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GASTRONOMIC CULTURE IN RUSSIAN INTERNET: DISCOURSIVE SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The paper deals with gastronomic culture in the Russian Internet. Despite the innovative properties of Internet communication as such, its content is often found reproducing traditional semantic categories. These invariables are demonstrated here using the example of gastronomic culture in Russian Internet. In our study we rely on the following methods: content analysis, discourse analysis, structural semiotic analysis, and comparative analysis. The objects of the study are: Internet memes about food, ads by various size retail chains, consumer online feedback, all of them revealing stable patterns and universal categories of thought. In the course of the study we reveal archetypal images and traditional thought concepts that are implemented in marketing communication and Internet memes about food. Comparison of the study results leads us to a range of conclusions. Russian marketing communication that steers consumer behavior, proceeds as the 'parent–child' interaction and relies largely on traditional stereotypes of behavior including gender roles. This model gains support from consumers as low tolerance to indeterminacy is rather characteristic to Russian culture in general, which is compensated for by the model "Caregiving Parent". Today's digital folklore is more focused in its evaluations on the vector of change. Here the value of freedom prevails over continuity and stability; important are also such semantic values as exploration of the new, creativity, hedonism, and individuality. These categories represent the values of the creative culture.

Keywords: Communication, gastronomic culture, gender, Internet, semantics.

1. Introduction

Communication today is largely shifting to the virtual reality. Web-chat and online collaboration create new forms of discourse and novel value fields. One of the popular topics in the digital sphere is food and various situations related to it. In social & humanitarian science, this domain is designated as 'gastronomic culture' meaning the modus of 'human–food' interaction as interfaced by local social cultural environments, which manifests itself in standardizing and controlling the primary need of nutrition, in giving shape to practices of eating as the forms and codes approved of in the given culture (Sokhan, 2013). The gastronomic culture includes both production/consumption and marketing of food, which makes it partially overlap with such value fields as 'consumption culture' (the way of life and how one uses consumer amenities) and 'food-marketing' (a system of promoting food products and related services) that is implemented today via online services *par excellence*.

Findings by Indian colleagues published in 2020 show that purchasing frequency online is appreciably impacted at various stages of retail trade process by: availability of information, consumer satisfaction and communication channel efficiency. Also noted is that proper understanding and management of these factors are what will help online food retailers efficiently win consumer trust (Suhail et al., 2020). In this connection, also of interest might be a study of such instruments as may facilitate management and control of modern man's perceptions and his/her consumer behavior. In paper Xu and Lee (2020) present a communication model of supermarket foodscape mediation in order to illustrate the mediatory influence of supermarket magazines on the formation of food practices and food relations.

In social networks today very popular are discussions of how to lay on a festive table, of related recipes with images of the actual cooking process, comparisons of various restaurants and cafes in respect of food and service. Research indicates the «growing entanglements between the digital and the world of food» (Lewis, 2018). «Food has emerged as a prominent subject in popular culture at a time when digital media is likewise assuming greater importance in everyday practices» (Kirkwood, 2018). Study of the Internet folklore is gaining popularity: legends, rumors and other horror stories related to nutrition problems (Rueda, 2018).

In a study of social networking, its authors identify hashtags related to taste preferences (#nomnom, #food porn) and to the need for safety and security (#vegan, #healthy food, #cleaning, #glutenfree), hashtags that describe one's belonging to a social group (poor/rich, young/elderly, for instance #foodforchildren), hashtags representing one's need for respect and appreciation from others. The latter group of hashtags seems to be linked to cyber-exhibitionism that manifests itself in the fact that young people post online the images of all they eat during a day (#theworldmustknowwhatIeat) (Pozhidaeva & Karamalak, 2018).

Food culture in modern research intersects with gender issues and self-control. Practices of digital self-control in food as a way to restore health are discussed in the papers by Wright (2018) and Lupton (2016). A correlation between digital self-control in food and gender relations is presented in the work by Schmechel (2016). She writes: "QS (Quantified Self) provides a modality to introduce feminized practices into the repertoire of male subjectification and gender performance without breaking Gayle Rubin's "sameness taboo"" (Schmechel, 2016, p. 279). On the other hand, Schaupp (2016) writes about androcentrism of the self-tracking discourse reproducing contemporary constructions of masculinity (p. 263).

A popular media used in online communication on eating-related topics are Internet food-memes. A 'meme' is defined as a unit of cultural data's storage and a way of its transmission, as a "communicative sign having a stable form to contain in it the concept/idea that may be variable" (Lysenko, 2017, p. 410). The use of memes in global communication has increased over the recent decade. Internet memes about food are being shaped within online communities and *per se* are a form of modern 'digital' folklore that is created and transmitted online, has comic effects and various connotations.

Thuswise, gastronomic culture in Russian Internet is represented mostly by marketing messages, recipe descriptions/photos, discussions on recipes and menus, food memes. Despite a few existing studies, there are huge masses of unexplored material waiting for proper investigation and analysis.

2.   Problem Statement

Food is one of the key components of human life stemming from a basic biological need. The process of the latter's satisfaction in a culture manifests itself as a complex system of ideas, institutions and technologies largely lying beyond our physiology. Internet environment is a novel context for human beings where the gastronomic topics of communication are made subject to the network culture logic. Some of the recent studies on Internet communication point out such facts as certain transformations of thought, of values, of the worldview, of perception properties and personal self-representation; traditional social and psychological characteristics are being diffused, the 'actor' of the new reality becomes a 'virtual personality'. Many a scientific conference has dealt with these problems. The subject of gastronomy in Internet communication has also gained new formats, connotations and evaluations. At the background of the dominant opinions on how cultural texts and personalities change in the virtual environment, a new counter-question arises: what semantic invariables can we identify in this case? We believe that it might be expedient to consider this problem using the example of gastronomic culture as the basic component of society's livelihood.

3.   Research Questions

In terms of the present paper, we had to study the visual and textual content of Russian Internet that deal with gastronomy, and to identify the segments where stable patterns of thought are represented. These turned out to be: Internet-marketing of foods and beverages vs Internet-memes about food. A comparison of these two phenomena is of special interest as their respective provenance is markedly different. While the former is a specific occupational field systematically developed and managed by professional marketers, the latter appears to be the result of creative activities pertaining to the so-called digital folklore that has been evolving spontaneously in the networking environment.

As our objects of research, we chose the already mentioned Internet-memes about food found in Russian Internet, and marketing messages by various-size retail chains: online food store "Delikateska" (Moscow and the Moscow region), national retail hypermarket chain "Lenta", Russian "OZON", and Finnish-owned supermarkets "PRISMA" (St. Petersburg). A detailed analysis of this material has given us ground to identify a series of stable patterns of visuality and thought within the framework of the gastronomic culture.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to reveal and identify stable patterns of visuality and thought that pertain to the online gastronomic culture in Russian Internet.

5.   Research Methods

The choice of methods was dictated by the properties of the texts and images under investigation and their respective provenance. Accordingly, for the study of marketing messages vs Internet-memes different research instruments were used.

5.1. Content analysis of online food-stores/supermarkets/hypermarkets

The content (ads and consumer feedback) of online food stores, supermarkets and hypermarkets was examined using the method of content analysis and discourse analysis. The study was done in two stages: empirical and analytical. Texts produced by the seller and the consumer were prepared for analysis and actually treated separately. At the empirical stage of the study, we colleted our data and reformatted them for the TextAnalysis software. Then we did primary ranking of the data resulting from machine processing. Quantitative processing of the web-sites' content revealed the basic concepts and their relations making a thematic structure/semantic network of the texts. Within this structure were revealed and identified notions having the strongest semantic 'weight' and accordingly being the core of the respective text. The final step of the empirical stage was automated summarization of the data with subsequent text 'polishing'. The second (analytical) stage was qualitative analysis and translation of the resulting data to the plane of cultural linguistics, semiotics and analytical psychology.

5.2. Study of Internet food-memes

Unlike marketing messages, Internet memes about food, over and above the text information, places great emphasis on visuality. Genealogically such memes are akin to folklore; this said we decided to apply here structural semiotic analysis methods common for studies of traditional mythology. The analysis has three stages:

- Information gathering on gastronomy, revealing and identifying the key values and functions;
- Determining relations between values and functions, their distribution among oppositions;
- Building up an integral system of values and functions, marking relations between such.

5.3. Comparison of study results data

The resulting data was compared with the results of a structural semiotic and psychoanalytic study of traditional culture texts and marketing communication, on the basis of which a series of semantic constants were identified.

6.   Findings

The analysis gave us ground to make the following conclusions in relation to how imagery and narrative structure of gastronomic culture texts manifest themselves in Russian Internet.

6.1. Supply/demand thesaurus in the food market

In marketing messages and ads, the max. value of semantic weight (100) is usually demonstrated by the names of stores or store chains i.e. they are the core 'topic', which is only logical. Other key topics disseminated by food marketing and having the semantic weight of 99 are consolidated into several semantic groups with regard to their semantic relations:

1. *Company image:* food store, company, personnel, care, product range, products, promotion, promote personnel, increasing the level, degree, preservation, emphasis, quality control.

2. *Assortment of products*: you will like, quality, property, tasty, satisfaction, we give pleasure, shelf life, premium quality, true delicacies, quality of delivered products.

3. *Services*: order, money refund, replacement of goods, replacement at your will, delivery, we deliver, delivery of food, you will get, the moment of delivery, comply with special civil arrangements, loyalty points, payment, order finalization, service, you get the delivery, time of delivery, to offer, I am happy to offer, couriers, price at the store, shop catalogues, no markup, instead of a two-hour journey, sales promotion, client loyalty card, offers, recipes.

The semantic weight of 100 in the narrative structure of consumer messages to the store has the idea of 'purchase order', which is characteristic, first, of online ordering system, and second, in the periods when 'no-contact delivery of goods' is essential (times of pandemics, etc.) The key topics sent through the system of feedback with the weight of 99, are also arranged in semantic groups with regard to their semantic relations:

1. *Service quality*: delivery of my order, several hours, criticism, delivered, order picking, storage, replacement, please specify, tracking, goods out of stock, calculated, out of stock, onsite production of food, quickly.

2. *Evaluation of service agents:* courier, quickly, receipt, polite, thanks, money, customer service, I phoned, application, order picker, I was told, web-site, phone number, the order is delivered.

3. *Quality and properties of food:* taste, tasty, taste and colour, saturated, best before, aroma, I like, I like to add, thickness, depicted, decently, frozen, I revealed, it turned out that, be stored, meat, wrapped up, packaging.

The majority of these notions establish firm links with each other due to their heavy semantic weight; therefore their consolidation also lets us get the feeling of the marketing message rhetoric and of consumer preferences. If the semantic groups of the marketing thesaurus can be, to a certain degree, associated with individual companies, conversely the semantics of consumer feedback ideas fundamentally defy any differentiation and rather reflect the needs of a typical Russian consumer.

6.2. Archetypes in marketing communication

A more detailed consideration of the conceptual system and sub-topic specifications allows us to state that today's consumer leaving comments in the "Feedback" section of a web-site (mostly female – a housewife) appreciates simplicity, usability and fast delivery, retailer honesty, precise service, product taste, product appearance including packing exterior. These priorities are also revealed during qualitative analysis of consumer valuations.

The seller promotes the philosophy of hedonism, economy and cost effectiveness, care for and full satisfaction of consumer needs, i.e. all that stand for consumer 'happiness' in a consumer society. The

concept of 'care' manifests itself in 'special control' of and guidance on healthy/specialized nutrition (incl. vegan, non-gluten and non-lactose products). Such expressions as "You will be the true creator of delicious foods at you own kitchen" places the consumer in the position of a local demiurge in his/her own right.

To these interim results we applied the method of marketing behavior models' grouping by USA colleagues Mark and Pearson (2005) as based upon the theory of collective subconscious and archetypes by K.G.Jung. We revealed that online stores, supermarkets and hypermarkets, in their respective marketing strategies, embody the archetypes of the Caregiver, Ruler, Lover and Creator.

The concept of 'care' is expressed in the rhetoric of 'parental custody' including the fact of 'feeding', providing convenient service, and the ability to hear the customer's opinion. The character of the Caregiver is a symbol of mother/father, family, homemade 'right' food, that are valuated positively. The focus on sustainability and stability that triggers identification of the archetype 'Caregiver', also characterizes the models of the Ruler and the Creator. The Ruler takes on responsibility for product/service quality control, lavishly distributes discounts, bonuses and VIP consumer statuses. His authoritarian control of all processes and his custody are necessary to avoid food delivery disruptions and make the situation predictable. The Creator systematically demonstrates innovative reform and improvement of production processes and services; he invites customers to co-create and directs implementation of creative recipes at customers' kitchens.

Representatives of various types of love are such categories as 'tasty', 'satisfaction', 'pleasure', 'exquisite', 'delight', 'bliss', 'gourmet', 'team'. Links between feeding (nutrition) and parental love, parallels between pleasure of eating and romantic relations, interaction with the sacral sphere through precious offerings (gifts) go back to archaic rituals and ancient mythology.

Demand for such archetypal models in modern gastronomic brands can be accounted for by the fact that for today's man who lives in a permanently changing and unpredictable environment, only logical will be longing for stability, order, love and recognition. And regular renewal, brought about by the Creator, is a prerequisite for a brand's competitiveness and sustainability of the whole system.

Despite the fact that the classification of archetypes used here has been applied to mainly advertising, branding and marketing, consumer behavior may also be a source of individual proto-characters going back to the characteristics of the Idealist, the Explorer, and the Everyperson. It is believed that consumer attraction works better if "your message conforms to an archetype that dominates their consciousness or springs up in it" (Mark & Pearson, 2005, p. 151). In the Internet communication within Russian gastronomic culture we can discern other types of complementarity. We considered them from the point of view of semantic matching; definition of whether these combinations are effective in business terms was not the goal of the study.

The marketing model 'care' addresses the consumer who implements in his/her behavior the archetype of the Idealist. Only the Idealist can organize the environment that is ideal for him/her, where he/she will feel safe, get abundance of everything, and find primeval simplicity and calm. The Ruler, in his turn, will ensure quality control, stability and economy. This notion of an ideal place goes back to the idea of Paradise after which both the Idealist and the Explorer are striving; only the former refrains from actively looking for it and waits for its coming about here and now. No surprise that the Idealist is attracted to the picture of a true, environmentally ideal world, which is important in the context of gastronomic culture. Any nonconformity with this idea of a perfect world irritates him.

The Explorer is focused on discovery, so his communicative model is combined with the character of the Creator, occasionally the Lover. The Explorer is attracted by the spirit of freedom and the values of individualism that are being translated from the Creator. The Explorer is in search of new taste sensations, exotics, and various creative decisions. He is always keen on something, has little time for waiting, so he values the speed of service.

The Everyperson as a consumer appreciates friendship, respects one's dignity and merit, from which follows that he would rather express certain solidarity with the retail company, send thanks to one or a group of its personnel, than complaint. Another of his strategies is to join in the opinion of a group of customers in respect of a product, since his main trait is the willing to belong to a whole or merge with it. The Everyperson avoids confrontation with other types of behavior, due to which he can easily share the standpoint of any other archetype; yet in any of his choices he remains a democrat. People realizing in their behavior the archetype of the Everyperson are unwilling to leave many commentaries online, possibly because they simply prefer not to type them in.

6.2. Internet memes about food: a system of values and functions

Within the system of meme imagery and narratives about food we clearly discern three interrelated thematic blocks: properties of food quality and origin, characteristics of physiological processes related to eating, and gender relations.

The first block is made up of the following binary oppositions: healthy/unhealthy food, homemade food/fast-food, Mom's food/food cooked by "your girlfriend". The right part of each of the contrapositions is more prominent in the number of its signifiers (lexemes). Thus, the semantic group 'unhealthy food' is made up of: sausages, grilled chicken, ravioli, fried eggs, cheeseburger, kebab, pizza, fried potato/French fries, fried pork, cola, potato chips, and the most popular 'unhealthy' food across all Internet memes – nuggets. 'Healthy food' is represented by a limited number of variants: fresh vegetables, fruits, potherbs; the favourite topic here is fresh broccoli/steamed broccoli. Such food is always homemade and mostly by Mom. People eat it in the allowed time of day (during daylight) while the unhealthy food is devoured at night. At the same time the Mom's healthy food is associated with excessive care, while the unhealthy fast-food – with freedom. These characteristics and the ones below shed some light on the age/sex of the authors of Internet memes about food.

Live beings symbolizing gluttony in the system of imagery of such memes are pig, cat ("cats"), and girl. Gender relations in the Internet memes are represented by the traditional groups that follow:

1) males symbolize moderation, have "good metabolism" and good body shape;

2) females are immoderate in their eating habits, have "bad metabolism" and, as a consequence, excessive body weight.

A man is depicted as the 'provider' of food ("I'll bring you spicy wings"), while a woman is the main 'consumer' of it ("I'll like you still better if you order another helping of … for me"). She is the consuming and not the producing actor, therefore occasional women's attempts at culinary are estimated by men as unsuccessful; at the same time a young female willingly eats all what her man has procured, which places her in the dependent position within the 'male' folklore. In the context of a pandemic we observe the following modifications of this story: a man's power over a woman is ensured by both a supply of food for several years and by his ownership of a bunker-ark as a place of rescue and seclusion.

This system of images and narratives in today's Internet memes about food reproduces a number of traditional motives. Similar values were found and identified by Levy-Strauss (2006) when he studied South American myths. Here are some of the key oppositions. Homemade boiled food (cooked in hollow kitchenware) is the symbol of culture; out of door eating of food broiled on a spit in open fire is the symbol of nature and forest life. The very instruments of cooking (kettle/pan – spit) stand as the symbols of the 'female' and the 'male' (similar connotations found in other cultures). Another pair of meanings that represents culture and nature is the 'raw' and the 'cooked'. Eating raw products without measure is ascribed to a mythological character - woman-cannibal that sticks to a man's back and parasitizes on him gradually sucking his life out.

Since we would be quite right in assuming that most of the authors of Internet memes have never had any detailed acquaintance with the four volumes of Levy-Strauss' "Mythologies", a more justified conjecture is that the fact that we find a similar system of meanings and relations in the Internet folklore might be the result of unperceived creativity, a product of the collective unconscious. Internet memes as artifacts of modern folklore broadcast in the Russian Internet via WWW, represent the traditional logic based on binary oppositions such as indoor – out of door, female – male, moderate – excessive, raw – cooked, etc., to which are added important for the gastronomic culture imperatives like healthy – unhealthy, i.e. are archetypal in their basis.

7. Conclusion

Analysis of digital gastronomic culture has revealed a range of basic components metaphorically represented in marketing messages and Internet memes about food. These invariables can be arranged in two groups as follows: the first one demonstrates low tolerance to indeterminacy Geert Hofstede's classification (Hofstede et al., 2010) and represents tradition, while the second one shows high tolerance to and positive attitude towards novelty. In each of the studied segments (ads and Interned memes) we find terms from both groups, but one of the tendencies seems to prevail.

The first of the two information fields is represented by meanings identified as the archetype 'Care'. These are ideas and images denoting home, stability, protection, control, continuance. The core component in this chain – parental love – is represented by the characters of the Ruler, Caregiver, and Mother. In Russian culture the figures of the Ruler and the Caregiver merge with the archetype of 'Czar the Father' that, like the Mother, is traditionally associated with the act of feeding. Russian marketing communication that effectively steers consumer behaviour, realizes the parent–child relations and largely relies on traditional patterns of thought, including gender roles. This model gains approval and support from the other communicant (consumer) because low tolerance to indeterminacy is characteristic to Russian culture, which is counterbalanced by the 'Caring Parent' archetype.

Whereas a typical supermarket consumer is represented by different age groups, the author and disseminator of Internet memes about food is a young person who values the lack of determinacy in his/her life. Gender relations reflected in the memes also reproduce traditional models of eating behaviour; on the other hand, if such topics were disseminated in the context of the European or North American cultures they would inevitably be subjected to a 'feminist censorship'. Modern digital folklore is more oriented in its valuations to the vector of change. Here the value of freedom prevails over continuance and stability. The

second semantic group, with the figure of the Creator standing in its centre, is made up of such meanings as freedom, exploration, creativity, hedonism, change and individuality. These notions represent the innovative type of society and the values of the creative culture. The very dichotomy 'tradition – novelty' represented by the two semantic models and types of Internet communication, ensures sustainable development of any system if the members of the opposition are balanced optimal.

Acknowledgments

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