

## Constructing Immigrant Identities in Food Consumption: a Case of Russian-speaking Immigrants in the Czech Republic.

### *Introduction and Literature Review*

Self-identity construction is one of well-researched, but at the same time, poorly deciphered phenomenon. One of the reasons for that is the absence of an agreed understanding of and interdisciplinary framework for studying people identity and instead, an abundance of research factors, forms and manifestations constituting this very personal knowledge of oneself. Modern research has already outlined various forms that identity can take including constructed, multi-faceted, negotiated, situational, fragmented, hybrid, plural and collective identities. However, mostly the forms and manifestation of the identity have been studied thoroughly up to date, with the number of researchers examining identity construction being much lower.

The majority of identity research tends to view the phenomenon of one's self-identity as a rather stable and solid knowledge. However, with more research in this field scholars started to question the existing identity paradigm and argue that there is a great extent of plasticity of identity as well as its multiple forms and manifestations. As Stuart Hall argued in one of his research on this subject:

*"Identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think. Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, with the new cultural practices they represent, we should think instead of identity as 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."*<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, identity studies were also reported to be prone to adopt what John MacInnes formulated as "banal nationalist perspective"<sup>2</sup>. MacInness claimed that a stricter distinction between the different meanings of the term identity is needed to help sociological researchers avoid

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<sup>1</sup>Hall's research discussed in MacCrone, David. *The Sociology of Nationalism: Tomorrow's Ancestors*.

<sup>2</sup>MacInnes, John. "Castells' Catalan Routes: Nationalism And The Sociology Of Identity." *British Journal Of Sociology* 57.4 (2006): 677-698. *SocINDEX with Full Text*. Web. 22 May 2015.

arguments which risk to become too determinist, teleological or both. Nevertheless, identity research also suggested that even though the identities are constructed by the individual's experience separately and uniquely, the exterior forces and factors also play a significant role.

One of the ways to look on the formation and shaping of the individual's identity and define the main identity altering factors would be concentrating on a particular aspect or a constituent of individual's identity. Perhaps, one of the most fluctuating manifestations of individual's identity that would allow to track down the factors shaping it, is consumer behaviour. A large volume of consumer culture literature suggests that consumption has become a vantage point for observing people's everyday choices, dilemmas and solutions. Furthermore, individual's behaviour as a consumer also reflects the outer environment and individual's understanding of his or her place in the society. With goods and assets starting to take more important roles in contemporary people's households, individual's consumer behaviour /culture may serve as an important reference point and help shedding a light on the process of individual's identity lifecycle and formation.

In order to track the changes in identity, or more specifically in one of its forms ( consumer identity), the triggering factor should be present. Migration, resettlement and displacement are cited as one of the most frequent causes for the identity reconstruction is sociological research. Therefore, it can be imagined that the shift in the consumer identity driven by the individual's relocation, prolonged experience of living abroad and/or adapting to another culture can also trigger the shift in the other identity levels such as national or social identity. It's also worth mentioning that the concepts of a culture and consumer culture themselves is another multi-dimensional concept that can be understood differently in different contexts. In case of consumer experience, we can refer to and understand consumer culture as a set of behavioural characterises typical for a certain consumer group. When referring to the immigrants, the changes of their consumer culture can serve as the clues to the changes in their immigrant, individual and even national identity.

To uncover how immigrant identity changes over the time and expressed by immigrants' consumer practices and behaviour, the future research has to be conveyed. Undoubtedly, it's rather laborious to track the changes that consumer identity undergoes as there are many factors that have to be taken into consideration. As a result narrower perspective has to be applied in order to lock in the changes immigrant's consumer identity goes trough and systematise them. For the proposed

research, four separate consumer culture theories will be analysed to have a better understanding of the consumer identity alteration. These theories include consumer culture and identity theory, consumer acculturation, hybrid identity theory and Bourdieu's hysteresis of habits.

### *The Research Problem and Hypotheses*

The current research will concentrate on the consumer experience and impact of such experience on consumer identity and immigrant identity of Russian immigrants in the Czech Republic. Russian-immigration from Russian Federation to the Czech lands has a rather long history of existence and currently going through another spike.<sup>3</sup> The interviews with Russian expatriates and migrants would offer greater insights into the role of Russian consumer identity in migrant's interpretations of, and interaction with the Czech consumer environment than plain questionnaires. Furthermore, people's articulation of their consumer experience and change in consumer practices may serve as an important insight into the changes in their identity. The current research aims to track the impacts brought by immigration and resettlement from the country of origin (Russian Federation) to immigrants' consumer identities, and whether the changes in consumer identity made people rethink their affiliation to a certain social group and even nationality. As a result, the research questions would be formulated as the following: how consumption strategies and consumption behaviour of the immigrants are involved in the formation of their immigrant and national identities.

### Data and Methods of Analysis

As the previous immigrant identity researchers show, the value of individual experience in a form of testimony allows "the glimpses into the lived interior" as well as more room for analysis. Therefore, the primary instruments of the proposed research will be of an ethnographic character and include interviews, participant observations, personal testimonies and text analysis of the interviews. Furthermore, the consumer experience will be narrowed down to the food consumption. Undoubtedly, grocery shopping and eating are daily and inseparable routines of every human being and are also integral to our identity. There is also a saying "We are what we eat" which means that individual's diet can tell a lot about his or her understanding of oneself's identity both intrinsically

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<sup>3</sup>Česko je oblíbený cíl ruských emigrantů. (Hospodářské noviny) Russian Emigration Spikes in 2013-2014 (The Diplomat)

and extrinsically. By examining how consumption of food and diet preferences serve the construction, reconstruction, expression, and making visible or masking of social and personal identity of immigrants we hope to learn more about the process of consumer identity reconstruction of immigrants. Furthermore, the observations on the consumer identity change and reconstruction are believed to help uncovering a more general mechanism of the individual's identity reconstruction and suggest further investigations in that field.

The interview questions will concentrate on several aspects of consumer behaviour, including interactions with local inhabitants, products missed and efforts to obtain them as well as word-of-mouth sources. The researcher would also work in a several fields including Prague and Carlsbad, to carry ethnographic observations. Observation sights would include restaurants frequented by immigrants, Russian food shops, religious and national celebration etc. Moreover, the consumer baskets in a country of origin and country of expatriation will also be compared.

The research aims to target immigrants in Czech Republic, Prague and Carlsbad and have interviews with men and women of different age, social status, occupation and background, but all coming from Russian Federation.

### Expected Results

The current research is aimed at deepening understanding of the factors altering the immigrant identity as well as the phases through which the identity is going through using the prism of consumer experience and consumer practices. Furthermore, the planned research would also like to attempt projecting the findings on other levels of identity forms and manifestation to learn more about the concept of identity as a whole.

## Preliminary Structure of Diploma Thesis

### ABSTRACT

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

- i. A concept of identity in sociology: definitions and understandings
- ii. Forms and expression of identity
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- vi. Immigration as a catalyst of identity alteration
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#### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

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- ii. Research Tools: observations and interviews

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- i. Description of Responses
- ii. Analysis of responses
- iii. Testing Hypothesis

#### 5. CONCLUSION

- i. Summary
- ii. Recommendations

iii. Suggestions for future research

APPENDIX

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