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KVN: Students' View on the Game

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Abstract

KVN is the most long-lasting humor program on national TV. Review of the academic studies show that there are different approaches to assessing the role of *KVN* in agenda-setting and forming political opinions in Russia, but most scholars consider the youth to be the game's target audience. The research goal is to find out if *KVN* is popular with young people in the Russian Federation. The article summarizes the results of the online survey conducted in April–May 2023 during which 200 students from Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod and Lobachevski State University of Nizhny Novgorod (aged 19–25) answered the questions on their attitude to the game, regularity and the way they watch it. The young people named their favorite teams, comedians, and sketches. The results prove that though respondents are aware what *KVN* is, the show is of no interest to more than a half of them. Those, who watch the game, do it mostly via the Internet, prefer wordplay, situation, and abstract humor. Teams and comedians who played in seasons 2013–2016 are named as favorites, possibly because of their frequent appearance on TV and social media. Students would like to see changes in the game's format and content.

Keywords: *KVN*, comedy show, TV game, humor, First channel, young audience, media.

1. Introduction

Russian television humor programs entertain, educate, form viewers' attitudes and opinions on different issues. Bounded to national audiences, they are a part of national mentality and culture, a valuable source of information about politics, business, lifestyle, opinion leaders, and topical problems. *KVN*, *Klub Veselyh i nahodchivykh* (*The Club of Cheerful and Smart or The Club of Merry and Witty*) differ in format from numerous Russian comedy shows. It debuted on the USSR First state TV channel on November 8, 1961, as a contest of students' teams which competed in prepared home sketches and improvised jokes. It turned out to be a long-lasting project and is still on the air at prime time. For several decades its participants were not professional actors, but amateur young men who presented collective, social reactions to the main drive" and "action" in the game (McLuhan, 1994).

The prime-time game gained the status of the highest league. Its host has been A. Maslyakov. The day-time premier league was launched in 2003 for less experienced teams who compete to win and move to the upper level. A. Maslyakov, Jr has become its emcee. Since 2016 cable *KVN-TV* channel has been running games from different seasons 24/7. The game was popular with TV-viewers for many decades, but in the early 2000s new TNT comedy programs emerged, the most popular among them were *Comedy Club* (started on TNT channel in 2005), *Uralskie pelmeni*

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(*The Ural dumplings*, debuted on STS channel in 2009) and later Stand-up shows. They attracted young viewers and started picking up *KVN*'s audience.

For several decades people from different age groups and social strata watched *KVN*, but the latest data of Russian Public Opinion Research Center prove that the young generation has less interest in the game than in *Comedy Club*, and the viewers of the game are 35-40-year-olds (Shutki..., 2021). Teams produce good jokes that spread virally and become winged phrases, but it is under question if young people are enthusiastic about the game.

The goal of the research is to find out to what extent *KVN* is popular among Russian students, what *KVN*'s teams and comedians they consider to be worth watching, and what type of humor attracts them. It is of interest if the show helps the Russian youth broaden their knowledge of internal and external politics, daily issues.

2. Materials and methods

In April–May 2023, 200 full-time and part-time students whose majors are journalism or public relations and advertising, from Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod and Lobachevski State University of Nizhny Novgorod (aged 19-25) took part in an online survey that helped to reveal their attitude to *KVN*, find out the most popular in their opinion teams, players, and the most hilarious sketches.

The research is based on analysis of *KVN* archives from its official web site, video materials from YouTube platform as well as academic, mass media publications on *KVN* and rating agencies' data.

3. Discussion

Valuable sources from which one can get the information about the project's first years, creative processes, internal conflicts, and problems are books written by *KVN*'s founders, who shared their memories and vision of the game's future (Akselrod et al., 1974; Masliakov, 2017), and former editors and players, who tried to explain the program's concept and present a classification of its main humor devices (Marfin, Chivourin, 2008; Hotnog, 2015). Those publications are of interest to *KVN* fans as well as academicians who examine the Soviet and Russian laugh culture.

There have been different approaches to studying *KVN*. Scholars analyzed it as a part of amateur movement, a factor of upbringing and socialization of the youth (Kovalyov, 2004; Manukyan, 2022; Ostromooukhova, 2011; Rubekina, 2015), characterized it as a phenomenon of national mass culture and an integrated part of Russian TV history (Buklans, 2010). Russian researchers, who moved to the West, criticized the game for being an instrument of the Soviet, later Russian, state-approved political satire (Semenenko, 2018, 2021), "controlled game" (Garey, 2020: 2) but felt nostalgic for its hilarious, energetic buzzing. Critics assume that as young people play *KVN* the viewers should be their age, but they might be under a delusion. The audience of mainstream TV channels consists of numerous age groups with "social, cultural, and political perspectives and beliefs, which are often very different or even conflicting" (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2020: 238).

In 2017, Latvian analytics in a report for NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, composed on a request of Latvian Ministry of Defense, characterized *KVN* as "a fundamental part of the eco-system of Russian humor (in Russian culture)" and "ready-to-act tool of strategic political communication" which helps the Kremlin to promote their geopolitical interests in media sphere all over the world (Ozoliņa et al., 2017: 96-121). The authors analyzed sketches of team "Parapaparum" (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) which showed, in their opinion, the US politicians as stupid and poorly educated guys who believed in American superiority and underestimated Russia. The report surprised *KVN* management and players who denied the accusations in being political spin-doctors (Akimov et al., 2017; Duhanova, 2017). O.I. Pimenova et al. share the opinion of the NATO StratCom report and consider that political humor in *KVN* is edited and censored to meet the goals and needs of the RF state propaganda broadcasted on TV federal channels (Pimenova et al., 2017: 218). But there are those who think that *KVN*'s humor is sincere, and the players criticize many aspects of Russian politics, economics, and daily life (Evans, 2016: 183-215).

The US comedy shows broaden viewers knowledge on politics and influence the electorate choices (Arkhangelskaya, 2021; Baumgartner, 2021; Droog et al., 2020; Ödmark, 2021), but *KVN* has never seriously challenged the Soviet or Russian political elites or played an important role in

agenda-setting and forming opinions. For that reason, the conclusions of the Latvian scholars seem exaggerated.

There is an opinion that *KVN* is an alternative way to help people get rid of negative emotions (Barashkov, 2018): most entertainment shows have that function.

We all witness that though “television is still the main source of information for most Russians, ... its audience is gradually declining” (Fedorov et al., 2022: 6), and it concerns the young generation. In 2016 Russian Public Opinion Research Center found out that, though *KVN* was the first in the rating of TV humor shows, the respondents aged 18-24 preferred *Comedy Club* (74 %) or *Stand up* (51 %) (Shutki..., 2021). The results of the survey prove that the youth has lost interest in *KVN*, chooses different television formats. It should be considered that “the competition with the Internet resource, which is getting stronger, can lead to the loss of positions” (Yefanov, Pugachev, 2023) of TV projects. For that reason, *KVN*’s key audience might be older than expected.

On September 2021, TNT channel launched a new humor show *Igra (The Game)* in which former *KVN* players competed for 30 mln rubles. The format was different from that of *KVN*: in the first episodes the participants had a chance to present their sketches for 15 minutes, jokes were bolder and more challenging than in *KVN*, sometimes they contained bathroom humor and foul language. *Igra* had high ratings from the start (Komedijnoye..., 2021), but soon was closed despite its popularity. The director general of the First channel K. Ernst expressed a thought that the concept of TNT’s new project was stolen (Ernst..., 2021). *KVN* management disliked the new show in which their alumni took part, but it is not clear what the real reasons of cancelling *Igra* were.

Nevertheless, *KVN* remains popular in Russia. The question is whether it has lost the young audience.

4. Results

In April-May 2023, 200 students, whose majors are journalism, public relations and advertising, from Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod and Lobachevski State University of Nizhny Novgorod took part in the local online survey and filled in the questionnaire. 96 % of respondents know *KVN* and have watched the game at least once starting at the age of 5 (4 %), 6 (12 %), 7 (15 %), 8 (14 %), 10 (12 %), 12 (8 %), 13 (4 %), 14 (5 %). Those who began watching the game at pre-school and primary school periods confessed that were doing it with the family, and parents influenced their choice.

It was surprising to know that more than a half of the respondents have not watched the program for more than three years.

Table 1. Respondents' answers to the question “How often do you watch *KVN*?”

How often do you watch <i>KVN</i> ?	%
I have not watched <i>KVN</i> for more than 3 years	52
Once in two or three months	18
Once in 6 months	13
Once a year	10.2
Once a month	5.5
Regularly. Try not to miss the game	1.3

The results prove that most students have no interest in the game. Thus, people aged 18-25 cannot be considered *KVN*’s target audience.

The survey revealed that most students prefer *YouTube* to television.

Table 2. Respondents' answers to the question “How do you watch *KVN*?”

How do you watch <i>KVN</i> ?	%
TV	9.82
YouTube	58.78
<i>KVN</i> channel	5.88
Recommended episodes on social media	25.52

Students who watch *KVN* on the First or special cable *KVN* channels often do it with their parents or grandparents. Television is not popular with young people, and there is a generation gap between the media viewers of different ages.

In comments the respondents wrote that they see less *KVN* collections or episodes in social media. As networks adapt the content to the users' interests, it is possible that those students who do not come across *KVN* videos, while browsing the Internet, demonstrated consumer behavior that made robots recommend them different forms of entertainment. We might also assume that *KVN*'s SMM specialists do not work effectively.

98 people who have watched *KVN* once a year or more agreed to share their opinions on what teams and comedians they find the best.

Table 3. Respondents' answers to the question: "What *KVN* teams do you consider to be the best?" (an open question, students' choice, more than one answer was possible)

What team/s is the best, in your opinion?	%
<i>Kamyzyaki</i>	26,46
<i>Gorod "Pyatigorsk"</i>	15.68
<i>Asia Mix</i>	15.68
<i>Soyuz</i>	13.72
<i>DALS, Detektivnoye agentstvo Lunnyi svet (Moonlight detective agency)</i>	8,82
<i>Plushki</i>	6.86
<i>Russkaya doroga</i>	6.86
<i>RUDN (Peoples' Friendship University of Russia)</i>	5.88
<i>Raisy</i>	4.9
<i>Dr. House</i>	4.9
<i>Rosy</i>	3.92
<i>Prikaz 390</i>	1.84
No preferences	42.14

Respondents mostly named the teams that became champions and stopped playing *KVN* in the period 2013–2016 but later appeared episodically in jubilee or alumni games. The leading players have continued their careers on TV in different comedy shows on TNT, STS channels or taken part in Russian movies, television series or have become popular video bloggers. The team that finished *KVN*'s career in 2022 is a Belorussian team *Dr. House*. Among their favorites Nizhny Novgorod students mentioned *Rosy*, team from their city they live and study.

As for the best *KVN* comedians, students have chosen those they saw in *KVN* not long ago as well as those who they could have watched in *KVN* only in childhood or middle school (A. Musagaliev, D. Dorokhov, G. Martirosyan, O. Kortunkova, A. Garaev), but the celebrity status, participation in popular shows, frequent appearances on federal channels as well as on video platforms determined the choice.

Table 4. Respondents' answers to the question: "Who is your favorite *KVN* player?" (an open question, students' choice, more than one answer was possible)

"Who is your favorite <i>KVN</i> player?"	%
A. Musagaliev (<i>Kamyzyaki</i>)	18.62
O. Kartunkova (<i>Gorod "Pyatigorsk"</i>)	18.62
A. Garaev (<i>Soyuz</i>)	12.74
D. Dorokhov (<i>Kamyzyaki</i>)	11.76
E. Kesarov (<i>Asia Mix</i>)	5.88
Ph. Voronin (<i>DALS, Detektivnoye agentstvo Lunnyi svet</i>)	4.9
B. Lisevsky (<i>Plushki</i>)	4.9
G. Martirosyan (<i>New Armenians</i>)	2.94
P. Netzky (<i>Prikaz 390</i>)	1,84
M. Razumkov (<i>Astana, KZ</i>)	1,84
M. Karin (<i>Rosy</i>)	1,84

“Who is your favorite KVN player?”	%
Like all KVN players who are <i>Comedy Club</i> residents	7.84
No preferences	42.14

Respondents, who have watched KVN, were asked what sketches they find most hilarious and memorable. Nobody recalled satirical parodies, political performances, or gags. That reaffirms the assumption that students are becoming more apolitical, rely on social media opinion leaders in their media consumption (Badalyan, Gavrov, 2021). Students voted for abstract, Monty Python type, or situation humor as well criticism of the youth’s cultural degradation accompanied by popular soundtracks.

Table 5. Respondents' answers to the question: “What KVN sketches/jokes do you remember find the funniest?” (an open question, students’ choice, more than one answer was possible)

What KVN sketches / jokes do you remember find the funniest (name of the sketch, team, date)?	%
U gub tvoih konfetnyi, konfetnyi vkus (Your lips have got a candy’s taste), <i>DALS, Detektivnoye agentstvo Lunnyi svet</i> , Belgorod. Oct. 26, 2014 (KVN DALS, 2014)	10.78
V detskom sadu (In a kindergarten), <i>Gorod “Pyatigorsk”</i> , Pyatigorsk. Dec. 28.2012 (KVN Gorod Pyatigorsk, 2012)	8.82
Gadya Petrovich Khrenova, <i>Utomlennye Solntzem</i> , Sochi. Aug. 27, 2005 (KVN Galusyan i Revva, 2005)	6.86
Pushkin, Te samye, <i>Stavropol’</i> . Sep. 24, 2022 (KVN. Te samye, 2022)	6.86
Skorokhod zdayet ekzamen po anatomii (Skorokhod takes exam on anatomy), <i>Triod I Diod</i> , Smolensk. Dec. 28.2012 (KVN Skorokhod..., 2012)	4.9
Tanetz vsplyuvayutzhikh pelmenei (The dance of the floating dumplings). <i>Rosy</i> , Nizhny Novgorod. Feb. 25, 2022 (KVN. Tanetz..., 2022)	1.84
Kolobok v postanovke Viktuyka (Kolobok staged by Viktuyk), <i>Sbornaya St. Peterburga</i> , St. Peterburg. Dec. 23, 1999 (Shedevr KVN..., 1999)	0.98
All sketches of <i>Asia Mix</i> (Kyrgyzstan)	4.9
No answer	66.64

The top favorite is a musical performance of a team, which consisted of two players, and could neither sing nor play any instruments but the group found the way out: they incorporated sophisticated remarks into a parody on a senseless hit, and that made the audience laugh. Sketch “In a kindergarten” reminded the students about problems they came across in childhood and ‘horrid girls’ they could have met. Seven students enjoyed wordplay and situation humor in “Gadya Petrovich Khrenova”. That type of laugh culture one could find in *Comedy Club*.

Episodes which highlighted poor knowledge of Russian literature, history, and biology (“Pushkin” and “Skorokhod takes exam on anatomy”) seemed funny to respondents who felt they were smarter than the characters of the performances and knew well Pushkin’s biography as well as his basic creative works. The mix of classical literature from school curriculum with rap music and topical issues amused the viewers. Abstract humor in “The dance of the floating dumplings” appealed to two respondents, and one has recalled a 1999 parody on extravagant theatre director Roman Viktyuk: the archive sketch, the student could have found only on the Internet.

102 students explained why they do not watch the game: the main reasons were – no TV-set at home (51.3 %), have got tired of the format (17.9 %) or “stupid humor” (9 %). That group prefers *Standup* comedy, show *Improvisations* (TNT channel), *Improvisators* (STS channel), and provocative vlogs (e.g. “Plushki”).

The results support the idea expressed by A. Fedorov and A. Levitskaya that “students need to be empowered to critically negotiate meanings, engage with the problems of misrepresentations and underrepresentations, and produce their own alternative media” ([Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2021: 323](#)). There should be changes in KVN to make it more up to the young viewers expectations.

5. Conclusion

KVN has become the most long-lasting humor program in the RF. Launched in the USSR in 1961, as a contest of students’ amateur teams, it has transformed into a commercial project and is

broadcasted at prime time on the First federal channel. With the archives on its official site, video materials on different platforms and social media, the program episodes are available to viewers any time. Cable KVN channel is another option of consuming the program's content.

The answers to the questionnaire, in which 200 students of two Nizhny Novgorod universities took part, have proven that the assumption that the game's target audience are young people might be wrong as more than half of the respondents have no interest in the program. The segment of those who watch the game on a regular basis is small.

Respondents appreciate wordplay, situation, and abstract humor and ignore political themes. Thus, we may conclude that KVN does not influence electorate preferences and behavior of the youth.

The teams and performers that students named as their favorites were active in KVN in the period 2013–2016. Most of the comedians, that respondents marked as their best, have been taking part in popular comedy shows or movies. Students choose opinion leaders and celebrities when asked who they like most.

Students prefer consuming entertainment content on the Internet, mostly on YouTube. That is why the communication channel with the youth should involve social networks. In that context improving and promoting video platform Retube seems to be a vital and challenging problem. The young generation requires new formats of Russian laugh culture.

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