Forever Foreign in the Homeland? Repatriates’ Consumer Identity and Belonging

Consumer researchers have acknowledged the significance of the relationships between consumption, identity, and one of the defining issues of the last centuries and still today (United Nations 2016) – migration. Largely relying on Berry’s acculturation theory (1989; 1997), individual-level studies exist on various migrant groups, for example Mexicans (Peñaloza 1994) in the USA or Greenlanders in Denmark (Askegaard et al. 2005). Other more recent research emphasizes structural (Üstüner and Holt 2007) and relational aspects (Luedicke 2015).

Most extant literature examines one-way migration from clear home to host countries and neglects subsequent movements such as back to the country of origin, also referred to as repatriate migration (Remennick 2003). While scholars have started to examine same-generation returns (Ndione et al. 2017), homecoming several generations later represents a research gap. This movement is often associated with diaspora, a term originally coined for the Jewish exile, but now more broadly used for ethnic communities living abroad (Tölölyan 1991). Diasporas are characterized by a strong relation to their ancestors’ homeland which they regard as their true place of belonging, based on a communal – frequently irrational – myth of an eventual return (Stefansson 2004).

We contribute to research on consumer migration and acculturation by studying consumers’ return from the diaspora to the ancestral homeland. Possessing an inherent global consciousness due to multiple identifications (Vertovec 1999), diasporas both bridge cultural differences between ‘here’ and ‘there’ as “exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (Tölölyan 1991) and reinforce them because they maintain boundaries between places of (not) belonging (Brubaker 2005). Building on diaspora theory (Safran 1991; Shuval 2000), several theoretical lenses are useful for our project.
We consider transnationalism and hybridity (Bhabha 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1995) as well as Relph’s (1976) theory on place belongingness. On a different level, depending on the generation, theories on coping with a breakdown of a belief system (e.g., homeland myth), for instance, Janoff-Bulman’s shattered assumptions theory (1992), might be a fruitful addition. Complementing Luedicke’s (2015) relational extension of migration research, we add a temporal domain by studying repatriates with a century-long migration history. We thus investigate structural, individual, and relational factors to explore whether and how consumption is linked with identity and belonging in different generations of repatriates, and how they consume to deal with identity conflicts.

This work in progress examines the context of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union. Having emigrated to colonize land from the 18th century on, many descendants of these migrants have returned to Germany, predominantly in the 1980s and 1990s as Aussiedler (resettlers) or Spätaussiedler (late resettlers). With a population of 3.2 million, they constitute one of the largest groups of people with migration background in Germany (Federal Institute for Population Research 2017). Data are gathered from interviews, participant observation, and photographs and are analyzed according to grounded theory principles (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Exemplary data insights reveal four groups (A and B: 1st generations, C and D: 2nd generations) with interesting dynamics regarding consumers’ self and their relationships with places and actors (see Figure 1). For example, repatriates for whom to “live as Germans among Germans” (informant #1), i.e. the myth of return, was the primary migration motive consider their place of return their true homeland (see panel A). They keep the myth alive as an illusion, but fail to use consumption to actually become accepted citizens, possibly due to the limited acquisition of consumption skills in the former socialist
economy. Instead, they defend their sense of belonging by separating themselves from their “compatriots”: “Some compatriots only cook Russian. […] In many families it’s certainly still like that. […] At our place it’s not so typically Aussiedler” (informant #1). Nonetheless, they have developed a guilty conscience and obligation to join their consumption activities: “We celebrated New Years’ Eve and there were mainly our compatriots. We felt somehow strange there” (informant #2). The consumer identities of the second generations are more mixed, depending on whether their repatriate side was suppressed or unconfined during childhood and to what extent their parents transmitted the myth of return. However, this hybridity is accompanied by inner conflicts with which they cope through, for example, mock consumption of their heritage (see panel D): “We’re throwing […] a Russian party at our place with vodka, Russian meals etc. […] Dress code: Russian style (jogging pants, fur coat, shapka, babushka or the like” (informant #3). Overall, understanding repatriate consumption enriches research by illuminating the interesting relationships between consumption, identity, and belonging shaped by a myth of return. More comprehensive findings shall be presented at the conference.
The figure consists of four panels on repatriate consumers' notion of home. Panels A and B represent the first generation, C and D the second generation of repatriate consumers. In each panel, four reciprocal relationships are illustrated: repatriates' general sense of belonging to the idea of the place of return and the place of diaspora, as well as their relation to indigenous actors and other repatriate actors in the place of return.
List of References


