

# **COUNTRY BRANDING IN EXPORT PROMOTION: CASE FOOD FROM FINLAND**

**Jyväskylä University School  
of Business and Economics**

**Master's thesis**

**2017**

**Author: Essi Suorsa  
Subject: Entrepreneurship  
Supervisor: Mari Suoranta**



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO



## ABSTRACT

Author Essi Suorsa	
Title Country branding in export promotion: Case Food From Finland	
Subject Entrepreneurship	Type of degree Master's Thesis
Time of publication December 2017	Number of pages 79
<p>Through globalization, country images are increasingly influencing the daily choices consumers make in different parts of the world. To promote a positive image, many countries are applying strategies in country branding on multiple levels reaching from tourism promotion to exports and investments.</p> <p>This research was conducted to explore the Finnish food exporters' perceptions on their home country's brand and to discuss the role of the export firms and of an export promotion program in the process of branding a country. The case for this study is the Finnish organization Finpro and their Food From Finland -export program for the food industry. The empirical data of the study includes eight qualitative interviews with the food export firms. The results are aligned with previous studies to that extend that Finland as a country and Finnish food are not yet well known abroad. As the origin is lesser known, the importance of the export firms' own brands in international marketing increases. In some firm cases the unknown origin was either not highlighted or the origin was related to more known geographical brands such as Scandinavia. However, export firms' role in country brand promotion is highly important, as these firms act as brand ambassadors for their country brand when doing business abroad. Thereby the role of the export promotion program is also highlighted as a brand coordinator. Additionally, the results of the study indicate that Finland's country brand is currently focused on few industries including technology, forestry and education, which has not promoted the growth of the food industry. The topic is current as Finland has set targets for increasing food exports remarkably until 2020.</p> <p>The results of the study indicate that the branding work for Finnish food is taking its first steps; the target image for Finnish food is currently characterized by clean nature, food safety and innovativeness. For assessing the strengths of the industry, this research applied Porter's model of National Competitive Advantage. Finnish nature and the top skills and knowhow in the industry are vital for the brand, but they are not enough alone to position Finnish food and food culture as something different, interesting and memorable. To support the brand that relies on these factual characteristics there would still be a need for content that applies to feelings, which would both promote consumers' need for these food products as well as unify the multiple operators within the industry. The implications of the study include suggestions on applying country branding to export promotion.</p>	
Keywords country branding, country-of-origin effect, economic clusters, food branding, export intermediary, export promotion	
Storage	Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Tekijä Essi Suorsa	
Työn nimi Country branding in export promotion: Case Food From Finland	
Oppiaine Yrittäjäyys	Työn laji Pro gradu -tutkielma
Aika (pvm.) Joulukuu 2017	Sivumäärä 79
<p>Globalisaation myötä mielikuvat eri maista vaikuttavat kasvavassa määrin kuluttajien jokapäiväisiin valintoihin ympäri maailmaa. Edistääkseen positiivista mielikuvaa, useat maat tekevät maabrändityötä, joka ulottuu matkailumarkkinoinnista vienninedistämiseen ja ulkomaisten investointien houkuttelemiseen.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteina oli valottaa suomalaisten elintarvikeviejien suhdetta kotimaansa maabrändiin sekä tarkastella vientiyritysten ja vienninedistämistoimien roolia maabrändin kehittämistyössä. Tutkimuksen kohteena on Finpron elintarviketeollisuuden vienninedistämishjelma Food From Finland ja tutkimuksen empiirinen aineisto koostuu kahdeksasta laadullisesta yrityshaastattelusta. Tulokset myötäilevät aiempia tutkimuksia todeten, että Suomen tunnettuus maailmalla on vielä heikkoa. Kun alkuperämaata ei tunneta hyvin, yrityksen oman brändin painoarvo kansainvälisillä markkinoilla korostuu. Joissain tapauksissa vientiyritykset eivät korosta tuntemattoman maan alkuperää markkinoinnissaan tai alkuperällä kuvataan laajempaa, paremmin tunnettua aluetta kuten Skandinaviaa. Vientiyritysten rooli maabrändityössä on kuitenkin ratkaisevan tärkeä, sillä yritykset toimivat maabrändin lähettiläinä toimiessaan maailmalla. Näin myös vienninedistämishjelman koordinoiva rooli korostuu osana maabrändityötä. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat lisäksi, että Suomen nykyinen maabrändi on keskittynyt muutamaan teollisuudenalaan, muun muassa teknologiaan, metsäalaan ja koulutukseen, mikä ei ole ollut omiaan edistämään ruokalan kasvua. Aihe on erityisen merkittävä juuri tällä hetkellä, sillä Suomen tavoitteena on kasvattaa elintarvikevientä huomattavasti vuoteen 2020 mennessä.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittavat, että suomalaisen ruokakulttuurin brändäys maabrändityön ohessa on vasta alussa. Suomalaisen ruuan tavoitemielikuvaan kuuluvat tällä hetkellä puhdas luonto, ruokaturvallisuus ja innovatiivisuus. Elintarvikealan vahvuuksien arvioimiseen käytettiin Porterin mallia maan kilpailukykytimantista. Suomalainen luonto ja elintarvikealan huippuosaaminen ovat merkittäviä tekijöitä osana brändiä, mutta eivät vielä riitä asemoimaan suomalaista ruokaa erilaisena, mieleenpainuvana ja mielenkiintoisena ruokakulttuurina. Faktojen tueksi tarvitaan tunteisiin vetoava brändi, joka luo sekä tarvetta pohjoisen ruokatuotteille, että tuo yhteenkuuluvuuden tunteen alan eri toimijoille. Tutkimuksen käytännön sovellus keskittyy maabrändin soveltamiseen vienninedistämisessä.</p>	
Asiasanat maabrändäys, alkuperämaavaikutus, klusterit, ruokabrändäys, vienninedistäjä, vienninedistäminen	
Säilytyspaikka Jyväskylän yliopiston kauppakorkeakoulu	

## FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.....	12
Figure 2. The Golden Circle by Sinek (2009).....	18
Figure 3. Progression of destination branding activity by Gnoth (2002, p. 271). 24	
Figure 4. Sources of Locational Competitive Advantage (Porter, 2000) .....	29
Figure 5. The data analysis process.....	39
Figure 6. The Finnish COO image as perceived by the interviewed firms. ....	57
Figure 7. Key findings of the main concepts in the study.....	67
Figure 8. Brand hierarchy from a region brand to a firm brand. ....	70
Figure 9. Recognition of the origin. ....	71

## TABLES

Table 1. Basic information about the expert interviews.....	36
Table 2. Basic information about the firm interviews.....	37

# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ

FIGURES AND TABLES

1	INTRODUCTION.....	8
1.1	Case presentation: Finpro and Food From Finland .....	9
1.2	Research objectives, problems and questions .....	10
2	KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORIES.....	12
2.1	Country branding.....	12
2.1.1	National identity .....	16
2.1.2	The Golden Circle .....	17
2.1.3	Finland's country brand.....	18
2.2	Country-of-origin effect .....	21
2.2.1	Finland as a country of origin .....	24
2.2.2	Branding Finnish food.....	25
2.3	Economic clusters.....	27
2.3.1	The Diamond of National Advantage .....	28
2.3.2	Clusters and national governments .....	30
2.3.3	Finnish food industry .....	31
2.4	Export intermediaries .....	32
3	RESEARCH DESIGN .....	34
3.1	Data collection .....	35
3.1.1	Expert interviews .....	36
3.1.2	Firm interviews .....	36
3.2	Data analysis .....	38
4	EMPIRICAL DATA.....	40
4.1	Single case analysis: Firms A-H.....	40
4.2	Cross-case analysis.....	44
4.2.1	Group I.....	44
4.2.2	Group II .....	45
4.2.3	Group III.....	47
4.2.4	Group IV.....	47
4.2.5	Summary .....	48
5	FINDINGS .....	50
5.1	Dynamics in food marketing.....	50
5.1.1	Brand development .....	50
5.1.2	Influence of domestic market.....	52
5.1.3	Food labels .....	53
5.2	Product origin in international marketing .....	54
5.2.1	The Finnish COO image.....	56
5.2.2	Finnish, Nordic, Scandinavian or Arctic?.....	57
5.3	Country branding in exports.....	59
5.3.1	Export firms' role in country branding.....	60
5.3.2	Export program's role in country branding.....	61

5.4	Finland's competitive advantages in food exports .....	63
5.5	Summary of the key findings .....	65
6	DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .....	68
7	CONCLUSIONS .....	74
7.1	Limitations .....	75
7.2	Recommendations for further study .....	75
	REFERENCES .....	76

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Countries compete increasingly on the global markets for exports volumes, investments, tourists, foreign students and skilled labour. Multiple studies support the idea that country images have an influence on people's everyday decisions; which product do you choose to buy, where would you travel next, what languages have you learned or where would you apply to work or study (e. g. Anholt, 2002, Kotler & Gertner, 2002, Beverland & Lindgreen, 2002, Sun & Paswan, 2011). People obtain information regarding different countries from media, education, business experiences, travels, encounters with others and from product purchases - thereby, every place has an image, whether strong or vague or positive or negative (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). Many countries aim thereby to influence these images with careful branding tactics. One cannot though brand an entire country the same way as a beer or a restaurant; the large number of operators including the public and private sector plus the country's citizens make the brand coordination a lot more complex (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002, Isokangas et al., 2010). One of the challenges for a country brand is to be focused enough, so that it is easier for the audience to make sense of what the country is about and what it is not. On the other hand, the brand needs to be inclusive enough to engage the varied number of operators, industries and cultural nuances within the country.

Exports are widely supported by the images regarding their countries of origin (e. g. Anholt, 2002). According to the general branding theory, brands influence on the perceived value of the product and thereby consumers expect to pay a lower price for an un-branded product and on the other hand are prepared to pay more for a valued brand (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). In joint branding the power of many magnifies the impact; when similar messages are repeated often enough in different contexts, these brand messengers are consciously contributing to the image of the place they represent. As messengers, one may see the national government in the first place, but no government has the required resources to do the place branding work alone (Gilmore, 2002). The branding work includes also the nation itself; the outgoing expat workers, students, travelers, artists, politicians, and, perhaps most importantly, the country's business sector with firms operating abroad and exporting the country's products round the world.

Though when a country does not have a strong brand the firms may not emphasize their origin as they feel that it does not bring any added value for their sales volumes (Anholt, 2002). Country brand promotion however is not developed without the firms; for building an image, everyone willing to profit from it has their stake also in the building process. From another perspective, in the building process the operators also have an opportunity to actively create narratives for the country's brand image and this way shape the image of their origin (Clancy, 2011). As Clancy (2011) notes, a country's brand should not be seen as neither given nor fixed to the country's historical past; the nation itself defines what the country's brand is about. However, to make the varied ideas



align and different operators to play the matching tunes, coordination is needed on multiple levels.

My research project focused exactly on the relation between a country's brand and exports; I wanted to explore Finnish firms' perceptions regarding Finland's country brand and how they saw that the country brand could benefit their international sales. I chose food industry and food exports both out of personal interest but also as it appeared as a current topic as Finland had set targets for increasing the value of food exports by 2020 and for this purpose a specific food export promotion program, Food From Finland, was launched. The timing of the study was also interesting in the sense that Finland was celebrating its 100 years of independence during the time of the study in 2017 and the anniversary year received a worldwide attention which naturally promoted Finland's country brand as well. Overall this research was conducted to record the perceptions of Finnish food exporters on their home country's brand and to discuss the export firms' and the export program's roles in country branding. For this research, I interviewed eight entrepreneurs and firm representatives from the Food From Finland -program. Additionally, I collected background information by interviewing four field specialists, three in export promotion within the food industry and one in the area of place branding. Interviews were conducted between 2016-2017 and were semi-structured qualitative interviews.

The report is structured as follows: this introduction chapter presents the overview to the research topic and the case for this study, the Food From Finland -program. Additionally, the research objectives, research questions and the conceptual framework is presented here. This is followed by the literature review in chapter 2, which presents the key concepts and theories. After the literature review the research design is presented in chapter 3. The results of the empirical study are divided to chapters 4 and 5, as the chapter 4 includes the single case and cross-case -analyses and the chapter 5 presents further findings from the firm interviews. Finally, the discussion part gathers the findings from the earlier literature, expert interviews and firm interviews together, after which the contributions of the study and the practical implications are presented in the conclusions part. This part also includes remarks regarding the limitations of the study and the recommendations for further research.

## **1.1 Case presentation: Finpro and Food From Finland**

Finpro Oy is a fully state-owned organization and operates as the Finland's national export promotion agency. Finpro ry (registered association) was established in 1919 and operated as a registered non-profit organization until 2015 (Finpro, 2017). Since the beginning of 2016, Finpro has continued the work with its new organizational form as Finpro Oy (limited liability) (Finpro, 2017). The main purpose of the organization is to help Finnish small and medium-sized (SME) enterprises to go international, to encourage foreign direct investments in Finland and to promote tourism (Finpro, 2017). Finpro operates under three brands, which follow respectively the organization's key focus areas; Ex-

port Finland, Invest in Finland and Visit Finland (Finpro, 2017). Under the three fields the main operations include scanning business opportunities, promoting Finnish knowhow, consulting and maintaining an international network; the organization employs nearly 300 professionals in 64 offices in 44 countries (Finpro, 2017).

As a part of promoting the Finnish SME exports, Export Finland has established 23 export programs for companies in various fields, with each program directed to a specific field (Export Finland, 2017). Food From Finland, established in 2014, is a government-funded export program that promotes the Finnish food sector and operates in cooperation with Team Finland -network operators and the Finnish Food and Drink Industries' Federation (Export Finland, 2017). The focus market areas for exports in this program are Scandinavia, Baltics, Russia, Germany, China, South Korea and Japan (Export Finland, 2017). In 2016 80 companies in the Finnish food sector are taking part in the Food From Finland -program, including small firms with few employees but also important sector players such as Valio or Atria (Food From Finland, 2016). The aim for the Food From Finland -program is to double the value of Finnish food exports to around 3 billion euros by 2020, to create synergies within the industry, to create jobs and to promote and expand the level of internationalization (Export Finland, 2017).

## 1.2 Research objectives, problems and questions

I started to design the study by selecting *country branding* as a central concept, as I wanted to look on the current status of Finland's country brand and explore how a country brand connects to international business. I narrowed the research more specifically to food exports, which both is my own area of interest and a topic that appeared current in Finland during the time of the study, as it was closely after the export promotion program for food exports was launched. Food industry was also an interesting industry to study in this context, as food is closely connected to the country's culture, and culture has a significant impact on the country's brand image. Food industry and branding was also an interesting concept to look at, as food is sold not only to B2B buyers but also directly to end consumers, which has an influence on how the products are branded and promoted abroad.

The combination of 'country branding' and 'exports' introduced me to the concept of *country-of-origin effect*, which refers to the images that foreign buyers and consumers have on the exported goods and services; this was exactly the core I wanted to explore from the firm perspective. As the study narrowed down to Finnish food exports, it was interesting to select the Food From Finland -export program as a frame for the case study. This program acts as a connector of multiple operators within the Finnish food industry and creates connections also to other industries, for instance to tourism. Therefore, the concept of *economic clusters* emerged during the research project while studying the data collected from secondary sources and from the empirical interviews.

The research objective was to describe how the country branding work and the image a certain country has may influence exports and what role the export firms and export promoters have in country branding. My aim was to describe what kind of perceptions export firms have regarding a country brand and the country-of-origin effect, so thereby this research can be classified as a descriptive research study (Kumar, 2014). The research problem was how a country brand can support the country's exports and, as the aim was to observe the topic especially from the firms' perspective, the main research questions for this study were:

Q1: How Finnish food export firms, that are members of the Food From Finland - program, perceive Finland's country brand and the country-of-origin image of Finnish products?

Q2: How is the role of export firms in country brand promotion?

Q3: How is the role of an export promotion program in country brand promotion?

## 2 KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

This chapter will introduce the three key concepts for this study; **country branding**, the **country-of-origin effect** and **economic clusters**. Additionally, as this is a case study within the frames of Food From Finland –program, the role of **export intermediates** is also discussed within the context of country branding and cluster formation. The conceptual framework with the theoretical concepts of this study and the perspectives is presented in Figure 1.

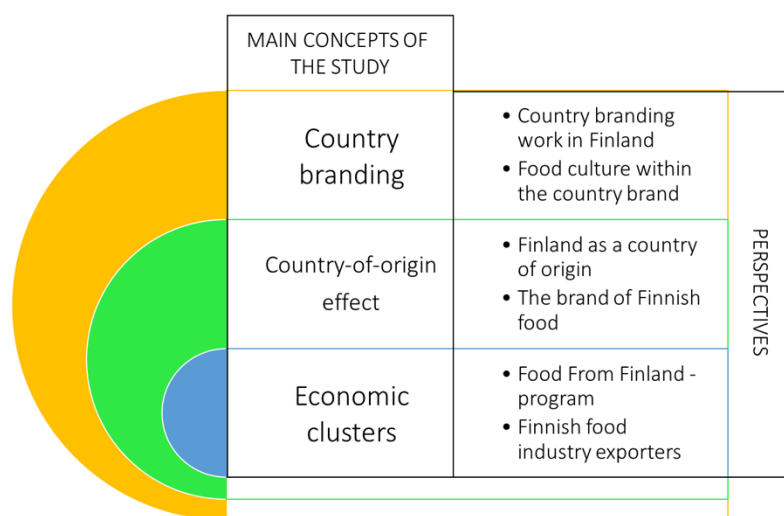


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

As illustrated in Figure 1, this study discusses the possible interconnections between the three concepts and how one concept influences the other; for example, a competitive cluster within a country may contribute to the country's country-of-origin image, which yet has an influence on the country's brand. In the following review of earlier literature, all these concepts are first discussed on a general level, and then focusing specifically on the Finnish context and food industry.

### 2.1 Country branding

As defined by Papadopoulos (2004), *place branding* refers to "the broad set of efforts by country, regional and city governments, and by industry groups, aimed at marketing the places and sectors they represent" (p. 36). Later on, the definitions have come to highlight the different dimensions of a place brand, as for instance Palgrave Macmillan (in Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009) states that place branding is "the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to the economic, political and cultural development of

cities, regions and countries” (p. 521). Country brand rankings have also clarified the brand dimensions; The Nation Brand Index by Anholt-GfK, which is described as the “world’s most comprehensive global branding survey”, includes six dimensions to form a country’s brand image; exports, governance, culture and heritage, people, tourism and investment and immigration (Anholt-GfK, 2017). For a rough 50 years, research has discussed place branding from a wide variety of perspectives; *destination branding* has referred to branding a place as a tourism destination, which in many cases has laid the groundings for a further developed *country brand* (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). Additionally, place branding has also been applied to cities and regions (e.g. Caldwell & Freire, 2004) and in product branding when discussing the effect of the country of origin (e.g. Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002, Sun & Paswan, 2011, Aichner, 2014). Research has also discussed the ‘nation’ as a subject of branding instead of a ‘country’ (e.g. Olins 2001). As Clancy (2011) describes, place branding has developed to cover not only the place itself but also the nation and is nowadays targeted not only to the elite, such as foreign investors, but also to masses.

The overall purpose of a country brand typically constitutes of three targets; to attract foreign direct investments to the place in question, to promote the exports of products and services produced there and to attract tourists (Papadopoulos, 2004). When discussing the marketing of countries, it is essential to separate two concepts, which are *country image* and country brand. As Kotler and Gertner (2002) stress, even if a country would not actively manage its own brand, people will still have images of countries that appear in mind by simply mentioning the country’s name. These images are the sum of each person’s own beliefs, impressions and education, combined with information gathered from media, travels, business experiences, product purchases, immigration, art and music and famous citizens (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002, Kotler & Gertner, 2002). As people aim to comprehend the vast amount of data they are exposed to, they form an image which represents a sort of simplification, including only factors that that person considers essential; thereby, the country images are used as a short-cut to process new information and as a help in decision-making (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). The difference is that a country image is an unplanned, coincidental entity whereas a country brand is a result of targeted actions (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008).

Some critiques say that places should not be seen as brands at all as they have too many stakeholders, underdeveloped identities and the general public does not perceive places as brands (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2002, in Kucbacki & Skinner, 2006). As Anholt (2002) remarks, country branding does raise emotions and those who promote it receive accusations for manipulating the reality. As a reply regarding manipulation, Anholt (2002) clarifies that place branding is more about brand management – which means the country takes care of the existing perceptions – rather than complete ‘rebranding’. Olins (2002) discusses also the objective views against country branding and comes to conclude that for many so-called intellectuals the main problem is not the process itself, but only the word ‘brand’, as outside of the business sector branding –or anything in business- is not associated with intellectual, cultural or social content. Therefore, Olins (2002) argues that the challenge may be the semantics that

what meanings certain words have for people, as for many, brands still represent only a label which can be something cheap and superficial whereas states represent something permanent and significant with deep emotional values.

There are anyhow good reasons why the own country's image abroad should interest all involved in international relations on any level, which reaches broadly from politicians to exporters and from employees of international organisations to artists and outgoing exchange students. As Kotler and Gertner (2002) explain, once one has formed an image of a country, it can last a very long time and be very challenging to change. This is due to people's tendency to only build the image in their minds stronger and use it as an explanation to make sense of the surrounding world (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). People are as well more likely to be attentive for such information that fits in the image and disregard such that does not (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). In order to guide the perceptions of a country towards positive connotations, Gilmore (2002) stresses the importance of country brand positioning and a proactive stance in country branding, because "unless carefully managed, a country can come to be dominated by a particular negative image or stereotype" (p. 283).

Managing the image refers to basic branding exercises, such as brand assessment, a strategy design and application of brand management tools (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Brands are however not born as an outcome of careful planning, not even with the best possible plan, but only when a decent amount of those belonging to the target group share common key perspectives on the brand and these perspectives reflect those that resemble the targeted brand image (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). Different target groups for the country brand need different strategies, even if these strategies are not completely aligned (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). As an example, Kotler and Gertner (2002) mention Ireland, that wishes to attract tourists with a countryside image and software experts with a high-tech country image. Whichever the image is, distinctiveness and connection to reality are highlighted as the key success factors (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). For instance, 'a friendly place' has already suffered inflation as a characteristic, same as brand promises referring to skilled workers with high education (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). Also, it is highly important that the brand resembles the authentic reality of the country, as otherwise it appears as a mere manipulation chasing an idealistic image (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). Without a connection to reality, a country brand may also appear too one-sided; as Gilmore (2002) describes, the 'Cool Britannia' -branding strategy was omitting the fact that many British firms in the service industry thrive from traditional characteristics such as honour and reliability, which could not fit in the dynamic image.

Kotler and Gertner (2002) describe that a complete reconstruction of a country brand appears as a challenging exercise, but one can however influence, measure and manage a country brand. The modernisation of the Spanish country brand, however, appears as a successful example of a reconstruction (Gilmore, 2002). After the regime of Franco, the country branding process was conducted on multiple levels including for instance the Barcelona Olympics, global expansion of multinational Spanish firms, rebuilding of cities like Bilbao and the films of Almodóvar; the key success factor in the process was that the Span-

ish government did not do the work alone but involved also experts from cultural field (Gilmore, 2002). Anholt (2002) discusses also the importance of the culture sector when building the nation brand because it enriches the brand with something humanist and makes it deeper than the two-dimensional ideas of a 'brand' that we commonly see in the commercial world:

...the cultural aspect of national image is irreplaceable and uncopiable because it is uniquely linked to the country itself; it is reassuring because it links the country's past with its present; it is enriching because it deals with non-commercial activities; and it is dignifying because it shows the spiritual and intellectual qualities of the country's people and institutions (Anholt, 2002, p. 236).

Anholt (2002) argues that a strong cultural sector can play a significant role in shaping a niche country brand that focuses for instance on creativity, music, tolerance, diversity, philosophy or safety rather than on power, wealth and sophistication empowered usually by economic muscles. Culture is the unique quality and quiddity, which is needed to prevent one country from resembling another with exactly same features such as blue sky, beautiful beaches and relaxation (Anholt, 2002). Problematic theme with the cultural sector is that cultural achievements do not 'sell' or provide return on investment the same way as some commercial brands do and are thus considered as 'non-profit' activities, but it is exactly because of its non-commercial features that culture can be the communicator of the country's true spirit and essence for the consumers that have already grown suspicious with commercial messages (Anholt, 2002).

A brand name that recalls significance and emotions is a powerful advantage in competition. Even though factors like the domestic market size, access to regional trade areas, education level and skills of the population, taxation, cost of labour and security influence on the marketability of a country (Kotler & Gertner, 2002), it can be argued that these characteristics -or functional dimensions- are not enough for building a brand for a country. The importance of a brand lies in the fact that even if a product can be differentiated with product characteristics, consumers often do not feel motivated enough or are not able to analyse these characteristics deeply enough (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Factual characteristics may also result in too similar country brands; as Moilanen and Rainisto (2008) state, one of the common mistakes in country branding is to promise something too generic that can be found in other countries as well. Caldwell and Freire (2004) also found that representational factors (those images that people use to express themselves) in a country brand may contribute to a more coherent and longer-lasting image, as functional factors -especially within the European market- may vary from target country to another. As an example, Caldwell and Freire (2004) discovered that Spain represents beaches for Brits but mountains and skiing for the Portuguese. Therefore, if applying self-expressional elements in the brand, i. e. feelings and emotions, the brand image may appear more unified in different target markets.

### 2.1.1 National identity

At the heart of any strong brand lies the identity of the brand and, for a country brand, it is the identity of the country's nation. As Gilmore (2002) defines, the identity of a nation consists of values that "endure no matter what the times because they represent what the nation's citizens believe in and believe about themselves" (p. 286). Irish historian Liam Kennedy also interestingly points out that it is the people themselves who tell who they are, or are others defining them (Gibbins, 2015). It is generally agreed that a person's origin shapes inevitably one's thoughts, feelings and behaviour (Kubacki & Skinner, 2006). However, it is also argued that a nation's identity should not be seen neither as given nor fixed; according to the scholarship of 'soft constructionism' of identity formation the nations in general are made, not given and therefore a national identity does not need to have much in common with the actual history or ethnography (Clancy, 2011). However, a nation's heritage forms still an important part of its identity, especially when observing how tourism communicates the nation's identity for visitors (Clancy, 2011). Therefore, a nation's identity could be described as something that has its roots in the reality, but that shapes over time and highlights those aspects that empower the nation, rather than those that discourage.

Besides for the tourism, exports and FDI promotion purposes, researchers have highlighted the importance of involving the country's own citizens in the branding process and of remembering them as important stakeholders of their home country's brand (e. g. Kubacki & Skinner, 2006, Clancy, 2011, Gilmore, 2002). Citizens form a significant group of brand ambassadors and whether they take this role actively or not, their actions and behaviour will have an impact on the country's brand (Gilmore, 2002). Therefore, apart from the country's government, a national branding process should also involve citizens and businesses, where all should share the same vision (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Gilmore (2002) discusses the aspect of involving the country's citizens from various perspectives; on one hand, it is crucially important that the country brand is relevant and credible for the country's own citizens as that is the prerequisite that the image can also be credible elsewhere. Moilanen and Rainisto (2008) likewise recognized that it is crucially important that the country brand is accepted and "lived" also in the country itself, among its citizens. On the other hand, even though rooted to reality, a country's brand should not lean on to its citizens too much as "the people of a country may be oblivious to the country's brand and not necessarily motivated to live the brand" (Gilmore, 2002, p. 287). Thereby the brand should be inspirational alone without relying on any specific input from the habitants (Gilmore, 2002).

Clancy (2011) argues tourism marketing to be ideal for researching nation identity, because tourism is important for the state's economy and for promoting tourism, state produces marketing materials where its own perception of the nation is showcased. National identity images in tourism may however possess also downsides over time. Kubacki and Skinner (2006) refer to this challenge by describing that a nation may recognize a change in their national identity faster than the outside world, which leads a nation being trapped with an



outdated identity. Clancy (2011) has also researched the sources of national identity and addresses specifically to the challenge of an outdated perception of national identity. As an example, Clancy (2011) presents Ireland, which carried an unchanged, traditional image in tourism despite the ongoing rapid economic growth. In tourism, Ireland was presented as a peaceful, green and rural place with a slow pace of countryside life and jolly people who did not have great interests in being part of the capitalist world (Clancy, 2011). By the times of the economic boom in 2000 also the Irish people's lifestyle and demographics had changed and were not responding anymore to the images cultivated by their tourism marketing (Clancy, 2011).

As means of 'selling the country brand' for the country's own citizens, Gilmore (2002) presents for instance the support of real physical infrastructural changes, promotion of strategic industries through tax incentives, attraction of venture capital, encouragement of creativity and engaging citizens with an international and/or opinion former profile to be brand ambassadors. It is also interesting what is the impact of the external opinion regarding a nation. As Anholt (2002) describes, when the country's cultural achievements are recognised abroad and the nation itself notices this attention, it can have a boosting effect on the country's culture sector productivity and funding. Vice versa, if a country is only known for industrial production, factories and engineering, the business sector will find investors and those projects will be considered as more 'useful' investments (Anholt, 2002).

### 2.1.2 The Golden Circle

The idea of a spirit and a purpose as the heart of a country brand resembles also the core of a brand as presented in the Golden Circle model (Figure by Sinek (2009)). As Sinek (2009) explains, it is more about leadership than about mere branding; it is about the ability to define the existential purpose and the deeper meaning, and through that to inspire action and build loyalty. In other words, when employees can relate with the organization's purpose, there is more at stake than just working for the money; similarly, when customers agree with the values of a brand and understand the brand's purpose, their purchase is more than a transaction. These values and beliefs generate internal motivation, which builds the loyalty towards a brand (Sinek, 2009). Sinek (2009) describes the brand dimensions in three layers; the first layer is the easy one, that everyone in an organization can tell; it is about *what* the organization does, in other words, what products or services do they produce. Many can also describe *how* those are produced and what is different or unique about the process; but as Sinek (2009) argues, fewer leaders or organizations can tell *why* they produce those products or services in terms that reach further than money or profit. According to Sinek (2009), the common presentation and marketing contents start from the outer layer, but what separates great leaders from the good ones is that they start with the *why*.

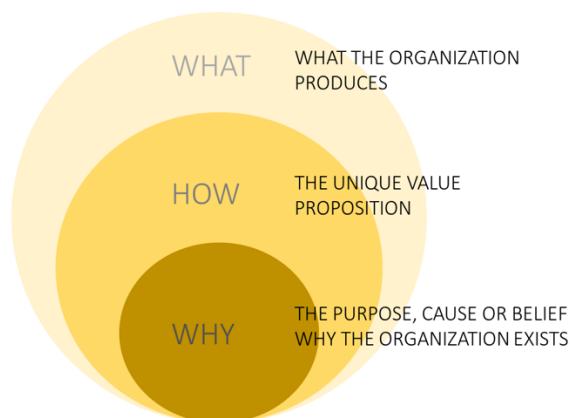


Figure 2. *The Golden Circle by Sinek (2009).*

### 2.1.3 Finland's country brand

Research around Finland's country brand gained more popularity in the early 2000, when studies regarding the images of Finland as a country were published nearly annually during the first 10 years of the new millennium (Isokangas et al., 2010, Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). This meant also that since 2000 there has been a more strategic take on Finland's country branding (Heino, 2016). Since the early 2000 till current times one can also notice an international trend that has highlighted Nordic countries and to some extent directed the spotlight also specifically towards Finland, creating a 'Finland-boom' in the media (Isokangas et al., 2010). In 2003, a study mapping the images of Finland as a travel destination concluded that the image of Finland was formed around nature, winter season and Northern location (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2003). In 2008, it was however reported that the brand communication regarding Finland was not coherent, there was no one coordinating it and therefore the perceptions regarding Finland were non-existent, neutral or positive and they did not position Finland anywhere in people's minds; therefore, it was concluded that Finland did not have a country brand (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). As an interesting difference to Sweden, it is said that in Sweden everything that has to do with promoting Sweden's interests abroad is called 'sverigefrämjande' whereas in Finland the discussion has been separated the same work under multiple titles (export promotion, public diplomacy, Finland-branding, culture exports, Finland-communication, country branding etc.) which each have had their own contexts, administrative bodies and operational territories (Heino, 2016).

The country branding work took a major step in 2008 when the Minister for Foreign Affairs set a working group to define what is the brand of Finland. The timeline for the working group's project was 2 years and the results were published in a report in 2010. The project involved not only those that were members in the working group, but also multiple target groups from Finnish businesses to representors of the culture sector as well as Finnish citizens. Addi-

tionally, a cooperation was launched with the nation branding specialist Simon Anholt, who defined as the central elements of the Finnish identity trustfulness, solution-focused and the 'no-fuss' mentality and the perseverance of Finns that clearly differentiates Finland from other Nordic countries (Heino, 2016). The outcome of the entire two years, as presented on the report, was that the Finnish brand has three dimensions; functionality, nature and education, and all these three do not only represent Finland as a country but constitute also beneficial tools to market the country internationally (Isokangas et al., 2010). For instance, the orientation to functional problem-solving that resides in the Finnish mentality should be utilized even more also for problem-solving on an international level (Isokangas et al., 2010). The report likewise had a practical orientation as the three dimensions, or themes as called on the report, were developed further into concrete tasks for various stakeholders; as described, some tasks were large projects to be done on a state-level but some were smaller and directed for any ordinary citizen, which highlighted the idea that everyone in Finland would be involved in the brand building (Isokangas et al., 2010). As noted, it is important that Finland builds the brand on those strengths that the country is already known for, so the aim was not to invent something new and exciting (Isokangas et al., 2010). Another important aspect mentioned was regarding communication; the working group highlighted that the strengths need to be communicated similarly but via as many different operators as possible and in order to make it happen there would be one coordinator that overlooks the international brand communication (Isokangas et al., 2010). For this task was named the Finland Promotion Board, that currently continues its work as the Finnish brand coordinator.

As noted in the country brand working group's report, many international rankings indicate that the images regarding Finland are positive, but Finland is not well known outside of its "closer circle" (Isokangas et al., 2010). Therefore, the report concluded that Finland as a country has not yet succeeded to deliver the message regarding all of its key strengths (Isokangas et al., 2010). As Rehn (2016) states, the problem for Finland has long been that as a small country, we have tried to identify ourselves too narrowly, thinking that multiple aspects or knowhow cannot fit in a small country. "Even though we are a small country with a small population, we are not even nearly that small that one could define us with three or four words, not to mention two." (Rehn, 2016, p. 22). Rehn (2016) explains the problem of having a too narrow frame so that it leaves part of the country out and therefore makes part of the country and its history 'invisible'. As an example, Rehn (2016) mentions how Finland has been described as the country of engineers.

Since 2003, the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs has been publishing annually a review of the articles written about topics regarding Finland in the world media during the respective year. In 2016, the main topics covered issues regarding society and politics, while the education system, sauna and Santa Claus still held their ground on the side (The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2016). Same year the Simon Anholt's Nation Brand Index ranked Finland on place 17, concluding that Finland's nation brand has improved in certain countries and in certain researched brand dimension categories, but for in-

stance the culture dimension has remained below the average and therefore the nation brand should be improved in regard to the brand dimensions of 'Tourism', 'Culture' and 'People' (Anholt-GFK Roper, 2016). Same conclusions appeared in the Nation Brands Index results in 2013 and also in another country brand ranking, the Soft Power Index in 2015; both indices concluded that Finland is well known for functionality, good governance and society structure, but poorly for its people and culture (Theman, 2016). Based on the Nation Brands Index from 2016, Finland's strengths are in (1) the social policy and governance, where especially the skills in environmental issues, peace keeping and equality are appreciated; (2) in business expertise, where technological skills are recognized and overall that Finns are regarded as honest, hard-working and reliable and; (3) in overall quality of life (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). The weaknesses however remain in 'soft' indicators which mean that the Finnish culture and cultural heritage and sports are not known and there is no clear image of Finland as a tourism destination (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). This means that the country image of Finland is dominated by the idea that the society runs well and business works, but otherwise the country does not evoke any specific emotions or interests (Theman, 2016). However, the nation brand won't be improved by worrying about the improvements, but through exploiting the positive sides of the nation brand – and also through promoting the positive sides to the country's own people (Anholt-GFK Roper, 2016). Therefore, the vague images regarding for instance nature only need strengthening. Generally, according to international brand rankings the clearest factor that differentiates Finland from other country brands is the clean nature (Isokangas et al., 2010). As noted, the image of clean nature resides even in those people's minds that do not have own personal experience of Finland; the image of Finland is framed by an idea of the last area of wilderness in Europe, where the nature has remained untouched (Isokangas et al., 2010).

Regarding Finland's relation image-wise to its neighbour Nordic countries, according to a Brand Tracking survey commissioned by Visit Finland, the image of Finland does not stand out from other Nordic countries; this means that for example in China, the whole Nordic region is seen as one entity, which creates an opportunity to highlight the unique aspects that make Finland stand out for instance as a destination (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). Overall the good rankings in multiple studies may indicate that Finland has an unfulfilled country brand potential, as currently the image of Finland has positive elements such as functional and competent but remains cold and clinical (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). Regarding the upcoming years, the Nation Brand Index recommends that the Finnish organizations promoting exports, investments and tourism should make use of the good nation brand that Finland has, but for improving the brand a wider, non-sector-specific influence and 'doing good' is needed (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). Currently, as redefined in 2016, the tasks of the Finland Promotion Board (2017a) are as follows:

The FPB comments on issues relating to Finland's country brand, taking an official stance if needed. It also determines the key themes of country brand communications for each year, looks after the planning, production and coordinated maintenance of

common tools, and acquires, utilises and produces research data pertaining to the development of Finland's country brand (p. 17).

For engaging other operators to the country branding work and to provide guidelines, the Finland Promotion Board designed a Finland Toolbox in 2015-2016 that is a set of communication materials including for instance a consistent visual identity and a thematic calendar produced by FPB on an annual basis (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). In addition to the Toolbox, the website at address [finland.fi](http://finland.fi), updated by the Unit for Public Diplomacy of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs provides information regarding Finland as the official country brand website (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). As a current topic is noted that the jubilee year of Finland's 100th year of independence in 2017 has created a special stage for country brand communications (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). Regarding the country brand work, it is commented that there is a room for improvement in coordination, efficiency and effectiveness, especially regarding the engagement of the multiple operators that have a noteworthy impact on Finland's country brand (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). The main network for collecting various operators together is the Team Finland -network; as said, the challenge for the country branding work are the changing governments and what each government at a time regards important, however, the positive change is that the current Team Finland -network carries on despite the changes in politics (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008).

## 2.2 Country-of-origin effect

The country-of-origin (COO) effect has been a popular topic for research since 1960s, as the legal requirements for placing the country-of-origin information in product packages raised the interest to research consumer perceptions on foreign products (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). The COO effect refers exactly to these perceptions, the country-of-origin images, that consumers in the intended target markets have on the products (Peterson & Jolibert, 1995). The 'country-of-origin' is oftentimes communicated with a 'Made in' -phrase and constitutes therefore an extrinsic product cue like a price or brand name, which as such do not influence on the product performance (Peterson & Jolibert, 1995). Earlier research with numerous empirical studies has long agreed that country images are a decisive element in product evaluations and that they have an influence on buying decisions, but the clear evidence of the COO effect and the causal relationship remains still unclear (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, Beverland & Lindgreen, 2002, Sun & Paswan, 2011). What has been agreed is that country names can add or subtract to the perceived value of the product (Kotler & Gertner, 2002) and that the 'Made in' -label can greatly enhance brand equity especially when the brand itself does not yet have a high-profile name (Papadopoulos, 2000). As Aichner (2014) argues, depending of the product category and target market, a strong COO can be a competitive advantage for firms and help to win market shares. Thereby it can be a powerful tool for sellers to showcase the country of

origin in order to differentiate and position their products on international markets (Papadopoulos, 2000). The origin's effect on consumer choices is even called to be pivotal especially within the food and beverages industry, where the origin has always played an important role in marketing and in consumer receptivity (Papadopoulos, 2004, Agnoli, Capitello & Begalli, 2014).

In a world of fast-paced flow of varied information, consumers may at times feel the exhaustion of absorbing new information regarding products and brands. This requires reading reviews and testing the products. Country images, however, are readily available as buyers have already learned about them through education, media, travels and previous purchases (Papadopoulos, 2000). Thereby, consumers oftentimes use the country-of-origin labels as a short-cut for processing information, to reduce the possible risk and to evaluate the social acceptance on their purchase (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). Through ever increasing level of global trade the country of origin has become a significant characteristic for a product alongside with price, brand name, packaging, material, design, colour and smell (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). As Ryan (2008) describes,

...in a highly competitive global market country of origin has become something more than a chance geographical or historical association. It has become an important marketing tool that seeks to broaden the criteria of choice from price alone to include the conditions of manufacture and their impact on the social, economic and natural environment (p. 19-20).

However, it also appears that the COO may have less importance when quality appears else way in a product (Heslop & Liefeld, 1988, in Kotler & Gertner, 2002), when the country image appears so narrow that an exporter does not feel like fitting in it (Anholt, 2002) or when the country of origin is not well known (Areni, Duhan & Kiecker, 1999). Research has also suggested that when the COO is negative or weak, a higher price does not necessarily indicate that the product would be of high quality (Aichner, 2014) and that highlighting an origin of an unknown country may even backfire if the other competing counterparts have better profiles (Areni, Duhan & Kiecker, 1999). As Anholt (2002, p. 237) comments, commercial brands "will, quite rightly, only comply with the official country branding strategy as long as it helps their sales." Therefore, the exporters' active usage of COO in their marketing strategies depends on the country brand and marketing context and is also something that can evolve over time (Areni, Duhan & Kiecker, 1999, Beverland and Lindgreen, 2002). This means, people's images of a country and images regarding singular brands from the same country (the COO images) can appear weaker or stronger from each other, but nevertheless they move in tandem; "One may think more highly of Japanese cars than Japanese fashion - but the more highly one thinks of Japan, the more highly one thinks of both its cars and fashion" (Papadopoulos, 2000, p. 31).

Traditional view has been that an image of a country is an independent variable and consumers use it when evaluating a product's quality, but it has also been thought that the COO image, once formed in the consumer's mind, remains static and does not change (Sun & Paswan, 2011). However, the recent

studies have presented an alternative view, which supports the idea that country images (and thereby the COO images) can be changed (Sun & Paswan, 2011). As Anholt (2002) states, strong international brands can promote their country-of-origin, which means these commercial brands transmit their national cultures and act as means for consumers for obtaining first ideas of their national identities. Sun and Paswan (2011) argue that the perceived product quality is in key role when actively shaping the country image among the target audience. This means a positive perception of product quality adds to a favourable attitude towards the COO and vice versa, perceived poor quality will have a negative impact on the COO image and further on shapes the whole image of a specific country (Sun & Paswan, 2011). Therefore, regarding exports, it is highly important to monitor the product quality perceptions within the target markets and to try to avoid and minimize the influence of a quality problem on the country's image (Sun & Paswan, 2011).

Regarding the process of building a country brand, Sun and Paswan (2011) argue that marketing activities from the business sector should not only advertise and promote the products themselves, but also their countries. However, when strongly shaped by certain brands, a country image tends to develop into a narrow stereotype and is therefore hard for such exporters to leverage the brand who do not fit to this narrow idea of a country, leading to firms downplaying their national origin (Anholt, 2002). Governments should support different kinds of firms as they promote and enhance the country image, for instance through subsidies for product innovation and international marketing efforts, as these actions attract also foreign direct investments and increase exports (Sun & Paswan, 2011). Papadopoulos (2004) presents a descriptive example regarding firms and the usage of COO;

For example, Canadian firms have typically avoided identifying their origin when operating abroad, for fear that foreign consumers have very little knowledge of Canadian products and so knowledge of their product's origin might work against them. But research shows that Canada and Canadians enjoy a very positive overall image internationally. As federal and provincial governments, working with various industry groups, develop campaigns to capitalise on this strength, producers may begin considering a 'made-in-Canada' tie-in in future marketing programmes (p. 46).

As a successful example of the balance between commercial brands and country's other branding work, Anholt (2002) mentions the USA, who has "always taken care to ensure that other channels of cultural and political communication (the US Information Agency, Hollywood, the Voice of America, etc.) have filled in the gaps around the brands (Coke, Disney, Levi's, Nike, Malboro, etc.)" (p. 234).

As a tool for connecting a place brand with exported goods, Gnoth (2002) presents a theoretical four-level model (Figure 1) of how a destination brand could be leveraged for exports. The aim for extending the brand is to convert tourists visiting a destination into customers of exported goods, once they have familiarized themselves with the products, gathered experiences that connect to them and have been convinced of the product quality and benefits (Gnoth, 2002). However, the wider the brand extension activities reach, the more chal-

lenging it is to avoid brand dilution, as it becomes harder for tourists to connect the products or services with the original (destination) brand even when exposed to the same attributes (Gnoth, 2002). Thereby, even reaching the third level can be regarded as a success. On the first level, the destination's own brand attributes are recognized; as an example, New Zealand as a destination is much about experiencing the outdoors with its wilderness and sheep farms and these characteristics are delivered by services that embrace human warmth, simplicity, rural surroundings and peace (Gnoth, 2002). The second level is to extend the brand into those essential services and tangible items that support the brand experience, for instance a traditional boat for transports or wooden plates and local food for the restaurant, and pairing these items with a unique service delivery (Gnoth, 2002). Tourist attractions in a country are dependent on the directly supporting primary and secondary industries such as farming and food production, production of design and technology items (Gnoth, 2002). The third level of the extension model is about creating a connection between these industries, that also produce goods for exports, and the brand of the destination (Gnoth, 2002). As an example, Gnoth (2002) mentions Austria that has a destination brand relying on mountains and outdoors, which has supported the country's export of ski lifts. Fourth level is to extend the destination brand to all nationally produced export products and services that are willing to join (Gnoth, 2002).

Activity	Level	Target
Branding	1	Attraction
Extending	2	Essential services
Extending	3	Support infrastructure
Extending	4	All export products

**Figure 2 Progression of destination branding activity**

Figure 3. Progression of destination branding activity by Gnoth (2002, p. 271).

### 2.2.1 Finland as a country of origin

According to Country Brand Index published in 2009, Finnish products are placed high taking the 4th place in ranking, where higher being Japan, United States and Germany (Isokangas et al., 2010). The image regarding Finnish products is that they are of high quality and that the Finnish firms are seen as reliable trading partners; however, this positive image is mainly built by and based on the industrial production of paper, metal and technology industries (Isokangas et al., 2010). Therefore, the reputation of Finland as a country is based on paper machines, ice breakers, mobile phones, elevators and forest machines (Isokangas et al., 2010). The first images regarding a country are formed at



young age and these images tend to change very little unless the person builds personal relationships with the country's citizens or personally visits the country; therefore, as the major part of influential decision-makers are currently 45-60 years old, one can well understand that the image of Finland and Finnish products resembles the dominant industries and products produced in Finland during the 1960s and 1970s (Finland Promotion Board, 2017a). The good image regarding high quality may on the other hand aid also other growing industries on the export markets and create a common benefit for all exports. However, the image regarding quality is not yet widely spread meaning that Finland as a country of origin remains rather unknown still; as a result, as customers do not know or connect any specific feelings to the Finnish flag, they are neither seeing any specific monetary value on it (Lepomäki, 2016, p. 156). Ryan (2008) describes the effect of Finland as a country of origin (COO) in products both intrinsic (embodied qualities in a product such as design, innovation and technology) and extrinsic (standards regarding safety and environment, respect for the customer plus overall justice and fairness).

The current COO image and the country brand's impact especially on food exports (e.g. Kiiski, 2017, Meriläinen, 2017) and on the Food From Finland -program (Kunnas, 2017) is receiving increasing attention as a research topic. The current research has concluded that Finland's country brand can provide firms with positive images regarding the origin, such as purity, high level of knowhow and trustfulness; however, in order to capture these advantages as a competitive advantage, the country of origin needs to be embedded to the firm's own brand identity (Kiiski, 2017). Through communicating the origin, a firm may self also contribute to the content of the COO images (Kiiski, 2017). Especially on markets where Finland and Finnish products are already known, like in Russia, it is not beneficial to compete with prices but rather use the origin to enhance the image of high quality, which adds value (Meriläinen, 2017). According to Kunnas (2017), the Food From Finland -program contributes to the formation of the country brand, but for firms currently the firm's own export strategy, own brand story and own international networks are the main success creators in exports, over the potential benefit generated by the country brand (Kunnas, 2017).

### **2.2.2 Branding Finnish food**

Food and food culture are little mentioned in the materials regarding the Finnish country branding work, but where it appears it relates to the theme of clean nature. It is also described that Finland can offer exactly those products and food ingredients that are the current top trends; clean and healthy super foods that are produced ethically and respecting the nature (Isokangas et al., 2010). Key ingredients include wild berries, fishes, mushrooms, root vegetables and traditional grains; besides of being trendy, they also offer high nutrition values and commercializing products made with these ingredients delivers the best parts of the Finnish nature, the clean water and soil (Isokangas et al., 2010). The report of the country brand working group describes that the image regarding Finnish food is based on wild food and rough nature conditions; however, de-

spite that the climate and soil set challenges for food production, the short but intensive growing season full of natural light gives a unique flavour for both farmed food and wild food (Isokangas et al., 2010). Finnish *sisu* plays its part also in food culture; harvesting has not been as easy as in the countries of warmer climate and people have learned to make the best of what the rugged soil has been giving for them (Isokangas et al., 2010). Building further on these ideas, it is also highlighted that the need for storytelling is constantly increasing and the consumers want to know the entire production chain from the farm through the production till their own dining table (Isokangas et al., 2010). Regarding local and organic food it is said that while local food is currently booming in Finland, the next trend would be organic food; this connects closely with one of the targets that the country brand working group set which is that all Finnish in-land waters would be drinkable till 2020 and in order to make it happen, half of the agriculture production needs to be organic (Isokangas et al., 2010). Organic production should be a strategic target for the Finnish food and beverages industry, as purity is seen as a strong asset for marketing and exports (Isokangas et al., 2010).

Another aspect regarding the Finnish country brand and food is wild food; according to studies conducted by Finpro and Sitra, blueberry and lingonberry appear for instance as superb export goods due to their high nutrition values (Isokangas et al., 2010). The highly important task is to convince also the Finnish consumers of the wild foods' health benefits and turn this knowledge into a source of national pride, so that these ingredients increasingly find their ways also to Finnish dining tables and to product development within the industry (Isokangas et al., 2010). There exists already a good basis for highlighting Finnish wild food as superfoods; the key messages just need to be shaped and this requires a close cooperation network within Finland (Isokangas et al., 2010).

In regard to wild food and superfoods, Broström, Palmgren and Väkiparta (2016) discuss the opportunity of promoting some of the Finnish food ingredients or food products as luxury goods. According to Broström et al. (2016), Finnish food has two key characteristics that tap perfectly on the luxury markets; firstly, with characteristics such as clean, secure and high quality, many Finnish food products are classified and priced in the premium category; secondly, unique Northern ingredients that are produced in small quantities (sometimes due to a small harvest) combined with craftsman skills used in the production process creates a feeling of something unique and rare. Regarding Finnish food in the luxury context, Broström et al. (2016) highlight the potential of wild foods and superfoods. According to Broström et al. (2016) the biggest challenge in producing luxury food products in Finland has been the ignorance to value and commercialize these natural ingredients. Broström et al. (2016, p. 146) think the lack of valuation of these products shows also in packaging; for instance, berries and mushrooms are sold for tourists in plastic boxes, when the experiential value –and price– could be much higher when the products are packed with a beautiful design. Another suggestion is to combine Finnish design with food related experiences; for instance, berries could be picked to an Iittala vase, which would stay as a memory from the trip (Broström et al., 2016). As a third suggestion Broström et al. (2016) suggest Finnish firms should com-

municate the health impacts, that for instance berries contain, clearer for the consumers. Broström et al. (2016) comment that luxury in its traditional sense may be a foreign thing in the Finnish culture and therefore it has not gained a larger market share yet, but when identifying the elements of the 'new luxury' and recognizing the opportunities Finland has regarding for instance purity, silence and our traditional sense for hospitality, one may recognize multiple opportunities for branding Finnish service and products with a luxurious twist.

## 2.3 Economic clusters

*Cluster* by its definition in Oxford Dictionaries refers to "a group of things or people positioned or occurring closely together". In economic terms, Porter (2000) defines clusters as

... geographic concentrations of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries, and associated institutions (e.g. universities, standards agencies, trade associations) in a particular field that compete but also cooperate (p. 16).

By specialized suppliers is meant suppliers of necessary components, machinery and services for the industry (Porter, 1998). In the era of globalization, it is easier than ever for firms to source all the necessities from global markets and to reach large target markets without being located next to them (Porter, 2000). Considering these facts, one may conclude that the location of a firm would not matter anymore, but as a counter-argument, Porter (2000) states that a great deal of competitive advantage lies in fact outside of the firms and of industries, residing in the locations where the businesses are based – that is to say, in clusters. Prior research indicates also that clusters offer a pathway for small and medium-sized firms to overcome limitations on available resources (Karaev, Koh & Szamosi, 2007). Commonly used examples of clusters include for instance the wine clusters in California (Porter, 2000) and in Chile (Sarturi, Vargas, Boaventura & Santos, 2016), the Italian footwear and fashion cluster (Porter, 1990), the Hollywood film cluster (Porter, 1998) and the Japanese auto industry cluster (Porter, 1990).

Geographic concentration of a cluster contributes to its competitiveness, as it magnifies the power of domestic rivalry and makes it more intense, thus better for each firm's own competence (Porter, 1990). Geographic proximity thereby increases the productivity, innovation and competitiveness of the entire region (Karaev et al., 2007). When connecting clusters to place marketing and place branding, Kotler and Gertner (2002) describe the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI) as the most interesting facets of place marketing as it brings an overall benefit on the country's economy but simultaneously requires business understanding from the country marketers. Luring companies may require also already existing or potential clusters and financial incentives such as tax benefits, work training, infrastructure investments (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). However, as Kotler and Gertner (2002) note, studies are showing that

place characteristics such as proximity to consumers and suppliers, skilled labour, confidence in administration and strong performance from the promotion agency together with commitment from local authorities play larger role in the site decision process than the mere financial incentives.

Competitive industries in a cluster are typically linked together in two ways; vertical relationships mean the industries have same buyers and sellers, whereas horizontal relation refers to common customers, technology and channels (Porter, 1990). Framing a cluster has its own challenges, as defining a cluster too widely results in weak linkages between the operators and generalized solutions on bottlenecks that would require specialized problem-solving; if defined too narrowly down to one industry, the cluster will lack the beneficial interconnections that promote competitiveness of the industry (Porter, 2000). As clusters reach beyond the conventional categorization of industries, there is more room for collaboration, joint action and also a role for the government, as the parties in a cluster can benefit from sharing the skills, technologies, information and marketing, as they all may share also customers with same needs (Porter, 2000). To map the efficiency of a cluster, it is beneficial to compare similar clusters from two geographical areas (Sarturi et al., 2016).

### 2.3.1 The Diamond of National Advantage

Ultimately, place branding and cluster formation can both be regarded as valuable assets in the global competition over investments, best talents, purchases and tourist flows. Therefore, I have applied Porter's theory of national advantage to this research, with an aim to analyse the potential cluster formation in Finland that would include Finnish food industry, as developing a competitive advantage eventually contributes to the COO image and to the brand of country. Theory on the *Competitive Advantage of Nations* (Porter, 1990) aims to explain how a nation can develop a competitive advantage through the development of clusters in order to compete globally with other nations. However, what can be turned into a competitive advantage depends greatly on the nation's history, culture, national values, economic structures, existence of specialized institutions and on the patterns of competitiveness within the nation (Porter, 1990). It may sound as if the determinants for a competitive advantage would be readily given for each nation, but according to Porter (1990), the truth is the opposite; "National prosperity is created, not inherited" (p. 73). To explain the dynamics that influence on a nation's level of competence, Porter designed a model in 1990 which got its original name as *The Diamond of National Advantage*, and was updated to *Sources of Locational Competitive Advantage* in 2000 (as illustrated in Figure 4). The updated model includes four determinants; (1) Factor (Input) Conditions, (2) Demand Conditions, (3) Related and Supporting Industries and (4) Context for Firm Strategy and Rivalry.

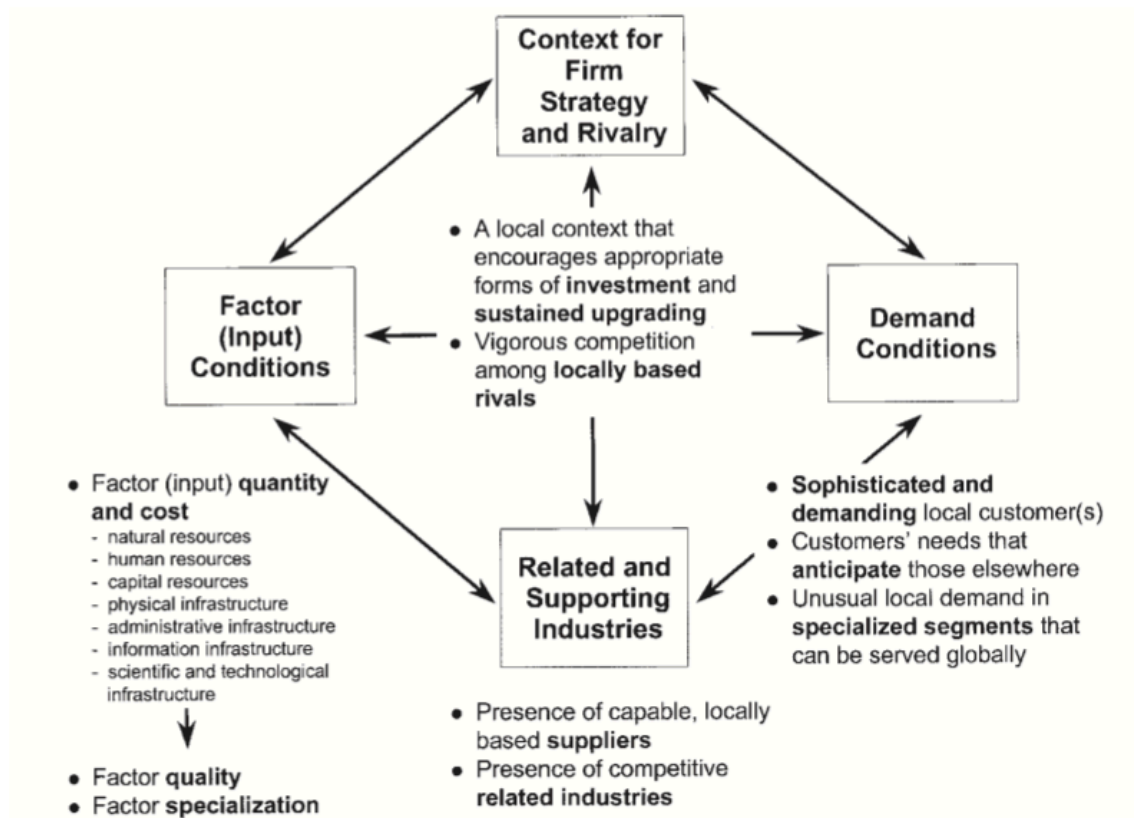


Figure 4. Sources of Locational Competitive Advantage (Porter, 2000)

*Factor Conditions* refers to factors of production, which includes widely everything from tangible materials to information, legal systems and research institutes (Porter, 2000). Factors are also the skilled labour, land, natural resources, capital and the infrastructure within the country (Porter, 1990). As countries vary in regard to their factor conditions, it makes sense that a nation can excel in exporting those goods that make the most use of the resources mentioned in their respective countries of origin (Porter, 1990). The unique combination of these factors can result in products and services that are considered unique on the international markets and products that would be challenging to produce anywhere else. Some of the factors may be inherited such as land, but as Porter (1990) stresses, the most important factors such as skilled labour, are created. A factor can only contribute to the creation of a national advantage when it is highly specialized for the industry's particular needs, as these factors are thereby harder to copy elsewhere (Porter, 1990). If there is a lack of a specific factor, as for instance land or local raw materials, instead of hindering development this factor disadvantage can be turned into a competitive advantage as the companies are forced to innovate and upgrade in order to compete, instead of resting on an ample supply of factors (Porter, 1990). *Demand Conditions* illustrates the character of the industry's home market demand; sophisticated and demanding buyers in the home market contribute to firms' competitive advantage as these buyers provide examples of advanced customer needs (Porter, 1990). Home market demand may also give early signals of emerging buyer needs, if the nation's needs anticipate or even shape the tastes in the rest of the

world (Porter, 1990). *Related and Supporting Industries* that are internationally competitive contribute significantly to a nation's competitive advantage, not only because of short distances that allow fast and efficient access to raw materials, components and machinery, but also because short distance allows closer working relationships, which promotes industry upgrade and innovation (Porter, 1990). Ultimately, the *Context for Firm Strategy and Rivalry* refers to the characteristics and level of local rivalry; what rules and incentives apply, what norms govern the competition and how intense the competition is (Porter, 2000). Low domestic rivalry results in inefficiencies and low productivity, where price becomes the sole competitive variable and the most competition comes from foreign imports (Porter, 2000). Regarding the firm strategy, Porter (1990) discusses how different management styles can contribute to the success of an industry, by comparing the Italian furniture, woollen fabrics and footwear industries with the German engineering-oriented industries. The former requires customization, niche marketing, flexibility and rapid change, which all fit to the characteristics of Italian management systems with SME-dominated industries, whereas for instance optics, chemicals and high developed machinery require careful planning and production, precision and well-done after-sale services that all fit with a German style of disciplined management structure (Porter, 1990). When observing the Diamond model as a whole, it illustrates a system where the effect of one determinant depends on the state of others; as Porter (1990) describes;

Sophisticated buyers will not translate into advanced products, for example, unless the quality of human resources permits the companies to meet buyer needs. Selective disadvantages in factors of production will not motivate innovation unless rivalry is vigorous and company goals support sustained investment. (p. 83)

Therefore, the Diamond model depicts a self-reinforcing system, where for instance active local rivalry upgrades the domestic demand, and where geographic concentration elevates the interaction of all four determinants (Porter, 1990).

### 2.3.2 Clusters and national governments

The opinions regarding the role of the government seem to be divided in two camps; there are those that consider governments as essential helpers and supporters, and those that accept the terms of complete "free market" (Porter, 1990). Porter (1990) argues that the role of the government is neither of the extremes, but rather that it should encourage and challenge companies to improve their performance and thus competitiveness, albeit it may be an unpleasant and difficult process. However, governments do have a powerful role for instance as a shaper of the institutional structures that surround firms, and as a transmitter of determinants within the diamond (Porter, 1990). Governments, ultimately, are the ones that create the environment that stimulates firms to achieve higher levels of competence (Porter, 1990).

The challenge for combining cluster development and government intervene is that it can take more than 10 years before an industry develops some-

thing regarded as a competitive advantage; this timeline is vastly long in politics (Porter, 1990). Therefore, it is luring for governments to favor policies that bring short-term benefits soon, rather than sustainable benefits later (Porter, 1990). In regard to government's role in cluster development, as one recommendation Porter (1990) suggests governments to set high quality standards regarding products, safety and the environment as a tool to achieve an advantage in international competition. The reason for this is that regulations upgrade domestic demand and pressure firms to improve the quality, technologies applied and features that serve better the needs of the market (Porter, 1990). Standards may also set the industry ahead of its time, if the regulations anticipate upcoming international standards (Porter, 1990). Currently, strict quality standards have been applied in the Finnish food industry and albeit they are inevitably creating challenges for the firms, they also contribute to the development of the industry, a topic further discussed later on in this paper.

### 2.3.3 Finnish food industry

Food industry, including both the food and beverages production, is the largest producer of consumer goods in Finland and the fourth largest industrial sector employing directly over 34 000 people (Hyrylä, 2016). The industry is dominated by micro firms as 75% of them employ less than 10 people, although recent development indicates that the number of staff is on the rise (Hyrylä, 2016). The impact on employment is significant as the entire food chain from production to trading employs a rough 300 000 people (Hyrylä, 2016). Food industry in Finland is highly competed, with incoming brands from abroad intensifying the competition, emergence of private labels, and the reductions on food prices characterizing the competitive environment (Hyrylä, 2016). Recent development within the food industry shows investments in production efficiency and in modernization of operations; domestic supply and demand stand as cornerstones of the industry (Hyrylä, 2016).

Internationalization within the Finnish food industry has occurred through acquisition, foreign investment and exports (Hyrylä, 2016). In 2015 the quote of exports from the whole industry turnover was around 14%, decreasing 7,7% from 2014 (Hyrylä, 2016). Main exported food products include alcoholic beverages, butter and other dairy fats, milk powder, sweets, fish, other dairy products, pork meat, chocolate and oats (Customs/ETL, 2017). The main target markets for the food products are Sweden (20,4%), Estonia (8,8%) and Russia (7,6%) (Hyrylä, 2016), other target markets include France, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom and China (Customs/ETL, 2017). Political events in 2014 resulting in trade sanctions and counter sanctions between the EU and Russia had an impact on food exports in various EU countries, not the least in Finland. Overall Finland's merchandise exports to Russia have decreased over 40% between 2012-2015, major part of it occurring due to the lower oil prices and thus depreciation of the Russian Rouble (Berg-Andersson & Kotilainen, 2016). The decline in food exports however increased the Finnish food producers' interest towards other target markets, which though requires extensively time and effort, and has also raised awareness regarding the competi-

tiveness of the industry in international comparison (Hyrylä, 2016). Despite the success stories in exports, the level of internationalization within the industry remains modest (Hyrylä, 2016).

Regarding innovation, the Finnish food industry excels specifically in the development of products that contain high values of protein (Hyrylä, 2016). Characteristic for the Finnish food export products are Nordic ingredients, knowhow regarding nutrition in general and a high level of food hygiene; Finland is also known abroad for strict quality controls within the food industry (Hyrylä, 2016). Current issues regarding the food exports are product development, branding and market customization; Finnish food products cannot compete abroad with prices, so the added value must be created with refining the product itself, and through an interesting brand story and packaging, that add content to the origin as 'Made in Finland' alone is not regarded as an asset (Hyrylä, 2016). Besides product development, other international market potential for food products resides for instance in raw meat products, in organic products used for cosmetics, and in knowhow regarding food safety (Hyrylä, 2016).

## 2.4 Export intermediaries

In the research literature, export intermediaries are defined as an outsourced export department (Root, 1994) and as a "specialized service firms whose mission is to bridge the gap between domestic manufacturers and foreign customers" (Peng et al., 2000, in Lehtinen et al., 2016, p. 1181). However, the prior literature indicates also that export intermediaries are defined in multiple ways, depending on the purpose of their operations (Lehtinen et al., 2016). This study follows the definition applied by Lehtinen et al., as this definition describes well the main purpose of Finpro's export services. For further definition, an export intermediary can also provide different services that support the whole export process (Fletcher, 2004).

For categorizing the services of an intermediary, Lehtinen et al. (2016) present the two most used ones defined by Bello and Williamson in 1985, which divides the export services into transaction-creating services and physical-fulfilment services. Transaction-creating services stimulate and generate the foreign demand, whereas physical-fulfilment services deal with practical matters regarding the actual processing of orders and managing the supply to foreign clients (Lehtinen et al., 2016). An intermediary providing both type of services is called a full-service provider, who is usually present also in the foreign market and serves multiple markets, also those that are geographically distant (Balabanis, 2005). By following this definition, Finpro can be categorized as a full-service intermediary, as it has multiple local offices worldwide that serve Finnish firms in their internationalization. Through local offices situated in psychically distant markets from Finland, Finpro can provide exclusive expertise as they are familiar with the local cultures and business cultures and have the local network.



As Lehtinen et al. (2016) state, it is essential for the intermediaries to study the needs of the firms and adapt to these needs in order to generate more tangible benefits for the exporting firms. The firms using Finpro's services are still managing their own exports fully by themselves. This means, unlike some export intermediaries that are more involved in the process, that Finpro does not purchase the export goods nor does it manage the export activities on behalf of the firm. Therefore, the firms are still practicing direct exporting, which means the firms sell their products directly to their foreign buyers (Lehtinen, Ahokangas & Lu, 2016). Even without purchasing or managing the actual export process, an export intermediary can have a positive impact on the process for instance by reducing the costs of internationalization (Lehtinen et al., 2016)

Prior research also indicates that intermediaries are a way for small and/or young firms to acquire knowledge and thus reduce uncertainties and risks and to acquire new customers (Terjesen, O'Gorman, & Acs, 2008). However, as the study of Lehtinen et al. (2016) concludes, Finnish SME-sized food exporters tend to favor direct exporting already in the start of their export operations, even though finding contacts, partners and customers in foreign markets appears as the greatest challenge for the firms. Lehtinen et al. (2016) suggest that the short history in exports within the Finnish food and beverage industry could explain why the firms are not used to using intermediaries.

### 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was designed to be an empirical cross-case study with in-depth qualitative interviews as a source for primary data. As Eisenhardt (1989) describes, a case study is an applicable strategy when one aims to understand the dynamics of a single setting. As the aim of the research was to explore and describe individual perceptions and not to generalize the data based on the quantity of the accounts, I chose case study as the method for this research. The aim of the enquiry and the use of the findings define largely the choice of the research method; when one seeks to explore the research problem, without confirming or quantifying, and when the findings are used to understand the process better, a qualitative study is an applicable method (Kumar, 2014). Therefore, the methodology chosen for this study is a qualitative case study. As I interviewed multiple firms and analysed the similarities and differences of the accounts, the study developed to be a cross-case study. Additionally, qualitative research aims to study things in their natural settings, with an intention to understand a phenomenon better through the meanings people bring to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

For the data collection, I used semi-structured interviews. Therefore, the epistemological grounding for the study was that the data will be subjective, as it is based on the personal views of the interviewees and will also be interpreted and analysed by me. In a broad sense, subjectivism as an epistemological view addresses to a reality that is being socially constructed and is built with our own observations and interpretations (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). My research topic was related to brands and branding, and therefore it is natural the research leaves room for interpretation and presents an overview of individual, subjective ideas that do not need to be generalized as ultimate truths.

As the chosen method was a case study on firms that have joined an export promotion program, the research approach was inductivist. This means the data collection is undertaken on a limited sample and the analysis of the data will take place only after the collection of the data (Stokes, 2011). Inductivism belongs under the umbrella of interpretivism and constructionism, which are concerned with subjective and shared meanings as a philosophical stance (Stokes, 2011, Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Case study was a suitable method for this research as the topic has not been researched yet widely, therefore, as Flyvbjerg (2011) explains, a case study may enable the generation of hypotheses for wider studies in the future. The sample selection was based on information-oriented selection (Flyvbjerg, 2011), as the companies chosen for the interviews were members of the Food From Finland -growth program. According to Creswell (2009), a qualitative study is often chosen when one wishes to make an exploratory study to a topic or a population that has remained under-researched. Therefore, the researcher aims to listen the participants and is building understanding on what is heard (Creswell, 2009). This understanding can be developed into a grounded theory, a case study or a phenomenological

study, where for neither of these three the prior literature sets any orienting framework (Creswell, 2009).

### 3.1 Data collection

The primary data used for this study consisted of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. When choosing the interviewees, I included three points of view that reflected the main theoretical concepts; export promotion, place branding and food exports. Altogether I interviewed 12 people; 3 from export promotion, 1 from country branding and 8 firm representors/entrepreneurs. Interviews were open-ended, personal interviews and phone interviews. Out of the three expert interviews one was a phone interview and two were personal interviews. Out of the eight firm interviews six were personal and two were phone interviews. Phone interviews were arranged for convenience due to the geographical distance, otherwise personal interviews were the preferred way for generating the data.

When assessing the validity of the interviews, my aim was to cover the topic of country branding from three perspectives; export promotion specialists, country branding specialists and exporting firms. This triangulation enhances the validity of the study as more perspectives are included. The eight interviewed firms included large firms with an extensive export experience, young firms, family firms and firms who were just starting exports; this diversity enriched the empirical data. The common determinant for all the interviewed firms was that they had joined the Food From Finland -growth program, meaning they had international operations already or had intentions to internationalize. As Stenbacka (2001) notes;

In qualitative research, the answer to the question of how to create good validity is actually very simple. With the purpose of generating understanding of a social phenomenon, one is interested in understanding another person's reality based on a specific problem. If the informant is part of the problem and if she/he is given the opportunity to speak freely according to his/her own knowledge structures (p. 552)

I started the research project by interviewing export promotion specialists as an introduction to my topic, while reading also the earlier research literature. I conducted the firm interviews also quite in the beginning of the research project, without having much of an expertise regarding the research literature. This was done on purpose as the aim was to collect the experiences, thoughts and ideas from the entrepreneurs or firm representors as they are, without guiding or informing about the topic with specific questions. For collecting experiences, open interviews are ideal as they let the interviewee present ideas and thoughts without being guided too much. As Flyvbjerg (2011) notes, this may bring challenges regarding summarizing or generalizing the data, but these are perhaps not the ultimate aims with a case study.

### 3.1.1 Expert interviews

The interviews with the export promotion specialists were conducted as guiding interviews for the study and therefore took place in the beginning of the research process. The information obtained from these interviews helped to narrow the research and to form the research questions. They also guided the formation of the interview questions for the firms. After analysing the firm interviews and the first expert interviews, I wanted to search for more answers to the questions regarding particularly the use of a country brand in business context. Therefore, I interviewed one specialist in the field of place branding. As Eisenhardt (1989) describes, this type of flexible data collection that overlaps with the data analysis gives well a head start for the analysis process. The basic information regarding the expert interviews is collected in Table 1.

	Number of interviewees	Duration of the interview	Personal/phone interview, date	Pages of transcribed text	Field of expertise
Interviewee 9 + interviewee 10	2	1 h	Personal interview 25.10.2016	10	Export promotion, food industry
Interviewee 11	1	50 min	Phone interview 27.10.2016	10	Export promotion, food industry
Interviewee 12	1	50 min	Personal interview 15.5.2017	8	Place branding

*Table 1. Basic information about the expert interviews.*

### 3.1.2 Firm interviews

In the beginning an option was to narrow the research only to consider organic food and the exports of organic food, but this sector turned out to be a rather small still in Finland and therefore, I decided to enrichen the data and choose different kinds of food and beverage producers. As I narrowed the topic to a specific industry, it did not seem relevant for this study to further narrow the interviewed firms based on a specific export target market. Therefore, the export target markets and their market characteristics did not play a role in the interviewee selection. Firm size was a relevant determinant as I aimed to include both large and SME –sized firms; location as it was important not to focus merely on some geographical area; products produced as it was interesting to include views regarding the country brand from producers of different types of products and ultimately; visual appearance of the marketing as I chose specifically some firms that highlighted their Nordic/Finnish origin in their firm marketing communications. The basic information regarding the firm interviews is collected in Table 2.

Firm / Interviewee	Title/position	Experience in the current firm	Duration of the interview	Personal/phone interview, date	Pages of transcribed text	Form of internationalization
Firm A, interviewee 1	CEO	3 years	35 min	Phone, 5.1.2017	6	None
Firm B, interviewee 2	CEO, co-owner	2,5 years	57 min	Personal, 10.1.2017	9	Exports
Firm C, interviewee 3	Export manager	8 years	30 min	Phone, 10.1.2017	6	Exports
Firm D, interviewee 4	Marketing & branding, co-owner	2,5 years	1h 20 min	Personal, 11.1.2017	11	Exports
Firm E, interviewee 5	CEO, owner	23 years	46 min	Personal, 12.1.2017	11	Exports
Firm F, interviewee 6	CEO, owner	31 years	39 min	Phone, 13.1.2017	6	None
Firm G, interviewee 7	Brand manager	30 years	46 min	Personal, 16.1.2017	8	Exports, FDI
Firm H, interviewee 8	Commercial director	4 years	1h 8 min	Personal, 17.1.2017	10	Exports, FDI

*Table 2. Basic information about the firm interviews.*

Firm interviews took place closely one after another within two weeks, each lasting from 30 minutes to one hour. The interviews were not strictly structured, meaning the topics were not handled in the same order in each interview, as my aim was to follow the thoughts of the interviewee and ask questions that appeared to be the logical continuation for the discussion. As Stenbacka (2001) notes, the interaction between the researcher and the respondent enhances the possibility of collecting a rich data set as important themes can be discussed more thoroughly and less relevant issues can be shortened. I had a guiding structure for each firm interview, so that all interviews would cover about the same topics, which made the comparison of the data sets easier. The issues covered in these firm interviews were:

1. The brand development and influential people or events within the process
2. Definition of country branding
3. Finland's country image and the country branding work
4. Possible interconnections between the Finnish country brand and the company brand
5. General views on the Food From Finland -program functions as a country brand promoter

### 3.2 Data analysis

The process of analysing the data includes commonly various analyses, as the researcher moves deeper into the data and searches ways how to present it and aims to understand and interpret the larger meaning of the interview accounts (Creswell, 2009). Content analysis means the researcher analyses the content of the interviews in order to identify the emerging themes (Kumar, 2014), for where the researcher selects usually 4-5 themes for the report (Creswell, 2009). Apart from merely reporting the themes, Creswell (2009) lists some options for processing the data further, for example a case study, grounded theory, narrative research and ethnographical research. My selection for this study was a cross-case study, so besides reporting the themes that emerged from the interviews, I also analysed some of the similarities and differences in the responses from different firms.

As a part of the analysis process, I took notes on a journal where I wrote down thoughts and ideas regarding what appears interesting, what connections I noticed between the accounts and what information or sources I would need to look further. After I had completed transcribing the accounts, I read through all the transcripts. As Creswell (2009) advises, I scanned first all the material optically through, to obtain a general sense of it and to see the overall use and depth of the accounts. Miles and Huberman (1994) list three phases for the content analysis, which are data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing/verification. Kumar (2014) suggest a more thorough process including four steps; identifying the main themes, assigning codes to the main themes, classifying responses under the main themes and finally, integrating themes and responses into the text of the report (p. 318). I followed the steps presented by Miles and Huberman. Data reduction meant that I organized the interview data into categories, which derived from the priorly set research questions but some new categories emerged from the data itself, for instance the influence of the home market for exports. The data was organized directly from the interview accounts as I wanted to keep the original wordings from the interviewees without summarizing them yet at this point, and without applying any form of analysis. The main categories for the data reduction were

1. Business perspectives on country branding
2. Finland as a country of origin
3. Company and product branding within the food industry
4. Ways of communicating the firm/product origin
5. Perspectives on the role of an export intermediary in export promotion and country branding

These main categories as well as the interview questions derived from the research questions. I formed further subcategories under these main categories, for instance under the company and product branding within the food industry came the '*influence of the home market*' and under the ways of communicating the origin emerged '*terminology in communicating the origin*'. The categorization

helped to identify, which issues appeared frequently in the interview accounts and thus could be highlighted in the results, in addition to the original research questions. After organizing the data under the categories, I drafted summaries regarding each category.

Before comparing the interview accounts with one another, Eisenhardt (1989) recommends a single case analysis, which familiarizes the researcher with each case as a stand-alone entity and offers an opportunity to discover some unique patterns within the case before the data is generalized with the other interview accounts. By following this logic, I conducted a dual analysis process with single case analysis and cross-case analysis, which are both presented in the following chapter 4. For the single case analysis, I used the interview transcripts and my own notes from the interviews. For the cross-case analysis I chose a strategy presented by Eisenhardt (1989), which was to select pairs of cases and list the similarities and differences within each pair; here especially interesting is to look at the differences between a seemingly similar pair or the similarities between a seemingly different pair (Eisenhardt, 1989). This was an interesting viewpoint, as the case pairs indeed had similarities regarding firm characteristics and thereby it was interesting to look whether the firm size, level of internationalization, firm age or other firm characteristics would have an influence on how country branding was perceived. The complete data analysis process is illustrated in the Figure 5.

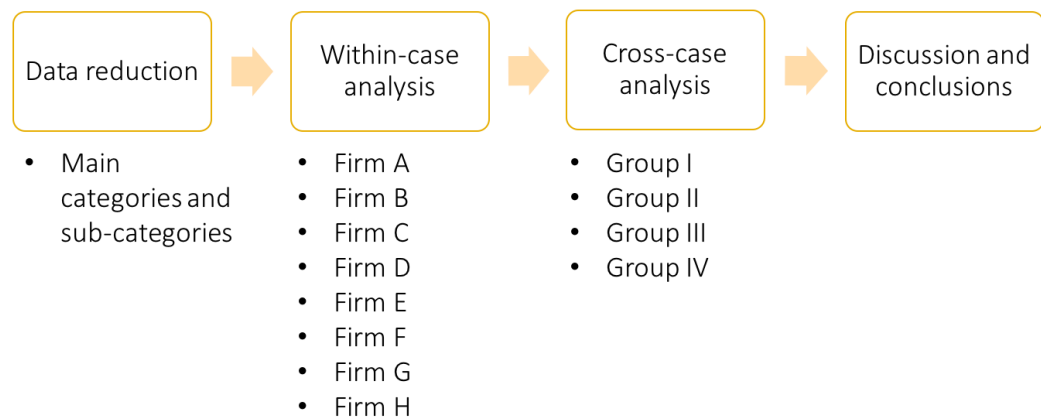


Figure 5. The data analysis process.

## 4 EMPIRICAL DATA

Regarding the firm selection, my criteria was that the firm is a member of Food From Finland -program and additionally I aimed to select a rich variety of different kinds of producers, firms of different size and age and from different places in Finland. Therefore, the product selection, company characteristics and location had an influence on the selection. The variety of firms contributed to a rich data set that provided multiple viewpoints to the research topic. As presented in the earlier chapter, the data analysis included a single case analysis and a cross-case analysis. In the single case analysis, I was describing each firm as a single case, based on the data from the interview accounts.

### 4.1 Single case analysis: Firms A-H

**Firm A** was a small firm from Northern Finland carrying over 30 years in business. The interviewee 1 was the managing director and had over 30 years of experience in the food industry in Finland and abroad, from tasks in marketing and also from managerial positions. Strategic wise the firm had acquired a strong market presence in the north of Finland and was distributing also to Southern Finland. The firm had operated so far only in the Finnish market and even though not yet actively heading to international markets, the firm had already taken part in some of the Food From Finland -program events. As the interviewee described, the workshops and the feedback from foreign buyers had been valuable, as these had given the firm new perspectives regarding marketing and branding. As the product was an iconic part of the Finnish food culture, it had been important for the firm to find an international context for the product before heading to international markets. This meant finding alternative ways to present the product without its cultural heritage. As the interviewee described, the firm had focused on product marketing and the firm's own brand image was not highlighted. However, recently they had started to emphasize also the firm's characteristics and brand image as a producer. Regarding country branding, the interviewee found it challenging to conceptualize entirely what country branding is about and thereby the interviewee had also doubts about the possible benefits or added value that a country brand could generate for export firms. Though when discussing further the meaning of the origin, the interviewee commented that it may help that a product comes from a country like Finland that has a good reputation as a country and as a travel destination. However according to the interviewee, the firm had not yet thought about how to communicate the origin in international marketing.

**Firm B** was a young firm from Southern Finland and the interviewee 2 was one of the owners, who had also prior experience from international entrepreneurship and sales before coming to the current firm. The international experience of the firm owners was characteristic for the firm, as this background had given the owners new perspectives to see the Finnish nature and the Nor-



dic food ingredients with foreigners' eyes. Since the beginning the firm had invested resources in customer research for scanning the demand and for identifying consumer preferences. Internationalization had been in the owners' minds since the beginning, resulting that the firm had started exports already at its early age. As the interviewee described, the idea had been that they use Nordic ingredients and by so they would 'export the Finnish nature' to international markets. Thereby the origin was a significant element in the firm's brand. However, as the interviewee described, the international consumers even from the nearby markets rarely have an idea of the Finnish nature and how it looks like. Therefore, the firm had come to the conclusion, that it is easier to relate the firm brand to the Nordic area, as it is internationally more known than Finland as a single country. Behind this thought was the doubt whether a small, unknown firm could benefit from an unknown country brand. Therefore, as the interviewee described, it may be possible they would highlight the Finnish origin once the firm brand would be more known. The origin had had an important part in marketing also in the sense that the firm had noticed it was easier for the foreign buyers to understand the added value of the products when it was communicated through the product origin. However, as the interviewee described, the official country brand communications had so far had little of such content that would have been applicable for the firm's own marketing.

**Firm C** was a family firm from Eastern Finland with over 100 years of operations, including a long experience also in exports. The interviewee 3 was the export manager of the firm, carrying the experience from multiple tasks in the firm. The firm had been highlighting strongly its Finnish origin and the Finnish cultural heritage in their international marketing and thereby country branding and Finnish characteristics were a familiar concept for the interviewee. Regarding the firm's own brand development, the interviewee described that while respecting their firm legacy and history, they had also revived the firm brand in order to stay relevant and up to date. The key elements for refreshing the brand image had been to promote openness and unformal style in their operations and to develop a sense of humor and joy as a part of the brand and company culture. As the interviewee described, these characteristics were also fitting well to their brand origin as a Finnish firm. Other important elements the firm connected to their brand and to Finnish origin were honesty, transparency, originality, commitment to high quality and the ingredients that come from the clean nature in Finland. Overall the interviewee had a positive but also a realistic image regarding Finland's country brand; as the interviewee described, the brand image includes positive elements such as the clean nature but also negative images such as darkness, cold climate and heavy drinking. The interviewee also acknowledged that Finland is still a fairly unknown country and some of the Finnish brands may be internationally more known than their country of origin.

**Firm D** was a young and small firm from Southern Finland, that had considered exports since the start of the firm and therefore, despite the young age, had already international sales alongside the domestic sales. The interviewee 4 was one of the owners, who had background in entrepreneurship and extensive experience in marketing and branding, especially within the food industry. Descriptive for the firm was that it had its roots in a strong brand, which had been the base for the business plan; thereby the way of operating was an essential part of the firm's brand. As the interviewee described, it is important in branding to separate the facts from the brand's core values. This meaning that mere characteristics such as organic ingredients, clean nature or local sourcing are not enough to build a brand, as the brand should also describe what is the firm's ultimate goal, why it exists. Thereby, the interviewee's view on Finland's country brand's current state was that the emphasis in the country brand communications has been mostly exactly on these facts and extrinsic characteristics, that describe Finland as a country. As described by the interviewee, similar challenge resides in the branding of Finnish food; it is described with facts, but there is little of such content that applies to feelings. However, the interviewee also saw that because Finland is not yet well known, it may appear more interesting for certain consumer groups such as the early adopters, and thereby the Finnish origin may attract interest as something new and exotic. Though as the interviewee explained, if placing brands in a hierarchical order, in exports the main emphasis is still on the product's brand and qualities, and only after that comes the possible influence of the country brand.

**Firm E** was a family firm from Southern Finland, that had previously operated only in B2B market but had then expanded to consumer markets with products that were now sold also to international markets. The interviewee 5 was the owner and the managing director of the firm, who had thereby an extensive experience of the firm's operations. As the interviewee described, the expansion first to consumer markets and then to international markets had started a process in the firm, when they had actively developed the firm brand and their marketing message. The firm had also successful experiences from cooperation in international marketing. When discussing the meaning of the origin in the brand, the interviewee saw country branding as an important concept in general, but questioned the supporting benefit of a country-of-origin effect especially in the context of Finnish food exports. This meaning the interviewee had not yet experienced that Finnish origin would have been important for the firm's international marketing. As the interviewee described, more important for any brand's success abroad was superb quality and adequate resources in production and marketing; only after these the origin of the product may be relevant for the buyer. As discussed, the interviewee perceived country branding as a long process where the results are seen many years later, and thereby as Finland is not yet well known, the meaning of the origin currently did not seem relevant for the firm. Regarding country brand promotion and export promotion, the interviewee described it would be highly important to see that where the export firms and the country brand are presented together, the

brand messages of the firms and the country brand should align in order to generate a mutual benefit and purpose.

**Firm F** was founded and owned by the interviewee 6 and had already a history of over 30 years in operations. The firm had focused on the domestic market, mainly in Central and Southern Finland. As the interviewee described, they had recently developed a new product and recognized that it had market potential also abroad. Characteristics for the firm's production were artisan methods, small quantities, local production and a niche target market. As the interviewee described, the main marketing message was focused on the product characteristics and the origin was not highlighted. The firm had developed its competence in the domestic market and the interviewee also believed that the success in domestic markets and establishing the operations there is a necessary phase before expanding to international markets. Regarding the image of Finland, the interviewee saw that Finnish products are known for their high quality and safety, but only in the nearby markets; as discussed, already in Central and Southern Europe the Finnish origin does not tell much for the buyers. Overall the origin did not seem relevant for the firm's marketing as the main emphasis was on the product's qualities and on the niche market value.

**Firm G** was a large Finnish firm with a long history reaching back to over 100 years in operations and it had a long experience also from international operations. The interviewee 7 was the brand manager of the firm and had extensive experience from the firm's operations. Regarding the firm's own brand, the interviewee described that throughout the years quality has been the core of the brand and the element that unifies all the firms' products. As an equally important brand element the interviewee described also the firm's Finnish origin. Regarding the firm's own product and brand development, the interviewee commented that large firms should not only follow the development, but choose the main themes that best relate with the brand and within these themes take initiative and actively promote the development. As the interviewee described, much of the gained knowledge in international marketing had come through interactions with foreign buyers in different countries. Regarding Finland as the country-of-origin, the interviewee commented that the origin does matter in all markets, and if somewhere Finland is not well known, they relate themselves first with the concept of being 'Nordic' and then specify that the products come from Finland. Regarding the firms' role in country branding, the interviewee saw that building an image abroad should happen on two levels, meaning that besides that firms are promoting their own brands and products, they should also contribute to the Finland's country brand image. Thereby the interviewee saw the Food From Finland -program and the network it forms among the food exporters as an ideal opportunity for creating a unified message and to coordinate the country promotion work more efficiently within the food and beverages industry.

**Firm H** was likewise a large Finnish firm with a long history and experience from international operations. The interviewee 8 was the commercial director of the firm, and in addition to this position, the interviewee had an extensive experience from the food industry and also from international operations. As an essential part of the country branding work the interviewee saw that

there needs to be an operator who is in charge of the coordination and who creates a concept around the country brand; what it is and what it is not, how it should be used, in which context and what kinds of typographies, images or sounds resemble the brand. Thereby, as the interviewee described, it is important to consider the roles of the different operators in the country branding work; ideally, a country brand could function as a unifying image for multiple firms. This way the foreign buyers could relate the firms from a specific country with the country's brand image and the firms on the other hand could utilize the key messages in their own marketing. However, the interviewee added that the first priority though is always that the food must taste good and it must have the correct market fit; good taste or clean ingredients alone are not automatically an advantage. Regarding markets that have perhaps similar products or where home grown food is also considered clean, the interviewee described that the competitive advantage can be found from the unique combination of the strengths the Finnish food industry has; traceability of product origin, food safety, cleanliness, knowhow and innovations.

## 4.2 Cross-case analysis

After reviewing the interview accounts for the single case analysis, I formed four case groups, where each group included two firms. The groups were formed according to the firm characteristics and so that two seemingly similar firms belonged to the same group. Thereby the views on country branding did not influence the grouping. The aim for the cross-case analysis was to review whether characteristics like the firm age or size or the level of internationalization had an influence on the firm's relation to country branding. The Group I included two young firms (firm age less than 5 years) that both had internationalized at their early age. The Group II included two large firms (over 250 employees), that both had exports to multiple target markets. Group III firms were both family-owned, had experience from exports and had both been recently developing their firm brands. Group IV included two firms that were yet operating in the home market but were planning to internationalize. Forming of these case groups was a step forward in analysing the interview accounts further, as I first compared the two accounts of each group, which is presented here as case by case. Ultimately, I compared the similarities and differences between the pairs, which is presented in the summary in the end of this chapter.

### 4.2.1 Group I

Group I firms were both small firms with an age less than 5 years, that had started exporting since their early age and overall internationalization was part of their growth strategy since the beginning. The early adoption of internationalization characterizes thereby these firms as born globals. Both firms were producing premium niche products, so they had also recognized the fact that with such products Finland will soon grow small for them as a market. There-

fore, everything these both firms had done since the beginning for their brand communications had been with the idea that the products will be sold also to international markets. The two firms had both done prior testing and studied carefully the market before launching their products.

Descriptive for these two firms was that the business idea was rooted in a strong brand, meaning the idea of a brand had further developed into a business plan and eventually into an existing company; this way, also the business model originated and formed an essential part of the brand. It was also essential for both firm brands that the brand reaches a deeper level and describes why the firm exists. Both firms had also well understood that when you produce premium, packaging must resemble high quality. This orientation to branding characterized also the both interviewees' views regarding country branding; they both saw it as an interesting and important concept, but described that the Finland's country brand is currently still lacking such content that appeals to people's feelings. Regarding country brand, both interviewees described that country branding in Finland has focused too much on concrete facts about Finland instead of describing or illustrating the 'feeling' of Finland. This is why these two firms had not yet seen how Finland's current country brand would relate or fit together with their own firm brand. Both interviewees had also doubts on country brand's supportive effect for the export firms firstly on a general level, as country brand should serve such a wide variety of operators, and secondly in the Finnish context as the country brand is not yet known.

In both firms' cases, certain characteristics (firm name, product flavours, package design etc.) indicated though a sort of Finnish/Nordic spirit, but neither of the two firms had the feeling they would connect directly with Finland's country brand. Finnish roots did have a meaning for both firms, but they were both perhaps searching their own angles to their country of origin, rather than identifying directly with the existing Finnish country and Finnish nature brands with the thousands of lakes, snow, Santa Claus, reindeers and northern lights. Different views included mainly that the other interviewee described they had related more with a general Nordic brand and the other described Finland might be more interesting as a brand as something unknown and exotic.

As seen, these two firms and interviewees were quite similar in their characteristics and views on country branding. This was perhaps the outcome of the interviewees' similar backgrounds in marketing and international entrepreneurship, plus the characteristics of the firms were similar, as the product had been directed also for foreign markets shortly after the launch. In summary can be said that both firms considered country branding important and interesting also in the business and exports concept, but that in its current state Finland's country brand had little connection to their own firm operations.

#### **4.2.2 Group II**

Group II included two large firms that had extensive experience from international operations. Both interviewees had likewise long experience from international marketing within either the same firm or within the industry. Both firms naturally had also multiple target markets. These firm and interviewee charac-

teristics influenced on the discussion regarding Finland's country brand and the brand of Finnish food; both interviewees observed country branding and food branding with a wide perspective, including views regarding other industries, the role of the state, the role of Food From Finland -program and the firms, and the influence of the home market dynamics.

Through their experience within the industry, both interviewees were describing some of the unique characteristics that make Finland stand out abroad; these were for instance the closeness of the nature or the desolation of the countryside with large inhabited areas. Both interviewees were also describing the key strengths of the Finnish food industry (innovativeness, purity of the ingredients, emphasis on high quality, focus on health benefits) and how the unique combination of the strengths creates competitiveness for international markets. Regarding the image of Finland in relation to other Nordic countries, both interviewees agreed there naturally is a strong relation and joint marketing is beneficial for all Nordic countries but in addition to that, Finland has its own characteristics and own image, and these should be highlighted in country branding.

Both interviewees had a strong interest towards country branding and a proactive mind-set regarding the firms' role in the process, which may have been well influenced by the size of the firms they represented. One theme that clearly stood out from these two interviews was the cross-industry cooperation; both interviewees saw that the country brand could be better promoted in the business field when more export industries would cooperate together. As described, till now many Finnish exporters or even entire industries have little to do with other firms or other industries that are also operating internationally.

The question of country branding on the business sector however was the clearest differentiator between the two interviewees' views; the other highlighted the role of the state as a way marker and leader in the process, whereas the other interviewee highlighted the cooperation between the firms and the Food From Finland -program. As the other interviewee described, the branding work in firms should be thought on two levels; firm branding considering specifically the firm and its products and country branding considering what kind of image this specific firm wants to transmit regarding their country of origin. The impact of the latter one is mostly dependant on cooperation and coordination, that more operators are transmitting messages that together contribute to the wider image of Finland and Finnish food. Thereby it was discussed that the Food From Finland -program has a significant role in the brand coordination. The other interviewee also agreed that a carefully formulated key message fits well for food marketing, as a shared message creates a cluster benefit for all.

In summary both firms appeared as proactive and influential members in the Food From Finland -program, and considered that both the export firms and the Food From Finland -program have their roles in the country brand promotion. Both also agreed it is beneficial to relate to the Nordic/Scandinavian -brands, but highlighted also the importance for building an own brand profile for Finland.

### 4.2.3 Group III

Both firms in the Group III were family-owned and had already years of experience in exports to multiple target markets. Both firms had also a history reaching back to over 50 years of operations and both had been actively updating the firm brand and product brands. Both firms had also strong orientation to export sales and international growth. Despite their long histories, both family firms appeared to have a young spirit and an innovative mind-set in product development. Both interviewees described the marketing and branding in a family firm as a balance between the past and the future; respecting the history and legacy while remaining relevant and innovative. Apart from firm characteristics, which appeared similar, the views from the interviewees differed in multiple topics. This might have been partly caused due to the difference in experience and position between the interviewees; the other interviewee was the managing director and owner of the firm with over 20 years of experience within the firm whereas the other interviewee was the head of exports and had round 10 years of experience within the firm.

Branding-wise the firm characteristics differed also slightly; the other firm brand appeared to be stronger rooted to the Finnish origin, whereas for the other brand the product qualities were the key contents of the brand message. Thereby the origin naturally meant more for the other firm, as the origin together with the firm history was the source for brand storytelling. For the other firm, the origin appeared more as a characteristic rather than as a key part of the brand. However, for both interviewees country branding appeared as an interesting topic and both described some of the unique characteristics regarding Finland and the Finnish country brand,

Regarding international business and exports in general and ways of operating abroad, both interviewees discussed how currently it is perhaps not needed anymore to follow strict business etiquettes; alternatively, business communication can also be more casual and leave room for originality and personality, which on one hand contributes to the brand image of the country of origin. It was also agreed that what is exported abroad from Finland, must be of premium quality. Specialized and premium seemed to be the key advantages for both of these firms; as the other interviewee described, with intermediate products it is too hard to compete on international markets.

### 4.2.4 Group IV

Group IV included two firms that were operating in the home market but were planning to internationalize and had thus joined the Food From Finland – program for scanning the market opportunities. Characteristic for both firms was their location, meaning their key regional markets were elsewhere than in the capital area and both had a long experience from domestic sales thus they knew their regional markets well. Both were producing food products that connected to Finnish food tradition, thus were well known in their home markets but needed other kind of approach in international marketing. For both firms, regionally sourced ingredients and traditional production methods were im-

portant key strengths and brand attributes. Referring to the long experience on the domestic market, the other interviewee also saw that successful domestic sales are a pre-requisite before advancing further to international markets, as in the domestic market the customers are also closer, thus the feedback is also more direct than from international markets.

For both firms, the main marketing message was focused on the product characteristics; what are the ingredients and how the products are made. Based on the descriptions by the interviewees, the origin or the cultural heritage was not specifically highlighted in marketing. Regarding branding, the main difference between the two firms was that the other firm highlighted their product brands and the other their firm brand. The other firm's product was clearly a niche product and therefore to reach growth the target was to take it also to international markets. Country branding and the country-of-origin effect appeared as unclear and vague concepts for both interviewees and the origin or Finland's country image did not seem to have had an influence on the firms' marketing. As the other interviewee described, the results from country branding are somewhat unclear and therefore the interviewee was not yet convinced of the possible benefits of country branding in the business context. As described by the interviewees, both firms had already obtained new perspectives and ideas to their marketing from the events within the Food From Finland – program. However, as a summary can be said that both firms in the Group IV were still mainly focusing on the domestic market and were not highly engaged with Finland's country branding or international marketing in general.

#### 4.2.5 Summary

In summary, it can be said that the firm characteristics did slightly influence the interviewees' views regarding country branding. This meaning that interviewees from firms that were exporting (Groups I, II and III) were familiar with country branding and had considered the meaning of the product origin in international marketing. However, not all who had considered the meaning of the origin thought it would be important for international marketing. Thereby similarities could also be identified across the case groups and thereby across the company characteristics. For instance, one view shared by multiple interviewees from different case groups was that the firm's or product's own brand and the product quality are the most important assets in international marketing, only after them the product origin may be a differentiating factor. It was though noticeable that those interviewees who considered that origin was important for export marketing were from firms that had embedded the origin in their firm or product branding as one of the elements that made the products unique in international markets.

As a clear inter-group difference was the Group II's proactive view on involving export firms in the country branding promotion; this could be explained perhaps with the firm size as both were large firms with more resources in comparison to smaller firms. Overall the conclusion from the cross-case analysis is that the firm characteristics such as the level of internationalization did have an influence on how the interviewees perceived country branding, but



when observing whether the origin mattered for the firm or not the key element seemed to be the firm's own branding and how far the brand was developed.

## 5 FINDINGS

### 5.1 Dynamics in food marketing

As the research was focusing on food industry and food exports, the interviewees discussed also the special features related to the industry and food marketing. For instance, regarding food marketing it was commented that the most important thing before any marketing or branding is that the food or drink tastes good. Equally important is the market fit; even a good tasting food product does not break success in foreign markets if people do not know what it is or how to use it. As an interesting aspect regarding food and international marketing was also how different customs, beliefs, habits and the cultural history influences on people's perceptions on food and food-related marketing messages or ways to use food products. It was discussed that when it comes to selling and marketing food, characteristics like clean ingredients, good taste and overall quality excellence are highly important, but likewise important are, like in any kind of production, the adequate production capacity and financial resources, especially regarding exports; only when all these are in place, the country of origin may be the differentiating factor in competition.

#### 5.1.1 Brand development

Brand development and company branding on a general level was discussed during the interviews as it reflected whether the origin has influenced the company brand and if it shows in the company's marketing communication. For reviewing the role of the export promotion program in regard to the firms' brand development, it was also discussed which people or events had had an influence on the firm brand. Overall it appeared from the answers that the origin does have an influence not only on the product brands, but also on the company brands as many comments were illustrating characteristics of the Finnish business culture. When discussing about branding in general, there appeared clear differences between the levels of branding among the firms, as some had developed the brand further, some had currently come through a process of refining their brand and some had not considered the brand at all yet.

Regarding the firms' own branding process and readiness for international markets, many of the interviewees commented that there is a number of firms within the program who need to work still for shaping their marketing message for international markets. It was noted that regarding competences in internationalization, it requires still more discussion, training and learning within Finland, before for instance a local bakery, who has been in business for already 50 years but has always operated in the same region, starts to explore foreign market areas. The program's support was also described as follows;

There are already opportunities, meaning they have searched foreign operators who produce market data and analyse the situation on the market, who conduct consumer researches, focus group studies and can produce also highly relevant analyses regarding a brand's potential success on the market. This has been already organized and that is the right kind of branding support they are giving. But then, I would see it so that there are different management styles within the Finnish firms; many firms are managed like industrial firms and fewer like brand firms, and there is a great difference between these two. That which one you study closer, Excel or people's moods --- The support is available, but everyone's capability for utilizing it is not the same (Personal interview by the author, 11 January 2017).

Another interviewee commented that the exchange of experiences is always beneficial even for the most experienced operators, but one key element in the program could be to support the marketing competence of the small firms who are starting their exports, and as a practical implication the interviewee saw a sparring support from marketing and branding specialists regarding ideas on business storytelling; how to conceptualize the company story into a visual format so that it raises interest also abroad. As another important element in marketing another interviewee mentioned packaging;

Our buyers have told us that they have received many brands from Finland and the products are good, but their appearance is not attractive. That it is then about such a small obstacle. That if you really have a good product--- it is just not enough anymore, it must also have a pretty appearance (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

Regarding the important people or events that have had an influence on the brand, overall the interviewees could first not mention anyone or any event specifically, but while discussing the topic further the influence of consumers, B2B buyers and generally the encounters with the people from other countries appeared as the most significant influences for the brands' development. Mostly the entrepreneur's, owner's or managing director's role in brand development were highlighted. Other people or operators mentioned were consultants, marketing agencies and international distributors. Social media was also mentioned for monitoring trends and country brand communications, especially from the neighbour Nordic countries. Other mentioning was about international trends in food culture and development in eating habits.

As a single event influencing on the firm's brand development, the year 1995 when Finland joined the European Union was mentioned as it opened the market and brought more competition. The current anniversary year of Finland's 100th year of independence was also mentioned, but as described, it was still carefully thought through that applying the 'Finland 100 years' would still align with the firm's and products' brand image. The influence of the Food From Finland -program for the firms' brand development appeared in two ways; the influence of the program activities and the influence of the other firms in the program network. The influence of the program activities consisted of new ideas obtained from the workshops and the feedback gotten from the encounters with foreign buyers. Overall however the role of the program regarding brand development was not highlighted.

### 5.1.2 Influence of domestic market

As discussed by multiple interviewees, the domestic demand in Finland in the food industry is problematic, as the food prices seem to guide the consumer purchases, meaning consumers focus mainly on the price over other qualities such as quality or nutrition values. Additionally, as the domestic produce in Finland is overall considered clean, safe and of high quality, so there is no large demand specifically for organic products. These both aspects hinder the growth of the organic food sector and of premium niche products that position in higher price categories. Therefore, for the producers of such kind of products, Finland grows soon small as a market area; this encourages firms to internationalize at young age. All the firms I interviewed were Finnish firms and Finland had been the home market for all of the firms where they had started and built the brands before expanding to international markets. Some of the firms had started internationalization on a very early stage and utilized the experience not only from the home market but also from the international markets as an asset for developing the brand communication further.

Overall, the main concerns from the interviewees regarding the home market were firstly the low appreciation towards food and food culture, which shows also that food industry is not perhaps seen as an attractive investment, and secondly the trend in consumption that favours low food prices over the quality and supermarkets pressing down the prices as a response. Regarding the appreciation of food, it was also discussed whether consumers consider the effects of lower food prices for the food industry. As described, in some cases lowered prices in the home market have inevitably an influence on product quality, which closes these products out from exports as the products do not have the competence anymore for international markets, where the competition is even higher and products need to be of superb quality. Similarly, it was commented that within the portfolio, those products that rank in the premium category are also exported abroad, whereas products with lower brand value, the so-called standard products, remain at the domestic market. Supermarket chains got their share of the critique in pricing strategies, that are on one hand pushing the prices lower but on the other hand pricing certain products too expensive. The influence of the supermarkets as middlemen appears interesting, as it was also commented that the trend of favouring low prices seems to shift when looking at the restaurant business, where people are increasingly favouring independently owned and originally styled restaurants. This could indicate that the appreciation towards food as a source of enjoyment and of new experience can be seen in the restaurant business but does not yet reach to food retail.

Consumer preferences were also described so that in the Central and Northern Finland organic food is not as well understood as in Southern Finland, as domestic food in general is considered to be clean, safe and of good quality. The differences in consumer preferences between the Northern and Southern Finland was further described so that for a firm whose product is much favoured in the North barely needs to do any marketing there but the market entry to southern Finland requires more resources as the competition grows higher. Regarding own production, it was described that for instance in the specific

field of the interviewee's firm, the production is versatile and handmade which results in small production quantities whereas in Sweden for instance a machine does its work on an industrial area but the marketing takes care of the brand image creation.

### 5.1.3 Food labels

Official labelling systems within the industry raised thoughts and comments from many of the interviewees; especially organic labelling and the recognition of wild food was discussed. Regarding wild harvesting, it was discussed that it is hard for buyers and consumers outside of Scandinavia to understand that herbs and berries can be sourced from wild forests. Therefore, the key for promoting products with wild ingredients would be to promote the international recognition of wild food; organic food is widely recognized and labelled and therefore valued, but terms such as 'wild forest' or 'wild harvesting' are not well understood and there are no labels for it that would provide an 'official backup', like for organic produce. As commented, it would be very beneficial to obtain an official label as a backbone for the wild food growing in Nordic forests, because buyers are not interested in hearing descriptions and explanations of how clean and idyllic it is there; "You either have the label or you don't have it." (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017). The relation between for instance organic food, that has official labelling systems, and wild food was described as follows;

It's not very clear yet how we could promote our natural products and raise their value also abroad and how people perceive it abroad, because organic produce is internationally recognized, it's certified, verified and monitored production and we could actually certify nearly the whole Finland as organic area, but it costs and it generates paperwork, so we have certified only a very small part of Finland and therefore we have a small number of organic food producers. But abroad 'organic' is associated with purity, quality and credibility, as someone else has said that 'yes, you really have clean forests', but when we do not have this label, we try to cover it up with branding and marketing. ...A German buyer for instance may well see it so that because the product does not have a certified label as a backup, the ingredients may as well have been picked from somewhere next to a highway (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

Regarding organic labelling, it was described that even though the firm's products were organic, the organic produce was not chosen just for its own sake; organic was chosen because ingredients that are grown and harvested with care simply have a better taste. "If our product would not taste good it would not have any purpose – then it doesn't matter if it is organic or not" (Personal interview by the author, 11 January 2017). It was also commented that the organic label was not seen as the decisive element that would close the deals, and that in some cases there is a hype around the organic produce which seems to over-run rational thinking;

Often the berries we use may be organic berries as they are sourced from an area that is classified as organic, but the other ingredients, for instance preservatives, are used

that we simply can make a product that remains edible for a certain period of time. I think it would be far more dangerous if the product would generate mould or yeasts, but it would carry an organic label. ...We should see the food rationally. Not only by reviewing that this contains this and this contains that and this has that label or this doesn't have that label ...We should rationally reason what is actually good and what is not good (Personal interview by the author, 12 January 2017).

An interesting comment regarding organic labelling was also that the only equivalence for the Finnish organic food labels is found only in Hong Kong; everywhere else 'organic' is defined somehow differently. Regarding other type of food labels, it was commented that gluten-free, lactose-free and kosher may appear even more significant in export markets than organic labels. It was described that organic label is more connected to an ideology, whereas for instance gluten-free is connected to the consumer's health, which sets the need on another level. Demographics play also their part in organic food marketing; as described by the interviewees, in Finland in general consumers that are interested in organic products are mostly in cities, on the countryside the label does not bring added value. Labels protecting the origin were also discussed; in Europe, the European Union is monitoring the labelling system for the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) -labels. It was discussed that Finland could also brand products under this type of labelling, especially because of the Northern climate which gives its unique flair to products' taste. Regarding the Italian Parma ham for example, it was described it as follows;

Pork meat is not the relevant thing there; it is the kind of wind that blows only in this certain place in a certain way, drying the meat and when you can put a label on such an original kind of ham, there is an idea of something you cannot copy. (Personal interview by the author, 11 January 2017).

Regarding labelling on a general level, it was also commented that labels do not bring immediate success either and they should never replace the branding work. This is because labels that communicate the product's origin or other characteristics are transmitting only facts but do not appeal to feelings.

## 5.2 Product origin in international marketing

Overall, the firm interviewees agreed that Finland is not yet very well known, or people may know the country by name but cannot describe Finland too much with details. As the origin is not well known, the importance of the origin as an asset in marketing seemed to decrease; as discussed, the firm or product brands themselves matter more than their Finnish origin, and therefore, the product quality is the best asset in situations when the origin does not say anything to the buyer. It was also described that there is a hierarchy in branding when it comes to combining multiple dimensions together;

I see that there is a hierarchy, where the first and foremost responsibility resides at the brand itself, product characteristics and origin come only after that. Or maybe it's

on the third level; first the brand, then the quality, then only characteristics. ...That I would be buying a piece of Finland does not come in the same order regarding preferences (Personal interview by the author, 11 January 2017).

The hierarchy was also discussed in the sense that would an unknown country brand benefit a small firm that has just entered the market, and would it thereby be more beneficial to build first a stronger firm or product brand and only then emphasize the Finnish origin. As described, Finland alone as the country of origin may not bring any added value, but in some situations the relation to Scandinavia or other Nordic countries may be the interesting differentiator;

We just happen to be in Finland, so yes maybe that sense, but I would not see that Finnishness is the thing here – in some cases it may be a plus, but in general – some people say that Scandinavia is now the thing, and then Finland appears as part of Scandinavia even though geographically it is not part of it, but a Nordic country anyway and that's enough. Sometimes only Northern Europe is enough, sometimes it's only like 'wow you have a great product' without caring what the origin is. ...No reactions, kind of like 'oh okay'. The same if we would be for instance from Canada, same reaction, so Finland as the country of origin is not the thing there. Except when some people have had some connections to Finland then they are delighted and like to tell where they have been. But this has no specific influence on sales volumes (Personal interview by the author, 12 January 2017).

It was also noted that if not for food supplies, the Finnish origin may though be a beneficial factor in other industries that are closer related with Finland's country image, as for instance anything related with technology, education or forestry. As commented, food and beverages industry or the brand of Finnish food, has remained absent in contexts regarding joint branding or country branding. However, it was noted that the awareness in general regarding Finland has risen over the years and thereby, by giving more importance for the origin as a part of the company and product brand, the operators can generate a cluster benefit for each other by speaking about the same things, which was seen to fit very well for marketing especially within the food industry.

It was also described that the meaning of the origin can reach further than merely stating the physical location of the firm; the meaning of the origin can also guide the style for the brand's style of communication and its visuals, and the choice of ingredients in the products. Other examples of combining the origin and the key brand messages included connecting the origin with the craftsmanship skills, commitment to high quality and to values such as transparency, originality and honesty in operations. Regarding local food traditions, it was commented that the Finnish origin was partly perhaps downplayed in brand communications as the product did not relate to any of the Finnish food traditions. On the other hand, it was also commented that marketing a product with a strong connection to Finnish food traditions beard a challenge of reconceptualization, as the product needed to be introduced for international markets that had no idea of the traditional use of the product.

### 5.2.1 The Finnish COO image

Whether the Finnish origin was counted as an asset or not, all interviewees spoke about the importance of the clean nature in Finland, which naturally is a significant element for the food and beverages industry. When discussing about Finnishness, Finland as an origin and how the origin shows in the firm, products or branding, the characteristics included honesty, no-nonsense style, funny, exotic, nothing pompous or grandiose but still very stylish, respect for others and for nature, simplicity, purity, keeping it natural and not faking anything; thereby the sense for being original and down-to-earth were highlighted. As described, the meaning of the origin was also up to the firm to recognize it and use it;

“We take care of things, we deliver good quality, we do what we promise and we do it according to the schedule; this is the general impression of us and I would say thereby we have good reputation and it is beneficial for us to strengthen this image (Personal interview by the author, 16 January 2017).

Purity and safety were also highlighted, and thereby it was also commented that especially in the Asian markets the Finnish origin has started to matter and it is thereby important to communicate the origin in the product packages, to ensure the buyers that the products are not copies but authentic and really from Finland. As described, regarding food safety, the advantages generated from the Finnish COO may also depend on the type of products;

I believe it (the origin) supports different type of firms even more; when we have been on a trip together and there was for instance a chicken egg farm with, they do acknowledge very well abroad that we are precise with the quality controls, and that the controls are so strict that we actually follow the EU standards by the book--- So they acknowledge the top quality of the eggs (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

Regarding markets that have perhaps similar products or where home grown food is also considered clean, it was described that the competitive advantage could be the unique combination of the Finnish food industry's key strengths, which are the traceability of product origin, food safety, purity, knowhow and remarkable innovations;

And when you combine all these elements with a good brand and a good story, you may well have a competitive product for exports” (Personal interview by the author, 17 January 2017).

Overall it can be said that characteristic to all the firms that the interviewees represented was the care for high quality products. This was described for instance through the choice of the entire business model that ensures premium quality, through the selection of ingredients and through the choice of production methods (e.g. artisan/handmade work, remaining close to the traditional production methods). Regarding ways of doing business included for instance the stability in operations, high quality control, no-nonsense style in interaction and communications, trustfulness and aim for long-term partnerships, rationali-



ty in product development, sincerity in marketing communication; “It’s all real here, we haven’t invented anything” (Phone interview by the author, 5 January 2017). The dimensions for the Finnish COO image according to the interviewed firms are summarized in Figure 6;



Figure 6. The Finnish COO image as perceived by the interviewed firms.

### 5.2.2 Finnish, Nordic, Scandinavian or Arctic?

As discussed with many interviewees, Finland as a country of origin does not evoke yet reactions abroad and therefore, some firms do not see a great benefit for showcasing it in the first place. Sometimes a wider concept as origin such as Nordic or Arctic, is used as an introduction; as described, for one of the firms the Finnish origin did matter in all target markets, but where Finland as a country is not well known or understood, they relate themselves first with the concept of being ‘Nordic’ and then specify that the products come from Finland. ‘Nordic’ seemed to be wider in use than ‘Arctic’, while ‘Scandinavian’ appeared also fairly often in many interviewee’s comments. Nordic as a region was seen as more descriptive and precise than Arctic, as Arctic region also includes for instance Canada, and on the other hand Arctic region also has its geographical definition;

Isn’t Arctic, if you define it very precisely, it’s everything that grows above a certain latitude, and below that we still have so much food production; so, if you speak about Arctic nature you are actually branding a quite a small part of Fin-

land. ...Rather would use Nordic, which is somehow wider and as a term more known, and in people's minds it also places the harvest here in the northern nature...because Arctic can also refer to the North of Canada, which they also use in their marketing, the kind of 'From the Arctic Circle' type of things. So, it is not bound only to our region (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

As also discussed, it may not be needed to emphasize the origin as 'Arctic' in marketing, as it may generate an image of a land where nothing grows;

'Arctic' is anyway always present; people see us more Arctic than we are. When you just look at the globe it is actually not a wonder; above the 60th latitude there's not much else than tundra, Greenland, Iceland and us. So, the assumption naturally is that it's quite rugged here (Personal interview by the author, 11 January 2017).

Regarding the Nordic origin, for one firm it had already formed an important part of their identity, as through the Nordic origin it has been easier for the potential buyers to understand what the firm does and why is it unique;

We use images that are from northern nature, so they are clearly Nordic. Not so clearly underlining the Finnishness there. Because we have noticed, if you say you're from Finland, for instance even in Denmark they do not have a clear image of how the Finnish nature looks like, which is funny as we are so close, but they do not have this sort of general image. So as a new brand, we have felt it is easier to relate to a wider concept, which is then the Nordic (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

As discussed, Nordic origin is also easier especially for the far-flung customers to comprehend than a single remote country. Regarding the neighbouring countries, it was discussed what elements differentiate Finland from Norway, Denmark and Sweden. As for one key characteristic, it was mentioned that Finland stands between East and West for instance regarding its food culture, as Finns have obtained influences both from Sweden and from Russia. Another viewpoint highlighting the uniqueness of Finnish origin was related to tourism;

We have somehow observed that it is better to speak about Finland than Nordic. This was a kind of surprise for me, but Finland is more interesting. This is connected with another aspect that those opinion leaders and early adopters enjoy when they find something new. Who would travel to Italy anymore for the 27th time when one hasn't been to an exotic place like Finland. It is something new. (Personal interview by the author, 11 January 2017).

The similarities mentioned among the Nordic countries included high education, good society structure, high level of social security and safety; but eventually, as commented, Finland and Finnish people still need to have an own vision regarding what we want to communicate about ourselves for others and when the Finland's own brand is thereby crystalized, and it does not collide with the images regarding Scandinavia or Nordic, they work also well together side by side.

### 5.3 Country branding in exports

During the interviews, country branding was discussed from multiple aspects; what is a country brand, what does country branding mean, how is the influence of a country's brand for private businesses that have international operations and how did the interviewees perceive Finland's country brand and the country branding work done in Finland. Most of the firm interviewees had a clear idea of what is meant with country branding and it was described for instance as follows;

It is an image, a feeling, an emotional bond and the level of awareness that people have regarding a country X. That what kind of feelings does it evoke, or does the name of the country bring anything in mind and if yes, what kind of things. And country branding is about seizing these images. Conscious, organized and structured actions and also coincidental things and events; what people do or don't do, what companies do and what does the society do (Phone interview by the author, 11 January 2017).

Regarding Finland's country brand, many interviewees commented that food culture and food industry had remained absent in the brand building process and that the brand communications are lacking content that build an image on Finnish food culture.

Finns are known of course for information technology and probably forest industry as well but when we talk about food industry, we have a lot of work to do still (Personal interview by the author, 17 January 2017).

Another comment shared by more interviewees was that currently the core of Finland's country brand lacks emotions; this means that 'Finland' as a word illustrates more factual characteristics such as snow, lakes, darkness, education or North rather than emotions like excitement, curiosity or affection. As described, formula drivers and Nokia are still holding their share of the Finnish country image, together with the ideas that Finland is a country of technology with highly educated people, but the challenge with all this is that the country image is lacking dimensions that would promote Finland as a food producer. From one perspective though the focus on fact-based communication is building credibility and trust; in food industry, credibility supports the message that Finnish food is safe and that the safety standards are strictly followed. As discussed, the importance of food safety will only increase in the future, so it may be beneficial that in Finland this type of branding is happening already.

As the case data indicates, food exporters relate mostly with the image of Finland's clean nature, which naturally is also an essential factor for the food industry's production. It was agreed that an image of clean nature does contribute to a stronger credibility especially in food business, but it is still 'just' a characteristic of a country that does not yet contribute to the feeling of the country;

In order that the brand can succeed, the brand needs to have the core on an emotional level that what for – the “why?” That is the thing I haven’t found from this country branding work at all yet. ...What is the feeling of Finland (Personal interview by the author, 11 January 2017).

Country branding was also seen as something too wide to grasp on; it was seen as a complex concept as all firms should operate under the same brand and vice versa the same brand should serve many different types of firms and the workload seems immensely wide and it takes a long time before the results show. From the firm perspective, the dilemma was described so that resources are spent on consultants that may create a nice image for a country, but at the end of the day all that matters in exports is that does it promote the trade. When the country brand promotes the chosen aspects, it is beneficial for the firms to connect themselves and their products to this country-of-origin, as then the firm and the products are associated with the themes of the country brand;

In the end, it’s about the awareness that people know your country, and when you can promote that, it also supports multiple operators from this country when they want to enter foreign markets and increases the interest towards these operators. ...I think the knowledge regarding Finland has increased and I would also see it as an increase of respect towards Finnishness (Personal interviews by the author, 17 January 2017).

### **5.3.1 Export firms’ role in country branding**

When discussing what concrete actions there should be regarding the country branding work, the views were both stressing the role of the state and the firms:

Firms need to take care of their own products and brand images and place all resources on promoting them, and the firm brands may support then the country’s brand as long as they don’t collide with the country brand; but the state should invest resources and provide practical implications and best practices on how to apply the country brand for different industries (Personal interview by the author, 17 January 2017).

It was also commented that building an image abroad should happen on two levels, meaning that besides that the firms are promoting their own brands and products, they should also contribute to Finland’s country branding work; as one of the key elements in the country branding work in the private sector the interviewee saw networking across different industries. Regarding Food From Finland, the program and the network it forms among the food exporters were seen as an ideal opportunity for creating a unified message and to coordinate the country promotion work more efficiently;

We build the image regarding Finland together with Food From Finland, but we are also building it in our own campaigns and therefore, we should think carefully that the messages support each other that we either strengthen the key messages together or bring up other related perspectives. (Personal interview by the author, 16 January 2017).

Regarding the comments on the Finland's unknown country brand, the active role of the firms was likewise highlighted;

This might be true but no one will ever get to know us either unless we introduce ourselves and talk about it; therefore, we have made the decision that we talk about Finnishness, not only in the sense that Finland is the country-of-origin but also about the culture in Finland that we are honest, trustful, hard-working, we do what we promise and we deliver quality so it is more than sticking a Finnish flag in every product. I have always said 'You must live the brand', and this means that in everything you do you bring the brand elements alive. We should not repeat that 'no one knows us' but instead, talk about Finnishness. It takes time but it also requires a shared agenda (Personal interview by the author, 16 January 2017).

### 5.3.2 Export program's role in country branding

The interviewees mostly described that country branding is not in the main focus in the Food From Finland -program, as the program is more about the practical arrangements regarding trade fairs and meetings with the buyers and journalists. On the other hand, public presence is always promoting brand visibility, but as commented, the branding work would need more coordination between the program and the member firms. It was discussed that a program like Food From Finland has a great momentum for raising the awareness regarding Finnish food and food culture internationally. Thereby the role of the program could be a coordinator whose task would be to conceptualize the usage of the country brand; what it is and what it is not, how it should be used, in which context and with what kind of typographies, images or sounds resemble the brand. It is beneficial for the firms that clean nature, credibility and honesty are emphasized, but the challenge is to apply these to the business environment and illustrate how a country brand can help closing deals abroad. The earlier country branding work was described as follows:

There was an active discussion on it, that involved a large number of key persons from politics and from the economy and they concluded it with a report, but the other side of these public ventures, and the downside, is that they are left on a strange level that the conclusions are not brought down on a concrete practical level, that what does this mean for which operator. We are strengthening the country brand when we go abroad with Team Finland, we fly the Finnish flag and there appear elements that connect with the idea of Finnishness, but this would have been the case also without this final report about the country brand. (Personal interview by the author, 17 January 2017).

One perspective to country brand promotion is that when a program like Food From Finland arranges meetings with foreign buyers, the member firms may realize new aspects regarding their home country and thereby the program promotes the meaning of the product origin in marketing. As one interviewee described, from the export promotion travels their firm became more aware of their origin and started therefore to pay more attention to it;

It (the origin) was part of our vision since the beginning, but maybe it didn't appear so visibly in our communication. But it changed as we noticed we need to clarify it

for others, that what we do, why we do it and where our products come from. So then we started to communicate the origin, by wording it clearly. ...In slogans and such, where you need to describe with couple of sentences who you are and what you do, we have noticed the origin has helped us, people understand us now much better (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

It was also discussed that these encounters with foreign buyers enhance the understanding regarding the origin's uniqueness and added value. As described, the origin can be a mere characteristic, or it can influence the product flavours and be embedded in the brand. Some flavours may also seem dull in the domestic market are actually exotic abroad. Regarding places, a mere name of a place without a specific meaning may not bring added value in export sales, as the place does not evoke any images or feelings in foreign buyers. Thereby, the meaning must be created;

So there we have gotten those light pulp moments that we need to crystallize these things somehow, so that a person who does not live in Finland can understand them as well (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

When discussing about communications in general it was described that regarding the Food From Finland -program, besides that each event is planned together with the firms, the coordination and communication regarding the campaigns and key messages should run throughout the year and include also a joint planning on an annual basis, for sharing the ideas about the broader outlines in marketing and promotion. This way, the marketing messages from Food From Finland and the promotion made by singular firms could support each other and create synergies while illustrating a coherent image of Finland and Finnish food. It was also commented that in order to benefit each other, the country brand and the firms representing it would need to fit together and the focus would need to be on the firms and on the products, that best resemble the desired image;

We should go abroad with more courage and with a larger budget, but when doing so we should take those things from here that are genuinely good (Personal interview by the author, 12 January 2017).

Business communication in export promotion was also discussed, which can also be seen as a form of building the image of the country. Many interviewees discussed the way how they saw that doing business abroad has changed and old etiquettes are perhaps not the one and only way to do business;

We are too much told to follow the old clichés in business etiquette. ...After all, they are people as well there, and they have the sense for good business opportunities when they see it. Many times, I feel the most known things from Finland are those where things are done with humour, like the Dudesons and others, not those where you follow a certain etiquette that you were told to follow. ...I think this way of behaving resembles in a way low self-esteem. When you have low self-esteem and you go abroad, you can try to sell whatever but people won't listen you. You should do it your own way, trust in that and think carefully your message, which is different from other firms." (Personal interview by the author, 12 January 2017).

Additionally, it was discussed that personality matters in business, as the unique characteristics attract attention and make the firms more memorable;

We think the point is not that you should be so formal; a person from Sweden is not that much different from a person in Japan or in Australia...I think in exports it would be important that firms have their own personality and we go abroad as people, not as number crunchers who must seal the deal, as then the communication tends to stay on a very formal and remote level (Personal interview by the author, 10 January 2017).

#### **5.4 Finland's competitive advantages in food exports**

Porter's (1990) model of nation's competitive advantage provides an applicable frame for discussing Finnish food industry's current competences. As presented earlier in this paper, the four dimensions of the model are (1) factor conditions, (2) demand conditions, (3) related and supporting industries and (4) firm strategy, structure and rivalry.

Regarding factors for production within the food industry, Finland has an advantage regarding highly skilled labour and developed research, which have resulted in successful product development, high level of quality and novel innovations. Examples of these include excellency in food safety and product development regarding lactose-free and gluten-free products. The Finnish food industry excels likewise specifically in the development of products that contain high values of protein (Hyrylä, 2016). Environmental factors include northern location with cold climate, short growing season, extreme changes of light during the year, clean air and large areas of untouched wilderness. These factors have a direct influence on food product quality and taste, as the usage of pesticides is on a comparatively low level and the flavours are naturally more intense due to the short growing season. Large wilderness areas offer an opportunity to specialize in wild food products. However, northern location causes also smaller harvest volumes and long distances to export markets. Small harvests cause challenges in the supply of ingredients as the volumes may fluctuate, and to competitiveness, as the volumes are lower than in countries where food production is more industrialized and producers can offer lower prices due to large harvests. Small harvests and thereby low supply are challenging especially the competitiveness of Finnish organic food (Personal interview by the author, 25 October 2016).

Domestic demand in Finland in food sector is challenging especially for premium and organic food producers, as the main trend seems to currently favor discount pricing. As the case data also indicated, consumers in Finland tend to perceive Finnish food as safe, clean and of high quality, in other words as "nearly organic", and thereby not all consumers understand the added value or purpose of organic food. This has resulted to a low demand of organic food in the country and to a relatively small selection of product variants (Phone interview by the author, 27 October 2016). It is interesting that according to the study by Taloustutkimus Oy (2014), consumers in Finland do value local and

organic food and hope that there will be an extensive supply of both in the future. It is also described that Finns generally appreciate nature and consider the clean nature in Finland as one of the key assets in their home country (Isokangas et al., 2010). However, as the case data findings of this study frankly indicate, the values regarding nature and ecological food do not show yet in sales volumes in the sense that many food brands that position in premium products remain as niche brands in Finland and seek the growth through internationalization. However, another aspect regarding the domestic demand in Finland is that the testing procedures for lactose intolerance and celiac disease diagnostics are highly developed, which has created a wide demand for lactose-free and gluten-free products and thereby supported the development of these product variants (Phone interview by the author, 27 October 2016).

Regarding related and supporting industries, tourism relates closely with the food industry, as it also connects to the country's culture and tourism together with food constitutes currently also an own market of culinary tourists that seek food-related experiences when traveling abroad. The current challenge for the country brand in Finland is the lack of interesting content that appeals to consumers that seek experiences and emotional connection with the country or destination. Likewise, the communication regarding food has focused muchly on facts rather than feelings. Producing experiences is the key competence of tourism, so therefore it may be beneficial to develop the brand of Finnish food together with the content that the tourism industry is producing. Though regarding exports, an interesting comment regarding tourism and food exports was that with tourism services one can create wonderful experiences around food but it is still important to think would the tourist buy the same food product in his/her home country, when the product is industrially produced and the environment is different; therefore, the question is how you sustain or deliver a piece of that travel experience in a packed food product (Personal interview by the author, 12 January 2017). This refers to the successful implication of Gnoth's (2002) brand extension model, where the key brand dimensions of a destination must be first well defined and understood by all operators aiming to leverage it in their own marketing. Additionally, other supporting industries to be mentioned for food in Finland are for instance cleantech and design. Cleantech as the promoter and knowhow for efficient use of resources and sustainable forms of production. Design on the other hand promotes the experiential side of packing and serving the food, an aspect further discussed in the next sub-chapter.

The fourth dimension of Porter's model is firm strategy, structure and rivalry refers to the simple dynamics of firm competition, which keeps the firms within the industry competent and alert to changes on the market (Porter, 1990). Regarding the firm strategy and structure, Porter (1990) discusses how different management styles can contribute to the success of an industry, by comparing for instance the Italian furniture, woolen fabrics and footwear industries with the German engineering-oriented industries. The former requires customization, niche marketing, flexibility and rapid change, which all fit to the characteristics of Italian management systems with SME-dominated industries, whereas for instance optics, chemicals and high developed machinery require careful plan-



ning and production, precision and well-done after-sale services that all fit with a German style of disciplined management structure (Porter, 1990). This is an interesting example to apply to Finnish food industry, as the case data indicated that many firms in Finland are traditionally lead like industrial firms where financial figures and facts weigh more than market trends. As discussed in the firm interviews, this has influenced perhaps partly on the marketing competence of some of the exporting firms. Finnish food industry firms are also currently still very much focused on the domestic market, which influences on the whole industry's competitiveness in export markets (Phone interview by the author, 27 October 2016). Additionally, regarding strategies the usage of the EU quality logos of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) is very low in Finland, standing currently on 12 products that are protected with either of these three logos (Töyli, 2016, May 12).

When reviewing the three categories for the Finnish food that were discussed during the interviews –organic food, wild food and free-from food products-, it seems that based on the Porter's model, Finland would have most competences in free-from products and wild food products. However, the challenge with free-from products is currently that the communication is much based on facts regarding production and product qualities and with wild food the international recognition is still low. These both aspects are however best supported with consistent branding efforts.

## 5.5 Summary of the key findings

Findings from the interviews with the export firms indicate that albeit the Finnish origin does have a meaning for the firms themselves, not all firms see the benefit of highlighting their Finnish origin in their own marketing communications. This is due to the perception that Finland as a country and the food culture in Finland are not yet well known, especially in remote target markets. Therefore, highlighting an unknown origin was not seen to bring any added value for the firm or product brand. Instead, firms tend to relate their origin in marketing communication with larger geographical brands such as Scandinavia, Nordic or Arctic. It was discussed that as larger regional brands such as Scandinavia are more known than Finland as a country, these larger brands provide a shortcut especially for buyers in remote markets for understanding the products and the origin better. However, it was also noted that Finland does stand out from other Nordic countries, and thereby it is beneficial to strengthen the brand Finland and the Finnish COO (country-of-origin) image.

In food marketing characteristics like clean ingredients, good taste and overall excellence in quality were ranked as the most important factors. Adequate production capacity and financial resources were also mentioned as key competitive advantages, especially when heading for exports and international markets. Overall it was seen that only when these former mentioned are in place, meaning the firm or product brand is performing strongly on its own, the

country of origin may bring an added value in marketing. Regarding wild harvesting, it was discussed that it is hard for buyers and consumers outside of Scandinavia to understand the concept of wild sourced food and therefore, the key for promoting products with wild ingredients would be to promote the international recognition of wild food. Overall the brand for Finnish food is still shaping and waits for coordination and clarification for its brand dimensions. Overall it was discussed that in the country branding work in Finland food culture has been left for lesser attention, and that the main challenge in the current country branding work in Finland has been the focus on factual characteristics rather than feelings and emotions that connect to the country's cultural heritage. Therefore, it has been challenging also for the firms within the food industry to tap on the country's brand and leverage it for their own marketing, as in food marketing the brands are essentially built on feelings and emotions connected to the food rather than facts that describe the product characteristics.

Regarding country branding in Finland and export promotion the main challenge appears to be the connections between the country brand's key messages and their implication into export promotion. This meaning, it is unclear for the firms how they could apply the country brand so that it promotes their own business and supports in market entries abroad. Country branding was seen as a complex concept as all firms should operate under the same brand and, vice versa, the same brand should serve many different types of firms. Views on firms' role in country brand promotion varied as some noted that firms must focus on their own branding and country branding was seen as an added extra, whereas according to another view the branding should happen on two levels, promoting both the firms themselves but also their Finnish origin. It was also noted that joint marketing, or cluster branding, fits especially well for the characteristics of food industry and thereby when all operators deliver similar or supporting messages, it generates benefit for all. For the interviewed firms their Finnish origin represented honesty, no-nonsense style, funny, exotic, nothing pompous or grandiose but still very stylish, with a respect for others and for nature, simplicity, purity, keeping it natural and not faking anything; thereby the sense for being original was highlighted. Some important values within firm cultures included stability in operations, high quality control, no-nonsense style in interaction and communications, trustfulness and aim for long-term partnerships, rationality and honesty in marketing communications.

The views on Food From Finland -program highlighted the program's support in practical matters regarding market entries, but the role of the program regarding country brand or COO image development or support for the firms' own branding were not highlighted. The program and the network it forms among the food exporters were seen as an ideal opportunity for creating a unified message and for raising the awareness regarding Finnish food culture and for coordinating the country promotion work within the food industry more efficiently. Regarding the general competence of Finnish export firms within the food industry, two types of challenges could be identified regarding branding and international marketing; the relevance of the firm's own marketing materials for export markets and the competence to analyse and utilize the data that illustrates the market opportunities and market characteristics. It was

also commented that in order to benefit each other, the country brand and the firms representing it would need to fit together and the focus would need to be on the firms and on the products, that best resemble the desired image. Regarding business communication in export promotion, many interviewees discussed the way how they saw that doing business abroad has changed and old etiquettes are perhaps not anymore, the one and only way to do business.

The cross-case analysis compared the views of similar firms; the analysis included all the eight interviewed firms that were divided in four groups, thereby each group consisting of two firms. The firm characteristics did appear to have some influence on how the firm or the interviewee perceived country branding; for born globals the concept of country branding and the origin of the firm on a general level were important, yet the interviewed firms did not relate directly with Finland's current country brand. For firms that had not done exports yet, country branding and branding in general appeared as unclear and vague concepts. For larger firms, country branding appeared as an important concept, and also something where the business sector should be actively involved. For family firms, and in this case for such with a long experience from exports as well, country branding in general was important, however for the other firm the origin meant more than for the other regarding their own firm marketing. According to the application of the Porter's model on national competitive advantage, it seems that the Finnish food brand could be based on free-from products and wild food products. However, for developing the brand communication, the former would need additional content than mere facts and the latter would need an official frame or a label that would increase the wild food's credibility. The key findings in relation to the main concepts of the study are presented in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Key findings of the main concepts in the study.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As it appeared both in the case data and in the background literature, Finland's country brand requires still active promotion as the country is not yet well known, especially in more remote target markets, but also within the European market. It also seems that Finland's country image abroad is relatively narrow, as it is mostly focused on few industries, such as forestry, machinery, education and telecommunications. This kind of image has highlighted technical excellence, which in itself is not a disadvantage, but the image does not include much about Finland's culture or people. As Rehn (2016) explains, the problem of having a too narrow frame for a country brand leaves part of the country and its history out, making it 'invisible'. Currently it seems that the art scene in Finland, traditions and food culture and the mentality of Finns are the 'invisible ones', which need to be highlighted in the branding efforts. As the case data indicated, Finnish food exporters have not yet found relevant touch-points to Finland's "tech-brand" and thereby the firms are neither convinced of the possible benefits that a country brand can bring in practice for food exports. Food is an essential part of a country's culture, so thereby the case data findings align with the Finland's country brand ratings that likewise indicate that the brand dimensions of 'Tourism', 'Culture' and 'People' are poorly known in other countries (Anholt-GFK Roper, 2016, Theman, 2016). Regarding specifically food industry, a recent industry report likewise aligns with findings that currently the 'Made in Finland' label is not regarded as an asset in marketing (Hyrylä, 2016). For food industry, the development of tourism in Finland is highly relevant, as both strive from the uniqueness of the Finnish nature and culture and through tourism visitors get to know the food culture also better.

As the case data indicated, country branding may seem as an overly wide concept for a single firm to tap on, as firms have enough of action in handling their own operations and in taking care of their own firm or product brands. However, the case data also indicates that country branding is seen as an interesting concept, but for many it is also something that happens on a higher level, mainly in public organizations and thereby does not feel relevant to own firm's operations. This comes back to the question of why should a single firm care. As Anholt (2002) notes, "Commercial brands will, quite rightly, only comply with the official country branding strategy as long as it helps their sales" (p. 237). Thereby, as the case data shows, currently some Finnish food exporters are not highlighting their origin as they do not consider it relevant when marketing their products or they have experienced in practice that as Finland is still an unknown country, mentioning it does not bring any added value. However, as the research indicates, consumers are generally more willing to pay a higher price for a product that has a strong and a positive brand image (e. g. Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Currently Finnish food suffers from the liability of newness on international markets and the fact that Finnish food has no clear country image as a backup, consumers may not be convinced to pay higher prices for unknown products that are coming from an unknown country. Higher prices on the other hand are inevitably caused by the cost structures in Finland in combi-

nation with other factors such as production methods, ingredients used and the international shipping costs. Therefore, in order to grow in volumes, it can be argued that the Finnish food exports would need a stronger image that would illustrate what Finland and Finnish food are like. As an answer to the first research question **Q1: How Finnish food export firms, that are members of the Food From Finland -program, perceive Finland's country brand and the country-of-origin image of Finnish products?** can therefore be said that the firms saw Finland's country brand as rather unknown, which is also the reason why many firms are not actively promoting their Finnish origin. The image of Finnish products was however perceived positively with qualities such as safe, clean, stylish and close to nature.

As the case data indicated, the large firms were the most proactive to participate in the brand building process, whether it's about Finland as a country or the brand for Finnish food. Apart from that, the other firms had either found their own ways to communicate their origin or did not see origin as a relevant element in marketing. However, prior research is supporting the active role of export firms as promoters of their home countries (Sun & Paswan, 2011). Likewise, the interviewed specialist of place branding (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017) agreed that firms' role in building the country's brand is "crucially important" for the country brand's success.

However, applying a country brand in the firm's own marketing may not be a simple task, as firms have their own brand profiles which are naturally prioritized. Thereby, the country brand should have applicable adaptations, but for generating concise brand applications, coordinators are needed in between. The hierarchy from a wider regional brand down to firm brands and the roles of the coordinators is illustrated below in Figure 8.

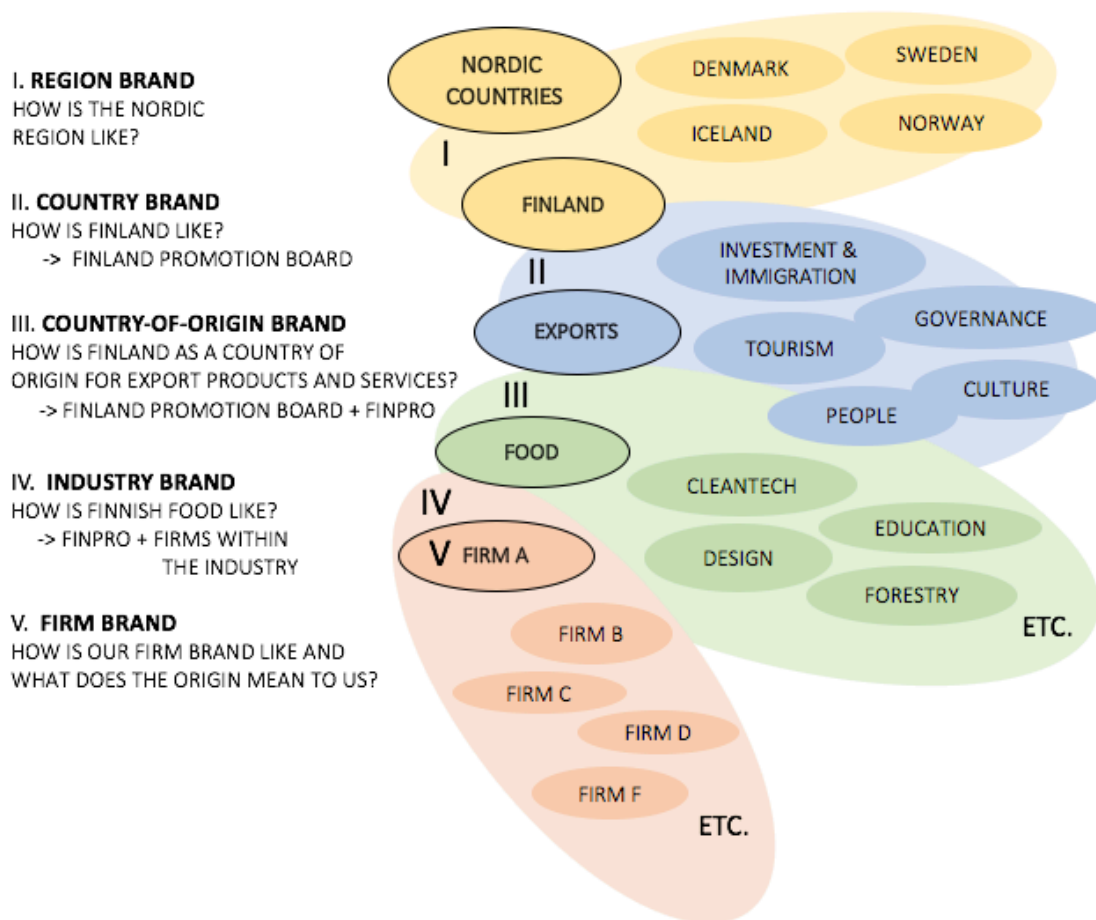


Figure 8. Brand hierarchy from a region brand to a firm brand.

On the highest level in the hierarchy, a wider regional brand (I) is formed - with or without coordination- and with certain countries influencing it perhaps more than others. Coming down on the country-specific level (II), a country brand coordinator is drawing outlines and narratives regarding what the country is all about and what differentiates it from the other countries included in the wider region brand. In Finland's case, this operator is the Finland Promotion Board (FPB). However, FPB does not create or promote the country brand alone, but rather provides tools and materials for promoting Finland and coordinates thereby the brand image. For this purpose, FPB has published the FINLAND TOOLBOX online site which is a material bank with images, reports, statistics and most importantly, narratives regarding Finland and the Finnish spirit and lifestyle. These materials serve multiple operators that speak about Finland abroad. However, when building the brand of Finland as a country of origin for products and services (level III in the hierarchy) and the industry-specific brand (level IV), Finpro as a cross-industrial operator and export promoter has a key role, together with other industry-wide operators. The coordination across different industries may not happen on a very specific level, but the thought behind it is that if certain themes (for instance clean nature, resource efficiency, respect for nature and for other people, simplicity, the 'sisu', honesty, high quality standards) appear in multiple contexts in different industries, they all con-

tribute to the COO brand. Regarding the firm branding on level V in the hierarchy, and as concluded in the cross-case analysis, it is highly important that when a firm utilizes origin in their brand marketing, the origin has a meaning, that describes why this origin adds to the uniqueness of these products. Otherwise place names may appear random for foreign buyers who may not be familiar with the place. As illustrated below in Figure 9, by adding a meaning to the origin, a firm is also contributing its home country's brand.

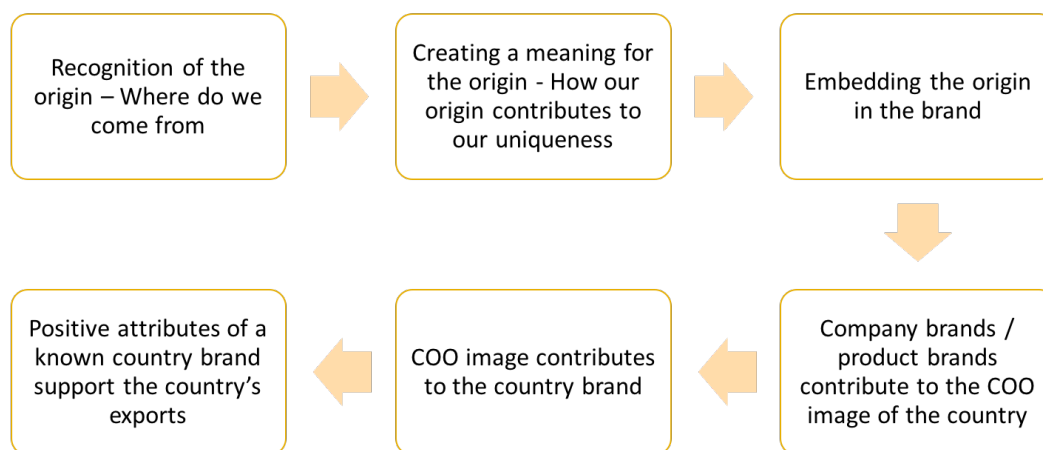


Figure 9. Recognition of the origin.

Therefore, as an answer to the research question **Q2: How is the role of export firms in country brand promotion?**, it can be said that firms should have an active role in the country brand promotion, which is comprised both from the firms' own branding and from applicable tools and country brand coordination.

Coherent brand messages are also building a brand promise, which means international consumers will better know what to expect from Finnish products and services. As the case data indicated and what is also discussed in research (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008, Sun & Paswan, 2011), to enhance and strengthen the image of a country as an origin for export products, it would be highly important that the products and services that are directly promoted under the country brand would deliver the desired brand promise. When a place brand, be it a country brand or a destination brand, is connected to products and services that do not relate with the target image, it may cause confusion or brand dilution in people's minds (Gnoth, 2002). As appeared in the case data, from the firm perspective the brand 'Food From Finland' has currently open doors for all kinds of export products, whether they align with the idea of Finnish food brand or not. Although as commented by the place branding specialist (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017), a joint branding process cannot neither proceed so that firms would be told how their brand or products should be.

As commented also by the export promotion specialists, (Personal interview by the author, 25 October 2016 and phone interview by the author, 27 October 2017) there is a pressure to increase the volume of all food exports, which means that as many firms as possible should be included in the program activities. As the program is funded by the state, it may neither be an option to use the funding for a program that selects its participants. As discussed by the place branding specialist (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017), some solutions to brand coherence and funding can be to create positive incentives and to attract private funding. The former example means that those products and services that align with the overall brand image and share similar brand values receive more attention in the joint branding scheme than those which differ from it (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017). The latter regarding funding occurred in Australia, where the firms took part in funding the branding efforts (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017).

In general, the Food From Finland -program and through that Finpro as an organization is in key role when defining what is the brand of Finnish food, how food relates to Finland's country brand and how firms can apply aligned themes in their own campaigns. As illustrated in Figure 8, Finpro has an important role as a transmitter of the brand message, from the upper levels of region brand and country brand down to industry brand and company brands. As commented by the place branding specialist (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017) and some of the firm interviewees (Personal interview by the author, 16 and 17 January 2017), here the key success factor is *coordination*, as no firm can do the work alone. Currently, Food From Finland uses resources for promotions under the program's own brand, for instance by setting up trade fair stands where multiple firms can take part in. This supports firms' participation on trade fairs and provides continuity and visual coherence, as the stand always looks the same. But equally important would be to coordinate the brand message regarding Finland and Finnish food among the firms and see that it is attractive, interesting and easy for the firms to apply the brand narratives or key messages in their own marketing. As described by the place branding specialist (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017), an imaginary sum of 10 million euros directed for country branding is like a drop in the ocean if it is spent on singular marketing campaigns. But when the same sum is directed to brand coordination, with an aim to promote the application of the country's brand in the operators' own marketing campaigns, the multiplicative effect of the 10 million will be significantly more (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017). Therefore, as an answer to the last research question **Q3: How is the role of an export promotion program in country brand promotion?** it can be said that the program has an important role as a brand coordinator, that ensures the firms have the appropriate tools and contents for applying the country brand message in their own marketing. It is also important to observe the brand messages; each firm does their promotion in their own way how it best serves the firm's brand, but it is mutually beneficial if the themes regarding the products' origin are at least sometimes aligned.

As appeared in the case data, currently the resources in the Food From Finland -program are highly occupied with trade fair arrangements and tackles



regarding trade barriers and export permits. Thereby the firms see the Food From Finland –program more as a trade promoter that provides relevant market data, promotes negotiations and arranges meetings rather than as a brand builder or brand coordinator, that would build narratives that depict the Finnish food culture. The establishment of the program is though already a major step forward in the brand building process, as it forms a common platform for the food industry firms and promotes thereby communication and cooperation among the firms (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017). Additionally, according to the place branding specialist (Personal interview by the author, 15 May 2017), the brand building would next require a clear concept that is easy for the firms to understand; what is it about, how it will be realized and what benefits will it generate for a single firm.

As for practical implications, regarding the firms branding and origin-related marketing, the local food traditions could well earn more attention also in international marketing; each dish or ingredient can be topped with stories regarding local traditions, which makes it more interesting for the international buyer. Each concept regarding the nature (polar night, wild forests, clean springs, archipelago islands) should be described as if the consumer never heard of such things; it may as well be true that they didn't. Pure flavors may be downgraded in comparison to food cultures that have an ample supply of spices; however, the other side is that the high quality of food ingredients can be best noted when the flavors are purest without additional spicing. Packaging should be regarded as high as the product's quality; it is what the consumer sees first before tasting the product. Food tourism offers multiple opportunities to promote the products also within the home market; it is also an easy way to collect feedback from international consumers. Besides packaging, any elements that the customer can customize will add to the feeling of something unique and special.

Regarding the Food From Finland's role, for applying the country's brand in their own campaigns and brands, firms would need more specific tools than what currently is available in the FINLAND TOOLBOX. The TOOLBOX's material regarding Finnish food, "Finland for Food Lovers", could be aligned with Food From Finland's brand communications and topped with cultural elements that have shaped the food culture in Finland, in addition to the influences from East and West. Food brand communications could be coordinated with the firms so that the broad themes support each other, as thereby the branding work would be supported also by the firm resources. Characteristics such as purity, safety, high quality and innovation are highly valuable assets for marketing and branding, but they may not alone create an image that tops domestic products or that describe something about the Finnish culture and lifestyle. Meetings with buyers could also be designed to reflect some of the cultural aspects, to make the encounters more memorable and less formal. Public funding and overall targets for export volumes create a pressure to include a vast number of operators in the program, which will though support all members, but may dilute the coherence of the food brand. Thereby it should be carefully planned that through encouragement and incentives, the firms that are promoted under the Food From Finland brand align with target brand image.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

This research was conducted to explore the Finnish food exporters' perceptions on their home country's brand, the brand's influence for exports and to discuss the role of export firms and of an export intermediate in country branding. In addition to firm interviews, field experts were also interviewed for background information and for bringing the expert views and firm views to the same discussion. The main contribution of the study is highlighting the firm perspectives on Finland's country brand and the active roles of export firms and of an export promotion program in country branding. This report also discusses the effects of an unknown country brand, which is a topic less covered in earlier research.

As the results indicate, Finland's country brand and Finnish food culture are still internationally rather unknown. This is why some Finnish food exporters are not highlighting their origin or they relate the origin to larger geographical areas such as Scandinavia or Nordic countries, which is seen as more beneficial especially in remote export markets. It was also seen that origin is not a decisive factor for buyers' decision-making, as more important are the product's own brand and product qualities like the market fit and in food products the taste. However, it was agreed that Finland does stand out from other Nordic countries and thereby Finland's country brand should be promoted. The clean Finnish nature is the most important part of Finland's country brand when it comes to food marketing, but apart from that it has been challenging for the firms to relate with the country brand. As the results show, Finland's country brand communication has been muchly based on facts and figures, that has had little relevance for food marketing. Thereby the results indicated that Finland's country brand would need also content that illustrates Finnish culture and people and comes thereby closer to consumers' feelings and attracts more interest.

The study concludes that when the country brand is less known, the firms operating in exports do not feel their origin would be counted as a benefit on international markets, or as a brand asset. However, the significant factor is that firms can actively engage to the creation of a COO image; both the interviewed expert in this study and the prior literature regarding place branding highlight the importance of firms as active promoters of their origin. As appeared in the results, those firms that did highlight Finland as their origin, they supported the origin with brand storytelling. Thereby these firms were also contributing to the COO image of Finland and Finnish food. Strengthening a COO image requires however strong performing product brands; a weak COO image does not seem to support undeveloped brands in international marketing. Thereby when a weak COO image does not bring added value for a company or product brand, the importance of the company's own brand is emphasized. Thereby one can conclude that a strong COO image may benefit undeveloped product brands on the export market but a weak COO image can only be strengthened with strong performing product brands. Thereby, the export firms' role for promoting espe-

cially an unknown country brand is highly important. Equally important is the role of an export promotion program like Food From Finland as a coordinator, that has formed a network of multiple export firms operating in the same industry.

## **7.1 Limitations**

The timing of this study took place two years after the launch of Food From Finland –growth program, which as a timeframe is relatively short when discussing about brand building and export promotion, where results may show only after a decade. However, all the companies included in the research had been members for some time already and had participated the program activities. Therefore, all interviewees had relevant viewpoints regarding the program. However, it is also acknowledged that an inductivist interpretivistic research approaches tend to be more difficult to generalize, because the focus is on a small, local sample and the interview accounts are subjective illustrations of a situation (Stokes, 2011). Therefore, the aim neither was to look for an ultimate ‘truth’ but more to explore and describe the current situation. It is recognized that similar settings may exist, but each case has their own nuances (Stokes, 2011).

## **7.2 Recommendations for further study**

As for further research, it appears as a relevant and interesting topic to assess the impacts of Food From Finland program in country branding and especially in the branding of Finnish food by the time the program will reach its current targets in 2020. Other interesting areas for further research would be to explore the opportunities regarding Finnish food products with applicable Protected Designation of the Origin -labels. Regarding theoretical models, the application of Gnoth’s (2002) four-level brand extension model for tourism could be beneficial for leveraging the destination brand into food exports. For providing concrete strategies for the export firms, Aichner’s (2014) strategies applied in practical implications may provide some useful tools in applying cues of the country-of-origin in company or product branding.

## REFERENCES

- Agnoli, L., Capitello, R., & Begalli, D. (2014). Geographical brand and country-of-origin effects in the Chinese wine import market. *Journal of Brand Management*, 21(7-8), 541-558.
- Aichner, T. (2014). Country-of-origin marketing: A list of typical strategies with examples. *Journal of Brand Management*, 21(1), 81-93.
- Anholt, S. (2002). Foreword. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 229-239.
- Anholt-GfK. (2017). Home page. Retrieved from <http://nation-brands.gfk.com>.
- Anholt-GfK Roper. (2016). Nation Brands Index - Results for Finland. Retrieved from <https://toolbox.finland.fi/toolbox/research/>.
- Ashworth, G. & Kavaratzis, M. (2009). Beyond the logo: Brand management for cities. *Journal of Brand Management*, 16(8), 520-531.
- Areni, C.S., Duhan, D.F. & Kiecker, P. (1999). Point-of-purchase displays, product organization, and brand purchase likelihoods. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 27(4), 428-441.
- Balabanis, G. (2005). Determinants of export intermediaries' service-mix configurations. *International Marketing Review*, 22(4), 436-459.
- Berg-Andersson, B. & Kotilainen, M. (2016). Pakotteiden vaikutus Suomen vientiin Venäjälle. Brief No 45. The Research Institute of the Finnish Economy (ETLA). PDF Document. Retrieved from <http://pub.etla.fi/ETLA-Muistio-Brief-45.pdf>.
- Beverland, M., & Lindgreen, A. (2002). Using country of origin in strategy: The importance of context and strategic action. *Journal of Brand Management*, 10(2), 147-167.
- Business Council of Australia. (2015). Building Australia's Comparative Advantages: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Agrifood Sector. PDF-Document. Retrieved from <http://bca.com.au/publications/reports-and-papers>.
- Broström, N., Palmgren, K. & Väkiparta, S. (2016). *Luksus: Suomalainen osaaminen kilpailuetuna*. Helsinki: Alma Talent.
- Caldwell, N. & Freire, J. R. (2004). The differences between branding a country, a region and a city: Applying the brand box model. *Journal of Brand Management*, 12(1), 50-61.
- Clancy, M. (2011). Re-presenting Ireland: Tourism, branding and national identity in Ireland. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 14(3), 281-308.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed). Los Angeles (Calif.): Sage Publications.
- Davidoff, Philip G. & Doris S. Davidoff (1994): *Sales and Marketing for Travel and Tourism*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Englewood Cliffs (NJ). Prentice Hall Career & Technology cop.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building Theories from Case Study Research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532-550.

- Elintarviketeollisuusliitto ETL (Finnish Food and Drink Industries' Federation). (2017). Ulkomaankaupan tilastot. Tilastoja elintarvikkeiden viennistä ja tuonnista. Vienti tuoteryhmittäin. Retrieved from <http://www.etl.fi/etl-tilastopalvelu.html>.
- Eriksson, P. & Kovalainen, A. (2008). *Qualitative methods in business research*. Los Angeles. London: SAGE.
- Export Finland. (2017). Homepage. Team Finland Growth Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.exportfinland.fi/web/eng/services/programs>.
- Finland Promotion Board. (2017a). BUILDING THE IMAGE OF FINLAND – Review of the country image work in 2015–2016. FINLAND TOOLBOX. Retrieved from <https://toolbox.finland.fi/toolbox/research/>.
- Finland Promotion Board. (2017b). Finland for Food Lovers. FINLAND TOOLBOX. Retrieved from <https://toolbox.finland.fi/toolbox/presentations/>.
- Finpro. (2017). Homepage. Retrieved from <http://www.finpro.fi/web/finpro-eng>.
- Fletcher, D. (2004). International entrepreneurship and the small business. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 16(4), 289-305.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2011). Case study. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 4th edition. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Food From Finland. (2017) Homepage. Retrieved from <http://www.foodfromfinland.fi>.
- Forsgård, C. (2016). Suomen brändi on tunne ja sen nimi on sisu. In Limnell, J. (Ed.), *Suomen idea*. (pp. 274-286). Jyväskylä: Docendo.
- Gibbins, S. (Producer and director). (2015). *Brand Irish* (Documentary). Spain: Padi Productions.
- Gilmore, F. (2002). A country - can it be repositioned? Spain - the success story of country branding. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 281-293.
- Gnoth, J. (2002). Leveraging export brands through a tourism destination brand. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 262-280.
- Heino, T. (2016). Julkisuusdiplomatian kehitysvaiheet 2000-luvulla ja nykytilanne. In Kivioja, V., Kleemola, O. & Clerc, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Sotapropagandasta brändäämiseen: Miten Suomi-kuvaa on rakennettu*. (pp. 319-330). Jyväskylä: Docendo.
- Hyrylä, L. (2016). Food industry. *Sector reports 7/2016*. Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland. PDF-document. Retrieved from <http://www.temtoimialapalvelu.fi/files/2737/Elintarviketeollisuus2016.pdf>.
- Isokangas, A., Kaskinen, T., Kilpi, H., Kuittinen, O., Laitio, T., Lippo, A., ... Vassinen, S. (2010). Tehtävä Suomelle! Miten Suomi ratkaisee maailman viheläisimpiä ongelmia - CONSIDER IT SOLVED - Maabrändiraportti 25.11.10. Helsinki: Demos Helsinki.
- Karaev, A., Koh, S. C. L., Szamosi, L. T. (2007). The cluster approach and SME competitiveness: a review. *Journal of Manufacturing Technology Management*, 18(7), 818-835.

- Kiiski, A. (2017). *Oman maan mustikoita ja maailman luokan urheiluteknologiaa - alkuperämaan liittäminen yrityksen brändi-identiteettiin ja Suomen maabrändiin*. Abstract. Retrieved from <https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/130683>.
- Kornberger, M. (2010). *Brand society: How brands transform management and lifestyle*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kotler, P. & Gertner, D. (2002). Country as brand, product, and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4/5), 249-261.
- Kubacki, K. & Skinner, H. (2006). Poland: Exploring the relationship between national brand and national culture. *Journal of Brand Management*, 13(4-5), 284-299.
- Kumar, R. (2014). *Research Methodology – A step-by-step guide for beginners*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Kunnas, K. (2017). *Suomalaisten brändialkoholijuomien vienti ja Suomi-maabrändi*. Abstract. Retrieved from <https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/134491>.
- Laroche, M., Papadopoulos, N., Heslop, A. L. & Mourali, M., (2005). The influence of country image structure on consumer evaluations of foreign products. *International Marketing Review*, 22(1), 96-115.
- Lehtinen, U., Ahokangas, P. & Lu, J. (2016). The role of intermediaries in food export: Case evidence from Finland. *British Food Journal*, 118(5), 1179-1194.
- Lepomäki, E. (2016). Suomalaisten yritysten tulevaisuus. In Limnell, J. (Ed.), *Suomen idea*. (pp. 156-168). Jyväskylä: Docendo.
- Meriläinen, I. (2017). *Suomalaisyritysten brändin rakentaminen Venäjän elintarvike-markkinoille*. Abstract. Retrieved from <https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/134082>.
- Moilanen, T. (2016). Tiekartta Suomen maabrändin rakentamiseen. In Kivioja, V., Kleemola, O. & Clerc, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Sotapropagandasta brändäämiseen: Miten Suomi-kuvaa on rakennettu*. (pp. 319-330). Jyväskylä: Docendo.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks (Calif.): Sage.
- Moilanen, T. & Rainisto, S. (2008). *Suomen maabrändin rakentaminen* (1). Lönnberg Painot Oy: Finland Promotion Board.
- Noël Chaker, A. (2016). Finland's SENSE - The broken myths of the future. In Limnell, J. (Ed.), *Suomen idea*. (pp. 299-305). Jyväskylä: Docendo.
- Olins, W. (2002). Branding the nation - the historical context. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 241-248.
- Oxford Dictionaries. British & World English. Cluster. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cluster>.
- Papadopoulos, N. & Heslop, L. (2000). Countries as brands. *Ivey Business Journal*, 65(2), 30-36.
- Papadopoulos, N. & Heslop, L. (2002). Country equity and country branding: Problems and prospects. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 294-314.
- Papadopoulos, N. (2004). Place branding: Evolution, meaning and implications. *Place Branding*, 1(1), 36-49.
- Peterson, R. A., & Jolibert, A. J. (1995). A Meta-analysis on country-of-origin effects. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 26(4), 883-900.

- Porter, M. E. (1990). The Competitive Advantage of Nations. (cover story). *Harvard Business Review*, 68(2), 73-93.
- Porter, M. E. (1998). Clusters and the new economics of competition. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(6), 77-90.
- Porter, M. E. (2000). Location, Competition, and Economic Development: Local Clusters in a Global Economy. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 14(1), 15 - 34.
- Rehn, A. (2016). Rajaton suomalaisuus ja ajattelun rajapyykit. In Limnell, J. (Ed.), *Suomen idea*. (pp. 15-26). Jyväskylä: Docendo.
- Root, F. R. (1994). *Entry strategies for international markets* (Rev. and expanded ed.). San Francisco (Calif.): Jossey-Bass.
- Ryan, J. (2008). The Finnish country-of-origin effect: The quest to create a distinctive identity in a crowded and competitive international marketplace. *Journal of Brand Management*, 16(1-2), 13-20.
- Saraniemi, S. & Komppula, R. (2003). Spontaanit mielikuvat Suomesta seitsemällä päämarkkina-alueella Euroopassa. Joensuun yliopisto.
- Sarturi, G., Vargas, C. A. F., Boaventura, J. M. G., & Santos, S. A. d. (2016). Competitiveness of clusters. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 11(2), 190-213.
- Sinek, S. (2009). Inspire People. *Leadership Excellence Essentials*, 26(11), 13.
- Spielmann, N. (2014). Brand equity for origin-bounded brands. *Journal of Brand Management*, 21(3), 189-201.
- Stenbacka, C. (2001). Qualitative research requires quality concepts of its own. *Management Decision*, 39(7), 551-556.
- Stokes, P. (2011). *Key concepts in business and management research methods*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sun, Q. & Paswan, A. (2011). Country branding using product quality. *Journal of Brand Management*, 19(2), 143-157.
- Taloustutkimus Oy. (2014). Maaseutubarometri 2014. Retrieved from [http://mmm.fi/documents/1410837/1516647/Maaseutubarometri+2014\\_LOPPURAPORTTI.pdf/3d544033-79ea-453d-9406-4ba37ffdf4aa](http://mmm.fi/documents/1410837/1516647/Maaseutubarometri+2014_LOPPURAPORTTI.pdf/3d544033-79ea-453d-9406-4ba37ffdf4aa).
- Terjesen, S., O’Gorman, C. and Acs, Z.J. (2008). Intermediated mode of internationalization - New software venture in Ireland and India. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 20(1), 89-109.
- The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. (2016). Finland in the world media – Ministry for Foreign Affairs review of 2016. (PDF document). Retrieved from <https://toolbox.finland.fi/toolbox/research/>.
- Theman, P. (2016). Maakuvatyo. (PowerPoint slides).
- Töyli, P. (2016, May 12). Introducing twelve protected Finnish products. (Blog comment). Retrieved from <http://www.aitojamakuja.fi/blogi/?p=1582>.