

The Myth of Return – Success or Failure? Consumer Identity and Belonging in the Case of Repatriate Migrants

Abstract

This poster introduces a new migration pattern into research on consumer migration and acculturation, repatriate migration. Investigating structural, individual, and relational factors, we stress the dynamic nature of how consumption, and belonging are related in the case of consumers having returned from the diaspora to the ancestral homeland after generations.

Extended Abstract

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 – migration (United Nations 2016). Largely relying on Berry's acculturation theory (1989; 1997), individual-level studies exist on various migrant groups, for example, Mexicans in the USA (Peñaloza 1994) 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 (Tambyah and Chng 2006), coming home several generations later represents a research gap. This movement can be 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 structural, communal – frequently irrational – myth of an eventual return (Safran 1991; Shuval 2000; Stefansson 2004). 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, p. 5) and reinforce them because they maintain boundaries between places of (not) belonging (Brubaker 2005).

We contribute to research on consumer migration and acculturation in the following ways. First, we add to existing literature by studying the link between consumption and a novel migration pattern, repatriate migration of consumers having returned from the diaspora to the ancestral homeland after generations. Second, this long time span of migratory life extends the temporal domain of research on consumer migration, complementing Luedicke’s (2015) relational extension. Third, we investigate structural, individual, and relational factors to explore whether and how consumption links with identity and belonging in different generations of repatriates, and how they consume to deal with identity conflicts. Fourth, we introduce new theoretical ideas, above all Relph’s (1976) theory on place belongingness, into the research field of consumer migration and acculturation, and propose a dynamic model.

Regarding theory, this project moves beyond extant acculturation theories which take for granted a static differentiation between places (home and host country) and people (domestic and foreign). Repatriate consumers relate to these well-documented dichotomies in a more complex way. Due to their long absence, their original home country – the place of return – might have become more of a host country and their initial host country – their place of diaspora – a home country. This may lead to a situation in which they are declared as foreigners in both places (Stefansson 2004; Tsuda 2009). Following

Ward (2008) and Luedicke (2011), we take a new perspective and acknowledge this complexity by studying belonging instead, a dynamic concept closely related to identity (Probyn 1996). Belonging is both an individual feeling as well as a structural and relational means of inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich 2010; Probyn 1996). Furthermore, it refers to “practices and processes, rather than [...] a status” (Wright 2015, p. 400). Therefore, studying consumption in this regard is interesting, as it can be one way to perform belonging, or on the other hand, not belonging.

Belonging is linked to place, especially the place of home, a fundamental part of our identity (Relph 1976) and central characteristic of diaspora (Safran 1991; Shuval 2000). We especially consider Relph's (1976) theory on place belongingness to assess how repatriates' consumption reflects their sense of belonging in the place of return. Furthermore, we consider concepts related to boundary-spanning identities, for instance transculturality or transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Welsch 1999).

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, a drawing task, and photographs, and analyzed according to grounded theory principles (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

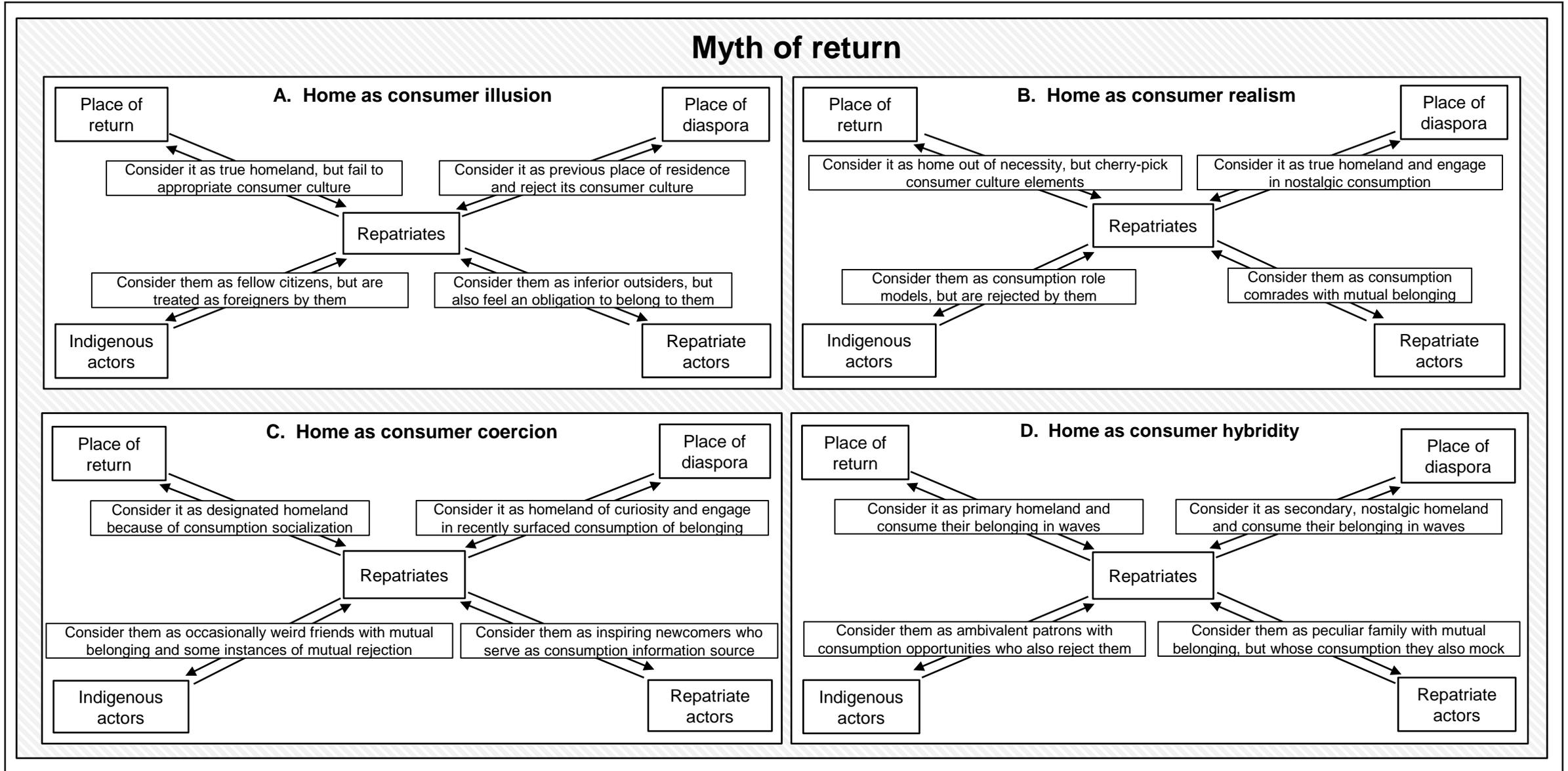
Exemplary data insights from eight interviews reveal four groups (A and B: 1st generation, C and D: 2nd generation) with interesting dynamics regarding consumers' relationships with places and actors (see Figure 1). For example, consumers for whom to

“live as Germans among Germans” (informant #1), namely the trust in the success 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 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 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*)” (informant #3).

Overall, understanding repatriate consumption enriches research by illuminating interesting relationships between consumption, identity, and belonging shaped by a myth of return. More comprehensive findings shall be presented at the conference.

Figure 1. Consumers' sense of belonging after repatriation

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. 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.



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