

## Research article

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# Readiness of food producers to reflect regions in their names and trademarks: a perspective for regional branding with sunflower oil

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**Abstract:** Popular food products can be used in regional branding. Names and trademarks of 56 Russian producers of sunflower oil, which is nationally high-demanded culinary oil, are analyzed to find indications of regions. The regional affinity is classified and scored. It is found that about a half of the considered producers indicate region of location in their names and/or trademarks. Often, regions are considered directly, although some producers mention them in unclear or allegoric ways. Many region-concerned producers concentrate in the Altai, Rostov, and Krasnodar regions. These findings indicates on the urgency of support of the region-related naming by regional administrations and professional associations.

**Keywords:** crop agriculture; food industry; place branding; producer naming; sunflower oil.

## Introduction

Economical competition, tourism growth, and globalization make regional branding a highly-urgent issue. Its various aspects are considered by Pedersen (2004), Herstein (2012), Vuorinen and Vos (2013), Clifton (2014), Magnus (2016),

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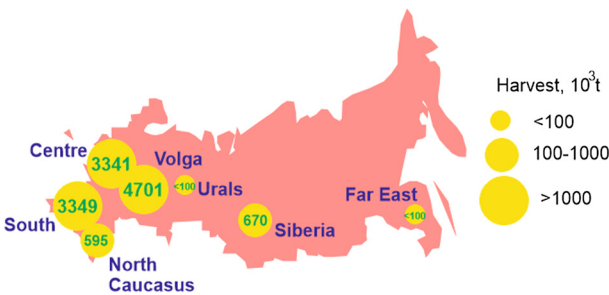
Oliveira (2016), Zimmerbauer (2016), Song and Jeon (2018), and Asprogerakas and Mountanea (2020). Food plays important role in regional branding. On the one hand, association of a region's name with exported products facilitates attention to this region. On the other hand, some food can be regionally-specific, and, thus, its export promotes regions. The related opportunities and approaches are explained in the works by Hashimoto and Telfer (2006), Askegaard and Kjeldgaard (2007), Marcoz et al. (2016), Hjalager (2017), Uchiyama et al. (2017), Gatrell et al. (2018), Bowen and Bennett (2019), and Svensson et al. (2020).

The previous research stresses urgency of the topic of regional branding with food products, but its various aspects are yet to be explored. Particularly, it is important to realize whether food producers are ready to indicate regions in their own names and trademarks, which is really important because consumers are attentive to such a kind of information (e.g., Petrescu-Mag and Petrescu 2017). Direct indication of a given region does not necessarily refer to basic properties of trademarks (Stadulskaya 2013), but it stimulates better awareness and positive judgments of this region. Such a branding approach differs from indication of country/region of origin on product labels, although the both solve essentially the same tasks (Bertozzi 2012; Hey 2004; Mathews and Brasher 2016; Menapace and Moschini 2012; Pyzhikova et al. 2020; Rippon 2014; Sitepu 2018). In big countries consisting of many administrative units (provinces, states, regions, districts, etc.), regional branding with high-demanded food products is of utmost importance. It promotes the regional identity and, thus, contributes to competitiveness of the regional food industry and/or agriculture.

Sunflower oil is important culinary oil with debatable health effect (Foster et al. 2009) and environmental performance (Schmidt 2015) and also with recognizable importance for regional economies (Semerci 2019). Its share on the global market of vegetable oils reaches 12% (USDA 2020). It is extremely popular in several countries, including Russia where sunflower was first cultivated as an oil crop (Gavrilova and Anisimova 2017). The consumption of sunflower oil in Russia is ~14 kg/year per capita (Abramova 2018), and its total national annual production exceeds 5.5 mln T (USDA 2020). Production of this oil requires extensive sunflower crop cultivation, which has developed significantly in Russia (Table 1). It is typical to many regions of the country, especially of its western part (Figure 1). The seeds of the both Russian and foreign varieties are used (Buklagin 2020; Gavrilova and Anisimova 2017). Sunflower oil is not only a nationally-demanded product, but also important constituent of the Russian agricultural trade: particularly, the export of this product increased substantially in the mid-2010s due to some economical and political factors (Borodin and Salnikov 2018). The high demand for sunflower oil in Russia and the geographical breadth of its production (Figure 1) form premises for the use of this product for the purposes of regional branding.

**Table 1:** Dynamics of sunflower crop cultivation in Russia (Rosstat 2019).

Parameter	Years			
	2005	2010	2015	2018
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	55,678	71,585	70,135	81,601
Harvest (10 <sup>3</sup> t)	6470	4980	9289	12,756
Productivity (t/km <sup>2</sup> )	119	89	142	160



**Figure 1:** Sunflower crop harvest in different parts (federal districts) of Russia (based on Rosstat 2019).

The objective of the present, essentially empirical study is to document whether Russian sunflower oil producers reflect regional affinity in their names and trademarks. Supposedly, when many producers of any given region are ready to show this affinity, they contribute to regional branding. More generally, this study aims at understanding the role of nationally-specific food products in regional branding.

## Material and method

Russia is a federative state consisting of 85 principal administrative units called 'regions' (some of them are termed republics and districts). The basic information about the Russian sunflower oil producers is gathered from the on-line source (Produkttsentr 2020). The exact name and trademark(s) of each producer, as well as its region of location are recorded. A total of 56 producers and 67 trademarks representing 23 regions of Russia are considered.

The analysis consists of two steps. The first step is the content (almost linguistic) analysis of the producer names and the trademarks. The region can be indicated there either directly or indirectly. A tentative classification of geographical affinities is employed for the purposes of this study (Table 2). Scores are assigned to the affinity types on the basis of the following reasons. The

full affinity receives the biggest score because it nominates the region directly, and this is easy-to-realize to customers. The unclear affinity receives a lesser score because a customer needs to guess which region is nominated. The indirect affinity can be valued even lower because it requires from customers some specific knowledge to ‘decipher’ allegoric naming of the region. The least-scored is the local affinity because only those customers who are aware of small localities (e.g., towns, villages, etc.) are able to relate the local toponyms to the particular region – naturally, such customers are rare in the other, especially remote regions of the country. The other affinity types are scored with zero because these do not permit judgments of the region. On the basis of the proposed system (Table 2), the producers are scored. This information is not disclosed to avoid any occasional challenge to firm reputation and also because this analysis can be conducted in only Russian. However, some typical examples are provided in Table 2.

The second step of the present analysis is summarizing the firm-related information on the regional level. For all 23 regions represented by the considered Russian sunflower oil producers, the numbers of producers and trademarks related to the regional affinity types are established. The average scores indicate on the general representation of a given region by the entity of the producer names and trademarks. The higher this average score, the better the regional branding with sunflower oil. More generally, this analysis sheds light on the readiness of the regional producers to promote regions and the preferred approaches to do this.

**Table 2:** Classification of geographical affinities of sunflower oil producers.

Affinity	Explanation	Example	Score <sup>a</sup>
Full	Producer's name/trademark mentions region directly (its official or common name)	Zolotoj Altai where Altai is a region; Dary Kubani where Kuban is a common name of the Krasnodar Region	10
Unclear	Producer's name/trademark incorporates part or modified form of region's name	Altaria where Alt- refers to Altai	5
Indirect	Producer's name/trademark mentions region allegorically	Zhemchuzhina Povolzh'ja where Povolzh'je is equated to the Nizhniy Novgorod Region	3
Local	Producer's name/trademark mentions particular locality of region (local toponym)	Alejskzerno produkt where Alejsk is a town of the Altai Region	1
National	Producer's name/trademark mentions country/nation	Russkij produkt where Russkij means Russian	0
External	Producer's name/trademark mentions region other than region of location	Donskaja slobodka where Donskaya can be associated with Don – a common name of the Rostov Region, whereas the producer is registered in the Moscow Region	0
Absent	Producer's name/trademark is not focused geographically	Korona izobilija (Crown of abundance) where locus is not mentioned	0

<sup>a</sup>Regional affinity is scored.

## Results

The analyzed sunflower oil producers differ by how they reflect regions in their names and trademarks (Table 3). From 56 producers' names, only 46% do not bear any geographical indications, whereas 23% demonstrate the full regional affinities. From 67 trademarks, 57% do not bear any geographical indications, and 28% boast the full regional affinities. The situation is more or less comparable in two regions with the biggest number of sunflower producers (Table 3). In the Altai Region (15 producers and 14 trademarks), the geographical affinity is absent in the names of 30% of the producers and 29% of the trademarks, whereas the affinity is full in 40% of the producer names and 57% of the trademarks. In the Krasnodar Region (8 producers, 17 trademarks), 38% of the producer names and 59% of the trademarks lack geographical indications, whereas the full affinity is present in 25% of the producer names and 35% of the trademarks. The unclear and indirect types of the regional affinity are found rarely, although one can note the Voronezh Region, where all producer names show the local affinity.

These lines of evidence mean that the Russian producers of sunflower oil are often ready to indicate the regions of location in their names and trademark, i.e., to contribute to regional branding. Many of them prefer direct indication of the regions (full affinity). This is sufficient basis to hypothesize that the producers either care of the regional identity or wish to exploit the positive image of the regions for effective promotion of their own products. Apparently, the regional affinity is more typical to the producer names than to the trademarks, which is not surprising as the trademarks serve the task of effective promotion of the product itself (Stadulskaya 2013).

The average score of the regional affinity differs significantly (Table 3). The average score is zero in 11 regions for the producer names and 12 regions for the trademarks, which means that the producer names and trademarks do not show any regional affinity in about a half of the regions. The average score for the producer names and/or the trademarks is the highest in the Irkutsk, Penza, Stavropol, and Tula regions where the producers are few. In the other regions, the average score is chiefly no more than five. It is relatively high in the Altai, Rostov, and Krasnodar regions listed in the descending order. These results mean that the regions can be subdivided into four groups, namely the regions driven by many regionally-concerned producers (e.g., the Altai Region), the regions driven by single regionally-concerned producers (e.g., the Stavropol Region), the regions driven by the producers with mixed regional concerns (e.g., the Nizhniy Novgorod Region), and the regions driven by regionally-unconcerned producers. It should be noted that the difference between the second and the third groups is not striking because the relevant average scores do not differ substantially. Additionally, all

Table 3: Regional affinities of the names and the trademarks of the Russian producers of sunflower oil.

Region	Number of P/TM with a given affinity												Average score	
	Full		Unclear		Indirect		Local		National		External		P	TM
	P	TM	P	TM	P	TM	P	TM	P	TM	P	TM		
Altai Region	6	8	1	1	1		2	1			5	4	4.7	6.1
Belgorod Region							1	1					1.0	1.0
Chuvashia Republic							1						1.0	-
Irkutsk Region	1											1	10.0	0.0
Kirov Region											1	1	0.0	0.0
Krasnodar Region	2	6			2	1	1				3	10	3.4	3.7
Moscow											3	3	0.0	0.0
Moscow Region											1	3	2	0.0
Nizhniy Novgorod Region					1	1					1	1	1.5	1.5
Omsk Region											1	1	0.0	0.0
Penza Region		1							1				0.0	10.0
Republic of Adygeya											1	1	0.0	0.0
Republic of Bashkortostan							1	1				2	1.0	0.3
Republic of Crimea											1	1	0.0	0.0
Republic of Mordovia											1	1	0.0	0.0
Rostov Region	2	3			1	1					3	4	3.8	4.1
Samara Region											1	1	0.0	0.0
Saratov Region											1	1	0.0	0.0
Stavropol Region	1	1											10.0	10.0
Sverdlovsk Region					1							1	3.0	0.0
Tambov Region											1	2	0.0	0.0
Tula Region	1			1									10.0	5.0
Voronezh Region						1	3					1	1.0	1.5

P, producer; TM, trademark.

regions where there is at least one producer name or trademark with the full regional affinity belong to either the first group or the second group.

Discussion

The outcomes of the undertaken analysis imply the importance of sunflower oil to the branding of the Russian regions because many producers show regional affinity in their names and trademarks. However, the readiness of the producers to act accordingly differs between the regions. Of question is how efficient can be such a branding. Although trade channels cannot be documented due to the lack of the relevant information, it should be noted that the regions with the high average scores occur in the different parts of Russia (Figure 2). This is premise for active regional branding via sunflower oil in the entire country. However, the average scores correlate with neither the number of the regional producers and trademarks, nor the regional sunflower crop harvest (Table 4), which means that the readiness of the producers to indicate region of location in their names and trademarks does not depend on the actual importance of sunflower to the regional economy. Generally, it is possible to anticipate a moderate efficiency of the regional branding via sunflower oil in Russia.



**Figure 2:** Strength of the regional affinities of sunflower oil producers in the regions of Russia (based on Table 3); abbreviations: P – producers, TM – trademarks.

**Table 4:** Correlation between the regional affinities of the Russian producers of sunflower oil and the basic parameters of the relevant industry.

Regional affinity parameter	Regional number of P/TM	Regional harvest (10 <sup>3</sup> t)
	Correlation coefficient	
Average score of P	0.16	−0.03
Average score of TM	0.29	0.20

P, producer; TM, trademark. These calculations are based on the data gathered in Table 3 and provided by Rosstat (2019).

The present study contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it extends the vision of the role of food products in place branding. Many researchers pay attention to the importance of either national/local gastronomy heritage (Castillo-Villar 2020; Rinaldi 2017; Vázquez-Martínez et al. 2019) or labeling country/region of origin for wine, beer, cheese, and the other products (Baker 2019; Bregoli et al. 2016; Marcoz et al. 2016). This study emphasizes on sunflower oil, and this echoes the proposition by Lopes et al. (2018) who revealed diverse opportunities of regional branding with food. Second, the attention is paid to region indication directly in the producer names and trademarks, i.e., the voluntary actions of sunflower oil producers that are not dictated by industry norms, state prescriptions, or business needs. This approach of regional branding is addressed in the literature, although not so frequently, with emphases on country names and local toponyms, and chiefly not in regard to food products (Foroudi et al. 2016; Hakala et al. 2015; Kladou et al. 2017; Kostanski 2011; Light and Young 2015; Medway and Warnaby 2014; Rose-Redwood et al. 2019). The present study confirms that the noted approach deserves serious consideration because really many sunflower oil producers demonstrate readiness to concern of regions.

The outcomes of this study have evident practical implications. Indication of regions in producer names and trademarks is a sign of food business concern of geographical affinity. This concern can be interpreted in the terms of regional identity and regional patriotism, which are linked to responsible business behavior. For each enterprise, such a behavior is voluntary, and business cannot be criticized for its absence. However, all kinds of branding are highly important to regions for their better positioning and, thus, attractiveness to entrepreneurs, investors, tourists, etc. This is especially the case of numerous regions of a big country. This means the already-made contribution of the Russian sunflower oil producers to the regional branding should be appreciated by the regional administrations and professional associations. Moreover, such responsible behavior can be recommended to the regional business communities. In this regard, national and regional projects and other official initiatives (Butova et al. 2019;



Nosachevskiy et al. 2019) may be very helpful. Examples of responsible naming documented by the present study (e.g., Table 2) need promotion among the national community of sunflower oil producers.

## Conclusions

The present study reveals that sunflower oil can be used for the purposes of regional branding in big countries, and many producers are ready to participate. Two main limitations of the present study are linked to its restriction to only Russia and to impossibility to take into account the trade routes of sunflower oil within the country. These limitations are unimportant for this pioneering and, thus, preliminary analysis, but, probably, these can be addressed by future researchers. The latter also need to examine the motivation of the producers to indicate regions of location in their names and trademarks, as well as the customers' perception of such geographical affinities.

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