

The Influence of the Season on Consumers' Feeling of Groundedness and Product Attractiveness

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Abstract:

Feeling grounded or emotionally and deeply rooted gives consumers a sense of safety, strength and stability. Products can make consumers feel grounded by connecting them to their physical, social and historical surroundings. Products that provide consumers with a feeling of groundedness are more attractive than products that do not. Recent research suggests that the season can influence consumers' need and feeling of groundedness. However, the question of when and why this effect appears remains open. We employ an online experiment with 220 participants from the UK to investigate the influence of the season on consumers need and feeling of groundedness. Using structural equation modelling, we show that consumers' having a higher need for groundedness also have a stronger feeling of groundedness. We demonstrate that consumers have a higher feeling of groundedness during colder seasons. We discuss theoretical and practical implications and propose promising avenues for future research.

Keywords: groundedness, season, product attractiveness

Track: Consumer Behaviour

1. Introduction

In an increasingly fast-paced, mobile and digitized world, and in the face of global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers often feel uprooted from their environment. Many consumers feel the need to reconnect to places, people, and the past and are actively seeking ways to do so by engaging in different forms of consumption (Eichinger, Schreier, & van Osselaer, 2021; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019).

The experience to (re)connect to places, people, and the past has been introduced by Eichinger et al. (2021) as the *feeling of groundedness*, which they define as a “feeling of emotional rootedness.” (p. 1). Consumers feel grounded by metaphorically connecting to their physical, social and historical environment. By doing this, consumers can feel a sense of stability, strength, and safety. Consumers can connect to places, people, and the past through various objects, including products (Eichinger et al., 2021). In this work, we focus on products and their ability to make consumers feel grounded. The importance of products for consumers to make them feel grounded can be seen in the increase in demand for handmade, traditional, and local products (Fuchs, Schreier, & Van Osselaer, 2015), as they presumably make consumers feel more connected to places, people, and the past (Eichinger et al., 2021).

As the concept of groundedness has only recently been developed and introduced as a construct for marketing research, there are many avenues for future research. Eichinger et al.'s (2021) qualitative exploration suggest that the need for groundedness is higher in colder seasons compared to warmer seasons. This article sheds light on the influence of the season on consumers' needs and feelings of groundedness and product attractiveness. We build upon psychology and consumer behaviour research about the effects of seasonality and weather on mood and emotional states to uncover underlying psychological processes. The findings hold important managerial and theoretical implications and encourage future research on this matter.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

The term “grounded” may sound familiar to many, especially as a personal characteristic of a person who is mentally and emotionally stable and firmly established (Merriam-Webster, 2021). However, there is a conceptual difference between the personal characteristic of being grounded and the feeling of groundedness. Building on the concepts of connectedness to nature (Mayer & Frantz, 2004), rootedness to a location (McAndrew, 1998) or rootedness to a socio-cultural environment (Ndi, 2014), Eichinger et al. (2021) define the feeling of groundedness as “... a feeling of deep-rootedness, having a strong foundation, and being

securely anchored—gives consumers feelings of safety, strength, and stability as well as confidence that they can withstand adversity.” (p. 2).

The feeling of groundedness emerges through three separable but often intertwined sources: connectedness to place, people, and the past. These connections provide consumers with a feeling of groundedness by “rooting” them in their physical, social and historical environment (Eichinger et al., 2021). Consumers can establish connections to place, people, and the past through products. Eichinger et al. (2021) pointed out that consumers feel connected to a place when consuming locally produced products, such as a typical beer from a local brewery. Buying directly from the producer, for example, at a farmers market or online, allows consumers to get “closer to the creator” (Smith, Newman, & Dhar, 2016), enabling them to connect with people and feel grounded as a result. Products manufactured according to traditional and artisanal procedures, such as handmade (Fuchs et al., 2015), may help consumers connect to the past. Thus, products designed in a traditional and local style, containing traditional ingredients or made traditionally can connect consumers to place, people, and past and thus make them feel grounded. In the following, we refer to such products as “indie” products and products that do not have these properties as “industrial”. Eichinger et al. (2021) showed that indie products are more attractive to consumers and positively affect consumer choice.

It is essential to differentiate the need and the feeling of groundedness. Eichinger et al. (2021) define the need for groundedness as “... the level of need for connection with place, people, and past...” (p. 5). In contrast, the feeling of groundedness describes the actual “...feeling of deep-rootedness, having a strong foundation, and being securely anchored...” (Eichinger et al. 2021, p. 2).

Both the need for groundedness and the feeling of being grounded are closely related to emotional states (Eichinger et al., 2021). In psychology, vast literature documents the effects of the seasons or weather on mood, depression and emotional states (e.g., Cunningham, 1979; Keller et al., 2005). The overarching finding is that the mood in the general population reaches a low point during the winter (Keller et al., 2005). People also experience higher anxiety, hostility and irritability during winter than in other seasons of the year (Harmatz et al., 2000). In addition, there is seasonal affective disorder, a seasonally recurring depression that typically occurs in the fall or winter and disappears in the spring (Keller et al., 2005). Research on embodied cognition found that individual emotions (e.g., romantic love [Hong & Sun, 2012]; loneliness [Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008]) are linked to physical temperature (Williams & Bargh, 2008). In sum, findings suggest that the season can influence consumers’

need for groundedness and the feeling of groundedness—however, the question of when and why this effect appears remains unanswered.

The influence of product types on the feelings of groundedness and product attractiveness. Eichinger et al. (2021) demonstrated that indie products could provide consumers with a feeling of groundedness, making these products more attractive and thus increasing willingness to purchase and pay. As a first step, we want to replicate these findings and expect:

H1: (a) *Indie (vs. industrial) products elicit stronger (vs. weaker) feelings of groundedness, (b) which subsequently make indie (vs. industrial) products more attractive and thus increase willingness to purchase and willingness to pay.*

H2: *Indie (vs. industrial) products are more attractive and thus elicit (a) a higher (vs. lower) willingness to purchase and (b) a higher (vs. lower) willingness to pay.*

The influence of the season on the need and feelings of groundedness. Harmatz et al. (2000) found that people experience higher anxiety, hostility and irritability during winter than in other seasons (i.e., spring, summer, fall). Based on these findings, we argue that consumers might have a higher need to feel safer, more stable, and stronger during winter. As the feeling of groundedness provides consumers with a sense of safety, strength, and stability (Eichinger et al., 2021), we assume consumers have a higher need for groundedness in winter than in summer. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: *Winter (vs. summer) elicits a higher (vs. lower) need for groundedness.*

Eichinger et al. (2021) claim that nostalgia, a “sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” (Pearsall, 1998, p. 1266), relates to one of the three sources of the feeling of groundedness, namely the past. However, nostalgia describes a state of longing but does not require that this longing has been satisfied by an actual connection to the past (Davis, 1979). Therefore, nostalgia is conceptually more closely related to the need for groundedness than to the actual feeling of being grounded (Eichinger et al., 2021). Nostalgia helps foster self-continuity, a sense of connection between one’s past and present, by increasing social connectedness (Sedikides et al., 2016). We argue that consumers experience a stronger connection to their past through a stronger sense of nostalgia, which is closely related to the need for groundedness (Eichinger et al., 2021). Therefore, we assume that consumers with a higher need for groundedness experience a stronger connection to their past and thus feel more grounded. We hypothesize:

H4: *Higher (vs. lower) need for groundedness elicits a stronger (vs. weaker) feeling of groundedness.*

Embodied cognition theory links individual emotions to physical temperature (Williams & Bargh, 2008). Hong et al. (2012) showed that physical coldness activates a need for psychological warmth leading to an increased liking for romance movies. The feeling of groundedness is defined as "...feeling of deep-rootedness, having a strong foundation, and being securely anchored..." (Eichinger et al. 2021, p. 2) and, thus, closely related to an emotionally warm state (Hong et al., 2012). The emotionally warm feeling of groundedness brings consumers below their homeostatic optimum (i.e., physically cold situations) closer to their optimal state (Bruno, Melnyk, & Völckner, 2017). In line with prior research, we assume consumers have a stronger feeling of groundedness in winter than in summer. Thus, we hypothesize:

H5: Winter (vs. summer) elicits a stronger (vs. weaker) feeling of groundedness.

3. Procedure, Sample, Measures and Manipulation Check

We used a 2 (product type: indie vs. industrial) × 2 (season: winter vs. summer) between-subjects experimental design to test our hypotheses. We recruited 220 participants from the UK (80.9% female, mean age = 34.1) through the online research tool Prolific.

First, we manipulated the season by asking participants to imagine that outside there was snowfall or sunshine (adapted from Schlager, de Bellis, & Hoegg, 2020) and randomly assigned them to one condition. After answering the three-item seven-point Likert scale assessing people's need for groundedness (Eichinger et al., 2021), participants were then randomly exposed to a colour picture and verbal description for two bars of almond soap (adapted from Eichinger et al., 2021). Following Eichinger et al. (2021), we described one firm as indie ("makes high-quality products that are produced in a small and independent crafts business") whereas the other firm as industrial ("makes high-quality products that are industrially produced at scale in a large factory"). Then we asked participants on a three-item seven-point Likert scale about their willingness to purchase the soap (White, Lin, Dahl, & Ritchie, 2016). We assessed willingness to pay (WTP) using an open response typed question (Schmidt & Bijmolt, 2020). After an instructional attention check, we measured participants' feelings of groundedness (Eichinger et al., 2021). Lastly, we introduced various control variables (e.g., the importance of product category or socio-economic status) used by Eichinger et al. (2021) and collected participants demographics.

The manipulation checks on seven-point semantic differentials confirm successful manipulations of both product type ($M_{\text{indie}} = 1.36$, $M_{\text{industrial}} = 6.70$, $t(218) = -42.55$, $p < .001$, $d = .93$) and the season ($M_{\text{winter}} = 1.39$, $M_{\text{summer}} = 6.44$, $t(218) = -34.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.10$).

4. Results

Structural equation model. We ran a structural equation modelling approach to test our predicted pathways. Measurement items were validated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in IBM SPSS Amos 28. We tested the structural model according to the hypotheses presented above and added the importance of product category as a covariate to the model.

Measurement model. A 12-item, 4-factor, covariance structure measurement model was estimated to assess the goodness-of-fit statistics, discriminant validity, and internal consistency of all constructs in the model. The model has good model fit statistics, according to Homburg & Baumgartner (1995) ($\chi^2 = 110.316$, $df = 48$, $p < .001$, comparative fit index = .966, incremental fit index = .966, Tucker-Lewis index = .953, root mean square error of approximation = .077). In addition, the CFA showed that all scale items loaded satisfactorily on the relevant latent variables (see Table 1).

To assess construct, convergent, and discriminant validity, we followed Fornell & Larcker's (1981) method of measurement model testing. The results suggested that the measurement model met both convergent and discriminant validity criteria. Table 1 presents convergent validity testing, showing significance levels of t statistics representing the relationships between the items and their latent constructs. Additionally, construct reliability exceeds the standard requirement of .70 (see Table 2). Further, Table 2 shows good discriminant validity of the constructs, as their average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than the squared correlations between the construct and all other variables.

Variable	Loading	t	p
Need for Groundedness Item 1	.926	N/A	
Need for Groundedness Item 2	.831	.060	<.001
Need for Groundedness Item 3	.687	.070	<.001
Feelings of Groundedness Item 1	.957	N/A	
Feelings of Groundedness Item 2	.868	.056	<.001
Feelings of Groundedness Item 3	.653	.064	<.001
Willingness to Purchase Item 1	.956	N/A	
Willingness to Purchase Item 2	.910	.037	<.001
Willingness to Purchase Item 3	.947	.031	<.001
Importance of Product Category Item 1	.775	N/A	
Importance of Product Category Item 2	.739	.085	<.001
Importance of Product Category Item 3	.881	.088	<.001

Table 1. Measurement Models: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Variable	Descriptive Statistics			Squared Correlations			
	M	SD	Reliability	1	2	3	4
1 Need for Groundedness	4.683	.313	.849	.673	.155	.076	.108
2 Feelings of Groundedness	3.230	.152	.856		.699	.293	.053
3 Willingness to Purchase	3.742	.212	.956			.880	.083
4 Importance of Product Category	3.883	.329	.837				.641

Note. The upper off-diagonal presents the calculated values of the squared correlations of the path coefficients between all possible pairs of constructs. Average variances extracted (AVE) are presented in bold along the diagonal.

Table 2. Measurement Model Descriptive Statistics: Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Structural model. The full model of hypothesized relationships was estimated using IBM SPSS Amos 28. Figure 1 presents the empirical estimates for the structural model. Similar to the measurement model, the goodness-of-fit statistics for the model were excellent according to Homburg & Baumgartner (1995) ($\chi^2 = 98.369$, $df = 67$, $p = .008$, comparative fit index = .982, incremental fit index = .982, Tucker-Lewis index = .976, root mean square error of approximation = .046). Although we can replicate Eichinger et al.'s (2021) mediation effects of indie (vs. industrial) products on product attractiveness, partially through feelings of groundedness, we cannot confirm the expected path of the season on the need for groundedness with our dataset. Besides that, all other paths were significant in predicting the hypothesized direction.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the product type ($\beta = -.172$), the season ($\beta = -.164$), and consumers' need for groundedness ($\beta = .353$) predict consumers' feeling of groundedness. Consumers' feelings of groundedness subsequently predict willingness to purchase ($\beta = .472$) and pay ($\beta = .253$). Additionally, the product type directly affects willingness to purchase ($\beta = -.183$) and pay ($\beta = -.231$).

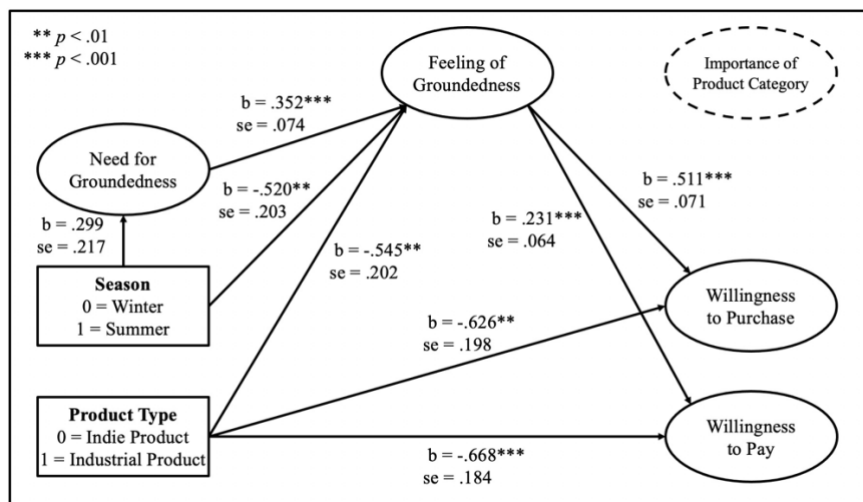


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model: Unstandardized Path Coefficients and Standard Errors
 Note. Squares represent manipulated variables; circles represent latent constructs; dashed lines represent covariates in the model.

5. General Discussion

The results of our study confirm all but one of our hypotheses in the predicted direction. We replicate in hypotheses 1a, 1b, 2a, and 2b the findings of Eichinger et al. (2021), confirming that indie products elicit higher product attractiveness partially mediated through feelings of groundedness. We extend Eichinger et al.'s (2021) model by two dimensions. First, we prove in hypothesis 4 that consumers with a higher need for groundedness also have

a stronger feeling of groundedness. Second, we shed light on the role of the season influencing consumers' experience of groundedness. Contradictory to Eichinger et al. (2021), we do not find evidence to support their proposition that colder season conditions lead to higher needs for groundedness. Although not significant, our data instead suggest the opposite. However, we show that during colder seasons, consumers have a higher feeling of groundedness.

Theoretical Implications. This research makes several contributions to prior research. First, we add two facets to the existing literature on the feeling of groundedness (Eichinger et al., 2021) by shedding light on the relevance of the need for groundedness and the season in consumers' evaluation of indie products. Second, we extend empirical evidence to literature on embodied cognition. Our findings show that physical temperature influences consumers' feeling of groundedness. Third, we provide implications for the growing marketing and consumer research literature on the association of weather with consumption (e.g., Cheema & Patrick, 2012; Li, Luo, Zhang, & Wang, 2017; Schlager et al., 2020). Our study is the first to support the initial findings by Eichinger et al. (2021) that indie products elicit stronger feelings of groundedness than industrial products. Especially during colder seasons, consumers have stronger feelings of groundedness, which suggests that the willingness to purchase and pay for indie products is higher during colder seasons.

Managerial Implications. The findings of this research provide actionable implications for marketers and retailers. The results suggest that indie products should be promoted more during the colder months of the year. Due to the higher feeling of groundedness in colder seasons, consumers are more willing to buy indie products and pay a higher price for them during this time. In addition, retailers can adjust their assortment in colder seasons by increasing the number of indie products as they are more attractive to consumers. In general, retailers might consider both store design and product promotion to be more indie (e.g., highlighting the locality and employees of suppliers or artisanal production methods of products) during the colder seasons, which makes consumers feel more grounded and thus could increase store appeal and consumer choice.

Limitations and Further Research. This research focused on the influence of the season on the need and feelings of groundedness in the context of products. As consumers can feel grounded through various objects, activities, and interactions (Eichinger et al., 2021), we cannot assure the generalizability of the findings in other contexts. Thus, future research should investigate the effects of the season, e.g. in the context of advertisements or service interactions with employees. Since we conducted an online experiment, it was impossible to

manipulate participants' sensation of physical cold. An interesting avenue of research would be to investigate the influence of physical cold on the need and feeling of groundedness. Field experiments in the area of refrigerated shelves in grocery markets, for example, would be very suitable for this purpose.

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