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AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTION OF BRAND MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING IN CRAFTSMANSHIP: STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

Craftsmanship plays a substantial role in the economic environment, with more than 300 billion euros in sales and more than three million employees in France for instance. It has, however been little studied in marketing, where research has mostly focused on consumer goods or services provided by industrial firms. Such firms are often distinct from craft enterprises in that they usually have a dedicated marketing department to work on brand identity (Kapferer 1996). In the present study, we specifically consider independent artisans, whose products can be found in local shops. Recent research on the concept of the human brand can help us understand the artisan as a brand (Thomson 2006, Moulard and al. 2015). A professional human brand can be measured by two dimensions – expertise and creativity (Parmentier and Fischer 2010) –, both of which are essential for the full development of a human brand (Arnould and Dion 2013). These two dimensions also characterize the artisan: He can be evaluated according to his skills based on his knowledge of the craft, know-how and expertise (Simeoni 1999; Amans, Bravo and Loup 2012) and according to his artistic qualities in relation to the creativity he reveals in his handmade work (Loup and Rakotovahiny 2011).

In the eyes of consumers, craftsmanship is often associated with notions of authenticity, expertise and proximity, whereas industrial brands are associated with elaborate marketing and less authenticity, resulting in a process of commodification (Camus 2001). Interestingly, in some sectors such as luxury or food, major brands claim values similar to those of craftsmanship. Given the usual opposition between craft and industrial brands, can this be reversed? Would an artisan who decides to apply marketing methods and tools used by industrial brands contradict the values of craftsmanship and consumers' perception of it? An interesting parallel may be drawn with artisanal and local products. A study on regional products shows that the marketing of local products is rejected because there is “too much cognitive dissonance between the image of local product and the underlying marketing approach” (Fort and Fort 2006). Specifically, local products and marketing do not match up because consumers are attached to the authenticity of these products and any changes may have a negative impact on their perception.

The aim of this study is to understand whether it is appropriate for an artisan to adopt a marketing approach. Is it risky for his image and might he then lose the values of authenticity and proximity usually associated with craftsmanship? This paper intends examining this question by means of a qualitative exploratory study. A focus group was formed among consumers to explore people's reactions when artisans adopt marketing methods. The main results of this analysis are then presented and discussed.

METHODOLOGY

The topic is relatively new and our study aims to understand in depth what artisans represent for consumers and whether such representations are compatible with brand management and marketing development strategies. For this exploratory study, a focus group was formed with consumers who regularly buy in artisanal shops. This methodology allows us to obtain the in-depth views of the respondents on the basis of their personal experience. It goes further in the exploration of the topic than individual interviews would permit, due to the group dynamics (Festinger and Katz 1974; Gibbs 1997). A

convenience sample of six consumers was selected on the basis of the criterion of regularly purchasing from artisanal firms in the food industry. We initially limited ourselves to this sub-sector because it involves day-to-day activities and offers an easy comparison between small artisanal businesses and large industrial firms.

The interview lasted 1h30 with a guideline around three themes: (1) the shopping experience in artisanal outlets and the reasons for this choice, (2) the role of the craftsman in this choice, and (3) reactions to the artisan's development strategies, based on four scenarios (moving to a larger shop, creating a second point of sale in another city, creating an e-commerce website with home delivery, and increasing the number of employees accompanied by the artisan's reorganization of his working practice). The participants' discourse were then transcribed and analyzed thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of transcripts shows that the various benefits traditionally associated with brands are also associated with the artisan, who may be considered as a brand. Furthermore, the analysis also reveal the boundaries in terms of developing marketing of the business, beyond which the artisan may lose these benefits.

'Artisan-brands' share benefits with traditional brands

The participants' discourses show that the various benefits for consumers associated with major brands, be they functional, experiential or symbolic (Keller 1993), also apply in the case of artisans, as brand's functions do.

The functional benefits of artisan-brands correspond to intrinsic values of artisanal products and are strongly linked to the local situation. First, product quality justifies making artisanal food purchases, as was evident from the comments of all the participants during the interviews.

"Yes, what is expected is product quality above all. I was sure of the product quality of my artisan" (Emmanuel); "The artisan is a guarantee of product quality" (Florent).

The second utilitarian benefit is the convenience arising from the geographical proximity of the artisan, which is a primary criterion for consumers in choosing a retail store for their food purchases (Colin et al. 2012).

"The practical side is very important, I alternate between different artisans in my town of residence and those close to my work" (Brice); "I go where it's most convenient" (Florent).

However, product quality always predominates in the choice and is the overriding pre-condition, as Brice and Emmanuel emphasize.

"I think convenience is very important. I shop nearby close and if it's good, whether for bread or meat, I go back. However, if I am disappointed by the quality, I'll go further afield" (Brice), "I go to the same artisan primarily for the quality of the product, and then for the convenience" (Emmanuel).

Experiential benefits of the artisan brand are linked to the consumption of the products and the pleasure derived from buying them. Firstly, consumers acknowledge the pleasure linked to the quality of artisanal products and they clearly distinguish between industrial and artisanal products.

"I go to supermarkets for a lot of products but generally to the baker for bread, as the baker's bread is better than the supermarket's" (Emmanuel); "I buy bread in supermarkets only when I cannot go to my artisan and I see the difference in quality" (Brice).

Furthermore, going to artisanal shops allows consumers to participate in a consumption experience (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), with the pleasure of talking to the person who manufactures the products and establishing a relationship with him.

“We have developed a cordial relationship” (Florent); “A friendly relationship has been created” (Emmanuel).

As regards the symbolic benefits, buying an artisan-brand can be a means of fulfilling the need for personal expression, social approval, or more generally relating to others (Keller 1993). Artisanal products are viewed as authentic quality products, either homemade or locally produced. These products may be chosen on a more occasional basis, for example to please guests invited to one’s home. According to Fuchs, van Osselaer and Schreier (2015), hand-made products generate an emotional dimension in the producer-consumer relationship and this affect is transmitted if a hand-made product is given to a friend or relative. Many studies on food consumption show that consumers are increasingly turning to local products (Fort and Fort 2006; Gabriel and Urien 2006; Merle and Piotrowski 2012). Doing so answers to the need for assurance with regard to food consumption (Gallen 2001), as well as the search for authenticity and nostalgia (Fort and Fort 2006), characteristics that enhance the symbolic aspect of artisanal products.

Consumers’ reactions to the development of marketing strategies by artisans

Respondents were presented with four scenarios of development strategies by an artisanal business. The initial situation was the same for the four scenarios, that is, a traditional artisanal butcher, with a small shop in a village, working with his wife, one employee and an apprentice. The scenarios were: (1) moving to a larger shop in a big city, (2) opening a second shop in a different location, (3) setting up an e-commerce website with a home delivery service, and (4) increasing the number of employees, with work reorganization by the artisan, who becomes less present in the store and takes on more administrative tasks. These scenarios highlighted what consumers view as the artisan’s business and reveal a line that if crossed can lead to a loss of authenticity.

In consumers’ imagination, the artisan is associated with a small shop. Enlarging the sales area is generally rather poorly perceived by respondents.

“It’s psychological, it’s preferable to go to the same small store with the same quality” (Sylvie); “The image of the artisan is that he must be in a cozy shop where the saleswoman is smiling, where the product is good. He will lose artisanal status compared to his original situation” (Emmanuel); “It’s puzzling” (Brice).

This situation raises worries about the role of the artisan in his business.

“Enlargement will mean the artisan won’t be able to manage everything, so it’ll be much more like a production line than artisanal work” (Pascale).

This undermines the trust in the artisan and even the perceived quality of the products.

“If the existing organization stays the same, they couldn’t produce everything in an artisanal way for supplying a large store. I’d trust it less” (Florent); “I’d tend to say that the quality may decrease because the artisan cannot be everywhere” (Marion).

Filser (1998) developed the theoretical concept of critical size for retailers, which states that below a certain size, a retailer cannot survive in the market. For artisans, the reverse seems to be the case, because an artisan has to sell his products in a small shop to so as ensure the hedonic character of visiting the store. Small size is essential for the perceived image of an artisanal business. The artisan's activity has to remain on a human scale, otherwise its artisanal values may vanish and the perceived quality of its products decline. Being able to visit or at least see artisanal workshops reassures consumers about the retention of artisanal values (Bergadaà 2008), in the same way that the presence of labels of origin on industrial products confers credibility (Larceneux 2003).

Alternatively the artisan may further modernize his business. Opening an e-commerce site tends to be seen as a vector of modernity that does not affect the values and perception of the artisan.

“It doesn’t shock me. He will always keep his artisanal values” (Emmanuel); “To have a modern artisan is pretty good, it won’t change the quality of the products, it’s just that he’ll sell his products to new customers” (Brice).

The above is true provided that product quality remains unchanged, otherwise trust in the artisan is undermined.

“These are the same products, so it doesn’t change anything” (Pascale); “If the products are handmade, the same as in the store, and transport is good in terms of hygiene and freshness with his name stamped on packages, it’s ok” (Emmanuel). But this department mustn’t become too large: “I ask myself about the links between food production, the store, and the internet business” (Florent).

The legitimacy of the artisan is a guarantee of quality. With regard to gastronomy, customers will primarily choose a restaurant for the chef, not for the setting (Dion and Boissieu 2013). The main reason is that such chefs have considerable charismatic legitimacy. Because of that legitimacy, a chef who has several restaurants does not have to be present at all them. Similar considerations were observed in our study when consumers were faced with an artisan who created a second point of sale. The purpose was to see if they would retain the same level of trust if the artisan was no longer present in the store where they shopped. The results show that this is the case, provided that the product quality is maintained. Moreover, consumers are in no doubt about this, as confirmed by spontaneous allusions to top chefs.

“I wouldn’t mind, I’d still be confident if the quality is the same” (Emmanuel); “For example, if Ducasse opens a restaurant next door to me, I’d go there because I know that the quality will be good even if he’s not there himself” (Emmanuel); “Yes, it’s the same thing on a smaller scale with the artisan known in his town or county” (Florent).

The physical presence of the artisan in his outlet is not essential for consumers and the development of his business may not have any impact on the perceived quality of the products. If this observation were to be verified by further research, this could prove to be an valuable development lever for artisans.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The primary goal of this paper was to explore the idea that an artisan could be considered as a brand, which is a new topic in marketing. Mobilizing the emerging literature on the human brand, we found relevant similarities among the different human brands studied (celebrities, athletes, chefs, film directors) and artisans. Like any professional human brand, the identity of artisans is based on expertise and creativity (Parmentier and Fischer 2010; Arnould and Dion 2013) and their legitimacy rests on traditional legitimacy, through their know-how and expertise, and on charismatic legitimacy, through their leadership (Dion and Boissieu 2013), because the artisan heads and embodies his business (Loup 2010; Dion and Boissieu 2013). Moreover, like some human brands (Moulard et al. 2015), artisanship is also characterized by its authenticity and its attachment (Thomson 2006). A key concern of this paper was to understand if it may be legitimate for an artisan to adopt a marketing approach without risking his artisanal values. An initial qualified answer can readily be advanced. Some types of marketing approach may be perceived positively by consumers (such as an e-commerce website), whereas others may induce negative perceptions (such as a larger shop).

Research on the legitimacy of brands has been mobilized to understand consumer reactions to artisans who undertake marketing approaches such as an e-commerce site. In addition to our theoretical findings, there are clear practical implications. Our results suggest that the artisan can use marketing without losing artisanal values. Nevertheless, he must be careful to retain many artisanal aspects of his business, such as limiting the size of his store and maintaining the quality of his hand-made products.

References Available Upon Request.