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What is a self-made expat? Self-disclosures of self-initiated expatriates

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Abstract: The label expatriates is increasingly used by and applied to a growing number of persons who do not fit classical concepts of company-driven expatriation. While relevant research is engaged in establishing interaction with smaller samples of self-initiated expatriates, the present article represents netnography of a larger, international sample of self-designated self-initiated expatriates who, independently of any research intervention, engaged in an online conversation headlined “Self-Made Expats?” on the international expatriates platform *internations.com*. While key findings from this non-responsive approach to the self-disclosures of an internationally diverse web community of self-made expatriates support certain dimensions of prevailing academic definitions, they also suggest reconsidering the so far disclaimed relevance of entrepreneurialism for the concept of self-initiated expatriation.

Keywords: self-initiated expatriation; self-made expats; entrepreneurialism; netnography; *Internations*.

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1. Introduction

Due to the increasing popularity of the expatriate lifestyle, the label *expatriate* has been increasingly applied to and used by persons who do not fit the classical definition of company-initiated expatriation. In this context, self-initiated expatriates have been discovered as a growing, yet under-researched population of the global work force (Doherty et al., 2013; Suutari and Brewster, 2001). Recent research on self-expatriation has hence focused on the disambiguation of expatriation, self-initiated expatriation, and migration (Andresen et al., 2012; Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013) as well as on growing the evidence base regarding self-initiated expatriation. The latter efforts, however, still rely predominantly on the in-depth analysis of smaller samples from specific organizational or geopolitical contexts, such as Chinese repatriates (Guo et al., 2013), US and UK nationals on expat platforms (Doherty et al., 2011), members of a Qatari company (Scurry et al., 2013; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2013), or self-initiated expatriates in Germany (Cao et al., 2013). Many authors therefore stress the need to extend research beyond specific organizational or geographical limits as well as to reconsider its theoretical sampling (Doherty, 2013).

Against this background, the present article represents a netnographic reading of self-disclosures of self-designated self-made

expats who pro-actively and voluntarily contributed to a thread on self-expatriation started by a member of one of the most international expatriate online forums. The contribution of this approach to the existing literature in the field is hence three-fold: First, the presented sampling is less theoretical and comes closer to a probabilistic sampling. Second, observational influences are reduced to the max. Third, the observation of self-designations reduces normative or conceptual interferences commonly associated with the observation of foreign appellations (Roth, 2014a; Roth, 2014b).

In the following section of this article, we will introduce to core concepts and definitions used in the research on self-initiated expatriation, against the background of which we will position our research question on key elements of the self-concepts of self-made expats. Results are then presented and discussed along the lines of a netnographic reading of an internationations.com discussion thread entitled *Self-Made Expats?* – comprised of 194 contributions posted between January 2008 and October 2012.

2. Background

Self-expatriation has become popular with multinational corporations, as they become increasingly interested in more flexible forms of employment of their internationally mobile high-skill workforce (Brookfield Global Relocation Service, 2012, p. 12). The major difference between company assigned and self-initiated expatriates is therefore clearly in the fact that the latter manage their expatriation on their own responsibility (Inkson et al., 1998). Cao et al. (2013, p. 57) hence define self-initiated expatriates as individuals who a) have been free to choose whether, where and how long to go abroad, b) have not been sent by an employer, and c) are currently working in their host country or have had relevant professional experiences there, respectively. The concept is commonly applied to persons with both singular over-sea experiences and longer international career path (Guo et al., 2013).

Theoretical shortcomings have been discussed with regard to the predominantly Western backgrounds and destination countries featured by the population of self-initiated expatriates, which is considered not only an issue of skewed samples (Doherty, 2013, p. 457) but also a form of stereotypical categorization at the methodological level: “With few exceptions (...), when expatriates come from less developed countries they are more frequently labelled as ‘migrants’ or ‘immigrants’” (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013, p. 80).

In contrast to existing research on self-initiated expatriation that starts from more or less cultural aware pre-definitions of self-initiated expatriates, the present article focuses on self-disclosures of individuals who, beyond any research context, pro-actively and deliberately link their own biography to the concept of self-initiated expatriation.

3. Research question

Our research does not start from prevailing distinctions of company-assigned expats, self-initiated expatriates, and migrants. Rather, our netnographic approach will help us to identify self-definitions of individuals who can be considered self-designated lead-users of the concept self-initiated expatriation. The key research question of the present article therefore is as follows: *How do self-designated self-initiated expatriates define themselves as self-initiated expatriates?*

4. Methodology

The present article represents a netnography of an online conversation of self-designated self-made expats. Netnography is a qualitative research method that uses publicly available information produced by participants in online forums (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010) or produced by the use of Internet search engines (Roth, 2013). The method is first choice for the analysis of textual behaviours and interactions (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010) and has been praised for its ease of use and its unobtrusive nature (Kozinets, 2002; Langer and Beckman, 2005). In fact, one major and clear advantage of the method is its allowance of the analysis of content that is not produced in a particular research setting. Observational influences can therefore be considered minimal, which is particularly true with regard to the analysis of online conversations that have ended before the actual research starts. Netnography therefore well suits our approach to focus on self-definitions of self-made expats rather than on the testing of pre-defined categories or the exploration of pre-segmented populations. Moreover, in following Belz and Baumbach (2010), the method will help us to decide as to whether the presented sample can be identified as lead-users of the concept “self-expatriation”.

The analysed content is an online thread, which emerged on a major international expatriate websites, *internations.com*. On 01/16/2008, user Maria Borges, who introduced herself as a Spanish language teacher living in Lima, posted the following message on the Expat Q&A section of the website’s World Forum:

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“Hi fellow expatriates, there are so many people who went to another country because their company sent them. I would also like to meet other self-made expats (who decided to expatriate themselves and their family rather than being sent to another country by their company). I hope we can share stories and tips! I come from Girona in Spain, and moved around a lot, Portugal, France, Spain again, and finally (so far) Lima. Found a nice place to live, love and work. Not making tons of money like other expats do, but I am happy. What’s your self-made expat story?”

Between January 2008 and October 2012, 188 members have made 193 comments on Maria Borges initial post. After identifying this thread as a self-initiated discussion of self-designated self-initiated expatriates and, thus, an appropriate empirical basis for our inquiry on self-definitions of self-initiated expatriates, we made a copy of the entire thread and read it several times. In the course of reading, codes emerged and were altered in order to arrive at selective categories. Topical codes were complemented by frequency codes. As our research took place after the thread ended, observational influences can be considered non-existent. All participants of the conversation consequently were completely unaware of both the research setting in general and the identity of the researcher in particular.

5. Results

Members of the analysed conversation have used a considerable scope of different semantics in order to define and link to the concept of self-initiated expatriation. In doing so, most participants chose to put shorter or longer autobiographical statements in the context of the overall topic. In the following, we will present themes and motives, which we identified as dominant in the investigated thread.

5.1. Family background

A handful of contributors traced their own self-initiated expatriation experiences back to their family history. For example, in a post dated 10/01/2012, at 08:46, a member wrote the following: “I grew up in a bilingual, binational (?) family so I’ve never felt that I belonged anywhere which contributed to my love of travel and dedication to being a global citizen from a very young age”. Another member identifies herself as a “navy brat” whose family was transferred abroad (09/28/2012, 22:43), which in her case was the start of her own international life course.

5.2. Nomadism

While some of the participants disclosed themselves as naturally born nomads, e.g. in terms of reflections on their life as a “TCK (Third Culture Kid)” (10/01/2012, 10:32), others have been raised by resident populations and deliberately chosen to become a nomad: “As a kid, my dream was to be a nomad, and though I am not exactly living a nomadic life, I hardly stay in the same place more than 2 years” (09/29/2012, 08:50). At least eight members explicitly admitted to the nomadic, “global life” (09/29/2012, 00:29) they live as “World citizens” (09/29/2012, 2012, 10:20).

5.3. Paradise

In contrast to the nomads, who consider the journey the reward, a considerable number of individuals expressed that the promise of a better life abroad has been their prime motivation to self-expatriate. Like the initiator of the thread, these people have been looking for “a nice place to live, love and work” (01/16/2008, 18:07), “a more sunny place” (10/01/2012, 12:45), a Mediterranean climate, sun, cobblestone streets ...” (09/29/2012, 18:43), or just for an appropriate place “to celebrate the break with the rat race” (09/30/2012, 19:27). For others this ideal place is “w(h)ere family values, love for nature, human rights and freedom are held up so high” (September 29, 01:06). The decision to move to paradise is made sometimes by the finger of God, who may point at Sweden in such a case (10/01/2012, 10:27), sometimes because of “soul searching” whose outcome is Norway (10/01/2012, 10:06). In one case, a US-family took advantage of their US-based employer’s teleworking policy and moved to Mexico to live in the land of their dreams (09/28/2012, 22:00). For at least 14 participants in the investigated conversation, their individual idea of an ideal or better life has been the main motivation to go abroad. Even if in some cases monetary reasons such as a more favourable tax environment (02/05/2008, 04:50; 01/03/2010, 03:22) might have played a role, in most of the cases, emphasize is on the value of their experiences, memories or improved work-life balance even if their “retirement plan is behind” (09/28/2012, 21:01), the latter of which is to say that the respective person could not afford to put much money into their pension scheme.

5.4. Love

The final post from October 2, 2012 states that it was “quite interesting how the subject of love seems to run through the thread. It seems it's a strong motivation (subconsciously or otherwise) for people who travel or decide to build roots in a foreign land”. However, while many participants used the term love, the majority did so predominantly to describe their relationship with their new host environment. Less explicit references to love were made in the context of couples moving abroad together or to the fact that love was found after the relocation. Apart from these, only a handful of community members actually linked the concept to an individual person who turned the balance to a move abroad. To this group might be added those cases in which an individual took the chance on a start-over after a broken relationship.

5.5. Start-over

At least seven contributors disclosed that they self-expatriated in order to take a chance on a new beginning. Typical reasons for this step are “a relationship that fell apart” (09/28/2012, 21:09) or the death of a marriage or life partner (09/28/2012, 21:34). Individuals with this background typically emphasize how the new environment comforted or distracted them and helped them to recover. In some cases, however, the decision to start-over is also motivated by the mere need for “a new life, a new world, a new civilization” (09/28/2012, 21:52).

5.6. Adventure and Fun

More than 18 persons clearly expressed that their longing for adventure, exploration, inspiration, or fun has been the main driver for their self-expatriation. One of the participants reflects his present situation and confesses: “I still look further. The reason: The life is no adventure anymore. In my early years in Germany, even buying a bus ticket was such a challenge. And now, it's not the case anymore ...” (09/28/2012, 19:43). Another states that her self-expatriation is successful “because I am an adventurer at heart” (09/30/2012, 08:34). Yet another discloses: “It's fun to move around the globe a bit and get some culture shocks occasionally” (09/28/2012, 22:34). Some of the participants expressed the idea that these rather hedonistic reasons for self-application might prevail in younger self-initiated expats without family ties (09/30/2012, 08:34) or to earlier stages of their own life (09/28/2012, 18:53), respectively. Still,

however, there is also plenty of evidence in the sample that there is no particular age or family constellation for adventure or hedonism driven changes of air (e.g. 09/29/2012, 12:00).

5.7. Entrepreneurism

More than 45 individuals explicitly linked self-expatriation in general and their own experiences in particular to the concept of entrepreneurship. Within this group, we find a handful of fully-fledged entrepreneurs who self-expatriated with a clear entrepreneurial project in mind, e.g. “with the desire to create something in Russia” (10/01/2012, 17:15); one member even characterized himself as a “serial overseas entrepreneur” (09/28/2012, 21:10). In a majority of around 30 cases, however, we read of persons who first self-expatriated to their host countries and then later on created businesses or worked as freelancers. A third group of self-initiated expat-entrepreneurs clearly displays social entrepreneurial features. Some of the commentators even state that self-initiated expatriation “certainly has an entrepreneurial flavour” (03/02/2010, 11:42) in general or that their particular self-expatriation was “because I have a strong entrepreneurial spirit and I love to explore new places and ways of life” (09/29/2012, 09:32).

5.8. Definitions

Next to the above-mentioned categories, we found a number of attempts to define self-expatriation in contrast to expatriation and migration. For example, one of the earliest comments states that the self-made expat is chosen as a self-designation because it is considered a sexier label than migrant (01/17/2008, 18:14). This comment possibly links to a precedent in which a former internationals.com member, who was sent to school abroad by his parents and later applied for political asylum there, applies the label to his own biography (01/17/2008, 04:06). The major line of argument in this discussion, however, is along the distinction of company-assigned and self-made expats. Around 14 members, among four of which have backgrounds in both company-assigned and self-initiated expatriation, contribute their experiences. Company-assigned expats are, sometimes enviously, described as “others who live life like a frog in a well” (01/16/2008, 21:38). Compared to those “who have a soft landing, with networks in place corporate credit cards, health care, jobs for spouses etc.” (01/30/2008, 21:22), self-made expats seem to consider themselves real expats. For example, one contributor compares herself with her

brother who “lives abroad but in a 'bubble', as his employer does absolutely everything for him and he and his wife have absolutely no idea what the true meaning of life abroad is” (09/28/2012, 18:44). Particularly those who have experienced both forms of expatriation emphasized the difference between the times when an “HR dept made everything as smooth as silk” (09/29/2012, 20:43) or their years in the “warm bubble of student life” (10/01/2012, 14:25) on the one hand, and their later experiences as self-made expat on the other. The situation of “being always at the mercy of a company” that can withdraw benefits and privileges anytime was also discussed as a downside of the status as a company-assigned expatriate (10/01/2012, 07:21). Last, but not least, two self-made expats reflected on the idea that the differences between company-assigned and self-made expats actually are or increasingly become blurred. The first claims that self-expatriation is “more of a personal trait” (01/17/2008) than a matter of (not) being sent by some company. And the second explicates that “An expat is a person being sent by his company to another country and for which the company do compensate fully financially the change meaning salary wise, accommodation, administration, education costs, ... in fact all what is needed. Practically, it does not exist anymore as all companies are under 'savings modus operandi' to reach enough EBIT to distribute to their investors and do not anymore really take care seriously of their employees. This means that very often, the expat package is small and either you move or you have to look for a new job” (09/29/2012, 14:58).

6. Discussion

The major difference between the present research and earlier approaches to the topic of self-initiated expatriation is in the fact that our sample has not been pre-selected, but rather consists of persons who voluntarily associated themselves and their biographies with the label “self-made expat”. In this sense, the persons in our sample can be considered self-identified self-initiated expatriates and, thus, lead users (Belz and Baumbach, 2010) of this particular semantic concept. In contrasting their self-disclosures with what has been found in existing research, we find that a number of topics and motives appear in both existing literature and our research. This is particularly true for the concepts “adventure” (Doherty et al., 2011; Scurry et al., 2013), “paradise” (Doherty et al., 2011), “family background” (Doherty et al., 2011), and love (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010; Doherty et al., 2011). The findings presented under the headline “start-over” suggest that new starts are not necessarily forms of

escape (Selmer and Luring, 2012), but can also be motivated by curiosity or neophilia. Our sample also included one person with a clear migrant profile who actively linked to the concept “self-made expat”, which supports the idea of Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry (2013) that migrants might tend to link to the presumably better label in order to overcome stereotypes. Though prevailing in the present sample, (auto-diagnosed) nomadism as a personal trait of self-initiated expatriates is not a dominant topic in the literature yet.

The surprise in our research has clearly been the dominance of the concept “entrepreneurism” in the present sample, which can partly be explained by the fact that the respective thread – headlined “Self-Made Expats?” – suggests the link to entrepreneurism more directly as compared to the concept “self-expatriation”. Still, the fact that more than 45 participants in the conversation actively chose entrepreneurial metaphors, or referred to typical *entrepreneurial traits* (Dana, 1997, p. 54), respectively, to describe self-made expats in general and their own biography in particular points at a still under-researched dimension of self-initiated expatriation. What is more, this emphasis challenges findings of Al Ariss and Özbilgin (2010), whose analysis of a sample of Lebanese expatriates in France did not find significant differences in the entrepreneurial disposition between company-assigned and self-initiated expatriates. A large number of persons in the present sample, however, stressed the difference of their “hard landing” compared to the experiences of company-assigned expats and explained how their comparably high resourcefulness, readiness to assume risks, their “entrepreneurial spirit” (Dana, 1995) helped them to pursue their self-initiated expatriation career, which some explicitly called an entrepreneurial venture in itself.

7. Conclusion

Netnography has recently been introduced as a method of lead user identification (Belz and Baumbach, 2010). In our case, however, we used netnography to analyse the self-disclosures of persons who had self-initiatively self-identified themselves as self-initiated expats. Rather than analysing convenience samples (Doherty, 2013, p. 457), we hence analysed an inter-cultural web community of lead users of the popular semantic *expat* and looked at the meaning they charged this particular semantic with. While the results support the relevance of yet-existing categories and themes in self-expatriation research, our research suggests complementing the respective research efforts by a focus on entrepreneurism as a key dimension of a self-initiated expat identity. In

fact, our analysis showed that considerable numbers of self-initiated expatriates a) expatriate with the intention to form an enterprise abroad, b) form enterprises after expatriations, or c) refer to entrepreneurial metaphors – or even the term itself – in order to define themselves and others as self-initiated expatriates. In this sense, we suggest complementing research on the internationalization of entrepreneurship (Dana, 1996; Etemad et al., 2010; Peiris et al., 2012) in general and migrant entrepreneurship in particular (Aliaga-Isla and Rialp, 2013; Al Ariss, 2010; Clark and Drinkwater, 2009; Dana, 1997; Dana, 1998; Harney, 2006; Roth, 2010) with research focused on the entrepreneurial dimension of self-initiated expatriation, thus also adding a new dimension to research on the impact of different motives for migrant entrepreneurship (Dana and Morris, 2011).

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