

34th EIBA Annual Conference

International Business and the catching up economies: Challenges and opportunities

Tallinn, Estonia, December 11th-13th 2008

Local or global?

Consumption behaviour of international migrants in their new environment

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Abstract

The field of international marketing is wide, with an abundant literature. The most striking point is that international marketing should deal with differences across cultures, be it by somewhat adapting a standardized product, or by offering customized goods to each local market. In this article, the author claims this differentiation has to be supplemented by the category of international consumers, who choose to consume products from different cultures. With the enlargement of the European Union, there is an increasing propensity to international moves, impacting directly consumption. This article examines the special case of international migrants who live in a country that is not their own, and adapt their lifestyle accordingly. The results of exploratory depth interviews show that the desire to purchase products from the country of origin is strong for the migrants, and that there are several ways to satisfy their craving for products from their country of origin.

Keywords: international migration, consumer behaviour, consumer acculturation, business opportunities, specialty stores

Introduction

Thanks to the opening of borders in Europe, and migration in general, an increasing amount of people are living in a country that is not their own, in a culture that is not their own. This article aims at understanding their consumption patterns in the context of international mobility. It is influenced by different factors than the local population. This will have an impact on the product landscape in the host country. The present aim is giving a better idea of this problematic, providing an exploration of the consumption behaviour of expatriates in a multicultural city such as Brussels.

This article addresses a specific kind of consumer, straddling different cultures. The customisation of products for the local market will not necessarily be adapted to them, depending on how similar they are to the local culture. On the one side, they might be much more interested in standardized products than the locals, as it permits them to evolve in a familiar setting. On the other side, the question can be asked whether they need products that have been adapted to their culture of origin, in their previous country of residence. Moreover, it is interesting to know about their opinion on the products sold in the local market.

The case of Brussels as an international city

For a better understanding of this situation, the case of international migrants in Brussels is examined. By international migrants, I refer to any person who lives in the analysed country for some time, without having the citizenship of this country. I thus encompass as well immigrants as expatriates and other sojourners, as defined by Berry (2006). This choice is justified by the multicultural status of the city. Indeed, the “capital of Europe” draws together a multitude of companies, institutions and organizations, defining the international character of the city. Based on a study by Van Daal (2006), the following figures underline this

statement. In Brussels, there are 77 international governmental organizations, including the EU, the NATO, and Eurocontrol, approximately 350 representations of regions and major European cities, 2,000 subsidiaries of foreign companies, including several European headquarters, 1,750 international interest groups and European federations of national NGOs. Furthermore, the city is the largest press-centre of the world with 1,200 accredited journalists. Finally, as Verbeke and López (2005) confirm, Belgium can be defined as an immigration country, as justified by its colonial past in Africa, and major successive immigration waves. The figures on the website of the Belgian National Statistical Institute suggest that there are 313,825 residents of foreign citizenship in the Brussels Region as for October 2007, representing 30 percent of the population. 67% of these foreign residents come from a European country (Department of Federal Immigration Belgium,(2007); EUROPA, (2007)). Accordingly, a multitude of different nationalities, cultures and preferences can be found in the city.

Due to geographical proximity, many migrants come from cultures that are close to the Belgian one. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the specific differences arising when moving from one European country to the other. Peñaloza (1989) explains that consumption preferences are influenced by the country of origin, through the process of consumer socialization taking place in the context of consumer acculturation. She highlights that the international migrants (immigrants in the case of her article) have to learn “consumer skills, knowledge, and behaviours that are appropriate within a new sociocultural context” (Peñaloza, 1989, p. 114). The applicability of this theory in the context of international migrants in Brussels is interesting to find out. Yet, while in the case of an immigrant-only study, the focus is on understanding how the consumers adapt to the local market, in the case of international migrants, living in an international city as Brussels, the question has to be

asked whether the consumer acculturation is actually taking place or whether it is the local market that adapts to its consumers.

The outlooks of international migrants, some staying forever, others just a couple of years, are much more diverse than those of immigrants who generally wish to stay in their new country. A report by Favell (2001) confirms that “It is one of the great things about Brussels that one can live in this city and never attempt to integrate as a national of the country” (Favell, 2001, p. 48); this statement shows clearly that nowadays, especially in the context of cultural diversity in an enlarged European Union, a multitude of different consumption styles can coexist in one country. The city offers the opportunity to understand the different consumption patterns arising from the enlargement of the European Union and the international status of Brussels, which leads to an increased mobility across countries.

Standardization versus customization

In the literature on international marketing, two main streams of thought can be found. The first one, lead by Levitt (see for example “The Globalization of Markets”,(1983), advocates a standardization of the products, offering the same product in the different national markets. The second stream of literature views it as important to adapt marketing strategies to the local culture, through different means.

Though outdated in many sectors, Levitt’s article on the globalization of markets (1983) is still present in the field. Levitt (1983) considers that the best choice for companies is to offer the same products throughout the different markets, as nowadays the tastes and lifestyles converge. As examples, he mentions Coca Cola, MacDonald’s and so on. However, he is contradicted by several authors, one of them being Hill (2004), who explains that even these multinationals do not fit anymore with the model given by Levitt (1983). Other authors

include Cui (1997) and Kotler (2006). The counter current advocates an adaptation of the products to the local market, even in the case of globalized companies. There are different understandings of the symbolic, the uses and especially the image the products will give to a customer base according to the culture of the country in question. Indeed, several companies have faced problems in that respect, and had to change their offer for each country (Kotler, 2006). Still, it has to be acknowledged that depending on one industry or the other, and the specific market considered, each technique has its advantages and disadvantages. In the case of business to consumer, there is a tendency towards adapting the offer to the local culture, while keeping common traits defining the brand and/or company image.

Pires (1999) is one of the authors contrasting those two viewpoints. In a study performed in the Australian context, the results point out that in the context of different subcultures in one country, two cases have to be avoided. The first problematic case would be to develop different marketing strategies for groups, which show the same consumption pattern. The second one would be to merge different ethnic groups when devising a strategy when their behaviours are different. This article therefore highlights the major role ethnicity and cultural identification play in segmenting multicultural societies.

As explained before, the present article brings the view point of different migrant populations and a different cultural setting to the same problematic. Those theoretical findings can thus be contrasted with different practical cases.

The Method

As the idea of studying migrants from very different backgrounds, both ethnic and social, is quite new in the field of consumer behaviour, this research was carried out on an exploratory basis. The goal of the present study being to understand the underlying reasons and

motivations for certain choices rather than others, a method had to be used which permitted to acquire an understanding of the migrants' individual motivations and reasoning underlying their consumption experience in a new environment. This is why I performed 18 in-depth interviews in two different rounds; the first twelve were carried out from March 2007 to May 2007, while the subsequent 6 took place in October and November 2007. The conversations were held either in the migrants' living room, or in another quiet setting for the interviewees to be at ease, without being overheard by people exterior to the study. The participants had the choice between English, French and German as interview language, enabling them to use the language they were most familiar with. The interviews followed a semi-structured questionnaire with open questions. The goal was to provide a general framework in which the study was undertaken, while leaving the interviewees free to answer the questions in varied ways, depending on what was most important for them.

The questionnaire itself was based on first conversations with international migrants as well as on information found on websites directed at them. In order to ensure that the questions were accurate and useful from the academic viewpoint, I reviewed it with an expert in interviewing. The advantage of this semi-structured technique is that letting the migrants answer the open questions the way they liked ensured "avoiding to impose the interviewers views on the interviewee", as McNeill and Chapman (2005) stated (p. 58). The interviewees were thus invited to talk freely about the consumption issues they experienced, with some probing questions encouraging them to explain one or the other aspect in more detail. The interviews were fully recorded and verbatim transcribed to prepare the analysis.

The selection of the participants took place according to the theoretical sampling method proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Interviewees were not selected on predefined list of

criteria. Instead, the choice of the next participant was based on the insights gained through the previous interviews. The accent was put on the heterogeneity of the sample, in order to bring up the common concerns of all migrants, regardless of factors such as age, professional background or nationality. This theoretical sampling technique was put into practice through snowball sampling, as recommended by Bryman (2004). After each interview, I asked the participant to recommend friends and acquaintances matching the emergent criteria. The reason for this choice was that a good relationship was created from the start between the interviewees and me, as I was referred to them by someone they know. It was thus less problematic to gain the participants agreement and trust. They opened up more easily, and let me share their experience, while being aware of the scientific nature of the interview.

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed following indications by Strauss and Corbin (1990) by the constant comparative analysis method. This means that the analysis takes place at the same time as the collecting of data. After gathering some interviews, I immediately started with the open coding of the different elements of the interview in order to assign general concepts and ideas to the phenomena encountered. Then I started grouping the emerging concepts in different categories and sub-categories such as the problems encountered, the solutions found, or the concrete ways of changing consumption. As the interviews went on, I could adapt the questions to the results of the analysis, in order to include all cited aspects. The technique of axial coding was then used to build a structure around the emerging concepts and categories, defining causes, contexts and implications. This led to a global understanding of the issues faced by international migrants after having moved to a new country, and discovering a new product landscape.

These depth-interviews were supplemented by interviews of companies and associations directed towards the international migrants, who gave me a deeper understanding of the infrastructure present for the international consumers.

Results

The analyses of the interviews lead to several conclusions. They can be divided into two parts. The first one shows the way the migrants manage to keep up the consumption of products they are used to from their country of origin. In the second one, examples are given of products that are missed. In each part, I cite the respondents, to clarify and to back the findings, giving the pseudonym and culture of the interviewee, and contrast these findings with theoretical notions on the subject. A complete list of participants to the study can be found in appendix 1, with some details blurred.

The acquisition of familiar products

Several issues arise in the acquisition of missed and needed products. The major one is that indeed, international migrants face specific consumption issues. Already at arrival, they lack the references and market knowledge necessary to get along in the new environment.

“I was lucky to find it [speaking of sour cream], because my [Russian] friend didn’t know, she was here five years!”

(Mariya, Ukrainian)

When referring to the concept of consumer acculturation, as used by Peñaloza (1989), the findings sustain that “consumer acculturation is a dynamic process in which consumption behaviours of one culture are acquired by another culture, but not without a corresponding

time lag effect and distortions possibly due to cultural stereotypes” (Peñaloza, 1989, p. 116). In the present article, this is verified through the interviews. It can indeed be confirmed that there is a period of adaptation to the new situation, when the migrants explore the product landscape. In practice, they discover that there are several issues to handle.

The first one is that, while it is easy to find some of the products they are used to in the supermarket; they don’t know how to acquire other products in the new country. The products found easily are often standardized ones that are the same across countries.

“In general, I tend to stick to products that are the same everywhere (...) I got into certain brands and stayed there”

(Gunnar, Icelandic)

The second issue brings about that, contrary to what might be assumed, it is not necessarily the basic consumption items, such as bread, milk or vegetables that bring about the least problems. Indeed, while those products are found in the shelves of the different stores, the taste and quality differs greatly depending on the country, leading to some surprises and disappointments.

“What I miss too is a lot of fresh dairy products, like milk... I’m used to have fresh milk of the day, and even the, I would say high range supermarkets don’t have this... or they just have a little bit of it [...] and that’s a quality difference I don’t like so much”

(Yasper, Dutch)

In the case of products that are not found right away, additional questions arise. The first is to determine whether a particular product is essential to the migrant's consumption. If he or she is ready to abandon consuming without too much regret or longing, the problem is solved quite quickly. However, if there is significant craving a solution has to be found for satisfying the need. The following quote illustrates the urge some migrants develop for familiar products:

“Particular products that you can’t get here ... and you look desperately in the supermarket, and you can’t find it, and you get a craving for this, you know, stupid product, and you can’t find it anywhere”

(Katie, English)

In practice, the international migrants in Brussels have come up with several ways of dealing with such needs. The easiest one is to find an “ethnic” food section which exists in some supermarkets that are specialized in the products from the country of origin of one specific population group. Most often, this is done in areas where there is a significant percentage of the residents belonging to a certain culture. The most known example is maybe Italian food, which has become “commodified” in the whole western world (Girardelli, 2004), suggesting that an increased demand for this type of products is linked at first to an important presence of the population from the culture of origin, and later on that the product is available easily through the mainstream retail channels. If this is not possible, there are still an important number of specialty stores in Brussels and its surroundings. Their offerings are either specific to one culture or offer products from the same region of origin. In the surroundings of Brussels for example, there are some neighbourhoods that are typically British or Scandinavian, due to the presence of international schools. Therefore, the surrounding shops

have adapted to this population. If those infrastructures do not offer what is expected, or do so at a price that is superior to what the migrant is willing to pay, the consumer will start to evaluate how he can import the missed product. Several means exist, such as asking friends or family to bring back products when they visit, or bringing products back oneself at the occasion of a trip back home.

“I bring cakes I buy in my favourite patisserie, I bring coffee, because it’s so much cheaper and it’s the kind of coffee I like for breakfast [...] on those very short holidays, I have just hand luggage [...] and it’s sometimes fruit, two lemons, cakes, a CD I bought there, things like that...”

(Joana, Portuguese)

While this enables the migrant to satisfy the need for a certain product, the downside is the organisational factor as well as the irregularity of the supply. In the case of car trip back home, facilitated by the relative short distances within Europe, it is easy to buy large quantities of products that can be stored for some time, and to bring them back home safely. In the case of a trip home by plane, or for fresh products, it becomes more complicated. Especially with the new flight restrictions for carry-on luggage, the migrants increasingly give up on the attempt to import products from their home country. When I asked one of the interviewees about importing products, she answered the following:

“I always [did] but now because there is the authorities that are making things a bit difficult because they are giving limitations on what you can take in your hand luggage, if you fly”

(Tiina, Finnish)

On the other side when speaking about using the car to import products, the respondent had to admit:

“Yes... well a lot, not very much, because it’s also the fact that certain things have to be cool all the time, or cold... and it’s a long way to Finland by car”

(Tiina, Finnish)

One last possibility for the migrants is the use of “new” technologies, i.e. online shopping. Indeed, it becomes increasingly possible and safe to buy products on the Internet, directly from the country of origin, if one is ready to pay the transport fees.

The results shown above confirm to some extent the statement made by Peñaloza (1989). She explains that the companies importing products for the immigrants assume there is an interest for these on the side of the consumers. My research shows that indeed the interest might be strong, and that in many cases, there is a clear craving for imported products. The international migrants will try to find a way to satisfy their longing for certain products they were used to in their country of origin. While further studies have to confirm this idea, there is however evidence encouraging companies to give a closer look to those consumers.

Product categories

Concerning the products that challenge the international migrants, several categories were cited more often than others. The advantage of selecting interviewees from various origins is that it is possible to determine general categories of products that represent issues to the international community, instead of giving concrete examples of the problems one nationality faces in the new country.

In general, the products that are missed are food products, through there are also some other needs. At the first place, there are dairy products. While in many European countries fresh milk is bought from the cooling shelves of the supermarkets, there is the tendency in Belgium to consume mainly milk conserved through UHT (Ultra high temperature) treatment. This has an impact on the taste, as was highlighted by several migrants. Other, more specific dairy products such as sour cream or butter milk are more difficult to find as well. The second category of products concerns sweets. The international migrants demonstrate cravings for sweets such as liquorice, or other candies while they were here. Thirdly, grains and cereals were mentioned as being different, both in diversity and availability. The fourth category of food products that was cited are vegetables. However this last category depended strongly on the country of origin of the international migrants. There could be found a slight tendency for the migrants from southern countries to complain more about the quality and taste of vegetables and fruit than the northern migrants.

Other categories concern for example water, be it from the tap or in bottles. The taste is perceived as different by several migrants, some also highlighting differences in packaging. Daily care products are also specific to the customers; there is a tendency to trust rather products they know from their country of origin than local ones. Finally, the clothing styles and preferences for car purchases are mentioned, though in those cases the migrants adapt without too much problems to the local situation.

In a similar study undertaken by Gilly (1995), the case of American women living in Madrid illustrates similar patterns of need. The women brought up issues of differences in freshness, packaging, and most prominently, about the difficulty to find specific brands. This highlights

that the gap between the products in two western countries such as the United States and Spain can be very different. When trying to rely on standardized products, it becomes difficult to satisfy the needs for specific products. However, no evidence is found that American women in Spain are able to acquire products from their country in other ways than through importing them themselves or thanks to visitors. It can thus be noticed that the product landscape changes according to the country of residence, and for sure also depending on the country of origin of the migrant.

Conclusion and implications for further research

In conclusion of the present article, a few facts can be highlighted. The international migrants who build their life in a new country have to adapt to some extent to the local settings. Indeed, as Favell (2001) explained, it is not necessary to adapt to the local culture in Brussels. Nonetheless, there are practical matters that will automatically change the migrants' life. The local market is different from the market in the country of origin, thus every migrant experiences some disorientation at first, before making himself at home in the new country.

The ease of purchasing a product the migrant is longing for will depend on its availability in the local market. In any case, if a product is really missed, no matter how difficult it is to obtain, the migrant will put the necessary effort in order to acquire it.

Impact on the market

Increasingly thus, companies become aware of the potential of these customers, and start importing products familiar to the migrants. Though this behaviour has existed for many years, the enlargement of the European Union suggests a soaring demand for ethnic products

of different categories, going as far as to have specialty shops offering eggs from the country of origin, a product that at first glance does not represent a product known for changing immensely from one country to the other (affirmation based on an example given by the manager of a specialties store in Brussels). Today's tendency to selling products from one country in another, circumventing the traditional notions of standardization or adaptation to the local market will surely prove to continue in the next years. It is the opportunity for many companies to broaden their market, while concentrating on their local culture. The pioneers of these techniques in the major European cities develop a competitive advantage they will have to defend vigorously in the future.

The question to ask is to what extent this has an impact on the local business. Many companies have seized the opportunity to enlarge their product offer by goods from different backgrounds. The advantage of it is not only that it satisfies international migrants who know the products, but also that it encourages the local population to try out new things, which can only be positive for the company. Grier, Brumbaugh and Thornton (2006) refer to this phenomenon as "product crossover". According to them, ethnic crossover happens when "a product that reflects the cultural experience of an ethnic minority group (an ethnic-oriented product) gains significant penetration among consumers outside the referent ethnic group" (Grier et coll., 2006, pp. 35-36).

To illustrate this issue we examine the example of a company with several specialty stores in and around Brussels. After starting to sell English and Swedish products that were not available at all in Belgium, the company expanded to products from a multitude of countries like the other Scandinavian countries, Ireland, Germany and so on. Now they as well offer products that are slightly different from the Belgian ones, differing in brands or tastes.

Increasingly, they also have customers who are not from one of the importing countries, but from Belgium or other countries.

“In the beginning, it was the main idea to supply the expats with their food, which maybe two years ago lead into that we wanted also to act as an ambassador for these countries, where we want Belgians to get to know our typical products, or our cuisine, and also all other nationalities [to do so]”

(The manager of a specialties store in Brussels)

Other specialty stores that can be found in the city are Ukrainian, Polish, and Portuguese. Moreover, some associations or organisms offer products from the country of origin, such as rye bread sold by the Finnish seamen’s mission. The success of these companies shows that there is a market for products from other countries, not necessarily for being introduced to the local population, but for satisfying the needs of the international migrants longing for familiar products. The attractiveness of those products comes later for the local population, as a consequence of the increasing popularity and offer in “ethnic products”. The tendency highlighted in the present articles is not entirely new, as during the major migratory movements in the earlier years, Italian, Greek and Asian food was imported first by the immigrants, before being commodified after some years. However this has to be contrasted with the presence of “food neophobia”, which is “the reluctance to eat and or/avoidance of novel foods (Pliner and Hobden, 1992; Lähtenmäki and Arvola, 2001). It can be related to the fear of bad taste reflected by the avoidance of unfamiliar type of foods” (Verbeke & Lopez, 2005, p. 4). Because of this “food neophobia”, the products from other countries are of course not accepted as rapidly by the local population as by the international migrants, it can be a barrier to the acceptance of the products in the “mainstream” market, but as it showed with

products from Italy, Asia or India, it is only a matter of time before they become accepted in the local customs.

In the context of an enlarged European union, it can be hoped that food neophobia is somewhat limited, as the cultural differences between the countries are in general less pronounced than in a completely global context. However, the importance of intra-continental differences should not be underestimated, as they represent a major issue both in the satisfaction of the international migrant, and in the product landscape of the different European countries.

The accent put forward in the present article upon international consumption has certainly to be nuanced by the fact that while the tendency to migration has increased, partly due to the enlargement of the European Union, the case presented in this article is only supplementing the mainstream market in each country. Nevertheless, companies should consider this issue, as it offers new market opportunities, in a niche segment. Moreover, with products already established in the local market, the step to exporting them to specific shops around the world in order to satisfy the need of the international migrants is rather small. The companies should look into this business opportunity with heightened interest in the next years, because even though there are some hurdles to pass concerning transportation costs or organisational challenges, the major task of developing a market offer is already done, as the product is successful in the country of origin, with the targeted population. The enlargement of the European Union moreover, eases the import/export of the products within the Union; therefore some barriers are already broken down for the companies to expand in their neighbour countries.

Further research should provide a deeper analysis of these issues, by analyzing the demand and offer in different European and international cities, in order to gain a better and more global understanding of the situation in multicultural settings. Indeed, as this study is limited to international migrants in Brussels, it would be interesting to know whether the findings apply to any international city. Both the consumers and the owners of specialty shops should be listened to, contrasting their statements with one another, in order to find out about the market potential of ethnic products for international migrants.

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Appendix 1 – Interviews

(In chronological order, with names changed and other personal details blurred to ensure anonymity)

Name, Nationality, Gender, Age, Education level, Profession, Family status, Time spent here, Intention to stay

- Anna, Russian, 36, Non-university undergraduate, Housewife, Married, 2 children, 5 years, Yes
- Gunnar, Icelandic, 27, University master, Entry-level employee in an international institution, Single, 1.5 year, No
- Alessandro, Italian, 56, Secondary school, senior employee in an international institution, Married, 1 child, 20 years, Yes
- Katie, English, 38, Undergraduate, Secretary in an international institution, Divorced, 1 child, 16 years, Yes
- Mariya, Ukrainian, 32, Undergraduate, journalist, Single, 2 years, No
- Michael, Swiss, 28, University master, Entry-level employee in an international firm, Single, 2.5 years, No
- Katarina, Slovenia, 45, University master, Photographer, Married, 8 years, No
- Marit, Norwegian/German, 27, Secondary school, Mid-level employee at a diplomatic service, Single, 26 years, No
- Mathieu, French, 25, University master, Engineer in semi-private sector, Cohabiting, 4 years, No
- Joana, Portuguese, 48, Postgraduate, Teacher at a European School, Divorced, 2 grown up children, 6 years, No
- Mats, Swedish, 28, University master, Manager, Cohabiting, 4.5 years, Yes
- Alicja, Polish, 37, Undergraduate, Housewife, Married, 2 children, 10 years, Yes
- Tamara, Ukrainian, 49, University master, Hospitality business, Married, 1 child, 15 years, Yes
- Tiina, Finnish, 60, Postgraduate, Accompanying spouse, Married, 1 child, 15 years, Yes
- Miriana, Polish, 30, University master, Mid-level employee in an international institution, Single, 6 month, No
- Freya, Danish, 29, University master, Youth advisor, Single, 6 month, No

- Yasper, Dutch, 56, Postgraduate, Senior engineer in between jobs right now, Married, 7 years, No
- Shafi, Algerian, 36, University master, Engineer for a private company, Single, 9 years, Yes

Moreover, I interviewed

- The Manager of a company owning different specialty stores in and around Brussels
- The Owner of a Ukrainian Restaurant in Brussels
- The President of the Finnish Club in Brussels