

Ice Cream and ‘CCCP’: Evoking nostalgia in post-soviet packaging

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Ice cream packaging from post-soviet Russian brand ‘CCCP’ employs soviet era themes, stylizations, and designs – including a potentially controversial use of the historic ‘State Quality Mark’ – evoking the past and appealing to nostalgic feelings of the Russian people. Capitalism and commodification breed conditions for nostalgia, according to Goldman and Papson: and this process may inspire the recycling of mass cultural texts as primary resources ‘for narrating our collective past as memory’ (1996). These cultural texts appear in numerous modes, from the recognizable meanings of particular shapes and colors to music and iconic photographic images. The intensity of this phenomenon and its peculiarities vary across countries and cultures, of course: However, since the start of economic transition, Russia’s accelerated commodification process has witnessed a growing tendency for nostalgia in marketing appeals – from both domestic and global companies.

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CCCP (USSR) ice cream packaging employs the graphic style of soviet posters, often including red as a representative colour of communism and the soviet past; a recognizably constructivist font; and a luminous white – suggesting something miraculous and powerful. In one instance, the ice cream package appears to represent space itself: the viewer looks down as if from a spaceship high above the Earth. Space here is dominated by the name of the product, 'CCCP', carrying numerous associations for those who lived in the USSR, as well as those who have inherited this history; and also creates a context for the product – an appeal to a nostalgic, patriotic feeling of remembering Soviet power. Observing further, the Earth is situated to the right of 'CCCP': the planet is red, recalling Cold War period propaganda aims and statements that communism would be the entire planet's dominant ideology. There is also an association with the soviet news programme 'Vremja' ('Time'), which started with a similar animation style (using the image of the Earth) and a recognizable signature tune. The 'red Earth' and 'red universe' are imaginary and hyperreal; however Sputnik appears as a real-life symbol of Soviet power.

On the 'CCCP' ice cream package, Sputnik carries a red star high above the planet, flying to the right of the brand name. Russians recognize Sputnik as a symbol of one of the Soviet Union's most important achievements. Soviet era propaganda interpreted the progress of space exploration as a step towards communism's total world dominance. This emotional atmosphere and enthusiasm for space exploration were supposed to be shared by Russian people as an 'hour of triumph' for the country – something to be proud of, along with achievements in ballet and figure skating; and indeed these still evoke patriotism. Sputnik's image appeals to national pride and nostalgia for a powerful state during the early period of cold war, a time when children were obsessed with space and every boy in the USSR was dreaming of becoming a 'cosmonaut'. An image of the ice-cream treat itself stands to the brand name's left, represented with the same importance as the red Earth and Sputnik. The Earth and the ice cream are similarly coloured and, with the graphic effect of a sparkling star, Earth also becomes an ice-cream dessert. Even as a child of a powerful Russian state in the late 80s, one of the authors tried her first ice-cream at the age of nearly five, and still recalls the distinct happiness of consuming this sweet

treat. In this sense, associations between ice cream and soviet symbols offer a promise of repeating that unforgettable childhood experience. Ice cream was a deficit product, difficult to obtain, in some areas; and although there were just a few types of ice cream in the USSR, all were high quality. Many people, whose childhood is connected with consumption of this limited range of ice cream, still consider it to be the best. Thus, not only brand representation, but the product itself – a traditional form of soviet ice cream – may act as a stimulus for nostalgia. In other words, these images integrate naïve dreams and inspirations of childhood with powerful pride for the motherland, the ‘hegemony of memory’ implicating this combination of signifiers that refer both to common past and personal memory.

A double reference to the past emerges, opening the collective and the individual past. Thus, the product’s image touches upon personal emotions, childhood dreams and moments of happiness, yet, evokes an overall reference to a triumphant USSR. Interestingly, multi-national corporations, such as Nestle, also exploit the image of soviet ice cream, launching a product called ‘48 kopeek’ (the price for ice-cream in the USSR), which has become a success.

Even with the nostalgic appeal, the visually overloaded package can hardly be perceived in a totally serious manner. Irony emerges when the ‘СССР’ manufacturer’s company logo is considered. The logo of ‘Russki Kholod’ (‘Russian Cold’) encompasses a variety of tsarist and traditionally Russian symbols – such as a royal robe and a crown along with the distinct pre-revolutionary Cyrillic font and the image of sables (the symbol of Syberia). From one perspective,

this might deepen the patriotic feelings further into the history of Russia, encouraging the national pride and stretching nostalgia back in time. However, in combination, the expressly bold soviet images and the pre-revolutionarily stylized parent company logo transform the packaging into an example of 'ironic-nostalgic kitsch', defined by Sabonis-Chafee as that which seeks to 'remember fondly but not re-create'.

Semiotic communication may appeal to specific human experiences, with interpretation requiring background in, or understanding of, historical and cultural contexts. Goldman and Papson have argued that 'history' represents a source of value in advertisements and can lend this value to corporations and other sponsors. As suggested by the packaging of 'CCCP' ice cream, signifiers rooted in history and culture used in brand communication transport meanings and values to brands (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006). Signifiers may be interpreted in many ways, however; and assumptions concerning product features may not correspond to relevant aspects of reality. Potential discrepancies between the interpreted features and values and their realization may be misleading for the consumers and cause confusion. This concern becomes especially relevant in the analysis of 'CCCP' ice-cream packaging design.

CCCP packaging carries the 'State Quality Mark' as a prominent aspect of the brand. This sign, the 'State Quality Mark', is still recognisable among different generations of Russians, given its prevalent use in soviet and early post-soviet times, on diverse everyday products; and the initial reaction is an assumption of high quality. The 'State Quality Mark' was established in 1967 by the USSR's State System of Standardisation. The right to use the sign was granted by state expert commissions, providing that the product corresponded to approved quality standards, and it marked the most important mass products of relatively high quality. Products carrying the sign were automatically thought of as having a high quality, and many products carrying the sign became deficit.

After the collapse of the USSR, the standard of attestation and the use of the sign were cancelled. Thus, quality expertise no longer supports the mark. Moreover, ice-cream production methods and recipes are different from those regulated by the soviet era Union State Standard. Thus, discrepancies may appear between historically expected, sign-evoked features and actual features of present day 'CCCP' ice cream products. In other words, the sign has lost its original meaning, yet is used as a part of the brand's past-invoking visual representation. Ethical concerns might include deliberately false representations of a product's quality. However, such sign use demonstrates a 'storehouse of recyclable exchange values' – historical meanings disconnected from their context and reproduced according to marketing logic – a semiotic gap in which signs shift meanings and value, being transformed and used according to marketing aims and fashions.

A phantasmagoric combination of brand name, iconic design, and other sign values, these ice cream packages refer to a collective past, the collectivist ideology of the USSR, 'softened' by the more intimate memories of childhood. The trend for nostalgia in brand meanings may continue, with signs constantly transforming in time's lapse. It is impossible to predict what meaning signs will carry in the future for new generations, where first-hand memories that capture relevant personal pasts are absent. Indeed, this absence of first-hand experience and memories combined with positive nostalgic perspectives – offered for example by popular soviet films and music, often extremely sincere and naïve – may reproduce and increase a nostalgia for the imaginary which,

although explored here in a specific case of product packaging design, arguably exists generally, on a global scale.

Images by permission of Igor G. Arhipov, the General Manager of TD 'Russki Kholod' (image permission can be viewed here: [View image](#))

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