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The Bechdel Test in Russian Fanfiction: The Portrayal of Women

Leila O. Algavi ᴵᴰ✉**, Irina I. Volkova** ᴵᴰ**, Alina V. Kharchenko** ᴵᴰ**, Mariam Jorjikia** ᴵᴰ

Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Россия
✉algavi-lo@rudn.ru

Abstract. There are very few discussions about the necessity of a syllabus on the study of fanfiction in the professional training programs of Russian teachers and university professors. The educational potential of fan art is still underestimated, although the possibility of using fan works, especially fan fiction, in pedagogical activities was first put on the media education agenda more than ten years ago. Fic writers are creatively and communicatively active schoolchildren and students the very social group the efforts of teachers are targeted to. Fan writings can be considered as additional empirical material for the study of motivation and development of students' special skills. This article presents the results of an analysis of Russian language fanfics based on the film series: *Alien* (1979), *Aliens* (1986), *Alien 3* (1992), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Prometheus* (2012), and *Alien: Covenant* (2017). The hypothesis of the involvement of Russian-speaking fic writers in feminist notions of gender, as well as gender impartiality, was tested. The Bechdel Test, adapted by the authors, was used as a means of analysis. It is the first time the means were applied to such fanfiction research. The results partially disproved the hypothesis. The case was tested in the 2022–2023 academic year as part of a special course program for students of the evening Department of the Faculty of Philology at the RUDN University and was approved by the teachers as a valuable source of information about the worldview of modern youth.

Keywords: media, fan art, gender impartiality, women's theme, youth values, media education

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Тест Бекдел в русскоязычном фанфикшене: изображение женщин

Л.О. Алгави, И.И. Волкова, А.В. Харченко, М. Джорджикиа

Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Россия
✉algavi-lo@rudn.ru

Аннотация. Дискуссий о включении курса по изучению фанфиков в программы профессиональной подготовки преподавателей недостаточно. Образовательный потенциал фанатского творчества до сих пор недооценен, хотя возможность использования таких произведений, особенно фанфиков, в педагогической деятельности впервые была поставлена в медиаобразовательную повестку более десяти лет назад. Авторы фанфиков — это креативные и коммуникативно активные школьники и студенты, та социальная группа, на которую направлены усилия преподавателей и педагогов. Фанфикшен можно рассматривать как дополнительный эмпирический материал для изучения мотивации и развития специальных навыков у студентов. В данной статье представлены результаты анализа русскоязычных фанфиков, основанных на серии фильмов «Чужой» (1979), «Чужие» (1986), «Чужой 3» (1992), «Чужой: Воскрешение» (1997), «Прометей» (2012) и «Чужой: Завет» (2017). Была проверена гипотеза о причастности русскоязычных авторов фантастических фильмов к феминистским представлениям о гендере, а также о гендерной беспристрастности. В качестве средства анализа использован тест Бекдел, адаптированный авторами. Подобная методика впервые применена для исследования фанфиков. Результаты частично опровергли гипотезу. Кейс впервые был апробирован в 2022—2023 учебном году в рамках программы специального курса для студентов вечернего отделения филологического факультета (Российский университет дружбы народов) и одобрен преподавателями как ценный источник информации о мировоззрении современной молодежи.

Ключевые слова: медиа, фанатское творчество, гендерная беспристрастность, женская тема, ценности молодежи, медиаобразование

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Introduction

The women's theme in the context of media is studied in different aspects (Amiri, 2023; Jorjikia, 2013; Sevastyanova, & Khudnitskaya, 2023). At the same time, the problems of feminism remain relevant. A *Savanta Research Center* (United Kingdom) survey claimed that feminist ideologies and movements are actively supported by young people. A large number of young women and men believe that feminism is needed in the developed and developing world (Hansom, 2019).

The women's movements in Western countries and in Russia have developed differently, which is why attitudes toward feminism and ideas of gender equality differ. As Russian women got the same rights as their men a century ago, most adults in Russia are totally indifferent to feminist ideas. Such indifference on the part of adults has impacted the country's ratings. According to the *Gender Inequality Index*, compiled as part of a special series of UN reports in 2024, Russia ranks 43th among 170 countries in the World on this indicator of social development[1]. *Women, Business and the Law* 2024 presents an index covering 190 economies and structured around the life cycle of a working woman. In total, 35 questions are scored across eight indicators. Overall scores are then calculated by taking the average of each indicator, with 100 representing the highest possible score. Based on this approach, Russian Federation scores 73.1 out of 100.0[2]. The overall score for Russian Federation is lower than the regional average observed across Europe and Central Asia (85.8). *Russian Public Opinion Research Center* (VCIOM) survey (2019) showed that only 31 % of adult Russian women and men support the feminist movement for achieving equality of political, economic, personal, and social rights. Younger generations are more likely to favor these ideas (44 % of the 18—24-year-olds vs 31 % across the sample in general). Thus, different generations of Russians have their system of values and different attitudes to this phenomenon. According to VCIOM, "Young young people have

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[1] Rating of countries of the world by the Gender Inequality Index (21.01.2025). Humanitarian portal: research and forecasts. Center for Humanitarian Technologies, 2006—2025. https://gtmarket.ru/ratings/gender-inequality-index

[2] Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) index in Russia in 2024, by indicator (2025). Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1088340/russia-women-business-and-the-law-index-by-category/

always been the subject of social changes because they are energetic, proactive, learn new things faster than others and as a rule adapts to changes more easily" (Gendernoe, 2019).

The authors proposed the following hypothesis: as Russian youth easily adapt to changing conditions of life, open to innovation and social change, they are likely to support feminism. To be sure of this statement, it was decided to test the hypothesis by analyzing youth fan writing: how much feminist principles of gender equality are manifested in it.

In the 1985 issue of *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–2008) by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, one of the characters states that she only watches movies that meet three conditions:

- They have at least two female characters whose names are known;
- These characters appear together in the same scene and talk to each other;
- The conversation they are having is not on the subject of men.

And the last such movie she saw was Ridley Scott's Alien (1979).

These rules were allegedly invented by a friend of A. Bechdel after reading Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which the writer stated that in most works of fiction female characters exist exclusively in relationship to male heroes: "I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. There is an attempt at it in Diana of the Crossways. They are confidantes, of course, in Racine and the Greek tragedies. They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose" (Woolf, 1929).

Conceived as *a moralit* on gender bias in commercial movies the conditions became a means for critical conception of the position of women in fiction and became known as the Bechdel Test (Bechdel). The test is commonly used to analyze movie tropes (Abdullaeva, 2021), but when used systematically, it reveals perceptions of gender roles in media and culture (Garcia et al., 2014). The Bechdel test does not pretend to be reliable in a mathematical sense; it is rather an indicator of a state, an analysis tool as a first approximation.

Research using this test has shown a gender bias in social science studies (Scheiner-Fisher, & Russell III, 2012) and motivated the use of computational approaches to analyze gender roles in fiction (Lawrence, 2011). As American researcher Scott Selisker rightly points out, the Bechdel Test, "akin to film ratings that warn viewers about strong language, violence, or sexual content<…> the test advertises a horizon of expectation for the content of a film, but, unlike them, it explicitly grants that content a political valence. In passing a politically charged judgment on a wide variety of kinds of cultural texts — it has been applied to plays, novels, films, videogames, and comics — the Bechdel Test

offers an unusual combination of empirical data and political judgment whose consequences for literary scholarship have not been addressed" (Selisker, 2015, p. 505).

The current amount of fan fiction creates a database suitable for analyzing subconscious biases and cognitive limitations. One challenge for the authors of this article is whether Russian-speaking fiction writers' perceptions of gender roles pass the Bechdel test. In other words, how deeply ingrained are Western feminist ideas about gender in the minds of Russian.

Materials and Methods

We decided to apply the Bechdel Test to fanfictions that are popular (created and read) among young people. As in the previous article, where the authors investigated the online creativity of young people, we proceeded from the assumption that any fictional text, regardless of its quality, reflects the worldview and worldview of the author, in particular, his ideas about the rules that conduct this world, society, and individuals (Algavi et al., 2021, p. 6).

Even though the conditions of the test are quite clear, we consider it necessary to make several clarifications concerning the criteria that must meet by the text under analysis.

The first condition is there must be at least two female characters in the fanfic. By character, in this case, we, following the definition of the Polish Slavist Jerzy Faryno, meant the so-called character-objects, "any person (including anthropomorphic creature) who acquires the status of an object of narration (in a literary text), <...> Not all anthropomorphic creatures or persons in the literary text are presented similarly. Some of them have the status of objects in the story world in question. They are, so to speak, character-objects". Others are given only as depictions but do not appear themselves in the story world. These are 'characters — images'. And some are merely mentioned, but they do not appear in the text as objects or even as images. These are 'absent characters'. They would have to be distinguished from mentions of persons who, by the convention of this story world, cannot appear in it at all. 'Absent characters' are not excluded by the convention, but on the contrary, are considered acceptable. Therefore, their absence is noticeable and thus significant" (Faryno, 2004, p. 106). So, in our research, we took into consideration only characters-objects.

The second condition is that these female characters have an oral dialogue. That is, the prerequisite is a conversation between one character and another, an unanswered phrase in this case is not considered a dialogue. Nevertheless, its length and the importance of the topic do not matter.

The third condition is that they must not talk about men at all. Not only lovers or husbands but also sons, friends, brothers, colleagues, etc.

So, since the comic book was about the Alien movie, we decided to see if these three test rules applied to fan works based on the Alien movie series: *Alien*

(1979), *Alien* (1986), *Alien 3* (1992) and *Alien 4: Resurrection* (1997), *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

The search was performed according to the following criteria: all fanfics exclusively in the *Alien* fandom (*Alien*/film series, 1979–2017) with the status 'completed' posted on the platform Ficbook.net (Fanfiction Book, or FB), since the 2007 year. So, we found 143 fanfics we posted during this period. 125 of them with the highest number of likes were selected. A detailed analysis revealed that only 7 fanfics out of 125 met all three criteria of the test. Thus, we have 118 fan-fictions that did not pass the Bechdel Test, and only 7 passed. The authors of three of the seven fanfics that passed the test were men, two were women, and the gender of the other two fic writers could not be ascertained. Ten fanfics out of 125 belong to one author (Doppelganger Twin), but only one meets all the criteria. Interestingly, this fan-writer, a woman, use a photograph of actor Lance Henriksen as her avatar, which, combined with the nickname Doppelganger Twin, suggests that she not only wants more anonymity but also wants readers (at least when they first meet her) to associate her with a man.

The most popular genre for this universe has been the so-called 'gen' (FB has its system for defining genres) – 68 fanfics out of 125 have a story not focusing on romantic or sexual relationships, actually absent in original movie plots. Though, this situation is not typical for fanfiction. In our case, the general tendency remained: 3 of 7 fanfics that met the criteria of the Bechdel Test represent the 'gen' genre, 2 represent 'femmeslash' (the plot is based on romantic and/or sexual relations between women), one corresponding to 'het' (romantic and/or sexual relations between a man and a woman) and one marked as 'other kinds of relations' (sexual and/or romantic relations which cannot be referred to slash (romantic and/or sexual relations between men), femmeslash or get). Such distribution by genres explains the age limit set by the authors: 5 fanfics are rated PG-13 (fanfics which may describe romantic relations and/or may contain hints of violence and other serious moments), 1 of them is rated R (fanfics with erotic scenes or violence without detailed graphic description) and 1 is rated G (fanfics which may be read by any audience)[3].

We adjusted the technique of determining gender to identify which dialogues contained masculine and feminine references. First, we manually filtered out nouns denoting inanimate objects, such as 'base' and toponyms. In other words, we filtered out all feminine nouns indicating objects that are neither agent nor patient in the text. Second, we eliminated the ambiguity of names that can be used for both genders. If a name is used for one gender at least five times more often than for the other gender, we assign it to the gender with the highest frequency. Third, we added possessive feminine and masculine pronouns. In each dialogue, they were treated as references to male, female, both, or none, depending on the presence of common words and names associated with each gender.

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[3] For more information on genres and age ratings, visit https://ficbook.net/

In our study, we apply the above method to a specific subset of dialogues, seeking only to answer the question of whether dialogues between characters of the same sex contain references to the opposite sex.

In each fanfiction we defined a set of dialogues. We considered each dialogue as a tuple with the following components $\{g_1, g_2, m/f\}$, where g_1 and g_2 are the gender of the dialogue participants (M — male, F — female and N — undefined gender), and m/f — binary values equal to 0 if the dialogue includes mentioning the opposite gender, and 1 is not. For example, the dialogue between a pair of female characters who do not mention men can be written as $\{F, F, l\}$.

Calculating the Bechdel score is a fairly simple way of assessing whether a media text passes the Bechdel test. We calculated the Bechdel score for female characters (B_F) of the fanfiction as the ratio of dialogues between female characters that do not contain any mention of men to the total number of dialogues in the fanfiction:

$$B_F = \frac{|D(F, F, l)|}{|D|}.$$

A high Bechdel score indicates a better passage of the Bechdel test text, while a low score indicates a failure to pass it. If a text has a high Bechdel score, it may indicate that the female characters in the dialogues discuss more than just men, and the author shows them as versatile, erudite persons. A low score may indicate that the author neglects to reveal the female characters, showing them solely as 'objects of service' to the male characters with limited interests.

We calculated B_F score for 125 fanfics. Manual labeling of the Bechdel Test is often controversial because the test contains a set of implicit assumptions about what characters should be included and what constitutes dialogue.

Results and Discussion

Dr. A. Alexander и Dr. R. Heuser rightly noted: "The test has inspired much academic as well as popular discussion. It has also been the subject of digital and crowdsourcing-based projects" (Alexander, & Heuser, 2022). However, we have not been able to find any major scientific study that uses this test to analyse literature. Nevertheless, most researchers agree that the test has important practical value, including for education. For example, Dr. A. McMaster (Thorneloe University at Laurentian) considers "it a useful tool for teaching Classical texts, to help students link culture and literature together" (McMaster, 2015, p. 274). Researcher S. Alaniz-Álvarez (National Autonomous University of Mexico) recommended that preschool teachers comply with the criteria of the Bechdel test to advance the profession of women scientists. For example, displaying illustrations in the classroom that meet these requirements (Alaniz-Álvarez, 2017). It can be concluded that this test is interdisciplinary. It is valuable because it is applicable to various cultural products, taking into account social,

historical and (in our case) literary context. This test forms an unbiased approach to social phenomena.

Views and likes provide information about the popularity or unpopularity of fanfics. We compared the reported values of fanfics that passed the Bechdel test with those of fanfics that did not pass the test. The analysis showed that the second kind of fanfics (those that did not pass the test) have more likes, with a median difference of 173 likes. The statistical probability that a fanfic passes the Bechdel test is $p = 0.056$ (7 fanfics out of 125), while the probability that it fails the test is $p = 0.944$ (118 out of 125). The percentage of likes for fanfics that fail the test is 95% higher than for fanfics that pass the test. What this means: fanfics with a male gender connotation are more popular.

All of the fanfics in question based on the Alien fandom, which considerably narrowed down the possibility of variations in the description of the character's appearance and habitus. Since the universe based on this movie series appeared long ago, readers are mostly rather earnest to the author's attempts to make any significant changes concerning the physical features of a character and his or her race. More loyally, judging by the reviews, they treat variations in the characters' worldviews, behaviors, and features. For example, in many fictions, extraterrestrial life forms are anthropomorphized, becoming, in the view of the authors, almost complete analogs of humans (with the exception of appearance).

As a rule, most fanfiction authors are women. An interesting explanation for this was given by Camille Bacon-Smith, an American researcher, author of *Enterprising Women*, and fan of the Star Wars universe: "male fans of the show generally balk at the restriction and prefer to engage in activities such as costuming or crafts, for which payment is not a traditional reward. Women, who traditionally spend large portions of their lives working in relative isolation for little or no pay, bring a different set of motivations to their writing and art. They want to talk to other women, to express themselves in the science fiction form that until recently has all but excluded them" (Bacon-Smith, 1986).

However, in the case of the Russian-speaking Alien franchise fandom, we do not observe a huge disproportion in the number of female and male authors: 40 to 33, respectively. What's more, male authors were much more prolific than female ones: of the 125 fanfictions we have selected, 64 (51 %) are written by them, but considering that male authors are fewer in number than female ones, the average number of fanfics per male author is about 2, while per female 'writer', it is 1.5.

Another specific of Russian-speaking fanfiction on the Alien/Aliens universe is the predominance of works of the 'genre' category with no or insignificant romantic or sexual relationships in their plots. In Russian-speaking fanfiction, in general, slash works (works about romantic and/or sexual relations between men), written generally by female authors, dominate here, as well as in non-Russian-speaking fanfiction. Lately, though, 'genre' is gaining popularity consistently in other fandoms (Populyarnye, 2023). In our case, the distribution of focus according to the author's gender is as follows (table 1).

Categorization by gender of the author

Author's gender	Number of fanfics
Female	**61**
Get	20
Gen	29
Other types of relationships	3
Slash	6
Femslash	3
Male	**64**
Get	8
Gen	38
Other types of relationships	1
Slash	13
Femslash	4
Overall	**125**

As for the issue of gender impartiality in Russian-language Alien/Anti-Aliens fanfictions, we find another interesting trait. If we remember the original works, i.e., the films *Alien* (1979), *Aliens* (1986), *Alien 3* (1992), *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), and the later prequels *Prometheus* (2012), *Alien: Covenant* (2017), we find that in all the original parts the protagonist is a woman, who struggles for life, and in the end, the only one of the whole team survives. In our case, however, only 81 of the 125 fanfics have female characters, and only half of the 81 have more than one female character, making them potentially eligible for the Bechdel Test. At the same time, the number of female and male fanfics potentially suitable for the test was almost equally divided (23 vs 17, respectively). The total number of female characters in male and female fanfics was also almost evenly distributed (table 2).

Number of female characters in male and female fanfics

Author's gender	Total number of female characters
Female	77
Male	78
Overall	**155**

However, we found the greatest number of female characters — 11 — in the fanfiction *Stranger Among Aliens* by male author nikv19 in the gen category. The maximum number of female characters is 5 (Angelica2001's *Alien* fanfiction in the "genre" category with a rating of NC-17).

In both male and female fanfics, female characters are not silent. Naturally, female characters are slightly more talkative in female fanfics than in male ones, and female characters communicate with each other more than in male ones

(42 vs 15, respectively). However, when it comes to Bechdel's score, we see the following picture (table 3): in female fanfics, two female characters talk about men more often than in male fanfics.

Table 3

Feminine and masculine fanfics on the Bechdel scale

Author's gender	Number of dialogs involving female characters	Number of dialogs between female characters	Bechdel Score
Women's	273.00	56.00	42.00
Men's	158.00	17.00	15.00
The overall result	431	73	57

Thus, a fanfic containing a dialogue between two female characters is more likely to pass the Bechdel Test for male writers than for female ones. Hence, we can assume that the female writers do not well understand what else two women can talk about, except for men.

How much does a fanfic's popularity depend on its gender impartiality? Only 31 of the 143 Alien/Suspense fanfics received 100 or more likes. Only 6 of those 31 fanfics passed Bechdel's test. Furthermore, only 17 of the 31 have female characters, 9 have female characters engaging in dialogue, and only six fanfics have two female characters talking to each other. From this, we conclude that gender impartiality does not affect fanfics' popularity among readers at all.

What do most popular fanfics have in common?

First, 21 of 31 fanfics are slash or het. It means that readers have a request for stories with romantic and/or sexual relationships between characters.

Secondly, 28 of 31 fanfictions have a high age rating from R to NC-21. Slashes written by males receiving the highest number of likes. It suggests that the readers favor male homosexual fantasies over female fantasies about 'how men do it'. In other words, young people apparently prefer to get information and experiences firsthand.

It is worth mentioning that most of the popular slashes were posted between 2011 and 2016, late fanfics that got into the list of 100+ likes mostly belong to the 'gen' and 'het' categories, which indicates a decrease in interest in homosexual themes among Russian-speaking fiction writers in the *Alien/Suspense* fandom, also confirmed by the yearly statistics (table 4).

Table 4

Decrease in interest in homosexual themes

The Year	Number of fanfics by category				
	Het	Gen	Slash	Femslash	Other types of relationships
2011	1		2		
2012	1	4		2	
2013	4	9	5		
2014	4	12	4	1	
2015	5	12	2	1	1

Table 4, ending

The Year	Number of fanfics by category				
	Het	Gen	Slash	Femslash	Other types of relationships
2016	3	7	2	1	
2017		4	1	2	1
2018	5	9	3		1
2019	3	6			
2020	1	1			1
2021	1	2			
2022		1			
Overall	28	67	19	7	4

As we can see, not a single slash and femslash *Alien* fanfic has been posted since 2019, and between 2017 and 2018, after the release of *Alien: Covenant* although there has been a surge in creative activity in the fandom (26 completed fanfics), only 4 slashes and 2 femslashes were published on the Fanfiction Book site then. Just as curiously, the number of the high age rating fanfics has been decreasing over the years (table 5): starting in 2019, only 3 out of 9 were published, representing only 38 % of the total. While in previous years, every second fanfic written had an age rating of R to NC-21, where R, as it was already mentioned, refers to fanfics that contain erotic scenes or violence without detailed graphic descriptions, NC-17 refers to fanfics intended only for adult readers over the age of 17, NC-21 refers to fanfics intended only for adults over the age of 21. Texts rated NC-17 and NC-21 contain detailed descriptions of erotic and sexual scenes, violence, coarse or crude language and other adult content. Authors, in addition to homosexual themes, are tired of erotica and pornography.

Of further note, we observe the same trends in other Russian-language fandoms.

Table 5

Dynamics of reduction of works with high age rating

The Year	Age rating					Overall
	G	PG-13	R	NC-17	NC-21	
2011				1	2	3
2012	2	2	3			7
2013	5	5	4	4		18
2014	4	5	5	5	2	21
2015	2	6	7	6		21
2016		3	4	6		13
2017	1	2	4		1	8
2018	1	4	7	5	1	18
2019		6	1		2	9
2020		1	1	1		3
2021		2	1			3
2022	1					1
Overall	16	36	37	28	8	125

Conclusion

This study does not pretend to fill the gaps of pedagogical science; it only introduces diversity into the methods of upbringing and education of adolescents. This study demonstrates the value dominants and subconscious attitudes of contemporary Russian youth. Directly or indirectly expressed in amateur writing integrated into the media platforms, they let us understand the priorities and spiritual needs of this part of the population. At the same time, exogenous and endogenous factors in the development of the Russian social sphere have disorganized the awareness of family roles by young people (Y-matrix), which is also reflected, directly or indirectly, in the considered amateur works.

A thorough, comprehensive study of various types of online content intended for the youth audience will not only reveal its information needs but also create a working targeted system of educational and educational actions by changing conditions. The study of fictional writers' creativity by the pedagogical community can adjust educational efforts to form family values in traditional Russian society. The results of analyzing fan texts can be used by teachers to develop students' creativity, inclination to literary creativity and reading, and design thinking. The very fact of teachers' familiarity with the problems of fanfiction contributes to the establishment of trusting relations with the younger generation.

Fanfics published on social media platforms, and therefore carrying the potential for viral spread, help to understand the priorities and spiritual needs of young people, and therefore assess the risks and neutralize them. A thorough, comprehensive study of various types of such content intended for and created by a youth audience will allow not only to identify information requests but also to create a working targeted system of educational and educational actions in accordance with changing conditions. The study of the work of ficwriters by the pedagogical community should correct educational efforts to form family values traditional to Russian society and remove or mitigate the contradictions in the worldview of the younger generation, which is formed during the period of global cognitive wars. This is a strategic task of the educational system of modern Russian society.

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Bio notes:

Leila O. Algavi, PhD in Philology, Associate Professor of the Department of Theory and History of Journalism, Faculty of Philology, RUDN University, 6 Miklukho-Maklaya St,

Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0001-5335-8506; SPIN-code: 1165-8610. E-mail: algavi-lo@rudn.ru

Irina I. Volkova, Grand PhD in Philology, Professor of the Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Philology, RUDN University, 6 Miklukho-Maklaya St, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0002-2693-1204; SPIN-code: 4272-3231. E-mail: volkova-ii@rudn.ru

Alina V. Kharchenko, Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Philology, RUDN University, 6 Miklukho-Maklaya St, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0009-0001-8105-892X; SPIN-code: 2475-3139. E-mail: alva.kharchenko@gmail.com

Mariam Jorjikia, PhD in Philology, Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Philology, RUDN University, 6 Miklukho-Maklaya St, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0009-0002-5024-935X; SPIN-code: 7220-9410. E-mail: m.jorjikia@gmail.com

Сведения об авторах:

Алгави Лейла Омаровна, кандидат филологических наук, доцент кафедры теории и истории журналистики, филологический факультет, Российский университет дружбы народов, Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6. ORCID: 0000-0001-5335-8506; SPIN-код: 1165-8610. E-mail: algavi-lo@rudn.ru

Волкова Ирина Ивановна, доктор филологических наук, профессор кафедры массовых коммуникаций, филологический факультет, Российский университет дружбы народов, Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6. ORCID: 0000-0002-2693-1204; SPIN-код: 4272-3231. E-mail: volkova-ii@rudn.ru

Харченко Алина Вадимовна, преподаватель кафедры массовых коммуникаций, филологический факультет, Российский университет дружбы народов, Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6. ORCID: 0009-0001-8105-892X; SPIN-код: 2475-3139. E-mail: alva.kharchenko@gmail.com

Джорджикиа Мариам, кандидат филологических наук, кафедра массовых коммуникаций, филологический факультет, Российский университет дружбы народов, Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6. ORCID: 0009-0002-5024-935X; SPIN-код: 7220-9410. E-mail: m.jorjikia@gmail.com