

THE EFFECT OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY ON THE PERCEPTION OF PRODUCT QUALITY IN VIETNAM'S LEADING CITIES; AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This paper of exploratory research employs principles of the social identity approach to examine the community identity of people in two cities of Vietnam. The social identity approach, specifically self-categorization theory, proposes that the self-concept is oriented towards both a personal identity and numerous social identities. The community identity is proposed as being one of these social categories. When a social identity is felt, particularly when placed in comparison with an opposing group, individuals will form perceptions and preferences supporting the group identity. Residents of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam were asked to indicate purchase preference for own versus other city products, rate the cities on the perceived quality of products made there and, finally, the degree of felt community identity was measured. Measurements for community identity and the degree of purchase preference for local products are the exploratory aspects of this study. Respondents had a more positive perception of the quality of products made in their community and expressed a purchase preference for these products. As exploratory research a random sample was not used so the results of this study are not generalizable to the overall population.

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The self identity that people possess can have a significant impact on the way they make consumption decisions. One manifestation of the self identity concerns the ways people associate with others in forming a social identity. One way of examining the associations people have with others is self-categorization theory. This theory considers the proposition that, not only do people have a desire and a propensity to hold a more positive self-esteem of themselves, but they also wish to hold a positive sense of esteem with the various groups with which they associate (Turner 1982; Tajfel 1981). This paper is concerned with one such group identity, the community identity. The effect of

this identity is examined as it is manifested in perceptions of product quality, consumer economic preferences and purchase preferences.

Literature Review

Social Identity and the Community

Social identity theorists posit that the self-concept is made up of two distinct aspects: the personal identity and the social identity (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell 1987; Hogg and Abrams 1990). The personal identity includes specific attributes of the individual such as competence, talent and sociability. The social identity is defined as “that part of an individual’s self concept which derives from his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981, p. 225). Essentially, personal identity refers to how people see themselves as individuals while social identity refers to how people view themselves with respect to the social groups to which they belong.

The ‘social identity approach’ is an umbrella term encompassing social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Hogg and Abrams 1990; Wyer 2010). Originally, social identity theory was an analysis of intergroup conflict and social change focusing on individuals’ need to have a positive distinctiveness in their in-group compared to out-groups, achieving a positive social identity (Tajfel 1978). The more recent and closely related self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987) represents a theory of group processes based on the idea that a shared social identity depersonalizes the individual identity. This is not a loss of personal identity but rather the group identity being internalized within the individual. As Turner points out, “the group process embodies a shift in the level of abstraction at which the individual self operates” (Turner et al. 1987, iv). Self-categorization theory offers to explain the process of acquiring and using social identities.

An individual can be said to have a taxonomy of social identities and the proposition has been accepted that an individual holds several identities contemporaneously and that any one may hold greater importance, depending on characteristics of the individual and the circumstance of the current situation (Turner et al. 1987; Haslam, Reicher and Reynolds 2012). Among the social categories with which a person may identify are work groups, religion, race, ethnicity and nation, along with many others. The integration of the self-concept with a social identity is intensified by two factors:

- 1) the degree of unity felt among those sharing the same identity, and
- 2) the relative distance felt towards those regarded as the ‘out-group’.

The concept of social identity can most readily be illustrated in the differences between ethnic or racial groups. Indeed, the term ‘ethnocentrism’ was coined by Sumner (1906) in his study of racism. Sumner felt that racism occurred as the natural consequence of people reacting to a perceived threat; they would increase their association with people similar to themselves and separate themselves from those who were different, in order to reduce the threat. More recently, it has been acknowledged that an actual threat is not

always required (Tajfel 1978; Turner et al. 1987). People have a desire to see themselves in a positive light and they also wish to see the people they associate with in a positive light (Reynolds, Turner and Haslam 2000). This desire may be expressed in a variety of ways less severe than racism. In a consumer context this desire to differentiate positively may be expressed as a purchase preference or in the perception of the quality of products originating from the group in question. A preference may be expressed in regard to any social group that may be relevant to an individual. The relevant social group in a consumer context might be a country, a religious affiliation, or even Girl Scout Troops selling cookies.

When a combination of personal characteristics and a particular situation creates a condition sufficiently strong, a particular social category will become more salient and increasingly affect the person's feelings (Onorato and Turner 2004). This occurs when the differences of people within a category are minimized and the differences between the categories are maximized. The greater the unity within the group and the greater the differences towards those outside the group, the greater the group identity will be.

Personal characteristics that may be important include the accessibility to a certain social category. Accessibility is accentuated by the frequency of occurrence or the depth of feeling associated with the thing. When attention is drawn to the differences a person perceives between that person's group and another group, the more important that group identity will become. In the case of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City the strength of a person's sense of community identity may be influenced not only by the attitude held about the respondent's own city but also by the attitude held towards the other city.

The word 'community' may have various meanings. It can mean a community of interest binding a group of people (Crowther and Cooper 2002). Community can mean a subdivision of a large city or a small town. Community, in this paper, refers to the city of a person's residence.

The measurement of community identity and the outcomes of community identity, such as differences in perceived product quality, are observed in the two leading, and possibly competing, cities in one country. The country is Vietnam and the cities are Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. While it is a country presently undergoing rapid growth, Vietnam is a country where poverty and poor infrastructure have limited the actual contact that many people have with others located in other parts of the country. The physical distance separating the cities is also quite significant, with Hanoi being located far to the north and Ho Chi Minh City being located far to the south of this very long, narrow country. These two cities are particularly interesting, as there are a variety of longstanding differences between them. Casual discussions with people in Ho Chi Minh City characterize people of the North in general, and Hanoi in particular, as being backwards and provincial. Additionally, the north and south of Vietnam were separate countries beginning in 1954, ending with reunification in 1975 at the conclusion of a long war. Residual feelings about the war, reunification and its aftermath may contribute to a continuing sense of difference which may be manifested in the sense of community identity when a

comparison is made between these two cities. The differences between these cities make for a unique situation providing for the expression of community identity.

There are historical reasons to believe that the people of each of these cities would find their sense of community identity more highly accessible when their city is placed in comparison to the other city. The comparison of a respondent's city to another city would give an occasion to feel the normally submerged sense of community identity. A sense of community identity is not one that is usually thought to be close to the surface. However, social identities can be primed and be encouraged to come to the surface in innocuous ways. Stayman and Deshpande (1989) primed the ethnic identity by using scenarios placing respondents in consumption situations with either their parents who held an ethnic identity, or others without the ethnic identity. Heightened awareness of a particular social identity may be quite transient. Forehand and Deshpande (2001) found 'ethnic self-awareness' to occur temporarily after the ethnic identity was primed in an advertisement.

To tie the community identity to consumer behavior an analogy to the national identity and the country of origin effect may be fairly straightforward. Country of origin refers to the tendency people have to show a preference for products based on the country where the product was manufactured (Liefeld 1993; Nagashima 1970). The topic has been widely researched with such factors as brand image (Tse and Gorn 1993), ethnocentric tendencies (Shimp and Sharma 1987; Sharma, Shimp and Shin 1995; Netemeyer, Durvasula and Lichtenstein 1991) and even consumers' "animosity" towards the manufacturing country many years after a war (Klein, Ettenson and Morris 1998) having been shown to sometimes be influential in forming a product preference. The community identity could reasonably be taken to be a matter of refining the national identity to accommodate a smaller level of aggregation. However, there are reasons why the national identity does not precisely parallel the community identity. Much research in the theoretical development of the national identity concerns an individual's ethnocentric tendencies. According to Sumner (1906) ethnocentrism often develops as a result of the perception of a threat from outsiders. The community identity may develop somewhat differently. It is much easier to feel a threat from those of another country than from those in another city within the same country.

In the case of the community there is often little reason to feel animosity or anger towards the people of another community. Still, people want to see themselves and the groups they associate with in a positive light and this desire may be illustrated in the way they evaluate products coming from another community as compared to their own community.

A study very similar to the current one is Lantz and Loeb (1998) where a purchase preference associated with community identity was identified. In that study Canadian respondents from the city of Winnipeg, evaluating products sourced from Winnipeg and Belleville, Ontario evaluated the Winnipeg product as being superior and they also gave it a greater purchase preference. There was a positive relationship between the degree of felt community identity and the strength of the product quality evaluation of the local product.

Hypotheses

Do people have a sense of shared identity with their community and, if so, does this shared identity affect their assessment of product quality and their purchase decisions? The main proposition being examined in this study is that people will show a sense of identification with their city. This is most clearly manifested by the purchase preference they express and the perceived quality of products manufactured there, as opposed to being manufactured in another city in the same country.

H1: Respondents in each city will have a greater purchase preference for products manufactured in their city than products manufactured in the other city.

H2: Respondents in each city will have a higher opinion of perceived product quality for products manufactured in their city than from the other city.

A proposition of self-categorization theory is that traits people hold may include the degree to which a person feels a sense of shared identity with the social group in question. Also, a logical outcome of holding this shared identity is an increased sense of ethnocentricity towards others and in support of the group (Turner et al.1987). The community is not an ethnic group, but it is a group that might achieve an 'us versus them' feeling towards another community in regard to the normative value of supporting the community economically. Therefore, city identity and city economic preferences should be associated with a manifestation of this, such as the assessment of the quality of products manufactured in the home city.

H3: There is a positive relationship between respondents high on community identity and community consumer economic preferences with perceived product quality for products manufactured in their city.

Methodology

Sample

The sample is comprised of 250 people, 150 from Hanoi and 100 from Ho Chi Minh City. The respondents were a convenience sample of a combination of city residents and some post-undergraduate level university students and people participating in a business training program. The student portion of the sample was comprised of sixteen respondents from an MBA class and there were thirty who were adults enrolled in business school sponsored training programs. While this convenience sample was not randomly selected, it was selected with the intent of approximating the general population. 45.6% are male and 54.4% are female. The ages range from 19 to 70 with a mean of 35.9 years old. The CIA Factbook (CIA, 2017) reports the median age as about 31 with a sex ratio in that age category of about one-to-one. So the sample was slightly older and slightly more female than the general population. The range of incomes was

widely distributed with the mean at about 1,500,000 Vietnam Dong per month (about US\$70). This is consistent with the World Bank's estimate of Vietnam being a low-middle income country (World Bank, 2017).

Education is the most important category where the sample varies from the general population. 58% of the sample has a university degree and 30% have high school or less with the remainder having a technical degree. This was not a randomly selected sample and it does vary from the general population, particularly in education, therefore the results are not generalizable.

Measures

The variables selected for inclusion in the study were (in order of presentation): purchase preference for products from each city, perceived product quality of products from each city, community identity, community economic preference scale. Additionally, demographics of age, gender, length of residence in the city, and income were included.

This research is about a person's perceived identify with a city, so respondents had to be qualified in this sense of identity. As a screening question, respondents were asked, "What city or town do you consider to be your home?" If the answer was someplace other than Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City they were excluded from the survey. Additionally, only respondents who had lived in one of these cities for more than five years were included. The arbitrary qualification of five years was felt sufficient to develop a sense of identity with the city. Years of residence of the sample ranges from five to sixty years.

Purchase Preference. Purchase preference was determined using a conjoint analysis. Conjoint analysis is a useful means of assessing purchase preference because it is possible to disguise the true matter of inquiry, thereby reducing the likelihood of a biased response from the respondents. In other words, the 'community' aspect is not given undue attention. Use of conjoint analysis also allows for a more realistic decision making scenario to be presented to respondents. Additionally, when price is included as a product feature, the degree of preference can be quantified in a more visible way.

The product chosen for testing was rice cookers. Although rice cookers are a mundane product, they are a familiar product whose qualities are well known to people in the country. The scenario presented to respondents was as follows:

"Two popular brands of rice cooker are: Tiger and Lion. Both of these manufacturers are located in Japan but are considering building a factory in Vietnam. Assume that the rice cooker holds 1.8L and the same cookers made in Japan sell for 1.400.000 dong. We would like to know how you would evaluate these products if they were offered in the combinations listed below.

First, carefully review this list. THEN, rank order your preference by placing a “1” next to your first choice, a “2” next to your second choice, and so on until you have placed a number next to all eight choices.”

Following this scenario were eight product attribute combinations. The conjoint analysis was a 2x2x2 full factorial design. Factors included were, brand, city where the factory was located, and price. The brands were Tiger and Lion brands; both products are presently manufactured in Japan and on the market in Vietnam although the brand names are not widely known. Two prices were presented to respondents, 950000 dong or 990000 dong; a four percent difference. These prices are about two-thirds the price of the same products when they are manufactured in Japan. This reduction in price from the Japanese-made version was considered reasonable by local standards as Vietnam often offers a tariff on imported goods to encourage local manufacturing. The design used only these three attributes in order to keep it simple but still meaningful to respondents. Including more product attributes would have increased the burden on respondents.

The conjoint analysis was performed solely to acquire a measurement for purchase preference for each city. The actual variable from the conjoint analysis used to indicate purchase preference is the utility, or partworth, obtained for the ‘city’ factor. The conjoint analysis portion of the survey was administered first so that other questions would not influence the respondents’ expression of purchase preference.

Perceived Product Quality. Next, product quality was assessed with five questions for each city on a Likert type scale of 1 to 7 (completely disagree-completely agree). The questions inquired about perceptions of quality of general products made in those cities. The questions were not about specific products. Respondents answered the questions for both cities. The items relate both to quality of products in general, and also to the quality of workmanship in the cities. These questions were primarily derived from Petroschius and Monroe (1987). The five items had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .84 showing good reliability for exploratory work. All five items formed a single factor under exploratory factor analysis. For hypotheses testing, the five questions were summed and made into a single variable.

City Identity. Indexes to measure the degree of identity with the city and ethnocentric tendencies associated with the degree of identification with the city were adapted for this study. These measures are the main ‘exploratory’ part of this research and are subject to further development. Items were adapted from the identity subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker’s collective self-esteem scale (1992). An additional item was taken from Hawes and Lumpkin (1984), an outshopping paper, because it appeared to focus on community identity. All items were a seven point Likert type format. As only a small amount of published work using measures for these concepts were found (Lantz 1997; Lantz and Loeb 1997) and none in Asia, this portion of the survey must be considered highly exploratory. Reliability analysis of this index was .84 and an exploratory factor analysis indicated that it was unidimensional.

Community Consumer Economic Preference. As with community identity, scant prior research has been published so this measure is also in a formative stage of development. To measure community consumer economic preference the Shimp and Sharma (1987) CETSCALE was adapted. The CETSCALE has a long and distinguished history in measuring consumer ethnocentrism at the country level so, as a matter of exploratory scale development, it offered a good starting point for measuring a similar concept at the community level. Only four items of the original scale were applicable to a community situation. Of the four items, one had to be deleted to make the index unidimensional with an alpha of .75. This alpha nears the lower range of reliability but is still acceptable for exploratory work (Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black, 1998). The items used to assess city consumer economic preferences are included in the appendix along with the items used to assess city identity.

When data was collected, after qualifying respondents the interaction with each respondent began with the conjoint analysis scenario and responses. After the conjoint analysis the questions about perceived product quality, city identity and community consumer economic preference followed.

Results

Conjoint analysis. The conjoint analysis was designed as a fractionated full factorial model and analyzed using SPSS. The results of the conjoint analysis are shown in Table 1. The results show a substantial preference for the locally manufactured product.

The most important factor was ‘price’, with the lower price being preferred. The relative importance of price is not surprising in such a poor country. However, the relative importance of ‘city’ is impressive. While respondents in both cities apportion nearly equal importance to ‘city’ their preferences are nearly opposite of each other. In both cases, they prefer the product manufactured in their own city. So, if prices and brands were the same, there would be a significant preference for the locally manufactured rice cooker. For hypothesis testing, the City partworth was used as the measure for Purchase Preference.

Table 1
Conjoint Analysis Results

	HCM City Sample	Hanoi Sample
City	35.96%	34.56%
HCM City	1.0625	-.7568
Hanoi	-1.0625	.7568
Brand	20.2%	26.68%
Tiger	-.2775	.4916
Lion	.2775	-.4916
Price	43.83%	38.09%
950000 dong	.8500	.9628
990000 dong	-.8500	-.9628

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Kendall's Tau	.786 sig.=.0032	1.00 sig.=.0003
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Overall importance of each factor is expressed as a percentage
Factor scores are partworths.

Table 2 shows the individual questions and the responses obtained from respondents in the two cities. Regarding products made in Ho Chi Minh City the differences between respondents from the two cities were significantly different in every comparison, with residents of Ho Chi Minh City perceiving higher quality. Respondents' opinions about products made in Hanoi are less distinctive; the differences are significant in only two of five comparisons.

Table 2
Perceptions of Product Quality in Hanoi and HCM City

	HCM City Respondents Mean Score	Hanoi Respondents Mean Score	T-test (sig.) difference
Products made in HCMC are of high quality	5.17	4.42	3.1 (.002)
Quality of labor in HCMC is high	5.52	4.49	4.86 (.000)
Products made in HCMC are made to last	4.70	4.12	2.57 (.011)
The average worker in HCMC is excellent	4.79	3.93	3.88 (.000)
I trust products made in HCMC	5.12	4.47	2.97 (.003)
Products made in Hanoi are of high quality	4.63	4.97	1.62 (.109)
Quality of labor in Hanoi is high	4.71	4.97	1.40 (.164)
Products made in Hanoi are built to last	4.43	4.90	2.24 (.026)
The average worker in Hanoi is excellent	4.30	4.33	.17 (.868)
I trust products made in Hanoi	4.39	5.27	4.65 (.000)

Mean score on a scale of 1=completely disagree to 7=completely agree

The means of analysis to answer H1 and H2 is essentially a comparison of two groups (cities) with multiple variables. To minimize the experimentwise error rate, the appropriate means of analysis is MANOVA. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Multivariate Analysis of Variance

Source of Variation	Supports	Multivariate F-Ratio	Univariate F-Ratio	Degrees of Freedom	P Less Than
Overall		69.741		3; 227	.000
City Purchase Preference	H1		210.89	1; 229	.000
Product Quality Hanoi	H2		4.59	1; 229	.033
Product Quality HCM City	H2		18.68	1; 229	.000

H1 and H2 are supported. Residents of each city had a significant preference for products made in their own city rather than products made in the other city. Further, they had a perception that the quality of products from their own city was better than the quality of products from the other city.

H3 is an illustration of the theoretical relationships proposed by self-categorization theory. To test H3 a multiple regression was performed. Community identity and community consumer economic preferences were the independent variables and perceived product quality for the local product was the dependent variable. A regression was performed separately for each city, specifying perceived product quality of each city as the dependent variable.

The results for the sample from Ho Chi Minh City were significant: $F=14.996$ (df 2,93) $sig.=.000$. City identity and community economic preferences were significant with standardized betas of .240 and .403, respectively. R square was .244.

The results for the sample from Hanoi were also significant: $F=29.765$ (df 2,142) $sig.=.000$. City identity and community consumer economic preferences were significant with standardized betas of .277 and .380, respectively. R square was .295. H3 is supported for both cities. This illustrates a degree of association between the concepts of 'city identity', 'community economic preferences' and 'perceived product quality'. The proposition that there is a role for community identity in determining perceived product quality is supported.

For exploratory purposes, the demographics of income, education, and 'years living in the city', were included in the regression with city identity and city ethnocentricity. None of the additional demographics were significant.

Conclusions

There are both theoretical and practical implications to be drawn from this study. As a work in the field of consumer behavior, the main theoretical implication of this study supports the proposition of self-categorization theory that people share a portion of their self-concept with the social category which may be called the community. The outcomes of the hypotheses concerning perceived product quality and purchase preference strongly suggest that some sense of community identity exists and that it can have a significant impact on product selection. Hypothesis three supports the theoretical structure espoused by self-categorization theory that the level of felt community identity is positively related to an outcome of normative value judgments supporting the community economically. Overall, this paper supports the proposition that people will form attitudes of product quality consistent with their level of felt community identity.

This study serves to illustrate one of the social self-concepts that people may develop and supports the propositions of self-categorization theory. While national, racial or religious social identities may be the first to come to mind when thinking of social categories,

categories as mundane as a person's city or town may also have a significant influence on their sense of identity and their consumption practices. Put together with an earlier study in North America (Lantz and Loeb 1997) there appears to be a similar movement towards recognizing community identity as a universal sense of identity that people hold.

The practical implications of this study may involve a firm's choice of factory location. If a firm is planning to build a factory in Vietnam to serve the domestic market, it might be better to choose a location in the industrialized area surrounding Ho Chi Minh City. People from Ho Chi Minh City stated a clear preference for products manufactured there as opposed to products manufactured in Hanoi. Likewise, these respondents expressed a perception of better product quality of products manufactured in the local area.

While the same preference for locally manufactured products was also apparent among respondents in Hanoi, the preference was of a slightly lower magnitude. Additionally, it ought to be noted that the population near Ho Chi Minh City is simply much larger than in Hanoi. And, as a practical matter, infrastructure problems that predominant in Vietnam also favor a firm locating near the largest center of population.

To marketing managers this study also suggests that advertising campaigns focusing on the sense of community identity can have a positive impact. Just as with 'buy American' marketing pitches, the 'buy local' appeal will work with consumers who feel this sense of identity while it will have less impact on consumers who feel it less. Other research (Onorato and Turner 2004) has shown that this sense of identity is pliable and a well-crafted campaign may be able to make the effect greater,

This study was performed in Vietnam, a low middle income country (World Bank 2017) in Asia. The study also used a non-random sample. Both of these things limit the generalizability of the results. The results are not generalizable in Vietnam due to the non-random sample. The characteristics of a low middle income country in Asia might vary from the world at large, also making the results not generalizable. Indeed, the effects in this study might be more pronounced simply due to the history of war between the North and South. Sumner (1906) found that when people felt a threat there was a greater propensity to feel the group identity and that groups like to see themselves in a positive light. If people in the sample still feel the past divisions this feeling might well show up in the more positive assessment of the locally produced products.

Overall, this paper can be considered to be an advance in self-categorization theory. Community identity has a meaningful and measurable impact on how people see themselves. This comparison of two Asian cities does not necessarily yield a generalizable experience in Western societies. However, this study does suggest a field for further research to illustrate the value of developing a sense of community identity.

Appendix

Community Identity

- 1) I feel good about living in my city.
- 2) I like being a citizen of my city.
- 3) Feeling pride in my city is important to me.
- 4) I feel a commitment to this city.

Community Economic Preferences

- 1) We should purchase products manufactured in our own community in order to help the community economically.
- 2) It may cost me in the long run but I prefer to support locally manufactured goods.
- 3) It is always best to purchase locally manufactured products.

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