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Journal of Macromarketing 2012 32: 361 originally published online 3 July 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0276146712449627

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Russia's "Pure Spirit": Vodka Branding and Its Politics

Olga Kravets¹

Abstract

This article examines the interplay of vodka branding and politics in post-Soviet Russia. The trajectory of vodka branding over the past three decades reflects shifts in politics and articulates changes in ideology, while setting the environment in which certain sociopolitical ideas unfold and become naturalized. The analysis suggests that the political economy and historical dynamics of a market system, and the societal standing of the commodity being branded, define and frame the potentialities of marketing meanings and their ideological inflections.

Keywords

vodka, branding, ideology, Russia, brand meaning, brand materiality

Introduction

This article investigates vodka branding in post-Soviet Russia. The commodity with the no color/no taste/no smell standard of perfection has been recently transformed into a highly differentiated product. The research examines how marketers have used cultural meanings of vodka to create a consumer good that mediates history and politics, a new socioeconomic reality, and collective aspirations, as well as the social imagination about power, nationhood, and Russianness.

In Russia, vodka has always been a deeply problematic object of cultural consumption—at once the joy and the sorrow of the *Rus'* (Herlihy 1991). For centuries, it has been an integral part of sociality in work and leisure, signifying goodwill and friendliness, and promoting candid interaction and a sense of togetherness (Christian 1990; Herlihy 2002; Jargin 2010). For just as long, it has been a "true national plague," causing individual and social ruin, and even "degeneration of the country" (Govorukhin 1991 cited in Pesmen 2000, 176). Vodka's presence on the table renders any cultural event "Russian;" it is served in equal measure to celebrate birth and to grieve over death. Vodka is frequently referred to as a trustworthy companion. During Russia's tumultuous history, vodka was often the only refuge against natural and political storms; drinking relieved physical toil and provided a realm for socializing outside the official frame and resisting the officialdom (Philips 1997). Vodka is also regarded as a traitorous enemy that historically has been a leading factor in physical, moral, social, and economic afflictions in Russia (Herlihy 2002; Levintova 2007; McKee 1999; Pridemore 2002; Ryan 1995). Thus, vodka is intertwined with Russia's history, economy, and culture. Now, through intensive branding, vodka has turned into an "instrument of ideological inversion" (Barthes 1972, 142): it

has become implicated in reshaping Russia's ideoscape, distributing ideological images and views of the state (Appadurai 1996).

Russian vodka branding over the past three decades reflects shifts in politics and articulates changes in ideology while setting the environment in which certain ideas unfold and become naturalized. The trajectory of vodka branding suggests that the political economy and historical dynamics of a market system, and the societal standing of the commodity being branded, define and frame the potentialities of marketing meanings. The study contributes to the emergent stream of research on macro perspectives on branding at the intersection of political economy, culture, and society (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Kadirov and Varey 2011; Wilk 2006). Specifically, the article examines branding across the vodka industry in Russia. It underscores the importance of the sociopolitical history of a material object in branding and shows that branding reflects politics while fostering the circulation and specific renditions of select sociocultural and political ideas and views. Thereby, it advances critical studies of branding, where a focus on signification and cultural discourses often overshadows the considerations of how the branded good—be it alcohol, a doll, or a toy—itself historically has been enmeshed in the economy, polity, and culture of a society (cf. Holt 2009; Diamond et al. 2009). Similarly, the critical focus on corporate involvement in politics

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often eclipses how politics transforms the imagination of business as state institutions delineate “a space for the market” (Polanyi 1957 in Chang 2002, 547). In contrast, this research engages in what Giroux (2004, 59) describes as “an ongoing critical analysis of how symbolic and institutional forms of culture and power are mutually entangled in constructing diverse identities, modes of political agency and the social world itself.” Overall, the analysis considers the role of marketing output as a lens for examining a state of a society and thus promotes the scholarly argument that marketing meanings reflect and inform society, popular culture, and everyday life (e.g., Clampin 2009; Minowa, Khomenko, and Belk 2011; Walsh 2011).

The next section briefly discusses the current research on branding and ideology and, in order to contextualize the discussion of vodka branding, presents a short history of Russian vodka. Then, different periods in vodka branding are contrasted to reveal the interplay of branding, market forces, and state politics. The account highlights ways that brands promote certain articulations of cultural ideas and carry state symbolism (along with its politics/official ideology) into the private sphere. The concluding section reflects on how brands as material market artifacts today mediate Russia's ideoscape.

Branding, Cultural Imagery, and Ideology

Historically, brands indicated a product's origin and were used to identify and distinguish goods (Kapferer 2004; Moor 2007). During the Industrial Revolution, brands developed into a mode of connectivity; they linked distant producers and consumers, reassuring the latter of product quality and enunciating a product's properties. As producers sought to mark their goods consistently and distinctively, brands evolved into symbols of a company's reputation (Kapferer 2004). Insofar as branding, in its simplest sense, marks ownership, it has always been implicated in an ideology (Coombe 1998). However, ideological potency grew as technology enabled the incorporation of complex imagery into packaging (Moor 2007). In “Imperial Leather,” McClintock (1995) states that brands such as Pears Soap drew on imperial imagery for commercial purposes, and thereby represented how the colonized and the colonizers should view the British Empire. The imagery reinforced values definitive of British identities (e.g., domesticity) vis-à-vis “the unwashed natives” and constructed the nature of relations and distinctions among peoples of the Empire. Similarly, in a historical overview of the Aunt Jemima brand, J. F. Davis (2007) suggests that by referencing the imagery of social outsiders within the American South, the brand reflected ideas of racial oppression and class identity. In short, historically, brands are representational devices that communicate commercial messages as well as certain societal and political ideas.

Yet, only recently have brands' ideological potential attracted significant scholarly attention (Arvidsson 2006; Coombe 1998; Goldman and Papson 2006; Moor 2007; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2005). Klein's (2000) “No Logo” manifesto thrust brands under a critical eye with its

observations on their growing pervasiveness. Brand logics—identification, differentiation, and cultural symbolization—are now widely employed by various businesses and noncommercial institutions that seek to promote their agendas. Most obvious is the upsurge of branding in politics. Politicians seek to brand themselves to present a memorable image to voters (Reeves, de Chernatony, and Carrigan 2006), while citizen-activists engage in branding to advance their causes (Bennett and Lagos 2007). A case in point is Red, a brand developed by music personalities Bobby Shriver and Bono to promote the goods of select manufacturers in exchange for their donation to the fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (Banet-Weiser, Sarah and Lapsansky 2008). Businesses also now explicitly attach themselves to political ideas to build a cultural cachet in pursuit of specific consumer groups. Moor and Littler (2008) describe the branded politics of American Apparel, a clothing company that capitalizes (on) the anti-sweat-shop sentiments of middle-class consumers by selling “made in America by Americans” products. The rise of branded politics is a contentious issue; critics claim it promotes the commodification of civic engagement and the overt intervention of business in matters of state and politics (Klein 2000; Goldman and Papson 2006).

Scholars and cultural critics are also concerned with the growing centrality of brands in our social worlds (Brannan, Parsons, and Priola 2011; Coombe 1998; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2005; Quart 2004). In the past few decades, brands have developed into cultural forms that play an important role in identity politics and in mediating people's social relations (Diamond et al. 2009; Holt 2004; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). This development relates to the focus of post-Fordist production on generating values by endowing products with sociocultural meanings (Goldman and Papson 2006). The practice is known as “cultural branding” (Holt 2004). Here, brands no longer index only goods and producers, but also consumers and their life worlds (Moor 2007). Meaning-imbued brands come to stand for societal ideas, and consumers seek brands whose meanings correspond to their own identity aspirations and worldviews. Thereby, brands increasingly frame the common understandings that legitimate and make possible common practices (Thompson and Arsel 2004). For example, Borghini et al. (2009) demonstrate how the ethos of the American Girl brand and its store structures moral and social female childrearing values by translating them through nostalgic nationalist ideals.

To understand the ways brands mediate our sociocultural worlds, researchers have studied how brands accrue cultural meanings. In *How Brands Become Icons*, Holt (2004) shows that to create enduring and distinct brand meanings, managers draw on cultural imagery, myths, and history as source material. Over time, through complex processes of co-optation and cooperation with populist worlds (e.g., urban youth) and cultural intermediaries (e.g., cinema), brands become associated with specific ideals and values. More recent studies point to the importance of focusing on multiple consumer groups that produce and enact diverse brand narratives so as to unpack the process of a brand meaning formation (Diamond et al. 2009;

Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010; Thompson and Arsel 2004). Scholars agree that successful creation of a cultural brand depends on marketers' abilities to tap into contradictions and tensions that exist between current ideologies and consumers' lived realities (Holt 2004). Overall, this research is characterized by the focus on specific culturally notable brands, such as Harley Davidson, Apple, and American Girl, and the ways consumers employ these brands to construct their identities, social positions, and cultural affiliations (Diamond et al. 2009; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

This research aims to complement the above lines of inquiry by adopting a macro sociohistorical perspective that examines the interplay of politics, economy, and branding within the vodka industry in post-Soviet Russia. This is a unique but illuminating context in which to investigate how the sociocultural significance of a branded commodity and the historical political-economic dynamics of a market system shape branding as a mediator of ideology. First, vodka is a symbolically dense, sociomaterial artifact that prominently figures in Russia's economic history and cultural politics. That is, vodka is not a "lump of coal . . . [an] utterly inanimate" product that comes to life in marketers' hands "through a cunning process of meaning manufacture" (McCracken 2009). Furthermore, the vodka market experienced rapid growth during the 1990s economic liberalization in Russia. Thus, interpenetration of state politics and business is more visible and relatively easy to trace (Chang 2002). Finally, the official ban on mass advertising makes other techniques of branding, such as naming, labeling, and packaging, a primary mode of promotion for the industry and therefore reveals a brands' ideological communicative potential outside a traditional media (cf. Holt 2009).

Method

To explore the dynamics of macro meanings in the vodka industry in post-Soviet Russia, the research considered the marketing output (primarily vodka labels and names), against the backdrop of "the historical experience and change in the shaping of specific myth/ideological systems" (Slotkin 1992, 8). The core data set consisted of over 200 vodka brands sourced from the publication titled *Vodka Design: Labels and Trademarks* (2000). Additionally, data were collected by photographing displays in liquor shops and utilizing the collection of vodka brands exhibited in St. Petersburg's museum of Russian vodka.¹ The process of constructing a chronological narrative of vodka branding and dividing it into coherent parts was context-driven (Hollander et al. 2005; Witkowski and Jones 2006). The chronological review of vodka brands revealed three periods when branding patterns shifted notably, echoing changes in politics, the market, and social values in post-Soviet Russia.

Given this study's interest in the historical dynamics of branding within the industry, the producer output—vodka names, labels, and brand stories—formed the empirical base for this study. A semiotic analytic approach was used to

"connect a mythical schema to a general history to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society" (Barthes 1972, 128). Specifically, cultural symbols, their original significance, and their use in vodka branding were noted as names and labels were categorized into themes. Each emergent mythic/ideological theme was read as a synergy of context, content, and purpose. Verbal and visual aspects and the relations between different elements across brands within and among different time periods were examined to develop a comprehensive understanding of dominant ideological motifs and changes therein. Where possible, the analysis of labels was supplemented with marketers' brand narratives published on company's websites, professional magazines, and popular press. Extensive discussions with a marketing manager of a distillery in Siberia² significantly informed the analysis and helped make sense of vodka branding and the industry in general. Furthermore, to enrich the understanding of each time period, the study drew on journalists' accounts, popular books, autobiographical narratives, a visit to the museum of Russian vodka (St. Petersburg), conversations with consumers, and literature on vodka production/consumption and Russia's political milieu at the time.

The three periods in post-Soviet vodka branding during which marketing and political agendas shifted in synchronous ways to respond and contribute to the changing ideoscape in Russia are identified. First, in the 1990s, vodka branding became a mythic kaleidoscope that materialized the fragmented, localized nationalism that defined Russia's ideoscape after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Second, the middle of the first decade of the new millennium was a period of the consolidation of ideological themes in branding, which reflected the changing political realities at the time. Third, the latter part of the decade was a period of a growing alignment between the centralization of the national ideoscape in Russia and the ethos of some leading vodka brands. In the discussion of each period, a number of brand examples are used to demonstrate how brand narratives and branding patterns generally reflected and informed the ideological sensibilities of the time. But first, to contextualize the understanding of the ideological potentialities of vodka branding, a brief history of vodka in Russia is necessary. This story, presented below, follows the narrative of the museum of Russian vodka in St. Petersburg as a convenient way to offer a panoramic view with a focus on vodka's political-economic and cultural significance in Russia. This review is not a comprehensive and definitive story of vodka in Russia;³ rather it aims to show how this commodity has been intertwined with Russia's history, economy, and culture.

A Brief History of Russian Vodka

"The origins of vodka are wreathed in mystery, and this is not surprising, since vodka is sacred (*sakral'na*); hence, for a Russian mind it has no history: it is an eternal substance that should not be subject to historic deconstruction or deciphering," states an article, titled "Russian God," devoted to vodka's 500th anniversary (*Ogonek* 2003). Defying such emotions, the

museum of Russian vodka (Museum hereafter) constructs a history of vodka dating back to its invention to 1429, when monks in a Moscow monastery distilled a grain-based spirit. Vodka's origins are placed in Russia's south, an area which traded heavily with Genovese merchants who reportedly enjoyed *aqua vitae*, a grape-based spirit. As the Museum documents, from the fifteenth century onward, vodka has been implicated in Russia's political economy and statehood. The development of distilling technology is credited with promoting Russia's feudal economy: the lure of vodka profits encouraged intercity trade and drew the nobility into a money-based market (Christian 1990; Nikolaev 2004). Proclaiming manufacturing control of and a tax on vodka as royal rights in 1471 marked a shift in the center of political power: to the tsar, away from the church.

Indeed, the Museum presents the entire history of vodka through "its relationship with each ruler of Russia." It goes as follows, Prince Ivan III established these relations when he fought the church for the privilege of taxing production and sales, thus making it a key source of state revenue for centuries to come (Pokhlebin 1994). In 1552, Ivan IV (the Terrible) built *kabak*, special drinking places where no food was served. *Kabak* were the first democratic institutions in Russia: managers (*kabatskii golova*) and salespersons (*tseloval'nik*) were elected for a one-year term by the community; they swore loyalty to the tsar and were accountable to a functionary in Moscow. However, proceeds from the *kabak* money were collected based on sales. Such a system encouraged vodka falsification and bribery, which led to "*kabak* revolts" in 1648. To control the situation, Tsar Alexei instituted a state monopoly in 1649. Desperately needing money to finance his modernization ventures, in 1716 Peter I privatized production and taxed sales. Yekaterina II's reign was not only a golden age of arts and science but of vodka as well: every noble estate in Russia boasted a unique brand. A shrewd politician, Yekaterina (aka Catherine the Great) extended the "privilege of distillation" to the aristocracy in 1765, securing their support of her still-shaky throne. Rank determined production quotas, so regulation of vodka production reinforced the social hierarchy. However, that system bred corruption, which forced Pavel I to revoke the privilege. Pokhlebin (1994) claims that this policy was the tipping point that led the nobility to revolt against Pavel in 1801.

After the Napoleonic wars of the early 1800s, the "privilege of distillation" was partially returned to the nobility as a royal reward. With this increase in production, prices dropped and vodka consumption reached catastrophic levels. In the late 1800s, the state monopoly was reintroduced. Prohibition began in 1894 as part of a state effort to civilize the working masses for burgeoning industrialization (Herlihy 2002); it entailed measures to educate people about the harms of drinking and improve vodka quality. The famous chemist Mendeleev set the optimal spirit/water proportion for the best-quality vodka at 40 percent by volume; esteemed physiologist Volovich stipulated a healthy daily dose to be 50 grams, and the renowned writer Tolstoy was commissioned to design a label for state-produced vodka (Ogonek 2003).⁴ The Bolsheviks extended prohibition when they took over in 1917 and Lenin, a teetotaler,

saw alcoholism as an impediment to the ideal communist state. In the Stalinist era, vodka production increased, but consumption was controlled primarily through administrative disciplinary measures (Artamonova 2007 cited in Fox 2009, 83). However, in an attempt to "demoralize" them, only the "parasitic intelligentsia" were free to consume (Nikolaev 2004). World War II saw vodka used to reward soldiers and became part of their daily rations. In the postwar period, despite the official line that "vodka [was] a social evil," consumption grew significantly, contributing to a host of social ailments from a rise of criminality to fall in productivity (Jargin 2010; Levintova 2007; Pesmen 2000; Pridemore 2002).

In 1985, Gorbachev reintroduced prohibition as part of his perestroika (organizational restructuring) campaign (Ogonek, 2003). Gorbachev's anti-alcohol initiative featured heavy-handed sobriety campaigns and forceful reduction in beverage production. The initial success in decreasing alcohol consumption was overshadowed by the growth of illegal *samogon* (moonshine) industry, with associated deaths (Jargin 2010; McKee 1999). Popular discontent increased until 1990, when the government relaxed restrictions. Still, Gorbachev's vodka initiative is widely believed to be a factor in the collapse of the Soviet regime because it led to "social sobering" (Ogonek 2001). The Museum presents the late 1990s as a "dark age" in vodka history, with the "black market" corrupting production and consumption. The Museum exhibition closes with Yeltsin's 1992 decree that abolished the monopoly and established a licensing system, which took consumption to a new high. The unprecedented level of per capita alcohol consumption, "society's alcoholization" (Pesmen 2000, 170), led in the early 1990s to a drastic increase in mortality rates, the incidence of domestic violence and homicide, and psychological disorders (Levintova 2007; McKee 1999; Pridemore 2002; Ryan 1995).

As if to defy the tragic personal, social, and economic costs of alcohol consumption, upon completing a tour, the Museum invites visitors to taste vodka in the Museum's bar. This convention of "the Russian hospitality" endorsed by the Museum highlights the equivocal attitude toward vodka in Russia: vodka is a matter of a national shame and a national pride. That pride stems from the cultural significance of vodka. After all, in Russian, vodka is etymologically water (*voda*) in the older linguistic form. The inflection "ka" connotes slightly rude but affectionate usage in words such as *mamka* and *papka* (Ozhegov and Shvedova 1992). Until the nineteenth century, the word "vodka" referred to both the alcoholic drink and water (Dal 1998 [1880]). For many Russians, such linguistic essentialism and historical embeddedness make vodka a profound part of what it means to be Russian. Vodka provides a sense of cultural belonging and is a complex unifying force (Ogonek 2003). Vodka has always been central to social interactions, including communal work (*pomoch*, e.g., building a house for a fellow villager), the essence of social living in Russia for centuries (Herlihy 1991).⁵ Most households have vodka in their fridges or cupboards even if they do not consume it regularly because vodka is a symbol of a cordial disposition toward guests and a generous nature of hosts.

In Russia, vodka is often referred to as a soul mate and a social salve of sorts (Pesmen 2000). People commonly say, “We don’t drink vodka; we use it to disinfect the soul.” Its medicinal properties lie in its ability to soothe the pains of the body and the mind, if consumed in a “cultured” manner (Nikolaev 2004). Popular writer Sorokin (1997) describes “cultured” drinking⁶ in an episode where a Russian girl teaches her German friends to drink:

Rule number one. Remember and tell your friends, wives, lovers, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren: Russian vodka is to be consumed during the meal. Repeat . . . Rule number two. Drink in a gulp, at once, about a hundred grams and follow it with a gherkin . . . [T]ake vodka into your right hand, gherkin into the left . . . say ‘*Na zdrov’e*,’ [to health] take a small breath of air and hold it, got it?

Beyond the mechanics, however, three inalienable ingredients constitute “cultured” drinking: good-quality vodka, good company, and good conversation. Good conversation means a heart-to-heart conversation (*po dusham*), where each gulp opens and joins souls, with trust being a necessary (emergent) constituent (Ogonek 2003; Pesmen 2000). Metaphysics aside, there is a pattern to a flow of conversation, which depends on the amount of vodka consumed. The *Russky Razmer* (Russian Measure) brand demonstrates this with a label that carries a chart matching a dose and a pace (starting at 6 p.m. and ending at 2 a.m.) to conversation themes, progressing from work and politics, to women (at the half-mark), to art, and finally to philosophy by the bottom of the bottle. The label captures the idea that drinking is a path and a vodka conversation is a genre of communication characterized by philosophical sensibilities, often bordering on absurdity (Pesmen 2000). The popular novel *Moskva-Petushki* (Erofeev ([1977] 1995) is a lively illustration of this aspect of vodka conversation: an alcoholic intellectual, Venichka, travels by commuter train from Moscow to Petushki, a utopian place, and on the way, he engages in philosophical discussions with fellow drinkers about literature, history, and the soul of a Russian peasant, and talks to God and consorts with angels.

Such representations of drinking as an almost heroic quest for the meaning of life and against the conventions of an officialdom are typical in Russia. While personally many people associate drunkenness with tragic deaths, families torn apart, and orphaned children, the cultural lore is populated with the tragicomic narratives about a drunkard as a daring jokester (Jargin 2010). Popular jokes, caricatures, and a host of movies from the Soviet “classics” such as “The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath” (1975) to more recent blockbusters such as “Peculiarities of the National Hunting” (1995) feature cheerful drunkards ingenuously overcoming often absurd life difficulties, presented by the realities of living in a Soviet/post-Soviet state. Also, culturally enduring is the depiction of a drunkard as a “tormented soul.” Historically, this image has been reified by the biographical stories of Russian intelligentsia, from Dostoevsky to Dovlatov, who are said to indulge in vodka

conversations about the meaning of existence (Nikolaev 2004). In Soviet times, it was in the jokes about drunkards and interactions over a bottle of vodka that people reflected on their lives, society, and “the [Soviet] system” (Pesmen 2000; Yurchak 2006). These reflections were then expressed in *samizdat* (self-publishing) literature and widely circulated, comprising discourses that were *vne* (outside) the authoritative discourse. Talks over vodka in the comfort of the kitchen shaped people’s political thoughts (Yurchak 2006).

While people generally regard vodka consumption as a private matter and see state regulation as interference in their lives (Expert interview; Pesmen 2000), nevertheless drinking has always been a political issue of significant social and economic consequence. For example, Philips (1997) talks of binge drinking in early Soviet Russia as a form of protest. Similarly, the “philosophical drinking” described in *Moskva-Petushki* is often interpreted as a protest against Soviet life (Nikolaev 2004). But politics infuse vodka consumption more directly through regulation of prices, drinking hours, and places. Significantly, for centuries in Russia, vodka has remained a guarantor of steady state revenues and the stability of political power (Pokhlebin 1994) and has been implicated in social matters and lived politics (Herlihy 2002).

Vodka Branding and Russia’s Ideoscape

“No color, no taste, no smell” is the standard of perfection for vodka. Thus, from the early days of intercity trade, labels have been the means of describing vodka: communicating origins and grain type, and adding affective attributes. Until the mid-nineteenth century, most vodka was produced and sold locally by the ladle and in 12.3-L buckets (Museum records). With the abolition of serfdom in 1860, population mobility increased, as did intercity trade, which led to the emergence of vodka branding. Commissioned by the Russian Ministry of Finance, a report on the vodka industry in the 1900s indicated that “the product’s reputation doesn’t always depend on the quality; very often, the product’s reputation depends on its harmonious name, the bottle’s shape, a colorful label, or just a higher price” (Himelstein 2009, 179). Indeed, keen to distinguish their products, Russian vodka merchants created artistically sophisticated labels and printed them in the best publishing houses in Europe (*ibid.*). During the 1894 monopoly, centrally printed labels were standardized and functional rather than artistic. After the revolution, labels remained simple and standard. In 1934, a state order was issued specifying labels’ formats (color, size, font, etc.). There were no real regional differences in vodka labeling (Figure 1).

Standardization notwithstanding, labels were always considered a propagandistic tool (recall Tolstoy’s commission to create a label for the 1894 monopoly). In Soviet times, special labels were issued to commemorate certain achievements and events, and famous artists were often enlisted to design such labels. For example, in 1944 in Leningrad, Boris Ioganson, a well-known artist, designed a now iconic white and red label for *Stolichnaya* vodka, that was made “for commanders and



Figure 1. Standardized Soviet labels in St. Petersburg's Museum of Russian Vodka.
Source: Author.

top civil functionaries to commemorate the Moscow defeat of the fascists” (Ogonek 2004, 66). This practice attests to the communicative importance that Soviet functionaries assigned to vodka. In post-Soviet times, labels changed dramatically, partly due to the popularity of Russian vodka in newly accessible foreign markets. Largely, however, the change arose from and was aimed at the local market. In the 1990s, label designs, styles, and themes greatly proliferated because vodka advertising was prohibited and producers “had to say all and more on an eight-by-eleven piece of paper . . . ‘My flavorless, colorless, odorless spirit is different and better than theirs’” (Expert interview).

This research suggests that when read along a sociohistorical timeline, vodka names and labels communicate more than product benefits; they reflect political and ideological changes in Russia. The data analysis reveals three distinct periods in vodka branding. In the discussion below, each period is illustrated with the examples of brand stories that are juxtaposed to the sociopolitical developments in the country and the government’s vodka policies at that time.

The Late 1990s: A Mythic Kaleidoscope

The 1992 vodka industry liberalization led to an explosion of producers: in the absence of state regulation, so-called mini-factories flooded the market. Many producers used Soviet-era labels (e.g., *Stolichnaya*) to mark their often subpar spirits. Vodka-induced poisoning became common. Understandably, consumers grew suspicious of the old Soviet labels. In such a market, a new label was not just a differentiator, but was taken as a sign of “a serious business” and pledged quality (Expert interview). To endow new labels with a halo of authenticity, entrepreneurs tapped into reserves of cultural imagery. The

labels of this period feature a myriad of images with historic and folkloric motifs. These images are grouped into two broad thematic constellations: *Empire* and *Regionalism*.

First, the brands within the *Empire* theme emphasize unique history (tsars and royal insignia, the Orthodox Church, and Soviet symbols), cultural superiority (famous works of Russian literature and art), and patriotic pride (national historical and mythical heroes). Such an imperial vision is typified by the examples in Table 1 and Figure 2.

This category is defined by references to the past. As the depiction styles and selection of images evince, this past is an idealized one. The idealization of cultural images beyond the present time/place, as Williams (1975) suggests, is a part of ideological myth creation: in a distant cultural domain, images, retouched by glory from the past or from an aspired future, acquire a hazy, soft, yet glorious focus. While such idealization is often associated with the past, it necessarily reflects the present: “a desire for stability and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time” (Williams 1975, 60). This sentiment is echoed in the informant’s commentary: “in those difficult times, it made sense to use pictures that evoked joy and pride in people . . . a heroic past is a sure way” to achieve this (Expert interview).

Second, the *Regionalism* theme includes images strongly associated with a specific locale. Looking at the array of labels, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that if a region did not have its own brand it did not exist. That is, vodka branding appeared to be an important way for a geo-administrative entity (town/region/province) to put itself onto the (new) map of Russia after the Soviet collapse and claim its socio-cultural and political place vis-à-vis and separate from others. The labels assert regional significance by referencing natural and cultural treasures. The theme is replete with postcard

Table 1. Russian Empire Theme

Subtheme	Representative Images
Imperial past	Tsarist Russia royal symbols (e.g., the Monomakh hat and double-headed eagle) and Tsars (e.g., Peter I, Catherine II and Nikolai)
Military glory	Thirteenth-century Tatar war warriors, Cossacks, and hussars (Napoleonic wars officers from nobility, who had a legendary honor code, and were known for bravery, drinking and debauchery) and victorious World War II soldiers
Heritage of the church	Saints, icons (Byzantine style), famous cathedrals, and representations of Orthodox Church holidays
The Great Soviet Era	<i>Aurora</i> (the ship that signaled the start of the October Revolution), the gun inventor Kalashnikov, the first cosmonaut Gagarin, and Sputnik
Traditional folktales	Bruin the bear, fisherman and his wife, and an array of folk characters from Ivan the Fool to Ivan the Prince
Art and literature	Characters from a Tolstoy's <i>War and Peace</i> (1865) and Chernyshevsky's bible of revolutionaries <i>What Is to Be Done?</i> (1863); the famous Vasnetsov's "fairy-tale" style painting <i>Bogatyr</i> s (1898) and a <i>Pravda</i> -style newspaper montage

images, with each region showing off its resources: horses (Altai region), wheat fields (middle Russia), or winter-scapes (Siberia), or traditional crafts, or recognizable landmarks such as rivers and mountain peaks (Figure 3). Some labels also feature famous local sons, for example, Prince Butrulin, pictured with his palace and a poem (Voronezh region), and Admiral Kolchak, a "White Army" commander (Siberia; Figure 3). These labels often look and read like a tourist brochure.

Similar to the *Empire* category, images of *Regionalism* relate to historical facts, happenings, and characters seen in a celebratory light. Notably, these are often presented in ways that can be described as reinterpretation. One example is the label depicting Admiral Kolchak, a polar explorer and an officer in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/1905. He later enlisted in the British forces, became the Minister of War and Navy in the anti-Bolshevik "All Russian Government" set up at Omsk, and proclaimed himself a Supreme Ruler of Russia in a *coup d'état* in 1918. Barely recognized by the Allied Forces, his government was overthrown and he was handed to the Bolsheviks, who executed him in 1920 (Smele 1996). For people growing up in the Soviet Union and learning about the brutalities of his dictatorship, he is an unlikely hero (Smele 1996). Yet, in the regionalized reinterpretation of history he becomes "a local hero"—a talented political leader, brave officer, and true patriot (Omsk governor's press conference, September 23, 2003). Numerous attempts at legally rehabilitating Kolchak failed (Teeter 2007). Yet, he appears to have been rehabilitated through a vodka brand (in Omsk) and a beer brand (in Irkutsk, the city where he was executed). Featuring Kolchak in full regalia and framed within the St. George's Cross, the Russian medal awarded for exemplary bravery in combat, the vodka label serves to revive and popularize the story of the "White Admiral," a distant past for many Russians today. The label conveys a particular version of the story to appeal to a specific consumer group. It remains to be seen if the label's *folklore* (LeBlanc 2003) will become a dominant version of the story. The label preempted the blockbuster Russian movie "The Admiral" (2008) and the official shift to a "new [reconciliatory] approach" to Russian history, where "historical figures worth being proud

of—from all parts of the [political] spectrum—should be studied" (Teeter 2007).

In the 1990s, vodka labels presented a kaleidoscopic ideoscape, reflecting the reality of an ideologically and economically fragmented country in search of regional identities amid a power struggle (Petrov 1999). There were over 1,200 vodka producers in the Russian Federation in 1995, compared to 123 in the time of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR; *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* 2004). Marketers were "digging out" ethnographic images and "gluing them onto the bottles, hoping that they stuck with consumers" (Expert interview). The result of such branding practice was a rich mosaic of cultural imagery. However disparate, the images, purified and glamorized for marketing purposes, cumulatively formed a glorious picture of Russia as imagined locally. Thrown together almost serendipitously by marketers, fragments of a cultural past, when placed side by side on a shelf in a vodka shop, coalesce into one narrative—that of a great Russia (Figure 4).

A move from one region to another had the effect of shaking a kaleidoscope: the pieces shifted somewhat but still settled into a splendid image of Russia. But, unlike in a kaleidoscope, differences in the emergent picture were not accidental. First, their existence was a reflection of the dominant 1990s line of politics-power decentralization and regionalization (Petrov 1999; *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* 2004). Regional brands dominated the market, considerably outperforming national (mostly Soviet) brands such as *Stolichnaya* (VCIOM (n.d.), May 2005). Moreover, the development of regional production and branding was not simply a reflection of, but a result of, weakening federal power (at least economically), the budget of which traditionally relied on "vodka money" (*Die Welt* 2005). Second, the kinds of regional differences evident in the labels indicate a rise of "regional self-consciousness" intrinsic to the regionalization move (Petrov 1999). As noted above, images of local heroes and landmarks served to reimagine a regional identity. Importantly, particular ways of branding local vodka were also reflective of regions' sociocultural and political ambitions. For example, commentators read the introduction of the *Gubernator Povolzh'ya* (Governor of the Volga region) brand as the Saratov region's governor's ambitions to take over the entire Volga region (*Vechernaia Kazan* 1997).



Figure 2. Labels depicting the Empire theme.
Source: Vodka-Design, 2000.

Generally, in the 1990s, many governors and political leaders tried to promote themselves through vodka; however, only the “truly popular succeeded” (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2004). Commenting tongue-in-cheek on the phenomenon, *Newsweek* (2008) proposed the creation of a “vodka index” as an indicator of political leaders’ popularity. Here, we see an almost inverted form of celebrity endorsement (McCracken 1989).—vodka endorsement creates a political celebrity.

Overall, through cultural excavation and airbrushing (rendering by simplifying, glossing over, and glamorizing historical facts), marketers cast the 1990s vodka market into an argot of Russian sociocultural/political traditions, patriotic emblems, and localized nationalistic ideals. Vodka brands offered a ready-made, accessible, and sumptuous palette of cultural ideas to suit any consumer’s political–social taste and help regional powers assert their own vision of and their place in the new Russia.

The Mid-2000s: Consolidation of the Ideoscape

In November 2003, the Moscow distillery *Kristall* put out a new brand—*Putinka* (Figure 5)—four months before the 2004 presidential elections. If emphasis is placed on the second syllable, the word *Putinka* is semantically close to an archaic Russian word for “path” or “way.” However, the word is clearly meant to be interpreted by consumers as it was—a vodka brand named after Vladimir Putin (using an affectionate diminutive form of his surname). In the conversations, people expressed no doubt that the brand was “*v chest’ Putina*” (in Putin’s honor) and even remarked that “it’s like drinking with Putin, from one glass.” The Presidential office denied having anything to do with the new vodka, although it did not contest the commercial use of the word’s clear association to the president’s name (*Putinka* n.d.). Historically, it is not unusual for a vodka to be named after a political leader and for a leader to

benefit from a vodka’s popularity. For example, in 1924, *Kristall* produced a 30 percent by volume vodka, which, as the writer Bulgakov (1997) records in his 1924 diaries, “the public called it *rikovka* [phonetically close to “throwing up”] with good reason: it was of poorer quality and four times more expensive than the tsar’s vodka.” The vodka’s nickname referred to Rikov, the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) at the time, who allegedly was an “avid drinker” (*ibid.*). When KGB chief Andropov became the leader of the Soviet Union in 1982, a new vodka came out that was 30 *kopeks* cheaper than the existing ones, and it was nicknamed *andropovka*. Nikolaev (2004, 212) suggests that this was “a populist move of a pragmatic” and that the “public appreciation of the new vodka, without a doubt, improved the new leader’s popularity.”

In contrast to these examples of grassroots labeling, *Putinka* is a case of strategic branding, if not by the government, then by a business that sought to capitalize on the leader’s popularity. Indeed, analysts attributed the brand’s spectacular launch—200,000 bottles sold in the first six weeks (an industry record)—to the leader’s spectacular popularity ratings—80 percent (*VCIOM* (n.d.), February 2004). *Kristall* managers did much to establish and reinforce this link. For example, CEO Romanov refused to say “who [was] behind the brand,” adding to its mystique (*Kompania* 2004a). Further, the brand launch four months before the election was not a coincidence, since, historically, sales peak within four to six months of the launch of a new label (Expert interview). Sanctioned or not, the new brand followed “ideological demands wherever action [was]” (Holt 2006), and its promotion commenced, at times overshadowing Putin’s political campaign by adopting a distinctive political rhetoric. Posters with “vote for *Putinka*” and a ballot-style “tick here” box were used to launch the brand. Images that equated properties of *Putinka* with qualities of the presidential candidate and his policy were everywhere. For



Figure 3. Labels depicting the regionalism theme.
Source: Vodka-Design, 2000.

example, several (promotional) articles in the popular *Trud* newspaper described *Putinka* in anthropomorphic terms (e.g., masculine, democratic in style, trustworthy). As one commentator noted, “like vodka, like president, and vice-versa” (*Trud* 2004). That people made the expected connection was evident by the critical and resistive acts of some. Critics of the government’s policy from the political left coined the phrase “Lenin-ka is library, Putin-ka is vodka.” Another example was a demonstration in Moscow’s Pushkin square (Figure 4) by the Union for Communist Youth, *Yabloko* (the Union of Right Forces), and the National Bolshevik party, where symbolic votes were cast into a ballot box standing next to a bottle of *Putinka* and a piece of rye bread (traditional refreshments at a wake) to show that “the elections were a farce and signaled the death of democracy” (Mereu 2004). Such examples suggest a blurring of the commercial and political purposes of branding, crafted during a period of heightened political awareness (Zhao and Belk 2008).

Putinka’s black and gold (traditional colors of the Tsar, signifying statehood) label is steeped in cultural–political symbolism. The tsar’s crown with the *troika* (the symbol of Russia) and the royal seal of a double-headed eagle point to the past empire and its glory, but the name *Putinka* anchors the symbol to the present and revitalizes it as a promise of a strong, powerful, and united Russia. Historically (and mythically), a tsar brings the country together and assures its might. In the label, the crown unmistakably casts the vodka’s near-namesake as a tsar of Russia. As Wirtschafter (1997) asserts, for Russians, the imagery of the tsar-father (*tsar-batyushka*) evokes the belief in a just and intrinsically good tsar. In this national myth, a tsar is always good, embodying paternalistic sensibilities such as protection and trust, which, in the case of *Putinka*’s label, translate into the product and its near-namesake, thereby reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between the two.

The significance of *Putinka* goes beyond playing up the ideological imagery of a “good tsar;” it marked a change in state politics and the economy. Indeed, *Putinka*’s success could

be seen as a materialization of a move away from the politics of regionalism toward “centrism” as a model of political and economic control, which, first noted by Petrov in 1999, Putin continued to pursue. Launched nationally, *Putinka* reversed the period of fragmented, localized nationalism seen in vodka brands and in the overwhelming consumer preference for regional vodkas (*VCIOM* (n.d.), April 2003). Within weeks of the launch, *Putinka* captured 2.7 percent of the market and was recognized as a “superbrand of 2004” (*Putinka* n.d.).

The national strategy pursued by the marketers of *Putinka* set off a new pattern in branding. In the mid-2000s, the local particularities of brand imagery were replaced with generic Russian symbols and names with a potential appeal to a specific sociodemographic (rather than geographic) segment of the population. The *Empire* theme continues to be used, but with a coherent imagery representing a powerful, united Russia and related politically motivated appeals. One example is the *Kaznacheiskaia* (Treasury) brand, with the following promotional message (author’s translation):

1819. Russia. The state alcohol monopoly is introduced. In less than a year state revenues from selling vodka increase by 10 million rubles, which allow the financing of many projects of significance.

1820. The Russian ships *Vostok* and *Mirny* reach the shores of Antarctica, discovering the last unknown part of the world. *Kaznacheiskaia*—at a state level.

This vodka brand uses imperial symbols from the days of the Antarctic discovery, one of the world-recognized achievements of the Russian Empire. As the country’s glory was financed by the state monopoly on vodka production, the brand message submits that a monopoly is for the nation’s good. But why would a private business promote the benefits of state monopoly? Commentators suggest that facing a losing battle “against regional vodka [and economic] separatism” with the



Figure 4. The kaleidoscopic narrative line of labels.
Source: Authors.

government, a few “vodka barons” switched sides, hoping to “access all areas” once state control was established (*Kompania* 2004b). Through a vodka promotion that popularized the idea of a glorious Russia built on a vodka monopoly, corporate heavyweights joined in “the fight against political separatism” and constructed a myth of a great new Russia, while solidifying their dominance in the vodka market (*Kompania* 2004b).

Apart from branding, the establishment of *Rosspirtprom* (the state corporation that manages all state-owned stock in the country’s distilleries) sealed the policy shift toward “centrism” and the market consolidation in vodka industry in 2000 (*Kompania* 2001). In 2001, *Soyuzplodoimport* was established: the federal enterprise charged with managing Soviet brands with a national appeal (e.g., *Stolichnaya*). Business analysts read this situation as a nationalization of Soviet trademarks, since many regional producers were thus driven out of the market. Those remaining were drawn into state-private partnerships, primarily represented by *Rosspirtprom*, which received the exclusive manufacturing rights to some Soviet brands (Gavriluk 2004; Levintova 2007). Political analysts commented that the control over Soviet trademarks served to strengthen the government economically, and, reflecting on vodka’s sociocultural significance, interpreted the move to market consolidation as centralization of power by the Kremlin (*Die Welt* 2005).

The Late 2000s: Reviving Empire?

In Russia’s highly competitive US \$13 billion legal vodka market, *Putinka* (priced about US \$7 a bottle) has a stable market share of 5.2 percent and is one of bestselling brands in the “democratic” or mass-market segment (*Business Analytica*

2010). It still sells poorly in Russia’s “red belt” (communist) area and is still effective agitation material in elections. For example, during the 2007 Duma elections, *Putinka* sold at a discounted price of 64.90 rubles (regular price was 92.50), with a promotion of “Everyone to the elections!” while proclaiming, “We have made our choice.” Complaints regarding the legality of such campaigning were dismissed. Since it was a product promotion, there was no conflict with electoral law (*The Wall Street Journal* 2007). In the past few years, the government has further increased its control of the vodka industry. In 2006, it implemented the Regulation of ethyl alcohol. The new system required substantial investment from producers and aimed to improve products’ flow through the country to combat “regional separatism.” This change has resulted in a greater market consolidation: the market share of top ten companies is over 35 percent and *Rosspirtprom* controls nearly 40 percent of vodka production and distribution in Russia (*Business Analytica* 2006, 53; Savostin 2011). The regulation of production however did little to reduce alcohol consumption (Levintova 2007). In 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev called heavy drinking “national disgrace” and launched yet another attack on Russia’s centuries-long war against alcohol consumption (Fox 2009; Levy 2009). The government introduced a series of measures limiting alcohol accessibility. In 2010, it banned nighttime retail of strong alcohol, reduced the number of alcohol-selling outlets, and regulated the retail price for vodka by setting a price minimum at US \$3 per a bottle and in 2011 increasing the excise tax (A. Davis 2011). Whether these measures have the desired effect on consumption remains to be seen; however, they have induced “a new wave of ordering” in the industry (Savostin 2011). With the price increases,



Figure 5. The demonstration on Pushkin Square (Moscow) on March 10, 2004.

Source: www.eng.yabloko.ru/Publ/2004/PAPERS/03/040312_mt.html.

producers have moved to strengthen their brand offerings, reduce their product lines, and consolidate their consumer segments. Thus, the number of brands has dropped significantly with a few brands now dominating each market segment.

The recent regulations and reordering of the market has impacted vodka branding. As one marketer put it, “the consumer is fed up with the false history. Nobody cares about Yekaterina, Pushkin, and Grishka Otrepiev . . . brands that wish to hang onto the overheated shop shelf must have a compelling story like *Zelenaya Marka* . . . or a powerful social platform like *Putinka* . . . or a clear product quality-based message like *Veda*, *Pyat’ Ozer*, or *Parlament*” (cited in Dolgova 2010). Indeed, brands with generic names such as *Zelenaya Marka* (Green Mark), *Pyat’ Ozer* (Five Lakes), *Zhuravli* (Cranes), or *Russkii Standard* (Russian Standard) are now among the market leaders (Savostin 2011). However, even though the names of popular brands do not have an immediate connection to the Russian/Soviet past or a regional heritage, many still draw heavily on history. In contrast to the 1990’s vodka branding, when history was that of famous historical personas and events, the history of the 2000s is a social one. *Zelenaya Marka*, the top-selling vodka in Russia since 2006, is the best example (*Zelenaya Marka* n.d.). Built on the aesthetic sensibilities of the 1960s, the brand does not talk of Soviet advancements in *kosmos*, rather of everyday life at that time. The brand tells stories of the simple joys of life in the 1960s and of people who cherished friendships and sociality above all. They laughed and loved despite lacking material things. They enjoyed their soulful conversations over a glass of vodka in “the world without politics and *Sovetskosti*” (Soviet mentality; *Zelenaya Marka* n.d.). With the slogan “Time passes . . . We remain the same,” the brand soothes the anxiety of many over their personal pasts, which seem to have been discarded as the country rushed to expunge all things Soviet (Boym 2001). Moreover, similar to the brands of the 1990s, *Zelenaya Marka*’s rendition of history conveys the desire for stability among its “democratic” (lower-middle class) consumer segment, which has been socially uprooted during the market reforms and remains economically unsettled (Patino 2008).

The now-established market order, where the “economy” (about US \$5 per L) and “democratic” (about US \$7) segments account for 75 percent of sales, and the “premium” segment for 15 percent (>US \$9 and the fastest-growing), reflects the growing socioeconomic disparity in Russia along with the emergent aspirations of Russia’s privileged (*Business Analytica* 2010). *Russian Standard* is one brand that articulates this trend. Launched in 1998, it came into its own by the mid-2000s and in 2008 was “ranked the fourth-fastest-growing premium brand in the world, with a presence in forty-eight markets and annual growth rates exceeding 40 percent” (*Russian Standard* n.d.). The official website links the brand’s success to the purported renaissance in Russia:

Over the last 10 years, Russia has undergone a true renaissance and *Russian Standard* has played a pivotal role, providing Russians from all walks of life the opportunity to realize their dreams. A premier entrepreneurial company with leading businesses in spirits production and distribution, banking and insurance, *Russian Standard* offers more than products; it provides Russians with a sense of pride and personal freedom.

But the brand’s ambitions lie beyond the motherland. It seeks to “assure Russia’s place as the birthplace of vodka” and the world’s recognition that “authentic vodka” is one made according to the chemist Mendeleev’s 1894 formula. *Russian Standard*’s promotional narrative ties this “tradition” to a US \$60 million state-of-the-art distillery in St. Petersburg (allegedly, the most advanced spirit-production factory in the world). We see images of millions of glasses of “authentic vodka” moving off a high-tech production line and marching across continents, thus re-presenting a Russian “renaissance” of “technical excellence and craftsmanship” to the world (*Russian Standard* n.d.).

The brand’s international ambitions powerfully echo the increasingly assertive political-economic voice of Russia on the international stage (Morozov 2008). *Russian Standard*

projects to the world a vision of the new, regal, rich, and open-to-the-(consumerist)-world Russia. Its promotional material features images of caviar, a Russian-motif designer shawl, Manolo Blahnik heels and a super-exclusive club setting. Read against reports about “filthy-rich Russians” and the annual Millionaire Fair in Moscow (Foges 2008), the brand articulates a “renaissance” of the idea of Russian excess (*cherezmerznost*) and expansiveness (*shirota*). In *The Russian Idea* (1947), Berdyaev, a political philosopher, formulated this national myth as follows: “There is that in the Russian soul which corresponds to the immensity, the vagueness, the infinitude of the Russian land: spiritual geography corresponds with physical . . . The Russians have not been given to moderation and they have readily gone to extremes.” With vodka, this ideological postulate is translated into hospitality and openness (recall “vodka conversation”) as well as excessive drinking and debauchery (Pesmen 2000). Various narrated by Russia’s greatest authors Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Pushkin as foolhardy abandon, impassioned play, or extreme self-indulgence, “the myth mutates”: Russian expansiveness is now the privilege of a select few and corresponds to Russian oil and gas reserves, rather than lands, says one observer (*Polit74* 2007). Indeed, as refracted through the *Russian Standard* brand, the myth brings conspicuous consumption to the traditional realm of *shirota* (excess), thus domesticating the new social reality while reifying social inequalities. The brand story glosses over the societal contradictions that became apparent with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of oligarchs. *Russian Standard* seamlessly links Russia’s “renaissance” (something that many wished for) with the emergence of the new elite (something that many resent), thus legitimizing the new social reality.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article identifies three points in the post-Soviet period in which branding patterns changed, echoing changes in politics, the market, and social values. In vodka branding, the 1990s are a kaleidoscope of fragmented cultural imagery, objectifying localized ideas about Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Next, the mid-2000s are when localized nationalism was replaced by a vision of a united Russia with a strong benevolent ruler at the helm. Finally, the late 2000s, in a consolidated vodka market with a few leading brands, articulates a consolidated national ideoscape and projects the idea of a new politically and economically ambitious Russia. But vodka brands do more than reflect a national ideoscape and shifts thereof. Following Barthes’ (1972, 142) discussion of how consumer goods are implicated in mythologizing, the article suggests that vodka brands are also “instruments of the ideological inversion.” Vodka brands partake in creating the ideological environment in which certain ideas and decisions unfold and become accepted in at least three ways.

First, drawing on and dusting off various fragments of Russia’s historical and cultural past, brands make certain images available to the public. The spirit in the bottle revives and amplifies forgotten and/or obscure stories. Contradictions of

historical facts within mythified versions of events (Kolchak’s example) are not consciously questioned. Consumers’ habituation to the conventions of marketing, and products’ “own justification of pure practical use” tend to obfuscate the details of a story (Barthes 1972). Even if historical inaccuracies are dispelled once the label is read carefully, the cultural and political propositions thus constructed remain. The label does not deny reality or history but purifies and simplifies the imaginary to appeal to the cultural sensibilities of a particular audience (Barthes 1972, 142). Through the imperative of branding “to evoke joy and pride in people” (as discussed above) happenings and stories are rescued from history’s obscurity and decoupled from their contexts. Placed on bottles of “Russia’s spirit” (*Ogonek* 2003), they are returned to circulation, ready for a new political engagement. The availability of thus-made free-floating cultural imagery is and was important for Russia, particularly in the 1990s, when the demise of the Soviet Union meant a shattered history and ideology and a need to fashion/refashion a national identity (Morozov 2008).

Second, vodka brands not only move certain imagery and ideas into the public sphere but also into people’s homes and private conversations. In contrast to the more ideologically obvious media such as television or literature, brands are a less-involved and more accessible means of experiencing ideological stories. Furthermore, in Russia’s case, the use of vodka as a medium was not serendipitous. Communication means such as television and press were discredited in Soviet times (Morozov 2008), but vodka has been “by nature” and traditionally a medium of trust (Nikolaev 2004). As such, vodka brands are truly an “oblique device” re-presenting cultural “truths” and a politicized social reality (Barthes 1972). That is, vodka branding is the Trojan horse that breaches the walls of public cynicism about traditional media, transmitting ideological messages. A message on a bottle is not (seen as) imposed by the state but as voluntarily brought into homes and domesticated. It enters the private sphere and cultural events as a commodity, where it absorbs certain sensory, affective, and cognitive associations. Then, being worked into a material entity, the message is conducive to a tactile engagement; recall how in our conversations, people reported toasting with Putin to Putin with *Putinka*. Moreover, a commodity’s materiality assures that messages endure and persist, if only by simply sitting in the cupboard waiting for good company and a heart-to-heart conversation.

Third, vodka brands serve a “naturalization” function: historical political imagery, recontextualized as a trusted “mythic good,” becomes part of everyday living, thus naturalizing and reproducing social reality and ideology (Barthes 1972, 129). For example, *Putinka* naturalizes the idea of Putin the tsar. That impression is achieved simply through the proliferation of an image, and the increased public visibility and ubiquity that, given its sociocultural significance, vodka can certainly facilitate. A more-encompassing example of this function is the public reappearance of the Soviet past. In the early 1990s, all things Soviet were effectively banned from the public arena; any references to the Soviet era were labeled as revisionism (a

pejorative term) or nostalgia (at the time, the word had a strong negative connotation of “backward”; Boym 2001). Today, while the Soviet past has not officially been addressed by the political elite, it has reentered the public sphere and popular vernacular through the commodification of Soviet images, including through vodka brands such as *Zelenaya Marka*. As the vodka branding timeline indicates, such images first appeared in the market as kitsch, then as sources of national pride and tokens of unique cultural–historical experiences.

By way of conclusion, the case of vodka regarding the interplay of branding and ideology raises a few questions for future consideration. First, at any one time, there is usually a selection of vodka brands on shop shelves (Figure 4), addressing different customer segments. Thus, we see a variety of social, cultural, and political messages broadcasted simultaneously. This cacophony of labels creates a perception of pluralism of views and voices, which is sustained by a vision of the market as an all-encompassing and straightforward reflector of popular consumer preferences. In turn, such a vision is based on a neoliberal conception of the market as equated with democracy and freedom (Schwarzkopf 2011). Clark et al. (2007) remind us that this is because relations between consumers and producers are largely viewed as direct and unmediated: consumers’ preferences translate into supply by producers. In this view, the invisible hand of the market seems to almost always eclipse the hand of the state, regardless of how strong the grip of the latter is, and producers are seen as (political) “free agents,” motivated solely by profits. However, the case of vodka branding indicates that even if the latter is true, producers often operate in industries (and markets) that are historically ideologically charged and structured. Thus, despite the visual diversity, brands and their choice (if nonstrategically) represent a limited, at best, scope of ideas and voices. Thus, the question is how market structure and regulation mediate the ideas being voiced and determine whose voices are being transmitted via the brands.

Next, as commercial entities infused with cultural imagery, brands tend to blur already-tenuous boundaries between, for example, commerce and politics, private and public, and so on. As we saw in the *Putinka* case, this tendency can be strategically played out by agentive social actors. In this period of heightened political awareness, marketers clearly benefited from directly engaging in a specific ideological agenda (evident through increased market share and sales figures). So did Putin, albeit in less-concrete terms: *Putinka*, grammatically indicating the female gender, highlighted “a softer side of a strong leader” (*Kommersant* 2008). Politicians, claiming non-involvement, dismissed marketers’ contributions to the cause as “marketing tricks,” while marketers appeared immune from scrutiny as long as they “caught a correct [ideological] wave” (*poimat’ pravel’ nuyu volnu*, in the expert interviewee’s words) and played by “the market rules” (Morozov 2008). In the end, consumers “voted with their wallets” (Micheletti, Andreas, and Dietlind 2003). It is through consumers’ market choices that the ideological message (on a bottle) entered the affective private sphere, thus circulating outside the institutional circuit

of sociopolitical communication. This movement, Yudice (1995) suggests, atomizes the public and eliminates the need to participate in real politics and contribute to a political process. In the Russian context, this means that popular politics are moving from the streets (where they were in the 1990s) back to the kitchens, as in Soviet times (Yurchak 2006). Again, voicing conflicting ideological interests becomes a matter for the private domain, while a (superficial) consensus emerges and is presented in a public sphere mediated by the market, an institution ideally built on a consensual exchange. Still, the question remains how attending to politics in private and as a by-product of consumption structures an individual’s vision of sociopolitical reality.

Finally, the ability of brands to blur boundaries can be contrasted with their role in delimiting the field of cultural imagery. In our case, by drawing on sociocultural sensibilities to promote vodka, marketers made select political aspirations visible and discussible, and socialized consumers into specific ideological expressions of these. Thus, discussions revolving around “consumer choice” and “consumer sovereignty” (e.g., Micheletti, Andreas, and Dietlind 2003), have posited the central role of the market in politics, only to raise questions regarding how branding conventions affect the mix of publicly salient sociopolitical issues, and determine particular ways these are depicted and discussed. Drawing on the case of vodka, the answer lies partly in carefully considering a materiality of a brand. The sociocultural standing of a branded commodity and emotive contexts of its consumption frame that information and serve to insert certain ideological sensibilities into people’s worldviews. Commodities materialize cultural “ideologemes” in a manner that allows people to interact with and around these otherwise ephemeral notions in everyday life (Holt 2006). Moreover, a branded commodity tends to become an almost indiscernible part of a context for social relations and actions, while still remaining powerfully present. That is, in contrast to other media, brands have an enduring yet inconspicuous presence—as a object on a table, a subject of a conversation, and an item in a store display—that lingers in time and space and saturates the physical and imaginary world. As such, these commercial artifacts settle in the background of everyday life and shape our political sociocultural preferences from a distance, yet so intimately. Specifically “how” and “to what extent” brands’ presence and experiences around them impact people’s sense-making and decisions (including on an election day) remains to be investigated.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the contributions of Teresa Davis, Guliz Ger, and the three anonymous reviewers in the development of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Museum of Vodka (Konnogvardeysky Blvd, 4, St. Petersburg, Russia) is one of several private museums of vodka that emerged in post-Soviet Russia. These museums typically cater to both local and foreign tourists, and feature guided tours and a restaurant.
2. This project began with interviews in June 2004, and a follow-up in 2008, with a marketing manager from a large distillery in Siberia. He generously shared his views on vodka and politics, and reviewed an earlier version of the article (presented at the 2004 Association of Consumer Research conference) but requested anonymity; hence in the text he is referred to as "expert interview." He took a researcher to his company's store where a researcher was able to talk to some customers and take photos of vodka displays.
3. For extensive discussions of vodka history, see Nikolaev 2004 and Pokhlebkina (1994); for scholarly analyses of the sociology, economics, and politics of vodka in imperial Russia, see Christian (1990), Himmelstein (2009), and Herlihy (2002).
4. Tolstoy's label, featuring a skull, crossbones, and a warning of "Poison," never appeared on bottles (Herlihy 2002).
5. Also, vodka has always been an integral part of business interactions, not only as a perfect compliment to business negotiations, but as an alternative currency (Himmelstein 2009; Pesmen 2000). Recently, a journalist compared prices for services commonly payable in vodka bottles (e.g., plumbing services), salaries, and changes thereto, and argued that vodka has been a more stable and reliable currency than the US dollar (Ogonek 2000). For a discussion of "liquid currency" politics in the post-socialist period, see Rogers (2005).
6. For a nuanced anthropological description of vodka drinking rituals see Pesmen 2000, 172–175.

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Bio

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