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Author(s)	Semenova, Anastasia
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“Our girls started to get lost”: How female sexuality is discussed in ethnic talk-show

Semenova Anastasia

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on how gender and sexuality are talked about in one of the national republics of Russian Federation - Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the largest administrative unit in Russian Federation and in the world. Despite a sparse population of approximately 480000 people, Sakha come third in the ranks of highest language proficiencies corresponding to nationality after Russians (99,9%) and Chechens (94%), sharing the rank with Kabardians (86%) (Дианов & Антонова, 2012). This could be interpreted as a sign of a high level of language loyalty. Also, among the above-mentioned nationalities, Sakha people have different religious background from the Orthodoxy of Russians and Sunni Islam of Chechens and Kabardians, which consists of shamanism and Tengri, and which recently got registered as an official religion, “Aar Ayi.” This fact implies that despite the huge influence of Orthodoxy and Russian culture, gender norms in Sakha culture can possess unique characteristics or forming factors.

Moreover, there are indications that Sakha males can exhibit patronizing behavior towards young Sakha women. These tendencies were brought to light by such events as an anti-immigrant rally in Yakutia, which was the largest in decades, with a consequent rise in anti-immigrant harassment following news of the alleged rape of a local woman by an immigrant in Yakutsk in 2019. Reportedly the organizers of these rallies were members of an ethnic-oriented community called “Yc Түмсүү,” which has also been involved in anti-alcoholic raids. During these raids, members of the community allegedly warned young Sakha women against drinking and dating immigrants. These actions suggest a worrying male paternalistic sentiment among some Sakha males, which can manifest in gender-based discrimination against Sakha women. All this forms a need to explore how Sakha women are perceived in Sakha society and what kind of societal expectations are placed on them. By targeting how women are talked about in the ethnic talk show, this study aims to draw attention to intersectional relations between gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and globalization.

2. Previous studies

Gender studies about women in Russia are heavily focused on Slavic Russian ethnos, its culture or language (Киру, 2000; Ashwin, 2000; Войченко, 2009; Ерохина, 2015; Воронина, 2018), sometimes unintentionally presenting results of surveys conducted in Russian language as universal for Russian Federation as a nation, without considering diverse ethnic, cultural and regional factors that exist in Russia.

An attempt to focus on gender representation in non-Russian languages spoken by Russian residents was made by Еропова (2020), who conducted a psycholinguistic analysis of associations with concepts of “man” and “woman” among speakers of Turkic languages (Altay, Tuvans, Khakas, Sakha) in Siberia. Еропова notes that gender stereotypes among Sakha people combine two cultural traditions - Turkic (patriarchal, polarized gender roles, hierarchy among genders) and Arctic (a lot of prohibitions in gender relations). According to

Еропова's study, Sakha people use such indicators as "mother," "beautiful, bright, well-groomed, attractive, pleasant, cute," "mistress of the house, keeper of the household," etc. The work offers valuable insights into associations with binary gender concepts that are shared among Russian Turkic people but lacks information on how those associations are used in relation to social context. Other works that concern gender stereotypes and images of women/femininity in cultures different from Slavic Russian mainly use folklore and literature as research data – for example, Sakha (Хохолова, 2012; Хохолова, 2013; Борисова & Винокурова, 2014; Макарова, 2015; Ефремова & Бурцева, 2021), Kумык (Бораганова, 2015), Nenets (Сэрпиво, 2017), Lezgins (Ветрова, 2016), Khakas (Покаякова, 2019), Avars (Исаева, 2011).

Previous studies show that Sakha women in folklore are strongly associated with being wives and mothers. Макарова (2015) mentions that during wedding rituals, a girl was prohibited to speak loudly, laugh, sing, meddle in other people's conversations; she was also prohibited from unwinding braids in front of men – those are rules she must obey if she wants to get married. Борисова & Винокурова (2014) present idioms that describe a woman as a wife/mother - "honorable madam mother" (күн күбэй ийэ), "mother-soul" (ийэ кут), and others. Interestingly, there is also a saying that "a girl is a destiny of her people" (кыыс оҕо омук анала), which describes a girl as an asset or treasure of her nation, implying that a nation can strive if a woman fulfills her traditional roles. However, the inclination of studies on gender roles and representation of Sakha women (or women of other nationalities) to select folklore as research data creates a knowledge gap, where views on women and femininity that circulate in a social context of life are left mostly uncovered.

A study on the (re-)construction of gender stereotypes and norms among Russian ethnic groups has the potential to significantly inform and improve gender policies, education, and welfare institutions in various regions, revealing patterns or signals worth consideration. Namely, such research could offer valuable insights into the contemporary state of gender relations and the existing challenges surrounding gender issues in national republics. By enhancing our understanding of how gender is (re-)constructed through discourse within these communities, we can identify the root causes of gender-based discrimination and develop more effective strategies to address these issues. This research can also inform the development of gender-sensitive policies and programs which consider the unique cultural and historical contexts of different ethnic groups in Russia. By incorporating these findings into policy and practice, we can work towards creating a more equitable and just society where gender equality is promoted, and discrimination is eliminated.

For a reader, who is not familiar with various definitions that are used to address the language and people living in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), I shall explain the next terminology. In this paper, the people of titular nationality will be addressed as Sakha, while all residents of the republic, regardless of their ethnicity, are called Yakutian. The same is applied to the language of titular nationality – the language is Sakha language, but anything that is attributed to the republic (e.g., media, institutions, etc.) is referred to as Yakutian.

3. Data and research method

The data used in this study is an episode from the popular talk show on Sakha national television channel "NVK Sakha" called "Talban" ("Талбан"), whose author and host is Oleg Kolesov, director-chief editor of

“NVK Sakha” and “Mamont” television channels. The episode was broadcasted on March 22, 2021, with the discussion topic “Our girls started to lose their ways” (“Кыргыттарбыт мунан эрэллэр”) and published on YouTube under the title “Is it okay for Sakha girls to be naked?” (“Саха кыргыттар сыгыннах сылдыаллара сөп дуо?”). It is said that “news reporting is often not a value-free reflection of facts. It is rather a mediation from perceiver to receptor/interpreter. Perception proceeds on the basis of the producer/interpreter’s particular frameworks” (Lams, 2010:101). Same is applicable to talk shows – the host and producing team are responsible for picking up the topic for discussion, which in this case reportedly was chosen because “lately we have been receiving a lot of messages from our viewers, who are worried by growing number of posts, made by half-naked young girls” and “we did not set out to judge anyone” (NewsYkt, 26.03.2021).

The reason behind selecting this data can be explained by its potential to demonstrate how conservative minds view the female body and possibly explain the motives behind paternalism over the female body in the context of such an ethnical minority as Sakha in the multi-national state. Moreover, the talk show is conducted in the Sakha language, which provides an opportunity to study discourse specific to Sakha culture. Additionally, this episode of the talk show “Talban” was largely discussed in the internet media, and it was also followed by a hashtag campaign #talbanism, where several Yakutian women challenged paternalism over the female body by posting their revealing photographs. This is not the first publicly discussed incident of male paternalism over a female body in Yakutian society. There was a precedent when during a videoconference meeting of the republican parliament male deputy made the female Minister of Trade a remark about her appearance, saying that “as a healthy man,” he was distracted by her skin showing in the neckline. This remark was discussed in media not only on the regional level but by Russian nationwide media portals as well and was mentioned by one of the discussants in the talk show.

The study sets the following research questions: 1. How does the media construct “lost” girls”? 2. How does the media construct a desired image of Sakha women? Why?

To answer these questions, multimodal discourse analysis is employed as a research method. Kress (2012) defines text as a “material site of emergence of immaterial discourse(s),” “the result of the semiotic work of design, and of processes of composition and production.” Depending on the agenda of the creator, various modes compose “ensembles” of texts. Multimodal discourse analysis is helpful when one wants to analyze such complex data as a talk show; it’s a view of a language as one of the means for representation and meaning-making. This approach will enable us to see how “lost” girls are represented through not only spoken languages but also through photographs and camera work. Lastly, as this study takes a qualitative approach to the data instead of quantitative, I focus on what has been told and how rather than how often.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Constructing “lost” girls

A viewer is greeted by images of “lost” girls already at the very beginning of the episode. The host (H) is standing in front of the screens that show three rotating photographs of girls in swimsuits or underwear while reading out the script about today’s topic:

1. Н:Инстаграмна саха кыргытара утуктуһе-үтүөтүһе аһаҕастык эттэрин-сиинэрин көрдөрөллөрө сыбыһах анаардах хаартыскаларын устууларын таһаараллара, бу төһө оруннаһый?
On Instagram, Sakha girls, repeating after each other, take pictures and post them, where they openly show their bodies and skin or completely naked - how right is this?
3. Н:Онуоха ама бу кыргыттар төрөппүттэрэ-аймахтара боппотторо буолуо дуо диэн ыйыты
үөскүүр Маныаха кыргыттарбыт буккулан эрэллэр арба дойдуну үтүктэн эрэллэр диэн эр дьон долгуйан биһиэхэ редакциябытыгар тахсах бу тиэманы ырытын эрэ диэн көрдөһүлэри быһа ҕымнахка бүгүн биһиги ол туһунан кэпсэтэбит
This leads to the question, don't the relatives and parents of these girls put a stop to this? These girls are starting to get confused, to repeat after Western countries - say the worried men who contacted our editorial board with a request to spread this topic and we did not leave their pleas unanswered.

First, from this opening statement, it is implied that the discussion issue concerns Sakha girls as a universal phenomenon that is true for most girls. However, the photographs, which rotate during the first part of the show, are limited in number – three pictures of girls are used in the beginning: a private photo from Instagram of a girl sitting on the beach in a bikini (Figure 1), a girl posing in a red lace underwear (Figure 2), and a professionally shot photograph of a girl sitting on the chair in the black bodysuit (Figure 3). Here, the photographs serve as visual modes, selected by the editorial staff of the talk show to communicate to a reader and interviewees an image of what kind of girls are said to be “getting lost.”

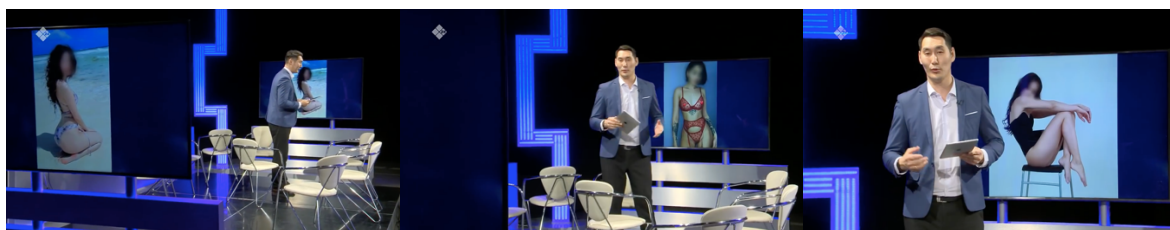


Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

A girl from Figure 2 was introduced to the discussants and viewers through the pre-recorded interview for this episode of the talk show. Before the interview segment with the girl, there were excerpts of videos of her dancing in underwear posted on social media (Figure 4, face mosaic added by the author).



Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

During her interview, the camera work accentuated her appearance with close shots of her body parts with tattoos, black nail polish, and her outfit choices like high-heel shoes (Figure 5-6). She was wearing a black dress that showed cleavage and at the same time, she was wearing silver jewelry in traditional Sakha style.

Her image creates a visual representation of modern sexuality that is frowned upon by the older generation. Notably, both she and the producers worked to transmit this image to a viewer, although the intentions of the two parties could differ – one is set to promote, and another intends to criticize.

The “lost” girls are also considered to be following the “stereotyped” culture of Western countries. The same idea is repeated by one of the guests, psychologist Afanasii (AF), who is also the eldest among the discussants:

<p>28. AF: (...) Ол иһин буоллаҕына эээ син биир буоллаҕына сиитинник хартына биһи культуурабытыгар сөп түбэспэт. Ити арааһыта арбаттан кэлбит сүрээччү буолуон сөп. Ар... арбааныларга баҕар сөп түбэһэрэ буолуо гынан баран бу биһи сахалар төрүт культуурабытыгар дигинэ</p>	<p>сөп түбэспэт. Хайдах эрэ сөп түбэһиспэт хартына (...) That’s why err anyway pictures like that don’t suit our culture. It seems like this phenomenon came from the West, yeah. The We... Westerns maybe are okay with that, but for our culture of Sakha it doesn’t go along well. Somehow this picture does not suit</p>
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The othering of the collective West is also a popular narrative in Russian ideological discourse, often used by politicians to justify domestic and international policies. In this case, instead of marginalizing people with gender identity and sexual orientation other than heterosexual and cisgender, the subject of disapproval is the girls who post photographs that show skin in a desire to imitate the foreign Western culture. The rise of visibility of so-called Western culture in public space in Yakutia is frowned upon by the older generation, who still feel nostalgia for the Soviet period.

The talk show also included a survey of 34 Yakutsk residents, where ten interviewees were females, and 24 were males. Out of 34 opinions, 17 shared negative perceptions of girls who take revealing photos: males stated they would not take such girls as wives, while women answered that they would not take such pictures themselves. Negative answers included an elaborative notion that photographs, which show a lot of open skin, are especially inappropriate for Sakha girls: “I’m against. This is wrong. Especially for Sakha girls,” “I definitely don’t like it. Are they Sakha? Then especially. Sakha girls should be modest (...)” This proves the existence of male paternalism over Sakha girls, as they are put on higher standards and higher expectations.

The next narrative concerning “lost” girls suggests that they become subject to “non-serious” treatment, as was voiced by Gavril (G), a male bodybuilder and trainer:

<p>22. G: Биһи холобур уолаттар кимниин эрэ билсэхпитин иннинэ бастаан инстаграама киирэн көрөбүт Бу кыыс тугунан дьарыктанарый аа тугу сөбүлүүрүй тугу гынарый диэн да ону аа кыыс биэтин манньк курдук көрдөрөр буоллаҕына да холобур профессиональной спортсмен буолбат түгэнигэр холобур фитнес эйгэтигэр тренер өттүн да инник көрдөрөр буоллаҕына конечно отношение оннук буолар. Сурьезнай отношениены кэтэһимиэхтэрин наада кыргыттар</p>	<p>For example, we guys before approaching someone we watch their Instagram, what this girl’s occupation err what she likes, what she does, yeah? And err, when a girl shows herself like that even if she is not a professional sportsman or fitness trainer, if she shows it like this, then, of course, the treatment is gonna be like that. The girls should not anticipate serious treatment.</p>
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Another male viewer (C5) also shared his opinion on what happens with “lost” Sakha girls, expressing his concern over Muslim male immigrants taking advantage of such girls:

77.C5: (...) Итилэр буоллабына бэйэлэрин (...)Those, out of their own belief, when seeing
 өйдөбүллэринэн итинник кыргыттары such girls, they gonna think that all girls
 көрдүлөр даваны бука бары сэлээччэхтэр are promiscuous. And their first thought about
 диэн өй киирэр. Уонна итинник кыргыттары such girls is only to sleep with them. If they
 кытта бастакы өйдөбүллэрэ – хоонньоһор эрэ can't, then they will even retort to rape our
 толкуйдаахтар. Онтукалара кыаллыбатабына girls. And they are gonna be guilty(...)
 күүһүлээн да кэбиһэллэр бую кыргыттарбытын.
 Уонна кинилэр буруйдаах буолаллар(...)

Interestingly, here C5 blames abstract Muslim males for generalization, stating that “they gonna think that all girls are promiscuous” while C% himself stereotypically talks about his collective image of Muslim males. This is an example of racist notions existing in the republic, which resonates with concerns of “white men” losing their women to “black men” (George & Martínez, 2002); however, instead of “white men” there are Sakha males and instead of “black men” – male immigrants from Muslim countries of Central Asia. As the ethnic majority and titular nationality, Sakha people form the host society, and people of other nationalities that are not indigenous to the republic are considered as Others (van Dijk, 1993; Triandafyllidou, 2000; Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008). In sum, Sakha girls are considered to be “getting lost” are those who post their skin-barring photographs on social networks - the act which is considered to be alien to Sakha culture. Sakha girls are allowed to show their skin and their bodies only in case when they are working in sports and fitness-related fields. They are not considered marriage partners and not treated seriously by men; thus, they fail to fulfill their main function – to become mothers and preserve the Sakha nation.

4.2 Constructing an ideal image of Sakha women

The most popular adjective to describe ideal Sakha girls is “modest” (сэмэй, скромнай), which was quoted by interviewees and discussants. For example, the host Oleg Kolesov uses this expression when addressing the photographs of girls, which were shown on the screen as their author and the youngest discussant, Luka Yuchugyaev, joined the talk show via video call from Moscow (Figure 7-9).

58.Н: (...) саха кыһа сэмэй диэн обраһа толоро арыяр хаартыскалар(...)
 (...)photographs which represent well the image of Sakha girls as modest(...)

In his words, there is an implication that a statement of “Sakha girls as modest” applies to all Sakha girls universally. Also, it shall be noted that the host used “modest” as a positive evaluation of this kind of photograph, but revealing photographs weren't evaluated by him positively. Instead, the host used expressions like “honestly speaking, are they even dressed or not dressed at all,” “openly showing their body in a public space,” and “taking photos naked,” which criticize images where a woman displays her sexuality.



Figure 7

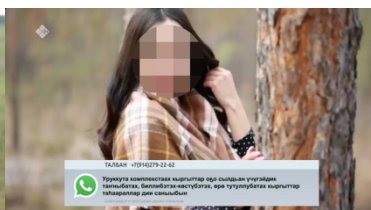


Figure 8

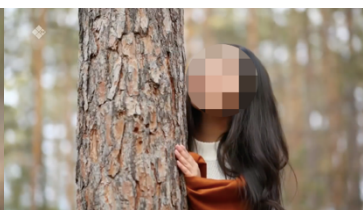


Figure 9

Figures 7, 8, and 9 show an example of what was positively evaluated by the host. Figure 7 shows a girl in traditional attire for Sakha culture – a long-sleeved maxi dress with a mock neck and silver accessories on her head and chest. This attire is worn by Yakutian women only once a year when celebrating the summer solstice, Ysyakh, although in the interview, two men expressed a wish to girls to wear traditional clothes instead. Other girls from Figures 8 and 9 are wearing autumn attires, which cover their bodies, and there is little skin showing. It can be implied that this is what a modest Sakha girl should look like and what kind of photographs she should take – in nature and fully dressed.

The reason why Sakha woman should be modest is explained by attributing her with a task to preserve a nation, as can be seen in excerpts below from a viewer (C6):

<p>85.C6: (...)Ити бу иһиттэхкэ эһиги биһиги кыргыттарбыт саамай аналлара диэн ийэ буолуу уонна омукупутун салвааһын, аймактарбытын салвааһын, ыал хотуна буолуу уонна уолаттарбыт аба буолан эмиэ омуктарын чэчирэтэр туһугар олоруохтаахтарын туһунан туох да өйдөбүл туһунан этиллибэтэ (...)</p>	<p>(...)You didn't say anything about that the highest call of our girls is to become a mother and to continue our nation, our people, to become a lady of the family, and for boys, it's to become fathers and also bring wealth to our nation, and about that, they should live like this(...)</p>
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The viewer states that the worth of the Sakha woman is based on her ability to bear children, which closely resonates with an idea of ethnic natalism (Brown, 2003; Thorne, 2004), where a desire to preserve cultural identity and escape cultural assimilation men reinforce higher standards for women of their own ethnicity and reinstate women's reproductive function as her sole social responsibility. Next, there is also a notion that a girl's social media is not a place for her self-expression but a tool used by men to judge whether a girl is a good fit to become a marriage partner or not:

<p>22.G: (...)бу барыта биир итогка ажалар ди эр киһи ээ кэрэ анаарын көрдүүр оҕолоро ийэ көрдүүр оно эээ кыыс биэтин спуорт өттөтүнэн көрдөрөөхтөх ээ үөрээхкэ тардыһарын да сөпкө ас астырыын көрдөрөхтөөх да оччоҕо онон ити мин санаабар түргэнник ийи уу свадьбалан оҕо төрөтөн (...)</p>	<p>(...)all of this comes to one thing yeah? A man looks for his pretty half, looks for a mother of his children, and here a girl should show herself in sports err how she put efforts in studying yeah? How she cooks right and if she does this then she, in my opinion, can quickly ummm err get married and give birth(...)</p>
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Gavril's point of view reflects the nature of this discussion, where a girl's exploration of her sexuality is judged by a male gaze (Ponterotto, 2016). A male gaze looks for a fit candidate to marry and bear his children, and a girl is deemed fit when she makes efforts and displays her achievements for a man to judge. Overall, the findings of this study on the description of Sakha women correlate with notions mentioned in previous studies – a Sakha girl is “a mother” and “a wife”; traditional gender roles are strongly present in modern society. However, as a new insight, this study offers knowledge about what stands behind reinforcing the idea of “modest” girls upon expressions of sexuality – Sakha girls must respond to her societal responsibility of continuation and preservation of a nation.

I shall note that the audience of this talk show is limited to Sakha speakers and those who still watch television amidst the popularity of streaming services. The ideas and cognitive models shared in this talk

show belong to a conservative older population of the republic, who strongly promote traditional gender norms as a way to overcome anxiety over losing ethnic and cultural identity – a fear that is brought upon by globalization and Western cultures.

While pursuing a topic to discuss the moral point of revealing photographs posted by Sakha girls on social media, the talk show manipulates public opinion by exaggerating the scale of the moral problem. While the origins of the third photograph of a girl in a black bodysuit are not known (Figure 3), it can be argued that it is an example of a professionally shot artistic photograph, which does not fall into the category of “lewd” content, creating which “lost” girls are blamed for. Moreover, the owner of the photograph (Figure 1) criticized the talk show’s producing team for using it without her explicit permission: “I have never taken lewd pictures, and the fact that my photos of me in a swimsuit at sea were criticized, of course, shocked me. Because many people have pictures from the sea where they are in a swimsuit.” (Sakhaday.ru, n.d.) It can be argued that the producers of the talk show “Talban” intentionally added the photo in a swimsuit and put it on the same level as photographs of a girl who intentionally takes revealing pictures as a part of her social media content (Figure 2, Figure 4-5-6), in order to create a visual proof for mass phenomena of “our girls who are getting lost.” It’s unclear why the moral issue was exaggerated to such a degree. Maybe it was to justify the right to control and paternalize a girl’s actions; otherwise, without guidance, she would get “lost.”

Additionally, there is a cognitive model, shared by the participants of the talk show, of an ideal Sakha girl that aspires to become and fulfill her role as a wife and a mother and dresses modestly; otherwise, her desirability as a candidate for marriage and motherhood will be undermined. When it comes to a girl’s intention behind taking revealing photographs of herself is never an autonomous and rational decision, it is either an imitation of Western culture or a desperate desire to attract a male’s attention. From the opening statement of the show, it could be understood that the problem of lost girls is defined by the “worried men.” The act of indulging the “worried men” by opening a discussion on whether Sakha girls should be allowed to post revealing photos or not reinforces the idea that men, indeed, have a right to police how women should express their sexuality.

5. Conclusion

This study draws attention to an examination of how gender norms are talked about in media in the light of intersectional connection with ethnic and gender contexts. The study provides us with knowledge about what males of an ethnic minority expect from their females, what is stigmatized, and what is praised. Particularly, this paper argues that the media exaggerated a scale of the problem of morally “lost” girls to justify the right to subject a female body to paternalism, as girls are seen not as individuals with a right to self-expression and exploration of their sexuality, but as a device to preserve the nation from extinction. Further research is required to investigate how legitimization strategies are used to enforce paternalism over female bodies and women whose behavior is considered problematic and what kind of counter-narratives are brought to resist those claims.

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