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Freedom calling

Telephony, mobility and consumption in post-socialist Estonia

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the development of consumer culture and specifically the notion of consumer freedom in the transitional society of Estonia. Drawing on the work of Zygmunt Bauman and Don Slater as well as the notion of ‘transition culture’ proposed by Michael Kennedy, it investigates the importance of western goods and western notions of consumer choice in anchoring emerging conceptions of individual freedom in post-socialist countries. This theme is explored through an analysis of a consumer item with a particularly high sign value in Estonia: the mobile phone. The analysis details the transformation discourses around freedom in print advertisements for mobile telephony from 1991–2001, demonstrating how over this period the meaning of freedom as a value shifted from political and economic conceptions to an individualized discourse of consumer choice emphasizing hedonism, self-expression and leisure.

KEYWORDS *advertising, consumer culture, freedom, mobile telephony, post-socialist context*

Introduction

The transition from socialism and the ‘return to the western world’ has proved to be a complicated and problem-ridden process for all the countries formerly located within the Soviet bloc. For many people within these societies, the arrival of consumer choice epitomizes both freedom from oppression and freedom to assume responsibility for one’s own life. This double sense of individual liberation is expressed through the proliferating forms and artefacts of an emerging marketing culture, complexly shaped by the intersection of three influences: socialist heritage; the specific context of transformation linked to the reassertion of the nation-state and a free market economy; and increasing immersion in a global consumer and media culture (see Stamenova, 1999).



Estonia is an interesting case, since its post-communist development (particularly in the economic sphere) has been rapid, leading to its promotion as a 'success story' both in the West and Estonia (see also Kennedy, 2002). This has a lot to do with its unique history. Estonia and the other Baltic States were always considered a 'Soviet West'. Their closer ties with foreign countries and mass media (mainly Finnish TV) made the Iron Curtain appear more transparent for those looking outwards. This openness to western influence became ever stronger after the mid-1960s, when the first regular ferry line began operation between Tallinn and Helsinki. These links created a specific milieu of 'western-ness' which served as a magnet for the Russian intelligentsia. As one Russian journalist recalls:

'We were looking for what we did not have,' says Leonid Parfyonov, journalist from the TV channel NTV who as a journalism student at Leningrad University used to go to a Baltic capital by the night train and back the next night. 'For instance, an opportunity to drink coffee. Or listen to the music that was more rhythmic than here. It was a bit of air, although not maybe the freshest one.' (Liik, 2000)

In order to unpick the way in which freedom as a value has been encoded in post-socialist Estonia, this article looks at the connotations carried by advertisements for one particularly resonant consumer good – the mobile telephone – on the assumption that advertising is one of the most influential 'circulators' of the sociocultural meanings attached to a commodity. But before moving on to this case study, we need to look more closely at the shifting meanings of freedom more generally.

Freedom in the post-socialist context

The meaning of 'freedom' in the post-socialist context is complicated. On the one hand, it is conceived primarily as freedom from oppression and restraint. On the other, in a totalitarian regime there is always a strong link between lack of political freedom and stifling of consumer choice. The Soviet project of rational planning colonizes the individual lifeworld not only through various party institutions, but also through the provision of standardized, 'grey' consumer goods. In this context, western commodities came to play an important role not only in personal hopes and dreams but in the creation of a collective 'resistance identity' which denied immersion in a mass of 'equal comrades' (see also Keller and Vihalemm, 2001). As Don Slater has noted:

[W]hile officially denigrated (and linked to the decadence of the West) the heroic consumer who connects freedom and social dynamism through the market pursuit of self-interest seemed to persist. Consumer culture survived in the seeming desperation for western consumer goods, for a culture of Coke



and jeans: culturally western consumption represented material success and private pleasures, but also the outcome and evidence of personal freedom. (1997: 36)

Western consumer goods and consumption habits operated not only as markers of individual success, but also – at least during the late Soviet period and early years of transition – ethno-romantic symbols of collective freedom, tangible proof of a free Estonian nation-state. Thus the symbolism carried by western consumer society for the inhabitants of the socialist bloc was very much ‘of western modernity in its heroic phase (enterprising individualism, rejection of authority in private life, autonomy defined as self-creation . . .)’ (Slater, 1997: 36). Reasserting these values and one’s cultural belonging to the West was a crucial issue for the socialist countries of Europe, who for decades had retained a strong resistance against Soviet ‘civilizational pathology’. It was a question of their national and cultural survival.

However, the development of the former socialist countries after the collapse of the Soviet empire did not proceed entirely as many commentators would have wished. As Mikko Lagerspetz (1997: 50) put it, ‘a mirror had appeared from behind the “iron curtain”’. Western socialists were unpleasantly surprised by the realization that ‘civil society meant consumer society, civic freedom meant freedom to shop freely’ (Slater, 1997: 37).

However, for many, ‘learning to be free’ was a painful process and the negative side of freedom – confusion, loneliness and feelings of individual insignificance and powerlessness – was felt vividly after the shock therapy of severing bonds with the state (which although forced, had created a certain sense of security) (see Fromm, 2002[1942]). For Fromm, writing in the 1940s with Hitler ascendent, ‘fear of freedom’ was driving people into the embrace of authoritarian regimes. As Bauman (2000) argues, the present fluidity of capitalist modernity, ‘postmodern’ playfulness and ever-increasing melting of solids has pushed those in search of a modicum of certainty and control over everyday life into the shopping centre. The ability to ‘shop around’ in a marketplace of identities offers the most accessible way in which to create a coherent individual identity narrative, now that the building blocks formerly provided by work, family, class or religious ties are becoming increasingly shaky (see also Giddens, 1991). Focus group research conducted in the former Soviet Republics (including Estonia) by Michael Kennedy (2002) has confirmed that ‘freedom of choice in consumption’ is one of the most common ways of talking about freedom. At the same time, as Kennedy notes: ‘While celebrating freedom of choice in consumer goods, most people followed with a lament that of course not everyone can afford that choice’ (2002: 188). Thus, people are invited to immerse themselves in a capitalist consumer market full of choice and to see consumption as ‘a fundamental component of day-to-day



activity' (Giddens, 1991: 80), even though they often have very limited resources. The result is that for many, the long-yearned-for expansion of choice feeds a sense of insecurity.

The context of Estonia

To a large extent, Estonia's return to the West (see Lauristin, 1997; Lauristin and Vihalemm, 1997a) has taken the path of neo-liberalism, where individuals are left to their own devices. The radical reforms of the early 1990s freed all prices (except some public utilities) and eliminated all tariffs and quotas on foreign trade. At the same time, social programmes for retired people, young families and the disabled failed to provide an adequate safety net. Consequently, although many western politicians and businessmen have dubbed Estonia a 'Baltic Tiger', it is a country where quite often the individual has to face socially produced risks alone (see Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1994[1986]), usually with scant resources.

The rapid development of western consumer culture has played an important role in this painful process of liberation and its concomitant social problems:

Changes in material culture are represented in symbolic language referring to success, prosperity, free choice and the closeness of Estonia to the West. Conspicuous consumption and the symbolism of public behaviour are quickly learned by those who want to show their excellent adaptation to the expectations of the new world. At the same time, for a majority of people this lesson is quite painful, because they must read the signs of their own failure. (Lauristin, 1997: 39)

The fundamental process of social transformation has been accompanied by a major shift in the meaning of 'freedom'. Once the collective political freedom sought by the 'unity of a nation gloriously rallying during manifestations of the Singing Revolution' (Lauristin, 1997: 40) was regained, other aspects of freedom moved to the fore. As Vihalemm has argued, on the basis of in-depth interviews conducted in the mid-1990s, by 1995 it was becoming clear already that 'these concepts [equality and freedom] which previously evoked a unified and strong ideological context are now related to everyday personal experiences – in the case of freedom meaning freedom of individual action' (1997: 278).

Of course, freedom of individual action can be embodied in the figure of the entrepreneur whose competition-stimulated energy fuels the neo-liberal economy. The 'pioneer' starting his or her own business is the quintessential hero of this narrative (see Bauman, 1988), offering a potent role model. At the same time, other values have been gaining ground, placing more importance on self-expression, enjoyment and emotion (see



Inglehart, 1997). The new heroes of this parallel narrative, mainly constructed by the ever-increasing volume of marketing texts, are hedonistic consumers continually restyling their selves.

Lauristin and Vihalemm are explicit about this shift towards consumerism in Estonia. Basing their argument on the extensive data produced by the Balticom research programme carried out in 1991–5, they claim that

during the five years of transition the change in the value system in Estonia has been in the direction of postmaterialist values. A significant role in this process has been played by the growing influence of the western entertainment industry (soap operas, movies and commercials), but more importantly the increasing consumerism of the transitional society as a whole... The younger generations in particular are rapidly integrating into international youth culture, assuming the individualistic–hedonistic value orientations which prevail there. (1997b: 255–6; see also Inglehart, 1997)

This shift is also confirmed by Research Institute on Social Change (RISC) research conducted between 1996 and 2000 which suggests that Estonian value orientations will be shaped significantly in the coming years by concepts of ‘connectedness and interaction’ and ‘hedonism and emotions’.¹ Here we come back to Bauman:

The extent to which freedom grounded in consumer choice, notably consumers’ freedom of self-identification through the use of mass-produced and merchandized commodities, is genuine or putative is a notoriously moot question. Such freedom cannot do without market-supplied gadgets and substances. But given that, how broad is the happy purchasers’ range of fantasy and experimentation? (2000: 84)

One ‘market-supplied gadget’ which has acquired remarkable sign value in Estonia, as in many other countries (see, for example, Varbanov, 2002), is the mobile phone. Consequently, exploring the shifting discourses around mobile phones offers a particularly fruitful way of shedding light on this ‘moot question’.

Mobile telephony as a symbol of freedom

According to the International Telecommunication Union (2003) the mobile phone penetration rate in Estonia was 65 subscribers per 100 inhabitants in 2002. Among the countries of the former socialist bloc this places it third after Slovenia (83) and the Czech Republic (85). However, a representative survey ($N = 1470$) conducted at the end of 2002 by the Department of Journalism and Communications of the University of Tartu (Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2004) showed ownership



rates standing at 76 percent among men and 67 percent among women. At the same time, these global figures conceal large generational differences, with 94 percent of 20–29-year-olds claiming to own a mobile phone as opposed to only 27 percent of 65–74-year-olds.

After a notable scholarly lacuna, research on mobile phones as ‘a mind- and society-altering technology’ has been increasing in recent years. As two of the leading commentators on the area point out in one of the most comprehensive collections of studies on mobile phones, *Perpetual Contact. Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performances* (Katz and Aakhus, 2002), during the initial phase of take-up although folk discourses on mobile phones proliferated, most social scientists showed little interest and few even owned one themselves.

Katz and Aakhus argue that the meanings that have accumulated around mobile phones centre on notions of increased freedom. As they note: ‘Mobile phones are praised . . . as devices that will liberate individuals from the constraints of their settings. Individuals who master these devices are shown as people who control their destiny’ (2002: 9). If this is so in advanced western societies, there is every reason to believe that connotations around freedom will resonate ever more strongly in the newly-liberated post-socialist countries, since political and economic freedom and this new communication device arrived in Estonia roughly at the same time. The advertising industry was quick to take advantage of this conjuncture and to promote mobile phones as an iconic technology of freedom. In 1999 and 2000 mobile telephony was one of the top three most advertised products; two and three (respectively) of the top five advertisers in those years were mobile telephony-related (*Baltic Media Book*, 2001).

However, in order to understand better why mobile telephony has become such a potent symbolic product in the post-Soviet context it is necessary to recall the arrangement of telecommunications in Soviet Estonia. Research conducted among the inhabitants of Tallinn (the country’s largest city) in 1975 and 1981 showed that while 48 percent of people who did not belong to the Communist Party had telephones at home, the percentage among the party-members was 66 (Hansen, 1990). In this situation, potential subscribers without party links had to wait sometimes for decades before their home telephone could be installed. Even as late as 1993 there were cases of families waiting for 40 years to be connected to the telephone network (Karja, 1990).

In addition, telecommunications were under strong central control. Intercity calling within Estonia was possible only through the central switchboard. For phoning abroad a long-distance call via Moscow had to be placed. Telephone exchanges had special rooms housing surveillance technology to which the KGB had unlimited access.² In contrast, in the post-socialist era, particularly after the Estonian Telephony Company (partly owned by Finnish and Swedish capital) was founded in 1993, telecommunications developed rapidly and the possibility of making



direct calls anywhere in the world, which initially was an unprecedented and almost euphoric experience, quickly became taken for granted.

The introduction of mobile technology at the beginning of the 1990s accelerated this opening up of communications, although at first it was a technology confined to the well-to-do. At the beginning of the 1990s, mobile phones cost tens of thousands of kroons (tens of times more than the then average monthly salary) and their mere ownership was a statement of wealth, which was not necessarily legally obtained. Thus, during that early period mobile phones were associated not only with being rich but (at least by the poorer and more educated part of society) with illegal business practices.

A third operator to the market arrived in 1997, which meant unusually sharp competition (even for Western Europe at that time). Call rates decreased and the cheapest phones cost about 1000 kroons (a smaller proportion of the then average monthly salary). From that point on, the mobile phone became a consumer good accessible to a wide range of people. The resulting pattern corresponds closely to Rogers' (1983) classic model of diffusion of innovation, with access quickly moving from the élite to the majority, while the older generation and the less well-to-do lag behind for some time.

Selling phones, reconstructing freedom

The analysis which follows is based on a sample of advertisements for mobile telephony carried by Estonia's largest weekly paper *Eesti Ekspress* from 1991 to July 2001. *Eesti Ekspress* was selected because of its wide readership and because most major ad campaigns in Estonia employ it as part of their marketing mix.

The sample included all advertisements in A3 or A4 format, 125 items in all. Partly observing the model developed by Richards et al. (2000), the concept of freedom was subdivided into four categories and all instances where they occurred in the text were coded, either explicitly or implicitly. The subcategories are:

1. freedom to move and communicate internationally – this includes all texts where international travel, communication or business are featured either explicitly (e.g. verbal promises are given that a mobile phone enables one to do business abroad, travel and be accessible whenever and wherever) or implicitly (e.g. pictures that represent the globe, New York etc.);
2. freedom of choice – texts which appeal to the consumer's freedom to choose between different options;
3. leisure time, rest – these texts include direct or indirect expressions of time free from work or household chores, relaxation and entertainment; and

4. freedom of self-expression – here the value represented is the consumer's freedom to shape his/her own style and express his/her uniqueness via mobile phone design.

Altogether one or more of these categories could be found in 65 of the advertisements sampled. From within this sample, examples have been selected which were identified (and which were used as a control group) as 'typical ideal' of the major discursive changes tracked in the full sample. This generated a subsample of 12 texts for intensive qualitative analysis. However, due to space limitations this article focuses on six.

Free capitalist heroes

The first advertisement to be analysed in detail here – a corporate image advertisement for the first and largest mobile operator Eesti Mobiiltelefon – dates from May 1994 (Figure 1).

It shows a sunset-gilded panorama of New York, with the now vanished Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, which at the time was one of the most potent symbols of western wealth and power. The left-hand side (perhaps representing the socialist past) is dark, while the right-hand side features the first business centre in Tallinn renovated according to western standards. This represents both the new and the ideal (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). The slanted lines forming a perspective stress aspiration and a drive forward. The yuppie looking straight at the viewer creates a personal relationship, inviting the consumer to identify with his dreams and plans. The hero of the picture is one of the 'pioneer entrepreneurs' who, as we mentioned earlier, were at that time the primary customers for mobile phone companies. The laptop and the mobile phone on the right symbolize a new era of modern technology and efficiency. The advertising copy, acknowledging the high cost of using the technology, assures readers that: 'A call made at the right time may compensate for the costs of buying and using the phone for a long time.' For the person living under Soviet rule such a calculation was rarely used, if not completely alien. Private business assets were non-existent, therefore there was no concept of freedom as the ability to guide one's behaviour solely by means–ends calculus, without needing to concern oneself with other considerations (see Bauman, 1988).

Release from isolation and restricted freedom of movement and communication is clearly illustrated by the sentence: 'On a mobile phone it is possible to call any phone in every corner of the world.' Here we see a new understanding of spatiality – the whole world is accessible. Even though the population was more or less used to the new situation by 1994, the advertisement underlines the need to use freedom effectively: to make



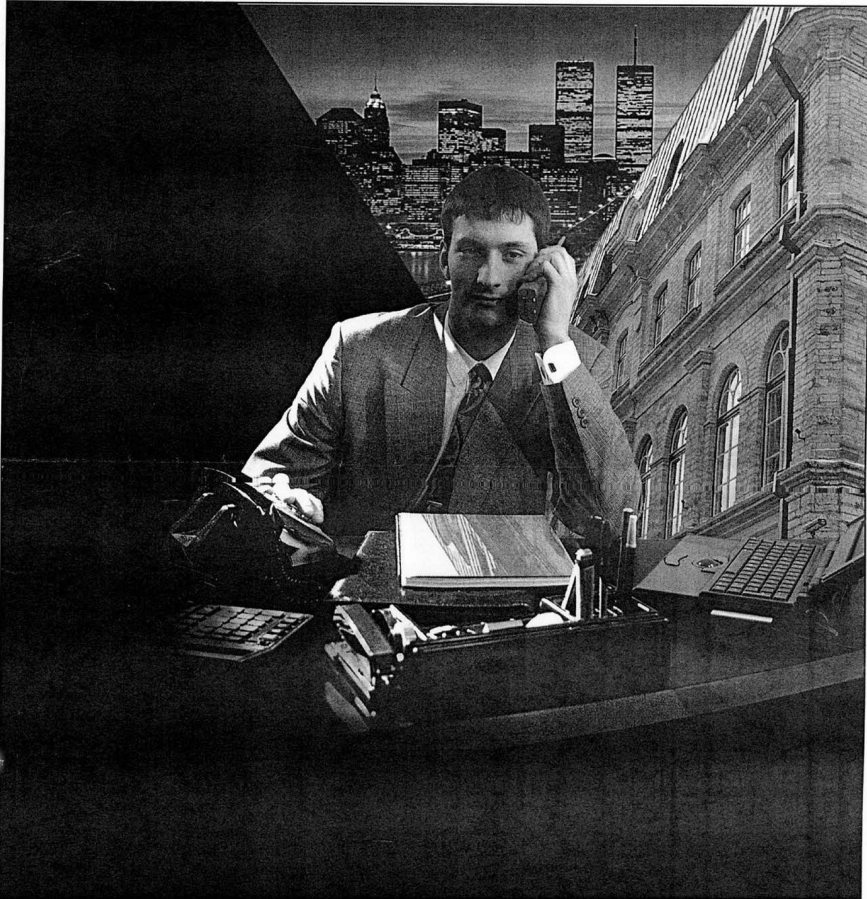
EESTI TELEKOMMUNIKATSIOONID TÄNA JA HOMME

MEIE ÜHISETTEVÕTE



EESTI MOBIILTELEFON

ÕIGE VALIK

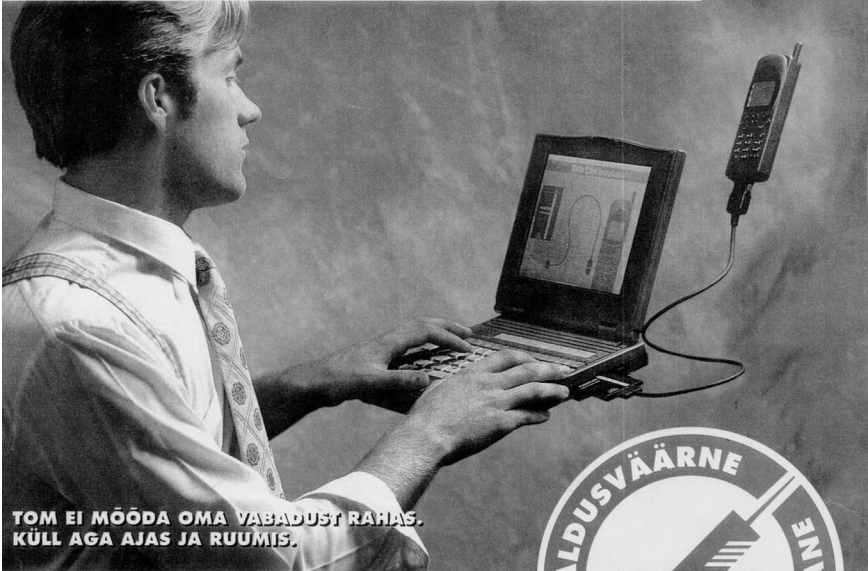


- * Mobiiltelefoniga helistades oled äritehingutes operatiivne.
- * Oled kiiresti kättesaadav kõigile, ka paigus, kus tavaline telefoniühendus puudub.
- * Mobiiltelefonilt saab helistada ükskõik millisele telefonile maailma igasse punkti.
- * Mobiiltelefonile saab helistada nii teise mobiiltelefoniga kui ka tavalise telefoniga.
- * Õigel ajal peetud kõne võib korvata nii telefoni ostmise kui kasutamise kulud pikaks ajaks.

Figure 1 Eesti Mobiiltelefon advertisement



MEIE RÄÄGIME VABADUSEST JUBA TÄNA.



**TOM EI MÕÖDA OMA VABADUST RAHAS.
KÜLL AGA AJAS JA RUUMIS.**



Tom on noor ja edukas. Sellegipoolest ei taha ta nüstudu välega, nagu oleks ta töömarkkonnas. Ise peab ta ennast käesli terveks, normaalseks inimeseks. Loomulikult ei saa ta eitada, et töökohas on küllaltki saar- mürarikud 16 pingelist töötundri päriest. Aga enne ajaks ta kasvõi õõpäevaringist Oma Ajaq, kui robab kallegi teise alluvuses üheksati viieni. See on lihtsalt tema põhimõte. Sest ülekatge äärmilmas armastab Tom vabadust (on vist üleilgine lisada, et Tom on vabaline).

Keegi on teinud, et vabadus - see on lendamine! Vägi oli see vastupidir! Igal juhul, just lennates Tomi päevad mööduvadki. Hea, et on olemas Eurotelefon-keegi tutvut oli soovitanud. Tom ei tea enam, mis ta ilma GSM-ita peale hakkaks! Täpsemalt, Eurotelefoni SIM-kaardid, mis teakavasti sobib kasutamiseks kõikides GSM-ides. Pikema reisele minnes jätab ta kavaliselt isikliku telefoni lihtsalt koju. Et ei korduks see, mis juhtus tema NMT-iga (jõi Luffhansa Boeng'isse)! GSM-maailmas on telefoni laenuus igapäevane asi.

SIM-kaarti hoiab Tom nagu Eesti passi - et oleks alati käepärast. See on tema "kodaniku müü", nagu ta ütleb. Näli naljaks, aga eks ole siin oma tüütera sees. SIM ju sisuliselt mikroprotsessoriga mälukaart ongi. Tähtis kõik vajalikud telefoninumbriid ning vahendab EUROTELEFON 256-e võrguteenuseid.

Vabadusest veel niipalju, et küni EUROTELEFON 256-ile on Tomi liikumisvabadus suurem kui kunagi varem. Nüüd võib ta teegi faks ja data-sõnumeid saada, niisama, oke "fiinuli" - autost, bussist või, kui vaja, kasvõi lennukist! Kõike on ette tahnud! Seejärel on tal igal pool (igal pool!) kaasas laptop arvuti, mis alati hoi meeslega Tomi võluva GSM-itega ühendusse astub. Tom trüüb vaid teksti, võib numbrit ja ... juba ta lendabki.

**OKTOOBRIKLIENDIEDU 708 kr.
PRO TRAVELER-I TEENUSPAKETI TASUTA!**

Eurotelefoni volitatud esindajad on:

Tallinnas: LEVI & KÜTO AS EETERAKO AS MOBITELE AS TELEFONPOOD AS KANANNA AS MORELL IC AS BELESTA OÜ VEE VINT AS "BÜRKO EKSPERT" RTI AS	Staadioni 8 Repleri 1 39/138 Gonsiori 29/233 Pärnu mnt. 137 Rävala pst. 4/717 Tatari 54 Vanu Narva mnt. 16 Pirita tee 20 Tatari 1 Tõnisme 3A	BOGA AS INTERAITUS AS EIBRID AS Sakus: GUSI AS Tartus: LEVI & KÜTO AS TELEFONPOOD AS A-ELECT AS TARTU INFOBÜROO	Laki 12 Toodi 44 Pae 74 Teaduse 1 Vanemuise 65 Tehase 16 Vanemuise 65 Roostoja pl. 14
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RADIOLINJA ESTI TEENINDUSBÜROO
Viimsi 47, Tallinn Telefon 639 9966
On avatud E-R Eurotelefon 256 56 56 66
kell 9.00-17.00 Faks 639 9977

IGUJA LISAVEAVET EUROTELEFONI KÕIKIDE EELISTE JA TEENUSTE KOHTA RADIOLINJA ESTI TEENINDUSBÜROOST VÕI MEIE VOLITATUD ESINDAJATELT.

Figure 2 Radiolinja advertisement



Another young capitalist hero is depicted in the second advertisement chosen for analysis here from October 1995, when the second mobile operator Radiolinja entered the market (Figure 2). The advertisement begins with a strapline: 'We speak of freedom already today.' The protagonist is again a yuppie, called Tom (note that he has an anglicized, not an Estonian name). Tom is deeply engrossed in his activity – establishing a data connection for his laptop via mobile phone.

The advertising copy refers to his frequent business trips, which are made by a Lufthansa Boeing (a marker of status at the time). In addition to this international dimension, Tom's personal and business freedom is also important. He is self-employed, he is in his shirtsleeves and wearing braces. The copy says:

Tom does not measure his freedom in money, but in time and space . . . But he would rather do his own thing for 24 hours than work for somebody else from nine to five . . . Because above all in this world, he loves freedom.

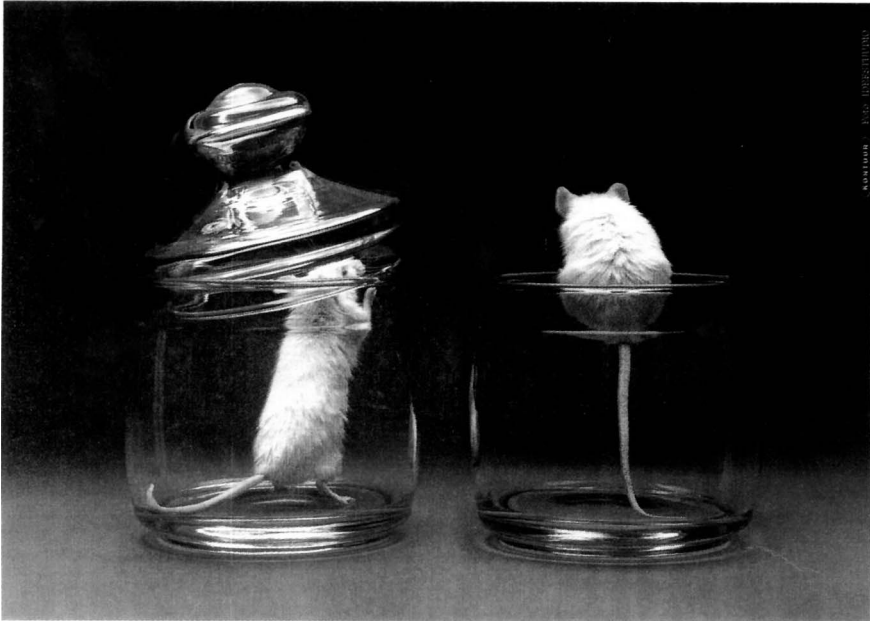
Needless to say, Tom is single. Significantly Tom's freedom is associated with working extra hours (16 hours at work is 'perfectly normal'), having his own firm, international travelling and being single. He is a typical 'free Estonian man' of the early to mid-1990s (such a figure had not completely disappeared by 2001, but as will be seen below he no longer occupies such a prominent position in advertisements). He actualizes himself in work; family life and commitments have been postponed.

Tom is the epitome of the 'self-made hero of entrepreneurial capitalism' (Bauman, 1988: 57), engaged in competitive struggle for money and power in which being at ease with the West constitutes valuable symbolic capital. Indeed, we may conclude that such young men were held in high esteem at the time, both within the successful transition countries (among which Estonia figures very prominently) as well as in the reports of the World Bank, one of the strongest ideological documents of the 'transition culture' (see Kennedy, 2002). At the same time they are not the 'self-made tycoons, pulling themselves up to the highest reaches of society by their bootstraps' described by Bauman (1988: 57). Although the newly-liberated Estonia had to begin modernizing (i.e. building up an independent free market economy) it was also constrained by the emerging structures of the new global economy. Those who do business in Estonia have to play by the rules of global post-industrial capitalism. There is no limitless freedom for them in the commercial field. However, in common with innumerable other countries, Estonian capitalism has found

[the] secret of the philosopher's stone: seen from the vantage point of the consumers, the consumer world (unlike the area of production and distribution of wealth and power) is free from the curse of elimination contest and monopoly function. (Bauman, 1988: 57)



VAJATE MOBIILTELEFONI?



Purk on purk.
Lihtsalt vabaduse piiramise võrdkuju.

**TEGUTSEMISVABADUS,
SÕNAVABADUS,
LIIKUMISVABADUS,
SUHTELEMISVABADUS**

- kui oled purgis, oled neist ilma.
Ja maailmale märku anda ka ei saa.
Sest traat, mida tõmmata, purki ei tule.



NOKIA 2110

MOBIILTELEFON ON VABADUS.

Sa oled maailmale kuuldav sealt,
kus Sa oled. Sest Sinu mobiiltelefon on
Sul kaasas. Isegi kui oled juhtumisi purgis.

VALIKUVABADUS peab Sul ka olema,
et valida see õige. Mitte ainult telefon,
vaid ka **TEENINDUS, KINDLUS,
NÕUANNE, HOOLDUS.**

ÜKS ON SELGE - LEVI & KUTO ANNAB SULLE VABADUSE JA MITTE AINULT MOBIILTELEFONI!



LEVI & KUTO
MOBIILTELEFONID

NOKIA
CONNECTING PEOPLE

TALLINN Staadioni 8 tel (2) 631 3777 • **TARTU** Vanemuise 64 tel (27) 420 400
PÄRNU Ringi 10 tel (244) 45 744 • **RAKVERE** Tuleviku 14a tel (232) 44 486

Figure 3 Levi & Kuto advertisement



So, the mobile phone operator offers all the ‘self-made’ and ‘wannabe’ aspirers a consolation – consumption of a highly conspicuous commodity.

The end of isolation and freedom from oppression is ‘crowned’ by an interesting example from February 1996 which promotes the phone vendor Levi & Kuto (Figure 3). The photo shows white laboratory mice in a jar.⁵ The metaphor of the jar is central: in Estonian the phrase ‘to be in a jar’ or ‘to get into a jar’ means ‘to be in a fix’ or ‘in trouble’. The text continues:

Freedom to act, freedom of speech, freedom to move, freedom to communicate – when in a jar, you are without them. And you cannot signal to the world either. Because the wire to pull does not reach the jar.

The four dimensions listed here summarize the post-communist understanding of freedom. They can be reduced to two: movement (travelling to the West), and talking (speaking one’s mind without fear of repression; see also Kennedy, 2002). Although it was already 1996, potential consumers could clearly remember the times when they were deprived of these two basic rights. ‘Signalling the world’ is vital. It connotes Estonians’ fear of being cut off. The old ‘wired’ technology also connotes the past, whereas wireless is the future: ‘The mobile phone is freedom. You are audible to the world from where you are . . . Even if you are in a jar.’ A free person can communicate with the whole world whenever and wherever he/she pleases.

At the end the text becomes imperative: ‘And you must have freedom of choice, to choose the right one.’ Freedom of choice is the foundation of consumer culture, without which one cannot survive in late modern society. The text ends: ‘One thing is clear – Levi & Kuto gives you freedom, not just a mobile phone.’ If the new technology could free even laboratory mice from a scientist’s hands (the memory of the communist regime?) the citizen-consumer of the new era will be made even ‘freer’. The promise is that freedom can be achieved easily through the consumption of a reputable and widely desired gadget, and by this simple act of purchase a person will belong to the West, be one of ‘them’, have all the freedoms of the individualist era.

Hedonism, self-expression and leisure

The discourse of freedom in mobile telephony advertisements begins to change in early 1997 when the third operator enters the market, offering cheaper phones and services. As a result, the sign value of the mobile phone begins to shift from an expensive status symbol to a mass-market product (however, with varying connotations). Self-expression and identity through style and leisure time become the most prominent themes.



Jäme ots on sinu käes

Taskutelefonist on saamas igapäevane tarbeasi.
Sa ei pea olema väga jutukas, et Q GSMi taskus pidada.
Lihtsalt mugav on, kui võid millal tahes teiste inimestega
kontaktteeruda ja alati olukorra peremeheks jääda.
Q GSM võrgus helistamine pole kallid. Ja telefon heliseb
alati sinu juures, mitte tühjas toas. Q GSM annab
vabaduse, mille eest pole vaja kallilt maksta.
Räägi inimestega.

räägi inimestega



Figure 4 Q-GSM advertisement



A remarkable example is the advertisement from the initial Q-GSM campaign in spring 1997 (Figure 4). Again we see a photo in the ideal position with the text offering a real solution to the dream. The weird-looking man, holding a petrol can, was an unprecedented representation of a mobile phone consumer and prompted widespread public discussion when the advertisement was first published. The ‘can-man’s’ identity was confusing: the can connotes the Soviet era, fuel shortages and old Russian cars. His appearance – suit trousers and a white shirt, bare feet and sandals, greasy, thinning hair – epitomizes lack of style. The consumer is not invited to identify with the man, but the man must look at least partly familiar (and he does). The information on the right-hand side – the Q logo – tells us that such weird combinations (‘a man from kolhoz’ and mobile telephony) have now become possible.

Several interpretations of his identity can be given. He can be read as a symbol of a past which is finally gone. Q-GSM proclaims the complete victory of the ‘communication era’ (their strapline was: ‘Talk to people’). He can be viewed also as a humorous metaphor for a simple, not so wealthy person, for whom ‘talking time’ has arrived. Mobile telephony is no longer only for the young and successful, it has become affordable for others as well and is promoted thus as a common consumer product, not as a luxury anymore.⁴ On the other hand, a different explanation can be offered. The bizarre man is a ‘postmodern hero’ who denies the grand narratives of success and wealth expressed by fixed codes of appearance. He ridicules the normative identity of a *nouveaux riche* yuppie by being free to wear no socks with a white shirt and not having to wash his hair every morning, by carrying a petrol can instead of a briefcase. However, he does not have to be like that all the time, the fluid and carnevalesque identity game allows him to alter himself whenever he pleases (the main mechanism of the game being consumption, of course). The copy says:

You don’t have to be very talkative in order to have a Q-GSM in your pocket. It’s simply convenient if you can contact other people anytime and always be master of the situation.

Control over events and people, making decisions (also on whether to conform to the so-called fixed code of the unity of yuppie and mobile phone or not) is ‘freedom for which you don’t have to pay a lot’, as promised by Q-GSM.

The self-expression dimension is emphasized especially in telephone advertisements which were not produced in Estonia, but nevertheless were adapted and widely used. The Nokia 8210 advertisement of November 2000, for example, is a part of a longer campaign fully oriented to self-expression through style. On the left there is a close-up of a young man (again the soft, trendy, slightly girlish type). On the top left-hand corner (according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) in the position of new

and ideal) is the phone, a departure from the usual layout where the product is in the position of the real, a solution to the problem. The copy claims:

Slim and stylish Nokia 8210 gives you voice dialling, excellent sound quality and five new colours. Wear your own phone. Live Your Own Style!

It is noteworthy that the English version of the text has 'comes with' instead of 'gives you'. So, the translators have added emphasis: again, the sound and colour are not features of the phone but projected on to the consumer whose personality is augmented by them. Also, the phone is not for carrying or holding, it is for wearing! The phrase 'Your Own Style' emphasizes new resources of image building (the fact that there are only five new colours goes unnoticed in the overall glamour of the advertisement). On the horizontal central line is a quotation from the young man: 'No need for extravagance. I only want every thing to be special' (the Estonian version has an unambiguous spelling 'every thing' with the aim of stressing the style aspect of material objects).

Arguably however, the valorization of hedonism and free time reaches its peak in the EMT's brand identity change campaign from spring 2001 (Figure 5).

The primary medium of the campaign was TV with supporting print advertisements. EMT changed its blue globe-shaped logo into a red ladybird. It was meant to mark a turnaway from technology-centredness to more human values. The main themes of the campaign were childhood nostalgia, playfulness and pleasure as well as the carefree flying associated with the ladybird. In an advertisement from the campaign from May 2001 a woman in a bath is holding a soap-shaped ladybird in her hand. Her face is peaceful, remotely erotic (evening make-up) – a stereotypical woman-object for the male gaze. She trusts the mobile operator so much that she lets it accompany her at her most intimate moments. The 'new EMT' enables her to relax from any chores and routine. The creed of EMT is: 'Enjoy!' However, as is characteristic of promotional discourse, true pleasure is reached only under the protecting roof of the 'right' brand.

The bottom part of the advertisement has barely noticeable verbal text shedding light on the ideological reasoning behind the brand change:

A ladybird has a place in everybody's dreams and memories. She symbolizes a sunny summer day and happy childhood. We trust the ladybird, she walks on our hand . . . Such is the new EMT – a small colourful detail in a simpler and more comfortable world.

Childhood is meant to connote warmth, innocence of materialism and instrumentality and, in a way, denial of technology.



Mis on ühelt välkesest värvikast leppimisel ja
 kõpsihobooliselt kommunikatsiooniga?
 Lepimisel on kõht meie kõigi unistuses ja
 maailmatuses, temaga soostunud palikeselise
 suurepärane, õnnelik lapsuslik. Lepimisel me
 usaldame - ta kinnitab meie kätt. Teab sis-
 kõigema sõrmenäki ja lõuseb lendu, vastu
 uutele toimetustele, viies endaga kaasa meie
 salassoovi.

 emt

Figure 5 EMT advertisement

Discussion

This article has set out to trace shifts in the discourse of freedom in Estonian advertisements for one particularly resonant consumer product – mobile telephony. As we have seen, initially emphasis was laid on economic and political freedoms and the figure of the entrepreneur. However, as the memory of the restricted freedom of speech and communication of the Soviet era fades in Estonia, we see the emergence of powerful new foci of representation. The mobile phone's function is no longer signalling to the world from a 'jar', it has become a style element. Advertisers now show new pioneer heroes who have accepted that one's 'real' identity is expressed not in work but in leisure and is communicated by playing with style. The new freedom is the freedom of capitalism's new liquidity. However, the varying connotations evident in this marketing do not emerge from a vacuum. In our case, they are embedded in the socio-cultural space of the post-communist world, which Kennedy has termed 'transition culture'. This consists of two basic movements: from plan to market, and from totalitarianism to democracy. Within this matrix Estonia has been represented repeatedly as a *wunderkind*, its success lying in smooth adaptation to an ideology which places emphasis on individualism and normality as constituted by the capitalist West in an attempt to completely wipe out the socialist past. Freedom, understood as freedom of choice within a proliferating consumer culture, constitutes the symbolic core of this new social and moral order.

There is no reason to doubt the benefits of consumer choice. It is more conducive to human dignity to enjoy a satisfactory living standard (see e.g. Miller, 2001) than to live in poverty or be subjected to totalitarian state management of needs. At the same time, a substantial section of the population in post-Soviet transition countries lacks sufficient economic and symbolic resources either for a smooth adaptation to the 'new rules of the game' of the culture of apparent abundancy, or for reflexive resistance (see also Kõresaar, 2003). In 1999, for example, 38.7 percent of the inhabitants of Estonia lived below the poverty line and a further 15.6 percent lived with the permanent threat of crossing it (Kutsar and Trumm, 1999). Consequently, it is not at all surprising that recent research suggests that the unhappiest and most dissatisfied people live in the post-communist transition countries (see Inglehart and Klingemann, 2000). This has much to do with rapidly developed consumerist ideology.

During the Soviet regime, official ideology was experienced (at least by many) as a concrete set of hostile ideas and practices to be resisted as a way in which to retain one's inner freedom (Kennedy, 2002). Studies from that period show that obtaining 'western' consumer goods or domestically produced goods in short supply operated not only as a strategy of individual distinction (in Bourdieu's terms) but also as a soft, everyday form of cultural resistance to Soviet power (see Keller and Vihalemm, 2003).



Today, consumer goods have been stripped of their ability to operate as markers of political refusal and reduced to markers of personal status and style. This is in large part because the new consumer ideology has become 'unnameable', 'hard to demarcate' (Kennedy, 2002: 188). It is now part of an everyday normality potently symbolized by the mundane and ordinary, yet pressure-exerting, mobile phone. Rapidly changing technologies which generate an incessant stream of new makes and styles are particularly vivid (maybe even extreme) examples of the new normativity. It is not sufficient to buy a mobile phone or a car and use it for years. Promotional culture aims to establish a norm of buying a new model long before the old one is worn out by inviting consumers, especially the young, to immerse themselves ever more completely in a global web of styles. Hence, 'outmoded' commodities are discarded not because new models offer significantly enhanced technical capacities, but because they offer new possibilities for personal differentiation and display.

Understanding these dynamics is a core task for emerging research on Soviet and post-Soviet consumer culture (see e.g. Gronow, 1997, 2003; Kõresaar, 2003; Rausing 1998, 2002; Shevchenko, 2002), of which this article is but a small fragment. We need to explore urgently the role of new consumer items and consumption patterns in managing and imagining transition in a context where public culture increasingly defines competence in the new rules of the game as the core criterion for defining 'winners' and 'losers'.

As Bauman notes, it remains a moot question whether, on balance, increasing calls to play with style and switch identities with the help of mass manufactured consumer goods create greater freedom or more constraint. However, this is not an 'either/or' question. For many citizens of post-communist countries it is a matter of 'both/and'. For them, the possibility of having and expressing inner freedom is provided and dismantled simultaneously by the forward march of the market and the new individualism. Transcending this double bind requires them to possess novel forms of cultural capital, ranging from knowledge of financial risk management to access to alternative models and ethics of consumption such as those developed by the environmental movements and by the movement for global justice. Therefore, the study of consumption in post-communist societies not only needs to address new patterns of everyday engagement with commodities and brands, but to explore emerging forms of consumer politics.

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Notes

1. Interview with Mari Uba, November 2001. RISC is an international value tracking and comparison system which was developed in France in 1980 by the International Research Institute on Social Change. Since 2000 the Estonian market research company EMOR has been the RISC licence holder for the Baltics and conducts regular value studies according to this methodology. Mari Uba is the project manager of RISC in EMOR. The RISC reports were unavailable for the author's use as they are commercially ordered by companies and cannot be freely distributed.
2. Interview with Kaja Tampere, November 2001.
3. Note that in the abovementioned focus groups conducted by Kennedy (2002), an interviewee pointed out an important dimension of freedom, 'Opening of the world', with a very similar metaphor: 'In my line of work, communication with foreign countries is essential, considering we have lived for so long like lonely mice in a cage and seen just a remnant of the world.'
4. In 1997 the penetration of mobile telephony was still only 11 percent. Unsurprisingly, advertising representation is well ahead of economic reality.

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