



Brand Perception, Origin Confusion and Local Brand Loyalty in Merged Provinces of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

In the context of administrative transformations and the enlargement of territorial units in Vietnam, the problem of uncertainty of the origin of products is increasing, which affects the stability of local markets and consumer behavior. The aim of the study is to assess the impact of regional brand perception on loyalty to local brands, as well as to analyze the moderating role of uncertainty of origin in the context of provincial unification. The paper uses a quantitative approach using the PLS-SEM method. The empirical base consisted of data from a survey of 628 households in North Vietnam. The results showed that the perception of a regional brand has a positive and statistically significant effect on loyalty ($\beta = 0.257$; $p < 0.001$), while uncertainty of origin has a negative effect ($\beta = -0.306$; $p < 0.001$) and weakens this dependence (moderating effect $\beta = -0.200$; $p = 0.007$). The model explains 28.7% of the loyalty variation ($R^2 = 0.287$), which indicates a significant but vulnerable role of regional branding in the context of institutional changes. The results obtained emphasize the need to increase the transparency of information about the origin of products and the consistency of regional branding strategies in order to maintain the economic stability of local markets. By providing empirical evidence from an evolving administrative context, the study contributes to regional marketing literature and offers practical insights for policymakers, cooperatives, and producers aiming to safeguard local economic value amid structural reforms.

KEYWORDS: Brand, Regional Branding, Brand Loyalty, Consumer Behavior, Consumer Confusion, Marketing Strategy, Economic Resilience, Vietnam

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Восприятие бренда, неопределённость происхождения и лояльность к локальным брендам в объединённых провинциях Вьетнама

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АННОТАЦИЯ

В условиях административных преобразований и укрупнения территориальных единиц во Вьетнаме усиливается проблема неопределённости происхождения продукции, что оказывает влияние на устойчивость локальных рынков и потребительское поведение. Целью исследования является оценка влияния восприятия регионального бренда на лояльность к локальным брендам, а также анализ модерерирующей роли неопределённости происхождения в условиях объединения провинций. В работе использован количественный подход с применением метода PLS-SEM. Эмпирическую базу составили данные опроса 628 домохозяйств Северного Вьетнама. Результаты показали, что восприятие регионального бренда оказывает положительное и статистически значимое влияние на лояльность ($\beta = 0,257$; $p < 0,001$), тогда как неопределённость происхождения оказывает отрицательное влияние ($\beta = -0,306$; $p < 0,001$) и ослабляет данную зависимость (модерерирующий эффект $\beta = -0,200$; $p = 0,007$). Модель объясняет 28,7% вариации лояльности ($R^2 = 0,287$), что свидетельствует о значимой, но уязвимой роли регионального брендинга в условиях институциональных изменений. Полученные результаты подчеркивают необходимость повышения прозрачности информации о происхождении продукции и согласованности региональных брендинговых стратегий для поддержания экономической устойчивости локальных рынков.

Предоставляя эмпирические данные в условиях трансформирующегося административного контекста, исследование вносит вклад в литературу по региональному маркетингу и предлагает практические рекомендации для органов государственной власти, кооперативов и производителей, направленные на сохранение экономической ценности локальных продуктов в условиях структурных реформ.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: бренд, региональный брендинг, лояльность к бренду, поведение потребителей, непонимание потребителей, маркетинговая стратегия, устойчивость экономики, Вьетнам

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INTRODUCTION

Recent administrative mergers implemented across Northern Vietnam have reshaped not only governance structures but also the symbolic foundations of local markets. Many local products, particularly OCOP goods, traditional specialties, and place-based brands, were historically associated with specific communes or district names that no longer exist in their former administrative form. As territorial identities are redefined, long-standing geographical cues embedded in product labeling and certification become misaligned with newly formalized administrative names. This misalignment generates increasing uncertainty in how consumers interpret product origins, giving rise to a distinct form of market disruption characterized by origin confusion.

This phenomenon poses a critical challenge for local economies that rely on place-based products. Regional brand perception plays a central role in sustaining authenticity signals, cultural meaning, and trust, key elements underpinning consumer loyalty and local economic resilience. However, administrative restructuring risks weakening these place-based anchors, potentially destabilizing local brand loyalty even when product quality and cultural value remain unchanged. Despite the scale and policy significance of administrative mergers, empirical research has paid limited attention to how such structural changes affect consumer perceptions, origin interpretation, and loyalty toward local brands.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines the interplay between regional brand perception, origin confusion, and local brand loyalty in the context of merged provinces in Northern Vietnam. Specifically, the study investigates (1) the effect of regional brand perception on local brand loyalty, (2) the direct impact of origin confusion on loyalty, and (3) the moderating role of origin confusion in shaping the relationship between perception and loyalty.

By doing so, this research makes two key contributions. Theoretically, it extends regional branding and consumer behavior literature by introducing administrative restructuring as a contextual driver of origin confusion and by clarifying its role in moderating loyalty formation. In practice, it offers evidence-based insights for

policymakers and local producers on how to preserve place-based brand value amid institutional change, thereby supporting the sustainability of local product competitiveness in post-merger contexts.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the inclusion of institutional changes related to administrative reform as a factor that creates consumer uncertainty and affects the sustainability of local brands. Thus, in the context of the transformation of the administrative-territorial structure, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how changes in the institutional environment affect the perception of regional brands and consumer behavior. The aim of this study is to examine the effect of regional brand perception on local brand loyalty and to assess the moderating role of origin confusion in the context of administrative mergers in Northern Vietnam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand loyalty is a central construct in marketing and consumer behavior research, commonly defined as a consumer's enduring preference and commitment toward a brand, reflected in both repeat purchase behavior and favorable attitudinal disposition (Dick & Basu, 1994; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Traditional approaches conceptualize loyalty as a combination of behavioral consistency and attitudinal attachment, shaped by satisfaction, trust, and perceived value. More recent perspectives emphasize that loyalty is not purely transactional but also relational, involving emotional bonds and identity-related evaluations (Veloutsou, 2015).

Contemporary loyalty research highlights several directions relevant to this study. First, brand loyalty has been increasingly linked to symbolic and identity-based meanings, particularly in contexts where products carry cultural or place-based significance (Batra et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2012). Second, studies show that loyalty is sensitive to consumers' cognitive clarity and perceived credibility, especially when brand-related information becomes ambiguous or inconsistent (Shahid et al., 2025; Walsh & Mitchell, 2010). These strands suggest that loyalty toward regional or local brands depends not only on satisfaction but also on the stability of symbolic cues that connect the brand to consumers' identity frameworks.

In the context of regional and local brands in Vietnam, brand loyalty is closely tied to geographical

origin and place-based identity, particularly for agricultural and specialty products associated with specific provinces (Veloutsou, 2015). Administrative unit mergers alter official place designations and may weaken established origin cues, thereby challenging consumers' ability to sustain loyalty grounded in regional identity. This study, therefore, treats local brand loyalty as a relational outcome that remains meaningful but potentially vulnerable when institutional changes disrupt consumers' perception of stable brand–place associations.

Brand perception refers to consumers' overall cognitive and affective evaluation of a brand, encompassing interpretations of functional quality, symbolic meaning, and emotional value (Arai et al., 2014; Kervyn et al., 2012). Traditional approaches view brand perception as the result of accumulated experiences, communication, and social meaning, which influence downstream outcomes such as trust, purchase intention, and loyalty (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016; Nyadzayo & Khajehzadeh, 2016). In this sense, brand perception functions as a key mediating mechanism between brand signals and consumer responses.

Recent research on regional branding emphasizes that brand perception is strongly shaped by origin-based cues and evaluations of authenticity. Studies demonstrate that consumers rely on geographical origin, cultural heritage, and perceived authenticity to form favorable perceptions of regional brands (Nikraftar et al., 2025; Hurdawaty et al., 2025). At the same time, emerging work highlights that sustainability communication and digitally mediated representations of place influence how regional identity is interpreted, potentially strengthening or weakening perceived authenticity (Isac et al., 2025; Japutra et al., 2025; Tao et al., 2026). These findings indicate that regional brand perception remains rooted in place-based meaning but is increasingly exposed to contextual complexity.

Within the Vietnamese context of administrative mergers, regional brand perception faces additional challenges. Changes in official provincial boundaries and place names may create discontinuities between historically recognized origins and newly formalized administrative identities. Prior research suggests that such institutional shifts can destabilize the symbolic coherence of place-based brands, particularly when consumers rely on origin cues as signals of authenticity and quality (Liao et al., 2025; Mbinza,

2025). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes regional brand perception as a context-sensitive evaluation shaped by consumers' efforts to reconcile established regional meanings with administratively redefined geographical identities.

Origin confusion is conceptually derived from consumer confusion theory, which describes a state in which consumers experience uncertainty or misinterpretation during evaluation and decision-making processes due to ambiguous, inconsistent, or excessive information (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010; Shahid et al., 2025). In traditional consumer behavior research, confusion is understood as a cognitive response that reduces judgment accuracy, confidence, and perceived control, thereby weakening evaluative clarity and trust (Chen & Chang, 2013). When applied to branding contexts, confusion undermines consumers' ability to correctly infer key brand attributes and meanings.

Building on this foundation, origin confusion refers specifically to consumers' uncertainty or misperception regarding a product's geographical or cultural origin (Thakor & Lavack, 2003; Samiee et al., 2005). Empirical research demonstrates that unclear or inconsistent origin cues—such as place names, symbols, or labeling can distort consumers' origin inferences and alter their attitudes and behavioral intentions (Zhou & Hui, 2003; Wang et al., 2004). Further recent studies show that ambiguity surrounding sustainability claims, overlapping symbolic cues, and dense digital information environments intensify confusion and weaken perceived authenticity, credibility, and trust (Daou et al., 2025; Mauri et al., 2025; Agnihotri et al., 2025).

In the context of administrative unit mergers in Vietnam, origin confusion emerges as a salient issue for regional and local brands. Products traditionally associated with specific provinces or districts may face discrepancies between historically recognized place identities and newly formalized administrative labels. Prior research suggests that when origin cues lose consistency or continuity, consumers may struggle to reconcile established mental representations of place-based brands with institutional redefinitions, increasing uncertainty regarding authenticity and provenance (Samiee et al., 2005; Liao et al., 2025). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes origin confusion as context-specific uncertainty arising from administrative restructuring

that disrupts consumers' interpretation of regional brand origin.

Based on the theoretical background discussed above, this study develops hypotheses regarding the relationships between regional brand perception, origin confusion, and local brand loyalty.

H1: Regional brand perception positively influences local brand loyalty

The positive relationship between regional brand perception and local brand loyalty can be explained through the functional theory of attitude, which posits that attitudes serve knowledge and value-expressive functions, enabling consumers to organize information and express self-identity (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Shavitt, 1990). When a regional brand is perceived as an authentic symbol of local heritage, consumers develop favorable evaluations and an emotional attachment, which in turn strengthen loyalty (Ajzen, 2001). Recent regional branding research further suggests that perceptions related to sustainability, digital representations, and experiential authenticity can reinforce consumers' emotional connection to place-based brands (Ren et al., 2026; Hurdawaty et al., 2025).

This relationship is also supported by consumer ethnocentrism theory, which argues that preference for domestic or local products is rooted in moral and cultural considerations (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Strong regional brand perception reinforces pride and familiarity with local identity, thereby fostering commitment and loyalty. Empirical evidence indicates that such identity-based loyalty operates within evolving socio-cultural contexts and may vary across demographic and generational groups (Fang et al., 2025; Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2025). In merged provinces, loyalty is therefore maintained when consumers continue to perceive brands as authentically representing their region.

H2: Origin confusion negatively influences local brand loyalty

Origin confusion refers to consumers' uncertainty regarding a product's true geographical or brand origin (Samiee et al., 2005; Thakor & Lavack, 2003). According to consumer confusion theory, ambiguous or inconsistent information

increases cognitive overload, reduces trust, and weakens loyalty (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010). A recent meta-analysis confirms that confusion leads to negative behavioral outcomes, including reduced purchase intention and loyalty (Shahid et al., 2025). Contemporary studies further show that confusion induced by greenwashing, digital information overload, or inconsistent brand representations erodes perceptions of authenticity and consumer commitment (Daou et al., 2025; Nguyen & Duong, 2025; Agnihotri et al., 2025). In the context of local products, origin confusion weakens the symbolic association between the brand and the place, a key driver of loyalty. When consumers are uncertain about whether a product truly represents its traditional locality, perceived risk and skepticism increase, leading to disengagement (Chen & Chang, 2013).

H3: Origin confusion weakens the positive relationship between regional brand perception and local brand loyalty

Beyond its direct effect, origin confusion is expected to moderate the relationship between regional brand perception and local brand loyalty. Consumer learning theory suggests that consumers update their beliefs when confronted with conflicting information, potentially downgrading prior evaluations (Zhao et al., 2011; Cleeren et al., 2013). When positive regional brand perceptions coexist with uncertain origin cues, the translation of favorable perception into loyalty becomes weaker.

This moderating effect is consistent with ethnocentrism theory, as loyalty toward local products depends on perceived authenticity and symbolic congruence with regional identity (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Empirical studies show that confusion reduces trust and word-of-mouth, thereby constraining otherwise positive brand effects (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010). Accordingly, origin confusion not only reduces loyalty directly but also weakens the positive impact of regional brand perception on loyalty.

Based on the hypotheses put forward, a conceptual research model is formed, shown in Figure 1.

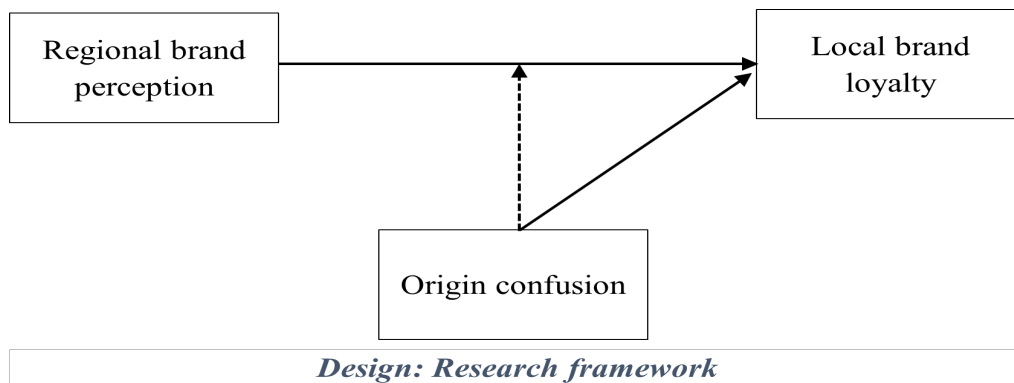


Figure 1. Conceptual research model

The conceptual research model presented reflects the relationship among perception of a regional brand, uncertainty of origin, and loyalty to local brands. The model includes the direct positive impact of regional brand perception on loyalty, as well as the negative impact of origin uncertainty. Based on the proposed hypothesis, the study proposes the above research framework with the independent variable “Regional brand perception”, the dependent variable “Local brand loyalty”, and the moderating variable “Origin confusion”.

METHODOLOGY

This study is situated in Northern Vietnam, a region currently undergoing large-scale administrative unit restructuring. Following the Government of Vietnam’s national program to reorganize district- and commune-level administrative units, numerous communes and districts have been merged, renamed, or dissolved, with several provinces moving toward consolidating lower administrative levels and eliminating intermediary units. While this reform aims to enhance governance efficiency, it has also produced unintended consequences for place-based identity and local product recognition.

For many local products in Northern Vietnam, particularly agricultural specialties, handicrafts, and traditional foods brand identity has historically been anchored in specific communes or districts. These place names function not merely as administrative labels but as symbolic origin cues that signal authenticity, heritage, and trust. Administrative mergers disrupt this linkage by replacing historically embedded geographical identifiers with newly formalized administrative names. As a result, products that were once clearly associated

with a familiar locality may now display labels or certifications that no longer align with consumers’ long-standing mental representations of place.

This context is particularly salient given Vietnam’s “One Commune, One Product” (OCOP) program, which emphasizes the development and certification of local specialties based on geographical origin and cultural distinctiveness. When administrative boundaries are redefined, OCOP products may be relabeled or reclassified, creating inconsistencies between historical place identity and current administrative designations. These inconsistencies create conditions under which consumers continue to perceive strong regional brand meaning while simultaneously experiencing uncertainty about product origin. Accordingly, administrative restructuring in Northern Vietnam provides a natural and theoretically relevant setting to examine how regional brand perception influences local brand loyalty and how origin confusion constrains this relationship.

This study adopts a quantitative research method to test the relationships proposed in the conceptual model. All measurement scales were adapted from established studies to ensure validity and reliability, with contextual adjustments made to reflect administrative restructuring in Northern Vietnam. The scale development process followed standard procedures, including adaptation from prior literature, contextual rewording, pilot testing, and refinement.

Regional Brand Perception (RGP) and Local Brand Loyalty (LBL) were adapted from widely validated scales in the branding literature (Johnson & Bruwer, 2007; Hankinson, 2005; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Given their extensive prior validation, these constructs required

only minor wording adjustments to ensure relevance to local products in Vietnam, without altering their conceptual structure.

Origin Confusion (OCF) was adapted from the consumer confusion proneness scale developed by Walsh and Mitchell (2010). In the original scale, confusion is operationalized through multiple dimensions, including similarity, overload, and ambiguity. In this study, selected items, primarily from the ambiguity-related dimension, were reworded to capture uncertainty regarding product origin following administrative unit mergers, while maintaining the original item logic. For example, the original item “The information I get from advertising often is so vague that it is hard to know what a product can actually perform” was adapted to reflect origin-related ambiguity as “Information about this product’s place of origin is often unclear after recent administrative changes.” Similarly, the item “When buying a product I rarely feel sufficiently informed” was rephrased as “I often feel insufficiently informed about whether this product still comes from its traditionally recognized locality.”

A pilot test with 30 respondents was conducted to assess clarity and contextual relevance. Feedback indicated that the adapted origin-related items were clearly understood in relation to administrative restructuring. Minor wording refinements were made to improve precision, and no items were

removed at this stage. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The questionnaire was translated and back-translated to ensure semantic consistency.

Data were collected using a stratified random sampling approach targeting consumers in Northern Vietnamese provinces affected by administrative unit mergers. The sampling design followed two layers. The first layer was based on provincial distribution, proportionally aligned with household expenditure scale across major northern localities such as Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Quang Ninh, and Bac Ninh. The second layer stratified respondents by household income groups to ensure socio-economic representation. Each household was represented by one primary respondent, and each completed questionnaire constituted one valid observation.

The survey employed a household-based approach, as local and OCOP-related products are primarily purchased for household consumption. As a result, the sample includes a high proportion of female respondents (81.85%), reflecting the consumption context rather than sampling bias, since women in Vietnam typically assume primary responsibility for household purchasing decisions, particularly for food and everyday household items. A total of 628 usable responses were retained for analysis. Detailed demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics results

Characteristics		Responses (N=628)	Percentage
Gender	Female	514	81.85
	Male	114	18.15
Household size	Single family	125	19.90
	Nuclear family	290	46.18
	Multigenerational household	213	33.92
Annual household income per capita	Under 5000 USD	311	49.52
	5000-10,000 USD	187	29.78
	10,000-20,000 USD	97	15.45
	Above 20,000 USD	33	5.25
Location	Ha Noi City (The Capital)	178	28.34
	Hai Phong City	102	16.24
	Quang Ninh Province	71	11.31
	Bac Ninh Province	59	9.39
	Red River Delta (Ninh Binh and Hung Yen provinces)	62	9.87
	Other provinces	156	24.84

Note: compiled by the authors

The final dataset included valid responses from participants with prior experience purchasing or consuming local products from the merged provinces. Data screening and cleaning were conducted using Microsoft Excel to remove incomplete or inconsistent responses. Common Method Bias (CMB) was tested using AMOS 24.0, and hypothesis testing was performed in SmartPLS 4.0 to assess both the measurement and structural models, following standard PLS-SEM procedures. The use of PLS-SEM is appropriate for both the proposed model and the practical context, as PLS-SEM is considered the most suitable approach for assessing moderation effects and theory-building orientations, rather than confirmatory testing, in line with the recommendations of Hair et al. (2019).

The CMB assessment was conducted following the recommendations of Henseler et al. (2016) using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The model fit indices shown in the figure indicate that no issues related to Common Method Bias were detected in the dataset.

The measurement model was evaluated according to the guidelines of Hair et al. (2021). Reliability was confirmed through factor loadings exceeding 0.708 for all indicators, and Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values above 0.7 for all constructs. Convergent validity was established with AVE values greater than 0.5, while discriminant validity was verified using HTMT ratios below 0.85. The results are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summarize the results of the measurement models

Code	<i>LBL</i> <i>(mean = 3.78)</i>	<i>OCF</i> <i>(mean =4.12)</i>	<i>RGP</i> <i>(mean =3.98)</i>	<i>OCF x RGP</i>
LBL1	0.811			
LBL2	0.832			
LBL3	0.811			
LBL4	0.821			
LBL5	0.828			
LBL6	0.800			
OCF1		0.847		
OCF2		0.894		
OCF3		0.852		
OCF4		0.813		
RGP1			0.855	
RGP2			0.845	
RGP3			0.870	
RGP4			0.845	
RGP5			0.862	
OCF x RGP				1
Cronbach's alpha	0.901	0.875	0.909	
CR	0.903	0.899	0.918	
AVE	0.668	0.727	0.732	
HTMT table	LBL	OCF	RGP	OCF x RGP
LBL	0.36			
OCF	0.394			
RGP	0.076	0.409		
OCF x RGP	0.360	0.400		

Note: authors' calculations using SmartPLS 4.0

These results confirm that the measurement model meets all recommended thresholds and is suitable for further structural model evaluation. The structural model was assessed using VIF values (to evaluate multicollinearity), R^2 (to assess the

explained variance of the endogenous constructs), f^2 (to determine effect sizes), and the significance of the structural paths. As reported in Table 3, all VIF values were below the recommended threshold of 3, indicating no multicollinearity issues.

Table 3. VIF and f^2 result

Relationship	VIF	f^2	Path coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
OCF $\rightarrow$ LBL	1.352	0.187	-0.306	4.097	0.000
RGP $\rightarrow$ LBL	1.167	0.172	0.257	3.814	0.000
OCF $\times$ RGP $\rightarrow$ LBL	1.176	0.139	-0.200	2.699	0.007

Note: authors' calculations using SmartPLS 4.0

Perception of a regional brand has a positive and statistically significant effect on loyalty ($\beta = 0.257$; $p < 0.001$), while uncertainty of origin has a negative effect ($\beta = -0.306$; $p < 0.001$). The moderation effect is also significant ($\beta = -0.200$; $p = 0.007$), indicating that the influence of brand perception on loyalty weakens as uncertainty increases. The model explains a moderate proportion of variance

in local brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.287$). All hypothesized relationships are statistically significant, including the direct effects of regional brand perception and origin confusion, as well as the moderating effect of origin confusion.

Figure 2 visually summarizes the structural relationships and illustrates the moderating role of origin confusion in the model.

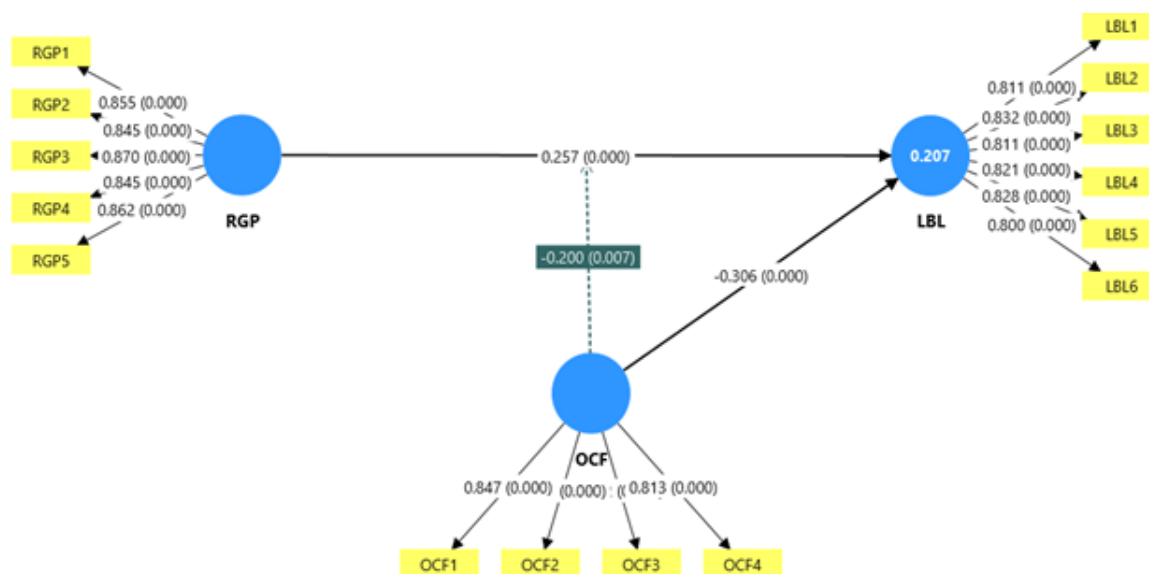


Figure 2. Summary result of the study

Figure 1 depicts a structural research model comprising three latent variables: perception of a regional brand (RGP), uncertainty of origin (OCF), and loyalty to a local brand (LBL). Perception of a regional brand has a positive effect on loyalty ($\beta = 0.257$; $p < 0.001$), while uncertainty of origin has a negative effect ($\beta = -0.306$; $p < 0.001$). A negative moderation effect was also observed ($\beta = -0.200$; p

$= 0.007$), indicating that the positive relationship between brand perception and loyalty weakens as uncertainty increases. All indicators have high factor loads, which confirms the reliability of the measurement model.

As shown in Table 4, all the relationships studied are statistically significant and correspond to the hypotheses put forward.

Table 4. Path coefficients results (Direct effect)

Relationship	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
OCF → LBL	-0.306	0.305	0.075	4.097	0.000
OCF x RGP → LBL	-0.200	0.189	0.074	2.699	0.007
RGP → LBL	0.257	0.264	0.068	3.814	0.000

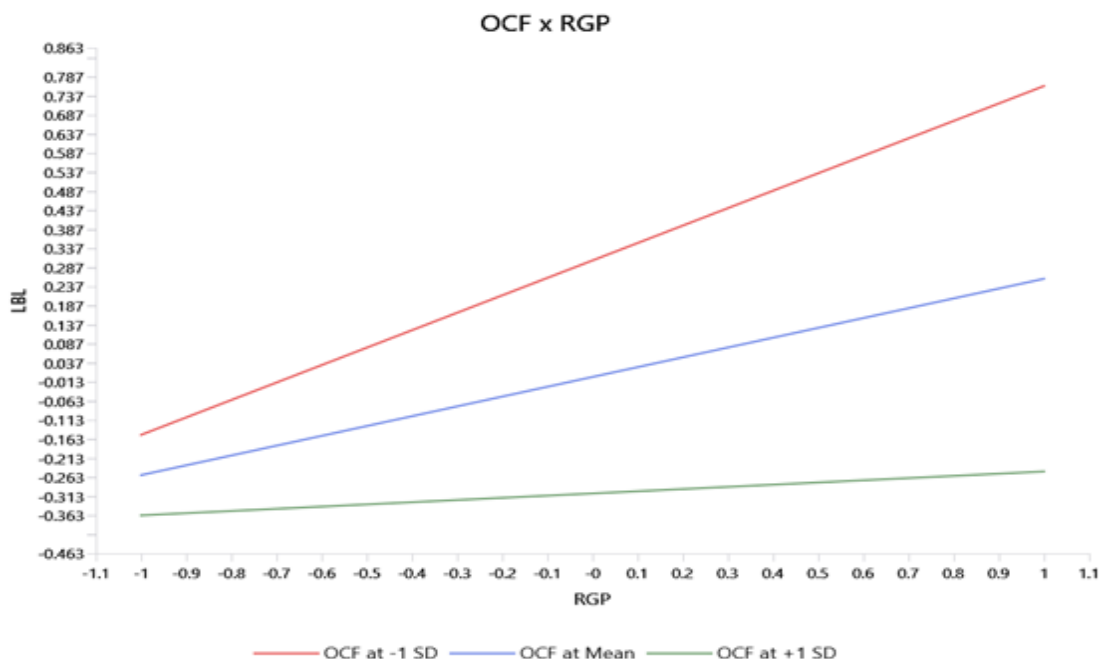
Note: authors' calculations using SmartPLS 4.0

Perception of a regional brand has a positive effect on loyalty ($\beta = 0.257$; $p < 0.001$), while uncertainty of origin has a negative effect ($\beta = -0.306$; $p < 0.001$). The moderation effect is also significant ($\beta = -0.200$; $p = 0.007$), indicating a weakening of the positive impact of brand perception on loyalty as origin uncertainty increases. The moderating effect of origin confusion was examined using path

coefficients and further visualized through a simple slope analysis. Based on the estimated standardized coefficients, the relationship can be expressed as follows:

$$LBL = 0.257 * RGP - 0.306 * OCF - 0.200 * RGP * OCF$$

The moderation effect is clearly shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Simple Slope analysis result

The results show that at origin confusion values corresponding to the mean, mean – 1 SD, and mean + 1 SD, the slope of the effect of regional brand perception decreases as origin confusion increases. This implies that when confusion about product origin becomes more prominent, particularly in the context of provincial mergers, where many former administrative identities now exist only historically, the influence of regional brand perception weakens and is no longer strong enough to generate local brand loyalty. This pattern is visualized through the Simple Slope Analysis above.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into how regional brand perception, origin confusion, and local brand loyalty interact during administrative unit mergers in Northern Vietnam. By integrating established theoretical perspectives such as the functional theory of attitudes, consumer ethnocentrism, and consumer confusion theory with household-based empirical data, the study reveals both the resilience and the emerging vulnerability of local brand loyalty during periods of territorial restructuring.

The positive mean value of regional brand perception (RGP = 3.98) indicates that consumers continue to hold highly favorable evaluations of local products in merged provinces. This finding is consistent with prior literature suggesting that regional brands accumulate symbolic, cultural, and emotional value over time, often functioning as expressions of local identity and community pride (Arai et al., 2014; Veloutsou, 2015). The significant and positive structural path from RGP to local brand loyalty further confirms that, even amid administrative complexity, consumers rely on deeply embedded associations with origin, authenticity, and cultural symbolism.

The demographic structure of the sample provides additional context for this stability. The predominance of female respondents (81.85%), together with the high proportions of nuclear (46.18%) and multigenerational households (33.92%), reflects consumption patterns in which women typically assume primary responsibility for food purchasing and for maintaining traditional consumption habits. This household-based dynamic helps explain why regional brand perception remains strong: local specialty products often carry intergenerational meaning, and women play a central role in preserving recognition and trust toward familiar place-based brands.

Moreover, the relatively balanced geographical distribution of respondents—from major urban centers such as Ha Noi and Hai Phong City to semi-rural provinces including Quang Ninh, Bac Ninh, Ninh Binh, and Hung Yen, suggests that attachment to regional identity continues to influence consumer evaluation across diverse socio-spatial contexts. This supports signaling and self-congruity perspectives, indicating that cultural narratives embedded in regional brands remain salient despite administrative reclassification.

Origin confusion exhibits the highest mean value among the constructs (OCF = 4.12), indicating that uncertainty regarding product origin is widespread and intense. This pattern reflects the real-world consequences of Vietnam's administrative mergers, where long-standing commune and district names have been renamed, dissolved, or merged. Many OCOP and local specialty products, historically anchored to specific place names, now face inconsistencies between consumers' mental representations of origin and newly formalized administrative labels.

Consistent with consumer confusion theory (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010; Chen & Chang, 2013), such ambiguity increases cognitive load, weakens confidence in origin claims, and disrupts evaluative clarity. The significant negative effect of origin confusion on local brand loyalty supports H2 and aligns with prior empirical findings showing that confusion undermines trust, emotional attachment, and purchase commitment (Shahid et al., 2025). In this context, administrative restructuring disrupts both cognitive cues (accurate identification of origin) and symbolic cues (cultural continuity), leading consumers to question whether products still embody the identities they value.

Although local brand loyalty maintains a relatively strong mean value (LBL = 3.78), it remains lower than both RGP and OCF, suggesting that loyalty is increasingly placed under pressure. From the perspective of the functional theory of attitudes, loyalty depends on the knowledge function, which uses familiar origin cues to organize judgments, and the value-expressive function, which uses regional brands to express cultural identity (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Katz, 1960). When origin cues become uncertain, these functions are disrupted, weakening the attitudinal foundation of loyalty. This highlights a critical research gap: existing regional branding studies rarely account for how policy-driven structural changes, rather than market competition alone, destabilize identity-laden brand relationships.

The moderation results further reinforce this insight. Origin confusion significantly weakens the positive relationship between regional brand perception and local brand loyalty, supporting H3. Even when consumers evaluate regional brands positively, uncertainty regarding origin diminishes the strength of their loyalty. This finding is consistent with consumer learning theory (Zhao et al., 2011; Cleeren et al., 2013), which suggests that conflicting new information, such as the renaming of administrative units, leads consumers to revise, and sometimes downgrade, prior evaluations.

These findings carry important economic implications for post-merger socio-economic transformation. Local brands, particularly agricultural and OCOP-certified products, represent not only cultural assets but also critical sources of household income, rural livelihoods, and regional competitiveness. The high level of origin confusion,

therefore, signals a tangible economic risk: weakened loyalty may reduce market stability, disrupt consumer–producer trust, and fragment branding strategies across newly merged administrative units.

At the same time, the coexistence of strong regional brand perception (3.98) and moderate loyalty (3.78) suggests a window of opportunity. Provincial governments and local cooperatives can re-anchor regional economic value through clearer origin communication, consistent labeling practices, and coherent regional branding strategies that reconcile historical place identities with new administrative boundaries. Failure to address origin confusion, however, may result in long-term dilution of brand equity, undermining OCOP initiatives and constraining local economic development.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how regional brand perception shapes local brand loyalty in the context of administrative mergers in Northern Vietnam and assessed the moderating role of origin confusion. The findings confirm that regional brand perception continues to serve as a strong attitudinal anchor, supporting loyalty through culturally embedded associations of authenticity, heritage, and place-based identity. However, origin confusion, heightened by the renaming and restructuring of local administrative units, exerts a significant negative influence on loyalty and simultaneously weakens the positive impact of regional brand perception. This indicates that even strong cultural and symbolic ties to local products become vulnerable when consumers face uncertainty about geographical origin. Although loyalty remains relatively stable, the growing mismatch between historical place cues and newly formalized administrative identities poses substantive challenges to sustaining long-term consumer commitment to local products, particularly those closely tied to cultural narratives and regional economic development.

The findings highlight important implications for local governments, producers, and regional development stakeholders. For policymakers, the results underscore the need to establish clearer, more consistent communication about product origins following administrative mergers. Aligning labeling, certification, and promotional materials with new administrative structures, while simultaneously

acknowledging historically meaningful place names, will reduce confusion and preserve consumer trust. Such alignment is particularly crucial given that policy-driven structural changes, rather than market competition alone, are now a major source of ambiguity about origins.

For local producers and cooperatives, the study points to the strategic importance of reinforcing authenticity cues through coherent brand storytelling, traceability systems, and unified regional communication efforts that maintain continuity between past and present geographical identities. These recommendations directly reflect the study's limitations: because restructuring is still ongoing and varies across regions, communication strategies must be adaptive and sensitive to evolving consumer interpretations. More broadly, ensuring clarity in origin claims will help stabilize local consumption patterns, sustain household income tied to specialty products, and support the long-term viability of regional branding initiatives such as OCOP.

Although comprehensive in scope, this study is limited to Northern Vietnam, where the scale and pace of administrative mergers may differ from other regions. Future research could employ comparative or longitudinal designs to capture how origin confusion evolves as new administrative identities become normalized. Additional moderators such as regional attachment, cultural pride, or consumer familiarity with policy reforms may further enrich the model's explanatory power. Moreover, exploring differences across product categories could provide more nuanced insights into how various types of local goods respond to shifts in place-based identity cues. These limitations also indicate that practical recommendations must be interpreted within the policy environment that gives rise to origin ambiguity, reinforcing the need for ongoing coordination between branding initiatives and administrative decision-making.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization and theory: DHL, THL, LMS and NTH; research design: DHL, THL, LMS and NTH; data collection: DHL; analysis and interpretation: THL; writing draft preparation: LMS and NTH; supervision: DHL and THL; correction of article: DHL, THL, LMS and NTH; proofread and final approval of article: DHL, THL, LMS and NTH. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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