

Outdoor Advertising and Social Change in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract

This study investigates the question: what does outdoor advertising communicate about the expansion of capitalism in the emerging capitalist economy in Russia in the 1990s? Examples of contemporary outdoor advertising, collected on a short visit to Russia in 1997, reflected the recent changes in the Russian economy as it embraced international capitalism, and also the overall standard of living of the Russian consumer. There was a significant proportion of foreign advertising, which was concentrated in large-scale billboards, freestanding signs on the main streets, and small scale proliferation of company logotypes. Foreign advertising tended to use more photography and Russian advertising used more illustration or text alone, a reflection of re-sourcing and budget constraints. Foreign advertising promoted consumer products while a high proportion of Russian advertising promoted cultural events. Advertising was dominated by repeat purchase consumables: cigarettes and fast food rather than expensive consumer durables except for kitchen appliances. Another area of growth seemed to be cell phones and new technology. There was no evidence of political or social issue advertising. Emphasis on cheaper products and repeat purchase consumable items reflects the level of the economy and lack of disposable income. The expansion of international business into Russia that is reflected in advertising does not translate into a transformation of Russia into a western style consumer society, because the major weaknesses of the Russian economy have resulted in a decline in the standard of living for the majority and limited the expansion of the middle classes.

Key words: not more than 5.

Introduction

Advertising has become an integral part of contemporary life in western industrialised society because of the role it plays in the capitalist system at the junction where the economy and ideology interact. This study investigates contemporary advertising and social change in the context of the breakdown of state socialism and the expansion of capitalism in contemporary Russia. Advertising under Communism, which expanded after the 1960s, was motivated by the desire get rid of surpluses and improve consumption rather than the product of competition between similar products as it is in the west. Since 1989 there have been dramatic changes in advertising with the breakdown of state socialism in the Soviet Union which reflect the expansion of capitalism and the incorporation of Russia into the global economy.

Part One: Advertising in the contemporary period of emerging capitalism

Advertising works on many levels and in contemporary society advertising has become a forum for the communication of social cues. Apart from conveying information about products and services it has come to play an increasing role in manipulating or reinforcing social attitudes, defining social roles and cultural values (Dyer 1995: 2). Sinclair claims that advertising's cultural role may be more significant and pervasive than its commercial role (1989: 31). In Russia the major social change reflected in advertising is the transition to capitalism and the expansion of consumer society. The very presence of considerable advertising is symbolic of, and a manifestation of, wider economic and political changes.

In contemporary Russia a deluge of western products and western advertising based on western referent systems follows a long period of consumer deprivation. There has always been some form of advertising in Russia and the Soviet Union in the 20th Century. Advertising has reflected the political and economic context and can be divided into three different stages: pre-World War Two, 1945-1990 and the 1990s. Prior to World War 1 Russian advertising was similar to other capitalist countries with rational descriptive strategies emphasising product qualities. After the revolution in 1918 some advertising continued but advertising was used more for political propaganda supporting the new government. Under the administrative command system of Communism since 1945 advertising was limited to fulfilling politically defined goals. Since the breakdown of that system and the transition to a free market economy Russia has opened its doors to foreign products and advertising. Though still confined to high-density traffic areas the overwhelming impression in metropolitan contemporary Russia is of an inundation of advertising similar to, and sometimes in excess of, the West.

One of the most significant changes in contemporary advertising in Russia has been the result of the opening of the economy to foreign business. Advertising and advertising agencies have followed foreign business into Russia and there has been a significant expansion of foreign advertising in the years since 1989 when the first agency to set up in Russia, Young and Rubican, entered into a joint venture with Sovero. In 1993 they won the campaign for privatisation of state enterprises, the largest campaign to date in Russia. By 1993 the major western advertising agencies in Moscow were: D'Arcy Masius Benton and Bowles (Mars, Procter and Gamble); O&M; BBDO (Wrigley, Pepsi, Avon); BSB/Saatchi and Saatchi; McCann Erikson (Coca Cola) and Young & Rubican/Sovero (Goldman 1993: 34). These same companies, except for O&M, all ranked in the top 10 American advertising agencies in 1995 (Biagi 1996: 235). Procter and Gamble were Russia's biggest advertiser, their product list including Head and Shoulders shampoo, Old Spice aftershave, Vidal Sassoon shampoo and Blendax toothpaste.

There was an opportunity for advertisers to shape the market in their own image, but in 1993 most of the agencies were still deriving most of their revenue not from advertising but from public relations, promotions, direct mail and distribution. Cheap production costs, and presumably billings and media rates, meant that agencies had little opportunity to make a profit as they do in the west. Another characteristic of early advertising was the general advertisements that did not sell anything but just featured the name of the company (*Adweek*, March 29, 1993). Uncertainty in the wider context has had impacts on advertising as well: these included a negligible support system, ill-defined media and confusing taxes and rules. In 1993 a government committee was formed to set up a regulatory framework for the advertising industry (Goldman: 1993). Other practical issues affecting advertising agencies include the lack of copyright laws and incidences occur of creative theft, where companies put forward creative pitches and then the job is awarded to another company who are then asked to execute the first company's concept (Wells 1996: 114). The lack

of a commercial advertising tradition is also reflected in a shortage of local expertise in advertising both in copywriting and execution (Burgogoyne:1995 and Repiev:1997).

The rapidity of social and economic change has meant that there has been dislocation throughout society in the 1990s and this also has affected advertising. The uncertainty over Russia's future and the dangers presented by the Mafia mean that businesses are more concerned with short term gain rather than long term planning. This affects their attitudes to advertising and weakens their position compared to international advertisers who are planning for long-term strategies and brand building that ultimately will strengthen their position (*Creative Review*, August, 1995). With the social structure in chaos, it was difficult to identify who has the money to target, so advertising had to be broad based in the early 1990s (*Art Direction*, December, 1992). In 1993 the three biggest advertising categories were spirits, cigarettes and chocolate bars (Goldman 1993) but in 1997 I found advertising for spirits and chocolate was not significant in outdoor advertising. Niche marketing is becoming apparent in the advertising of products such as sports shoes and cell phones. Until recently, as the political and economic system stabilised, income differentials increased and consumption rose which resulted in an increasing market for products. Foreign businesses set up production and the numbers of products available increased and the numbers of foreign products available also increased. Television advertising is also increasing in Russia and by 1995 four and a half hours of advertising were being broadcast a day (Burgoyne: 1995). Russia was the only country to allow cigarette and alcohol advertising on television until 1995 (Savenchko: 1999).

There has been a certain amount of consumer ambivalence to advertising associated with the expansion of the market economy. Some people resented the changes while others welcomed them. Resentment was generated when advertising showed products that people could not afford, or were only available for hard currency or even showed products that were not available (Wells 1996). The pent-up demand for goods was so great in the past that people wanted whatever was available and affordable and in the early 1990s it was enough for an advertiser just to announce that they had goods to sell (*Creative Review*, 1995). Some foreign firms took advantage of this to flood the market with poor quality goods, often made in China (Petrov, 2000). Advertising in Russia is complicated by contradictions, for example image advertising can backfire and amid hardship displays of wealth are both sought after and resented. Pragmatic campaigns can be more successful than image based campaigns. Thus a strategy for selling a razor 'look how sleek you can look' could have been more successful saying 'lasts 3 months, can use with cold water' (*Art Direction*, Dec 1992). Peoples' attitude to the west and western products is also ambivalent. Focus groups attacked McDonalds thinking that they were being sold inferior meat, while queues lined up to get in.

Figures from the Russian Public Relations Group reflect the rapid expansion of advertising in the early 1990s. From a small amount of revenue in 1992, in 1993 revenues amounted to \$US250 million and \$US 1.3

billion in 1994 (Tantsura: 1995). After the 1998 crisis and the devaluation of the ruble it was estimated by Advertising Age that the Russian advertising market could contract by 38.5% from \$US 2.7 billion in 1997 to \$US1.8 billion in 1998. There was a decline in foreign advertising with foreign companies importing goods more affected than those who were producing in Russia. The decline in foreign advertising presented an opportunity for local producers to push their brands and was accompanied by a media campaign for consumers to buy Russian goods. By 1998 Russian advertisers made up 30% of all advertising revenues with the likelihood of increases in 1999 (Sarchenko: 1999).

There was also a change in the mood and content of advertising at this time. By 1997 there was evidence of a growing anti-western mood (Maheshwari: 1997). Products like Mars and Snickers were well received when they first came on the Russian market but eventually too much advertising created a negative reaction. 'Russianness' came back into vogue in the late 1990s (Carryl: 1998) and the media launched a campaign appealing to consumers to buy Russian-made goods. Advertising strategies at this time also became more focused, and multinational companies switched from wide scale advertising all year round to support brands to seasonal promotions such as aspirin in winter and antiperspirants in summer (Sarchenko: 1999).

The expansion of capitalism in Russia in the early 1990s resulted in a decline in the standard of living for many because cutbacks in state subsidies brought hardship to many. There were improvements for some sectors and expansion in consumer markets during the 1990s but the recent economic crisis has had considerable impact on this expansion. Russia has a very different social profile from western capitalist countries which have significant middle classes. The average wage in Russia in 1994 was only US\$100 per month (*Economist* 1994: 67). In a recent article in the Moscow Times (27th September 2000) it was estimated that if a middle class monthly income was \$US500-\$1500 per person, then numbers have dropped from 15% of the population in 1998 to less than 10%, in comparison to the United States where the middle classes are seen to be 64% of the population. Moscow is seen to have the highest concentration of middle class people estimated at 20%. With the middle classes so small, and with large numbers of the population with little disposable income this limits the size of the markets for consumer products.

Part Two: Impressions in 1997

In April 1997 I had the opportunity to make a brief visit to Russia. I was able to document a large proportion of the outdoor advertising in the main streets of inner Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Advertising tended to be saturated on the main shopping streets of both cities, Arbat Street and Old Arbat Street in Moscow and Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg, and on the roads to the airports. I listed the billboards on the motorway in Moscow (31 km) and photographed many of them in St. Petersburg. Neon signs were also prominent in the squares near the Moscow Railway station in St. Petersburg and along the river by the White Palace in Moscow. The quantity and concentration of advertising was a surprise, and reflects the rapidity of recent change in Russia. A colleague who visited the same locations in 1995 saw none of the advertising I

documented. Off the main streets, however, there is little advertising and it was easy to gain an impression of what streets looked like under Communism when there was limited advertising.

I consider that the images collected reflect the chief characteristics of outdoor advertising in those cities and that the sample gathered, while not statistically representative, does reflect the main thrust of contemporary advertising in Russia as these were the centres of population concentration in the two largest cities. Moscow and St. Petersburg are the key centres of economic and retail activity in Russia. Moscow has the highest concentration of advertising agencies and outdoor advertising amounts to 60% of advertising revenue. Outdoor advertising was both accessible for documentation and important in the Russian context where 'old fashioned media' including outdoor advertising, shop window display, catalogues brochures and leaflets were the dominant forms of advertising in the 1970s (Hanson:1974) and continues to be significant in the main centres. Monthly advertising rates in Moscow in 1999 were \$US 500 for banners hung over the streets and \$US 500-\$700 for billboards (Sarchenko: 1999).

I felt that this snapshot approach to advertising could provide useful insights into the characteristics of contemporary social change. In analysing the advertisements I focussed on the amount of advertising for foreign products compared to Russian products and what strategies are being used to market those products. My aim was to create a profile of advertising, which would provide an indication of the amount of advertising of foreign products, and whether they were being advertised with global strategies or customised to the local market. Assumptions that I made included: the incidence of global products originating in capitalist industrialised countries would reflect more the globalising of marketing rather than manufacturing as Russia only allowed foreign production since 1990 (Shama:1996). The globalisation of marketing is accompanied by globalisation of consumption and eventually the homogenisation of culture even if marketing is customised to local markets. The key criteria I used were: what was the percentage of foreign advertising compared to Russian advertising; were the advertisements text only, in English text or without text; did the advertisements have company symbols or logotypes; were the products consumer durables, durables or services; were the images photographic or illustrative and what was the physical form of the advertisements? A total of 236 advertisements were surveyed.

1. Key characteristics

Hardly surprisingly, foreign products dominated advertising both numerically and in their physical characteristics. There was much differentiation in the types of displays used. Foreign products dominated the large-scale billboards and new freestanding street signs and some of the largest advertisements were several stories high and have major visual impact. There was also much foreign advertising on bus shelters and kiosks along main streets, neon signage on buildings, as well as on buses and trams. On Arbat Street in Moscow there were many smaller signs hanging from lamp-posts. The freestanding displays on Nevsky Prospect, as well as the advertising on bus shelters, have been put in place in the last two years according to a

colleague who visited in 1995. There was more Russian advertising attached to buildings, than in freestanding displays and billboards, and Russian advertisements tended to be small posters, clustered together and a high proportion were for cultural events rather than products.

2. Product types and their country of origin

I was interested in investigating Sinclair's proposition that 'the goods with the heaviest advertising and most intensive product differentiation are not positional markers of status, but relatively cheap, accessible, mass marketed, repeat purchase, non-durable items' (Sinclair 1989: 6). The data collected supported this. The most advertised product was cigarettes with 13% of the total. The other product that was widely advertised was Coca Cola with its unique style of saturation advertising, mostly small scale but pervasive, and more so than Pepsi, which has been in Russia much longer. The western running shoe which seems to have superseded jeans as the international icon of the male youth market was also commonly advertised. This profile differs from that described by Goldman in 1993, where the main products advertised were alcohol, cigarettes and chocolate (1993).

There was a significant amount of advertising for household appliances, compared to western markets, which reflects the scarcity of these products under Communism. Most of these products are European brands. There was also a noticeable amount of advertising for sweets. European products tended to dominate the consumer durable advertising while American advertising dominated the repeat-purchase consumption items, cigarettes and soft-drinks. Repeat purchase consumables (cigarettes, fast food and soft-drinks) were the most advertised products and were promoted with lifestyle campaigns which had American references without being blatantly American except for cigarettes.

3. Advertising strategies, the types of products advertised and country of origin

Globalised strategies using English were not common, this reflects the fact that English is still not commonly spoken. Foreign advertising usually had Russian text, and only a small proportion used a combination of English text and Russian text. Some of the consumer durables were advertised with just an image of the product and its name or the product and a telephone information number. No foreign billboard advertising used only the company name without an image as did some Russian advertising. Foreign advertising was dominated by photographic images and there was not much evidence of computer manipulation in the imagery except for NBA/Sprite and Pepsi. Asian companies such as Samsung, Daewoo, Sony, Hyundai are also making their presence felt, but I only saw each company represented once.

Other characteristics of globalised marketing, saturation and variety of manifestations, were evident for products such as Coca Cola and Marlboro. There was a considerable amount of small advertising on shop windows, kiosks and telephone booths and Coca Cola was even attached to street signage in Saint

Petersburg. There was a considerable amount of signage with just the company name on it or their symbol such as Kodak and Philips. There was very little advertising of just the product without text except for Coca Cola and Marlboro which often had just the product name and package graphic, or sometimes just had an image, photo of the cigarette packet and the company name. Marlboro, the world's most expensive brand, and valued at \$31 billion (De Mooij 1994: 92), was also the most commonly advertised cigarette with a range of strategies including a couple of different cowboy images as well as the rafting image that was seen throughout Eastern Europe. Two local brands were common, including Peter the Great, which just had an illustration of the package, and another that was advertised with a very western lifestyle image of a group of men round a fire beside a river.

There was a much higher incidence of Russian advertisements with just text or simply a large company name. Most concert and theatre posters and notices were text only or with a small graphic. There was a much higher use of illustration than photography in Russian advertising. There is a tendency to use bold primary colours, especially in text only advertisements. The small cultural posters tended to be printed in one or two colours on a white background, reflecting budget and production constraints, and also the ephemeral nature of the product. Russian advertising tended to fall into the descriptive or rationalist category as defined by Leiss et al (1990) similar to earlier stages in western advertising.

Russian advertisements for products tended to use illustration rather than photography and this probably reflects the level of training and budgeting constraints experienced by Russian agencies. There was little evidence of social service advertising or government advertising. There was a noted absence of any evidence of the traditional Russian folk heritage or the strong Russian graphic design tradition in Russian advertisements. Asymmetric layouts, powerful photomontages, layering of typography and images were pioneered in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and Soviet designers were leaders in the modernist movement, are still influential on contemporary graphic design. It is ironic that Russian designers of this period have become a key reference for 'postmodernism' and contemporary designers of the western industrialised countries in the 1980s and 1990s. There was also no evidence of the Soviet realist tradition of the 1930s to the 1950s. This trend reflects the contemporary rejection of the icons of communism. A change in this trend was in evidence by the end of the decade with an increase in Russian imagery, with Coca Cola joining the trend in 1998 with a campaign based on Russian folklore (Wirth-Fillman, *Marketing News*, October 12, 1998).

Technological and electronic products were promoted with less emphasis on lifestyle, which partly reinforces Levitt's (1991) claims that consumers in all societies are driven by the desire for the latest, high quality technology at the lowest prices. Another factor would be that the referent system of international business is itself understated and doesn't need a hard sell, and its associations with jobs, income, status and power are more easily made compared to the aspirations addressed in cigarette advertising. Consumer durables were

also mainly European in origin (rather than from Asia) and were not marketed with lifestyle campaigns or cultural referents (as were cigarettes and fast food).

4. Social and cultural impact and changes

Cultural change is inevitable with the increasing globalisation of consumption in terms of fast-food, soft drinks, clothing and cigarettes. American culture is promoted with some products such as Coca Cola which is strongly promoted with American food such as hamburgers and barbecues but the range of messages is diffuse when you look at the number of campaigns, even across the same product group, a good example being cigarette advertising. Foreign cigarette advertising tended to be dominated by personalised lifestyle advertising, but some local brands followed a similar format, with images of men bonding around a campfire. Some cigarettes had simply a photo of the package, while Peter the Great cigarettes (Russian) had an illustration of the package. There was no evidence of the largest foreign advertiser of 1995, Proctor and Gamble (Old Spice, Blendax and Head and Shoulders shampoo) but these products may just be marketed in different format from outdoor advertising.

Foreign advertising in Russia is thus tapping into cultural values that already exist. In time, if the standard of living improves advertising could contribute to the expansion of consumer culture as in the west. The aspects of culture first affected by advertising are the cheaper consumption items such as food, drinks, clothing and the smoking of cigarettes which are dominated by lifestyle marketing and heavily dominated by American companies that reinforce the value of American culture and lifestyle. Food and consumption patterns are likely to change and there is likely to be more consumption of take-away and fast food. One of the McDonalds that have opened in Moscow is one of the largest in the world. There is also a duplication of the concept in local variations of hamburger and fast-food restaurants. The consumption of soft drinks like Coca Cola, Pepsi and Sprite will all increase, with perhaps a decrease in alternative local products, but also it is quite possible that the market itself will expand. American food is promoted with Coca Cola advertising, including hamburgers, barbecues and shishkebab (eastern food that has been colonised). Sportshoes and baseball caps are the most obvious American clothing being adopted.

Institutional change is much harder to assess. The breaking down of the social support system can not be attributed to advertising but is the result of the breakdown of the economy. Expansion of capitalism and consumer markets could result in the expansion of consumer industries and a move away from the heavy industry focus, but it will be a long time before Russia will resemble the consumer culture profile of western industrialised nations.

Conclusion

Advertising has become an integral part of life in western industrialised society. It plays an important role in selling the products of industry, reflects social change but also plays a more subtle role in defining and reinforcing cultural values. In contemporary Russia advertising epitomises the expansion of capitalism and the breakdown of the Communist system. This study of outdoor advertising reflects these major changes and the opening of the economy to foreign business.

The profile of advertising reflected the proliferation of foreign companies which dominate outdoor advertising in terms of size, type of display and the pervasiveness of global brands such as Coca Cola and Marlboro. The advertising also reflected the globalisation of business with companies originating in the United States, Asia and Europe, product type tending to be aligned with countries of origin. Advertising was dominated by cigarettes and soft drinks which are cheap, non-durable, and repeat purchase items and the absence of expensive items like cars reflects the standard of living and level of disposable income of the population. These heavily advertised products tended to be American in origin and promoted with lifestyle campaigns which are part of an American referent system that probably has a strong appeal to Russian consumers associated with higher standards of living, freedom from political oppression, more of a hedonistic lifestyle and reflect a glamorising of the culture that was out of bounds for so long. These same appeals however, do seem to work in most nations of the world whether they have been Communist or not.

Russia has been considered an important emerging market, it is a market that is part of the European tradition, it is already industrialised and there was an enormous potential market of consumers who have experienced consumer deprivation, scarcity, queuing for basic goods and lack of quality in the goods available. These problems were associated with the Communist system and the expansion of capitalism was linked to the rejection of that system. However, the breakdown of Communism and the expansion of capitalism did not result in rising standards of living for a large proportion of the population. This is reflected in the types of products advertised which reflect low levels of disposable income and an economy still in crisis. Thus the expansion of advertising in Russia does not herald the transition to consumer society similar to western industrialised countries.

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