

# Groundedness: *Connecting Consumers with Place, People, and Past*

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**O**ur fast-paced world keeps picking up speed, with digitization, globalization and mobility recognized widely as signs of progress and innovation—yet for many there is a growing desire to take a step back, catch their breath and establish some emotional roots for a measure of safety and stability. Consequently, businesses that deliver products and services that address this need to be grounded may have a leg up on the competition, new research shows.

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The growing interest in craft breweries, farmers markets and online outlets such as Etsy that connect consumers with individual artisans is cited in the study as evidence that people want, and will pay a premium for, offerings that strengthen their ties to place, people and the past. The paper was co-authored by Stijn M.J. van Osselaer, the S.C. Johnson Professor of Marketing, Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business.

Collectively, connections to place, people and past engender feelings of groundedness by “rooting” us in our physical, social, and historic sphere, the study notes. “These connections may be established through many different objects, activities, and types of interactions.”

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Links to place may include consuming beer from a local brewery, for example, while ties to people can be established by meeting the folks who sell vegetables at a farmer’s market or by featuring the faces of a firm’s workers on product packaging and in promotions, and those that tout their use

of traditional methods and “natural” materials and ingredients can draw consumers seeking connections to the past.

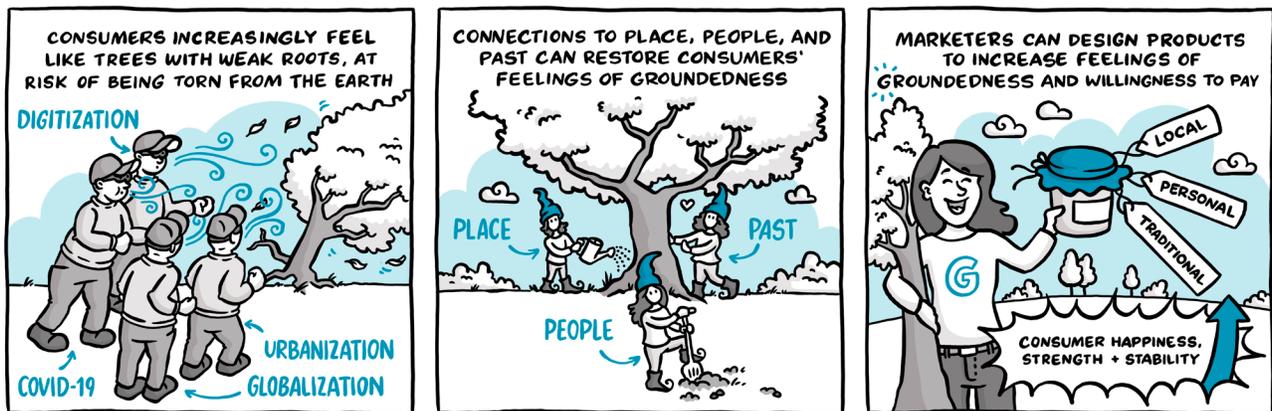
For the hospitality industry, this research helps explain the popularity of farm-to-table cuisine, boutique and historical hotels, bed and breakfast and Airbnb operations, and wine trails and clubs, van Osselaer says. “People now want more meaningful relationships, with people, place and history. It’s a fundamental need that has become even more prominent recently in response to threats like the pandemic and the war in Ukraine,” he says.

Personal contact with the owner of an Airbnb, for example, or meeting the owner of a winery on his turf, help establish the affinity valued by consumers seeking groundedness.

Hotels should consider adding some local flavor to their properties, including historical facts and anecdotes, heritage-based tourism offerings and craft workshops that create personal connections. Restaurants, in turn, may provide introductions to the chef and staff, along with the locally-sourced menu, to encourage personal relationships with patrons.

The need for groundedness is more acute among leisure travelers than business customers, van Osselaer says, but brands that embrace the idea should keep in mind that it applies also to the

**APPEALING TO CONSUMERS SEEKING GROUNDEDNESS**



growing ranks of those suffering from isolation while tied to their computers, or who feel cast adrift by the office environment.

Those on business trips to several cities may find a sense of familiarity, and comfort, with a hotel brand that offers the same services and amenities at each location, van Osselaer says.

van Osselaer points to the traditional French concept of *terroir*, translated literally as “the soil,” but referring not just to soil, but also the location, people and cultural history connected to that soil. Highlighting *terroir* in this sense—including factors such as the ground, climate, topography, owners and workers, and cultural history of the vineyard—can be an effective way for wineries to create connections.

This study, published by the Journal of Marketing and summarized by Harvard Business Review, also notes that groundedness makes customers happier and creates a sense of stability and safety in a changing social environment.

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Marketing variables such as communication, product design, and channels of distribution can be designed to boost the feeling of groundedness.
- Establishing groundedness is more important to customers whose work and/or emotional environments lack a strong connection to people, place, and past.

- The feeling of groundedness increases customers’ well-being.

The findings suggest that groundedness is a powerful concept, providing a comprehensive explanation for a variety of consumer trends, “We expect that the importance of this topic to consumers and marketers will only increase as digitization, urbanization and global migration continue to challenge consumers’ connections to place, people and past,” the authors conclude.

## PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Eichinger, Isabel, Martin Schreier, and Stijn M.J. van Osselaer. “Connecting to Place, People, and Past: How Products Make Us Feel Grounded.” *Journal of Marketing*, (November 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211027469>.

Eichinger, Isabel, Martin Schreier, and Stijn M.J. van Osselaer. “Why We Buy Products Connected to Place, People, and Past.” *Harvard Business Review*, (November 2021). <https://hbr.org/2021/11/why-we-buy-products-connected-to-place-people-and-past>. ■

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## ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS



**Isabel Eichinger** is a research and teaching assistant and PhD candidate at the Institute for Marketing Management, WU Vienna. She holds a Master's degree in Marketing from WU Vienna. In her research, Isabel focuses on the consumer's perspective in the contexts of empowerment, the development of urban neighborhoods, and producer-consumer relationships. For her projects on empowerment and on urban neighborhoods (with Monika Koller, Institute for Marketing and Consumer Research), Isabel has been awarded grants from the "Jubiläumsfonds der Stadt Wien 2015" and the "Wirtschaftskammerpreis 2016". Isabel's teaching areas include High Tech Marketing, Smart Cities and Scientific Writing. Beyond her involvement with WU Vienna, Isabel

has gained experience at Ecole de Management Strasbourg in France and with L'Oréal Österreich, Korn/Ferry, RUAG Space and the Austrian Federal Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth.



**Martin Schreier** is Professor of Marketing and Head of the Department of Marketing and the Institute for Marketing Management at WU Vienna. Furthermore, he is Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, the official journal of the European Marketing Academy (EMAC). His research has been published in prestigious academic journals such as the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Management Science*. His work has also been featured in acclaimed international media outlets such as the Harvard Business Review as well as in prominent German-speaking media including, TV (e.g., 3SAT), radio stations (e.g., Ö1), and newspapers (e.g., Handelsblatt). Moreover, his research has been honored with several awards, including

among others, the INFORMS TIMES Best Paper Award 2019 for the Management Science paper "Integrating problem solvers from analogous markets in new product ideation" (together with N. Franke and M. Poetz).



**Stijn van Osselaer** is the S.C. Johnson Professor of Marketing at the Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University. His research focuses on branding, customer loyalty, connecting customers with service providers, and the influences of learning, memory, and cognition in consumers' decisions. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, and many other scientific journals. Professor van Osselaer serves on the editorial review boards of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, and *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, and he has twice served as an associate editor at the *Journal of Consumer Research* (2008-2011, 2012-2018).

At the Johnson School, Professor van Osselaer teaches the core marketing course. He previously taught at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, London Business School, and Rotterdam School of Management. In 2012-2013, he was a visiting research scholar at the University of Colorado's Leeds School of Business. In 2015, Professor van Osselaer served as the president of the Society for Consumer Psychology. He has also co-chaired the 2010 annual conference of the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) and served as a member of this organization's board of directors.

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