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LOCAL IDENTITY IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: BETWEEN POTENTIAL AND STRATEGIC CAPITALIZATION

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SUMMARY

The article explores how brands in the Republic of Moldova draw on local identity – traditions, symbols, know-how and community stories – in their marketing communication, and what prevents this resource from being used to its full potential. Relying on academic studies and institutional documents, it reviews cases such as winemakers' stories, hospitality-based tourism campaigns, shared brand platforms and the pairing of tradition with artificial intelligence. These cases show that origin can be conveyed through people, practices and experiences, not only through emblems. The key weakness identified is that the link between identity imagery and the actual offer is often left unexplained. The author proposes to examine three relationships – local resources and the offer, the brand promise and its supporting evidence, the message and its interpretation by audiences – and derives practical recommendations for companies and for collective promotion initiatives.

Key words: local identity, marketing communication, place branding, brand authenticity, differentiation, Republic of Moldova.

IDENTITATEA LOCALĂ ÎN COMUNICAREA DE MARKETING DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA: ÎNTRE POTENȚIAL ȘI VALORIFICARE STRATEGICĂ

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REZUMAT

Articolul examinează modul în care brandurile din Republica Moldova recurg la identitatea locală – tradiții, simboluri, cunoștințe practice și povești ale comunităților – în comunicarea de marketing, precum și factorii care împiedică valorificarea deplină a acestei resurse. Pe baza studiilor academice și a documentelor instituționale, sunt analizate cazuri precum poveștile vinificatorilor, campaniile turistice centrate pe ospitalitate, platformele de branduri comune și asocierea tradiției cu inteligența artificială. Aceste cazuri arată că originea poate fi transmisă prin oameni, practici și experiențe, nu doar prin embleme. Principala slăbiciune identificată este faptul că legătura dintre imaginea identitară și oferta propriu-zisă rămâne adesea neexplicată. Autoarea propune examinarea a trei relații – resursele locale și oferta, promisiunea brandului și dovezile care o susțin, mesajul și interpretarea sa de către public – și formulează recomandări practice pentru companii și inițiativele de promovare colectivă.

Cuvinte-cheie: identitate locală, comunicare de marketing, branding teritorial, autenticitatea brandului, diferențiere, Republica Moldova.

Introduction. Whenever a Moldovan brand refers to village crafts, to the vocabulary of a region, to a familiar ornament or to a family winemaking story, it draws on a stock of cultural material that can tell buyers both where the product was born and why it differs from its rivals. Such material helps a company build associations that its customers care about, yet a Chișinău or Cahul address on the label does not by itself persuade people that the brand belongs to Moldovan culture; according to the review by Liu and colleagues, perceived localness is constructed in the minds of consumers from the meanings they attach to a brand, well beyond the formal statement of origin [13].

Three fields stand out in Moldovan practice where this resource is exploited: tourism, consumer goods and the international image of the state. Miron argues that recognisable domestic brands contribute to the way their home territory is pictured, while national promotion, in return, lends these brands extra exposure [14]. The trajectory of the "Tree of Life" ("Pomul Vieții") is instructive here – a sign launched for tourism that was later widened to cover many branches of the national

economy, in an effort to bind heritage and present-day business together [2].

A multitude of projects, however, does not by default produce a unified voice. Furdui's comparison of country brands across Central and Eastern Europe records poor coordination between actors, programmes that are interrupted before they mature and budgets spent on short campaigns and emblems instead of long-range planning [10], whereas Ana's fieldwork among Moldovan wine workers reveals that the heritage-and-belonging narrative used in promotion resonates very unevenly with the people who actually produce the wine [7]. Read together, these two strands of research invite us to study promotional messages in close connection with the work and the people they claim to portray.

What deserves scrutiny, then, is less the mere presence of local motifs in advertising than the job these motifs perform in explaining the product, which, if they are to be exploited strategically, implies choosing references that truly suit the brand, backing every statement with checkable facts and verifying how the public decodes the message.

Against this background, the paper sets out to map how Moldovan marketing communication currently uses local identity, to identify what holds this use back and to suggest ways of strengthening it; relying on scholarly literature and on documents issued by public bodies, it traces the connections between identity resources, the particular traits of brands' offers and audience interpretation.

Results and discussion. Under the label of local identity the paper groups the values, customs, idiom, emblems, practical know-how and collective memories with which a community portrays itself and marks its difference from others, applying the notion to the Moldovan state taken as a whole as well as and to the individual character of its regions, towns and villages.

Marketers need to keep apart two things that are easily confused – the place a brand actually comes from and the localness that buyers ascribe to it – since the former is a matter of fact, whereas the latter emerges from interpretation; in the literature reviewed by Liu et al., perceived localness is broken down into cultural symbolism, rootedness in the home market, place of manufacture and place of origin [13].

Naming the country of origin is therefore merely the first step, and the message must go on to show how this origin is embodied in the product itself. Buyers of a product made in Moldova may never learn which local skills, methods or experiences went into it unless the communication tells them about the people behind it, their expertise, the raw materials they rely on and the way they organise their work.

Three types of actor can mobilise local identity – the state, a whole industry and the individual firm – and, as Miron notes, their efforts feed into each other, because domestic brands help shape the reputation of their home territory while the promotion of that territory raises the profile of its brands [14]. Common origin, however, is no reason for all companies to repeat the same slogan: shared belonging forms the backdrop, and every organisation must still spell out, against it, what makes it distinct.

Perceived authenticity calls for separate attention, since a link to tradition may reinforce a brand but cannot exhaust what consumers regard as authentic. In the framework of Morhart and her co-authors, authenticity rests on four pillars – continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism – which refer respectively to an identity that stays stable over time, to promises that are kept, to values that are respected and to symbols that carry meaning for buyers [16].

For this reason, judging identity-based communication requires looking simultaneously at the way identity is staged and at the evidence underpinning the claims, and the paper offers four yardsticks for doing so: coherence, relevance, concrete support and adaptability.

Table 1. Criteria for analyzing the capitalization of local identity

Criterion	Aspect analyzed	Key question
Coherence	Consistency between local references, the offer and the brand promise	To what extent are the messages consistent with the brand's activity and offer?
Relevance	Significance of origin for the audience	Is the contribution of origin to the features of the product or experience explained?
Concrete support	Information substantiating the claims	What verifiable information supports the messages about origin, tradition and values?
Adaptability	Adjustment of expression to different audiences and contexts	How is the meaning of identity preserved in messages adapted to different audiences?

Source: Prepared by the author.

The documents consulted reveal that local identity has been entrusted with an ever wider range of tasks: Ejov and Furdui connect it with the reputation of the country, with incoming tourism, with exports and with foreign investment, so that cultural assets are now expected to serve the economic positioning of Moldova and not only the safeguarding of its heritage [9, 10].

No institutional case illustrates this better than the "Tree of Life", which, having started life as a tourism mark, was progressively adapted to other sectors; its imagery currently sets vines, fields and woven patterns

side by side with allusions to information technology, manufacturing, connectivity, infrastructure and energy, portraying Moldova as a country that is at once faithful to its culture and economically dynamic [2, 3].

A different strategy puts the makers themselves in the spotlight. Targeting buyers in Romania, the campaign "Wine of Moldova Stories by Diana Pavelescu" paired each wine with the biography of its winemaker through ten hosted online tastings featuring 30 wines [17, 18], with the result that the sector acquired recognisable faces and bottles, and the claim of Moldovan provenance gained tangible content.

In the tourism field, local identity is translated into the language of hospitality: since 2017, the "Be Our Guest" campaign has revolved around the meeting between traveller and host [11, 15], and its 2023 sequel, "Be Our Guest in Regions", connects regional destinations with artisans, smallholders and rural entrepreneurs [15]. Instead of leaning only on landscapes and emblems, both campaigns describe the country through the things a visitor can do there and the people a visitor can meet.

The biographies of the creators and the direct impressions of visitors thus add depth to the purely visual dimension of the identity; however, their communicative value depends on two conditions: a visible link to what is being offered for sale, and a faithful representation of the people and practices being presented.

Pooling brands under one banner offers yet another avenue. "Din Inimă. Branduri de Moldova" ("From the Heart. Brands of Moldova") unites national labels from the garment, footwear and textile industries, and AGEPI reported in 2016 that the platform was supporting more than seventy of them [4]; the common name informs shoppers about provenance, while every participating label keeps its own visibility.

Wine has a comparable arrangement in the national "Wine of Moldova" brand, beneath which wineries and their products are presented and within which the "Wine of Moldova Stories" campaign gave individual producers and bottles their own stage [17, 18]. As for the "Tree of Life", its mark may be used only with the consent of the Investment Agency, a rule that equips the shared identity with formal governance [3].

All such umbrella schemes must strike a balance between a feeling of shared membership and the freedom of each member to stand out: the common label makes Moldovan origin easy to recognise, but only the participants themselves can say what is exceptional about their goods.

Innovation is a further partner of local identity. The project "Wine of the Future: Moldova's First AI Vintage" relied on artificial intelligence to analyse data, to propose choices at successive stages of production and to generate wine names, labels and promotional texts, while its presentation continues to name Moldovan grape varieties and wine regions and to credit the local specialists involved [19]; the wines it produced were unveiled at ProWein 2024 [8].

In this case digital tools are woven into an offer that never loses its anchoring in place, so that the message combines an argument about local resources with an argument about modern technology and becomes more believable when it makes clear what each of them has brought to the finished wine.

Viewed as a whole, the practices examined prove that provenance can be communicated through people, lived experience, partnerships and innovation, yet whether this potential is exploited strategically depends on how firmly these practices are connected to what organisations actually do and on the significance they acquire in the eyes of consumers.

The weakest point detected is that the connection between identity imagery and the concrete offer frequently remains implicit: common emblems and slogans make provenance recognisable, but on their own they reveal almost nothing about what distinguishes a particular product or service.

Each graphic component of the "Tree of Life" is given a cultural and economic meaning, and the line "Wine of Moldova. A legend alive" announces how the wine sector wants to be perceived [3, 17]; individual firms, nevertheless, have to supply specifics on their products, techniques, expertise and the experiences they offer, since the danger stems not from symbols as such but from failing to state why they matter for the offer.

The way promotion is organised can aggravate this gap, because isolated or short-lived projects tend to emit signals that fail to strengthen each other; Furdui's regional comparison similarly finds that money tends to flow to campaigns, logotypes and taglines at the expense of sustained strategic effort [10].

Diversity raises a further complication. Selling a country abroad demands a consistent storyline, while its population, regional histories and interests are anything but homogeneous, and Vulpe and Filimonov, examining the communication of Invest Moldova, document the friction between projecting one image and acknowledging this internal plurality [21]; some selection cannot be avoided, but it turns problematic as soon as it flattens the realities being shown.

A similar difficulty surfaces within single industries. Ana observes that among Moldovan wine workers the bond with the product and with its cultural story varies with job status, working conditions and proximity to the finished wine [7], so the testimony of one person may be precious for promotion without speaking for everyone in the sector.

Messages that rest on firm ground also presuppose a sound knowledge of the target public, because what seems self-evident to the campaign team may have to be explained to its recipients. The terms of reference issued in 2025 for researching Moldova's image abroad and drafting a country branding strategy foresee surveys, interviews, consultations and focus-group validation [20], a sign that the perceptions of audiences are intended to shape the future strategy.

Left unaddressed, these shortcomings threaten coherence, differentiation and credibility alike: disconnected messages do little to consolidate a common image, vague references to origin prevent buyers from telling one offer from another, and promises lacking evidence lose their power to persuade. Research conducted beyond Moldova by Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis, as well as by Morhart et al., associates

perceived authenticity with trust in the brand, perceived value, emotional attachment and readiness to recommend it [12, 16].

Among public bodies, the documentation for the national branding strategic framework explicitly demands coherence maintained over the long run [1], whereas at company level the same goal can only be met if each firm clarifies what it contributes to the shared message.

Measuring outcomes is a matter in its own right. Reach and visibility indicate neither what people have understood nor whether they trust what they heard, which is why, following the AMEC framework, evaluation should separate exposure, reception and the effects obtained [5, 6]; by the same token, the absence of published figures does not demonstrate that organisations never assess their campaigns internally.

On the basis of these findings, the paper recommends concentrating on three links – local resources and the offer, the promise and the evidence behind it, the message and the way audiences decode it – since examining them makes it possible to locate a weakness precisely and to choose a suitable remedy.

Table 2. Analyzed relationships and directions for improvement

Relationship analyzed	Key question	Possible problem	Proposed measure
Local resources and the offer	What does origin explain about the features of the product or service?	Local references whose relevance is insufficiently clarified	Selecting references related to the brand's activity and explaining their contribution
The promise and its support	What information supports the brand's claims?	General messages or insufficiently substantiated promises	Supplementing information, specifying or narrowing the claim
The message and audience interpretation	How does the audience interpret the association between the brand and local origin?	Recognition of provenance without understanding the distinctive features of the offer	Testing the message and adapting explanations and wording

Source: Prepared by the author.

Message content is the first field for improvement, in the sense that statements about origin and tradition ought to point to features the buyer can identify. A formula like "we preserve local tradition" gains weight once it names the technique in question, the people who still practise it and the way it shapes the product; the aim is not to multiply cultural allusions but to explain more sharply what they mean for the offer.

Coordination inside collective schemes is the second field. On top of visual identity rules, common guidelines could define what the messages should convey, who checks the information and how often it is revised; the national branding documents already list inter-institutional coherence among their goals, and the authorisation procedure for the "Tree of Life" supplies a governance tool that is ready to use [1, 3], provided that such instruments help members display their differences rather than make their offers look interchangeable.

Inviting the people who appear in promotional stories to review them increases accuracy, as facts can be checked, individual contributions credited and overlooked viewpoints brought in – a precaution that Ana's account of the very diverse experiences of Moldovan wine workers clearly justifies [7].

Reviewing a story with those it portrays and testing it on consumers respond to two different questions, the first being whether the story is true to reality and the second whether the public grasps the meaning the author intended; a message may be correct in every detail and still fail to get through.

An assessment might check whether people notice the local references, whether they understand how these relate to the offer, whether they consider the message believable and whether they regard the brand as distinctive. When the objectives call for it, subsequent behaviour such as enquiries, targeted website visits or registrations can be monitored too, on condition that measures of exposure, reception and effect are not mixed up [5, 6].

To take the "Tree of Life" once more, recognition of the logo could be measured separately from knowledge of what its motifs signify according to the official brand website [3]; if the logo turns out to be familiar while its symbolism remains obscure, the cure lies in explanation and not merely in greater exposure.

Every finding should lead to a specific correction. Consumers who recall the origin of a product but cannot say what is special about it need a message that makes this connection explicit; when the promise is understood yet doubted, more evidence must be provided; and when segments of the public read the message in divergent ways, its wording can be reworked without touching its core idea.

Finally, results only make sense in context, because growing interest or a higher number of enquiries cannot be credited automatically to identity-themed messages when prices, distribution or parallel campaigns may have played their part; a rigorous evaluation therefore weighs the contribution of communication against these competing influences [5, 6].

Conclusions. The cases reviewed demonstrate the many ways in which Moldovan marketing communication taps into local identity: winemakers' biographies, tourism campaigns built on hospitality,

shared brand platforms and projects marrying tradition with technology all show that origin can be conveyed through people, practices and experiences rather than through emblems alone, although they reveal opportunities for differentiation without proving that organisations apply such approaches consistently [4, 15, 17, 19].

The core finding is that showing where a product comes from does not amount to using its origin strategically. Local identity reinforces a brand's position only when it clarifies what is distinctive about the offer and supports a promise that buyers find believable, and this is precisely the line separating identity worn as a mere badge of belonging from identity employed as a real argument.

Companies are advised to begin with an audit of the statements about origin, tradition and authenticity that appear in their existing materials, tying each key statement to a concrete feature of the product and to the evidence supporting it. Generic mentions of tradition can give way to descriptions of the techniques kept alive, the skills they demand and their effect on the product or service, which means that better communication may start with sharper content and does not require redesigning the brand's visual identity.

Within shared labels, the collective message should be enriched with arguments specific to each member, and institutions and platforms can foster this by laying down rules for checking, presenting and periodically updating information. Asking the individuals featured in promotional stories to take part can moreover guard against over-generalisation and one-sided portrayals, as the uneven experiences documented among Moldovan wine workers show why the view of one person should not be presented as the voice of the whole community [7].

Evaluation has to look past reach and examine comprehension, credibility and perceived distinctiveness [5, 6]. Testing messages before they are rolled out widely can reveal whether consumers really perceive the link between origin and offer; if they miss it, the explanation must become more precise, and if they understand the message but remain unconvinced, the supporting evidence has to be reinforced.

The added value of the study lies in bringing together three decisions that are usually taken in isolation – which identity references to use, how to substantiate the promise and how audiences interpret it – so that remedies can be matched to the specific problem observed. Exploiting local identity strategically does not demand more cultural references; it demands a clear and credible account of what origin contributes to the offer of today.

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