

The role of the moderating effect of regional affiliation on the influence of the perceived authenticity of the label of a traditional food product on the consumer's perceived value and purchase inten

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Abstract:

Based on the concept of the authenticity of traditional food product labels, this paper sets out to show their influence on the perceived value and purchase intention of consumers in sub-Saharan Africa. The study focuses on Sodabi, a traditional liqueur made by distilling palm wine and consumed in sub-Saharan Africa. To answer the main question, we consider regional affiliation as a variable moderating the links between the perceived authenticity of the label and the perceived value of the product, and purchase intention. We are currently administering an online and face-to-face questionnaire to a convenience sample of adults who have recently purchased the product under study. This research contributes to the marketing literature on the competitiveness of traditional agri-food products through the authenticity of their labels. It will help producers to better design their positioning, based on the authenticity perceived by consumers.

Keywords: *Perceived Authenticity ; Purchase intention; Regional identity*

1. Introduction

Traditionally, local agri-food products in Sub-Saharan Africa are sold in bulk at markets, allowing customers to see, touch, smell, and select them in precise quantities. However, to compete with imported products and meet the increasing demands of local consumers, companies are opting for a standardized offering of packaged products in various formats. Additionally, for other reasons, these companies are encouraged by the FAO to enhance their food packaging systems to reduce both food loss and waste.

Unlike the Western market where a distinct visual code exists for each product category (Heilbrunn, 2008; Mathieu, 2006), entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa must not only propose innovative packaging but also work on defining visual identities for packaging suited to traditional food products. According to Kuhne et al. (2010), consumers are willing to accept packaging innovation in the traditional food sector, provided it maintains the authentic character of the product.

It is evident that more and more brands are adopting Western-style labeling systems, while others use symbols like cowries, patterns of African fabrics, etc., to create visual codes for their products and ensure their African authenticity. Similarly, Celhay and Passebois (2009), in a study conducted on the wine market, assert that offering a label that conforms to the visual codes of its region of origin reassures the consumer.

In marketing, several studies address issues of product authenticity (Dwivedi and McDonald, 2018; Fritz et al., 2017; Morhart et al., 2015; Riefler, 2020; Yin and Shen, 2017), the antecedents of perceived authenticity related to the product and the purchasing environment (Camus, 2002 et Camus, 2004a), identifying the elements of the label that can confer authenticity to the product (Pelet, 2010) and the impact of innovation in the traditional sector on perceived authenticity (Pantin-Sohier et al., 2015). While these studies have made certain theoretical advances in promoting traditional food products, they have not sought to highlight the influence of perceived label authenticity on consumer reactions. Thus, in this research, we aim to respond to this call by enriching the literature around this concept with the answer to the question: how does the authenticity of labels of traditional food products influence consumers' perceived value and purchase intention?

The answer to this question will allow us to integrate regional belonging as an individual characteristic in understanding the effects of label authenticity. Additionally, it will enable us to enrich practical knowledge regarding the use of the label as a differentiation element by brands (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010).

Our work is organized as follows: first, we present a literature review around the concept of authenticity, product visual code, and regional belonging. Second, we will present our hypotheses derived from our research question. Third, we present the conceptual model of our research. Finally, as data collection is ongoing, we will outline the methodology of our study.

2. Authenticity in Marketing

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

Perceived authenticity is defined by Camus (2004b) as a characteristic of the product that links it to an origin, distinguishes it because it fills a gap, a dissatisfaction, and is reinforced when the product represents a part of the consumer's identity. In addition to this definition, Napoli et al. (2013) believe that authenticity is a link between individuals and places, history, culture, and others. Authenticity is a concept that has been extensively studied in multiple disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and sociology (MacCannel, 1973); although it has not been used in the same way in all these literatures (Handler and Saxton, 1988; Wang, 1999). Two aspects emerge from the works around the concept: historical anchoring and rooting in tradition and heritage.

In the society of mass manufacturing of standardized products, the revitalization of brand authenticity (Rose and Wood, 2005) responds to consumers' aspiration for authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004); a notion that holds particular importance and evokes the desire for authentic products, brands, and experiences (Arnould and Price, 2000).

In the case of food products, authenticity serves as a guide that directs consumer choices and as a positioning tool for producers and distributors (Camus, 2004b). The perception of a food product's authenticity is enhanced by knowledge of its origin, its journey, the factors that distinguish it from other products in the same category, and the individual factors that allow identification with the product or brand (Camus, 2004b).

2.2 Authentication Strategies

With the goal of developing a competitive advantage over their competitors, several brands use authenticity as a positioning tool (Beverland et al., 2008; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). They thus refer to cues (Guèvremont and Grohmann, 2018), which consumers use to infer their authenticity (Dwivedi and McDonald, 2018). This construction of authentic brand perceptions in the sense of Beverland (2005) occurs through dimensions such as heritage, consistency, and style.

Empirically, Fritz et al. (2017), have demonstrated that heritage cues confer authenticity to brands. Heritage is thus particularly important in communicating brand authenticity, as it connects them to longevity, historical practices, or places of production and craftsmanship.

Operationally, producers design their authentic offerings so that the object itself and its packaging possess images, inscriptions, a form, an aspect... evocative of a particular, known, and unadulterated origin (Camus, 2004a; Maille and Camus, 2006).

2.3 Visual Code of a Product

In the context of our study, visual codes represent the colors, typographies, types of layout, styles, and illustration themes most often exploited on the packaging of products of the same category. The existence of visual codes can be explained in different ways. They may result from a form of tradition, be explained by correspondences with characteristics inherent to the product (Divard and Urien, 2001) or by correspondences with the social representation of the product. Color codes stem from the visual code and constitute the most used colors on the packaging of products in the same category.

2.4 Regional Belonging

The region frequently recurs in studies on authenticity as the regional origin of products can enhance their authenticity (Camus, 2004b; Cova and Cova, 2001; Dion, Rémi, and Sitz, 2010). In the literature, several concepts (regional belonging, regional attachment, or the feeling of belonging to a region) have been developed to approach the link that can exist between an individual, their birth region, their work region, or their region of residence (Dion, Rémy, and Sitz, 2010).

Unlike concepts like regional attachment (Brun, Vachon, and Ricard, 2008) or the feeling of belonging to a region (Van Ittersum, 2001), regional belonging results from an affective construction process (by an emotional significance of the region for individuals) and a cognitive process (by the appropriation made by individuals of images, representations of the region, and regional stereotypes). It is therefore different from simple regional attachment (Brun, Vachon, and Ricard, 2008) or the feeling of belonging to a region (Van Ittersum, 2001) by allowing an understanding, beyond a simple affective dimension, of a cognitive dimension of the link between an individual and their region. The concept of regional belonging is therefore more comprehensive than regional attachment and the feeling of belonging to a region, which only consider the affective aspect of the link between the individual and their region. Regional belonging is also multiple, often combining the region of origin and the current or past region of life, or even the holiday region (Charton-Vachet and Lombart, 2015).

3. Research hypotheses

3.1 The influence of label authenticity on perceived product value

Several works in consumer behavior (Bouchouar et al., 2017; Day, 2002; Zeithaml, 1998) have attached particular importance to the notion of value. For some researchers, perceived value should be placed at the center of marketing policy given its importance for companies in terms of competitive advantage (Aurier et al., 2004; Lai, 1995; Woodruff, 1997).

In his study on olive oil, Bernoussi (2019) estimates that the perceived authenticity of olive oil is favored by knowledge of its origin and increases its perceived value. This leads us to formulate our first hypothesis H1: the perceived authenticity of the label of a traditional food product positively influences its perceived value.

3.2 The influence of perceived label authenticity on purchase intention

Purchase intention is recurrently used to analyze consumer buying behavior in the context of food products. For example, it was used by Celhay and Passebois (2009) to explain the influence of the typicality and originality of the wine label design while Merle et al., (2016) exploited it to understand the effects of the mention of local geographical origin of products.

Empirical data show that consumers appreciate authentic brands for which they are ready to pay higher prices and to disseminate positive information among others (Morhart et al., 2015; Newman and Dhar, 2014).

The literature speaks of a positive effect of brand authenticity on the attitude towards it (Ewing et al., 2012; Spiggle et al., 2018), an increase in quality expectations (Moulard et al., 2016), a favorable influence on purchase intentions (Fritz et al., 2017; Napoli et al., 2014) and a high degree of consumer satisfaction through positive "word of mouth" (Morhat et al., 2015). By virtue of these links, we formulate our second hypothesis H2: a label perceived as authentic increases customer purchase intention.

3.3 Regional belonging as a moderator of links H1 and H2

Authenticity has undergone a series of conceptual changes, moving from an objective and concrete vision (Belhassen et al., 2008) to a more subjective and abstract vision (Kim and Jamal, 2007; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999) highlighting the different individual manifestations.

One of the individual characteristics that can influence the consumption of traditional products is regional belonging. It is considered as a positive and identity link between an individual and a physical, social, and cultural space, apprehended by this individual as their regional territory (Charton-Vachet and Lombart, 2015).

Debenedetti (2006) has shown that the more a consumer is attached to a place of consumption, the more they tend to commit to that place. Van Ittersum (2001) highlighted that the feeling of belonging to the region of origin of a product has a significant and positive impact on the intention to buy that product.

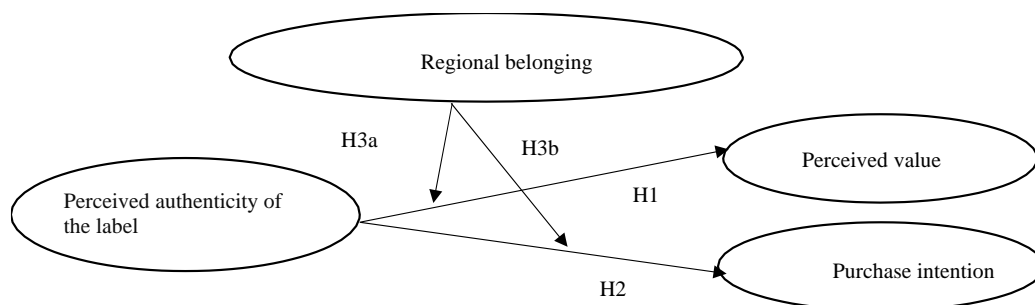
Just as regional belonging is relative to the region of origin of the consumer, several authors have highlighted origin as a particularity of an authentic product (Bryla, 2015; Camus, 2004b; Napoli et al., 2013). This implies that an individual with a high score of regional belonging will have a tendency to consume products linked to their origins and thus products with authentic labels. It is therefore possible to formulate two new hypotheses:

H3a: the influence of perceived authenticity of the label on perceived value is stronger among individuals with a high degree of regional belonging.

H3b: the influence of perceived authenticity of the label on purchase intention is stronger among individuals with a high level of regional belonging.

Based on the above hypotheses, we propose the conceptual model below in the framework of our work.

4. Conceptual Model



To test our conceptual model, we made methodological choices regarding the product, the experimental procedure, and the mode of administering the questionnaire.

The product under study is sodabi (name used in Togo and Benin), a traditional liquor obtained by distilling palm wine and widely consumed in West Africa. This choice follows the work of Pantin-Sohier et al. (2015) who recommend studying the effects of authenticity on other categories of food products besides wine.

To study the influence of label authenticity, we were inspired by the approach of Celhay and Passebois (2009). Indeed, three versions of the label (authentic, mixed, and Western) were designed to present exactly the same informational content. These labels were pretested among potential consumers of the traditional liquor. The shape of the bottle and all other product-related elements were kept identical except for the label (images of the bottles bearing the labels are attached to the article).

Variables were measured using validated items in the literature through 3-point Likert scales ranging from 1 to 3: 'Disagree', 'Neutral', and 'Agree'. The choice of 3-point scales is justified by the work of Ouattara (1997) and Sogbossi (2010), who argue that the illiteracy of the majority of populations in Africa often does not allow them to differentiate expressions like 'Very good' and 'Good', 'Bad' and 'Poor', or 'Somewhat agree' and 'Agree'. The confusion generally observed on these expressions renders 5- or 7-point scales ineffective. The choice of variables was made by referring to their psychometric qualities, and all meet the reliability threshold with Cronbach's alpha above 0.6 recommended by Nunnally (1967).

To measure perceived value, we were inspired by the aggregated scale of Sweeney and Soutar (2001), taking into account certain items from the 'Performance/quality' and 'Emotional value' dimensions that align well with the objective of our study. Purchase intention is measured via the scale of Nancy and Surendra (2004), which has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96. As for regional belonging, it is measured via the three-dimensional scale of Charton-Vachet and Lombart (2015), which has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.937.

As data collection is ongoing, the questionnaire has been administered online via the social network WhatsApp and in person to adults (aged over 18) who have recently purchased the product (purchased within the last 3 months prior to the survey) under study. Three groups of respondents were formed, and individuals from each group were exposed to one model of the label (authentic, mixed, or Western). We used a convenience sample due to the absence of a database that could provide information on the parent population.

At the end of data collection, we plan to process the collected data using the PLS structural equation method via SmartPLS4. The choice of this method is justified by the fact that we will have the opportunity to test causal relationships between variables based on the approach of Hair et al. (2016; 2022) and also because of the likely small sample size, which is expected to be below the standards typically required for this method.

6. Conclusion

This study enriches research in the field of agri-food marketing by analyzing the effect of label authenticity of a traditional food product on its perceived value and the purchase intention of

consumers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, it incorporates regional belonging as a moderating variable in the link between label authenticity and the product's perceived value on the one hand and purchase intention on the other.

Beyond these theoretical contributions, this research will allow professionals in the agri-food sector to have knowledge about the use of the label as a differentiation element for traditional food products. It also offers the possibility to segment the market of traditional products based on the regional belonging profile of consumers. Local governments (municipalities, prefectures, cantons, etc.) are also part of this research. Indeed, it will enable them to guide the actions of local entrepreneurs to enhance the value of traditional products from their factories.

As our research is ongoing, one of the future perspectives it aims to achieve is to compare this product studied in this research with other products, in other contexts, to increase the external validity of our future results.

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<p>Appendix 1: The Bottles</p>  <p>A = Authentic label B = Mixed label C = Western label</p> <p>Appendix 2: Measurement Scales Used in the Study</p> <p>Perceived Value Measurement Scale</p> <p><u>Functional Value</u></p> <p>X is well made X has an acceptable level of quality X has poor finishing</p> <p><u>Emotional Value</u></p> <p>X is one I would appreciate X would make me want to use it X is one I would feel relaxed using X would do me good X would please me</p>	<p>Purchase Intention Measurement Scale</p> <p>Please describe your general feelings about the product described in the advertisement you just read:</p> <p>I would never buy the product/I will definitely buy the product I absolutely have no intention to buy/I definitely intend to buy Very low buying interest/High buying interest I will certainly not buy it/I will certainly buy it I probably won't buy it/I probably will buy it</p> <p>Regional Belonging Measurement Scale</p> <p><u>Cultural Dimension</u></p> <p>I find it pleasant to hear the accent and/or expressions from my region I enjoy consuming culinary specialties or beverages from my region I like using expressions from my region I feel at home when I cook products from my region</p> <p><u>Physical Dimension</u></p> <p>I love the landscapes of my region I do not appreciate the climate of my region I like the typical colors of my region (color of the sea, sky, mountains, stones, houses, etc.) I appreciate the typical architecture of the houses, villages, or cities in my region</p> <p><u>Social Dimension</u></p> <p>I do not appreciate the mentality of the people from my region If I had to move away from my region, I would miss its friendly atmosphere I find that people from my region are quite pleasant I feel close to the people who live in my region</p>
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