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The influence of proximity on consumers' trust toward wine of their favourite winery region

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Abstract :

Following the work that had investigated the perception of risk associated with the purchase of food (Mitchell V-W., 1999 ; Muraro-Cochart M., 2000 ; Muraro-Cochart M., 2003 ; Yeung R.M.W. et Morris J., 2001), this paper have focused on the influence of proximity (Bergadaa M. and Del Bucchia C., 2009 ; Damperat M., 2006; Hérault-Fournier C., Merle A. and Prigent-Simonin A.H., 2012 and 2014) on consumers' trust and perceived risks reduction when purchasing wine. The first section of this paper is devoted to a literature review of health risks and the notion of proximity. The next section presents the methodology used in this research, which is based on a quantitative survey of 591 French respondents aged from 18 to over 64 years old. The results of this work confirm the role of proximity, under almost all its forms, as an antecedent of trust. The conclusion of this communication describes the theoretical and managerial implications, the limitations and the future lines of investigation that stem from this work.

Key words: consumer's behaviour, risk, proximity, trust.

Introduction

Since the 50's, all the different French governments have put in place actions against alcohol by sensitizing the French about the potential danger alcohol's consumption and more particularly wine can be for the health. Even if the effect of drinking alcohol isn't to prove anymore, the French consumers have a representation of wine that means that "tasting wine, is about stimulating your sensorial system and take pleasure out of it and a lot more than that as well" (Aron, 1999)

In the continuing works that investigated about the risks liked to buying food (Mitchell, 1999; Muraro-Cochard, 2000 and 2003; Yeung et Morris, 2001; Pichon, 2006), the authors of this communication got interested in the perception of risk in the act of buying wine. The results of their work suggested that the physical risk, long or short term, was weakly perceived by the consumers. On the contrary, the financial risks, gustatory performance and psychological self-image exist in the buying act. In order to reinsure their choices, they will mobilize the notion of proximity (Damperat, 2006; Bergadaa and Del Bucchia, 2009; Hérault-Fournier et al., 2012, 2014), under every aspect (proximity of access, relational proximity, identity proximity, processual proximity and functional proximity).

This research is looking to define the concept of proximity and point out its interest as a reducer of risk through the wine buying process by considering its influence on consumer's trust.

The first section of this communication will be devoted to a literary journal about the alimentary risk, the concept of proximity and the trust. The next section will present the hypotheses of this research before processing the methodology to test them. The obtained results will then be detailed before being discussed in the conclusion that will present the theoretical and management involvement as well as the limits and lines of research.

Literature Review

This first section is devoted to a literary review about alimentary risk and the notion of proximity.

The alimentary risk

The fears linked to food appeared long ago. Chiva (1998) reminds, "*In all times, man king had to consider eating as taking a risk*". Also Apfelbaun (1998) considers that "*the alimentary risk is never absent and is hardly quantifiable*".

Researchers explain this continual risk taking with the principal of incorporation (Corbeau, in Corbeau et Poulain, 2002). Antoine (1997, quoted by Marouseau, 2001) describing the future tendency's of consumption, estimates that "*the new consumer is probably a myth: the scared consumer, surely a reality*".

The notion of risk is omnipresent in the food marketing and many researchers have taken an attempt in listing all the different existing types of risks (Kapferer, 1998 ; Guillon, 1998 ; Brunel, 2002). For Brunel (2002), the risk is multidimensional and covers the risk of performance, the financial risk, the short and long term physical risk, the psychological risk (self-esteem, fear of swelling), the social risk (socio-economic and ecological consequences that consuming the product can induce).

According to the principal of incorporation, the physical and sanitary is the major risk when it comes to alimentary consuming (Müller, 1985 ; Kapferer, 1998 ; Dandouau, 1999, Brunel, 2000 ; Poulain, 2002 ; Gallen and Cases, 2003 ; Muraro-Cochart, 2003 ;Pichon, 2006).

The notion of risk is however hardly quantifiable (Khan, 1998) and the alimentary risk in reality is less important today than it was thirty years ago (Apfelbaum, 1998 ; Duby, 1998 ; Gurviez et al., 2003). According to literature, if the (objective) alimentary risk has considerably decreased these last few years, his perception has also been highly changed and accentuated.

Moreover, if the consumers can sense the risks, this involves that they have to try and reduce then if they wish to acquire the product or the service (Bettman, 1973 ; Ingene et Hugues, 1985).

The research of information is a way of reducing the percept risk (Dowling et Staelin, 1994, Volle, 1995). Locander et Hermann (1979) rank these risk reducers by the source of information and distinguish five categories :

- Impersonal sources that are non disinterested (TV adverts, radio, written ads on selling locations)
- Impersonal sources that are independent (a technical notice about the product, consumers associations)
- Personal sources that are non disinterested (sellers or producers advices)
- Personal sources that are independent (friends, neighbours or family advices)
- Sources resulting from experience or personal observation (trying the product before buying it, an information on the products packaging, a demonstration on using the product)

The notion of proximity

The term of proximity comes from Latin word “*proximitas*” meaning “*neighbourhood*”. Olivier-Yaniv said “*It’s in the 16th century that proximity meant something that is close to something else (in space)*” before being used as a term of resemblance.

In the context of continual risk taking we exposed previously and if we take in consideration the principal of incorporation wherein the eater will ingest an extern organism susceptible of putting him in danger (Corbeau, in Corbeau et Poulain, 2002), previous work from the authors show that proximity can be considered as a major risk reducer in the case of buying alimentary products.

This need of proximity can be explained by the fact that the industrialization of food production and the alimentary transformation revealed new products missing identity (Poulain, 2002). Furthermore, the perceived complexity of the food spinneret and the appearance of new food technology’s (Kreaziak, 2000) increase the distance between the aliment and the consumer. We are far away from that time when the aliment was clearly and affectively identified, a time when an eater knew personally and intimately the one that had cooked the product that they had in their plate: the antes canned food, the garden salad, etc. (Poulain, 1996). Seeing this distance driving away the consumer from the product, it seems legit that he is in search of all the elements susceptible of minimizing this distance.

Bergadaà and Del Bucchia (2009) identified five dimensions of proximity between a consumer and a store (cf. Table 1):

- Proximity of Access : Refers to the geographical proximity.
- Proximity of Identity : According to Rallet and Torre (2005) it is linked to the proximity of similitude and “*creates a link by sharing the same system of representations and belief*”.
- Relational Proximity : It matches with direct relationships between the consumer and the brand’s staff.
- Processual Proximity : It is about the knowledge of the internal operation of the store that guaranties the quality of the products.
- Functional Proximity: It deals with the efficiency of the purchase and is characterised by a willing of optimizing the time spent in the store finding the wanted product.

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Proximity of access | Makes it easier for the consumer to go to the store (distance, time, convenience of access). |
| Proximity of Identity | Relation that the consumer has with the store and the values it represents. |
| Relational Proximity | Physical encounter, direct relationships between the staff and the consumer. |
| Processual Proximity | The importance allowed by the consumer on to how the store works : quality and origin of the product, method of preparation and distribution. |
| Functional Proximity | Search of efficiency in relation with the activity: finding the products easily, time you have to wait at the checkout, having a large choice of products. |

Table 1 – Dimensions of proximity between a consumer and a store
(Bergadaà and Del Bucchia, 2009)

Nowadays, the word “*proximity*” is more and more used by commercial organizations concerned about insuring “*proximity*” relationships with their clients and to be perceived as “*close to their clients*”.

In fact, through the commercial activities, proximity as seen by a consumer can have a positive influence on the degree of satisfaction (Barnes, 1997) or in its loyalty (Damperat, 2006).

However, until now, the notion of proximity has mainly been used as a way to study about the trust given by the consumer to the store (Hérault-Fournier and *al.*, 2012, 2014) but never towards the product.

But the results of the researches conducted by the authors show that proximity towards food, industry stockholders, or any other element susceptible of being mobilized; from the conception to the marketing of the product are major risk reducers.

Indeed, in the context of buying wine, researches show that the consumer’s search of proximity shows especially by a particular attention allowed to the origin of the product (proximity of access), to relationships with the wine spinneret and especially with the “*cavistes*” (relational proximity), defending a “*terroir*” (proximity of identity), knowledge of fabrication methods (processual proximity) and the search of a wine that will have a good taste and we will have some pleasure drinking (functional proximity).

Research hypotheses

This research tests the predictive powers of the four dimensions of proximity on the trust the consumers have towards wine of their favourite wine region, defined as the belief in the credibility and integrity of the product (Morgan and Hunt; 1994) that the consumer will buy. The central hypothesis of this research resides in the positive influence of proximity on trust as postulated on multiple times (Bergadaà and Del Bucchia, 2009; Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008; Gilly and Torre, 2000). This hypothesis can be decomposed in the five following hypotheses :

- H1: proximity of access has a positive influence on trust
- H2: proximity of identity has a positive influence on trust
- H3: relational proximity has a positive influence on trust
- H4: processual proximity has a positive influence on trust
- H5: functional proximity has a positive influence on trust

The next section will present the method used to test these hypothesis.

Methodology

A quantitative study based on a questionnaire was conducted on 591 individuals aged from 18 to more than 64 year old, with 325 women (55,1% of the sample) and 256 men (44,8% of the sample). The tables 2 and 3 describes the sample of this study.

| | Number of Respondents | % |
|-----------|-----------------------|-------|
| 18-24 Y/O | 66 | 11,2 |
| 25-29 Y/O | 61 | 10,3 |
| 30-34 Y/O | 64 | 10,8 |
| 35-39 Y/O | 60 | 10,2 |
| 40-44 Y/O | 76 | 12,9 |
| 45-49 Y/O | 64 | 10,8 |
| 50-54 Y/O | 74 | 12,5 |
| 55-59 Y/O | 67 | 11,3 |
| 60-64 Y/O | 49 | 8,3 |
| + 64 Y/O | 10 | 1,7 |
| Total | 591 | 100,0 |

Table 2 – Sample demographics by age

| | Number of Respondents | % |
|---------------|-----------------------|--------|
| Lot | 240 | 40,6 |
| Haute-Garonne | 111 | 18,8 |
| Aveyron | 100 | 16,9 |
| Others | 67 | 11,3 |
| Corrèze | 23 | 3,9 |
| Dordogne | 16 | 2,7 |
| Hérault | 12 | 2,0 |
| Gironde | 11 | 1,9 |
| Tarn | 10 | 1,7 |
| Syst. missing | 1 | 0,2 |
| Total | 591 | 100,00 |

Table 3 – Sample demographics by geographic area

The measurement scale of proximity comes from a measurement tool used in a study made by Hérault-Fournier and *al.* for a brand (2012, 2014). The items used in this study were adapted to the wine context according to results obtained by the authors in previous researches mobilizing a qualitative approach (Bories and *al.*, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). The measurement scale of proximity is presented in the appendix 1. The results of reliability are synthesized in table 4. The trust has been measured with 3 items and presents an acceptable level of reliability with an Alpha of Cronbach (1951) of 0,795.

| Dimension of proximity | Cronbach's alpha |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Proximity of access | 0,836 |
| Proximity of identity | 0,800 |
| Relational proximity | 0,896 |
| Processual proximity | 0,887 |
| Functional proximity | 0,686 |

Table 4 – Alpha Coefficients for each dimension of Proximity

Findings

The hypotheses of this research have been tested with a linear regression model which presents an R² of 0,415. The summary results of the model are presented in table 5.

Table 5 – Summary of models

| Model | R | R-2 | R-2 adjusted | Standard error of the estimation |
|-------|-------------------|------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | ,644 ^a | ,415 | ,410 | ,76882206 |

a. Predicted values: (constants), Proximity of access, Proximity of identity, Relational proximity, Processual proximity, Functional proximity.

The two variables taken into account explain 41,5% of trust (re-adjusted). The table 6 shows that the model is significant and that the coefficients of linear regression are not equal to 0 (F=82,204 ; sign. 0,000).

Table 6- ANOVA^b

| Model | Sum of squares | ddl | Mean square | D | Sig. |
|--------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|-------------------|
| 1 Regression | 242,949 | 5 | 48,590 | 82,204 | ,000 ^a |
| Residual | 342,831 | 580 | ,591 | | |
| Total | 585,780 | 585 | | | |

a. Predicted values: (constants), Proximity of access, Proximity of identity, Relational proximity, Processual proximity, Functional proximity.

b. Dependent variable: Trust

As shows table 7, the link between proximity of access, functional proximity and trust as significantly positive (t = 3,930, significance = 0,000; t=15,688, significance = 0,000). Moreover, the collinear test results show that the tolerances and factors of inflation of the variance (VIF) are very close to 1, widely in the recommended limits (Tolerance > 0,3 an VIF < 3). The independent variables are then weakly correlated between them, witch is a hint of quality of the model.

Tableau 7- Coefficients

| Model | | Coefficients non standardized | | Coefficients standardized | t | Sig. | Statistics of correlation | |
|-------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|--------|------|---------------------------|-------|
| | | B | Standard error | Beta | | | Tolerance | VIF |
| 1 | (Constant) | -,002 | ,032 | | -,076 | ,940 | | |
| | Proximity of access | ,130 | ,033 | ,129 | 3,930 | ,000 | ,932 | 1,073 |
| | Proximity of identity | ,093 | ,038 | ,093 | 2,413 | ,016 | ,686 | 1,458 |
| | Relational proximity | ,023 | ,039 | ,023 | ,604 | ,546 | ,668 | 1,498 |
| | Process proximity | ,001 | ,040 | ,001 | ,013 | ,990 | ,620 | 1,613 |
| | Functional proximity | ,550 | ,035 | ,551 | 15,688 | ,000 | ,818 | 1,222 |

a. Dependent variable: Trust

The results validate the hypothesis H1 and H5 whereas the hypotheses H2, H3 and H4 are not validated by the tested model. Thereby, only the hypothesis of proximity of access and functional proximity have a positive influence on consumer's trust toward wine coming from there favourite winery region. The positive influences of identity, relational and processual proximity on trust have not been validated.

Conclusion

The results of this research confirm that proximity is a previous factor to trust. (Damperat, 2006; Bergadaa and Del Bucchia, 2009; Hérault-Fournier and al., 2012, 2014).

However this work of research shows that it is not possible to conclude that all the dimensions of proximity have an influence on the consumers trust towards the wine of their favourite wine region. Thereby, among all the investigated dimensions, only proximity of access and functional proximity seem to have a positive and significant impact on their trust. Speaking of identity proximity, its effect is non significant.

The collected data did not allow validating the effects of relational and processual proximity on trust. This might explain the fact that, when they buy wine in supermarkets, the consumers don't necessarily, neither know the producers, nor their work methods.

It is important to say here that, in the case of a food product, the risk of taste performance is preponderant. Therefore, it's not surprising to note that the consumer trust in wine is based on the functional proximity.

The most important implication of this research is to highlight the importance of functional proximity in the case of trust toward wine. It is necessary for wine professionals to implement wine tastings to reinforce the notion of functional proximity in consumers' minds. Furthermore, these wine tastings will help working on the other dimensions of consumers' proximity toward the product.

Despite these contributions, this research shows limits inherent to the concept of proximity as developed in previous researches. In fact, it seems necessary to deepen the role of functional proximity because, as would say Hérault-Fournier and al. (2012), it seems that this dimension of proximity can be interpreted as an utilitarian value rather than a real dimension of the concept of proximity. It therefore seems essential to clarify the links between "*functional proximity*" and the utilitarian value of the product.

This research confirms that a lot of work still needs to be done in order to clarify the notion of proximity toward a product as this concept was mostly studied toward the shops (Hérault-Fournier and cie. 20012, 2014). In a more general way, future researches will have to focus on looking for all the factors contributing to shorten the distance between the consumer and the product.

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Appendix 1: Proximity measurement tool - Results of the exploratory factorial analysis

| | | Factor | | | | |
|--|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Items | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Proximity of access | Q53 I easily find wine of this region in shops | | | ,885 | | |
| | Q54 The wine of this region is always in section a the place where I normally buy wine | | | ,878 | | |
| | Q55 I can vary easily get to a place that sells the wine of this region | | | ,820 | | |
| Proximity of identity | Q58 I completely share the vision of viticulture advocated by the winemakers that produce the wine of this region | | | | ,726 | |
| | Q60 My personal values and the wine of this region are very close | | | | ,822 | |
| | Q61 The values defended by the winemakers of this region are very important to me | | | | ,818 | |
| Relational proximity | Q62 I have a friendship with winemakers of this region | ,816 | | | | |
| | Q63 I spend a lot of time interchanging about the wine with the winemakers of this region | ,838 | | | | |
| | Q64 I spend a lot of time interchanging with the winemakers of this region about other things than wine | ,861 | | | | |
| | Q65 I personally know winemakers of this region | ,802 | | | | |
| Process proximity | Q66 I know exactly how the wine is made in this region | | ,701 | | | |
| | Q68 I know very well the rules and organization of the winemakers in this region | | ,836 | | | |
| | Q69 I know very well the producing methods the winemakers use to make the wine in this region | | ,884 | | | |
| | Q72 I know very well how the winemakers that sell wine in this region work | | ,787 | | | |
| Functional proximity | Q67 I certain I can not be disappointed when I buy a wine from this region | | | | | ,762 |
| | Q71 I know the wines of this region have a nice taste | | | | | ,814 |
| | Q74 It makes me happy to buy a wine from this region | | | | | ,700 |
| Explained Variance for each dimension | | 18,370 | 17,540 | 13,436 | 13,068 | 11,078 |
| Total Explained Variance (%) | | 73,492 | | | | |
| Cronbach's alpha for each dimension | | 0,896 | 0,887 | 0,836 | 0,800 | 0,686 |
| Cronbach's alpha's for the measurement tool (17 items) | | 0,872 | | | | |

Table 1 - Factorial structure and reliability of the scale (values inferior to 0,4 are not reported)