

# An Exploratory Approach to Consumer Based Online Authenticity: The Case of Terroir Product of Souss Massa Region, Morocco

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**Abstract**—Marketing research is starting to focus on authenticity to position an offer, especially terroir products. However, with internet its usage remains more problematic. This paper investigates how digitalization impacts the satisfaction of the quest for authenticity. On the theoretical level, it explains authenticity in the online and offline context in the postmodernism era. Then, an exploratory qualitative study tries to understand the contribution of the digitization to the satisfaction of the search of authenticity. Therefore, cooperatives selling terroir product on the internet are advised to keep also direct contact which tends to show traditional manner of production, in order to enhance customers' perception of terroir product authenticity.

**Keywords**—Authenticity, online authenticity, postmodernism, terroir products.

## I. INTRODUCTION

AUTHENTICITY has become an essential part of a consumer's consumption. The extant literature considers that the link to the product is more determining than its attributes [1]-[4]. In this sense, the contemporary consumer is in searching of his origin's traces. For [5], modernity is expressed by a growing need to satisfy a subjective and self-referential imagination, most often referring to the terror. Furthermore, the digital revolution has led to the emergence of paradoxes and confusions in the way to satisfy this contemporary quest [6]. We are living in a world where everything and its opposite appear side by side to fill a need. For example, postmodern consumers might use technology to maintain a connection with an old and traditional product.

This paper aims to explore the terroir product as a possible answer to the quest for postmodern authenticity in the digital context. It is organized as follows: the next section provides a brief background of the literature review concerning the authenticity quest in online and offline context. Then, we present the applied methodology used to answer our topic question. In this way, semi-directive interviews were conducted with 20 consumers of terroir products in the Souss

Massa region. Finally, we highlight the key propositions for improving cooperative marketing.

## II. FRAMEWORK

### A. *Quest for Authenticity in the Postmodern Era*

The postmodern consumer gives meaning to the object only at the moment of its consumption [2]; in this reflection, the ideal worlds are criticized [7]. The consumer draws his own consumption guidelines. His material objects refer to a subjective and multiple imaginary by admitting different conditions, which are sometimes contradictory. Researchers accept that postmodernism is described as synergy between technology's development and the traditional world [3]. According to the analyses of [8], the doubt, the distance, the incredulity, and the irony are thus succeeded to the confidence and the optimism. In this sense, we assist to a postmodern search of the irreproachable things, often, coming from the past. Certainly, this postmodern research does not escape from the idealism since it hopes for past things [9], but we should recognize that this characteristic is negotiable between the two heroes participating in this quest of authenticity: seller and consumer. This later, in this quest, directly or indirectly solicits a movement of rerouting or an encounter that goes beyond the market conditions [1], [5].

The terroir or the thing of origin has been seen as answers to this postmodern demand [1], [4], [3]. However, to our knowledge, little research has been devoted to the quest for authenticity in a virtual setting for a terroir product. In what follows, we question the contributions of a digital device to the answer to this postmodern quest.

Marketing literature has pointed out that it is difficult to assimilate the concept of authenticity without relating it to a specific object and context of research, as it admits several acceptations. Consequently, for philosophy it is the perfect knowledge of the individual [7], it reflects an artwork created by the hand and mind of artist [10] or the thing sought by individuals alienated by modern life [11]. In another sense, it also reflects a framework that values the object or experience in question [12]. Nonetheless, consumer wishes to encounter authenticity would risk being confronted with inauthenticity, or pseudo-authenticity. This problem of staged authenticity has encouraged studies to also look at the factors of inauthenticity in order to understand authenticity. These divergent definitions all point to the fact that authenticity despite its polymorphous nature could explain postmodern

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behavior [11]-[16]. Therefore, authenticity was no exception of the phenomenon of commercialization. However, these two worlds present a conflictual relationship. Particularly, it is difficult to maintain it in a mass service logic [14], [5], [1], [17]. In this sense, the commodification of a product, even an objectively authentic one, would be a modern activity that would escape from authenticity's rules. According to [1], mass production and modern marketing practices would render the cold product meaningless. As an attempt to overcome this aporia, we will follow the recommendations of [1], they suggest establishing a compromise relationship between the two actors in the quest for authenticity: the seller and consumer. This involves considering the features of postmodern consumption, which are institutional failure, social resizing and the demand for the traditional object [18]. Acknowledging the main effects of postmodern life on consumer behavior, researchers have presented five conditions: the reversal of production and consumption, the decentering the subject, the hyperreality, the fragmentation, and the juxtaposition of the opposites [19]. This theoretical framework posits the existence of a consumer who is free of old consumer groups and a single globalizing truth, who demands paradoxical features in a single product and who is motivated by values and connections more than product or experience.

#### *B. Quest of Authenticity in Online Context*

Social media are burgeoned lately. This craze can be seen not only in their huge uses in marketing practices but as well in the scientific papers about postmodern consumption. In a period of two years, the internet has been able to facilitate access to an audience of 50 million, while television had to wait more than 40 years to reach the same target [20]. Also, in 2017 we witness an average of 1.15 million active users per day. Digital could be a tool for consumption in the postmodern era, studies have shown that this framework allows its tenants to satisfy their search for authenticity [6]. Their results highlight that the virtual experience presents itself as an opportunity to express the traits of postmodernity indicated in the literature. Indeed, to assimilate this interactivity between individual and technology, researchers' papers were focused on the different aspects of the man-machine relationship. This is based in addition to the user-friendliness of the site, the beauty of the interface too [21]. In this sense, the design transmits a good framework to this interaction [22]-[24]. Beyond this cognitive aspect, this study introduces the affective dimension by exploring the role of emotion [25]. Our paper emphasizes that consumers often use digital to search for information, they became an active subject and not only travelers on website [26]. The online presence is now mobile and attached to the daily life of consumers. We are witnessing a virtual life more important than ever [27], [6], [19]. Consumption through digital tinges several scientific research. Their contributions revolve around the re-enchantment of consumption [28], [29], [6], the co-production of consumption [28], [30], [19], and tribalism and consumption [31], [3]. A common thread among these different works is that online life

has become an important crossing point for today's consumers. They converse any time and everywhere. Indeed, this trait of being alone and in the community refers to one of the axes of postmodernity: it is one of the paradoxical ambitions. The contributions that are interested in the digital aspect of this relationship begin to elucidate the implications of unreality (technology) on authenticity. The ease of use of an e-service reduces the perception of its artificiality [32], which supports the perception of authenticity for its user. To capture this affective content, [6] debated that if the virtual adventure refers to the consumer's real-life experience and allows satisfying the self, it would promote the re-enchantment of this consumer.

Web is getting an increasingly important place in the lives of contemporaries. Literature has underlined that there is a mutual relationship between the real life and the virtual life for postmodern consumers, which would begin to catch the attention of the researchers in various fields [6]. Our paper considers that the online search for authenticity is sufficiently intense to be taken as a framework for analyzing consumer behavior. The web could provide a main context for re-enchanting consumption with all its advantages: speed, freedom, ease, mobility and interactivity. It is also a space to express oneself and share it with others. The literature has emphasized that the use of consumption to touch one's self is intimately linked to a quest for authenticity.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research is to answer the following question: What are the determinants of perceived authenticity in a virtual context? However, given the complexity and richness of the definitions of authenticity, this exploration attached the quest for authenticity to a specific framework and object. It concerns terroir products from the Souss Massa region. The data collection was oriented towards semi-directive interviews with 20 consumers, lasting an average of 45 minutes. They took place in different contexts: the cooperative's premises and during a regional exposure of terroir products. The participants' selection was made randomly, respecting the principle of saturation of responses. Thus, we chose a strategy of maximum diversification [33]. We satisfied diversification in the age of the respondents, the socio-professional category and the purchase budget. With this in mind, study can consider all possible explanations for the psychological mechanisms behind the online quest for authenticity for Moroccan local products. The interview guide is composed of five themes:

- The first theme consists of expressing oneself around the determinants of the purchase of terroir products in a real context.
- The second theme aims to clarify the contributions of digital technology to the purchase of a terroir product (complementary or paradoxical relationship).
- The third theme assesses the difference between the real and the virtual context to purchase a terroir product.
- The fourth theme corresponds in presenting and defining the authenticity of a local product with a spontaneous

way.

- And the fifth theme focuses on a synthesis of the main ideas and allows the interviewee to propose his or her recommendations for maintaining authenticity online.

The individual interviews were entirely recorded and then rewritten. Thematic analysis was chosen as the content analysis technique for the collected verbatim. According to this technique, the theme, or unit of meaning, is the unit of division, coding and analysis [34]. Thus, the recorded interviews were subsequently cut up and grouped into thematic units.

This study used an analysis under the software *Nvivo 12*. To do this, authors mobilized multiple coding through the creation of several recoding categories in order to qualify the responses on different dimensions. In this sense, this methodology did not transfer a node for each question automatically, but it mobilized a coding based on the reading and understanding of the meaning of the answer.

First, a first floating reading was done in order to recall the interview and select the first level of nodes, this is considering as the meaning units for the descriptive information [33]. Subsequently, with an average of four full readings of the entire interview, the text was assigned to the appropriate thematic unit. Two types of code were created: nodes upriver from encoding and nodes in parallel of this process [35]. The validation of the final codebook, mobilized for the thematic analysis, was based on a discussion between the authors of this article in order to reduce the bias of the subjectivity of interpretations.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The verbatim analysis was structured around the themes of our interview guide.

##### A. *Sharing and Expression*

When our general theme "authenticity of terroir products" was announced, the majority of respondents expressed a difficulty to respond: "Online authenticity is difficult to define it" (N. 3); "authenticity online, online and authenticity ... it's a bit tricky to talk about it..." (N. 4). However, after the discussion was developed about the apprehension of authenticity in a digital universe, respondents note: "There, I can say that I first perceive the authenticity of the product and then I share my experience with my circle of friends via Facebook for example" (N. 11); "obviously, if I am satisfied with the authenticity of a local product, I talk about it quite often in groups, among friends, the internet also allows us to easily and freely promote the local product" (N. 12). These results outline that for the offline, authenticity is directly linked to the product and to the consumption experience, whereas in a digital context, this perception is linked to a preliminary contact and to the ease of use of the interface. According to [24], in their study focused on wine's authenticity perception, the consumer compares the online experience with the classical characteristic of product in order to reduce the risk of purchasing a wrong terroir product. The exposure to the hugely complex interface may have a lesser

effect on purchase intention.

##### B. *Interactivity*

Despite the unsatisfactory existence of the online commercial exchange, the interactive dimension of the online option was established. Respondents often prefer to turn to social platforms perceived as a point of connection with cooperatives. "Facebook allows me to ask questions, see comments, follow the news, in short, it brings me closer than the website to the cooperative and its product" (N. 1). Thus, this network counts a particular importance compared to other social networks to be heard and to maintain the link with the cooperative. "To address a cooperative, I often use its Facebook page, it is the most used by its manager and consumers too, I think we, Moroccans, still have this preference for the face" (N. 5); "I visit the fairs of local products, and I often ask for the business card of the cooperative ... it is the Facebook page that is used to keep in touch" (No. 13); "for me, the Facebook always has the last word when I am looking for information about a local product online" (N. 8). Indeed, our results support the work of [20], which highlights the prevalence of Facebook on the website. For it is increasingly attractive and a gateway for the postmodern community. In this sense, this result as well raises other studies [36], [6]. These papers stressed that any recent technology would mark a new society whose practices must explore its characteristics. Also, [31] exposes the key role of tribal marketing recently.

##### C. *Direct Contact*

Consumers who have already tried both canals of purchase (online and offline) of a terroir product emphasize a particular privilege to acquire it in a real contact. "Talking face to face with the person behind the production of a terroir product reassures me about its quality, authenticity and tradition" (N. 6). "The local product traces a manufacturing history behind that must sometimes be explained directly, the real before the virtual" (N. 20). The tangible contact between the consumer and the cooperative is considered important and allows exchanging on the means of production and the ingredients used. This preference of the public exposition may be explained by the nature of the local product. According to [37], the relationship goes beyond the simple service, the author-consumer touch represents a salient ingredient of authenticity for both actors. These results maintain the role of the real meeting place between manufacturer and consumer in the perception of authenticity of local products, because in addition to the cognitive dimension we also have the emotional aspect of this meeting. It is in this sense that [31] has shown that if the context of the product transmits an emotional and aesthetic charge, it could enchant the quest for authenticity of visitors. Our context exposes that: "There, I can say that I first perceive the authenticity of the product and then I share my experience with my circle of friends via Facebook for example" (N. 18); "obviously, if I am satisfied with the authenticity of a local product, I talk about it quite often in groups, among friends, the internet also allows us to easily and

freely promote the local product" (N.17). These results outline that for the offline, authenticity is directly related to the product and to the consumption experience. Whereas in a digital context, this perception is linked to a preliminary contact and to the ease of use of the interface. Fig. 1 shows the key role for experience and contact with the seller. Our results joint the recent results' research of [24], the perception of authenticity is not definite with complexity.



Fig. 1 Direct contact word cloud

#### D.Barrier to the First Shopping on the Internet

The informative role of digital is shared by half of the consumers. "A local product is to buy directly" (N. 9), "The online purchase comes after a first experience with the same object" (N. 3), "Personally, ordering argan oil on the internet is a bit risky especially for the first time" (N. 10). This result supports the findings of [38]. They have shown that information is an experience item. Therefore, the digital is seen as an interface diffusing information that its value is perceived only after having obtained it, because the search for information is easier in digital environment than in a retail point [39]. In a Moroccan context, for the purchase of a local product, consumer prefers the multi-sensory apprehension at the shop than a context mediated by a technology, such as a website, especially for a first discovery of the terroir product. Fig. 2 demonstrates that: taste, value, and contact are the important words in verbatim. Thus, consumer could afford to use his connected environment, but just to get an idea. The direct contact with such a product/cooperative is still important for the first purchase.



Fig. 2 Cloud of word frequency query

#### V.CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As the quest for authenticity was not only born with the flourishing of social media, it seems wise to us to always go

back to the primary sources of authenticity. Of course, every economic actor should follow the technological mutation, but without neglecting the original reason for consumption, especially when it comes to an unconventional product. Therefore, taking as a starting point the quest for authenticity for a local product, allows us to look at its antecedents and not its theatricalization, staging. This study's results show that digital technology could respond to the quest for postmodern authenticity under certain conditions. Direct contact remains a key ingredient of authenticity. Without aiming at a consensus between the different discourses on postmodern consumption, this paper specifies that digital could be a source of re-enchantment. It represents a convivial context of expression. On the managerial level, we specify that the wave of curiosity ends with a wave of popularity of social networks for Morocco. We are already around 29 million users, or 60% of Moroccans [40], so it is necessary to take the digital in the strategies for terroir products. The results highlight the need to go beyond the classic segmentation criteria by considering new criteria. In particular, the digital interface and the online profile of consumers. Moroccans do not prefer the "simulated" authenticity [2] of a terroir product, but they do want to know the real authenticity first, which is why the real character of the products should be promoted even in an online interface, as it remains important for consumer loyalty [41].

There are limitations to this work. In this exploratory study, we relied on a small sample, the use of a large sample is very suggested larger sample could that deepen the richness of the question studied. Thus, it would be interesting to study other terroir products from other national or international regions to see if culture could influence the contribution of digital on the quest for postmodern authenticity.

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