

THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF THE FRENCH GOODS IN THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN YOUNG CONSUMERS

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Abstract

The symbolic approach to the analysis of meanings of goods of the country in the consumer's consciousness of the country-recipient is one of the most relevant in cross-cultural marketing. Companies often turn to: cultural, social, mythological, religious, political or ethnic symbols of the country for the organization the advertising communications with the consumers of other countries. For centuries political- economic, socio-cultural contacts between France and Russia have led to shaping the positive image of the goods from France in the minds of the Russian consumers. At the beginning of the 21st century, this situation begins to change. The author's hypothesis consists of the suggestion that under the pressure of the policy of economic sanctions of France against the Russian economy and the deterioration of the financial and economic well-being of the Russian inhabitants, the demand for French goods begins to decline. The purpose of the research is to analyze the symbolic meaning of the French goods in the consciousness of modern Russian youth.

The research is interdisciplinary and the author integrates concepts, theories and methods from philosophy, sociology, political science, intercultural communication and marketing. The empirical basis is based on the results of a sociological survey among the Russian students. It is also uses phenomenological and post-structuralism's approaches. The empirical materials are based on the results of the sociological surveys of the Public Opinion Research Centres and the author's survey. The author's survey was conducted in April - October 2018 in Rostov-on-Don among students. The number of the respondents is 780 (450 females and 330 males). The respondents consist of the students at the Universities (18 - 25 years old from different regions of the Russian Federation). 3% of the

respondents are married and 97% are single. The 60% of the respondents had the monthly income between 5,000 and 10000 rubbles. 72% of those responding had less than 21 years old. Gained results are analysed by comparative method of analysis.

One of the results is disclosing of identification symbols associated with France among Russians. It is also revealed the measure of valuable of the French goods for consumer behaviour for young peoples. 27% of the respondents cannot identify the national symbols of France. According the opinion of the majority correspondents, Paris is not the capital of the current fashion, and more than 80% respondents do not want to live in France. Results connected with Russian perception and valuation of the list of the concrete food and non-food French goods reveals that 72% of young people recognize the traditional French food goods (cheese, chocolate, perfume, cognac, etc.). Furthermore, majority of young people have knowledge about the top-brands of the French origin. In the whole all consumer goods from France are rated as high quality products. However, the Russian young men and women prefer to buy cheaper, but no less quality from consumer goods from: Russia, China, India, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) countries than from France. The exception is 7% of the young people who prefer to buy exclusive French food goods. More than 53% of young people prefer to buy non-food goods (these are categories such as baby products, cosmetics, perfumes) of French origin because they think that the quality of these goods is higher than from the states of RIC (Russia, India, and China) and.

Author comes to conclusion that the goods from France are already beginning to lose their traditional

symbolic meaning in the minds of the Russian youth. The results are illustration of the process of globalization in the Eurasian economical system when the traditional consumer good from one country (France) is changing with the analogue good from the home country (or closed economic partner-state).

Key words: *French goods, French symbols, Russian young consumers, Cross-cultural marketing.*

1. Introduction

The symbolic approach to the analysis of the meaning of goods of a country in consciousness of the consumers of the country-recipient is one of the increasingly relevant approaches in the cross-cultural marketing. In current international marketing companies often turn to cultural, social, mythological, religious, political or ethnic symbols of the country for the organization and conduct of the advertising communications with the consumers of other countries. Many researchers underline the significant role of the symbols as the non-verbal means of international and intercultural communications between countries [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9]. The key idea of the research is to see symbols as the important means of the marketing communications [10, 11, and 12]. Symbol is able to break down language barriers between countries, because symbol is a material form for transmitting of abstract content [3, 6, and 13].

Today the influence of globalization on the country-image is one of promising trends of cross-marketing research. The core of globalization is the product of growth in world trade and the business activity [14, 15, 16, and 17]. In the globalizing world economy of the nation state has become irrelevant and market capitalism is producing cross-border movements of the peoples and civilizations [18]. So, the epoch of globalization has opened for many countries to unique opportunity to intercultural communication. One of the forms of intercultural communication is international exchange of the cultural brands of the national countries.

After the collapse of the USSR and demise of the socialistic economic bloc, Russia has been open to the influence of globalization in all spheres ranging from trade and economy to culture and education. From the end of 1980th the states of European Union are important trade-partners of the Russian Federation. Particularly the French goods are traditional goods for the Russian consumers. For centuries political, economic, cultural and scientific contacts between France and Russia have led to shaping the extremely positive image of France in the minds of the Russian consumers [19, 20, and 21]. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, this situation has begun to change.

The author's hypothesis consists of the suggestion that on the one hand under the pressure of the policy of economic sanctions of the European Union against the Russian economy, and on the other hand, the deterioration of the financial and economic well-being of the Russian inhabitants, the demand for French goods begins to decline. Moreover, under the influence of increasing competition of goods from China and other countries (primarily from the members of the Eurasian Economic Union), the value of the French goods as the symbols of "un art de vivre à la française" (in the common sense), and as the symbols of high quality of goods (in the narrow sense) are beginning to be get lost among Russians.

The purpose of the research is to analyze the symbolic value of the French goods in the consciousness of the contemporary Russian youth.

2. Materials and Methods

The research is interdisciplinary and the author integrates concepts, theories and methods from philosophy, sociology, political science, history, psychology, intercultural communication and marketing. The author uses phenomenological and post-structuralism's approaches [22, 23, and 24] involving comparative method of analysis. The basic concepts, principles and methods from symbolic interactionism [1, 3, and 25] can find modern application in cross-cultural marketing theory [11, 26, 27, and 28]. Consumer culture theory also served as one of the theoretical basis for research [29, 30, and 31].

The empirical materials are based on the results of the sociological author's survey. The author examined the data collected from 780 respondents (450 females and 330 males) and used structural modeling to test the hypothesis. In this case the author used the arithmetical mean value method. The author's survey was conducted from 10 April to 30 October 2018 in Rostov-on-Don. The respondents consist of the students of the higher educational institution (18 - 25 years old from different regions of the Russian Federation). 3% of the respondents are married and 97% are single 72% of those responding had are younger 21 years old. At least 60% of the respondents had the monthly income between 15,000 and 20,000 rubbles. As qualitative, the research is focused on the description and interpretation of the "webs of meanings" (term by Geertz, [32]) of the symbolic forms of the French goods in minds of young Russian consumers. Gained results are analyzed by comparative method of analysis.

The questionnaire included several questions regarding the national symbols which are associated with France as a study country, knowledge of French dishes and different types of goods of individual consumption.

The research design has main parts. Firstly, the questions were connected with the examination of the symbols of France. The author used the symbolic approach when the correspondents chose the key national symbols of France and the traditional products associated with France. The analysis of different categories of the French symbols can open their meanings in shaping the image of the French goods in mind of the contemporary Russian youth. On the other hand, these symbols have served as a model for examination of Russian perception, attitudes and understanding of the ideas, ideals, concepts and standards of French behavior patterns. In this framework one of the questions of particular research interest was "What does mean (or does not mean) the conception of "the art of French living" (fr. "un art de vivre à la française") for you?" Historically, for Russian mind a model of "the art of French living" has been very attractive and deeply rooted in the Russian literature, visual art and philosophy of life. France was pictured as the country of the high level of comfortable and aesthetic standards of living. In contemporary time this image of France is changing.

3. Results and Discussion

Among the states of the European Union France is one of the leaders of the trade volume with the Russian Federation. Traditionally for the Russian consciousness French products are not simply the objects of consumption but the cultural brands. We must take into account the fact that from the medieval time of Moscow's kingdom to current day France and Russia have been developing the close and permanent economic contacts and trade relations. From old times namely France was served as a culture-donor for borrowing concepts, ideas, norms, standards and values from philosophy, language, art, science, education, diplomacy, science, technology, economy by Russia as a country-recipient.

Remarkably that culture consists of visible and invisible parts. Metaphorically saying, culture can be described as iceberg [33]. The part of the iceberg that we can see above the ocean is only a little part of what is truly under water. In the structure of culture there are some visible parts which are embodied by things people may see, smell, hear, taste or touch, such as language, visual art, music, etc. and some invisible things (ideas, values, beliefs, norms, etc). The hidden part of culture is more powerful. This part is more difficult to identify. What you cannot see are the values and assumptions that can sink your ship if you mistakenly run into them.

Indeed consumer's behavior is influenced by patterns, norms and values which work closer to the surface than the essential cultural assumptions. The majority of foreigners are not able to understand hidden elements of the French cultural iceberg. In the intercultural

exchange between Russia and France the Russian recipients mostly see the visible part of the French culture iceberg. Therefore iceberg model of culture shows that international marketers need to train the cultures of customers in order to satisfy their basic needs [34].

The symbolic approach [2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 24] allows to represent culture of the country as the system of the particular symbols. Symbols are represented the key concepts, beliefs, norms and values of a particular culture. Symbol is the important non-verbal mean of in intercultural business communication between countries [4, 8]. The national symbols of the country play relevant role in the constructing the national identity. In the context of cross-cultural marketing cultural symbols can be seen as consumer brands of the special country [35].

The reactions of the foreign consumers to the cultural symbolic brands reflect their views about the effect of country-origin of the goods. The symbols as the national brands can embody the distinctive characteristics of the associated culture of the country. Such brands can automatically activate its associated cultural meanings. S.L. Levy thinks that people buy products not only for what they do, but also what the product means [36].

In marketing the cross-cultural approach [28] begins by development of the international marketing strategy in the context of national traditions, customs, norms and values in various countries. It intends to emphasize what is country's particular and what is universal. This approach is particular for the preparation and implementation of marketing strategies in different national contexts. The intercultural view also extends to the interaction between goods from a particular national country and consumers from other country. Usunier and Lee, assume that "consumers generate meanings by buying products produce" [28]. Consumer goods are perceived as the vehicles of cultural meanings. Therefore, consumers choose these cultural meanings [37]. A lot of symbolic meanings in marketing exchanges are rooted in culture: they are inter-subjectively shared by a social group [38].

Thus, France is a country with the sum of the well-known cultural symbols represented the special French valuable concepts (beauty, fashion, luxury, prestige, high quality, etc.). The author's survey disclosed the main national symbols of France in the minds of the Russian young people. The majority of the Russians (69%) consider that the main national symbol of France is Eiffel tower. Other responses are: museum of Louver (10%), Arc de Triumph (3%), and Cathedral Notre Dame de Paris (18%). Therefore, some central elements of the French national culture can be effectively using in the means of marketing communications for the Russian young consumers.

In the era of globalization, France is actively trying to protect its national brands as cultural symbols [39]. The gastronomical sovereignty is one of the competitive advantages of the French Republic on the international market. E. Hoffman writes: "In international communication, food discourse is of particular importance" [40, 16]. Among the essential components of the French cultural identity, food is "one of the most universally recognized internationally" [39]. French food is closely associated with a symbols of "the art of French living".

As rule the people often associate the value of the products with national culture [30, 31, 35, and 41]. According the data of the author's survey, the majority of young Russian men and women (77%) like the French traditional foods. It is interesting to note that in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg many highest-rated restaurants have French chefs and offer traditional French dishes. However, in the other Russian cities and towns it is quite difficult to find truly French dishes in the cafes or restaurants. Meantime 64% of the young respondents visited the French cuisine in the restaurants.

The Russian associations with the basic dishes of the French cuisine are: "ratatouille" (42%), "croissant" (30%), "onion soup" (8%), "snails" (6%), "frog legs" (6%), "foie gras" (4%), "baguette" (4%). It is interesting to reveal the myths and the stereotypes about France on the example of the responses on the question "Do you think that the modern French people eat frogs?" 57% of the young respondents answered "it is possible that it is true", 43% of the respondents consider that "this tradition is in the past". Curiously the traditional stereotype of France as the center of world fashion is gradually being destroyed. According to the opinion of the 82% correspondents, Paris is not the capital of the current fashion. 35% of the respondents think that today Milan is a capital of the fashion. Among list of the cities are: London (27%), New-York (17%) and Moscow (3%).

The question of the associations of the products with France gave the results which are represented in the Table 1.

Table 1. The most popular food products of France

No	Product	Percentage (%)
1	Cheese	44
2	Wine	28
3	Champagne	13
4	Cognac	7
5	Chocolate	6

The analysis of the research about the historical backgrounds of the Russian perception and attitudes to the French symbols reveals that in the Russian consciousness the image of France as a society with the best cultural standards and patterns of living has been preserved [43, 45, 46, and 47]. The symbolic model of "the

art of French living" has been operating in the Russian culture at different levels: aesthetic standards, norms of etiquette, scientific technologies to culinary traditions, design, etc. Surprisingly that on the question "What does "the art of French living" mean for you?" the author received the following results. For young Russian people "the art of French living" is represented as "beautiful life" (51%), "life based on consumption only luxury thing" (27%), "paradise life (namely, life without of problems)" (13%). Probably, the nature of the answer "paradise life" is rooted in the old mythological stereotype about France as a beautiful and fairy-tale country which is preserved in the Russian consciousness [48, 49, and 50].

Thorelli and Cheng noted that "people can address their cultural identity needs through increasing liking of brands that symbolize a foreign culture" [42]. The image effect of France on the consciousness of the Russian peoples can be explained by consumer level of knowledge about France, the French people. For many centuries Russian civilization are borrowing words, notions and things from French civilization [43, 44, 45, and 47]. French language, poetry, music, theatre, art, movie, literature are relevant elements of the Russian education system, parts of entertainment and pleasure. 43% of the young people like the French music. The majority of the young men (62%) and women (86%) like the French faire-tales from childhood. According the results of the author's survey in the whole the image of France is positive for the majority of the Russian young respondents (68%). It is neutral for 28% of the respondents and negative for 4% the respondents. Meantime it is interesting fact that more than 80% of the young Russian people do not want to live in France.

In addition to our analysis it is necessary to note that in terms of marketing the home country of the product is used for differentiation of this product. The home-country might influence the consumer's desire and intention to buy this product. Consumers can show preferences for the products of their own country or neglect goods produced in the particular country. As a matter of fact goods and brands are able to make a reputation for the countries in which they were produced. In addition products may be influenced by traditions of the national cultures. The French Republic is characterized as a country of the high-quality products. No doubt 86% of the Russian young people assumes that all products from France have high quality. However, for last years in Russia the financial crisis and as a consequence of the increase in prices for most types of goods led to a decrease in the paying capacity of the young population. As the result, the price of the goods of French origin is high for the majority Russian customers especially for youth.

As we as we mentioned earlier the French goods are well-known for Russian consumers. At the same time we suggest that the goods from France are already

beginning to lose their traditional symbolic meaning in the minds of the Russian youth. Buying the specific French goods depends on the Russian knowledge of the following components: product quality, price sensitivity, product type and price. In the framework of this study we have not opportunity to research all elements of the consumer product evaluations of the French goods. In the author's survey we tried to disclose the role of price and quality in the Russian desire to buy the goods of French origin. These results are represented in the Table 2.

Obviously, the country of origin has potentially positive or negative effect on product evaluations and it is connected with economic and social factors that can assist on purchasing decisions of customers. "The country of origin plays an important role in the mind of the consumers while making purchase decision" [51]. Product quality and price have positive important influences on buying the products. We must take into account the fact that the amount of the Russian people thinking negatively about the European sanctions. According to the results of the author's survey the current image of France after the sanctions against Russia become "more negative than positive" (10% of the responses), "more positive than negative" (28%), "remained neutral" (62%).

The results of the author's survey indicate that young Russians are beginning to pay more attention to products from the EAEU countries and China. We can see that the data of Table 2 indicates that it is possible to appearance the trend to replace the goods from France with goods from the all countries of Russia because of the high price of goods from France.

The following results are connected with Russian perception and valuation of the list of the concrete

food and non-food French goods. Majority of the young people recognize the traditional French goods (cheese, chocolate, perfume, cognac, clothes, etc.). Furthermore, the majority of the young people have knowledge about traditional brands of the French origin. In the whole all consumer goods from France are rated as high quality products. However, the tendency is revealed that the Russian young men and women prefer to buy cheaper, but not worse quality from consumer goods from Russia, China, and the EAEU's countries rather than from France. The exception is 27% of the young people who prefer to buy exclusive French foods of special consumption. More than 53% of the young people prefer to buy non-food goods (these are categories such as cosmetics, perfumes, clothes) of French origin because they think that the quality of these goods is higher than from the states of Russia, China and EAEU. Our survey reveals the measure of value of the French goods for consumer behavior for the young Russian people.

The analysis of the research materials [52, 53, 54, and 55] shows that West sanctions on the Russian economy has the negative effects. In current time EU and USA economic sanctions "have been reinforced by the fall in the oil price, the depreciation of the ruble and other variables, leading to a deterioration of the macroeconomic situation in Russia" [53]. Oxenstierna and Olsson come to conclusion that "geo-political tension, threats of sanctions and the imposing of sanctions have produced a crisis of confidence" [54] between West and Russia.

In turn, the Russia approved some sanctions on imports of particular goods (including food) from some states of the European Union. It is worth to note that the food security policy of the Russian Federation

Table 2. The measure of Russian young desire to buy French goods

No	Question	Answer	
		Country	Percentage
1	If you have the choice to buy everyday food products, you would choose the goods produced in :	EAEU (with the exception of Russia)	10
		Russia	55
		France	27
		China	8
2	If you have a choice to buy food products of special consumption (alcoholic beverages, delicacies, confectionery, etc.), you would choose the goods produced in:	EAEU (with the exception of Russia)	9
		Russia	62
		France	27
3	If you have a choice to buy non-food items (cosmetics, perfumes, cloths), you would choose products manufactured in:	EAEU (with the exception of Russia)	5
		Russia	37
		France	53
		China	8
4	If you have a choice to buy a product from France or a product from another country at a cheaper price, but high quality, from which country you would choose?	EAEU (with the exception of Russia)	21
		Russia	35
		France	32
		China	12

reflects world-view in which “dependence on imports is considered dangerous” [53]. The European Union’s export bans on particular Russian food products are not very crucial for the Russian economy because it was stimulus for the Russian Federation to develop of the policy of import substitution and trend on the innovations [56, 57]. Now Russia looks for other markets and develops cooperation with non-European Union’s trade partners that can be more stable in terms of possible economic and political risks. In international trade for Russian strategy substituting imports with domestic production is not simply the reaction to the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. Indeed, import substitution and promotion of domestic production in key sectors of the Russian economy is an important in Russian politics [53].

As a result of the political and economic crisis, Russia is forced to look for new trade partners in Asia. Thus, the formation and development of Russia’s cooperation within the BRICS countries allowed Russia to expand and increase trade with India and China. Li considers that the cooperation between five Post-Soviet states represents “the basic outlines of Russia’s strategic and decisive “pivot to the entire Asia” [58]. The Russian scholars assume that in future global perspective “Russia’s pivot to East” may lead to a change of its European identity to Asian identity [59, 60, and 61]. With the emergence of the brand “Made in EAEU” interest in goods from the EAEU’s states is growing rapidly. The memory of historical ties within the Russian Empire, the USSR, the Commonwealth of Independent States with the countries of the former Soviet Union (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia remains in the minds of Russians keeping common cultural values and traditions [62, 63].

Finally, and most importantly, to draw attention to psychological consequences of the policy of sanctions against Russia on the national consciousness. As Oxenstierna and Olsson wrote: “As a result of the propaganda, perceptions in Russia are that the West wants to hurt Russia for no particular reason and the impression has been spread that the West wants to see regime change in Russia which has fuelled anti-Western feelings” [54]. Probably, it is the beginning of the process of reducing the positive image of France in the minds of Russians. According the results of the survey of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center 42% of respondents believe that today relations between France and Russia “are rather bad than good” [64]. 13% of respondents believe that in the future these relations between these countries will deteriorate, and according to 36% of respondents these relations “will remain unchanged” [64]. The study of the VCIOM demonstrated a lack of knowledge and a relatively large number of negative reviews among young people [64]. However, these predictions await further investigation.

The results of the author’s survey serve the illustration of the process of globalization in the Eurasian economical system when the traditional consumer product from one country (France) is replaced by the analogue product from the home country (or closed economic partner-state). In conclusion it is important to note that the possible and real effects of politic of sanctions will be most urgent problems of discussions in many public forums, conferences, meetings and academia.

4. Conclusions

- The hypothesis of the study is confirmed. The author comes to the conclusion that the goods from France are already beginning to lose their traditional symbolic values in the minds of the Russian youth. The Russian young people prefer to buy cheaper, but worse quality products from Russia, China, the EAEU’ countries rather than from France. From a socio-psychological point of view, this can be explained by the growth of pragmatism in the minds of Russian youth as a consequence of developing of Post-Soviet society on the road of a capitalist economy. From an economic point of view, this process is due to increased financial viability and decline in the economic well-being of young people. The political and cultural reasons for analyzing this phenomenon are due to the fact in the recent historical period the political and cultural distance between France and Russia begins to grow against the backdrop of aggravation of political and economic contradictions between the European Union and Russian Federation.

- In order to better understand the nature of the transformation in current Russian perception and attitudes to the French goods it is necessary to conduct more wide and deep sociological and psychological review with the Russian respondents. The picture of the Russian value’s system of the French will be draw by various methods and ways. The primary role of this process has the public opinion.

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