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**METAPHOR-BASED RESEARCH FOR STUDYING RUSSIAN AND
CHINESE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

The potential competition between the emotional and cognitive components of marketing communications is an important issue within the process of ad's content designing and planning of brand communication system both for a commercial company, and for a modern university. Traditional research as a part of educational marketing is almost exceptionally verbal and linear, although there is often a serious mismatch between the verbal data and the multisensory language of the university's brand communications. Therefore, a need for a technique to elicit students' feelings, emotions and attitudes toward the university is significant. The modern projective and psychosemantic research techniques in education could provide vital information on students' perception of the university's image. The article discusses the results of the Metaphor-Based research of Russian and Chinese students' perception and attitude toward the university. The study was carried out on a base of the modified Zaltman Metaphor-Based technique at Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University. To process the results, the semantic differential technique was used to reveal the unconscious attitudes of the respondents. The study showed that Russian and Chinese respondents perceive the university's image as strong, active and evaluate it positively. The modified Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) helps to reveal the visual and synonyms and to understand students' thinking and behavior toward the university and its brand activities. The study results can be applied to the process of designing and honing communication activities of the university, aimed at the various groups of the students within the multicultural educational environment.

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Keywords: Brand communications, semantic differential, students' emotional attitude to the university, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET).



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1. Introduction

Universities, both in Russia and around the world, in recent years have begun to compete intensely for students. Nowadays an applicant can enter higher education institutions everywhere in the world. Modern universities compete with alternative education systems and forms: distance learning courses (Shearer et al., 2020) and corporate universities (Razinkina et al., 2018). Every university strives to attract the best students from the foreign countries as a response to the increased requirements of its marketing policy and global challenges (Pokrovskaia et al., 2019). Thus, China as a supplier of students for Russian universities is an attractive partner, and although the number of Chinese students in Russian universities has increased doubly in the last decade (according to the Xinhua News Agency with the reference to the Center for Sociological Research at the Ministry of Science and Higher education of the Russian Federation), at the moment only 2% of Chinese students studying abroad have chosen Russia. A recommendation to Russian universities to intensify their efforts to attract Chinese students is advised in the report published on the website of the Russian Council on Foreign Affairs (“The number of Chinese students...“, 2018).

The most important factor that affects the process of choosing a university to study abroad is the image of a particular university among students, its academic reputation and its position in World University Rankings (Fersman et al., 2017). Many universities in the world launch Chinese-language versions of their official websites to promote their educational programs and Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University is no exception. Currently, more than 2,000 Chinese students are attending various basic educational programs and pre-university courses to meet the university’s entry requirements. Chinese students’ feedback and references based on their perception of the university, as well as the Russian students’ explications, can be helpful for the university’s advertising campaign and the brand strategy reinforcement.

2. Problem Statement

The issue of foreign students’ adaptation for many decades has been in the limelight of educational marketing research (Antonova, 2013). To organize effective students’ assistance during their studying at the Higher School of International Educational Programs and after the pre-university courses, several studies were conducted on the basis of sociological surveys, including Chinese language questionnaires (Hunt, 2005; Piskun et al., 2018; Varzin et al., 2014).

However, as the experience of the research interaction with Chinese respondents shows, for various reasons such as features of national psychology, poor Russian command, inherent caution in verbal contacts with the university’s representatives, those verbal surveys proved to be challenging both to the researchers and the respondents (Jumardi, 2020; Shipunova et al., 2017; Stroganova et al., 2019). Moreover, these studies are often very superficial due to the respondents’ furtiveness and tendency to hide their true motives and feelings even without the pressure of language barrier (Sachkova & Esina, 2020).

Furthermore, different psychological studies revealed the fact that communication contains only 20% of verbal information. Experts estimate that people use about six metaphors per a minute of

conversation. Consequently, metaphors can help the foreign respondents to express important, but unconscious thoughts and feelings, that could be stimulated by sounds, touches, movements, background feelings (mood, emotions), peripheral images, colors, etc. (Padgett & Allen, 1997).

3. Research Questions

The central research question of the presented study was to reveal the main metaphors ascribed to the university by Russian and Chinese students and to find the differences in the students' perception of its everyday image. The study of Russian and Chinese students' attitudes toward the university based on The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) was embarked in the framework of the Business Communication discipline in December 2019. Students between the ages of 19 to 21 took part in the survey. The sample of Russian students consisted of 68 respondents; the overall number of Chinese students participating in the study was 67. All Russian and Chinese students, to one degree or another, contacted with Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University's marketing communications activities during the admission campaigns and decided to choose this particular university among other universities of the region.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to identify the core analogies and similes basing on the images, presented by Russian and Chinese students, to assess their emotional attitude toward the university, and compare the results between people from different cultures.

The respondents were given a preliminary task to select and bring an image that would most closely depict their personal feelings and perception of "My University" connotation. The researchers set the initial condition that the participants should work independently during the process of searching for the appropriate photos and images to convey visually what the university emotionally means to them.

5. Research Methods

The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) as a qualitative method allows to "probe" a person's subconscious with the sets of specially selected pictures that provoke an emotional response and activate hidden visual and other sensory images to elicit metaphors and mental constructs to provide deeper understanding of consumers' drivers and behavior as a starting point to tailor advertising, branding and various marketing-mix decisions. This technique reveals not only metaphors, but also the hidden impetus and incentives that lead to a certain consumer actions through the processes of nervous activity (Hancock & Foster, 2019). Being non-linear and nonverbal qualitative technique the ZMET helps to extract what a consumer himself has no idea about, but still those latent stimuli render a decisive influence on a client's thoughts, actions and intentions (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

As the images were collected and identified, the graphic schemes are constructed to form the basis for a strategy of interacting with the consumers and to design a communication network both verbal and non-verbal (type, color, shape, sound, tactile sensations, smell, taste, motor reactions, etc.) to fit better to

the consumer's requirements and to improve existing products, advertising, brand (Khoo-Lattimore, 2015).

5.1. Description of the original research procedure according to the ZMET technique

In the original version of the ZMET procedure, respondents from the target audience are given the task to select and bring photographs or pictures to the guided interview to elicit their inner feelings regarding "Product / Service N". These pictures should not be directly linked to a specific product or a service, but have to represent and to shape a person's thoughts and feelings about a product or a service under review. The ZMET technique helps to understand the respondents' emotional attitude to a product or a service more deeply than the classic verbal methods, such as traditional interviews and focus groups. In addition, a significant part of people has a difficulty in describing their emotions verbally (Poyatos, 1993). Modern neuromarketing research shows that nonverbal communication is dominant and nonverbal signals are preferred more than verbal ones. The consumer's choice or a particular purchase solution tend to be influenced by the contextual environment, latent or emerging needs, as well as the previously presented incentives (priming effect). Therefore, understanding the emotionally-shaped component of the consumer's attitude to a product is critically important in the process of creating coherent advertising campaign.

Thus, decoding visual images helps to understand consumer thinking, decision making and behavior related to the products and services much better than the verbal techniques. The selected picture serves as a starting point for identifying words, phrases and metaphors that explain the perception of the product and helps to shape communication mix.

5.2. Adaptation of the ZMET technique to study the students' attitude toward the university.

For studying Russian and Chinese students, the original ZMET procedure was modified. Along the lines of the original technique, the respondents were instructed to bring a picture that fully expressed their feeling toward the university. Then, the respondents were asked to give their picture a name, comment on it and describe the core emotion that this picture represented. Though this truncated research procedure allows to reveal less metaphors from a respondent than the original ZMET, but it allows to cover a larger sample in a shorter period of time.

5.3. Processing the responses of Russian and Chinese students

The purpose of the original ZMET technique is to highlight the core metaphor of the product shared by a target group of respondents. In this study, the respondent's emotional attitude to the object of study was expressed in one word. It could be a term or a notion that was repeated most often in the picture's description, or a word describing the general impression of the picture, its name and a comment on it. In the second stage, the received notions were grouped into 16 general categories (a procedure similar to content analysis). These 16 categories represented 8 bipolar scales as follows:

1. Vitality (potential energy, creativity, determination, strength) – Decline (fading, extinction, decay).
2. Pleasure (extracurricular activities, entertainment, delight) – Discontent (frustration, dissatisfaction, displeasure).

3. Cohesion (unity, harmony, integrity) – Alienation (disunity, exclusion, dissociation).
4. Power (success, leadership, achievement) – Powerlessness (impotence, weakness disability).
5. Affiliation (traditions, history, connections) - Lack of tradition.
6. Individuality (personal identity, self-determination, distinction) – Mass (anonymity, impersonality).
7. Control (stability, regulation, grip, “cold” mind) – Uncontrollability (inability to control, slackness).
8. Security (safety, transparency, the absence of conflicts with the outside world) – Insecurity (exposure, vulnerability).

These bipolar scales coincide with the dimensions of the semantic differential pioneered by Ch. Osgood: evaluation, strength, activity (Rosenberg & Navarro, 2018). According to Ch. Osgood, the semantic differential deals primarily with the emotional response to the quality aspects of the reviewed object, and at least, to the cognitive and behavioral reactions (Pokrovskaja et al., 2018). Below 8 bipolar scales are presented, which were assigned to three dimensions of Ch. Osgood’s semantic differential (Table 01).

Table 01. Bipolar scales assigned relevantly to three dimensions of Ch. Osgood’s semantic differential

Semantic differential dimensions	Scale	
	Positive antonym	Negative antonym
1. Strength	Affiliation	Lack of tradition
	Control	Uncontrollability
	Security	Insecurity
2. Evaluation	Pleasure	Discontent
	Cohesion	Alienation
	Individuality	Mass
3. Activity	Vitality	Decline
	Power	Powerlessness

The proposed set of the bipolar adjectives within Osgood’s semantic differential (Verhagen et al., 2015) helps to measure students’ attitudes expressed by visual means, so a wide range of unconscious stimuli can be examined on the stage of data processing.

6. Findings

6.1. Russian students’ emotional attitude toward the university

The results of the study on the emotional attitude of Russian students toward the university in dimensions of the semantic differential are presented in Figure 01.

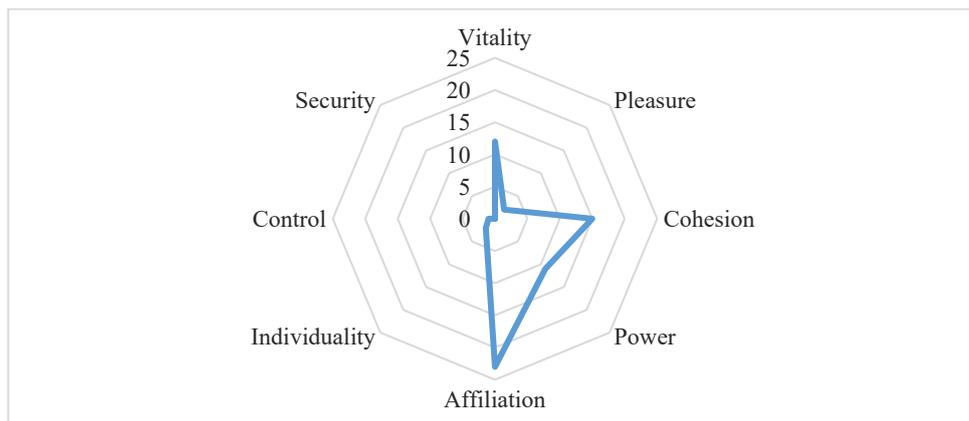


Figure 01. Russian respondents' answers describing their emotional attitude toward the university

As can be seen from fig. 01, the “Affiliation” scale is more pronounced and rigorous than other scales expressed by the images, 23 respondents (33.8%) brought in images that connote the historical heritage of the university. Russian students perceive their university as a place where the traditions and history are strong, this scale refers to the Strength dimension of the semantic differential (Figure 02).



Figure 02. Images representing the scale “Affiliation” (photos published by permission of the respondents)

The main vocabulary, used in the comments during the interview, were following: “A beautiful, majestic, appealing, attention-drawing building that evokes warm, partly domestic emotions and feelings”, “Classic. Superior higher education institution. Successful, famous, rich cultural and scientific heritage”, “Knowledge, power, history, traditions”.

The “Cohesion” scale took the second place among all results, 15 respondents chose the pictures concerning their integrity with the student community (22.1%). The results show that the respondents feel involved in the life of the university, emotionally attached to it, feel it “like at home” to some extent. The main vocabulary in the comments on the selected images was: “Communication. Intercourse with the classmates and friends at the university. Joy”, “Unity. A large and committed team sharing the same values from all over the world”, “My university. Positive. Meeting with friends before class”. This scale contributes to the “Evaluation” dimension of the semantic differential.

The third place was taken by the “Vitality” scale. 12 respondents (17.6%) chose pictures that unveiled their perception of the university as a place where they could implement their potential, dreams and opportunities. The vocabulary commenting on the selected images was as follows: “Gratitude. Gaining knowledge, an interesting student path, friends, opportunities”, “Self-development. The

opportunity to improve and develop. Various competitions, festivals, practice”, “For me, to study at the Polytechnic University is an achievement, and after the graduation I will succeed in my career. Emotions: joy, happiness, satisfaction, relaxation”.

Another 11 respondents (16.2%) in pictures expressed their latent feelings that the university offered an opportunity to achieve leadership in the chosen field (the “Power” scale).

Only 2.9% respondents specified the negative associations with the university on the scale of “Security - Insecurity”.

Thus, it could be concluded that the factors of “Strength” and “Activity” dimensions dominate in the Russian students’ emotional assessment of the university image. The university is perceived as a place with the strong traditional roots, where every student can find many ways to self-actualization, fulfilment and success in life. The “Evaluation” dimension takes the third place and is mainly represented by the “Affiliation” scale demonstrating the sense of community and integrity with the university.

6.2. The emotional attitude of Chinese students toward the university

According to the aforementioned research ideology based on the adapted ZMET technique, the study of the Chinese students’ attitude toward Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University was carried out. The students who took part in the survey attended International and Regional Studies bachelor's program and had a moderate level of Russian language proficiency.

The analysis of the obtained images, as well as the lexical material, showed the following: the “Affiliation” scale proved to be the most significant indicator for Chinese students on the “Strength” dimension of the semantic differential (34% of all respondents' answers), Figure 03.

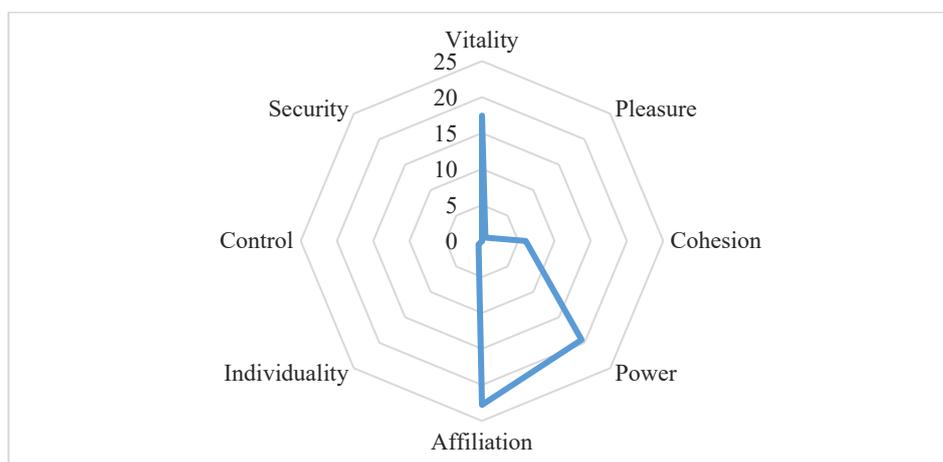


Figure 03. Chinese respondents' answers describing the emotional attitude toward the university

The main vocabulary used in the comments to the selected images were as follows: “Many university students come from all over the world and that fact allows them to get along better with different cultures”, “The main building is very beautiful in the sunlight”, “Students in the picture represent hope for the future”, “ Powerful and engaging educational atmosphere”.

The examples of images selected by Chinese students are shown in Figure 04.



Figure 04. Images selected by Chinese students (photos published by permission of the respondents)

The indicators of the “Activity” dimension of Ch. Osgood’s semantic differential are clearly pronounced (the “Vitality” and “Power” scales received 26% and 29% respectively). These results were predictable due to the Chinese national mentality (Shipunova et al., 2017). The “Evaluation” dimension of the semantic differential has the third place (the positive synonyms of the “Cohesion” scale has 9% of respondents' answers). The remaining scales have less than 2%. It is important to note that Chinese students mentioned the multicultural environment and the international aspects of their learning process more commonly than their Russian colleagues.

7. Conclusion

Thus, it may be inferred that Russian students’ emotional attitude toward the university is determined by the dimensions “Strength” (scale “Affiliation”, positive synonyms) and “Activity” (positive synonyms of the “Vitality” and “Power” scales).

Chinese respondents perceive the university image as traditional, classic, strongly linked to the history and science, active (contributing to the students’ potential and achievements of leadership) and thus evaluate it positively. However, Chinese students’ answers do not indicate the “Unity” scale as a fundamental factor in the development of their relationship with the university (Figure 05).

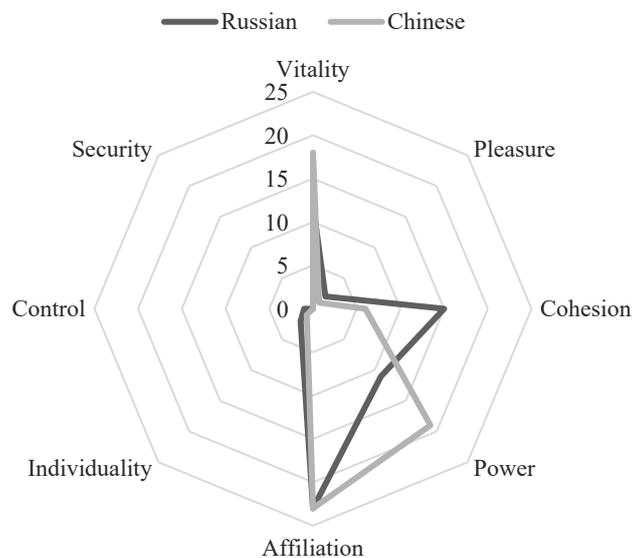


Figure 05. Comparison of Russian and Chinese students’ attitude research results

It is interesting that both Russian and Chinese students expressed a minimum of their emotional attitude toward the university through the “Pleasure” and “Individuality” scales, despite the large number of extracurricular events held at the university nowadays. It is obvious that the tailoring the individual educational trajectories and learning pathways to Russian and Chinese students will require to engage their sense of personal identity to develop the “Individuality” scale. It should also be noted that the “Security” scale should be worked over through the different promotional activities of the university’s international advertising campaign. In our opinion, emphasis in marketing communications with Chinese applicants should be accented on safety and security at the university during their future study.

Thus, the Metaphor-Based Research Technique based on the adapted Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) and applied to the study of Russian and Chinese students showed its usefulness and can expand verbal marketing research tools traditionally used in the educational field up to the non-verbal association level.

The advantages of the Metaphor-Based Research Technique in education should be considered as follows:

- The opportunity to get insights from foreign students about the brand of the university and its positioning and image in the way of associative line. Poor Russian language command often does not allow foreign students to be specific and to express accurately their feelings and emotions verbally. Evidently using both nonverbal and verbal technique could close the gaps between foreign students’ feelings and their Russian command.
- Considerable potential from educational and communication point of view based on the understanding and identifying the emotional characteristics of the university image and brand by different ethnic groups and cultures. The language barrier, cultural differences can be the reasons for the immunity of foreign students to the university’s marketing communications. Using the Metaphor-Based Research Technique allows to identify metaphors and unconscious inexpressible feelings and adjust marketing communications of the university to market realities unique to the various countries and cultures.

The Metaphor-Based Research Technique could help to reveal latent emotional response to the particular educational services and the university’s brand in general.

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