Ikuo Kameyama, wrote his own version of the continuation of Karomazov’s story. “I’ve noticed some details, characters, whose acts mean to have a continuation, - the professor said. – Finally, I’ve understood, that Dostoevsky wrote implying the continuation, and I couldn’t resist the temptation”. And this book is also a fanfic, though it’s a rare example of fanfic’s publication as a book. Most of them don’t have a commercial value, because its publication can be considered as a violation of a copyright.

As today the cultural and information expansion of the west goes mostly through the entertainment (4), the youth phenomenon fanfiction is perspective way to export the culture and to improve image of the country. It’s also a unique possibility to explore the public opinion among the youth audience and to estimate the country brand. Though fanfiction was already learned by many scholars as linguistic phenomena there is still a lack of information about it’s influence on the country’s brand and public opinion. The purpose of this article is to examine how it’s possible to use fanfiction in improving and estimating country’s brand. This research is able to be used while making a program of improving the image of the country.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

There are numerous studies concerning different aspects of the country branding, as mentioned previously, but researches concerning the role of fanfiction in forming country brand are practically non-existent. The image studies mentioned earlier spotlight certain aspects of the role of the World Wide Web sources in image making, but none paid the attention to the role of fanfics.

The information about the role of fanfics in branding would provide valuable image-building tools and will help governments to use web-sources more effectively in country-branding. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

**RQ1:** What is the fanfiction’s influence onto Belarus image?

**RQ2:** How is it possible to use fanfiction to improve the image of the country?

## **METHOD**

The texts for the analysis were chosen from the site [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net) – the biggest Internet-site of fanfics comprising approximately 2,5 mln texts of different genres, plots and the degree of completion. There are more than 300 texts dedicated to Russia and Belarus on this site that made possible to made definite conclusion about the image of these countries among the visitors of [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net) (4 mln people per day, 25-32 years old, women mostly). 279 texts dedicated to Belarus are written in English, 7 – in Spanish, 4 – in Italian, 1 – in Indonesian.

The author of the research was interesting mostly in the fanfics of the category “Hetalia” that described the relations between the countries as the relations between people. The main heroes of these texts are Germany, USA, Russia, Italy and Belarus. This is demographically diverse and productive fandom. The analysis of these texts allowed to understand what do the authors (Americans mostly) think about the policy of these countries.

The method of the content-analysis was used to answer the questions posted in this study. The nature of this particular research is formative, requiring a research paradigm that allowed the researcher to begin with rather broad ideas and then gather research to develop more specific theories.

### *Procedures*

For Research Question 1, all the fanfics dedicated to Russia and Belarus were analyzed and broken down into their component messages.

For Research Question 2 the messages were highlighted and sorted on categories. That allowed to understand the main topics and plots the fic-writers prefer to use and that could be used to realize what information should the government translate to maintain interest for the country and this way to improve its image.

## **THE RESULTS**

In most fanfics Belarus is a blond with violet eyes, who has the elder sister and the brother (Russia and Ukraine respectively). The addition to the image of Belarus are «bags under your eyes», the love for the cold – «she was not used to warm weather» and permanent hunger. America (the another hero in most plots) tries to save Belarus all the time. The author of the text think Belarus has to live in awful circumstances without noticing how much does she suffer: «You can't see how much you are suffering», «You are dying at Russia's feet». More of that Belarus refuse America's help all the time and every time she has to visit America she miss home where «the snow falling outside and a hot drink of vodka in hand» (5).

Using these text it's possible to built the image of Belarus as the authors see it. These fanfics repeat the stereotypes about Belarus that European and American press replicate that confirms the great influence of media for the public opinion. Here it's possible to see that authostereotype is not the same as heterostereotype, the authostereotype about Belarus is that Belarusians are hard-working, peace-loving,

hospitable people, but here, in fanfiction, it's possible to notice an opposite stereotypes. In one of the texts it's told that Belarusian's «hands had killed many and she wished she had the hands of a man to show she was stronger than she looked». Belarus has the same character in most texts because of the specific features of this phenomena: «the canon of the fanfic define the specifications of the behavior of the character» (6).

These fanfics are priceless source of information about the national prejudices, e.g. in most texts America likes hamburgers, Russia likes vodka, Belarus likes snow and Russia. The most fully the image of Belarus describes the fanfic “The list of bans for Belarus” (7) written from first person:

«I'm not allowed to stalk big brother».

«I'm not allowed to say that brother has agreed to marry me».

«I'm not allowed to make false promises about leaving big brother alone. Because I'm obviously lying».

«I'm not allowed to train any of the African nations to be a copy of myself. That's cruel».

«I'm not allowed to destroy the doors at his house. Even thou they are treacherous and are keeping brother away from me».

It's evident that the Big Brother is Russia, the house is the ex-USSR, the doors are the borders between the countries that appeared after the USSR crashed. The fanfic is dedicated to the recent events in Belarussian policy and reorientation of policy to the West. The stereotypes reflected at the fanfics describe the really exist Belarusian country brand.

This image is a result of the articles at the American media, as the “negative” model of perception is forming because of the lack of the information about the country, the absence of the interpersonal communication. The difficulties in having interpersonal communications between the representatives of Belarus and Western countries is the reason because of that the audience has to use just media information getting the representation of the country.

It's possible to notice the development of the image of Belarus while the relationships between Belarus and Europe became better analyzing the fanfic «The Italy Brothers Visit Belarus». The analysis of the visit of Silvio Berlusconi, the ex-prime-minister of Italy, to Belarus is given allegorically here. It's possible to notice the development of the image of Belarus here. Firstly Italy was afraid of Belarus - «WAHHHHH! Me visit Russia's sister? She's scary! Even more scary than Russia himself!», «the EU considers Belarus to be a...pariah state»). But later the dislike turned into the willing of cooperation: «Freulien Belarus will open up more after your meeting». The Belarusian realities are described quite objectively in the text: «they were surprised at how...normal her country looked. Sure, her infrastructure was a little bit dated, and was not nearly as extensive as theirs, but it was still a decent place. On the way to her house, they passed by her National Library which had a distinct blue rhombicuboctahedron shape». The author of the fanfic tried to show that the dislike between Belaris and Europe is groundless. One of the favorite plots of fic-writers is also romantic relations between Russia and Belarus, America and Belarus. In most of the stories Belarus suffer a lot because of the collapse of the USSR: «She realized the difference from her «love» for Russia, and what she felt for this American boy».

The contest of the fanfic “Impossible love” is quite simple. Belarus was a young lady who was very hungry. Traditionally, she was a bride and a sister of Russia. Suddenly, she met America who was even more handsome than Russia was. America tried to feed Belarus, but she’s too proud to except his care. The house of America has “the white walls, the expansive looking furniture”. America made a special room for Belarus which had a wooden floor and a fireplace to give her a sense of her home. But Belarus wanted to get home “with the snow falling outside and a hot drink of vodka in a hand”. Belarus is a very serious woman and she even tried to kill America with one of her knives. Knives are an important element of Belarus’ clothes in many fanfics. The topic of former Soviet Union countries devotion to Russia is a major in a such kind of fanfic.

It’s also possible to notice a hint on an identity of former Union countries as, for example, in the fanfic “We see as we hold”. When the Ukraine had cut her long nice hair she became a twin of her brother Russia. Sometimes Belarus is called Natalia, Ukraine is Katja and Russia is Ivan. “Katya was always the more masculine one, the strong body and the hips and waist that are of equal width, the unfeminine one”, - thinks Belarus looking at her sister.

Some Americans think the aim of Belarus is reconstructing the Soviet Union. Then the main victim in the fanfics is Russia. His sister has the only goal – to get marriage. But he wants to stay a free man. He betrayed to Belarus with Ukraine and Lithuania, he drank a lot, he “raped, tortured, destroyed”. Finally, Belarus had understood that “the only thing they shared was a border and language. She was no longer the nation who loved Russia, but Belarus, a strong woman nation of the Northern East”. This example shows that some Americans suppose Belarus and Russia have the common language.

The analysis of the reviews for these texts also proofs the interesting to Belarus:

«I love Ame/Bela, and this is NOT ENOUGH on this site».

«Aww she acts different when Alfred (America) with her, that’s the fact!».

As there are such a lot of fanfics dedicated to Belarus, the young people of the USA and Western Europe are interested in Belarusian policy and history. It’s proved by the statement that “fanfiction is a literature created because of strong emotions” (6).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results give an opportunity to decide that the image of Belarus is based mostly on stereotypes, But still it's impossible to say that Belarus got so called “enemy halo”, the fic-writers are interested in Belarusian policy and culture. That’s why Belarus should provide the world community with more information about itself to contend stereotypes.

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