

Critical Analysis of Commercial and Political Ads in Russia and Kazakhstan: Applications in Education

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Abstract

Commercial and political advertisements are integral elements of modern culture. Their abundance outdoors, on internet, on TV, and in various publications present an opportunity for educators to use such advertisements in developing critical thinking skills of their students. Applications of critical analysis of commercial and political ads in education are by no means limited to developing critical thinking skills. Nevertheless, such educational practices would be appropriate and relevant given that students often fall victim to the persuasive power of advertisements. In this paper, we systematize and demonstrate some popular ways of working with ads, such as deconstructing ads and evaluating ads claims, and make suggestions on marrying formal education with popular media. Examples and cases are primarily drawn from Russia and Kazakhstan.

Key words: advertisements, critical thinking, Russia, education, critical analysis

1. Introduction

Post-Soviet states, such as Russia and Kazakhstan, have undergone one-generation transition from totalitarian communist states to open capitalist countries. Within this one-generation period, both the economies and political systems of these countries have undergone sudden and intensive changes that have taken hundreds of years in Western Europe and North America. Following *glasnost* and *perestroika*, people educated in totalitarian school systems found themselves facing changes and novelties that required more than the skills taught at Soviet schools. Critical thinking was in dire need to fight the manipulative and authoritative organ that TV had become. Advertisements, both political and commercial, flooded the social arena and replaced the dictatorial propaganda machine. Advertisements became a guide to new era, educating both the young and the old of the realities and possibilities of an open capitalist system through a method of trial and error.

Nowadays, advertisements have expanded their presence by adding the Internet to their playing fields. Interactivity, a new property and quality that ads have acquired, empowers advertisements in the latter's capacity of serving as tempting agents of capitalism. As diverse members of our society as toddlers playing on iPads and grandmothers talking on Skype with their grandchildren have become direct participants in and consumers of interactive advertisements. Nevertheless, Internet advertisements target specific audiences on specific websites, thus precluding popularity of certain advertisements among members of a larger segment of population. That is why we

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decided to keep using TV advertisements that are better recognized across a wide array of households. In addition, TV advertisements present educational value due to the fact that children have opportunities to be exposed to them along with their family members, who can discuss and analyze the ads with the children.

2. Materials

The period from the fall of the Soviet Union (December, 1991) till the launch of the Eurasian Economic Union among Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus (January, 2015) is marked by waves of political conflicts (the Chechen conflict in the 1990s, the Georgian conflict in 2000s, and the Ukrainian conflict in 2010s) and economic crises for Russia. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, had not experienced significant political changes, although it did follow Russia in many an economic turmoil. These conflicts and crises served as backdrops and brought about some creative and aggressive political and commercial ads. The ads make more sense when studied in the context of those events and enable students to seek holistic view that is crucial for a critical thinking mind. All of the ads selected for analysis below employ Russian or Kazakh language and commit some form of fallacy that can be analyzed in class.

2.1. Appeals to authority

Specific aspect of political ads in Russia is that it is not always clear whether information being addressed is an ad or not. Political endorsements for Putin, especially in 2012 elections, were voiced by many a famous people in Russia, making *appeal to "experts" and authority* basic political ad. It may be that endorsing athletes (soccer star Andrei Arshavin, heavyweight fighter Fyodor Emelyanenko, figure skating champion Evgeniy Plyushenko), comedians (Mikhail Galustyan), and artists were indeed expressing their honest opinions about Putin. However, the fact that they were all over commercial TV and newspapers shows that such advertisements were backed strongly by the Russian Government. It is important to note that these "experts" enjoy immense popularity on TV and their endorsements of Putin's candidacy must have proved to be quite successful, because in the recent Ukrainian crisis the same "famous people" again have been used to support Putin's political direction. During the Ukrainian crisis, the problem was that a list appeared with famous people opposing Putin's annexation of Crimea [1]. There were 32 of these people and they were a minority compared to the supporters, of whom there were 80 [2].

In terms of educational use, the case of appeals to authority shows that being an expert in politics is no prerequisite for talking about politics. In our practice, students have generally been quite surprised to find this out as they have grown up in an environment where it is usual to hear laudatory talks about politicians on TV. Another benefit of analysis of such cases is that they provide an opportunity to talk about bias of news sources (Russian v. Ukrainian, pro-Putin v. opposition, etc.).

In Kazakhstan, however, where there is little international news coverage of domestic issues, news pieces tend to be heavily one-sided. Appeals to authority are made whenever new popular

figures emerge. Usually, popular figures tend to come from among athletes, singers, and actors. Whenever possible, old men and women are asked to support their favorite candidates during presidential/parliamentary elections, since old men and women are traditionally seen as wise and authoritative people. Some students can find analysis on the use of old people as highly cynical and we find that such analysis should be used as students continue more in their coursework. One possible explanation for such reactions is that the whole Kazakh high school curriculum pays good amount of attention to basic Kazakh traditions, such as respect for language, respect for old people, and respect for customs. Therefore, it is also common to see the use of such old people in commercial advertisements, such as those of tea, cable networks, and cars, which are all centered around family values.

2.2. Appeals to emotions, nationality, and religion

Some political and commercial ads target people's emotions, such as envy, fear, hatred, pity, and pride. These are usually quite recognizable emotions and students may enjoy detecting them in activities. For example, Putin's political commentaries after the Ukrainian events appear to be targeting hatred and pride. These are not only clear from the emotional aspects of his speeches, but also they are clear from his use of flawed arguments in his speech. Students can be given his speeches for analysis, such as Putin's State of the Union address of 2014. Putin emphasizes Crimea's essential role for Russians and the birthplace of Russian Christianity and compares Crimea to Jerusalem, stressing that Jerusalem is equally important to both Muslims and Jews [3]. This comparison may not be accidental in that it shows that Putin's claim on Crimea is similar to that of either Muslims or Jews; it is a Russian claim, not simply a claim of Russian Federation. In his address, Putin concentrates on ethnic Russians' national and religious sentiments, making appeal to pride a hallmark of his speech. He also compares political situation in 2014 to World War II events, comparing his adversaries to Hitler.

Despite our unprecedented openness back then and our willingness to cooperate in all, even the most sensitive issues, despite the fact that we considered – and all of you are aware of this and remember it – our former adversaries as close friends and even allies, the support for separatism in Russia from across the pond, including information, political and financial support and support provided by the special services – was absolutely obvious and left no doubt that they would gladly let Russia follow the Yugoslav scenario of disintegration and dismemberment. With all the tragic fallout for the people of Russia. It didn't work. We didn't allow that to happen. Just as it did not work for Hitler with his people-hating ideas, who set out to destroy Russia and push us back beyond the Urals. Everyone should remember how it ended. Next year, we will mark the 70th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War. Our Army crushed the enemy and liberated Europe. However, we should not forget about the bitter defeats in 1941 and 1942 so as not to repeat the mistakes in the future. [3]

Analysis of such comparisons, use of history, and politics of fear has to go both ways, however. By providing only Putin's speech, for example, educators will be doing an injustice to students by taking sides on political issues and thus inhibiting critical thinking and introducing bias. Such approach would be pedagogically unacceptable. Therefore, it is best to couple Putin's speeches with speeches from the opposing sides and let students compare and contrast the positions of

authors.

While Russian political propaganda has overtones of pariah empire ambitions, Kazakhstan's political propaganda is more attuned to values of globalization. Kazakhstan has been hosting a number of international forums and conferences, be they athletic, spiritual, political, or economic. Currently, the most advertised international event in Kazakhstan is the upcoming Expo 2017, which is a specialized exhibition on future energy to be held in Astana. This event, in popular imagination, signifies world's recognition of Kazakhstan as a mature and independent enough a partner to host such large-scale events. Given that Kazakhstan is now competing with China to host Winter Olympics 2022, this outwardly oriented direction might continue despite the closer economic and political ties with Russia as a result of creating the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. Video ads and posters on Expo 2017 may serve as useful handouts in class to show students the meaning and possible intent of hosting the whole event.

2.3. Mistaking correlation with causation

Commercial and political advertisements frequently mislead people into accepting correlation as causation. This can have a decisive impact on purchases and elections. Before analyzing such ads, students need to understand basic concepts, including “correlation”, “cause”, and “effect”, depending on students' grades. In commercial ads, naturally beautiful people may present their good looks as effects of certain cosmetics, perfume, or clothes. In political ads, politicians may present economic gains during favorable global financial climate as results of their own economic policies. At the same time, however, politicians may blame the global financial and/or political situation for in-country problems.

It is helpful to introduce students to “contrapositive” equivalents of statements, because advertisements offer cases when the false reverse is presented as true. It may also be that contrapositive equivalents of ad slogan, for example, are offensive or unethical. Take Kazakhstani example of a street poster:



Figure 1 Ad against jaywalking in Almaty, Kazakhstan (2012)

This ad is against jaywalking and its slogan can be translated from the Russian and Kazakh as “People cross the street at designated places; Sheep cross the street wherever they can.” The contrapositive of this slogan targeting pedestrians is “If you do not cross the street at designated places, then you are not people”. Once it is established that you are not people, the second statement provides an option for what to be if not to be a human. This ad caused much disagreement and discussion, but it was received well as part of examples in our book called “Fundamentals of Critical Thinking” [4].

2.4. Appeal to popularity

Commercial advertisements frequently use popular people in support of advertised products and services. However, a more recent phenomenon in Russia and Kazakhstan is to use foreign popular people to advertise local brands. Global stars, in a way, confirm locals’ choices and support their identity politics. For example, David Duchovny has recently appeared in a commercial for Siberian Crown, a Russian Siberian beer. In it, the famous actor wonders about his life if his ancestors stayed in Russia, musing on scenarios of what it would be like if he were Russian. Throughout the ad, he fantasizes about being a cosmonaut, a Bolshoy Theater actor, and other stereotypical Russian and famous occupations. Given the political context, Duchovny comments on the ad that “being proud of one's ancestry is not a political statement on any current government or public policies” and adds that “in retrospect, and in light of recent tragic events, I can now see the potential for misunderstanding and hope people will understand” [5]. This is a good example of a commercial ad getting political ad properties and can elicit responses from media that can serve as a good material for critical thinking in class.

3. Special Case: Critical Thinking in Kazakhstan

All of the materials selected for analysis of the ads were developed with Russian and Kazakh audiences in mind. Nevertheless, similar materials can be found in other languages and countries. The case of critical thinking in Kazakhstan can also be quite interesting and instructive.

3.1. President’s Speech

In 2013, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev mentioned that Kazakhstan is in need to improve critical thinking of its students in his annual State of the Union Address. His suggestion was immediately picked up by the National Movement “Kazakhstan 2050” and resulted in a book, which was written by the authors of this paper. The book was written in both Kazakh and Russian in accordance with the bilingual policy of the country. This example shows that government can sometimes be willing to support developing its citizens’ critical thinking skills.

3.2. Proverbs and Essays

The problem with developing critical thinking among students in Kazakhstan is the abundant use

of proverbs, which are essentially verbal axioms. Such proverbs are often supported without much criticism, because people assume they understood them. Disobeying or criticizing proverbs is almost tantamount to disobeying the elders. It may be that proverbs acquired such power in the society because they are, in many ways, traditional by their nature and often function as a source of inspiration.

Writing essays is rarely taught in Kazakhstani schools. Usually, students are asked to produce essays about how they spent their summers and about seasons of the year. Questions, such as “How I spent my summer”, “My lovely country” and “On the Autumn”, are quite standard. Such questions have little value for critical thinking *per se* and may represent attempts by the Government to extend its propaganda reach.

3.3. Bilingual TV

TV in Kazakhstan includes both Russian and Kazakhstani channels. Such a mix allows for cross-country analysis of international news and can serve as a useful tool to identify vested interests and objectivity in news. This difference is particularly noticeable during conflicts and crises that involve Russia, because Russia tends to be defensive in its news coverage whereas Kazakhstan tends to be neutral.

3.4. Nazarbayev University

In 2010, Nazarbayev University opened its doors to students in Astana and quickly became the best university in Kazakhstan. It now attracts close to 700 students to its Foundation program each year. Students who want to study humanities or social sciences have to take an exam on critical thinking. This requirement has led to popularization of critical thinking among aspiring students of Nazarbayev University [6].

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Commercial ads and political ads employ similar techniques in both Kazakhstan and Russia. It seems that some reasons why such ads are popular and successful have to do with competition within communities that have been grouped together since kindergarten. Usually, a group of students spend all 11 years in one class together, despite differences in their academic abilities and interests. As a result, it can be theorized, people try to gravitate towards the standard and average by following the customary and the popular.

Another reason why ads in Kazakhstan and Russia play special role is because majority of people speak only Russian as their reading tongue and this precludes intervention from Western media sources. Due to the Cold War, the Soviet Union restricted access to learning English. Only highly specialized schools seem to have offered English-language education. Such linguistic isolation allows for great control of information by the state.

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