



# Impact of the link between individuals and their region on the customer-regional brand relationship

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of the link between individuals and their region on the development and translation of the consumer-regional brand relationship through the concepts of trust, attachment, affective commitment, attitude and behavioral intentions. Based on data collected from 311 consumers in a supermarket in France, the study finds that the relationships established between consumers who value their region and the brands of this region vary with the positioning adopted and the products offered by these brands. It also highlights that the duration of consumers' residence in the region improves the understanding of the studied relationships.

## 1. Introduction

A national study conducted in 2014 by NewCorp Conseil found that 76% of individuals in France are proud or very proud of their region of birth or residence.<sup>2</sup> In parallel with this upsurge in interest in and reference to the region, French consumers have become much more drawn to products with regional or local branding and identity in recent years. A 2016 study by Opinion Way concluded that 63% of French consumers prefer local and regional food products.<sup>3</sup> The origin and geographic proximity of the product are criteria that reassure consumers the most.<sup>4</sup> Regional and local brands are also thriving. They are capitalizing on their place of production and highlighting their identity to attract consumers.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the value for managers of the link between consumers and their region, scant works have studied its impact on their purchases of regional products (van Ittersum, 2001; Lee et al., 2016). van Ittersum (2001) examined the impact of sense of belonging on consumers' information search, attitudes and behavioral intentions toward regional products. Lee et al. (2016) analyzed the impact of consumer region-centric tendencies and community involvement on consumers' willingness to buy products from their own region.

Moreover, regional products may be proposed by different kinds of

regional brands (Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018). While some brands may adopt a regional positioning and offer typical products from the region, others may offer atypical products from the region but as their companies are based and originated in the region, they are integrated parts of it. To our knowledge, no research has investigated the impact of the link between individuals and their region on the customer-regional brand relationship considering these different kinds of brands. Consequently, this research proposes and empirically tests an integrating framework designed to clarify how the link that develops between consumers and their region influences consumers' attitudes and behavior regarding the different brands from their region.

From an academic standpoint, this research differs from previous works because it approaches the consumer-brand relationship from the territorial angle through dual anchors: the brand and the consumer. From a managerial standpoint, this study deepens the knowledge of the relationship between consumers and regional brands, through the link that they may develop with the region. We will thus propose recommendations for managers regarding regional brands.

First, this article focuses on the potential link between individuals and their region. Then, the research hypotheses and model on the impact of this link on the consumer-regional brand relationship are presented along with the methodology used. Lastly, the results obtained

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<sup>2</sup> Data taken from Le TOPDESREGIONS 2014. A study conducted on a representative sample of the French population over age 18, comprising 2000 people surveyed online between February 21 and 27, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Study conducted on a representative sample of the French population over age 18, comprising 1002 people surveyed online between March 30 and 31, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> LSA, 2014 (<http://www.lsa-conso.fr/ce-que-pensent-les-francais-des-produits-locaux,162580>).

<sup>5</sup> LSA, 2013 (<http://www.e-marketing.fr/Thematique/Strategies-1001/Breves/Les-marques-regionales-gagnent-du-terrain-53899.htm>).

from a survey done in a supermarket (pertaining to the Système U retailer) in Vendée (a region in France) on 311 consumers are discussed, and the limitations, future research avenues, and managerial implications of this research are presented.

## 2. The link between regions and individuals

There is growing interest in place branding (Vuignier, 2017), which is an element within place marketing (Eshuis et al., 2014). Place branding refers to the development of brands for geographical locations, such as regions, cities or communities, usually with the aim of triggering positive associations, adding value and distinguishing the place from others (Braun, 2008; Eshuis and Klijn, 2012).

Ideas of place branding has been applied at the national, regional or city scale (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). At the regional scale, regions such as Wales (Clifton, 2014), Western Australia (Crockett and Wood, 2000), the Öresund region between Denmark and Sweden (Falkheimer, 2014), the Veneto Region in Italy (Pierantoni, 2015), and Auvergne (Chanut and Rochette, 2012) as well as 21 other regions in France (Chamard et al., 2013) have been branded.

Like other places, regions actively claim their unique identity, to create a competitive advantage over other regions (Kotler et al., 1997), to ensure their economic development (Gilmore, 2001), to attract tourists from abroad (Florida, 2007; Anholt, 2009) or domestic tourists (Díaz Soria and Llurdés Coit, 2013) and to maintain or attract residents (Terlouw, 2009).

The identity of a region refers to the physical (e.g., geography), cultural (e.g., history, art, music) and historical (e.g., famous citizens) characteristics which distinguish regions (Kotler and Gertner, 2011). Despite the fact they are constructed by the mindset of people (Agnew, 1999), they are also essential parts of the physical elements and stories of a particular region. Physical and symbolic aspects do help to stabilize cultures. They give abstract cultures a home, fix identities in place and make cultures self-sufficient and unified entities (Hall, 1995). Buildings, landscapes and symbols in space as the materialistic objects of identities secure, sustain and clarify places, cultures and identities.

Like other places, regions must engage with the outside world in a clear, coordinated and communicated way, if they are to influence public opinion (Anholt, 2008). Consequently, a place branding strategy can support the aims of stakeholders in helping to increase the attractiveness of a place on the basis of its authentic features (Hospers, 2004). Place branding is seen as a collective exercise in defining the meaning of the place for the various stakeholders (e.g., business and industrial sector; government; marketing agencies; visitors and residents) (Merz and Vargo, 2009; Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013) with, for instance, a body that assembles them and coordinates their actions (Vuorinen and Vos, 2013).

By conceptualizing regions as brands, not only can competitive advantage be achieved, but also community development, thereby reinforcing local identity and the identification of citizens with their place of residence, and activating all local social forces (Kavaratzis, 2004). Moreover, like other places, regions evoke positive feelings among individuals as a result of the memories, experiences or routines associated with these locations (Hospers, 2011). This has implications for both places and people. For places, it is difficult to re-brand a place when there are strong feelings about it. For people, as they become progressively part of the community of a place, such a region, a positive attitude and loyalty develop toward this place and the movement from one location to another often requires a significant effort or catalyst. A region-based identity can give to people some stability and provide a sense of safety in a constantly changing society (Agnew, 2001).

The link between a region and individuals has been investigated in a limited number of marketing studies. Four concepts have been proposed to clarify the link between individuals and regions: 1) the sense of belonging to a region, which captures the strength of individuals' affective attachment to the region (van Ittersum, 2001); 2) regional

attachment, or the affective and positive link between individuals and their region (Brun et al., 2008); 3) regional ethnic affiliation, considered as the result of identity building in social interaction (Dion et al., 2011; Dion and Sitz, 2011); 4) regional belonging, i.e., the positive and identity-forming link between individuals and the physical, social and cultural space that individuals conceive as their regional territory (Charton-Vachet and Lombart, 2015). Regional belonging is also the result of an affective (via the emotional significance of the region for individuals) and cognitive (via individuals' ownership of images and representations of the region and of regional stereotypes) construction process.

The concept of regional belonging has been retained in this study. This concept is both inherently affective, like regional attachment (Brun et al., 2008) or the sense of regional belonging (van Ittersum, 2001), and cognitive. It can thus fully grasp the complexity of individuals' ownership of regional images and representations conveyed by institutions. In addition, a reliable (internal consistency), and valid (convergent, discriminant and predictive validities) measurement scale of this concept was recently developed, which is generalizable to different regions (Charton-Vachet and Lombart, 2015).

## 3. Research hypotheses and model

The objective of this research is to propose an integrating model that will capture the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of the link between individuals and their region, captured by the concept of regional belonging. Consequently, in this section, we will examine the explanatory power of regional belonging in four attitudinal variables: trust, attachment, affective commitment and attitude toward brands originating from the region, and two behavioral variables, namely intention to recommend and purchase regional brands.

The first type of consequence linked to the consumer-brand relationship concerns trust in brands. In line with Rosenbloom and Haefner (2009), who showed that consumers' trust in brands that they perceive as originating from their country or world region of residence, a link may be posited between consumers' region of origin, within a nation, and the trust they place in brands with the same origin. Given the link between consumers and their origins, more specifically in a regional framework, the study of van Ittersum et al. (2003) demonstrates that consumers' sense of belonging to a region influences the importance of available information on regional products. Trust has cognitive bases (McAllister, 1995). Several studies suggest that information that consumers can access about a brand affects their trust in the brand (Ha and Perks, 2005; Xingyuan et al., 2010). We may then posit a direct relationship between consumers' link to their region and the trust they develop in brands originating from that region.

By considering the identity aspect of regional belonging, we can envision two other types of attitudinal consequences of this belonging: attachment and affective commitment to the brand. On the one hand, it is interesting to analyze the impact of the link between consumers and their region on attachment to regional brands, given that the study by Dion and Sitz (2011) concludes that for consumers who developed a link to a region, regional brands serve to express regional identity, and that Lacoëuilhe (2000) emphasizes that the fact that consumers express their identity through a brand explains their attachment to that brand. On the other hand, given Mercier's (2010) analysis of the link between social identification and commitment to the brand, together with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), we can posit that belonging to a group, through the social identification that it offers, leads consumers to commit to brands that are consistent with the group to which they belong. Consequently, by referring specifically to the region, we consider the impact of consumers' regional belonging on their affective commitment to regional brands.

These elements lead us to formulate the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Regional belonging positively influences consumers'

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