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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to conceptualize and measure consumer-based authenticity as well as its effects on social networks (SN) and attachment. In addition, it explores the effect of consumer attachment. In order to address this focus, it suggests a framework for analyzing this relationship by using the Partial Least Squares Equation Modeling. This study utilizes applied quantitative research in the Moroccan context. The results showed that consumer-based authenticity represents a marketing tool that can influence purchase intention. The key contribution of this research is the feature of consumer authenticity that influences social network confidence. Consumers need to feel the connection with the terroir product goes beyond the digital interface as they look for a more human relationship. The virtual context may display a high risk of deficient relationships; hence, the low consumer-based authenticity.

Keywords

authenticity, social networks, terroir product, attachment, consumer

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The Effect of Consumer-Based Authenticity on Attachment and Social Networks in Digital Context: Case of Moroccan's Terroir Products

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to conceptualize and measure consumer-based authenticity as well as its effects on social networks (SN) and attachment. In addition, it explores the effect of consumer attachment. In order to address this focus, it suggests a framework for analyzing this relationship by using the Partial Least Squares Equation Modeling. This study utilizes applied quantitative research in the Moroccan context. The results showed that consumer-based authenticity represents a marketing tool that can influence purchase intention. The key contribution of this research is the feature of consumer authenticity that influences social network confidence. Consumers need to feel the connection with the terroir product goes beyond the digital interface as they look for a more human relationship. The virtual context may display a high risk of deficient relationships; hence, the low consumer-based authenticity.

Keywords: authenticity, social networks, terroir product, attachment, consumer

Introduction

Literature in consumer behavior is experiencing a new orientation that places consumption in a postmodern context. This attraction inherited from postmodern sociology (Cova, 2005; Cova & Cova, 2002) makes the local and the original thing as a dominant preoccupation of the market. This return has been translated into a search for the profound self, true meaning, connection (Trilling, 2009), and a quest for authenticity (Badot & Cova, 1995).

In Morocco, the valorization project of terroir products presents a crucial issue for the development of the economy. With the national strategy launched in 2008 (Akesbi, 2012), this project increasingly supports the agriculture of the future in the social and solidarity economy; it roots in Moroccan traditions (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2013). Moreover, Morocco is home to a diverse biodiversity and a great heritage of ancestral know-how. The cooperative sector occupies a pilot place with a growth in the number of members from 5749 to 15,737 between 2007 and 2011; and from 15,737 to more than 30,000 between 2011 and 2018 (Office of Development Cooperation, n.d.). To encourage the expansion of this sector, the Moroccan Agricultural Development Agency has selected and designed sites for various terroir products to develop a strong relationship with online consumers and cooperatives; e-commerce offers many advantages for both economy and consumers.

Despite the interest in scholarship about authenticity and the increasing number of consumers that choose to use digital tools in Morocco, literature on the interaction between authenticity and Social Networks (SN) is rather limited. The scarcity has been highlighted in previous studies (Davis et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2020; Pelet et al., 2020). In this context, current research has argued that managers should reassure consumers about the authenticity of products in the virtual context. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to conceptualize and measure consumer-based authenticity as well as its effects on the SN and the attachment. This aim is very important because it proposes a fresh understanding regarding the uses of digital technologies for traditional products (Davis et al., 2019; Pelet et al., 2020). The analysis has applied the Partial Least Squares Equation Modeling (Nguyen, 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Literature Review

Authenticity Quest and Postmodernism

Authenticity has intrigued specialists from different fields. Over the last decades, marketing research has also started to take an interest in this phenomenon. It motivates tourists to discover other cultures (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973). Researchers have admitted that authenticity is a rather ambiguous and difficult concept. Scholars have suggested relating it to a field or research (Shen, 2011; Wang, 1999); it accepts several forms of conceptualization and operationalization (Akbar & Wymer, 2017; Beverland, 2005; Napoli et al., 2014; Pelet et al., 2020).

Objective Authenticity

Authenticity has its roots in the environment of museums as it embodies the meaning used by experts to examine an art object (Trilling, 1972). This conceptualization refers to the original meaning. For example, the originality of works of art, based on the true origin that relates a product to an author, a culture, and/or a period. The authentic is sincere, true, and honest. It has an indubitable origin.

Constructive Authenticity

This second acceptance shows that authenticity is the result of social construction. It is the consequence of the interpretation of the reality of objects (Cohen, 1988). Its determinants come from outside the object, reflecting a particular imagery, a dream, a stereotyped image, or an expectation. It varies from one individual to another. Authenticity is a contextual, negotiable, and ideological concept (Silver, 1993). In this sense, an authority certifies authenticity even, sometimes, when it is a reproduction of the authentic.

Existential Authenticity

Philosophical thought has essentially studied the question of authenticity, especially of man. It is a question of examining the true nature and the essence of being which is without another particular description. The knowledge of the inner self gives one the power to be oneself (Heidegger, 1976). Human existence apprehends its meaning from the expression of the inner self and its autonomy (Taylor, 2001). For example, a product that has been used since childhood, certainly, has a particular meaning which is very authentic even if it is an inauthentic product. Authenticity denotes a bond of attachment that brings a moment to life. According to Wang (1999), existential

authenticity refers to the emotions of the individual, caused by a process. In this sense, authenticity allows us to rediscover one's identity, namely, one's true self and one's a more or less emotionally rich history.

Authenticity Quest and Social Networks

The effect of e-word-of-mouth on consumer behavior has been emphasized in several studies (Hamouda & Tabbane, 2014; Roy et al., 2019). Mainly with the advent of E-commerce, SN has become essential for marketing and advertising strategies. In a short period, the internet has been able to access an audience of above 50 million, while television had to wait more than forty years to attain the same target (Piotet, 2011). Technologies have changed some of the ancient economic principles and led to revisions in organizational culture and the operational framework of the marketing strategy (Turktarhan et al., 2022). This paper defines SN as follows:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others (Boyd et al., 2007, p. 212).

The nature of links may differ from site to site (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). This research uses SN to describe the phenomenon of using Facebook or Instagram to purchase terroir products. Moroccan' users of the internet have reached 22.5 million recently (Global Web Index, 2021) with a penetration rate of 49%; we can argue that the SN offers a huge opportunity for managers.

The question of the interpretation of authenticity represents a crucial topic in the consumer behavior field (Arya et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020a; Chen et al., 2020b; Gao et al., 2020; Girish & Lee, 2020; Mapes, 2020; Melewar & Skinner, 2020). This quest has become a huge part of postmodern consumption and life in general (Melewar & Skinner, 2020; Napoli et al., 2014; Portal et al., 2019; Saffran et al., 2020). For consumers, authenticity refers to the origin of the product and its producer (Camus, 2004); it is a solution provided to the postmodern consumer to attribute meaning to his food act and satisfy his demand for credibility and sincerity (Bergadaà, 2008; Cova, 2005; Cova & Cova, 2002). This study uses the existential approach. In this sense, authenticity is a value given to the postmodern consumer, in an era where truth is deeply questioned (Cohen, 1988). This quest is a search for a credible past as Lowenthal (1992) states. Authenticity also supports a dimension linked to the past and traditional production manners (know-how). Recent studies have claimed that this inquiry has been among different domain choices including terroir products (Pelet et al., 2020), tourism (Chen et al., 2020b), art, beer, coffee, and ethnic cuisines (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Lee & Chung, 2019; Mapes, 2020; Youn & Kim, 2017).

Effects of Consumer-Based Authenticity

The quest for authenticity is a search for meaning and credibility (Cova, 2005) in the postmodern context where the false and the true get along with ease (Delfosse, 2012). In the digital context, consumers seek a sense of security that the perceived authentic product will honor their values and remain faithful. It is a product responsible for well-being (Munuera-Aleman et al., 2003). A product with the ancient sense links with the origin, traditional manners, customs, and beliefs and offers a typical identity and a nostalgic aura (Napoli et al., 2014), affecting the behavioral intention of consumers (Beverland, 2005). In addition, the digital context can enhance this demand (Pelet et

al., 2020). In this sense, confidence represents the key to the relationship between the product and the consumer (Kim, 2016).

Overall, SN exposes social posts having information on how friends or families have interacted with the content. For Waldman (2016, p. 196), “it not only creates the circumstances for social interaction with those we trust, it exploits the trust we have in our friends and families for financial gain by manipulating us into sharing information with third-party advertisers, as well.” Studies have argued that authenticity leads to improve service and consumer experiences (Hernandez-Fernandez et al., 2019). Thus, authors expect:

- H₁ Consumer-based authenticity is positively related to consumer confidence in SN.
- H₂ Consumer-based authenticity is positively related to consumer intention.
- H₃ Confidence in the social network is positively related to consumer intention.

Scholars have investigated that the attachment to an object has several definitions. It is the emotionally charged connection between a person and a product (Bozzo et al., 2008; Lacoeyuilhe, 2000; Louis & Lombart, 2010), as it represents the emotion of the person towards the product or brand (Thomson et al., 2005). It refers to the passion, connection, and pleasure towards the product (Thomson et al., 2005). In this vein, it is an effective and durable relationship that expresses a psychological closeness for consumers who are in search of authenticity (Choi et al., 2015; Oh et al., 2019; Ram et al., 2016). Studies argued that attachment and authenticity provide the basis of postmodern marketing, especially in the case of a traditional product with a long history (Cova, 2005; Wickham et al., 2018), especially, in the case of a traditional product with a long history. Davis et al. (2019) recommend satisfying this quest in a digital context. Thus, authors expect:

- H₄ Consumer attachment is positively related to consumer intention.
- H₅ Consumer-based authenticity is positively related to consumer attachment.

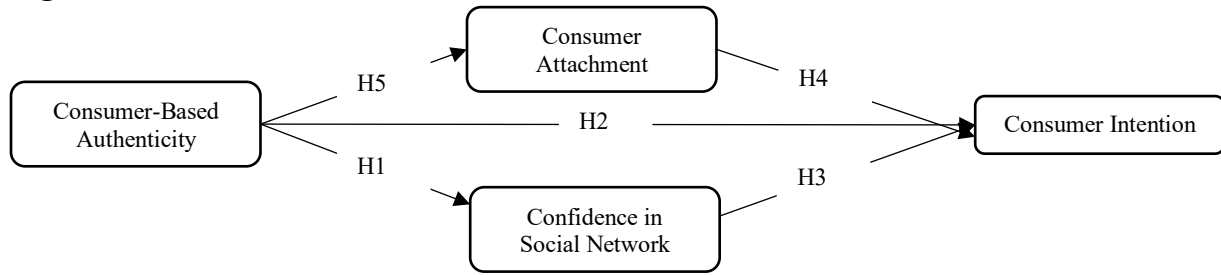
Methods

The study uses the operationalization of Napoli et al. (2014) of the consumer-based authenticity construct. It applies the Partial Least Squares approach with a reflective-reflective higher-order construct (see Figure 1). The assessment for the constructs has been established on the standard criteria of the Partial Least Squares approach (Akbar & Wymer, 2017; Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Sample and Data Collection

The authors administered the survey in Morocco, with a convenience sample of 200 regular consumers of terroir products. The questionnaire contains a filtering question at the beginning, only respondent who regularly consumes terroir products can conclude all questions. All items have been taken from the existing literature and adjusted to the study's context. Behavioral intention is adapted from Price & Arnould (1999); Consumer authenticity from Camus (2004) & Napoli et al. (2014); Confidence in SN from Benamour (2000); and attachment from Thomson et al. (2005).

Figure 1. Causal Model With Second-Order Construct



Findings

Measurement Model

First, the authors conducted a lower-order confirmatory factor analysis on consumer-based authenticity. The research’s model specified three dimensions (heritage, originality, and symbolic). To evaluate the internal consistency of the items, this study refers to Cronbach alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the CR evaluated the convergent and discriminant validity of the research’s model. The results have revealed that the first-order model of consumer-based authenticity has encountered the regular criteria (Hair et al., 2019): loadings > .7; α > .7; CR and AVE also are > .7 (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Measurement Items of the First-Order Model

First Order	Item	Loading	Alpha	CR	AVE
Originality	OR_1	.937	.918	.948	.858
	OR_2	.911			
	OR_3	.931			
Symbolic	SB_1	.805	.856	.913	.777
	SB_2	.892			
	SB_3	.917			
Heritage	HR_1	.905	.842	.905	.761
	HR_2	.905			
	HR_3	.833			

Next, the authors have evaluated the measurement model with authenticity as a second-order construct that is related to attachment, confidence in SN, and consumer intention (a, CR, AVE – Table 2). Also, the discriminant validity (square root of AVE superior to correlations for all constructs of the measurement model was fulfilled (see Table 3).

Table 2. Measurement Items of the Second-Order Model

Construct	Item	Loading	Alpha	CR	AVE
Consumer-Based Authenticity	OR	.833	.746	.857	.668
	HR	.896			
	SB	.713			
Consumer Attachment	ATT1	.889	.891	0.932	.821
	ATT2	.917			
	ATT3	.912			
Confidence in Social Network	CON1	.897	.855	.909	.769
	CON2	.891			
	CON3	.842			
Consumer Intention	INT1	.784	.809	.887	.725
	INT2	.910			
	INT3	.957			

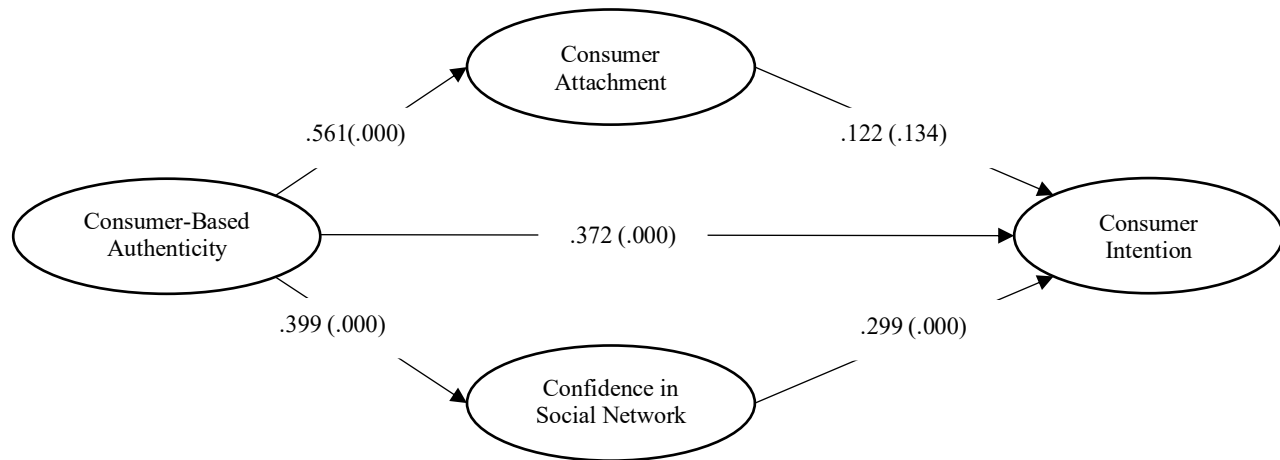
Table 3. Correlations Between Constructs

Construct	Consumer Attachment	Confidence in Social Network	Consumer Intention	Consumer-Based Authenticity
Consumer Attachment	.906			
Confidence in Social Network	.427	.877		
Consumer Intention	.459	.499	.852	
Consumer-Based Authenticity	.561	.399	.560	.817

Structural Model

Figure 2 displays the structural model coefficients. The adjustment of the model encountered the standards (Hair et al., 2019). The R^2 value for consumer attention is .413, which is above .3. The SRMR rate of the research model is .073 less than .08 which specifies a good fit. Additionally, the NFI value is almost .78, which is an adequate fit for research; it proposes that the model of research fits the data well.

Figure 2. Path Coefficient of the Structural Model



The first hypothesis regarding attachment and consumer intentions was rejected ($p > .001$). Thus, results establish a positive impact of consumer-based authenticity on attachment, confidence in SN, and consumer intention. Finally, the results display a positive effect of confidence in SN on consumer intention (Table 4).

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing.

Model	Path	T*	P value**	Confidence Intervals	Decision
Consumer Attachment -> Intent	.122	1.497	.134	-.038; .282	Rejected
Consumer-Based Authenticity -> Consumer Attachment	.561	10.198	.000	.453; .669	Accepted
Consumer-Based Authenticity -> Confidence in Social Network	.399	6.996	.000	.287; .511	Accepted
Consumer-Based Authenticity -> Consumer Intention	.372	4.812	.000	.221; .524	Accepted
Confidence in Social Network -> Consumer Intention	.299	4.491	.000	.168; .429	Accepted

Note. *>1.96; **<0.01 (Hair et al., 2019)

Conclusion

The main theoretical contribution of this paper is to answer a major question: what is the effect of consumer authenticity on SN and attachment? Little research has answered this question, to our knowledge. This study has combined the effect of variables considered according to the consumer’s perception. It has proposed an explanatory framework for the influence of perceived

authenticity on consumer behavior. The effect of perceived market authenticity on consumer attachment is largely acceptable. This result shows the crucial role of emotion in the consumption of terroir products by the postmodern consumer.

It is a fundamental aspect of the relationship with the authentic product (Thomson et al., 2005; Thomson et al., 2012; Thomson & Johnson, 2006). Contrary to our expectations, the direct link between attachment and consumer behavioral intention was not significant.

The first key contribution is that the relationship between the consumer and the local product is not only based on the emotional attachment (rejection of H₄), but it is much more oriented towards the satisfaction of the quest for authenticity (*path* = .561) and its dimensions in an online context.

For managerial implications, authors advise cooperatives to use the heritage dimension in their communication about terroir products (most important loading). In addition, it is in their interest to listen to their consumers. In this sense, consumers need to feel that the relationship with the terroir product goes beyond the digital interface as they look for a more human relationship. The consumer-based authenticity is positively related to behavioral intention and confidence in SN.

The second key input is the component of authenticity in a virtual context. It affects the confidence of SN. Authenticity offers a competitive advantage to marketing strategy for positioning a terroir product. This finding is in line with contemporary scholars that underline the huge social need of using digital by consumers (Zhang et al., 2022). Findings have noted, directly or indirectly, the possibility of commoditizing authenticity in this digital era. Moreover, recent research has posed this problem: Liang et al. (2018) could not confirm the direct link between perceived market authenticity and behavioral intention in a digital context, while Pelet et al. (2020) also emphasize the role of a first real experience with the local product and the difficulty of marketing authenticity exclusively in an online context. Future research papers may explore different attributes of the product.

Findings stress the significance of real strategies for the social and solidarity economy to help both terroir products and cooperatives. Moreover, results invite online managers to focus on human interactivity more than cold communication of the digital interface. Because high levels of authenticity and social network confidence are important to provide the necessary indications to consumers, the aim is to enhance this huge sense of authenticity and preserve it. The virtual context may display a high risk of deficient relationships, hence the low consumer-based authenticity.

As any vigilant postmodern consumer knows, several entities dynamically challenge to present themselves and their merchandise as authentic. The findings recommend that cooperatives may take advantage of human contact and real experience with consumers; they come to be perceived as authentic. Yet such only digital efforts are challenging because it is perceived as inauthentic, and sometimes consumers even rebound by a huge request for a real story. The construction of hypotheses based on Moroccan consumers only is a limitation of this paper. Future papers may try to reproduce the present study with a sample of consumers from different cultures.

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