Bridges to Displaced Meaning: the Reinforcing Roles of Myth and Marketing in Russian Vodka Labels

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - This paper explores the use of McCracken's (1988) 'displaced meaning' in the context of modern day Russia. It identifies vodka as a product that is replete with cultural significance and therefore can be used as a 'bridge to displaced meaning'. Vodka labels are analyzed and categorized into themes of 'mythification' which help in accessing 'displaced meaning'. Barthes (1972) discussion of myth is offered as an explanation for this unusual use of vodka labels to recreate and mythify historical fact in Russia's search for national identity in a turbulent post soviet era.

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This paper explores the use of McCracken’s (1988) ‘displaced meaning’ in the context of modern day Russia. It identifies vodka as a product that is replete with cultural significance and therefore can be used as a ‘bridge to displaced meaning’. Vodka labels are analyzed and categorized into themes of ‘mythification’ which help in accessing ‘displaced meaning’. Barthes (1972) discussion of myth is offered as an explanation for this unusual use of vodka labels to recreate and mythify historical fact in Russia’s search for national identity in a turbulent post soviet era.

This paper outlines the historical and cultural significance of vodka and of the use of vodka labels over the past in Russia. It argues that Russia is going through a crisis of national and regional identity in its post soviet period. Having been the centre of the Soviet Union and having shared its cultural identity with the USSR, Russia today finds itself with little that was not part of the shared Soviet identity. The vodka labels and their unusual use are presented as the process by which Russia is reclaiming its individual identity from the collective past. Thus displaced meaning from the past is being accessed using vodka labels as a ‘bridge to displaced meaning’. Mythification (Barthes 1972) is identified as a means of facilitating this process of access.

Over 150 vodka labels used today in Russia, were examined and classified into broad themes; ‘Greatness of the Russian Past’ and ‘Regional Significance’. Various sub themes were also identified within these two themes. The themes are explained using McCracken’s (1988) ‘displaced meaning’. It is suggested by McCracken (1988) that meaning is displaced along time and space continuums. He uses the examples of such displacement - the ‘glorious past’ and the ‘pastoral other’ as means of displacing cultural meaning by cultures in time of turbulence. In the example of the vodka labels, one sees the two major themes of the ‘greatness of the Russian past’ and of ‘regional significance’ fitting with McCracken’s (1988) shaping of displaced cultural meaning. Having displaced meaning, the need to access these ‘cultural reserves’ becomes imperative in future times. The use of material products or objects that are culturally rich to access this displaced meaning has been suggested by McCracken (1988). Vodka is seen to be a culturally a very ‘potent’ product in the Russian historical context. Thus we suggest that vodka serves as a ‘bridge’ to displaced cultural meaning. Building of the bridge is carried out by using the vodka label images to recreate and establish historical and mythical stories of the past and of specific regional histories and folklore. This rich mythical ‘bricolage’ is best described by using Barthes’(1972) notion of myth creation. The idea of form, concept and signification are highlighted and explained in this example. The need for myth making is discussed as identity creation and search for stability in a time of socio-political uncertainty. It is argued that Russia is in a period which is ‘mythologically ripe’. Barthes’ process of ‘mythification’ explains the actual images and stories told by the labels which provide a vivid and idealized picture of ‘Russianess’. These images are shaping and reinforcing Russian cultural identity at the same time that the myth thus created is helping the marketing of vodka. This symbiotic relationship is discussed in the context of historical and commercial realities.