

# (II)Legitimate in the Homeland? The Co-Construction of a Collective Consumer Identity of Repatriate Migrants

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Recently, countries all over the world have begun to invite emigrants to return to their home countries, motivated to counter shrinking populations, by labor shortage or the wish to reunite their people. Because of the favorable starting position vis-à-vis other migrants, one would expect that these returnees adapt easily to the consumer culture back home and will be seamlessly accepted. However, exploring the case of ethnic German repatriates from the former Soviet Union – in whose case consumption was operationalized as a legitimacy criterion –, we found out that their public collective consumer identity is rather negative instead.

Most scholars have studied one-way, permanent migration from home to host country; much less is known about other migration patterns such as return migration and reacculturation in the homeland (Ndione, Rémy, and Bah 2017). Moreover, extant consumer acculturation literature has increasingly moved from investigating consumers' individual-level experiences and outcomes (Peñaloza 1994) to exploring relational (Luedicke 2015), structural (Üstüner and Holt 2007), and institutional influences (Veresiu and Giesler 2018). The latter have been portrayed as internally conflict-free, patterning consumer experience (Üstüner and Holt 2007) or prescribing a consumer identity without granting migrants much influence in shaping it (Veresiu and Giesler 2018).

How did the Germans mentioned above become Russians in the public view? In order to examine this phenomenon, we ask the following research questions. Which forces and dynamics are involved in the co-construction of the collective consumer identity of repatriates? What is the role of consumption and markets in this process? Addressing these questions, we illuminate the dynamic co-construction of migrants' collective consumer identity, which is especially interesting in the underresearched context of repatriate migration, "the return of ethnic minorities to their historic homelands" (Remennick 2003, 24), often from the diaspora (Brubaker 2005). We also discover that, contrary to extant literature, institutional influences might

actually be of a contradictory nature. We do not just answer Veresiu and Giesler's (2018) and Askegaard and Linnet's (2011) calls for further research embracing institutional frameworks, but we also respond to the conference's invitation to engage with macro-level approaches.

Theoretically, we build on legitimization and delegitimation, the process of granting or withdrawing legitimacy (Suddaby, Bitkine, and Haack 2017). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), legitimization entails both cognitive explanation and normative justification, and may be given regulatively through laws and regulations (Scott 2001). Delegitimation is not just the withdrawal of legitimacy, but may also be associated with stigmatization (Suddaby et al. 2017), the process of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001).

Our concrete context is the repatriate migration of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union. Their migration history predominantly started in 1763, when Empress Catherine the Great invited foreign settlers to colonize the vast lands. After periods of success and discrimination, most settlers were allowed to leave the diaspora and return home around the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain. Nowadays, repatriates from the former Soviet Union constitute the second largest group of people with migration background in Germany (Federal Administration Office 2019).

In terms of method, our ethnography contains triangulated interview, field, archival, and netnographic data. Interviews are our main data source. 47 interviews were conducted with institutional representatives, indigenous consumers, and repatriate consumers. Field data include 551 photographs and videos taken during observations in the marketplace and at events. Archival data include 197 newspaper articles and 13 court judgments. Data have been analyzed in an interactive process, adhering to Thompson's (1997) principles.

Our findings contain two parts. First of all, we give a historical overview, distinguishing five phases in which

repatriates' collective consumer identity has taken important terms, ranging from anticipation to replacement. Second of all, our findings show that four forces – policy-making, market exchange, repatriate institutional work, and repatriate consumer practices – both legitimize and delegitimize repatriate consumers in the collective identity co-constitution trajectory. These four forces are intensified by amplifying forces – media discourse, territory, language, and marketplace sentiments. Delegitimation dominates these dynamics, as we found much evidence of stigmatization in the form of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001). Thus, the broader societal identity ascribed to repatriates is polysemic at best, and outright negative at worst. Furthermore, we show that the forces are contradictory, exhibiting both legitimizing and delegitimizing potential. In the following, two key forces are explained in more detail.

In terms of legitimization, policy-making has granted high regulative legitimacy to repatriates. They were given immediate German citizenship and various financial benefits, as well as the opportunity to change their first name to a typical German one. Remarkably, the state operationalized consumption as a legitimacy criterion. Only in case Germans had consumed in a specific way in the former Soviet Union and its successor states (for instance cooking German meals and celebrating German traditions) and formulated these consumption habits during the application process, they counted as "proof of Germanness" and the migrants were allowed to repatriate. At the same time, this legitimization was delegitimizing, since the state legitimized a version of German consumer culture from 250 years ago, as the consumer culture had not developed much over time in the German diaspora communities. Also, 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), further decreasing their public image. In terms of market exchange, repatriate consumers coming from a socialist or transitioning economic system were suddenly able to participate in a capitalist market system. 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, which are on the one hand an expression of the newly gained market freedom, on the other hand they have contributed to segregation, since indigenous consumers are mostly sceptical of these stores. Also, repatriates made discriminatory experiences with the market, as they were, for instance, due to their lacking consumer skills, exploited by sly salesmen.

Our paper is relevant for various audiences. It gives actors in policy-making a complete picture of the dynamics at work in terms of repatriates' collective consumer identity. Even though many policymakers call repatriates the poster child of integration or admit that they have fallen into oblivion, it should serve them as a reminder that repatriates are to a large extent not fully accepted members of the local society. Government officials should sensitize newly repatriating migrants about the fact that the maintained German consumer culture is not likely

to correspond to contemporary consumer culture anymore. Findings also show that indigenous consumers have very little knowledge about repatriates' background, which is why we suggest to include it in history lessons at school. Our findings also allow marketers within the repatriate marketplace to reflect upon their own offerings and inform them how these are viewed by indigenous consumers. They should invest in making their stores and advertising material more attractive for indigenous consumers as well as training their frontline employees. Last but not least, the findings are relevant for repatriates who will benefit from a hopefully higher understanding of their history.

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