Understanding perceived marketing authenticity: approach from consumer discourse. Case of Souss Massa’s terroir product

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Abstract

Authenticity is an important ingredient of postmodern consumption. This paper makes an exploratory study about the authenticity as much as a concept mobilizing a craze from the current consumer. Our research question is: what are the determinants of the authenticity of terroir product for consumer? We mobilize the postmodern paradigm to understand the contours of the authenticity. First, in theoretical background, we identify their etymology and the main authenticity’s determinants of an object in business context. Next, we present our study with consumers of local products in order to meet our research question. Finally, this paper highlights the core propositions for future researches.

Keywords: Authenticity, Perception, terroir product, Postmodernism, Souss Massa

Résumé

L’authenticité représente un trait important de la consommation postmoderne. Cet article vise à explorer l'authenticité en tant qu'un concept mobilisant l'engouement du consommateur actuel. Notre question de recherche est : quels sont les déterminants de l'authenticité des produits du terroir ? Nous mobilisons le paradigme postmoderne pour comprendre les contours de l'authenticité. D'abord, sur le plan théorique, nous identifions son étymologie et les principaux déterminants de l'authenticité marchande d'un objet. Ensuite, nous présentons notre étude qualitative auprès des consommateurs des produits de terroir afin de répondre à notre question de recherche. Enfin, nous concluons avec des propositions pour les futures recherches.

Mots-clés : authenticité, perception, produit du terroir, postmodernisme, Souss Massa
Introduction

Authenticity seems to be a marketing tool that provides a capital of credibility and sincerity to products (Pine and Gilmore, 2008; 2007). In a context of globalization (Arnould and Price 2000), marketing should not only focuses solely on customer relationship management, but also, consider the emotional load of the consumer by providing him with emotional cues to better satisfy his quest for authenticity. The postmodern consumer needs social link and to give meaning to his consumption through tribal taste (Cova and Badot 2003), this consumption is strongly linked to the terroir (Cova and Cova 2002). Furthermore, the products are subject to a quest for authenticity. To meet this concern for sincerity, producers are constantly using certification signs.

Different meanings have been attributed to the concept of authenticity, depending on the object of study (individual, consumption, work of art, emotion) and the discipline (philosophy, art, law, archaeology, tourism). Authenticity is a value created by natural matter (Cohen 1999), a search for meaning and a feature of the current consumer (Cova and Cova 2002), is a representative of the individual's feelings (Wang 1999), and a strategic axis to position his offer (Camus 2004). This variety of thoughts leads us to question the contribution of this concept in a Moroccan context. Our core objective is to understand the different meanings and determinants of authenticity. We mobilize the postmodern paradigm to understand the contours of the authenticity. First, in theoretical background, we identify their etymology and the main authenticity’s determinants of an object in business context. Next, we present our study with consumers of local products. Finally, this paper highlights the core propositions for developing cooperative's marketing.

1. Authenticity's etymology

In ancient Greek, the word authentic comes from the word authentikós, which is "what is authoritative" (Quillet Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1975); "whose authority, reality, truth cannot be contested" (Robert Dictionary, 1988); "what is powerful, whose authority is unassailable" (Historical dictionary of the French language, 1998). As the etymology points out, the definition of authenticity comes close to the notion of authority, because when the author of an object is known and certain, the latter has authority by itself and is reputed by an effective and reliable value as indicated in the dictionary (Du moyen Français, dictionary, (1330-1500)). We can say that the authenticity of an object gives it a deep, reliable and not superficial truth.

Also, the dictionary (le petit Robert, 2015) lists among the most up-to-date acceptances, a dimension of authenticity towards "quality of what cannot be controversial and intrinsically
true, pure", in this sense, we are not talking about an original quality, but conformity with an original considered undoubtedly authentic.

The authentic term is intimately linked to its author; it expresses a more or less profound truth of the object and/or its author. But also it is an imprecise and heterogeneous concept that has several meanings that push us to explore it by referring to the different disciplines to facilitate the task of its subsequent use.

In legal field, authenticity is an essential concept that is a characteristic of a legal act. For Aynès (2014), the law does not know authenticity but it is always the authentic act that makes law. For each State, it is the authorities that organize it according to its legal system. In Morocco, the authentic instrument is defined, under article 418 of the Code of Obligations and Contracts, as "one that has been received with, the solemnities required by public officials having the right to instrument in the place where the instrument was drawn up"; thus, this instrument is totally reliable until proof of forgery by the public officer. Here, the authenticity is attested by an expert body.

In artistic object, authenticity is a core characteristic for enhancing artistic creation. Its definition is not only limited to an origin known but also, It aims the identification of reality and the link between the artistic piece and its author. According to Heinich (1999a), the author's relationship with his work must not be broken by another hand or confusion. It is a continuous attachment between the object and its author characterized by singularity. Indeed, confirming or denying this character, poses certain difficulties, for example, the case of an artist influenced by another antecedent to him, here, the question of authenticity seems to generate nuances. In this sense, Van Gogh's works constitute an artistic legend that cannot be imitated by modern art if not at the risk of authenticity because its standards are necessarily original and innocent (Heinich, 1999b), also, that uniqueness lies in the interiority of inspiration and being new in his imagination.

Authenticity in the artistic field aims to preserve and protect the artist who is a predecessor, even for works of which the painter is unknown. The difficulty of deciding on the authenticity of an art object affects experts, because it is an exercise with important consequences on the market and history. The qualification of authenticity is not an end in itself, but it is a specific attribution (Stephan1991). This construction of the identity of the artistic figure requires a signature (Guichard2008) or a certificate of authenticity in order to guarantee the sincerity of the true work that traces the artist's thought and emotion (Lauwaert 2013).

At the intersection of these ideas, we assume that artistic authenticity is based on the relationship with the artist's person and originality in his or her feelings at the time of
creation, which are proven by the signature. This practice among painters became widespread towards the end of the 18th century (Guichard 2008). This constituted a favorable stage for the development of the debate on the notion of authenticity, especially towards the end of the 19th century (Lequette de Kervenoael 2006). This guarantee of uniqueness through signature as an element of reinsurance, constitutes, in a way, a type of brand that has existed for a long time in the artistic field, because the painter's signature predates the creation of the product and service brand as known today (Barnier and Lagier 2012).

What is authoritative is what is talented and new.

After those definition's exercises, we find that understanding this notion requires an effort to contextualize it. Subject to different definitions, often unsatisfactory, authenticity refers to certainty, accuracy, originality and indisputable attribution (Law). It is a quality of what is talented, very old, emotional, sentimental, new in its imagination, ahead of its inspiration, sincere in its creation or even, innate in the person (Art). This census gives us the opportunity to advance our thinking on market authenticity, our field of research.

2. **Authenticity's perspective**

2.1 **Objective authenticity**

This conceptualization refers to the original meaning (originality of works of art for example, as seen above) which is based on anchoring in the true origin that relates to an author, a culture and/or a period. The authentic is sincere, true and honest because it has an undoubted origin. In this sense, cultural objects are authentic because they are made by local hands and with local natural materials before modernity (Cohen, 1988). The objective criteria require thorough knowledge in the field (Wang 1999), they refer to character: original, traditional, genuine, real and unique (Shen 2000). This first acceptance reflects the particularity of the objects exhibited in museums, which have already been the subject of the expertise of competent specialists and that the exhibition setting their colleagues even this authenticity.

2.2 **Constructive authenticity**

This second acceptance evokes authenticity, which is the result of a social construction which, in turn, is the result of the interpretation of the reality of objects (Cohen 1988); here, its determinants come from outside the object, satisfying a particular imaginary, a projection of dreams, stereotyped images or expectations, we can say that authenticity is a variable criterion from one individual to another. The authentic comes from reality built by beliefs, attitudes and power, it is not an intrinsic reality of the object (Cohen 1988). Authenticity is a contextual, negotiable and ideological concept (Silver 1993). For example, the use of regional
labels, for local products, testifies that the products are of exact origin, not an imitation, and they are authoritative because of their legal forms

2.3 Existential authenticity

Philosophy's research has widely studied the question of the authenticity, in particular, of Man. It depends of questioning the true nature and essence of the Being, of what it is, without any other particular description. Knowledge of the inner self gives power to be, to oneself (Heidegger 1976), and human existence finds its meaning in the affirmation of the inner self and its autonomy (Taylor 2000). This sense given by philosophy leads us to understand the quest for authenticity under the quest of self and image made of oneself. For example, a product that has been consumed since childhood, certainly, has a particular meaning, more authentic, even if it is an objectively inauthentic product. Here, authenticity is created by a bond of attachment that brings the moment to life. According to Wang (1999), existential authenticity refers to the individual's emotions caused by a process. This search for authenticity makes it possible to recover one's personal identity, namely one's true self and one's history, which is more or less rich in emotion (Camus 2007). According to Cova and Cova (2002), consumers encounter authenticity in rebuilding the local past that allows them to live real life. In this order of ideas, and unlike the first two types, existential authenticity is lived after a first experience of consumption with the object in question, the essential here is to generate a perception of authenticity lived and based on the individual, and which results from a personal construction. So the consumption experience, positive or negative, can encourage the perception of authenticity or can be an authenticating’ manner of the object consumed (Camus 2007).

Methodology

As discussed earlier, authenticity can be a polymorphous concept with different meanings. Furthermore, consumers’ perception of authenticity might play an influential role in marketing strategy. This study aims to explore and understand the determinants of terroir product's authenticity. Our sample is 20; 10 women and 10 Mans; consumers, recruited according to the principle of saturation of responses. To meet our objective, our lines of exploration were about: the profile of the interviewee, the authenticity and the origin of terroir product, criterion of authenticity’s quest, the use of authenticity, and the core features attributed to the concepts of terroir product authenticity.

According to Fensel, (1992) people give situations a special meaning, and their activities are based on this meaning. In order to understand their behaviors, the researcher must understand
their interpretation. In this sense, we have opted for an interpretative paradigm in order to understand the reasons behind the consumer' behaviours.

We are committed to a credible and rigorous approach in order to maintain the internal reliability of the meanings of the interpretations (Flag 2004). Our goal was to understand the individual determinants of the authenticity of a terroir product.

We have chosen a thematic analysis of the content, which is mainly comprehensive and involves several readings of the full interviews in order to understand them (Thompson and al, 1990). Indeed, we started by completely rewriting the recorded interviews, which were then divided and grouped into thematic units. The results of verbatim's analysis are presented in the following lines.

**Finding and Discussion**

**Health for children**

The literature on postmodern consumption has pointed out that we live in an era of paradox. Despite the development of life expectancy and its conditions, postmodern consumers display significant fear on their diets (Fischler, 2001; Poulain, 2001; Bergadâa, 2006). Consumers tend to buy local products because they are known for their nutritional qualities and virtues (Bond and Bond, 2008; Lusk and Briggeman, 2009). On their side, respondents expressed comfort for the consumption of local products considered authentic because they allow them to protect the health of their children: "For me, an authentic product allows me to take care of the health of my children in these times when there are too many diseases" (W1); "naturalness helps to protect the health of the whole family"; "I don't hide anything from you, it's difficult for children to accept to eat 100% healthy... but I still convince them, and of course since I am from the region, I see that these natural products are beneficial for them" (W10). These results highlight the importance of naturalness for children's health according to their parents. In this sense, the work of Muratore and Guichard (2010), who have pointed out that naturalness, is a factor that promotes the "good for the health" of children. However, interviewees did not indicate the importance of the taste aspect of the product in order to encourage their children to consume it: "I do my best to integrate ingredients based on local products, to ensure a minimum of health in a world where it is difficult to respect a well-balanced diet, especially with all the dishes that make you want to eat all the time, also the story of fries with my children... it is difficult" (M10); "in my family, sometimes I force my children to eat these products... I do not give them the choice even it is not good taste" (M2). However, other researchers have not found the same result. Raghunathan et al (2006) indicated that taste is in high demand by consumers in order to encourage their children to consume everything that is
good for their health. Undoubtedly the difference between our research objects induces this difference, however, research on the consumption of local products by children in a Moroccan context, would seem to be of great importance to ensure a transfer of good consumption practices to future generations.

**Familiarity**

Research on origin's perception and product evaluation has highlighted the influence of familiarity with the product on consumer behaviour. The verbatim also revealed this result: "I know enough information about the product, I see it quite often around me, I started consuming it since my arrival in Agadir, it has been years! (M7) "In childhood, I didn't appreciate the taste of Argane oil, but there was to be around me, now I consume it and I recommend it to my children, especially for their well-being" (M2). In this sense, we can say that in a Moroccan context, familiarity with the product could positively promote its authenticity later on. According to Josiassen et al (2008), familiarity is the number of times the product has been used or experienced, directly and indirectly. Indeed, Familiarity is important to promote a positive image of the product: "Argane existed around me; I also buy it for my house and my children" (M8). In addition, familiarity with the product has a positive influence on the perceived nutritional quality: "As much as mom, I see that natural products are a basis for consumption for my family, I trust these original products for their health benefits, they are essential for me" (W9). Matthiesen and Phau, (2005) noted that familiarity is an ability for the consumer to classify the product into a category of products that are already experienced.

**Production area**

Origin of product has been seen by some as closely linked to its authenticity (Cova and Cova, 2002; Camus, 2007; Heinich, 1999a). Our results are also in this sense: "the place of production is important for me, sometimes I find, for example, cooperatives outside Souss that market this product, I always try to know if there are links with the region, if not I do not buy it" (M6); "the origin of the production is a brand for me, it is important, it attests not the quality but especially the old way of production" (M3). Thus, the area of production represents a good place for meeting and re-enchantment the quest of authenticity: "I think that the origin reassures me on the respect of the know-how, because in reality, it is what I seek, sometimes I move on the place to buy this type of product, I know that now the marketing is developed, but the place of production always has a charm for me" (W4). However, we did not find a direct request from the institutional authentication to verify origin, but a preference to meet the family or person behind the production: "Of course the origin of production is an
identity card for the local product, it reassures me about what I am looking for, because I take the origin before the product, and I buy from a good person, and I always ask questions about this aspect before buying" (W7); "I prefer to buy from a person I know and often from very old families in this trade" (M4). Our results support the work of Darby et al, (2008) with a difference in consumer's ways. In their context, these researchers found that a product labeled "from a small family" is more likely to be purchased by consumers, while in our context, consumers prefer to come into direct contact with the person or family behind the production than to check the label. In this sense, the origin is certified by the author of the local product.

We can explain this difference by the fact that consumers are still in the process of learning about the use of labeling for local products.

**Singularity**

The particularity represents an important character in the eyes of the respondents for the local product of the Souss Massa region. "When the product is only in one place, it has a certain very original and important quality... it is the most important for me and that is what I look for in Argane oil for example" (M3); "authenticity is the particularity and privilege linked to a single place, this gives the product an indisputable and real quality" (W5). This finding is consistent with that of Cova and Cova (2002) in their research. They pointed out that the authenticity of an object is enhanced by the ritual to be approached to acquire an object. In our case, Argane oil is a unique product from Souss Massa, and this is what makes it unique and authentic. It signifies, an effort to find information and travel, if necessary, for the purchase represents the effort to be made to enhance the authenticity of the product: "with the development we've been experiencing lately, it's difficult to trust and separate the true from the untrue, that's why I always base myself on the particularity, practically, I buy the singularity of production for each region, for example argan from the subsoil, and olive oil from Marrakech...it's difficult but it's reassuring" (M5); "Authenticity for me is a very singular quality that is not found everywhere and in all products, and to meet it you must have some minimum information to assimilate it in its proper sense" (M5). We find that market authenticity traces links with artistic authenticity for a very unique product in a specific location. According to Heinich's work (1999a, 1999b), authenticity is defined as the singularity and uniqueness of the object.

**Simplicity**

The analysis revealed that a perceived authentic terroir product is a product that respects its primary nature and does not address any other criteria outside its usual context: "I have got used to taking Argane oil from people I trust, hand in hand... authenticity is a simple quality
that does not find its superiority in very sophisticated and technological production methods” (M8); "before we base ourselves much more on production methods but while respecting the nature of the product, the most important thing is the original and central quality, and not the superficial decoration... a local product seen authentic if is a simple and natural product and not developed” (M1). Indeed, authenticity is simple and spontaneous, which does not require a technological effort considered modern enough than the determinants sought in the product: "when I want a natural product, I want simplicity and I don't trust a very sophisticated product easily because the manufacturer's hand must always keep these traces on the product that I must then feel them"(W8); "when I visit a cooperative stand, I prefer to touch the simple ways of these women but who give superior qualities, the secret is not in cold technology but in their hands full of care and expertise"(M5). We note that authenticity is above all a natural character of a local product, the more the product escapes from this condition, and the more likely it would be to be perceived as non-authentic. In their work on the sociology of consumption Holbrook, (1993) and Divard and Robert-Demontrond, (1997), emphasized that marketing should consider the sociology of consumers in order to satisfy their needs according to their demands and not only according to market development. Indeed, we note that cooperatives make a great effort to market their products, but this great desire to follow the development of the market and competitors should not be to the detriment of the development of consumer behaviour, because in the end, it is the consumer who judges authenticity according to his own criteria and not those of the market where he has bought his product.

**Conclusion and scope for future researches**

Isn't time to ask the question about consumers' enthusiasm for authenticity because the phenomenon is already well established. Indeed, understanding its conditions seems to be an important lever for postmodern marketing. The marketing strategy should consider the determinants of the quest of authenticity in the eyes of the consumer.

This research tried to explore the determinants of authenticity for a local product in a Moroccan context. We have found that authenticity is linked in minds to different meanings and sometimes refers to a subjective imagination. At this stage of reflection, we can say that authenticity accepts characteristics related to the product and others directly related to the consumer. For the product: it is obviously simplicity and particularity. On the consumer side, perceived authenticity is influenced by familiarity with the product, its use of the product, here for family health, and the origin of the product.
The challenge is to certify authenticity not only through a label but also through other ingredients that go beyond the physical product alone. In this sense, cooperatives of local products, seeking to position their offers as authentic, should consider its aspects in the marketing process.

There are limits to the research. We used a qualitative exploratory approach in a single context with a small sample. We suggest that research be extended to other regions. For future research, we propose to study the contribution of the nutritional value of local products to the quest for authenticity in a Moroccan context, because this theme emerged in the results without considering it in our initial research object, which demonstrates its importance for consumer.

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