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### Abstract

The study focuses on Finland's Country-of-Origin Image (COI) and its utilization in the foodstuff industry. Finland's foodstuff industry has been struggling with its profitability in recent years. The Finnish foodstuff industry has been highly oriented in the domestic market and exports may be part of a solution to its profitability issues. A country's COI may be used as a marketing resource in exports. The study examines Finland's COI in terms of its attributes, its utilization and the ways in which its utilization could be improved. The main research question is: "How can Finnish foodstuff exporters utilize their Country-of-Origin-Image?"

The study is a qualitative interview study utilizing existing theory on the subjects of foodstuff export marketing and the phenomenon of COI. Theoretical background for relevant phenomena is presented as well as models for the assessment of COI and its utilization. Empirical data was collected via semi-structured interviews with industry experts from both governmental organizations and private companies. The companies included three exporters each focusing on dairy-, meat- or berry products. The interviews focused on the interviewees' experiences about Finland's COI and its utilization. The results showed a positive COI for Finnish foodstuffs, though the COI was weak globally. Finland's COI is a good product-country -match regarding foodstuffs due to the image of, for example, its pure nature. Finland's foodstuff exports focus on semi-finished products and raw materials, which makes B2B-marketing with "hard facts" common. Finnish foodstuffs are often marketed by bringing up, for example, Finnish nature, technical details such as low chemical residues, and famous places, characters, or phenomena.

The conclusions included confirmation of some existing COI theory and suggestions for Finnish foodstuff exporters in COI utilization. COI marketing should be better adapted to target markets and a clearer message conveyed. The most effective selling points of COI should be used in marketing, though they might seem mundane or too prestigious. Exporters should increase focus on end products instead of raw materials. Further study is suggested in the strengthening of Finland's COI and identifying the most effective COI selling points.

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| Key words | Country-of-Origin Image, Foodstuff exports, Finnish foodstuffs |
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### Tiivistelmä

Tutkimus käsittelee Suomen alkuperämaakuva (COI) sekä sen hyödyntämistä elintarviketeollisuudessa. Suomen elintarviketeollisuudella on ollut ongelmia kannattavuuden kanssa viime vuosina. Suomen elintarviketeollisuus on ollut kotimarkkinaorientoitunut ja vienti voisi olla osa kannattavuusongelmien ratkaisua. Alkuperämaakuva voidaan käyttää markkinointiresurssina viennissä. Tutkimus tarkastelee Suomen alkuperämaakuva sen ominaisuuksien ja hyödyntämisen suhteen sekä sitä, miten alkuperämaakuvan hyödyntämistä voitaisiin parantaa. Päättökysymys on: ”Miten suomalaiset elintarvikeviejät voivat hyödyntää alkuperämaakuvaansa?”.

Tutkimus on laadullinen haastattelututkimus, joka hyödyntää olemassa olevaa teoriaa elintarvikkeiden vientimarkkinoinnin sekä alkuperämaakuvan suhteen. Teoreettista taustaa esitellään olennaisten ilmiöiden sekä alkuperämaakuvaan liittyvien mallien osalta. Empiiristä dataa on kerätty alan ammattilaisilta puolistrukturoitujen haastattelujen keinoin sekä julkiselta, että yksityiseltä sektorilta. Yksityistä sektoria edustivat kolme vientiyritystä, jotka edustivat maitotuote-, liha- sekä marja-aloja. Haastattelut käsittelivät haastateltavien kokemuksiin Suomen alkuperämaakuvasta ja sen hyödyntämisestä. Tulokset osoittivat Suomen positiivisen, mutta heikon alkuperämaakuvan. Suomen alkuperämaakuva sopii elintarvikevientiin muun muassa puhtaan luontokuvan vuoksi. Suomen elintarvikevienti keskittyy raaka-aineisiin tai puolivalmisteisiin, jonka vuoksi asiantuntijamarkkinointia tehdään usein faktapohjaisesti. Suomalaisia elintarvikkeita markkinoidaan usein muun muassa luonnon, kemikaalijäämien, sekä kuuluisien paikkojen, hahmojen tai ilmiöiden kautta.

Johtopäätökset vahvistivat joitain olemassa olevia teorioita sekä loivat ehdotuksia Suomalaisille elintarvikeviejille alkuperämaakuvan hyödyntämiseen. Alkuperämaamarkkinointia tulisi sopeuttaa kohdemarkkinaan ja markkinointiviestiä tulisi selventää. Tehokkaimpia myyntiä tukevia osa-alueita tulisi hyödyntää, vaikka ne saattavat tuntua arkisilta tai liian näyttäviltä. Vientiä tulisi lisätä lopputuotteiden osalta, raaka-aineiden tai puolivalmisteiden sijaan. Jatkotutkimuskohteita esitetään Suomen alkuperämaakuvan vahvistamisen keinojen sekä tehokkaimpien myyntiä tukevien alkuperämaakuvan osa-alueiden tunnistamisen osalta.

### Avainsanat

Alkuperämaakuva, Suomen elintarvikevienti, maakuvamarkkinointi







**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

Turku School of  
Economics

# **UTILIZING COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN IMAGE IN FINNISH FOODSTUFF EXPORTS**

Master's Thesis

in International Business Administration

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Exports as a solution to Finnish foodstuff industry's profitability

The Finnish food industry has been struggling with its profitability in recent years. Production costs in Finland are strongly affected by factors such as the country's northern location, which causes e.g., logistical, and environmental handicaps (Patjas 2016). The Finnish foodstuff industry also suffers from low productivity, small-scale production, and a centralized retail structure (Irz et al. 2017 31, 134-135). These factors, among others, create a challenging environment for Finnish food producers to maintain profitability. In a report for the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the entrepreneurial income of food producers has been on the decline from the start of the millennium (Karhinen 2019, 9). Thus, the food industry is facing challenges and must look for new strategies for its operation.

The COVID-19 -pandemic of 2020 highlighted the food industry and brought up issues such as disruptions in global food supply chains, food safety and nations' self-sufficiency (Fedunik-Hofman, 2020). The Natural Resource Institute of Finland statistics show that Finland is a clear net importer of agricultural products and foodstuff. The value of exports in November 2020 was 0,15 billion while exports at the same time amounted to 0,46 billion euros. The value of exports in comparison to the same time in the previous year decreased in almost every product group where statistics were compiled. (Luke 2021b). The export sanctions imposed on Russia in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine further exacerbated the export barriers (European Council 2022) and further limited the importance of Russia as a target market. Of all the Nordic countries, Finland is the least export-oriented with 85,7 % of its production being directed to domestic markets, in contrast to Denmark, where almost half of the production is exported (Irz et al. 2017 57-58). Figure 1 illustrates the development of the trade of Finnish foodstuffs in the last 19 years.

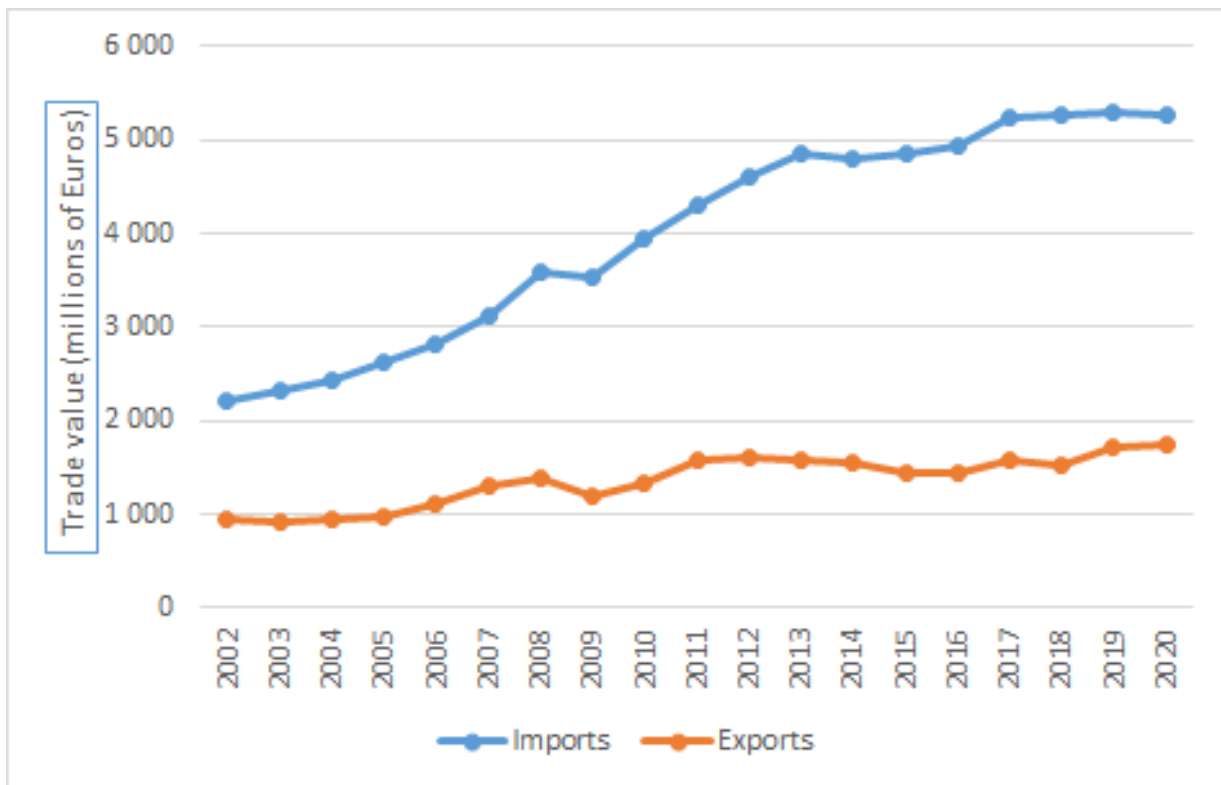


Figure 1 Trade of Finnish foodstuffs in 2002-2020 (Luke 2021c)

The foodstuffs trade deficit seen in Figure 1 calls for the improvement of Finnish foodstuff's desirability in foreign markets. Currently, Finland's most important export destinations are Sweden, Estonia, and China and the most important product categories are milk and dairy products and processed foods (Luke 2021c). Increasing exports could also prove to be part of the solution to the issue with the industry's declining profitability as a globalizing world gives rise to new business prospects for companies in most industries. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2017) identifies focus on the domestic market as the most central challenge to the Finnish food chain's growth competitiveness.

The world is becoming ever more interconnected and business across borders is increasing in value (UNCTAD 2022). The global food market may present business prospects along with new kinds of competition. This pits exporters against new rivals, and they must find ways to differentiate themselves from their global competitors. For a Finnish foodstuff exporter, this means adapting to new kinds of market conditions.

Despite some disadvantages inherent for Finnish food production, the Country-of-Origin Image (COI) of Finland is an issue to be considered by all foodstuff exporters. In this thesis, COI is a general concept used to describe the overall effects and mental images

that a product or service creates when it is associated with an origin country, even though some more specific terms or taxonomies will be introduced for its sub-phenomena. Kotler (1997, 607) states that an object's image highly influences people's attitudes and actions towards it. This makes the embedded image of an object a vital issue for a marketer, and in the export context, the role of an origin-country is emphasized. Overall, Finland's Country-of-Origin Image is considered weak but positive, with it declining in strength as physical distance from Finland increases (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 98-99, 111-114). The phenomenon is of course multi-faceted and a closer look on the subject is taken later in this thesis.

A country's Country-of-Origin Image is a squandered marketing resource if its potential is left untapped. As one sort of a ubiquitous resource for Finnish companies, the utilization of Finland's Country-of-Origin Image could be a source of advantage or disadvantage in international firms' marketing efforts. This research aims to analyze its utilization in the foodstuff industry and improve on the ways Finland's Country-of Origin Image is managed. Extensive research exists on the subjects of foodstuff marketing and Country-of Origin Image. The issue of Finland's Country-of-Origin Image is widely addressed in non-scientific publications by companies and organizations such as Finland Promotion Board (2010). Little research is focused on combining these issues and addressing the effect of Country-of Origin Image in Finnish foodstuff exports. This research gap incentivizes further research on the subject.

The Natural Resource Institute of Finland highlights the clean and safe high-quality food from the Finnish food chain and encourages competition in the higher-end market segment (Luke 2021a). Success in this segment internationally requires marketing efforts that must be cost-optimized. The exploitation of the prevailing Country-of-Origin Image could prove to be an asset for individual companies and thus motivates research on the subject.

## **1.2 Aim of the research**

The research aims to examine the usage and effects of Country-of-Origin Image in Finnish foodstuff exports. By examining the use of Country-of-Origin Image, its most important applications may be identified. The importance and magnitude of Country-of-Origin Image's effect is not the focus of the research, but instead the extent to which it is utilized, and which aspects are considered most effective and where there is still room for

improvement. The research also recognizes the particularities of foodstuff marketing in the export context and relates the issue of Country-of-Origin Image to the same context.

The research aims to answer the question: *How can Finnish foodstuff exporters utilize their Country-of-Origin-Image?* The main research question is a rather broad one to answer on its own, which is why the research can be clarified with sub-questions. The sub-questions that help in forming an overall picture on the broader subject are as follows:

- Which features are attributed to Finland's Country-of-Origin Image in the foodstuff sector?
- How do Finnish foodstuff exporters currently utilize their Country-of-Origin Image?
- How could Finnish foodstuff exporters improve the utilization of their Country-of-Origin Image?

The matter will be addressed through an analysis of the specific attributes of foodstuff marketing particularly in the export context and the nature and effects of one's Country-of-Origin Image. The phenomenon and attributes of Country-of-Origin Image vary across industries (Suter et al. 2020, 3) and an analysis across industries or countries could only provide results on a general level. This motivates focusing the research on a specific industry and a specific country to provide a basis for concrete results. As stated before, the Finnish foodstuff industry needs new ways to improve its profitability, which makes it an interesting industry to study. The specific importance of Country-of-Origin Image in foodstuff marketing (Otter et al. 2018, 355-357) also plays a role and will be more thoroughly addressed later.

The Country-of-Origin Image as a concept will be outlined, after which Finland's and Finnish foodstuffs' Country-of-Origin Image will be analyzed. With these sub-questions, the context of the issue will be more thoroughly examined, and the main research question may be better addressed. The research will be conducted as a qualitative study with a qualitative analysis on interviews of relevant industry actors. The interview results will be synthesized with existing literature to form an overall picture of the combined phenomenon of Country-of-Origin Image on Finnish foodstuff exports. At the end of the thesis, conclusions will be formed based on these sub-questions and the findings will be summarized. Prior research and the gaps in it motivate the study and help in finding implications for further studies. The study produces practical implications for companies in the food industry as well as possible theory refinement.

## 2 COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN IMAGE IN FOODSTUFF EXPORTS

The theoretical background of the thesis is based on export marketing in the foodstuff sector and the image a company's, or product's country-of-origin reflects. The Country-of-Origin Image is a multidisciplinary issue, but its effects differ according to the context and industry in question. The image described will be analysed in the context of foodstuff exports. First, this motivates the exploration of the specifics of foodstuff export marketing to later find relevant common aspects in the domains of foodstuff marketing and the phenomenon of Country-of-Origin Image (COI).

### 2.1 Foodstuff exports and marketing

In this thesis, the domain of international foodstuff marketing is a theoretical lens, through which national images take effect. By understanding some of the principles, upon which foodstuff marketing differs from marketing in general, useful insight for analysing the effects of COI may be gained. The theoretical background will identify and present the relevant issues existing literature has to offer. This review aims to form a basis for a thorough analysis considering the effects of phenomena such as COI in foodstuff marketing.

*A foodstuff exporter* in the context of this thesis is a company or an individual that engages in the selling or delivering various kinds of foodstuff to foreign markets. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2021), any substance with food value before or after processing may be regarded as foodstuff. This makes foodstuff exporters a varying group consisting of companies producing or marketing fully refined consumer-goods as well as businesses operating in the B2B-market providing raw materials for further refinement.

The purchasing and consuming food is a complex process and there are a multiplicity of attributes affecting the evaluation process of its quality (see, for example Garber et al., 2003, Gil et al. 2000, Grunert 1995). Consumers must be informed and assured about the production, transformation processes, origin, and the symbolic values they encompass in order to form expectations and positive attitudes towards food (Nosi & Zanni 2004, 789).

The contents and the ways of transmitting food-related information have become a particularly relevant tool in the marketing mix in a typical food business' strategy (Nosi & Zanni 2004, 790). A growing trend in food marketing has been considering it an

intellectual experience with exploration, love for history and culture as well as a search for traditional identity and something new (Mattiacci & Vignali 2004, 703).

The trend in the foodstuff industry has recently been towards a few corporations dominating many sectors of the industry on the international scale (Hingley & Lindgreen 2002, 808). Nosi and Zanni (2004, 781) characterized the foodstuff industry's supply as a conventional industrialized system with large companies, technology-based processes, standardized outputs and traditional distribution channels. While some of these characteristics might have changed in recent years, some of them still remain valid.

In addition to the foodstuff sector's industrial scale, another important factor in determining consumers' food purchasing habits is the lifestyle-aspect of buying food. Convenience is an important factor in the purchasing decisions of foodstuffs and is a driver in a consumers' choice of point-of-purchase. The convenience of buying groceries at a supermarket drives customers towards them instead of buying directly from e.g. farmers markets, despite them sometimes being the preferred point-of-purchase. (Chambers et al. 2017, 210-212).

Foodstuff exports are regulated similarly with other industries and face challenges with national regulations regarding e.g., labeling, ingredient approval or production processes (Gordon 2015, 117-119). In addition to these similarities however, the exporting and marketing of foodstuffs on a foreign market has some peculiarities that are not shared among all exporting industries. In foodstuff marketing and business relationships, exclusivity, trust, and power dependency were found to be especially important (Hingley & Lindgreen 2002, 822-823).

Marketing foodstuffs is a prominent research issue, with many recent researchers focusing on the external effects of foodstuff marketing, such as nutrition and obesity (See, e.g. Onete et al. 2014, Horsley et al. 2014). Foodstuff marketing largely affects people's consumption choices and health, which makes it an aspect for national and international regulation, such as recommendations by the World Health Organization (WHO 2019).

The foodstuff industry has some peculiarities regarding the marketing of products. For example, within the European Union, specific regulations exist for the marketing and naming of food products, such as a scheme to protect the production methods of certain products. The Traditional Specialties Guaranteed (TSG) -scheme prevents companies from using some known product brands, such as Mozzarella, for a similar product but produced with different methods (Van Couter & d'Ath 2016, 290-291). Similar schemes include the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and the Protected Geographical

Indication (PGI), which delimitate a product's production to a certain geographical area. Finnish products, such as reindeer meat from Lapland (PDO), rye crust pie with lingonberries (PGI) and Karelian pastry (TSG) have also been registered under these schemes. (Ruokavirasto 2020). This is one peculiarity differentiating the foodstuff industry from most industries, where production and its methods are not protected with such labels.

Ethnocentrism in food products has been identified as a significant factor in product evaluations and should be taken into account by marketers (Chryssochoidis et al. 2007, 1536-1540). In addition to the image its home country provides, being a foreign company also affects consumers' attitudes. An exporting company must overcome some general obstacles independent of one's Country-Of-Origin, such as the liability of foreignness. Foreign companies have an inherent disadvantage that they face due to their non-native status. Differences in culture, norms and values are also a major source of liability of foreignness and a company may need to deploy overwhelming resources and efforts to overcome this. (Peng 2013, 142-143) In some cases, the purchase of foreign goods could be seen as unpatriotic and immoral as it has an adverse impact on the domestic economy, which can drive consumers to purchase local products even though their quality might be lower than that of imported goods' (Wall & Heslop, 1986, 27-36). For example, Carter (2020, 11-19) identified the effect of ethnocentrism and consumer animosity towards a foreign country and consumers having a significant negative attitude towards buying foreign products.

## **2.2 Country-of-Origin Image (COI)**

### **2.2.1 Identifying COI**

The effect of a product or service's country-of-origin (COO) was first introduced by Schooler (1965) and has since been subject to extensive research. Schooler (1965, 395-396) hypothesized and proved that consumers in Central American countries evaluated products differently according to their sourcing country and therefore proved the existence of the effect. The phenomenon's importance and potential use as a marketing tool has made it a popular research subject since 1995 (see, e.g., Peterson & Jolibert 1995,

883-884; Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, 9-10; Seaton & Laskey, 1999, 79-83). Country-Of-Origin (COO) and Country-of-Origin Image (COI) are terms associated with marketing and country branding. Brands and mental images associated with countries related to a product are described with many terms, some of which may be regarded as near-synonyms and some that, despite being terminologically close, have different meanings altogether.

*Country-Of-Origin (COO)* is the country that a product or service originates from. Although multinational supply chains and global companies have blurred the boundaries and raised the need for more precise concepts, a general term for a Country-Of-Origin is still relevant. Products and services usually have one country they are attributed to more strongly than others, be it because of their brand name, country of manufacture, design, or assembly. Peterson and Jolibert (1995, 883-884) describe COO as an intangible product attribute similar to price, warranty, or brand name or an extrinsic cue that exists outside the product's intrinsic attributes and performance but nonetheless affects the mental picture product. In the context of this thesis, the term COO refers to the country that is most linked to the product or service in question. In other contexts, a more detailed taxonomy could be relevant, but when examining Finnish foodstuff exporters, the level of general COO is considered most functional for the purposes of this thesis.

*Country Image* is a general term related to marketing and country branding, but not limited to products or services from that country. The term has a multifaceted meaning and can be described as a general term covering many of the specific concepts used to describe sub-sections of national image. Brand, country, or other place images are identified as the mental pictures they create when connected to a specific country. These mental pictures exist in the minds of consumers and affect their attitudes towards things related to that country. Businesses are naturally interested in these images and the qualities they embed on their products and services. (Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, 14-15).

*Country-of-Origin image (COI)* is also a term related to national images, country branding and marketing. Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006, 30) describe the Origin-Country-Image (OCI) as "The overall image of a country that is considered to be associated with brands or products". The phenomenon was earlier used as a synonym with Country Image before COI was defined as its own term. For example, Kock et al. (2019, 43) label the term of Country-Of-Origin (COO) image under the general label of country-induced predispositions (CIP's). As shown, numerous terms, abbreviations and a wide taxonomy for the phenomenon exists. COI can be described in a multitude of ways, all describing



the same phenomenon. General terms such as Country Image may be more easily attributed to some other contexts than evaluating a country as a source of products or services and thus, in this thesis, the term Country-of-Origin Image (COI) is used as a synonym to these corresponding terms.

The main difference in this thesis between Country Image and COI is the aspect of COI concerning specifically the image of a country as a source of products or services. Table 1 illustrates some definitions for the phenomenon and the development of the term.

Table 1 Defining Country-of-Origin Image

| Term used  | Description   | Author/authors                     |
|--|---|------------------------------------|
| (First notion of the phenomenon without a distinct term) | The attitude toward people of a given country is a factor in existing preconceptions regarding the products of that country.                                      | Schooler, Robert (1965)            |
| Country image  | The picture, reputation or stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to products of a specific country.  | Nagashima, Akira (1970)            |
| Country image  | A halo from which consumers infer product attributes or a construct that summarizes consumers' beliefs about product attributes and affects their brand attitude. | Han, C. Min (1989)                 |
| Origin-Country-Image (OCI)                               | The overall image of a country that is considered to be associated with brands or products  | Jaffe & Nebenzahl (2006)           |
| Country-Of-Origin image                                  | The beliefs held by consumers towards products and services originating in a country (e.g., French perfumes are considered sophisticated and sensual).            | Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., (2011)   |
| Country-of-Origin-Effect (COE)                           | The country of origin effect is the influence of a country's image on consumer evaluations of products and brands originating in that country                     | Bartosik-Purgat, Małgorzata (2018) |

The main term that is considered in this thesis is the effect of Country-of-Origin Image (COI), which is a term capturing the general effect on the minds and attitudes of consumers, when a product or service is associated with an origin-country. There are numerous terms for similar phenomena that all encompass different aspects of national image in a broader sense (see Table 1). Kock et al. (2019, 43) call these attitudes “country-

induced predispositions (CIP)” and use the term to label all different aspects of the phenomenon. The broader phenomenon is the issue of national image, which has numerous sub-phenomena.

A company and its offering are influenced by many factors when assessing their desirability and potential for international success. The image of their home country in the export market is widely researched and may be regarded as an important factor in this aspect (see, for example, Schooler 1965, Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, Suter et al. 2020). The image of the exporter’s home market, or the country-of-origin effect will be examined here.

Country-Of-Origin is used in product evaluations as a stereotype allowing predictions about products manufactured in certain countries having certain features. In these predictions, consumers’ predictions will be more favorable for a product manufactured in a favorable country. (Maheswaran 1994, 363). Firstly, Country-Of-Origin can signal consumers with prior perceptions about the general quality of a particular country’s products. These preconceptions are then used to infer the rating of other product attributes and the overall product evaluation. Country-Of-Origin can also act as an independent cue that is used in product evaluations. (Hong & Wyer 1989, 180-185). Country-Of-Origin could also be used as a heuristic simplifying the process of product evaluation or as a standard in relation to which the product can be compared with (Li & Wyer 1994, 187). The aforementioned heuristic usually occurs in situations where there is too much information about the product or when consumers are not familiar with the product (Hung 1989, 15-23)

Han (1989, 222) points out the existence of a halo effect affecting the beliefs about product attributes and its mediating effect on brand attitudes even though they have no previous experience from the product itself. When, on the other hand, consumers are familiar with products of a country, consumers infer a country’s image from its product information which in turn influences attitudes towards brands. This is characterized as a summary construct model. Figure 2 illustrates the formation of country image and its effect on brand attitudes.

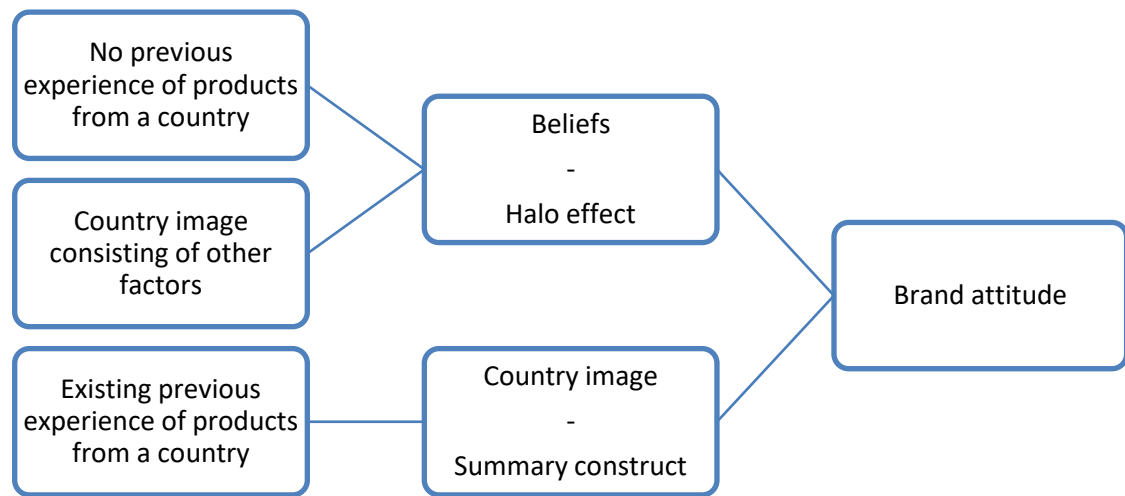


Figure 2 Formation of brand attitudes (modified from Han 1989, 224)

The model in Figure 2 differentiates the way that people form their image of brand or a product's attributes. The issue of brand attitudes and country image is relevant for COI and it is important for a marketer to be aware of how images and beliefs towards their COO are formed (Yasin, Noor & Mohamad 2007).

### 2.2.2 Managing and utilizing COI

COI is a relevant aspect for many companies that are engaging in exports. Countries, as well as individuals or companies, have an image they project, be it favorable or unfavorable. (Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, 9-10). The effect of COI on the evaluation of foreign products has been widely demonstrated (see, e.g. Schooler, 1995; Seaton & Laskey, 1999; Carter, 2020). The consumer's home country naturally impacts the attitudes towards foreign products and their general consumption habits (Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, 28), which is a partly external factor from the marketer's point-of-view, but an important consideration, nonetheless. This means the COI's are not always similar or co-dimensional internationally but can be generalized under some common perceptions that are shared among countries and can thus be managed and utilized as such.

The formation of COI is a long-term process unlike day-to-day marketing (Han 1989, 228-229). Unlike brand image, COI is an issue that is deeply embedded in people's thoughts and the changing of which often requires consistent long-term experiences and

may take years or decades (Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, 56). People form images on several levels, that have a combined effect on the product or service in question. For a product, the overall image is affected by the country brand image and the industry image, which may form unfavorable combinations or favorable ones, like the automobile industry in Germany. (Suter et al. 2020, 8-9).

While the image that is focused on in this research is the overall COI, Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006, 28-32) introduce a diverse taxonomy of different images varying from e.g., a products assembly, design, or sourcing. Specific qualities, such as design or reliability, may be attributed to countries and they are important to be recognized. For example, the automobile or fashion industries occasionally emphasize the country of design in their marketing (Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, 14-15, 79-83). Also for example, Apple prints the text “Designed by Apple in California” on their product packages, while not emphasizing the manufacturing country or overall country-of-origin (Zuckerman & Ive 2016).

The made-in -label is also of interest and is widely used in product packaging. The made-in -country may form an image of low- or high-quality products and its marking on a product is an established practice in many industries. This makes the made-in -labeling an important factor in the context of national images and a key component in the overall COI. Jaffe & Nebenzahl (2006, 29) also identify the sourcing country of key parts as well as the country-of-assembly as factors of national image. In a world with global supply-chains, the origin-country may be a vague concept in general, but it is still important at least as the sum of its parts that were presented here.

Jaffe & Nebenzahl (2006, 29-31) illustrate the complexity of COI’s formation with a General Motors car that is of Italian design with Japanese key components, Mexican assembly, and a U.S. brand while the end product is purchased by a French consumer. They further specify the origins by identifying terms down to the location of the design or assembly of a specific product line. To understand the complexity of the phenomenon, these nuances in the theoretical domain are important to acknowledge even though they are generally referred to as COI.

Even though smaller companies might not have established a global brand image at the beginning of their exports, the country they represent provides an image of some sort. Though it probably is not the only thing considered, all other factors being equal, a good origin-country-image may prove to have economic value (Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2006, 59). This is especially relevant for new companies that have yet to form a clear brand image

in new markets and the first mental image about their brand is formed on the basis of their COI. The extent to which smaller companies identify and exploit or overcome the image their country-of-origin gives them is relevant in this research.

The direct value of a COI is difficult to estimate due to the phenomenon's qualitative and intangible nature. Nonetheless, it is possible to approximate the effects and through them, its value may be monetized. This effect has been analyzed and significant variance were identified in the perceived value of automobiles depending on the knowledge of its origin. An automobile originating in the United States was preferred to one originating in Mexico or Korea, which was indicated by the customer's willingness to pay more for a product from a country with a better COI. The formation of the COI was demonstrated through identifying the effect of the brand's name, the component sourcing, and the assembly as separate factors. (Seaton & Laskey 1999, 79-83).

COI may prove to be a valuable asset or a liability for a company, but its management is not as straightforward as a company's own brand. While a company's own influence on its COI is limited, it can still affect their COI and at least manage it more effectively when familiar with its formation and determinants. The understanding of one's customers is also an important factor, as experts in an area emphasize COI differently in product evaluations than novices making a similar purchase. Only when the product information is ambiguous, do experts resort to COI, whereas novices tend to include COI in product evaluations whether the product information is ambiguous or not. (Maheswaran, 1994, 361-363).

Han (1989, 228-229) identifies possibilities for an opportunistic company, that could sell inferior products while benefiting from a positive COI. This could tarnish the origin-country's COI and be harmful for other companies from the same origin. Naturally, a single company's effect on a whole country's COI is limited but national images form as aggregates and thus need to be managed as such. Han (1989, 228) further proposes industry-level action and management of COI's determinants through quality-control, tax benefits, export incentives for high-quality products and even export taxes or withholding export licenses for companies failing to meet the required standards.

A company must consider different levels of images in marketing due to the mediating effect the industry's image has between the country's image and a product or service's image. A company must also consider the match between their COI and industry image when managing their marketing. Similar considerations must be made on the country- and institutional levels when they develop and promote their country brand.

(Suter et al. 2020, 16-18). The usage of COI varies but some common strategies may be identified, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Typical strategies for Country-Of-Origin marketing (Aichner 2014, 84-91)

| Name of strategy   | Actualization  | Examples  |
|--|--|---|
| Made in  | Adding made in -labels on products to facilitate recognition     | Made in Finland -label in a Finnish product   |
| Quality and origin labels  | Using legally regulated quality and origin labels                | "Traditional Specialties Guaranteed" - label in Europe  |
| Country-Of-Origin in the company name                            | Embedding the country, region or city in the company name        | Air France, Bank of America, Deutsche Bank, Royal Dutch Shell   |
| Typical Country-Of-Origin -words in the company name             | Embedding stereotypical elements in the company name             | Husky Energy (Canadian oil company), Lincoln National (U.S. insurance company), Novo Nordisk (Danish biotechnology company) |
| Using Country-Of-Origin language                                 | Referring to COO in brand name, slogans or advertisements        | Volkswagen's slogan "Das Auto", "Pomodoro Mutti" as an Italian company's name   |
| Using famous or stereotypical people from the Country-Of-Origin  | Presenting famous or stereotypical people in advertisements      | Using an Italian actor in an ad for Italian company's product launch in Germany   |
| Using famous or stereotypical scenery from the Country-Of-Origin | Using famous or stereotypical scenery from the Country-Of-Origin | Embedding the pyramids in the logo of an Egyptian company or the Swiss Alps in Swiss chocolate packaging                    |

There are a multitude of ways in which COO may be relayed and COI may be exploited, and Table 2 is not a comprehensive list. The list nonetheless presents some strategies that are commonly used and on which a company may base its marketing. Marketing strategies must also consider, for example, the industry level image (Suter et al. 2020, 16-18), which among other considerations, may affect the choice of the strategy. In addition to these strategies, a marketer can also utilize a country's COI by adopting or acquiring a brand or a brand name that associates the brand with the COI of another country with a more favorable image (Ahmed et al. 2004, 103).

When assessing COI usage in marketing strategies, one should also note the hierarchies among preferred sourcing countries. Consumers in developed countries tend to prefer domestic goods over foreign alternatives. When no domestic products are

available, goods from other developed countries are preferred over products from less-developed countries. (Okechuku 1994, 10-15). In some countries, ethnocentrism is low and foreign products have no significant handicap, as is often the case in, for example, China (Ding 2017, 559). There are also situations, where, for example, historical events affect the image of a country, which may result in a hostile or negative sentiment, an example of which is some Chinese consumers' hostility towards some Japanese products due to the countries' violent past (Zhao 2016, 347-350). Developing countries differ in their ethnocentrism from developed countries in their perception of foreign products' quality. In developing countries, foreign products are often associated with higher product standards than domestic products and are thus in high demand. (Wang & Chen 2004, 394-396).

COI is not permanent, and it may change as time passes and events unfold. Countries, industries, and companies must consider the effects of their actions on their COI. COI may undergo changes in time as consumers abstract product attributes into country image. This may call for government and industry involvement through e.g. quality standards or export licenses. (Han 1989, 228).

A company must recognize and internalize their COI and then turn it in to a firm resource. A company may then exploit their COI as a Country-specific-Advantage (CSA), when their COI is positive. (Suter et al. 2018, 47). Figure 3 presents one model for assessing a company's COI as a Country-Specific-Advantage. The figure also presents the issue in a way that is generalizable for companies located in a specific country.

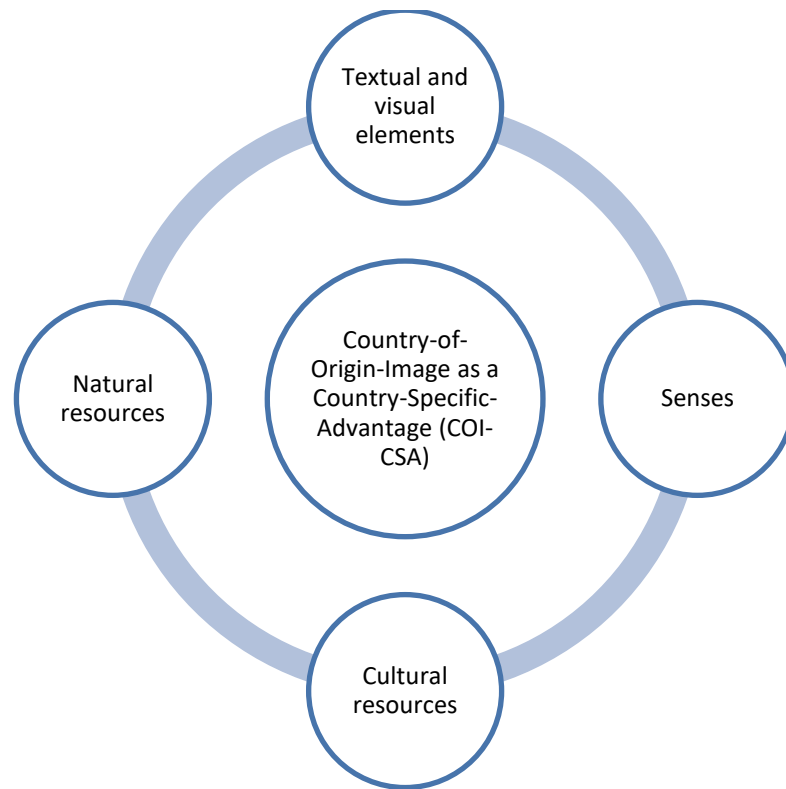


Figure 3 Country-of-Origin Image as a Country-Specific-Advantage (Suter et al. 2018)

The components of COI as a Country-Specific Advantage (CSA) are conceptualized in Figure 3. The COI-CSA is divided into four components, each of which may be assessed separately and are addressed here. The natural resources -dimension is exploited when typical raw materials from the origin country is used in the production process. This could mean the use of a country's natural fibers, fruits, gems etc. (Suter et al. 2017, 126-130). The cultural resources -dimension means building the brand identity on cultural myths and incorporating value-adding cultural aspects of the COO. A nation's values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, norms, and customs, among other aspects, are referred to as culture. (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2013, 145-165).

Textual and visual elements may consist of a country's flag, colors, acronyms, symbols, icons etc. These elements represent a resource and may be integrated into the firm's brand strategy. (Samiee 2010, 442-444). The aspect of senses gives customers the experience or feeling of association with the brand, encouraging its perception as authentic and more genuine. This aspect may be conveyed through, for example, music or atmosphere at the point of sale, events, partnerships, or product design. (D'Antone & Merunka 2015, 726-728) This model and these aspects of COI as a Country-Specific Advantage may be used as a tool in a company's marketing. Marketers must consider



these nuances in their COI-marketing to generate favorable competitive advantages. (Suter et al. 2018, 56).

### **2.3 Country-of-Origin Image in the foodstuff industry**

The phenomenon of COI and the specific qualities of foodstuff exports and marketing need to be combined and cross-examined to enable better analysis of the phenomenon in a specific industry. The implications from existing research must be considered for an analysis to be valid on the industry in question. For typical food producers it is important to effectively manage the Country-Of-Origin and the territory of origin (Nasi & Zanni 2004, 789-790). This emphasizes the need for joint examination of these aspects and the existing theory applicable to them explicitly.

In the foodstuff industry, geographical origin is increasingly developing into a value driver (Van Couter & d'Ath 2016, 307). The effect of product type and product category has also been demonstrated to influence the importance of COI. An important issue to consider is the fact that by buying local produce, consumers feel that the products are more authentic and of higher quality (Boyle 2003). An important aspect in the purchasing intentions of consumers is also the image of putting domestic farmers out of business by buying foreign products and preferring some nations over others as a source of food (Chambers et al. 2007, 211-212).

While global research on the matter is lacking, some regional studies show that there are differences in how much weight a consumer puts on the origin of the product rather than, for example, the price of the product. These consumer profiles varied according to regions of residence and socio-economic groups with little variance associated with the consumer's ethnic origin. (Schnettler et al. 2010, 119-120). For example, Fernández-Ferrín et al. (2020) highlight the importance of ethnocentrism in food marketing and point out that ethnocentrism in foodstuffs may appear on a sub-national level with preferred sourcing even among the regions within a single country. Despite this micro-level ethnocentrism, the country-level images are considered relevant in the international context and are addressed here.

The usage and visibility of the product in question, be it for public use or private, also affects the importance of COI. (Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al. 2011, 973-974). A favorable situation arises when a country's perceived strengths and image match with important features and benefits for a particular industry (Suter et al. 2020, 8). For

example, Bartosik-Purgat (2018, 135) identified variance between different product types and their preferred sourcing countries. This implies the significance of COI on the industry-level. In the European Union, the foodstuff industry is one regulated with industry-specific regulations regarding the origin of foodstuffs, which highlights the importance of these issues in the sector. Van Couter & d'Ath (2016, 290-291) exemplify these kinds of regulations by the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) or Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) -scheme that mandates the package labeling of Parma ham to verify its origin. To connect these requirements to the previously discussed COI-taxonomy, the extent differs to which the production of these labeled goods is location-specific. As in the case of a PDO-label, all steps of production must take place in the specific location, whereas a PGI-label only requires a key step in the production to take place in a specific location (Van Couter & d'Ath 2016, 296-300).

A company must consider the match between their COI and the industry's image, as in how their home country's image matches the industry's image (Suter et al. 2020, 16-17). This means that for a company to succeed in its marketing, the COI must be considered also from the point-of-view of their industry's image. A company must therefore consider the match of their COI and the foodstuff industry.

A study conducted in the U.K. showed that respondents valued buying local foods, but often deemed them expensive. In the U.K. local foods were considered expensive, domestic foodstuffs as mid-range and imported foods as most affordable. (Chambers 2017, 210). Countries with lower income levels showed dissimilar results, as, for example, Chinese consumers may attribute imports with higher quality and are often willing to pay a premium on price for imported quality goods (Wang & Chen 2004, 395-397).

When assessing COI's effect on a specific industry, one must also consider that a consumer's reliance on COI as a cue for product attributes depends on the consumer's involvement in the product selection process. This means that consumers rely more on COI when they are not highly motivated to research into the products actual attributes or the information is lacking. (Chryssochoidis et al. 2007, 1536-1540). A foodstuff exporter should account for this in their marketing and product information labeling.

When considering the effect of COI on a specific industry, more precise considerations can be made. One of these considerations is the product-country -match, which illustrates the matching of desired product feature dimensions with dimensions of a country's COI. An example of a favorable match of product and country-of-origin is

shoes made in France, which may be associated with prestige and design, both of which may be significant considerations when buying shoes. (Roth & Romeo 1992, 482-484) Figure 4 divides the possible matching combinations in a four-field.

|                                   |               | Country image dimensions |                      |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
|                                   |               | Positive                 | Negative             |
| Dimensions as<br>product features | Important     | Favorable match          | Unfavorable match    |
|                                   | Not important | Favorable mismatch       | Unfavorable mismatch |

Figure 4 Product-country -matching (Roth & Romeo 1992)

The different possibilities between the matching of dimensions of country image and product features seen in Figure 4 each have different characteristics. Image dimensions such as innovation, prestige, workmanship, and design create different combinations corresponding to different fields in Figure 2. An unfavorable match occurs when a country's strengths do not match with the important dimensions of a product. Hungarian shoes could be an example of this, as e.g. design is important in shoes but is not considered a positive dimension in Hungary's country image. (Roth & Romeo 1992, 482-484). In the industry of foodstuffs, e.g. France and Italy are known culinary countries with the most EU-registered and protected food product names (Ruokavirasto 2020). A favorable mismatch occurs when a positive country image dimension is not important for a product, as would be the case in e.g. French beer. A case where a negative country dimension is an unimportant product feature would be called an unfavorable mismatch. Understanding and exploiting these combinations is an important consideration in the domain of COI and marketing. (Roth & Romeo 1992, 482-484). These aspects highlight the importance of recognizing the fit of foodstuff with a specific country's image dimensions.

After discussing the domains of foodstuff marketing and COI both separately and together, the next chapter focuses on the research approach. The research approach - chapter will discuss the ways in which the subject is examined.

### 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 3.1 Qualitative interview study

The research was aimed to better understand Country-of-Origin Image in Finnish foodstuff exports. Due to its abstract and non-quantitative nature, the phenomenon is examined through a qualitative analysis. While quantitative analysis is best suited to understanding causal relationships or for example, identifying mediating or moderating effects, qualitative analysis is well suited for comprehensive understanding of abstract phenomena. When the problem and its parts are difficult to quantify, the data collection is more thorough utilizing qualitative research methods. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 3-6). For example, Peterson and Jolibert (1995, 885-889) conducted a quantitative study on the effects of COI, but still recognized the consensus on the phenomenon's qualitative nature.

An iterative process between deductive and inductive reasoning was utilized to understand and explain the discovered results and phenomena. As was the case with this study, deduction or induction are seldom presented purely as most research uses both concepts (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 14-16). The study is conducted as a qualitative study, with an aim to learn about Finnish foodstuff companies' utilization of COI in their exports. Another point of interest is the integration to their business processes as well as to contribute to the theory with possible practical implications not yet included in the domain theories. The study is focused on a particular field and a few organizations to examine the issue in a relatively specific setting.

A positivist (or naturalist/realist) research is generally more interested in the question "what" rather than "how" (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 79-80). The choice of approach is based on the lack of existing study on the subject, which could make answering the "how" -question hard without a proper knowledge base. Holstein & Gubrium (2003, 68-70) state that despite the typology of different forms of research, the best result is achieved by asking both, the "what" and "how" -questions. Therefore, some interview questions were designed in a more constructionist manner to facilitate deeper analysis and more open conversation with the interviewees. Thus, a fully positivist approach was not attempted.

The research data was collected via interviews to enable a wide-angled approach to the case subject. As Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, 62) state, when we want to know how a person thinks or acts as they do, it is reasonable to ask them. A face-to-face interview has a considerable strength as a data collection method, which is the richness of the communication (Gillham 2000, 62). An interview is the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research due to its flexibility and potential to produce data of great depth (King 1994, 14). One of interviews' weaknesses is the challenge of researching one's opinions, beliefs, or meanings in general. An interview only allows the discovery of an interviewee's reconstructed notion of a phenomenon instead of the actual objective phenomenon. (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 77). Choosing interviewing as a method of data collection in general is nonetheless suitable to gaining insight on the issue through the interviewees, who have practical experience in the field (King 1994, 14-15). These aspects were considered in the selection of the research and interview approach.

### **3.2 Data collection**

Data collection is a vital part of any empirical study and depends on a multitude of areas. An important step is the choice of data collection method, be it quantitative or qualitative. While a qualitative approach is chosen in this research, there are more choices to be made, like the utilized interview type. A vital part also is the selection of interviewees, which forms the outlines of the collected data and provides a basis on which further analysis can build on. The selection of the interview themes and questions is also an important consideration in successful research. These issues about data collection will be addressed here.

The interview type used in the research was semi-structured. A semi-structured interview gives room for a less structured discussion which gives the opportunity to pick up on weak signals and bring up issues that might not otherwise arise or themes that the interviewee might not have thought of beforehand (Puusa 2011, 80-82). The typology of qualitative interviews may be complex, which is why the general term "qualitative research interview" is used here. Kvale (1983, 174-176) describes a qualitative research interview as a method designed to understand the research topic from the interviewee's perspective and the causes behind that perspective. To achieve this goal, a qualitative research interview has predominantly open questions and a low degree of pre-determined structure by the researcher. A semi-structured interview falls into this category. Merriam

& Tisdell (2015, 110) describe a semi-structured interview as one where the interview guide includes some more or less structured interview questions but are used flexibly in the interview situation. These methodological justifications, the subjectivity of the interviewee's answers and the possibility that the theoretical background was not known to the interviewees, resulted in the selection of a semi-structured interview.

The themes and objectives of the research are specified in the operationalization table (Table 3). The operationalization table clarifies the parts of the research and links the theoretical background to the research questions as well as the sampling choices.

Table 3 Operationalization chart

| Research question   | Sub-questions   | Theoretical frameworks                                       | Interview themes   | Theoretical or practical contribution  |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Research question: How can Finnish foodstuff exporters utilize their Country-of-Origin-Image? | Which features are attributed to Finland's Country-of-Origin Image in the foodstuff sector?     | Country-of-Origin-Image, Country Brand, Country Image        | - Recognized aspects of Country-of-Origin Image - Finland's country brand                                | Identifying the components and strength of Finland's COI                                       |
|   | How do Finnish foodstuff exporters currently utilize their Country-of-Origin Image?             | Country-of-Origin-Image, Foodstuff marketing                 | - Country brand utilization - Most effective aspects of country-of-origin-image                          | Identifying relevant aspects in the utilization of Finland's COI in foodstuff export marketing |
|   | How could Finnish foodstuff exporters improve the utilization of their Country-of-Origin Image? | Brand-building, Country-of-Origin-Image, Foodstuff marketing | - Underutilized aspects of COI - Aspects with the most room for improvement - Ineffective aspects of COI | Identifying areas where COI could be better utilized   |

The interview questions were made in a logical order and in such a way that the possible discussion subjects could correlate with the theories used. The selection and organization of the questions were also done so that the following thematic coding could be done efficiently. The questions were formed to accommodate a comprehensive enough analysis of the research themes presented in Table 3. Though the structure of the interview

was not fully predetermined, some structure was attempted by using an interview guide (Appendix 1) where the questions/topics were listed in a manner supporting the structure of the thesis and order of the research questions.

The aim of the data collection is to get a varying sample of actors on the relevant field. As the sampling method, purposeful sampling or nonprobability sampling is chosen. For qualitative research, e.g. generalization in a statistical sense is not the goal, which makes probabilistic sampling an unnecessary method (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 96). This method is chosen to enable a diverse set of data with a purposeful focus. Patton (2015, 53) states that the power and logic of purposeful sampling in qualitative research derives from specific information-rich cases, from which a great deal can be learned about issues of central importance to a research. The selection of the interviewed companies and organizations is purposeful sampling but also partly convenience sampling as not all suitable organizations are willing to partake in this kind of research. Guest et al. (2012, 6-8) also note the common usage of purposeful sampling in qualitative research with an exploratory analysis.

The informants were chosen by first evaluating the type of information that would answer the research question and sub-questions. After assessing the desired form of expertise from the informants, organizations or individuals fitting the description of Patton's (2015, 53) information-rich interviewees were chosen. Table 4 presents the interviewees in short.

Table 4 Interviewees and their organizations

| Interviewed organization  | Name of interviewee        | Interviewee position                    | Date of interview |
|---|----------------------------|---|-------------------|
| Food From Finland   | Esa Wrang                  | Program director                        | 1.11.2021         |
| Finnish Meat Producer X (pseudonym)                             | Mary Marketer (pseudonym)  | Marketing manager                       | 17.11.2021        |
| Kiantama Oy   | Vernu Vasunta              | CEO / Partner                           | 19.11.2021        |
| Valio Oyj   | Hanna Hiekkamies           | Head of corporate responsibility        | 23.11.2021        |
| Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Communications Department | Donna Director (pseudonym) | Responsible for Finland's country image | 25.11.2021        |

The interviewed organizations were selected to represent a wide range of sectors as seen in Table 4. The interviewees represented the foodstuff industry and public



organizations representing Finland abroad. Three of the interviewees represented private companies providing information from practical exports while two represented the public sector and exports on a general or governmental level. Many of the direct contacts were result of a recommendation by the first interviewee, Esa Wrang, who had numerous contacts from the field of industry, through his position as the head of a program directly related to Finnish foodstuff exports.

The first interviewee was Esa Wrang, the Head of Food Program at the Food From Finland -program. Food From Finland is an initiative for the development, growth, and promotion of the Finnish foodstuff industry. The Food From Finland -program supports Finnish foodstuff exporters by supporting their internationalization, financing, networking and increasing and developing Finland's quality image abroad (Business Finland 2021). The Interviewee has been the Head of Food Program from 2014 and is responsible for the program's organization.

The second interviewee represented a Finnish company specializing in meat products but chose to keep their own and organization's name anonymous. The organization is later referred to under the pseudonym Finnish Meat Producer X. The interviewee is a marketing director in the company's export organization, later referred to under the pseudonym "Mary Marketer". The third interviewee, Vernu Vasunta, is the CEO and partner in a Finnish berry company. The company is export-oriented with their main focus on bilberry and lingonberry. The fourth interviewee, Hanna Hiekkamies, represents the dairy product -company Valio Oyj. Valio Oyj is Finland's biggest foodstuff exporter with a third of their revenue coming from exports. Valio Oyj exports their products to about 60 foreign markets. Hanna Hiekkamies is the Head of Corporate Responsibility at Valio and is closely associated with their exports.

The fifth and final interviewee represents the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and is a director responsible for Finland's country image in the ministry's communications department. The interviewee requested to remain anonymous and is later referred to under the pseudonym "Donna Director". The interviewee's department managed Finland's country image through, for example, the This is Finland -website.

The interviewees in Table 4 were contacted by phone directly by the researcher and the interview times were agreed on. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via a video conference. The video conferencing software used was Microsoft Teams. The interview lengths ranged from 45 minutes to 70 minutes. The interview language was Finnish because it is the interviewees' as well as the interviewer's native language. An

interview relies largely on the use of language and the possibility to recognize contexts and the subtextual meanings of the language in use (Puusa 2011, 74-75). Despite the thesis being written in English, the best outcome was considered to be produced by positioning the translation of data between the data collection and analysis stages.

The data collection of a research often involves the problems of research ethics and especially the issue of informed consent (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 32). The data collection in this research was mainly not done anonymously, at the approval of the interviewees and the organizations they represent. Anonymity is a difficult issue to ensure as a close interview may reveal information about the organization, that might make it identifiable unless research-relevant information would be withheld. Anonymizing interview data is challenging and also presents the risk of losing the integrity of some data (Saunders et al. 2015, 627-629). Despite these aspects, at the request of two interviewees, their anonymity was maintained. Two interviewees are thus presented under pseudonyms to sustain anonymity. Using pseudonyms does not guarantee complete anonymity (Walford 2005, 87-89). This aspect was considered, and the level of description given was agreed upon with the interviewees. The pseudonyms were chosen instead of simply referring to the interviewees as for example, letters, to ensure readability. One of the organizations is also presented here as simply Finnish Meat Producer X and only general information not enabling direct identification were presented. In this research, the source of data is also considered to be an essential aspect in assessing the interviewee's credibility on the subject matter.

The data was initially collected in a memo of the interviews, instead of a word-for-word literature. The interviews were not recorded, but some main points were written down word-for-word. The interview memos were structured according to the themes and sub-questions which are presented in Table 3. This enabled a more focused source for data analysis with relevant points brought out. The interviewer could also illustrate the existing literature on the subject to encourage deeper analytical thinking from the part of the interviewee. In doing this, the risk exists of the interviewer projecting their own ideas on the interviewee. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 31) point out, reflexivity is an integral part of qualitative research and the researcher is also an integral part of the knowledge creation, as opposed to a logico-deductive analysis.

### 3.3 Data analysis

There are many possible ways to analyze the data of a semi-structured interview. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015; 195, 202) state, the data collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process while they also emphasize the emergent nature of qualitative design. They also describe the analysis of collected data as making sense out of the data by interpreting, consolidating, and reducing the data collected. For an exploratory study, trends, themes, key words or ideas are looked for in the data before any analysis occurs.

The data analysis used in this research is exploratory. Data analysis may be exploratory or confirmatory, which means driven by content or hypotheses (Guest et. al 2012, 7). In qualitative data analysis, confirmatory approaches are less frequent and confirmatory analysis is generally more suited for testing hypotheses than open research questions. An exploratory analysis is suited for open questions where no predetermined options exist. An exploratory analysis is more suited for generating hypotheses for further studies rather than testing existing ones. In an exploratory analysis, the codes and themes are not specifically predetermined and there is room left for codes to be derived from the data. (Guest et. al 2012, 7-8). This research is conducted with no pre-existing hypotheses and a clear exploratory nature is recognizable in the research questions, sampling as well as the coding of data.

Data analysis begins by identifying the data segments or units that are somehow responsive to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 203). The research question was divided in to four sub-questions, each of which have different functions and concerned different themes. The first sub-question concerns foodstuff marketing and exports in general and is not the main focus of the interview, but nonetheless provides the context. The latter sub-questions examine the subject's response to each examined aspect of COI and its utilization. The second part is identifying the source or driver of COI, as in the physical or abstract phenomenon where a part of COI originates from. This can be e.g., the purity of a country's nature or the perceived reliability of its people. The third part is the level and quality on which the interviewee considers the identified issue to be utilized. This encompasses the extent and manner in which the issue is utilized in companies' COI -marketing and communication. The fourth part focuses on the points where the interviewee recognizes room for improvement regarding the utilization of the perceived issue.

The coding of data was done immediately after the interview and data units concerning the examined phenomena are identified. The first step used was open coding, which means identifying and marking any units of data that seem relevant to the research (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 229). After the open coding, the data was categorized in to four categories, which correlate with the sub-questions. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, 79) regard categorization as the most primitive way of organizing data and can be regarded as kind of quantitative analysis. In addition to these three categories, a separate category was added to code possible research-relevant findings that do not fit under any specific sub-question directly. The coding was assigned according to which sub-section the data units naturally fit, and which issue they relate to. The interview data was then coded and presented in a categorization matrix to enable efficient analysis. Table 5 presents an extract of the matrix as an example.

Table 5 Categorization matrix extract

| Interviewee and organisation | Finland's COI, SQ 1                               | Utilization of COI, SQ 2   | Improving COI utilization, SQ 3  | Other supporting findings, RQ general   |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Esa Wrang, Food From Finland | Weak COI, and known in neighboring countries only | Domestic foodstuffs are preferred nearly everywhere, which should be noted   | Use of medicine residues and disease situation (e.g. salmonella) in meat should be brought up, (LUKE ruokafakta) | Logistics is a major issue in Finnish food exports  |
|                              | COI is attributed to a general Nordic image       | Systematic promotion of purity, medicine and chemical residues in professional marketing. These aspects are difficult to raise into consumer | COI-communication should be unified in all contexts. Budgets limit the amount of messages that can be conveyed   | Origin is an important aspect in foodstuff marketing. Variation exists between product categories, e.g. meat versus soft drinks |

The examined aspects of COI in the foodstuff industry being sometimes overlapping creates a challenge in data coding and analysis. Therefore, some data units may fit in more than one category in Table 5. To clarify the thematic coding matrix, the categories are marked with the corresponding sub-question (SQ 1-3) or the general findings regarding the main research question (RQ). The same markings were added to the questions/themes

of the interview guide presented in Appendix 1 to note the themes each question/topic most correlates to. The interpretation of the data might be subjective to the researcher's understanding, which emphasizes the need for precision in data coding. The issue of the interview being conducted in Finnish and the research in English may produce linguistic problems but due to the complexity of the issue and terminology, as justified in the previous chapter, the translation was done at the coding stage.

After the interview results were coded and combined in the categorization matrix to enable an aggregated look on the data. The categorization matrix is divided according to the sub-questions of the research, which, in turn, were formulated according to different themes. The categorization of the interview data enabled the aggregation of different interviewees' views on each theme and through that, the conclusions to each sub-question based on these findings. In the following chapters, the interview findings that are most relevant to the theme in question will be brought up.

### **3.4 Evaluation of the study**

A study conducted as a qualitative interview study needs to be carefully assessed as to the study's trustworthiness and other factors. The aim of the research design is to provide a study with reliable results that readers deem credible and that can be used as a basis for research and decision-making. Aaltio and Puusa (2011,153) identify trustworthiness as a central feature in research, providing quality research based on trustworthy results. Unlike quantitative research, in a qualitative research, trustworthiness is not quantifiable through an objective measure. They also state that good research practices require the researcher to present on what grounds the study should be considered trustworthy.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015, 265) identify validity, reliability, and ethics as major concerns in evaluating research. These criteria vary and there are several different criteria for evaluating a study's rigor or trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985; 290-293, 301-327) present two parallel frameworks for assessing a research, the classical criteria and the alternative criteria. The alternative criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of a study are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 301-327). The alternative criteria are more suitable to assess qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 239-240). Therefore, the alternative criteria of assessing the research's trustworthiness will be used in the assessment of this research.

Credibility is dealing with the question whether the research findings match reality and how well they succeed in this (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 242-244). Credibility deals with problems such as how well the findings describe what is really there and how congruent they are with reality. One way to enhance a study's credibility is through triangulation, which can be done through using multiple methods of research, multiple researchers, multiple theories to analyze and interpret the data and using different sources to collect data (Carter et al. 2014, 545; Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 245). The research was done from the standpoint that the interviewees were not familiar with the whole theoretical background that the research concerned. This gives even more emphasis on the researcher's credibility, as the interview was moderated by the researcher and the interpretations of the company's actions must be interpreted by the researcher. Therefore, the credibility of this research is more dependent on the researcher than in a positivist quantitative research. The ethics, training, intellectual rigor, and credibility of the investigator as important determinants of a credible qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 260-261). The researcher in this study is not well-versed in qualitative research methods but has no other than intellectual motivations for conducting this research, which leaves little incentive to, for example, falsify data or otherwise reduce the trustworthiness of the research. On the other hand, the themes of the interview were not too theoretical to grasp for an industry expert not versed in export marketing or COI theory. This possibility to make the data collection in an interview with clear themes makes assessing the credibility of data collection easy. The research's operationalization chart was also presented to increase the research's credibility.

Transferability means that the findings of the study might be relevant and applicable to other situations in addition to this particular research (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 253). Although research with a limited number of samples might be quite particular, in qualitative research a small purposeful sample can be selected because the purpose is to find out what is true of the particular case, instead of finding generalizations of the many (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 254). Lincoln and Guba (1985, 298) state that the original researcher must design their research and describe it so that the results or methods may be applied in other research contexts also. Merriam and Tisdell (2015, 256) leave the assessment of a research's applicability in other contexts to the person aiming to apply the findings but deem it the original researcher's responsibility to describe their research well enough to enable this kind of future assessment. The transferability of this research, to some extent, relies on the researcher's analysis and the coding of data units. The

interviewees and the research context was described to help the reader assess the transferability of the research and its findings.

In the social sciences, reliability in general is problematic as human behavior or interpretations are never static (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 250) and thus dependability is better used in qualitative research. Reliability means the extent to which the study, if replicated, will provide the same results, while a dependable study is traceable, logical, and documented (Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 250). Dependability might be easier to achieve and accept in traditional positivist research, and more problematic in a postpositivist qualitative research. An important point for interpretation is the coding process, which is the most subjective process of the research and therefore relies on the researcher. The openness of the semi-structured interview and the lack of a word-for-word literature also increase the subjectivity of data collection and data analysis. The interview included themes and theories that are not regarded as general knowledge and therefore may require explaining from the researcher. The researcher used probing to enable deeper analysis on the subject, which might project their subjective views on the interview. One main problem concerning the dependability of this research is that there is no unified measure of a COI's quality or export marketing's effectiveness and the evaluation of these is not a pervasive basis for further analysis. Therefore, it is difficult to answer the research question in definitive terms and instead only a description of the answer can be given and the approximation of whether these findings correlate with business in practice and other companies' context is left to the reader. One dependability-improving aspect is the collection of data and the themes' applicability to other contexts as well. Many exporting companies are faced with the same kind of issues as the interviewed organizations. The theoretical background used in the research is quite general and is applicable to varying kinds of companies and industries.

Confirmability concerns positivism's objectivity criterion and how the research's interpretations and findings result from dependable data collection and inquiry processes (Lincoln & Guba 2013, 105). Confirmability ensures that the findings reflect the study instead of the researcher's biases, interests, or preconceptions (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 310-325). Confirmability can also be expressed by providing an audit trail where a reviewer could verify the research process and data interpretations to be consistent with the literature and methodology (Given 2008, 112-113). In this research, the confirmability is improved by describing the data collection and the themes covered in detail. The interview was conducted as semi-structured, which gives room for subjectivity for the

researcher's view. The coding is subject to the researcher's bias, which though an integral part of qualitative research, still hinders the study's confirmability. Also, the issue of translating the interview and the interview data being in a different language partly reduces the confirmability of the research.

Aggregating the trustworthiness of the research is difficult, but these trustworthiness criteria were considered to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. The research does not leave critical points of data analysis solely to the researcher, as the open coding is done carefully, and the categorization is presented for the reader. Therefore, the reader has the option to consider the categorization themselves and adjust their opinion on the results accordingly. The interview, with its notes and translation leaves room for subjectivity or researcher bias. This issue is a problem at some level in many qualitative studies in which interviewing is the main data collection method.



## 4 FINLAND'S COI IN FOODSTUFF EXPORTS

The research brought up many aspects of Finland's COI through the interview findings as well as existing literature, which will also be addressed in this chapter. The chapter will combine the findings of the collected interview data and external data on Finland's COI and its utilization. The first subchapter will address Finland's COI and briefly also its development. The second subchapter will focus on the utilization of the COI and on ways in which the utilization could be improved

### 4.1 Finland's COI

Each of the organizations had their own view on Finland's COI, which is more thoroughly addressed here. In some issues the findings were unanimous and in some issues the results varied depending on the source. The main findings of the interviews are addressed here and combined with data originating from existing literature on the subject.

#### 4.1.1 A positive overall COI

Consumers have a more positive attitude towards products from a highly developed country in contrast to products from less developed countries (Cordell 1992, 259-270). Considering the preferred origin countries for developed and developing countries (see, for example Okechuku 1994, Wang & Chen 2004), the role of a Finnish foodstuff exporter is advantageous. As a developed country, Finnish products should be considered more favorable in other developed countries than similar products from less-developed countries. This gives Finland an underlying advantage compared to many other countries. The same claim is supported by the interview findings, as all five interviewees assessed Finland's COI as positive. Director (Interview, 25.11.2021)) from the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs made the strongest claim:

*“The quality of Finland's COI and Finland's country image is positive almost without exceptions.”*

Naturally, Finland seems to be better known in nearby countries than in further away markets. The interviewees brought up the neighboring countries of Sweden, Russia and

Estonia as countries where Finland is well-known. In some further away EU countries, Finland has a vague Country Image, as described by Wrang (Interview 01.11.2021):

*“To Germans Finland is the land of lakes, summer cottages, winter, purity and nature”*

From distant outside EU-countries, the Japanese people were mentioned to have a notion of Finland’s COI. (Marketer, Interview 17.11.202; Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021). In other distant countries, Finland falls under a general Nordic image, which is generally positive.

#### **4.1.2 Suitability for foodstuff exports**

A country’s COI must be evaluated also from the point-of-view of the foodstuff industry specifically (Suter et al. 2020, 16-18). According to Hartikainen (2020), Finnish foodstuffs are known in the German market for their purity, healthiness, and safety. Thus, Finnish foodstuffs’ strengths in marketing would be innovativeness, reliability, and Finnish nature. This claim is partly supported by the interview findings. All of the interviewees pointed out Finland’s pure nature as an important aspect in Finland’s COI. The nature aspect was brought up also in more specific aspects like lakes, summer cottages and winter (Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021). Some more concrete aspects were also pointed out such as the low soil chemical and heavy metal residues that emphasized the nature aspect to for example professional buyers (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021; Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021). Finland’s COI also has some specific aspects supporting foodstuff COI, as Hiekkamies (interview 23.11.2021) pointed out:

*“A cool climate image is thought to ensure the preservation of foodstuffs”*

Despite these positive aspects, Finland’s COI in respect to foodstuff exports is not completely optimal. In addition to Finland’s COI’s positivity, the product-country -match was also discussed. Some topics outside nature aspects and the foodstuff industry also supported Finland’s foodstuff COI. These included the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021), welfare state reputation (Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021) and high level of education (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021). Shortcomings in Finland’s country image in aspects such as

culture may negatively affect Finland's COI in the foodstuff industry. Similarly, the lack of "warm" and exciting attributes in Finland's country image may negatively affect Finland's COI. (Director, interview 25.11.2021). Also, in some areas, (e.g. Russia or China) Finland's COI may be considered a bit "backwards" and could require a different approach (Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021).

Within the foodstuff industry, it was noted that Finland's COI branding has focused more on natural products, such as berries or wild fish, while industrial foodstuff exports are neglected (Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021). This points out differences in the product-country -match even within the industry.

#### **4.1.3 Making Finland known**

The COI of Finland's foodstuff exports is largely based on outside-the-industry-factors, as Finland's COI was considered to be based on external things. Finland is known, for example, for its natural phenomena (Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021; Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021), geography (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021), climate (Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021) and celebrities such as athletes (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021). This means that Finnish foodstuff has a weak COI globally. Only in the neighboring countries the situation is partly different. In some parts of Russia, mainly the St. Petersburg region, the local population had a strong experience of Finnish foodstuffs and had formed a positive image of it (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021; Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021; Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021). Also in Sweden, Finnish products are known and are often preferred over other export products, though still being thought of as secondary to domestic products (Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021; Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021). When considering the status of Finland's COI, these findings suggest that Finland's COI is mostly representative of Han's (1989) halo effect while only in a few neighboring markets a summary construct may be identified. This claim is also supported by one of the interviewed companies, Valio Oyj, being well-known in Russia (Yle 2021). Wrang (Interview 01.11.2021), strongly summed up the weaknesses of Finland's COI in the following way:

*"The biggest weakness of Finland's Global Country-of-Origin Image is that there is no global Country-of-Origin Image."*

Finland has engaged in several activities to develop their COI and make Finland and its foodstuff industry more visible. Finnish foodstuff export companies have campaigned in, for example, the German foodstuff fair Grüne Woche in order to gain renown and boost demand of Finnish foodstuffs (Hartikainen 2020). The government also supports the development of Finland's COI in numerous ways. The Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs lists at least the following as public initiatives for the development of Finland's COI. (Ulkoministeriö 2021):

- Finland Promotion Board's yearly theme calendar containing the most important COI- themes and the most important COI-related events domestically and globally
- Finland's official country brand media This is Finland
- The Finland Toolbox, including COI content for all interested parties to use
- Finland's international representative offices
- Journalist- and influencer visits

These initiatives are examples of Han's (1989) government-level involvement on the formation and development of COI. Despite these initiatives for the strengthening of Finland's COI, the interviews brought up a clear issue with Finland's COI. All of the interviewees highlighted the weakness of Finland's COI as the biggest impediment regarding Finland's COI. So even though the COI is positive, effort should be put into strengthening Finland's COI abroad.

The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index ranks Finland's country brand as the 15<sup>th</sup> out of 60 ranked countries (Ipsos, 2021). This supports the previous findings about Finland's country brand. Finland's country brand is still far from the strongest country brands as Finland is a relatively unfamiliar country globally. Finland's COI strength would benefit from some globally well-known consumer brands, that it is now lacking. (Director, interview 25.11.2021). Director (interview 25.11.2021) aggregated Finland's Country Image in terms of strength and quality:

*"Finland is better liked than known."*

This summary of Finland's Country Image points out the attributes of the most important COI aspects. It also reveals that making Finland better known is the area where most room for improvement lies.

## 4.2 Utilization of COI

The extent and quality of the utilization of Finland's COI varies among the companies and organizations involved in this study. The interviewed companies have an understanding from at least their own point-of-view and the organizations focus on the broader picture and the utilization of COI across industries and companies. The utilization of COI is addressed here.

Similar aspects of COI are used in all marketing, but they are brought out and weighed differently to professional buyers than to consumers. In professional, or B2B, marketing, the main aspects of COI that are utilized are purity, medicine and chemical residues. (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021). Quantitative and technical qualities such as these, in addition to price, are used to convince professional buyers (Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021). The marketing of products directly to consumers is less focused on price (Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021).

The actual selling points are ones that were listed in the previous subchapter. According to the interviews, these include nature, purity, "the world's happiest people" - image, famous people, and natural phenomena among other things. Finnish forest imagery may also be used in contexts such as the background of a company's video conferencing software (Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021). In marketing imagery, famous Finnish locations and people are used. The way that these aspects are brought out are numerous, as illustrated by Marketer (Interview 17.11.2021):

*"Finnish nature is brought out in, for example, marketing materials and packaging or even by hosting customer meetings in Lapland or going berry-picking in the forest"*

The Finnish colors of white and blue are often used, even though package colors are adapted to local preferences when necessary. (Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021). In some countries, such as China, the product's domestic packaging is used, and a local label is simply glued on the package. Though this might seem contrary to a classy impression, this model is effective in promoting the product's import status (Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021). COI is also often brought up somehow in product or export brand names and product packaging. This kind of export brands include, for example, Finlandia cheese and Laplandia yoghurt. The packaging of Valio's Laplandia yoghurt is illustrated in Figure 5.



Figure 5 Packaging of Laplandia Yoghurt (Red Dot 2022)

As seen in Figure 5, the nature elements and the name of the Lapland area are well utilized, resulting in a design award (Red Dot 2022). The COO is also brought out in social media marketing in Instagram, for example (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021; Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021). On a governmental level, pure food, every person's rights and the relationship with nature are brought out in Finland's Country Image and COI communication. Also Finland's climate actions are highlighted at the moment. (Director, interview 25.11.2021). These methods represent most of the COI-marketing strategies presented by Aichner (2014, 84-91), except using the country name or country-related words in the company name.

### 4.3 Improving COI utilization

In addition to assessing the way COI is utilized, an important contribution is the way in which the utilization may be improved. This subchapter focuses on the aspects in which the COI may be utilized better.

#### 4.3.1 Highlighting advantages in a clear and limited message

The biggest issue in with Finland's COI utilization was the COI's strength, which is an important issue that should be improved (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021; Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021; Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021; Director, interview 25.11.2021) even though the issue is not directly linked to the COI's utilization on the firm-level. COI communication should be unified on a national level in all contexts, as the message that may be conveyed to consumers is limited. Finland's relatively small marketing budget limits marketing resources. Wrang (Interview 01.11.2021) pointed out an important issue to consider in COI utilization:

*“A consumer can only recall 3 things at a time.”*

This makes the case to focus on a clear and limited message. This extends to, for example, unifying product origin labeling. Therefore, Finland should systematically develop its COI with a long-term focus. (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021). Cooperation within and between industries and with public actors should be enhanced, for example, by offering Finnish foods in technology export events in China or using Finnish ingredients such as berries in Finnish meat tastings (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021; Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021). In some nearby areas, such as Sweden or the Saint Petersburg area, Finland has a relatively strong COI (Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021; Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021).

It should be noted that the preference to favor domestic foodstuffs exists in most markets (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021; Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021). In developing countries, the quality perception and fashionable image of imports often overcomes ethnocentrism. This can be an advantageous selling point for a marketer from a developed country and provides opportunities for positioning their products and charging prestigious prices (Wang & Chen 2004, 396). One risk in utilizing COI in marketing efforts lies with consumers' misperception of the brand's or product's origin, the results of which are mostly detrimental (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos 2011, 95-99). For a small country the size of Finland, this effect is to be carefully considered, to avoid wasting marketing resources. Even though Finland's own COI is weak, Finland is part of a relatively strong Nordic brand, which should be accounted for when directing marketing messages

(Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021; Marketer, Interview 17.11.2021; Director, interview 25.11.2021).

The advantage gained by the Finnish raw materials must be effectively conveyed to the customers. Wrang (Interview 01.11.2021) suggests some governmental websites (Luke 2022) as one source for data:

*“The low use of medicine and low chemical residues in the Finnish foodstuff industry should be highlighted with the use of government databases such as the National Resource Institute’s Food facts - website “*

The advantages may be communicated by hard facts to professional buyers and by cooperating with public actors about organic certifications. (Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021). One example of this material-induced advantage is Finnish butter’s reputation as the best ingredient for croissants (Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021). These aspects fall in the natural resources -category of COI turned into a Country-Specific Advantage (Suter et al. 2018). Also, the solution-orientation and innovation aspect of Finnish foodstuffs should be highlighted. This includes plant-based proteins and healthy foodstuffs. (Director, interview 25.11.2021).

#### **4.3.2 Adapting to different markets**

Marketing efforts should consider the target market also regarding COI marketing, as marketing messages may be perceived differently across markets. Hiekkamies (interview 23.11.2021) describes Finnish marketers’ shortcomings:

*“Finnish marketers sometimes seem to be lukewarm in their marketing.”*

This may be seen as somewhat backwards or grim in some markets. Especially in China and Russia, the Finnish modest style should be modified to a more prestigious or “splashy” approach. (Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021). In other Nordic countries, Finland is sometimes considered backwards, which should be considered or somehow turned into an advantage (Vasunta, interview 19.11.2021). Finnish foodstuff exporters should consider local culinary tastes and thus adapt their offering according to target markets in, for example, culinary tastes and packaging sizes. Also, some colors or number



may be considered inappropriate in foreign countries, which should be considered even when using colors or messages typical to Finland. It should also be noted that global food cultures and preferences are not as uniform as fashion preferences, for example. (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021). Finland's COI has numerous aspects and not each market is interested in the same aspects. Therefore, marketers should highlight the aspects of COI that are of interest in each particular market. For example, Finland's local embassies should be contacted to learn the messages that could be most effective in each market. (Director, interview 25.11.2021). Hiekkamies (interview 23.11.2021) exemplified local preferences in the Chinese market:

*“The Chinese consumer is interested in stories and horoscopes, according to which some even time having children.”*

They also exemplified a mundane aspect for Finland being potentially turned into an exotic selling point:

*“In China, nature's exoticism is valued and in big cities even clear skies and clouds may be seen as such.”*

Finnish foodstuff exports are too heavily focused on exporting ingredients or semi-finished products. This lack of consumer end-products is a major hindrance in utilizing Finland's COI (Wrang, Interview 01.11.2021). The lack of popular consumer end-products can be seen in the low amount of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and other internationally registered foodstuffs (Ruokavirasto 2020).

Finnish export marketing's effectiveness could be bolstered by utilizing the most effective marketing messages. These may be found in the Finland Toolbox -website (Finland Promotion Board 2022; Director, interview 25.11.2021). Some marketing messages, such as using Santa Claus or Lapland imagery, may seem corny or ineffective for Finns, but they often end up being effective in export marketing. In China, for example, a Santa Claus -campaign has been one of Valio Oyj's most successful export campaigns. This highlights the issue of choosing the marketing messages that truly separates one's own offering in each market. (Hiekkamies, interview 23.11.2021). Director (interview 25.11.2021) commented on daring to use the most effective arguments in marketing:

*“Worn arguments, such as Finland’s four distinct seasons and Finland’s nature should be utilized, even though they may seem corny”*

These findings show that the ways in which COI utilization may be improved are many. Many of the points were overlapping, but some interesting individual observations were also found that could be of use. The strongest points were presented here, based on which conclusions will be formed in the next chapter.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The concluding chapter will be presented in three parts, each of which will address separate outcomes and implications of the research. First, the contributions to existing theory will be introduced, after which the implications to managerial decision-making will be addressed. Lastly, the limitations of the research will be addressed, and suggestions will be made for further research on the subject.

### 5.1 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical basis for the research is in export marketing. The issue of utilizing COI was of specific interest in the domain of export marketing. There were some findings that may contribute to future research on the subject by confirming existing research (see, for example, Aichner 2014, Roth & Romeo 1992). These mainly concerned effective aspects of COI and the affecting factors of COI utilization. Also, some aspects concerning foodstuff exports, such as ethnocentrism were noted (see, for example, Chryssochoidis et al. 2007, Peng 2013).

For current marketing research focusing on the foodstuff industry, clear indications were recognized of the effects of an image of pure nature on foodstuff COI. Based on the data, Finnish COI seems to provide a favorable product-country match in foodstuff exports, as described by Roth and Romeo (1992). The product-country -match is greatly enhanced in the foodstuff industry when the origin country has managed to embed an image of purity and nature in its COI. This finding is important in future research and assessing effective aspects of COI.

In COI-marketing, it is important to also find out the factors that are unique to a marketer and their origin country. These aspects are more easily remembered and thus more effective in recalling and supporting a COI. This adds another layer to the examination of a country's advantages. To be truly effective, the advantages provided by COI should also be as country-specific as possible as opposed to general positive traits attributed to a country. This finding furthers understanding of which dimensions of COI are to be used in COI marketing.

Another finding was that an important issue in COI utilization is the strength of the COI. As Finland's COI is considered weak globally, it is not as effective in marketing as the COI's quality would suggest. This implies the role of a COI's strength as kind of a

prerequisite for COI's utilization and motivates focus on this aspect. This finding supports the choice of assessing COI or country image in terms of its strength as well as its quality, as done in, for example, the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (Ipsos 2021).

## 5.2 Managerial implications

The managerial implications of the study concerning the research question, "*How can Finnish foodstuff exporters utilize their Country-of-Origin-Image?*" were many. Managers should be particularly interested in the first and third sub-questions of the research, which concerned Finland's COI and about how its utilization should be improved.

Finland's COI seems to be compatible with the foodstuff industry because of the image of pure nature and high quality -products that are associated with Finland. In addition, Finnish products could be considered more favorable than similar products from less-developed countries. In assessing market potential and the strategies for entering new markets, these aspects should be considered, and the opportunities exploited. This suggests that Finland's COI should be used in marketing as few negative sides to its usage were discovered. Finland's COI is relatively strong in the nearby areas, such as Sweden and in the Saint Petersburg area in Russia.

The ways in which COI utilization could be improved were also suggested. Finland's COI consists of numerous aspects, some of which are suitable for professional marketing and some more suitable for marketing directly to consumers. Foodstuffs should be marketed to consumers with less technical details while professional buyers may be convinced with "hard facts". The factual advantages of Finnish foodstuffs include, for example, low chemical and medical residues of the soil and foodstuffs. Consumer marketing may exploit more abstract issues such as imagery from Lapland or famous natural phenomena such as the northern lights. The Finnish foodstuff currently has too few export products directly to consumers and is too heavily focused on ingredients or semi-finished goods. To exploit all of Finland's effective COI-aspects and selling points, consumer end-products should be focused on.

The most useful aspects of Finland's COI in the foodstuff industry are not always the ones that Finns themselves value but may be different in foreign markets. In addition to the image of pure nature, Finland has some unique country-specific strengths, such as the image as the world's happiest people. Characters such as Santa Claus may be effective in

export marketing, though they might seem “corny” or overused from a Finnish point-of-view. Also, some mundane things such as the four distinct seasons or Finland’s high level of equality and education may prove to be effective selling points. In their marketing efforts, a Finnish exporter should thus consider issues that are interesting, rare or exotic in their target markets, despite the possibility of them seeming mundane for a Finn. Also, some markets, such as China or Russia, may require a more “splashy” or prestigious approach than what Finns may be accustomed to, and the marketing efforts should consider these kinds of aspects as well. Finland has important Country-Specific Advantages in the COI aspect, such as its pure nature and characters like Santa Claus.

These preferences naturally vary between markets, which emphasizes the marketers need to familiarize themselves with their target market before making marketing decisions. The Russian market was often used as an example in this study, despite its significance being dramatically altered in 2022. Despite its significance as a target market in the future, lessons learned in past exports may be used in adapting to new markets. Each market has their own preferences regarding foodstuffs, which should be found out by getting to know the market’s culture and, for example, contacting local embassies to discuss local preferences and Finland’s local COI. These actions may help marketers find the most effective selling points locally and to avoid cultural backlashes in, for example, using improper words, numbers, colors, or figures in their marketing.

The strongest finding was the identification of Finnish COI’s biggest weakness, which is the COI’s strength globally. Finland’s COI must be strengthened through long-term planning and commitment. COI-development should be executed in cooperation within and across industries and between public and private actors. Finland should be brought up in all contexts and the messages that are conveyed about Finland should be a limited amount and they should be carefully considered. Too many separate or conflicting messages about Finland makes COI development ineffective, especially considering limitations in the public and private sector actors’ budgets.

### **5.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research**

The study was conducted as qualitative research using existing literature and expert interviews on the subject. Though the study should give a relevant overview on the topic, the study has some limitations that are addressed here. The limitations should be considered when assessing the conclusions of this research. The limitations of the

research also bring out some important considerations for future research. Suggestions for further research are also presented to further build understanding on the subject.

Export marketing is a widely academically researched subject while the same may not be said about Finland's foodstuff industry. The information on Finnish foodstuff industry is mainly gotten from governmental or private actors with an interest on the subject. This stake in the industry may be a source of bias in the material. The material on Finnish foodstuffs is also limited to certain areas of the diverse foodstuff industry. This may limit the companies or products on which the source material and the conclusions made on their basis may be applied to.

Additional material was provided by interviews on the subject and the interviewees represented a wide range of expertise in the foodstuff industry. Despite this, the findings may not represent or be applicable to all areas of the foodstuff industry. The interviews covered only a small representation of the Finnish foodstuff industry on the company-level and might have left out important aspects regarding other product groups or branches of foodstuff exports. The findings of this study could be used to formulate a wider study on a larger sample of Finnish foodstuff exporters to discover more effective ways to utilize Finland's COI or to quantitatively examine the effectiveness of marketing methods by target markets or product groups.

The phenomenon of COI itself is difficult to quantify, which makes its assessment a highly subjective matter. Each interviewee only presented their own individual assessment of the complex phenomenon, which may not correlate with other experts' views. Each interviewee also had a limited experience on the target markets as no companies interviewed in the study operated on a truly global scale. This limits the interview results' applicability on the markets in which none of the interviewees have had previous operations. The conclusions of the study are aimed at being universal and applicable in the global market, but these limitations should be considered, nonetheless. Further studies could enhance the results' global applicability by including exporters to more markets, such as South America or Africa.

One important suggestion regarding further research, is deeper analysis on how a country with limited resources could strengthen its COI. The issue of the Finnish COI's strength was repeatedly brought up and it became clear that to increase effectiveness of Finnish COI marketing, the main issue is the COI's strength rather than its quality. The issue is complicated as little research was found on effective ways in which smaller countries with limited budgets could strengthen their COI.

The research also brought up the need for a concise and consistent message that should be conveyed in COI-marketing and COI development. The effectiveness and compatibility of different aspects of Finland's, or any other country's COI, would be a point of interest and of particular value in the development of COI marketing theory and practical adaptations of marketing in the COI context.

## 6 SUMMARY

The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2017) identifies focus on the domestic market as the most central challenge to the Finnish food chain's growth competitiveness. This research was aimed to provide information of the available tools or means to improve the competitiveness and desirability of the industry. The focus was on marketing of foodstuffs in foreign markets utilizing Finland's Country-of-Origin Image (COI).

The main research question "*How can Finnish foodstuff exporters utilize their Country-of-Origin-Image?*" was divided into the three following sub-questions:

- Which features are attributed to Finland's Country-of-Origin Image in the foodstuff sector?
- How do Finnish foodstuff exporters currently utilize their Country-of-Origin Image?
- How could Finnish foodstuff exporters improve the utilization of their Country-of-Origin Image?

The research question and these sub-questions were addressed by first examining relevant existing research on foodstuff export marketing and COI marketing. These two aspects were then combined by examining the issue of COI in the foodstuff industry. The research included qualitative research interviews on industry experts from public organizations and private companies with practical experience on the matter. The interviews focused on the attributes of Finland's COI and on its utilization. The interview data was then combined with existing literature on the subject to form an overview of Finland's COI utilization in the foodstuff industry.

Previous research on the Finnish context of COI marketing was little, but the domains of foodstuff exports and COI-marketing were more thoroughly researched. Previous research identified foodstuff industry specialties such as heavy regulation, high degree of ethnocentrism and protectionism, of which ethnocentrism was of particular concern. Previous COI marketing research identified different ways in which COI is formed and different strategies for COI marketing as well COI dimensions. Research on COI and the foodstuff industry consisted of issues of COI marketing in the foodstuff industry, which included issues such as certifications and protectionism. The compatibility of a country's COI with different products was illustrated by the model of product-country -match (Roth & Romeo 1992, 482-484).



The findings of the study included some confirmation of existing theories as well as guidelines for the planning and execution of COI-marketing in practice. The marketing strategies currently utilized correlated with strategies presented in existing literature (Aichner 2014, 84-91). Finland's COI is positive and is currently utilized in varying ways. A considerable weakness in Finland's COI and its utilization is the strength of the COI, as Finland is not well-known globally. COI could be better utilized, if it was strengthened through long-term planning and cooperation.

The quality of Finland's COI is positive and can be advantageous in marketing. Finnish foodstuff exporters should utilize the COI as a resource but consider how to use COI marketing in each target market, as preferences vary. The highlighted aspects of Finland's COI should be considered and adapted to each market. Effective COI marketing strategies may utilize mundane issues for Finns that are exotic to foreign markets. These may include, for example, Finland's clear nature or Santa Claus. The marketing approach should be adapted to markets, as a lackluster approach sometimes typical for Finns may not be prestigious enough for some markets. By adhering to these guidelines and recommendations, the Finnish foodstuff industry could benefit more from the advantages of Finland's COI.

To concisely answer the main research question, the following guidelines should be considered:

- Finland's positive COI should be used as a resource in foodstuff marketing.
- Selling points should be considered according to each individual target market.
- Professional buyers may be convinced by technical details such as chemical residues while consumer marketing may focus on more abstract points.
- Finnish foodstuff exporters should develop more consumer end-products rather than focusing solely on ingredients or semi-finished goods.
- The most effective selling points may be found by considering what is interesting in the target market, even though these selling points may seem mundane or too showy for a Finn.
- All actors in the export industry, be they public or private, should strengthen Finland's COI in cooperation and with a long-term focus, as Finland's COI is relatively strong only in some nearby areas.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Interview guide

Interviewer: Juho Siikarla

Interviewee:

Interviewee's organization:

Date and location:

- Could you briefly introduce your organization and your responsibilities within the organization?
- Companies: To which markets do you export to and what is Finland's COI like in your target markets?
- What industry-specific aspects can you recognize in foodstuff exports and marketing? (Industry-specific aspects, RQ General)
- What is Finland's COI like globally? (General COI, SQ 1)
- Are there areas where Finland's COI is especially strong or weak? (COI strength, SQ 1)
- Are there countries with a particularly positive or negative sentiment towards Finland? (Preferred sourcing /hostile sentiment, SQ 1)
- What does Finland's COI consist of globally in your experience? (Summary construct or halo effect, SQ 1)
- Does Finland's COI, in your experience, consist more of a general image of Finland in varying contexts or of previous experience of Finnish products? (Summary construct or halo effect, SQ 1)
- What is Finland's COI like as a source country for foodstuffs and how suitable is it for supporting the exports of the foodstuff industry? What are Finland's strengths and weaknesses in this issue? (Product-country -match, SQ 1)
- Companies: How do you utilize COI in your exports?
  - o For example: packaging, marketing and advertising, company/product name, using known celebrities, phenomena or locations

- How is Finland's COI generally utilized in foodstuff exports and what kinds of COI marketing strategies can you recognize being used in the foodstuff industry? (Utilization strategies, SQ 2)
- Do you modify / do others generally modify their COI marketing according to customer types, depending on whether they are professional or non-professional buyers? (Utilization strategies, SQ 2)
- How could Finland's COI in the foodstuff industry be improved? (Product-country -match, SQ 3)
- How could COI be better utilized in foodstuff exports and which previously mentioned utilization strategies could be utilized more or better? (Utilization strategies, SQ 3)
- Is there something you would like to add that could be relevant to the operations of Finnish foodstuff exporters? (RQ)