

“How Global Conflicts Shape Consumer Behavior : A Marketing Study of the Russia-Ukraine War”

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Abstract- Armed conflicts not only reshape geopolitics but also alter consumer decision-making, loyalty, and market dynamics. The Russia-Ukraine war (2022–present) created one of the largest modern disruptions in consumer markets, as more than 1,000 multinational corporations—including globally recognized names such as McDonald’s, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, Nike, and IKEA—suspended or terminated operations in Russia. This mass withdrawal effectively transformed Russia into a live case study of forced market adaptation, as everyday consumption habits were abruptly destabilized. This paper examines how Russian consumers responded to the disappearance of these global brands, with attention to substitution choices, price-versus-prestige trade-offs, and the growth of local and Asian alternatives. Drawing on secondary data from Statista, Euromonitor, Reuters, and Yale CELI, the study traces shifts in consumer sentiment, market shares, and purchasing priorities across the fast-food, retail, apparel, and beverage sectors. Findings reveal that consumer loyalty, traditionally considered durable, was highly elastic under geopolitical pressure. Russian consumers largely prioritized functionality and affordability, enabling domestic firms such as Vkusno i Tochka and Chernogolovka, as well as Chinese apparel and electronics brands, to expand rapidly. Although nostalgia for Western products persisted, pragmatic needs outweighed symbolic attachments. The study underscores the importance of adaptive strategies for marketers, showing that crises demand localization, resilient supply chains, and flexible brand positioning. For multinationals, the Russian case highlights the risks of overdependence on politically sensitive markets, while domestic players benefited from opportunities to build loyalty during a period of forced transition. Key findings of consumer behavior adaptation in Russia during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Source: Compiled by author using secondary data from Statista(2023), Reuters(2022) and Euromonitor(2022).

Keywords - Armed conflict, Consumer behavior, Market adaptation, Geopolitical impact, Brand loyalty.

I. INTRODUCTION

Marketing scholarship has long highlighted the role of brand equity as a strategic asset, emphasizing its ability to create differentiation, foster trust, and secure customer loyalty. Foundational theorists such as Aaker (1991) and Keller (2001) positioned brand equity as a stable driver of consumer preference, resilient even in competitive or uncertain conditions. Under normal market circumstances, these qualities often render established brands seemingly irreplaceable. However, global crises—whether economic downturns, health emergencies, or geopolitical conflicts—can expose the limits of this resilience, testing whether loyalty is genuine or conditional.

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in February 2022, provides one of the clearest real-world disruptions to established consumer-brand

relationships. In response to sanctions, reputational risks, and stakeholder pressure, more than 1,000 multinational companies—including McDonald’s, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nike, Adidas, and IKEA—withdrew or suspended operations in Russia (Yale CELI, 2022; Reuters, 2022). This mass exit not only removed familiar products from a market of over 140 million consumers but also disrupted daily consumption routines that had become culturally embedded since the 1990s.

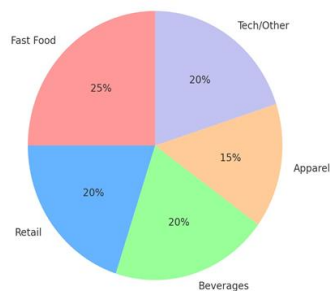
The consequences were particularly evident in consumer-facing sectors such as fast food, retail, beverages, and apparel, which experienced sudden and large-scale supply disruptions. The departure of McDonald’s, for example, was more than the closure of a restaurant chain; it represented the loss of a symbol of Russia’s post-Soviet integration into global capitalism. Similarly, brands such as Coca-

Cola and Nike carried aspirational value that extended beyond their functional use. Their sudden withdrawal left both practical shortages and a cultural gap.

As shown in figure A2 fast food, retail, beverages and apparel were the most heavily disrupted, illustrating the scale of consumer impact.

Source: Yale CELI (2022) and Reuters (2022)

Figure A2 Sectors Most Affected by Western Brand Exits in Russia (2022)



At the same time, this crisis created fertile ground for domestic and Asian firms. Companies such as Vkusno i Tochka, which rebranded former McDonald's outlets, and beverage producer Chernogolovka capitalized on the opportunity to expand market presence. Chinese apparel brands like Li-Ning and Anta, as well as digital retailers such as Shein, also moved to fill the void with affordable alternatives. These developments prompt a critical question: how do consumers adapt when familiar global brands vanish almost overnight?

This research frames the Russia–Ukraine conflict not only as a geopolitical crisis but also as a natural experiment in consumer behavior. It seeks to explore four interrelated questions:

- **Brand Loyalty:** To what extent do consumers maintain attachment to brands during external shocks?
- **Substitution:** Which types of alternatives—domestic, regional, or Asian—are most readily accepted?
- **Price vs. Prestige:** In times of scarcity, does affordability outweigh symbolic or emotional brand value?

- **Strategic Implications:** What lessons can marketers derive from consumer responses in disrupted markets?

Using secondary data from Statista, Euromonitor, Yale CELI, Reuters, and corporate disclosures, the paper examines changes in market share, consumer sentiment, and purchasing behavior. By situating the Russian case alongside broader crisis literature, the study contributes both theoretical insights into the fragility of brand loyalty and practical guidance for firms operating in volatile environments. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that consumer behavior is dynamic, context-sensitive, and deeply shaped by external shocks.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Behavior under Crisis

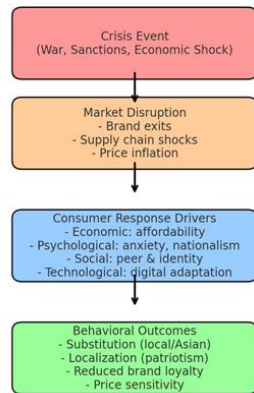
Consumer decision-making is highly context-dependent and shifts markedly during periods of external disruption. Under normal circumstances, purchasing choices balance functional benefits with symbolic attachments such as prestige or lifestyle alignment (Kotler & Keller, 2020). However, during crises, consumer priorities often realign toward basic availability, affordability, and necessity.

Evidence from earlier disruptions illustrates this trend. During the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, households reduced discretionary consumption, substituted premium products with lower-cost alternatives, and adopted savings-oriented behavior (Ang et al., 2010). Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption, encouraged stockpiling of essentials, and normalized substitution behaviors when supply chains failed (Sheth, 2020). These cases highlight that crises tend to amplify pragmatic decision-making, weakening the role of aspirational or emotional attachments in consumption.

A structured view of this process suggests that crisis events trigger market disruption, which in turn activates a range of consumer response drivers—economic, psychological, social, and technological. These drivers collectively influence behavioral outcomes such as substitution, localization, and reduced brand loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2020; Aaker, 1991; Euromonitor, 2022).

Source: Adapted from Kotler&Keller (2020), Aaker(1991) and Euromonitor (2022)

Figure A3 Consumer Behavior Drivers During Crises



Geopolitical Conflicts and Markets

Unlike pandemics or natural disasters, wars introduce a political dimension to consumer choices. Geopolitical conflicts disrupt supply chains while simultaneously shaping the ethical and ideological associations attached to consumption. Ghemawat (2018) emphasizes that in a globalized economy, corporations are increasingly exposed to political shocks, sanctions, and reputational risks.

The Russia–Ukraine war is a clear illustration. Sanctions and reputational pressures forced multinational giants such as McDonald’s, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, Nike, and IKEA to exit the Russian market. Similar patterns have occurred historically: during apartheid in South Africa, international boycotts reshaped both supply and demand by politicizing consumption (Klein, 2003). These cases underline that in conflict zones, consumer choice becomes entangled with ideology, nationalism, and political signaling, not just price or quality.

Brand Loyalty and Substitution Effects

Brand loyalty is often portrayed as a cornerstone of marketing strategy. Aaker (1991) conceptualized it as a critical element of brand equity, grounded in trust, recognition, and emotional connection. Yet crises frequently test the depth of this attachment.

The Russian fast-food sector demonstrates this fragility. After McDonald’s exited in 2022, its successor, Vkusno i Tochka, retained much of the infrastructure, menu design, and brand aesthetics. Within months, the chain reportedly achieved sales equivalent to 80–90% of McDonald’s former volume (Euromonitor, 2022). This rapid acceptance aligns with substitution theory, suggesting that consumers often remain committed to a product category (e.g., fast food) rather than to a specific global brand. A similar case is observed in beverages: Chernogolovka, a domestic cola producer, expanded rapidly after Coca-Cola’s exit, leveraging affordability and national pride to attract consumers.

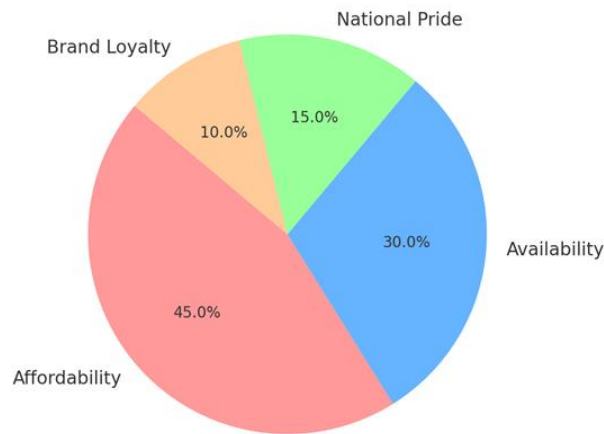
Nationalism, Localization, and Consumer Identity

Crisis conditions also amplify identity-based consumption. In Russia, the government promoted “import substitution” policies as patriotic consumption, encouraging citizens to view the purchase of domestic goods as a civic responsibility (The Moscow Times, 2022). This mirrors insights from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which argues that consumption is embedded within cultural and ideological meaning systems (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Comparable effects have been observed in other sanctioned economies. In Middle Eastern markets, for example, restrictions fostered the legitimacy of local firms as symbols of cultural and economic independence (Alserhan, 2016). Survey evidence from Russia in 2022 suggests that around 15% of consumers intentionally chose domestic brands such as Chernogolovka for patriotic reasons, while larger segments prioritized affordability (45%) or availability (30%). Only about 10% demonstrated strong resistance to substitution, clinging to Western labels despite their withdrawal (Euromonitor, 2022; Reuters, 2022; Yale CELI, 2022).

Source: Euromonitor International(2022), Reuters(2022), Yale CELI

Figure A4 Consumer Substitution Drivers



Price Sensitivity and Affordability Orientation

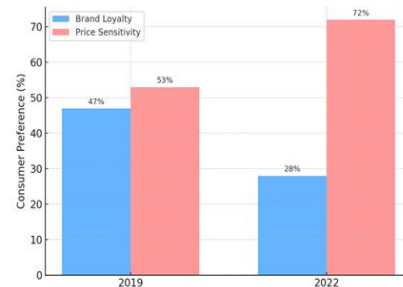
Economic instability during conflicts frequently magnifies consumer price sensitivity. After 2022, the Russian ruble experienced volatility, disposable incomes fell, and inflation increased. Euromonitor (2022) reported that by the end of that year, 64% of Russian consumers prioritized price over brand, a notable increase from 47% in 2019.

This pattern is consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), which predicts that under stress, individuals prioritize basic needs such as food and shelter over aspirational or self-expressive purchases. In Russia, this translated into a visible downshift from premium goods to affordable local alternatives. Statista (2023) confirms that price sensitivity overtook brand loyalty as the dominant factor in purchasing decisions by 2022, a reversal of the balance observed just three years earlier.

Figure A5 illustrates this transition : before the war, brand loyalty and price sensitivity were nearly balanced. By 2022, price sensitivity became dominant, highlighting a reorientation of consumer decision making under global conflict conditions.

Source: Statista (2023) and Reuters (2022)

Figure A5 Shift in Consumer Priorities: Brand Loyalty vs Price Sensitivity (2019-2022)



Digital Adaptation and Market Innovation

Another outcome of brand withdrawals is accelerated digital substitution. The absence of Western retailers created opportunities for domestic e-commerce platforms like Ozon and Wildberries, which rapidly expanded to fill market gaps. This mirrors the Iranian experience under sanctions, where local digital ecosystems replaced restricted Western services.

Sheth (2020) argues that digital adaptation formed during crises often persists beyond the disruption, embedding new habits into consumer routines. For marketers, this implies that investment in digital channels is not merely a temporary survival strategy but a long-term competitive requirement in volatile environment.

Gaps in Literature

Despite extensive research on consumer behavior during economic downturns and health crises, the intersection of armed conflict and micro-level consumer adaptation remains underexplored. Existing studies have focused more heavily on macroeconomic outcomes such as GDP contraction and trade disruption. The Russia-Ukraine war provides a rare opportunity to investigate:

- How consumer loyalty is reshaped under sanctions and forced brand exits.
- The relative weight of pragmatism versus nationalism in substitution decisions.
- The long-term marketing implications of localization and protectionism in politically unstable markets.

By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of how global

conflicts reconfigure consumer markets at the individual and brand level.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research applies a secondary data approach to investigate how the Russia–Ukraine war has transformed consumer behavior in Russia. Given the political sensitivity of conducting fieldwork within the country and the restrictions imposed by sanctions, primary survey methods were not feasible. Instead, the study relies on triangulating information from industry reports, databases, and press coverage, which together provide a comprehensive and ethical foundation for analysis.

Research Design

The study follows a case study design, with the Russia–Ukraine conflict (2022–present) serving as the focal case. This design allows for in-depth examination of consumer responses to an extraordinary disruption: the large-scale withdrawal of Western consumer brands. By combining qualitative interpretation with quantitative trend data, the research identifies how consumer adaptation unfolded across different sectors, including food services, beverages, apparel, and retail.

Data Sources

Data were drawn exclusively from verified secondary sources to ensure reliability:

- Statista (2021–2023): Provided statistical insights on consumer trends, price sensitivity, and sector-specific market shares.
- Euromonitor (2022): Offered detailed market intelligence on Russian adaptation under sanctions.
- Reuters and The Moscow Times (2022–2023): Supplied real-time press coverage of brand exits, corporate responses, and consumer sentiment.
- Yale CELI (2022): Served as the authoritative tracker of multinational corporate withdrawals from Russia.
- Corporate Reports (McDonald's, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, IKEA): Provided official disclosures and company perspectives on exit strategies.

Data Collection and Processing

The research proceeded in several steps:

- Identification of Brand Exits: Establishing a timeline of corporate withdrawals between March and December 2022.
- Market Share Comparisons: Compiling pre-exit and post-exit data to observe structural changes in key sectors.
- Categorization of Consumer Responses: Classifying behavioral adaptations into substitution, localization, affordability-driven decisions, and digital alternatives.
- Visualization of Trends: Using graphs, charts, and timelines to represent market shifts and consumer sentiment patterns.

Analytical Framework

To interpret the data, the study applied a mix of qualitative and quantitative tools:

- Comparative Market Analysis: Assessed pre-war versus post-war consumer patterns.
- Trend Mapping: Plotted brand exits alongside consumer adaptation milestones.
- Descriptive Statistics: Highlighted changes in consumer preferences (e.g., percentage shifts from global to domestic brands).
- Content Analysis: Reviewed corporate statements and media narratives to contextualize observed market behavior.

Limitations

While secondary data provides a reliable overview, this approach also imposes limitations. First, it restricts direct insight into consumer attitudes and emotional responses, which could be better captured through surveys or interviews. Second, reliance on media sources introduces potential political bias, especially in reporting on nationalist consumer trends. Finally, the findings are context-specific to Russia and may not be generalizable to other markets experiencing conflict or sanctions.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

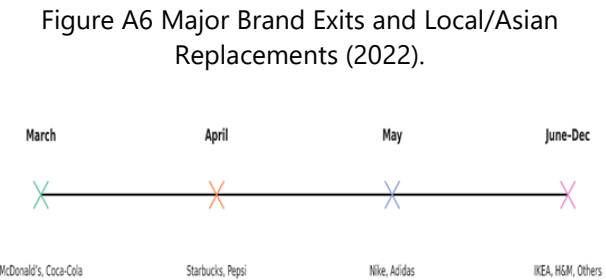
The Russia–Ukraine conflict has created one of the largest consumer market disruptions of the twenty-

first century. Using secondary data from Statista, Euromonitor, Yale CELI, Reuters, and company disclosures, this section examines the consequences of mass corporate withdrawals from Russia, focusing on brand exits, market share shifts, substitution behavior, and consumer sentiment.

Major Brand Exit

Following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, international firms faced mounting pressure from governments, investors, and consumers to suspend operations in Russia. Yale CELI’s Corporate Exit Tracker (2022) records more than 1,000 companies scaling back or completely departing from the Russian market. High-profile consumer brands included McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Starbucks, Nike, Adidas, and IKEA.

The immediate impact was a supply shock in everyday consumer sectors. Yet adaptation was swift: for instance, McDonald’s outlets reopened within weeks under the new brand Vkusno i Tochka, minimizing disruption in the fast-food sector and demonstrating consumer willingness to accept continuity over symbolism.



These exits created immediate supply shocks, but Russian consumers displayed resilience by adopting substitutes rapidly. For example, McDonald’s stores reopened under the rebranded Vkusno i Tochka within weeks, ensuring continuity in the fast-food segment.

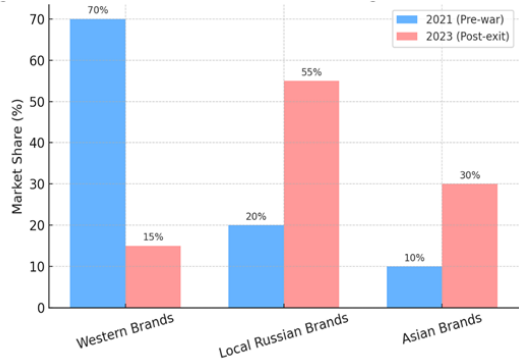
Market Share Shifts

The retreat of Western brands opened significant space for domestic and Asian competitors. Data from Statista (2023) illustrates substantial realignment across multiple categories. Instead of collapsing,

demand shifted toward accessible alternatives, suggesting that product availability outweighed loyalty to global labels.

This redistribution of market share points to a structural rebalancing: while global firms once dominated Russia’s consumer landscape, local and regional players rapidly absorbed their market presence.

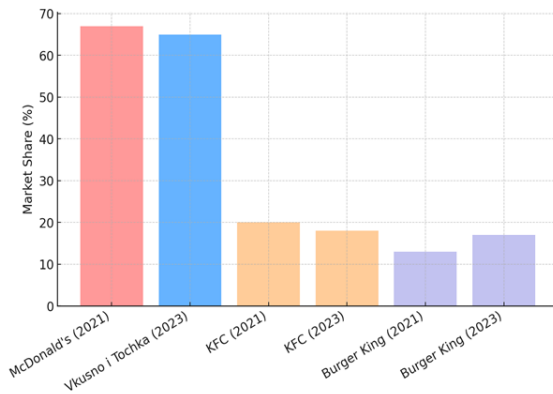
Figure A7 Market Share Shift in Food & Beverage Sector, 2021 vs. 2023.



Consumer Preferences in Fast Food

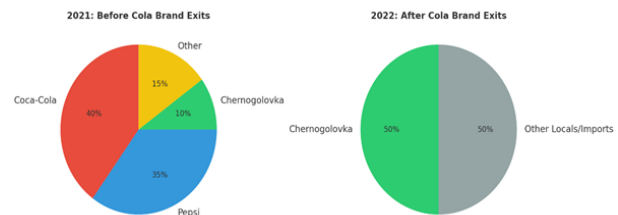
The fast-food industry provides a vivid example of consumer substitution. Before the conflict, McDonald’s controlled nearly 67% of Russia’s quick-service restaurant market (2021). By 2023, its successor Vkusno i Tochka had secured approximately 65% of the same market. Despite nostalgia for McDonald’s as a cultural symbol, consumer behavior revealed a pragmatic orientation. The preservation of menu design, pricing, and infrastructure made the transition relatively seamless, suggesting that functional continuity outweighed emotional attachment. This finding challenges conventional marketing theory that emphasizes the durability of global brand equity.

Figure A8 Fast Food Consumer Preferences Before and After McDonald’s Exit.



This growth reflects a prioritization of affordability and accessibility over long-standing global brand prestige. Consumers were willing to trade down to local substitutes that offered functional equivalence at lower cost, reinforcing the dominance of economic pragmatism during crisis conditions.

Figure A10 Beverage Market Shares Before and After Cola Brand Exits (2021 vs 2022).

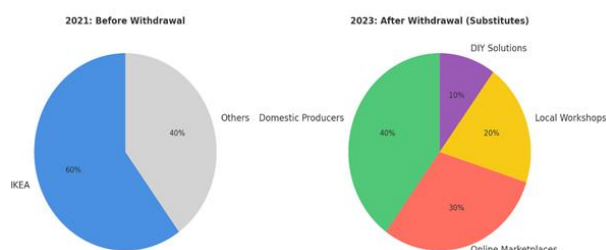


Market transition in Furnishing market

IKEA's 2022 withdrawal disrupted Russia's furniture sector more severely, as the brand had long dominated affordable, ready-to-assemble home furnishings. In response, consumers adapted through several channels: shifting toward domestic producers, purchasing from online platforms such as Ozon and Wildberries, and relying on smaller workshops. Some households also turned to do-it-yourself (DIY) solutions to address shortages.

This adjustment underscores the role of accessibility and necessity in guiding consumer choices. Rather than maintaining loyalty to a withdrawn global brand, Russian households quickly redirected demand toward available substitutes.

Figure A9 Furniture Market in Russia: Before and After IKEA Withdrawal



Consumer Sentiment and Localization

Alongside economic concerns, consumer sentiment shifted toward national pride. Surveys reported by The Moscow Times (2022) found that many Russians began to view the purchase of domestic products as an act of patriotism. Companies responded by framing "Made in Russia" as not only a functional advantage but also a symbolic choice aligned with national resilience.

This dual influence—economic necessity and cultural nationalism—accelerated localization trends and further diminished the hold of global brands.

Key Findings from Data Analysis

The analysis points to several clear patterns in Russian consumer behavior under conflict:

- **Rapid Substitution:** Consumers quickly replaced Western brands with local or Asian alternatives.
- **Fragile Brand Loyalty:** Nostalgia for global brands persisted, but practical concerns over price and availability dominated.
- **Strength of Domestic Firms:** Local companies such as Vkusno i Tochka and Chernogolovka gained market share at unprecedented levels.
- **Dominance of Price Sensitivity:** Inflation and declining incomes made affordability the top driver of choice.

Price Sensitivity and Substitution

Euromonitor (2022) reported heightened price sensitivity among Russian consumers in the wake of brand exits. The beverage sector illustrates this dynamic vividly. When Coca-Cola and PepsiCo suspended operations, Chernogolovka, a domestic cola manufacturer, experienced a 200% surge in sales during 2022.

V. DISCUSSION

The Russia–Ukraine conflict provides a rare opportunity to observe how consumers adjust under conditions of extreme geopolitical disruption. Unlike cyclical recessions or health-related crises, this case involved the near-simultaneous withdrawal of hundreds of global brands, leaving a vacuum across multiple consumer sectors. The Russian market therefore serves as a natural experiment in resilience, substitution, and the redefinition of brand loyalty.

Consumer Resilience and Rapid Substitution

The rebranding of McDonald's into Vkusno i Tochka demonstrates how quickly consumers adapted to the sudden absence of a cultural icon. By mid-2025, the chain operated close to 900 outlets with minimal service interruption, largely due to retaining familiar menus and formats. This highlights that consumer loyalty may attach less to a brand's symbolic value and more to the continuity of category-level experiences such as convenience and affordability.

Expansion of Local and Chinese Brands

The crisis environment created fertile conditions for domestic firms and Chinese entrants to expand. Vkusno i Tochka solidified its position as Russia's dominant fast-food chain, while local beverage companies like Chernogolovka capitalized on consumer pragmatism. In parallel, Chinese automakers surged, claiming over half of Russia's car sales by mid-2025, with brands such as Chery and GAC showing rapid month-on-month growth. Similar trends occurred in electronics and retail, where Chinese companies leveraged both government incentives and consumer demand for affordable alternatives.

This shift illustrates how crises can permanently alter competitive landscapes, replacing global corporations with regional challengers.

Geopolitical Protectionism and Policy Reinforcement

The Russian government actively reinforced these market transformations. Proposed legislation sought to block the re-entry of Western firms by invalidating repurchase agreements, thereby consolidating opportunities for local players. In addition, state

subsidies supported Chinese electronics and beauty retailers, helping them capture market share rapidly. By late 2024, more than 9,000 companies with Chinese capital were operating in Russia, reflecting a broader realignment of trade and consumption partnerships.

These measures suggest that consumer adaptation was not only a bottom-up process but also shaped by top-down policy interventions that restricted foreign competition while elevating domestic and allied firms.

Shifts in Consumer Preferences

Russian consumers demonstrated flexibility in adjusting their consumption habits. Declining incomes and inflation pushed households toward value-driven purchases, especially in categories like food, smartphones, and apparel. While some consumers expressed nostalgia for global brands, survey evidence indicates that affordability and availability became the primary decision-making criteria. For instance, budget-friendly Chinese smartphones gained traction, signaling a willingness to sacrifice symbolic brand attachment for functionality. This trend underscores a reorientation of consumer priorities from brand prestige to pragmatic concerns, with long-term implications for marketing strategies in volatile markets.

Long-Term Considerations

A central question is whether these adaptations will endure if sanctions are lifted or Western firms attempt to return. In the short term, entrenched protectionist policies and the strong performance of local and Chinese substitutes make a reversion unlikely. However, long-term consumer preferences may depend on economic recovery, geopolitical stability, and the capacity of domestic firms to sustain innovation and quality.

From a marketing perspective, the Russian case suggests that while global brands can re-establish presence in theory, their former dominance may not be easily recovered. Consumers who have built new routines with local and regional alternatives may not automatically revert to old loyalties.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Russia–Ukraine war represents one of the most significant geopolitical shocks of the twenty-first century, reshaping not only politics and economics but also the everyday consumption habits of millions. This study demonstrates that global conflicts do not simply disrupt supply chains; they fundamentally alter how consumers perceive, evaluate, and substitute brands.

Consumer Behavior Under Stress

The evidence shows that brand loyalty, long considered a durable marketing asset, is highly conditional. When sanctions, inflation, and scarcity reshaped the Russian market, consumers rapidly turned to local or Asian substitutes. This adaptation highlights that functional needs and affordability can outweigh symbolic or emotional attachments to global brands when external shocks destabilize markets.

The Rise of Localization

The withdrawal of Western corporations opened opportunities for domestic firms to gain legitimacy and patriotic appeal. Companies such as Vkusno i Tochka and Chernogolovka not only filled market voids but also redefined consumer identity around national pride and self-reliance. This suggests that crises can accelerate localization, transforming temporary substitutions into lasting structural changes.

Price Sensitivity and Market Adjustment

With declining real incomes and volatile currency conditions, Russian consumers placed greater emphasis on affordability. Value-for-money considerations became the dominant driver of consumption, with premium or prestige offerings losing relevance. This underscores the importance of adaptable pricing strategies for firms navigating unstable environments.

Implications for Global Marketing Strategy

For multinational corporations, the Russian case highlights the vulnerability of over-reliance on politically exposed markets. Years of brand equity can be undermined almost overnight by sanctions or

reputational risks. To remain resilient, global firms must embrace contingency planning, diversify supply chains, and consider localized partnerships. In politically unstable regions, symbolic brand value alone is insufficient to maintain loyalty if products are unavailable or unaffordable.

Globalization in Transition

More broadly, the findings question the inevitability of globalization as a unifying force in consumer culture. The rapid embrace of local substitutes and the strengthening of nationalist consumption patterns suggest that global markets are fragmenting. Hybrid models—where global firms adapt to local identity, affordability, and resilience needs—may represent the new paradigm.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's reliance on secondary data means that consumer attitudes and emotional drivers could not be explored with the same depth as survey-based research. Additionally, the long-term durability of these behavioral shifts remains uncertain. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal surveys to examine whether consumers return to Western brands if geopolitical conditions stabilize, and comparative research in other conflict-affected markets (e.g., Syria, Venezuela) could test whether the Russian experience is unique or part of a wider trend.

Final Reflection

In conclusion, the Russia–Ukraine conflict illustrates that consumer behavior is adaptive, pragmatic, and context-dependent. Under conditions of conflict and scarcity, availability and affordability outweigh global brand loyalty. For marketers, the lesson is clear: resilience, localization, and flexibility are not optional strategies but essential tools in navigating an uncertain global landscape.

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