

# Chapter 7

## The Socializing Role of Expatriate Online Platforms

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in expatriates' secondary socialization into new consumption environments. On the basis of the qualitative study of a question and answer platform directed at expatriates in Brussels, this chapter differentiates between market orientation and socialization practices online. It shows how processes of market simplification, market guidance, and market manipulation co-exist both in expatriates' orientation and socialization in the new consumption context. The findings of this study firstly provide insights into the consequences of those online interactions for nationalism, where digital tools may in fact reduce expatriates' cosmopolitanism. Secondly, the study shows how collaborative knowledge construction on those platforms creates new forms of market adaptation.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In a world where digitalization and globalization are major buzzwords directing public and academic discourse, questions of national belonging, and of individuals' socialization into particular cultures become ever more complex. This is particularly true for migrants, whether immigrants, refugees, expatriates, or international students, crossing contexts and cultures even more routinely than other individuals. Although mobile for very different reasons, and with quite unequal opportunities, these population groups all find

themselves in a context foreign to them, requiring a second period of socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which in the case of migration is also referred to as acculturation (Berry, 2008).

Nowadays, this acculturation takes place to a large extent through consumer acculturation (Peñaloza, 1994). Indeed, with the rise of consumer culture as major constituent of modern societies (Sassatelli, 2007), affiliation to particular cultures is often expressed through the display of consumption practices associated with those cultures (Firat, 1995). Appadurai (1990) for instance highlights the major role played by interactions between

movement of people (ethnoscapes), economic exchanges (finanscapes), and flows of information (mediascapes) in global contexts, which are only exacerbated by digital technologies. An understanding of global economic prosperity needs hence to pass through an appreciation of the way in which the development of digital technologies changes migrants' consumption practices in a context characterized by global availability of goods and services.

Previous research has already investigated the relationship between digitalization and consumption on the one hand, and on the other, migrants' appropriation of digital resources, which this chapter details at a later stage. Despite the valuable insights provided by this previous research, understandings of the role of digital resources in migrants' socialization in a new consumption environment remain scarce.

The present book chapter provides answers to this problematic, with the study of secondary socialization through a qualitative content analysis of an expatriate online forum. Investigating how expatriates socialize into a new consumption environment through the use of digital tools has the potential for providing important insights. Indeed, it provides the opportunity of studying changes in business practices and national belonging in a digital age without the barriers of language, education or financial insecurity. Indeed, expatriates can be considered the tourists of a global migratory stage (Bauman, 1997), individuals whose cultural economic capital enables them to cross contexts with relative ease, and with the ability to adopt various consumption practices at least from an economic perspective. Moreover, their relatively high literacy provides sufficient familiarity with digital tools rendering this investigation possible. In consideration of the wide range of digital tools existing nowadays, this chapter focuses on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in particular, detailed in a next section.

Building on an extensive analysis of interactions on the Q&A platform of a website directed at expatriates in Belgium, this chapter shows firstly how the platform functions as guide for consumption practices in the new context. Indeed, it provides extensive support either before migration or upon arrival, in all matters related to the choice, purchase, consumption or disposal of products and services of all kinds. Secondly, the analysis points to the major role played by this platform in not only advising the expatriate consumers, but in fact, in socializing them into the local context, with noteworthy results in feelings of (national) belonging. These results are subsequently discussed in terms of their influence on global markets and in terms of their impact on expatriates' nationalism.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Socialization has been discussed by many authors. A full overview of socialization research would be beyond the scope of this chapter, therefore referring to other sources for this discussion (Grusec & Hastings, 2007). For the purposes of this chapter, the differentiation between primary and secondary socialization as proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) is a main reference point. The authors define primary socialization as "the first socialization an individual undergoes in childhood, through which he becomes a member of society" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 130). In contrast with this thorough and extensive learning of the rules and norms underlying a particular societal context, secondary socialization "inducts an already socialized individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 130). Berry (2008) assimilates this concept to acculturation when discussing about contact between individuals of different cultures. Indeed, in its oldest definition, acculturation can be seen as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into

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