

Institutional Complexity in Migrant Consumption

Abstract

In most research on consumer acculturation and migration, institutions act consistently in shaping consumers. Using institutional logics, we conduct an ethnographic study of repatriate consumers to show that macro- and meso-level forces are conflicted inter- and intrainstitutionally. This complexity triggers consumer responses, from sustaining an illusion of legitimacy to re-diasporization.

Key words

Institutional complexity, institutional logics, legitimacy, consumer acculturation, diaspora

Introduction

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). Structural elements mostly remain "outwardly distinct but inwardly – to a large extent – homogenous" (Luedicke 2011, p. 226). Üstüner and Holt's (2007) study marks the beginning of more structurally-oriented consumer acculturation studies. In their case of dominated consumer acculturation, three sociocultural elements pattern consumers' experiences and result in a shattered identity. Veresiu and Giesler's (2018) article explores how institutional actors from the areas of politics, market research, retail, and the consumption environment shape the ethnic consumer.

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. For instance, 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 homogenously upon the consumer.

Introducing the theoretical lens of institutional logics to the research area, we intend to counter this coherence of institutional forces. We contribute to research by showing that the main macro forces, 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. Moreover, the majority of extant studies investigates cases in which home and host culture are clearly distinct (e.g., Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Peñaloza 1994). Research has not yet taken a closer look at a case where this distinction might not be as clear for consumers – repatriate migration.

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. This study is relevant for several stakeholders. On a macro level, a holistic picture of migrants’ institutional frame allows the state to consider migrants adequately in terms of legislation and assistance programs. An understanding of the interplay between different institutional signals and consumption activities allows market actors to adapt 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, indigenes learn about their fellow citizens which shall reduce uncertainty

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 article aims to give them a voice.

An institutional theory lens is well suited to capture structural dynamics in a field. We base this study on a broad notion of institutions as taken-for-granted external frameworks which impact identity and action (Jepperson 1991). Thornton and Ocasio (1999, p. 804) define institutional logics as “socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals [...] provide meaning to their social reality”. In the case of several institutional logics, these logics can coexist or compete with each other (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). The “incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics” (Greenwood et al. 2011, p. 317) are the essence of institutional complexity. Institutional logics can be the origin of legitimacy (Thornton and Ocasio 2008), the perception that actions or entities are in line with socially common norms, values, rules, laws, and beliefs (Suchman 1995).

With regard to migration, Veresiu and Giesler (2018) demonstrate how it is difference that is legitimized and the other who is celebrated. Üstüner and Holt (2007) claim that postmodern consumer culture legitimizes migrants’ home cultures as marginal consumption archetypes. Scaraboto and Fisher (2013) emphasize that migrant consumers are in fact illegitimate and powerless. We contribute to illuminating this field of tension between legitimacy and illegitimacy in a context in which the boundaries of otherness are unclear.

Context and Method

Repatriate migration refers to “the return of ethnic minorities to their historic homelands” (Remennick 2003, p. 24). The migration pattern is often associated with diaspora. 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 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. The migrant history of most ethnic German repatriates started in 1763, when Empress Catherine the Great invited foreign settlers to colonize the vast lands. 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. It was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union that the descendants of the first settlers, in total over 2.5 million repatriates and their relatives, were allowed to remigrate to Germany.

This paper includes interview, field, and archival data. 15 depth interviews were conducted with repatriate consumers. Fourteen interviews relate to the institutions. These are 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. 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

As a foundation for understanding repatriates' current institutional environment, 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 Russian dishes. [...] My parents attached great value to this. [...] German songs were sung.*" 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.” These findings clearly set this study apart from other cases in which there is no personal connection before migration.

The present

Figure 1 summarizes the findings after repatriation. It depicts the main institutions and their distinct logics and conflicts within the logics as well as repatriate consumers’ strategies.

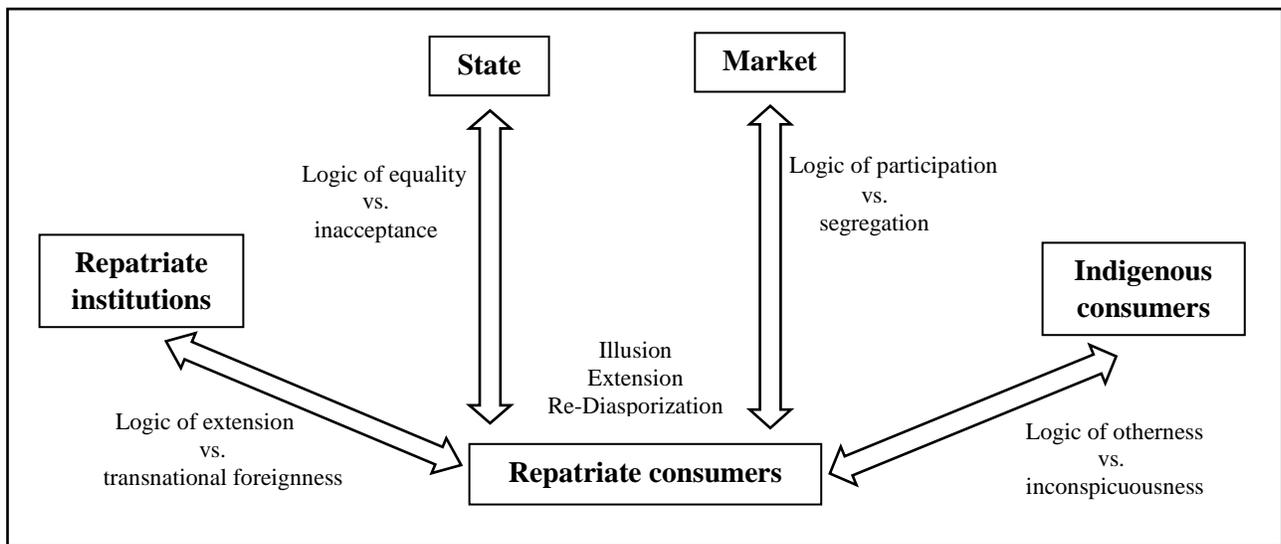


fig. 1: Repatriate consumers’ complex institutional environment

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, according to which ethnic Germans are persons who avowed themselves to be German in their place of residence, supported by characteristics such as language, education, or culture. The Federal Expellee Law granted affected persons various privileges and the right to return to West Germany as *Aussiedler* or *Spätaussiedler*. 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 logic of equality is pervaded by intrainstitutional inconsistencies. For example, public authorities did not recognize the majority of qualifications, which is why most repatriates have worked in lower-level positions (Federal Employment Agency 2007).

The market

The key logic of the market is the logic of participation, based on a capitalist logic of moneymaking. Whenever consumers demand something, they will be served and are thus able to participate. Since the late 1990s, stores with products primarily known in the former Soviet Union with Cyrillic labels have appeared in many German cities. As such, they perform difference and signal otherness and 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 rather discriminatory experiences, like Teresa's (55) 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, many indigenous consumers view repatriates as immigrants, representing a logic of otherness, which is often accompanied by feelings of skepticism as Martina (65) explains: "A lot of them [...] 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." 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." He even shops in repatriate supermarkets: "It is a bit better and cheaper than at the farmer's market."

Repatriate institutions

On a meso level, particular repatriate institutions represent a logic of extension, claiming 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 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 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 foreignness.

Repatriate consumers

Repatriates’ consumption reflects this institutional tension in distinct ways via illusion, extension, 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, while their consumption does not indicate this. To reinforce this illusion, they emphasize their own consumption’s superiority vis-à-vis other repatriates’. Vadim (59) demonstrates this 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*.”

The second strategy we identify involves the logic of extension and complementing 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 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 the place of diaspora than the ancestral homeland. Consumers engaging in re-diasporization become a diaspora again, but of the former host country. Re-diasporization is associated with a sense of illegitimacy and can either occur involuntarily or voluntarily. Involuntary re-diasporization is mostly fueled by disappointment, as Alex (58) explains:

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.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that extant research has painted an incomplete picture of the institutional environment of migrants. Findings show that repatriate consumers navigate these tensions by sustaining an illusion, by a third consumer culture, or by re-diasporization. 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 institutions’ own ‘shattered identity’.

Future research should be concerned with the well-being of repatriate consumers. 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 and open the door for further research on other migration patterns and institutional complexity.

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