

Institutional Complexity in Migrant Consumption

Abstract

Only few research articles have emphasized the institutional structures migrant consumers are embedded in. In most of these articles, institutions act in a uniform way and function jointly in shaping the consumer. Using the theoretical lens of institutional logics, we conduct an ethnographic study of repatriate consumers to show that macro- and meso-level forces, first, may diverge among each other in the messages they communicate and, second, may be inherently heterogeneous and thus diverge within themselves in terms of shaping migrant consumers. This institutional complexity triggers consumer responses, from sustaining an illusion of legitimacy to re-diasporization.

Introduction and Research Opportunity

The institutional environment of migrant consumers addressed in research has become more complex over time. Initially, researchers largely examined the individual level of consumer acculturation, the process of adaptation to the consumer culture in the immigrants' host country (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994). Later studies have widened the scope of the research stream. For instance, they include influences from structural forces, such as ideological and class-based conflicts (Üstüner and Holt 2007), or institutional actors representing politics, market research, and the marketplace (Veresiu and Giesler 2018). Others focus on the indigenous population (Luedicke 2015). Institutional forces have so far been depicted as largely homogenous and sending similar signals. For instance, institutions pattern consumer acculturation in terms of identity projects (Üstüner and Holt 2007). Introducing the theoretical lens of institutional logics to the research area, we intend to counter this

coherence of institutional forces. More precisely, we argue that the main macro forces we identify, state and market, can be conflicted both inter- and intrainstitutionally, resulting in inconsistent notions of legitimacy for the migrant group. Additionally, we identify meso forces, group-specific institutions and indigenous consumers, which may have their own logics and complicate the situation even more, resulting in high institutional complexity. On a micro level, we show how this complexity triggers strategies consumers use to navigate the tensions. Overall, our study extends the domain of consumer migration and acculturation research in terms of institutional complexity. We believe not just consumers may fail in living their desired lifestyle, resulting in a shattered identity project, as Üstüner and Holt (2007) do, but that the nature of institutions can be spoilt, too. We thus contribute to research by focusing on the 'shattered identity' of the institutions involved.

Our study is set in the context of repatriate migrants who returned to Germany after they themselves and their ancestors had lived in the former Soviet Union – their place of diaspora – for generations. With a share of over 13%, this migrant group holds the second rank of all 19.3 million people with migration background in Germany (Federal Statistical Office 2018). By choosing a case with a century-long migration past, we follow Ger et al.'s (2018) demand to study consumers as people with their specific characteristics and histories. Also, repatriate migration is a global phenomenon, but to our knowledge it has not been researched within the scope of consumer migration and acculturation before.

Beside its theoretical significance, this study is relevant for several stakeholders: actors representing politics, the marketplace, and repatriate institutions, as well as indigenous and repatriate consumers. On a macro level, it is first of all relevant to the

state. Only when politicians and other state representatives get a holistic picture of the institutional frame migrants are embedded in, they can consider migrants adequately in terms of legislation, assistance programs, and so on. Secondly, market actors benefit from our findings. An understanding of the interplay between different institutional signals and consumption activities allows marketers to assess possibilities of adapting their offerings. On a meso level, our findings help repatriate institutions to uncover what both repatriates' and indigenes' relation to their institution is and how these institutions may become more well-known. Furthermore, this article is relevant for the indigenous population in two related ways. Indigenes learn about the general history and the life stories of their fellow citizens and learn to relate these to the institutional complexity their fellow citizens are experiencing. Secondly, this knowledge shall reduce uncertainty in indigenes with regard to repatriates and facilitate communication as well as joint consumption activities. Last but not least, this article is important for repatriate consumers themselves. Recent migration movements have caught the attention of the public, making repatriate consumers gradually fall into oblivion. This development is also reflected in our findings, as many of them report to feel misjudged and ignored. This article aims to give them a voice.

Literature Review and Theory

Consumer Acculturation

External forces have played distinct roles in the consumer acculturation literature over time. Luedicke (2011) distinguishes two waves of consumer acculturation literature. The first wave highlighted patterns and differences in terms of immigrants' versus locals' consumption (Luedicke 2011), assuming a process of learning and adoption of the local

society's attitudes and activities. The most prominent acculturation agent were mass media, described, for example, as a socialization agent (O'Guinn, Lee, and Faber 1986).

Roughly at the same time, psychologist John W. Berry developed and refined his seminal acculturation theory (1989; 1997) which has been the conceptual foundation of numerous articles until today. Mostly based on Berry's theory, the second wave of consumer acculturation research explores consumers' acculturation experiences (Luedicke 2011). Scholars depict specific outcomes of consumer acculturation (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Peñaloza 1994) or focus on situational switching between identities and practices related to both their home and host cultures (Oswald 1999). Institutional forces appear as acculturation agents, but mostly remain "outwardly distinct but inwardly – to a large extent – homogenous cultural environments" (Luedicke 2011, p. 226), such as Peñaloza's (1994) twofold set of acculturation agents from the home and host country, for instance peers or churches. For Luedicke (2011), this constitutes a conceptual limit. He encourages researchers to include migrant consumers' dynamic institutional environment which can be agentic and non-agentic.

Üstüner and Holt's (2007) study on deprived women's consumer identity projects in the context of a Turkish shanty town marks the beginning of a third wave of consumer acculturation studies. This wave distinguishes itself due to its attention to structural forces shaping consumers' lives, thereby embracing general calls for a shift from phenomenological investigation to a context-oriented approach which reflects consumers' life worlds and histories (Ger et al. 2018). Üstüner and Holt (2007), for instance, recognize the generic nature of acculturation agents appearing in prior literature. They demonstrate how in the case of dominated consumer acculturation three sociocultural structural elements – low social class, ideological differences, and Western

consumer culture – pattern consumers’ acculturation experiences and result in a shattered identity. Furthermore, Luedicke (2015) extends the relational domain of the research field by studying how reactions of the indigenous population fuel ethnic group conflicts. Veresiu and Giesler’s (2018) article explores how in an ideology of multiculturalism, institutional actors from the areas of politics, market research, retail, and the consumption environment commodify ethnic differences and shape the ethnic consumer. They take a critical neocolonial perspective and thus make a valuable contribution by taking into account power relations as requested by Ger et al. (2018). Other recent studies focus on one specific institutional agent, such as schools (Rojas Gaviria et al. 2018) and governmental structuring of space (Veresiu 2018).

Even though this third wave has been advancing our understanding of the involvement of structural forces in consumer migration and acculturation, extant literature does not capture institutional complexity to a sufficient extent. First, there is no interinstitutional conflict, that is, the institutional forces all pursue the same goal. The meaning and effect of Üstüner and Holt’s (2007) three sociocultural structural elements differs depending on the women’s generation, but among the structural elements there is no rivalry, even though they are perceived by mothers and daughters differently. It is thus in the perceptions and practices of consumers where complexity takes place, not the structures themselves. Similarly, Veresiu and Giesler’s (2018) institutional actors exhibit different consumer socialization strategies, but they all shape and legitimize the ethnic consumer similarly. Second, there is no intrainstitutional conflict, that is, each institutional force is inherently consistent and acts homogeneously upon the consumer. To illustrate the point again, when performing knowledge about the *Batıcı* lifestyle in a shop, Üstüner and Holt’s (2007) young Turkish women are not taken seriously by the

salesperson. The salesperson's behavior is thus consistent with the abstract notion of modern consumer culture as one of the forces structurally shaping dominated consumer acculturation. Likewise, in Veresiu and Giesler (2018), the ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism is reflected collectively by politicians. Our research goes beyond these studies, examining a case where macro forces diverge among themselves as well as within themselves in terms of how they shape migrants' consumer identity.

Moreover, our study distinguishes itself from others regarding the migration pattern. The majority of extant studies investigates cases in which home and host culture are clearly identifiable and distinct. For instance, studies on migration from one country to another (e.g. Peñaloza 1994), post-colonial migration (e.g., Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005), internal migration (Üstüner and Holt 2007), and sojourner migration (Tambyah and Chng 2006) all share a common understanding of what the culture of origin and the culture of the place of migration is. Research has not yet taken a closer look at a case where this distinction might not be as clear for consumers – repatriate migration.

Institutional Logics

An institutional theory lens is well suited to capture structural dynamics in a field. In opposition to behavioral and rational approaches, many new institutionalists set out in the end of the last century to illuminate how shared rule systems structure action and how organizations conform to these influences to achieve legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Friedland and Alford (1991) criticized these authors' insufficient understanding of the substance of institutional orders shaping isomorphic tendencies and rather emphasize the role of higher-order societal institutions in shaping interests and power. For them, institutions are supraorganizational, symbolic, material, and interrelated.

According to Friedland and Alford (1991), each institution has a distinct logic, and thus society is shaped by numerous logics. We base this study on a broad notion of institutions as taken-for-granted external frameworks which impact identity and action (Jepperson 1991).

It was not until roughly ten years after that Friedland and Alford's (1991) article really sparked research on institutional logics. Thornton and Ocasio (1999, p. 804) define institutional logics as "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality". Consumer researchers have used institutional logics so far to investigate fields such as fashion (Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) and yoga (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015). In the case of several institutional logics in a field, these logics can coexist or compete with each other (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015), for instance, show that within the US yoga market, the spiritual logic has weakened since the 1980s, whereas the commercial, fitness, and medical logics have gained importance. The "incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics" (Greenwood et al. 2011, p. 317) are the essence of institutional complexity.

It is important to review other terms associated with the concept. First, institutional logics can be the origin of legitimacy (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). Legitimacy refers to the perception that actions or entities are desired, suitable, and in line with socially common norms, values, rules, laws, and beliefs (Suchman 1995). Consumer research has investigated legitimacy often in the context of marginal groups or practices, for example, casino gambling (Humphreys 2010). Legitimacy can be

achieved through institutional work, “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, p. 215). For instance, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) find out that institutional entrepreneurs, dissatisfied actors who strive to change the field, serve as an inspiration for plus-sized consumers to engage in institutional work themselves.

With regard to migration, Veresiu and Giesler (2018) demonstrate how institutions legitimize the ethnic consumer subject. In other words, it is *difference* that is legitimized and *the other* who is celebrated. This view is also sustained by Üstüner and Holt (2007) who claim that postmodern consumer culture legitimizes migrants’ home cultures as marginal consumption archetypes and therefore establishes difference, regardless of potential negative consequences. Scaraboto and Fisher (2013) emphasize that migrant consumers are in fact illegitimate and powerless, lacking the resources for full participation in the field. We contribute to illuminating this field of tension between legitimacy and illegitimacy in a context in which the boundaries of otherness are unclear, not just in terms of home and host, but also in terms of personal characteristics like names. We introduce the theoretical perspective of institutional logics to research on consumer migration and acculturation. We investigate inter- and intrainstitutional conflicts in terms of logics and assess how different actors enact the logics and how repatriate consumers navigate this field of tension.

Context

Repatriate migration is a specific form of return migration. Whereas return migration mostly encompasses the return of the same person (Gmelch 1980), repatriate migration refers to “the return of ethnic minorities to their historic homelands” (Remennick 2003, p. 24). Repatriate migration is a global phenomenon and its volume has increased

significantly in the last decades (Tsuda 2009). The migration pattern is often associated with diaspora, a term originally coined for the Jewish exile, but now used for ethnic communities living abroad (Tölölyan 1991). People living in the diaspora are characterized by a strong relation to their ancestors' homeland as well as the maintenance of boundaries to the host society (Brubaker 2005). Frequently, a possibly irrational myth of an eventual return to the ancestral homeland is believed in over generations (Stefansson 2004).

This work in progress examines the case of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union. Although people of German origin had been living in Russia as early as the 900s, the migrant history of most ethnic German repatriates started in 1763, when Empress Catherine the Great invited foreign settlers to colonize the vast lands, luring them with numerous privileges, such as religious freedom. Many peasants from the former scattered German territories followed her call and settled in communities predominantly in the Volga, Black Sea, Caucasus, and Volhynia areas. After tough first decades, the settlers' status improved. Their colonies became largely self-administered with schools and German as official language. The German settlers contributed significantly to the economic development of the Russian Empire, but in the end of the 19th century, anti-German sentiments began to rise. During World War II, over 900.000 ethnic Germans were deported eastwards to Siberia and Kazakhstan, where many of them were compelled to forced labor. As the tensions between East and West decreased, their hopes of migrating to Germany increased. However, it was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union that the descendants of the first settlers were allowed to leave. In total, over 2.5 million repatriates and their relatives have so far returned to Germany.

Method

This paper includes interview, field, and archival data, all relating to both consumers and institutions. The main data source are 15 depth interviews with repatriate consumers. The sample is diverse with regard to generations (ages 30-80) and time of repatriation (1980-2002). Participants were first asked to narrate their biography. Then the interviewer tied in with the past, slowly moving forward in time. The majority of interviews encompasses a drawing task and a think-aloud leaflet elicitation. Field data on repatriates include photographs and participant observation. Regarding institutions, we conducted fourteen interviews. These were complemented by field data, such as short ethnographic interviews, visiting exhibitions and events. Archival data include newspaper articles, court judgments as well as other relevant publications such as print ads or association journals. Netnographic data collection is planned.

Much data was collected in southern Germany, mostly in a city with a population of about 300,000. The city has a share of over 45% people with migration background, many of whom are repatriates from the former Soviet Union. To enhance the ethnographic character, the lead author moved to the quarter with the highest share of repatriates over three years ago and still lives there. Data collection is in the final phase, but shall be continued until theoretical saturation is reached. Data were analyzed using Reay and Jones' (2015) pattern matching technique as well as Thompson (1997).

Findings

The past

As a foundation for understanding repatriates' current complex institutional environment and their strategies, it is necessary to take a look at their consumption when they were

living in the former Soviet Union. Findings show that they did live a diasporic consumer culture, as Adriane (62) explains:

Kaiserschmarrn, [...] Dampfnudeln, Schupfnudeln. [...] We cooked more German than the Russian dishes. [...] And at home predominantly German was spoken. My parents attached great value to this. [...] German songs were sung.

It is important to note that the language spoken was actually the vernacular from the 18th century which survived in the diasporic communities. Furthermore, houses inhabited by Germans distinguished themselves from Russian-inhabited houses. According to Milena (34), “you could spot whether there lives a German family.” At times they had to cope with discrimination, as Vadim (59) explains: “You weren’t allowed to do every job, simply because you were of German descent.” Moreover, the myth of return was prevalent, as in Lenka’s (57) case: “The parents always said that someday, we’ll go to Germany, I remember, I was a little girl. [...] [To] simply be German.” As these findings show, ethnic Germans indeed maintained boundaries with the host society and identified with their ancestral homeland – clearly setting this study apart from other cases in which there is no real connection between immigrants and the country.

The present

Figure 1 summarizes the findings after repatriation. We identify the state and the market as the two main macro forces with distinct logics. On the meso level, we identify repatriate institutions and indigenous consumers as the main institutions which increase complexity in terms of logics. On the micro level, repatriate consumers navigate this field of institutional tension in different ways. Their consumption reveals distinct strategies which reflect back to the institutions (this paper, though, concentrates on the direction from the institution to the consumers). The strategies, ranging from illusion to re-

diasporization, represent a spectrum between defending legitimacy and accepting illegitimacy.

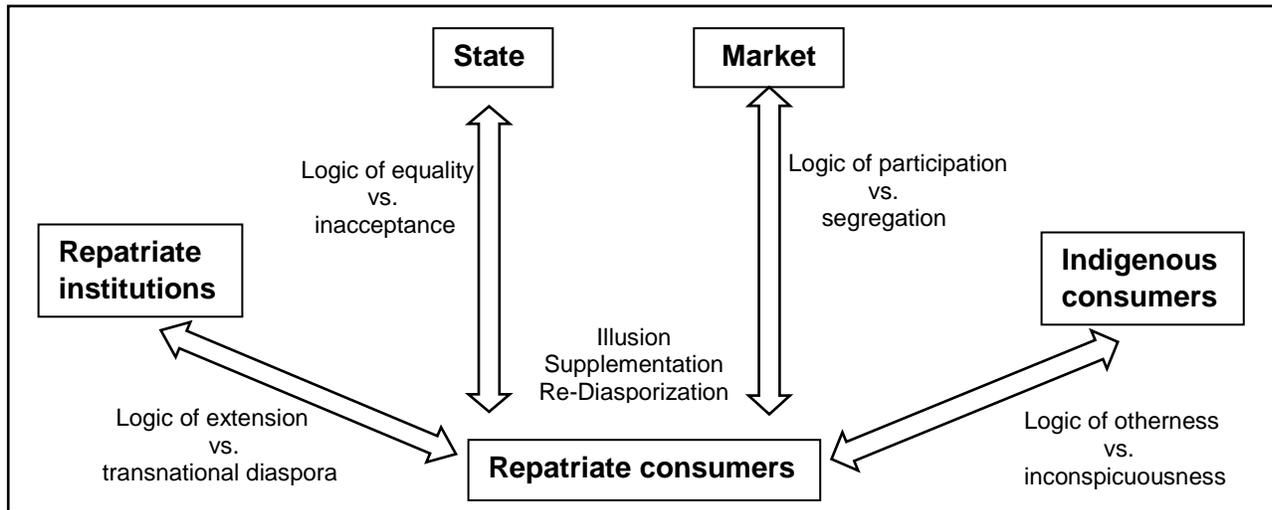


Fig. 1: Repatriate consumers' complex institutional environment

The state

The key logic the state exposes with regard to repatriate consumers is the logic of equality. The foundation of this logic can be found Federal Expellee Law of 1953. This law was introduced to regulate the situation of ethnic Germans who were deported or escaped from former eastern territories and further Eastern European areas due to World War II. According to § 6 of the Federal Expellee Law, ethnic Germans are persons who avowed themselves to be German in their place of residence, supported by characteristics such as language, education, or culture. Administrative court judgments on the granting or non-granting of the status show how the state uses consumer culture as a proof of ethnicity, such as this excerpt pronounced by the higher administrative court of the state of Baden-Württemberg on March 7, 2001:

The plaintiff's commitment to the German nationality until repatriation corresponds [...] to her entire life circumstances. [...] She grew up [...] with the awareness of being German. [...] Witness xxx [...] described her as a person who

lived according to German customs and habits. Her and her sister's weddings were 'proper German weddings'.

The Federal Expellee Law granted affected persons a special status and the right to return to West Germany, motivated by a felt historical and political responsibility of the state. Repatriates who returned before 1993 are called *Aussiedler*, those who have returned after 1993 are called *Spätaussiedler*. The logic of equality manifested itself in various privileges, such as immediate German citizenship and financial benefits. Repatriates were also entitled to a name change performed shortly after immigration: in case they had a Russian first name, either because it had been sovieticized during the Stalin era or given by the parents, repatriates were offered a comparable, archetypical German first name. The perception of repatriates as Germans is evident in this statement of the current state commissioner for repatriates and expellees: "Aussiedler are not migrants, but German compatriots who return to their ancestors' homeland and who avow themselves to Germany [...] in a unique way."

This welcoming and legitimizing logic of equality is pervaded by various intrainstitutional inconsistencies. First, the welcoming attitude did not stretch out to most repatriates' professional situation. Public authorities did not recognize the majority of qualifications, which is why most repatriates have worked in lower-level positions, sometimes unrelated to their former occupation (Federal Employment Agency 2007). Second, the initial joy was diminished by state-provided housing they received after immigration, like Inge (36): "We had such a big house in Kazakhstan and then we come to Germany and the five of us have to sleep in one room!" Third, institutional representatives with direct contact to repatriates sometimes did not comply with the logic they were supposed to embody. Thus, the institution's norm and its execution were not

always equal, like in Thea's (76) experience with a form to be filled in by an official: "The woman was a bit evil [...]. She says, 'what do you want?' I say 'you have to fill in these papers for me.' 'I DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING', she said."

The market

The key logic of the market is the logic of participation, based on a bald, capitalist logic of moneymaking. Whenever consumers demand something, they will be served and are thus able to participate. Since the late 90s, stores and supermarkets with products primarily known in the former Soviet Union with Cyrillic labels have appeared in many German cities. In many regular supermarket chains, the same or similar products are displayed on special ethnic shelves, again often with Cyrillic labeling. As such, they perform difference and signal to people they are consuming 'the other', a relationship imbued with power differences (Woodward and Emontspool 2018). Thus, segregation can emerge from the logic of participation, which conflicts with the generally positive notion of market openness and product variety. This segregation is especially evident in the housing market. Many repatriate consumers had no welcoming, but rather discriminatory experiences, like Teresa's first interaction with a bank employee when asking for a loan: "He told me that many Russian-Germans come and immediately want their own house. [...] I even cried, I was hurt. For a while I thought I won't look anymore, I don't want this anymore."

Indigenous consumers

On a meso level, we conceptualize the indigenous population as another distinct environmental element with conflicting logics of the social reality repatriates face. On the one hand, many indigenous consumers view repatriates as immigrants, representing a logic of otherness – evident in the fact that two third of indigenous informants emically

referred to repatriates as 'Russians'. Otherness is often accompanied by feelings of skepticism as Martina (65) explains: "A lot of them came, and they should have spoken German, as they were supposed to be Germans [...]. And then we wondered because they rather spoke Russian to each other [...] and it's still the case that they shop in their Russian stores." Otherness is also evident in the experience of Andreas (29): "I was once at the doctor's here and I was addressed in Russian." Often this view is nurtured by a lack of knowledge, summarized by Rosemarie's (70) answer to the question what she knows about their history: "Nothing at all. No clue."

In some cases, otherness takes the form of backwardness. Their, as Martina calls them, "very, very traditional" first names, intended by the state to help repatriates' integration, may actually be perceived as backward by indigenous consumers. Knut (68) says ironically, "they have better names than Germans". Also, indigenous consumers perceive this backwardness in consumption, as evident in Christina's (31) comment on a supermarket leaflet: "The fish is like from the 70s. [...] You know, how it is presented. [...] Old-fashioned." On the other hand, indigenous consumers perceive repatriates as inconspicuous and in a positive way, as Björn (40): "What is noticeable is that [...] they are not as secluded as they always say, that they form groups. [...] They talk to you when there's an opportunity." He even shops in repatriate supermarkets: "It is a bit better and cheaper than at the farmer's market."

Repatriate institutions

Repatriate institutions act as another element on the meso level. Particular repatriate institutions represent a logic of extension, claiming that repatriates have a distinct consumer culture which complements German consumer culture. Examples are the Regional Association of Germans from Russia or the Museum for Russian-German

Cultural History. The museum was founded by an institutional entrepreneur, Karolina, with the aim of raising awareness: “The aim was for people to get to know us. [...] I was sure we had a culture, I was not sure exactly what it is comprised of, I just knew how I lived [...] and I considered it important to tell the story.” Other repatriate institutions, however, represent a sharp contrast to this orientation, explicitly referring to their foreignness in their name, such as the Federal Association of Russian-Speaking Parents. Institutions like this convey the idea of a transnational Russian-speaking diaspora, focusing on offerings for everyone speaking Russian, completely taking the focus off any identity-related work related to the ethnic German heritage.

Repatriate consumers

Repatriates’ consumption reflects this institutional tension in distinct ways. They employ distinct consumption strategies, suggesting a spectrum between defending legitimacy and accepting illegitimacy: illusion, supplementation, and re-diasporization.

Some repatriate consumers strive to defend their legitimacy via illusion. They sustain the myth of return and the state logic of equality, pretending to be accepted in their ancestral homeland, while their consumption does not indicate this. To reinforce this illusion, they engage in self-hierarchization, strongly emphasizing the superiority of their own consumption vis-à-vis other repatriates’ practices. Vadim (59) demonstrates this disparity in the following: “We don’t have any hobbies. [...] You don’t have to join a bowling club. [...] Going to a city festival, taking a beer and eating bockwurst is not fulfilling for me. [...] Some compatriots, they cook only Russian. In our home it’s not so typically *Aussiedler*.” Simultaneously, though, possibly in order to gain a sense of community, they frequent events targeted at repatriates: “We celebrated New Year’s Eve, there were mostly our compatriots. We felt somehow strange.”

The second strategy we identify also involves defending legitimacy, but these repatriates do not force pretending. Rather, they represent the logic of extension, living a distinct consumer culture which complements the German consumer culture. In other words, their consumer practices and identity are neither German nor Russian, but a third kind, Russian-German. Wilhelm (56) exemplifies this while pointing at a snack called *krebel* on his table: “This is also Russian-German, Volga-German. [...] Russians have a similar one called *chvorost*, it’s a bit more dry and crisp.”

A third strategy we identify is re-diasporization, a stronger affiliation to consumption representing the place of diaspora than the ancestral homeland. Consumers engaging in re-diasporization become a diaspora again, but this time of the former host country. Re-diasporization is associated with a sense of illegitimacy and it can either occur involuntarily or voluntarily. Involuntary re-diasporization is mostly fueled by disappointment, for instance in terms of unfulfilled consumption expectations or the failure to approach indigenous consumers. Alex (58) has experienced both:

For me it was always missing, what is Easter, Christmas, and I thought ‘now I’m coming to Germany, maybe I can learn more about these holidays’. But then it became clear, our family knew more than in Germany. [...] At first we somehow tried to integrate, but then it somehow didn’t work out. [...] I would like to talk to someone [...], I’ve also invited a German family to my home. However, let’s say it like this, it doesn’t go well with all this talking.

Voluntary re-diasporization may be associated with defiance, as Veronika (30) explains:

You just don’t belong. [...] Bite me. You know, it’s like a defiant behavior when you say you consider me a Russian, this I am a Russian. [...] We listened to a lot of Russian music, we went to discotheques with Russian music.

Additionally, some repatriates engage in re-diasporizing behavior to counter backwardness. Inge's (36) example shows this with regard to her name: "They suggested Irma. No, I won't be Irma, it's too antique. [...] Yes, Inge sounds better. [...] However, it was not necessary. [...] Irina is a Russian name and many call me Irina." Thus, repatriate consumers engaging in re-diasporization largely comply with the market logic of segregation, either reluctantly and feeling powerless to change the status quo, or willingly, actively supporting this separation via consumption.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that extant research has painted an incomplete picture of the institutional environment of migrants, as it may be far more complex. Findings show that repatriate consumers navigate these tensions using distinct strategies: sustaining an illusion of a realized myth of return, complementing German consumer culture via a third consumer culture, and re-diasporization due to the realization of a failed return. However, we believe our study shows that it is actually not only the consumers who may fail, but also the institutions, as a result of their own 'shattered identity'. Our study also shows that otherness may also be evident on a temporal dimension in one country, through a perception of backwardness. Paradoxically, this backwardness largely emerged through a state initiative to emphasize equality.

Future research should be concerned with the well-being of repatriate consumers, since especially in the case of illusion and involuntary re-diasporization, well-being can be questioned. A few repatriates have actually remigrated back again to the Soviet Union (Baraulina and Kreienbrink 2013) – making the migration history of ethnic German repatriates one of tragic eternal foreignness. We hope this work will be beneficial for all stakeholders as intended, as well as institutional representatives in other countries

where repatriate migration exists, and open the door for further research on other migration patterns and institutional complexity.

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