

Exploring the role of food origin as a source of meanings for consumers and as a determinant of consumers' actual food choices

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Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to food consumption literature by tackling certain shortcomings in the country of origin studies both qualitatively and quantitatively. As regards to the meanings consumers attach to food of various origins the findings show that Finnish consumers associate partly overlapping partly distinct cognitive, affective and normative meanings with Swedish, German and French food. In turn, the results of the real food choice experiment revealed that activating domestic origin cognitively actually results in favoring foreign food products while activating domestic origin affectively leads to favoring of domestic food products. Authors review and analyze several alternative explanations for the main effect. The article concludes with a discussion highlighting theoretical and managerial implications of the results of the two investigations.

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Keywords: Food origin; Meanings; Consumer choice

1. Introduction

Food and eating are, by their very nature, dynamic phenomena full of changing psychological, social, cultural and economic meanings (Hirschman et al., 2004). Origin is one product attribute that affects the meanings consumers associate with food. Food origin and its associated meanings in the minds of consumers, is an especially timely topic now when the EU has proposed the adoption of “made in EU”-label in the food products category. Thousands of consumers in many European countries have strongly protested against this suggestion. Domestic origin also partly determines a consumer's food choices (Guerrero, 2001). Some studies even consider country of origin as the fifth element of the marketing mix (Felzensztein et al., 2004).

Past research shows that the origin of food influences consumer decision-making (attitudes, evaluation, willingness to buy, choice) in substantial and complex ways. In regard to attitudes, for example, compared to more collectivistic consumers, consumers who are more individualistic have a more critical

attitude towards domestic products (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000). Second, consumers evaluate food products more favorably when a low cultural distance or an interest in foreign cultures prevails, compared to consumers who have a high cultural distance or a lack of interest in foreign cultures (Juric and Worsley, 1998). Third, consumers who identify themselves strongly with a given region are willing to pay significantly more for products from that region (Skuras and Vakrou, 2002). Finally, Granzin and Olsen (1998) demonstrated that choice of domestic products relates negatively to consumers' perceived costs of “helping” and positively to internalized responsibility for “helping”, when “helping” refers to a feeling of sharing a common fate with fellow citizens and social concern for fellow members of their society.

In spite of the abundance of prior research, some shortcomings in the country of origin studies are evident (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1999; Orth and Fibrasová, 2003). In many previous studies, researchers have asked consumers to make their choice based solely on the country of origin cue: this may produce unrealistic results, because in a real choice situation many other choice cues are available. In addition, investigators typically use verbal product descriptions rather than real end products when examining the effect of the country of origin on consumer choice. Not using real end

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products may distort the results of the study. Further, only a few studies examine the effect of country of origin information on actual food choice behaviors. Usually, researchers only measure intended behavior. Finally, surprisingly few country of origin studies have applied qualitative research methodologies or focused on issues beyond those of a cognitive nature. For example, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999, p. 521) present a call for more research on the symbolic and emotional aspects of country of origin.

The present study seeks to contribute to food consumption literature by taking the above-mentioned problems in food origin research into account. This study combines qualitative and quantitative methods to address under-explored research questions. The paper has three objectives. The first objective is to introduce a conceptual framework for analyzing the meanings consumers attach to food of different origins as such and as a basis in their actual food choice behaviors. The second objective is to reveal and analyze the meanings Finnish consumers associate with Swedish, German and French food. Finally, the third objective is to assess the role of domestic origin in consumers' actual food choice behaviors.

2. Conceptual background

Food and eating carry a large number of meanings that affect consumers' food choice behaviors. The great diversity and subtlety of these meanings represent a formidable challenge for covering them through conceptual means. When focusing specifically on the role of the origin of food as a source of meanings and as a determinant of choice behaviors, some researchers have divided the effects of 'origin' into cognitive, affective and normative aspects (Verlegh and van Ittersum, 2001). According to Verlegh and van Ittersum (2001, p. 269): "Cognitive aspects of geographic origin relate to the beliefs that are associated with the geographic origin of a product, while affective aspects refer to the feelings or emotions that are evoked by the place of origin. Normative aspects relate to personal and social norms regarding the purchase and use of products from a particular origin". The two empirical studies of this article use this division into three categories of the effects on the creation of meaning in the minds of consumers and their subsequent behavior when making food choices. Thus, the paper discusses these three categories in more detail in what follows below (based on Verlegh and van Ittersum, 2001).

Cognitively, the origin of food can possess both predictive and confidence values for consumers. The origin of food has predictive value when associated with a product attribute preferred by a consumer. Predictive value may also rest on experiential beliefs, for example, a consumer who through personal experience noticed that German bratwurst is very tasty. On the other hand, the predictive value of food origin may be a result of inferential beliefs too. In this case, a consumer lacks personal experience with a food product and must infer whether origin-of-food is a good indicator for the desired qualities. For example, when a consumer knows that Spain is a sunny country and that oranges taste best when they are "sun-ripened", he or she will form an inferential belief that "oranges grown in Spain

taste good". Confidence value reflects the extent to which consumers believe that they can make a reliable evaluation of food origin. If consumers are uncertain about whether a food product originates from the area specified on the "made in..." label or communicated by branding or advertising, they feel less confident about using origin as a signal for preferred qualities. Thus, if a producer guarantees the origin of food (e.g. PGI labels), this will increase in the confidence value of "origin" in consumers' decision-making.

The affective meanings associated with food origin involve feelings and emotions attached to different geographic origins, and to the symbolic and cultural messages of food products originating from certain locations. Feelings consumers associate with different geographic regions and their inhabitants may be positive, negative, or even mixed as in the case of the relationships between Finland and Sweden, or between Canada and the USA. These emotional associations may derive from historical events, family relations, friendships, vacation memories, and impressions formed through films, art, literature, and education. With regard to the symbolic and cultural messages of food products, the notions of authenticity, tradition and status (e.g. exotic, special) are relevant. Often consumers attach these notions to foods with particular origins. Japanese sushi, Scottish haggish, Turkish kebab, and Savo kalakukko (the famous fish pasty made in Eastern Finland) serve as illustrative examples.

Normative meanings attached to the origin of food derive from consumers' moral considerations concerning buying food products from a particular geographic region. Consumers may boycott food products from certain geographic regions for political, economic or ethical reasons. A recent example of this is the decline of French wine sales in the USA as a result of American consumers' refusal to buy French products because France did not support the USA in its war efforts in Iraq. Occasionally, an inverse effect occurs; consumers reward sympathetic regions and their people by buying their food products. Perhaps the most salient normative meaning aspect of food origin relates to the idea of buying domestic. "Buy domestic" campaigns are common in many countries: such campaigns rely on consumers' ethnocentrism and their perceived moral obligation to support the home region's economy.

The above discussion of the cognitive, affective, and normative aspects of the meanings attached to the origin of food implies that these factors operate independently, although in reality they interact (Verlegh and van Ittersum, 2001). For instance, normative aspects as expressed in boycotting relate to both cognitive processing and emotional experiences. In the two empirical studies here, the underlying assumption in both was that consumers attach different combinations of cognitive, affective and normative meanings to food, originating from different countries to guide their choice behaviors.

What follows now is the presentation of the two, related, empirical studies conducted to first investigate how these categories affect the creation in the minds of consumers of meanings related to the origin of foodstuffs, and second to study their choice behaviors on the basis of these meanings related to origin. Each study separately reports its key methodological

choices and results. Finally, the summary and conclusions section will present the implications of both studies combined. Only Finnish consumers participated in the studies.

3. Study 1: food origin as a source of meanings for consumers

3.1. Method, sample, and data

Analyzing subjective meanings necessitates a qualitative approach. The exploratory nature of the study led to a focus-group-interview approach. A researcher conducted three focus group interviews among Finnish consumers: the first group discussed Swedish food, the second group German food and the third French food. The study investigated Swedish food because of the long-established love–hate relationship between Finland and Sweden, German food because the retail chain Lidl has recently penetrated Finnish markets, and French food quite simply because Finns perceive France as the homeland of gastronomy.

Verlegh and van Ittersum's (2001) theoretical framework directed the collection and analysis of data. The themes that guided the focus group interviews concerned the cognitive, affective and normative meaning dimensions. The cognitive main question asked: What is the Swedish/German/French food like? The kinds of feelings Swedish/German/French food evoke constituted the affective main question. Finally, the normative main question was: What kinds of moral statements relate to Swedish/German/French food? To improve the quality of the data, the participants received an assignment (answering questions that made them think about Sweden/Germany/France and their people, culture, food) that they were to perform prior to the interview.

Only participants involved in food and eating took part in the discussions in order to produce as rich and varied a data set as possible. The Finland–Sweden group consisted of seven participants, the Finland–Germany group of eight and the Finland–France group of three participants. The participants

consisted of 14 women and 4 men, whose age varied between 20 and 57. In terms of occupation, the participants were workers, entrepreneurs, officials, managers, and students. In regard to family status, equal number of couples with children, couples without children, and single persons belonged to the group of participants.

The researcher tested the interview questions with a pilot group and as a consequence of this slightly modified the questions before the actual focus group interviews. Cafes and lunchrooms served as places for recruiting the participants. Group discussions took place in classroom-like surroundings. The researcher tape recorded the interviews (lasting from 60 to 90 min) and then transcribed them into written text. The language of the interviews and discussions was Finnish: the author has translated the Finnish text into English here, preserving much of the original Finnish syntax in order to give an idea of the thought processes involved in the mind of the person making a statement.

The analytical process consisted of three phases. First, the researcher read through the transcripts several times in order to get an overall view of the content and nature of the data. Second, he identified those text segments that reflected the cognitive, affective, and normative meanings assigned to the origin of food. Then, he developed a set of subcategories for each of these aspects and assigned the relevant text segments to each subcategory.

3.2. Findings

Table 1 presents the cognitive, affective and normative meanings that Finnish consumers associate with Swedish, German and French food, categorized on the basis of the interpretive analysis. The findings indicate that Finnish consumers attach partly overlapping partly distinct cognitive, affective and normative meanings to Swedish, German, and French food. Generally, the term 'indifference' appears to capture the mental image Finnish consumers have concerning Swedish food. The term 'ambivalence' summarizes the group of

Table 1
Cognitive, affective and normative meanings Finnish consumers attach to Swedish, German and French food

Meaning aspect	Swedish food: indifference	German food: ambivalence	French food: superiority
Cognitive	Healthful High quality Safety Cleanliness Expensive Not available Common taste	Unhealthy Varying quality Questionable safety Questionable cleanliness Cheap Reasonably available Good taste	Healthful High quality Safety Cleanliness Overpriced Readily available Excellent taste
Special characteristics	International	Simple, heavy, down to earth, conservative	Strong reputation
Affective	Uninteresting Not enjoyable Lack of tradition	Modestly interesting Enjoyable Strong tradition	Highly interesting Enjoyable Strong tradition
Special characteristics		Ethical concerns, economical, masculinity	Prestige, high image, artistry, originality
Normative	No historical reservations No reasons to boycott Occasional arousal of bad conscience	Some historical reservations Some reasons to boycott Occasional arousal of bad conscience	No historical reservations No reasons to boycott No arousal of bad conscience
Special characteristics			Status communication

meanings Finnish consumers attach to German food. Finally, ‘superiority’ seemed an apposite term for describing the range of meanings in Finnish consumers’ minds regarding French food.

Limitations of space do not allow a detailed interpretation of Table 1. Instead, this discussion will focus on representative subcategories of cognitive, affective and normative meanings related to Swedish, German and French food. Before presenting findings specifically to food, however, a brief discussion of Finnish consumers’ attitudes to the relevant countries in the study will follow.

3.3. Country images

This section briefly covers the country images Finnish consumers have of Sweden, German and France. Interestingly, Finnish participants related both stereotypical beliefs and ambivalence to Swedishness, Germanness and Frenchness. Finns perceived the Swedes as proud, bigger and better on the one hand; but as nice and friendly rivalries on the other hand. In turn, Finnish consumers saw Germans as systematic, persistent and European; but also as inflexible, impolite and dull. Finally, positive aspects related to France included status, sophistication, history; negative aspects clannish, rude and overrated. Three comments below illustrate these country images.

Sweden:

“Swedes have their noses up when they walk. The country is, as a state I mean, that they think that they are better than the rest, better than us.”

Germany:

“I appreciate Germans because they are systematic and persistent. And they also have lots of guts, after the war the country was ruined, but they rebuilt it. I have that kind of impression of them. Nevertheless, a lack of a sense of humor is also associated with Germans, I think.”

France:

“Somehow I feel that French think that they are a little bit better. And if you go there you will get the feeling that you must adapt to their norms and habits.”

3.4. Cognitive meanings

One of the subcategories of cognitive meaning that repeatedly came up in the data in relation to Swedish food was “common”. Finnish consumers thought of Swedish food is ordinary, everyday food; that is, Swedish food is all right, but nothing special. Regarding German food, “unhealthy” is worth mentioning. In Finnish consumers’ minds, the unhealthiness of German food relates to a straight-forward pleasure in drinking and eating (e.g. beer and bratwurst), large amounts of additives and to some extent an unclean food production environment. Intriguingly, in the case of French food, Finnish consumers brought up the notion of “cleanliness”, even though the food production environment in France is not necessarily that much different from the food production environment in her neighbor,

Germany. Presumably Finnish consumers’ overwhelmingly positive image of French food carries over into a positive bias in their thinking processes related to all things French. A few illustrative comments follow.

Swedish food:

“I can’t say that Swedish food is bad, but I have never had an A-HA! experience with Swedish food, it has never been extraordinary good....It is completely different, for instance, in Italy and Germany that have strong food cultures compared to Sweden. Somehow I see Swedish food as dull and flat, I only remember Swedish flavored bread, flavored sausages and marzipan. They really lack something that would be very chic.”

German food:

“I think that in Germany healthfulness is not considered as such a big problem as it is in Finland. They don’t make a big fuss about it like we do here. In Germany, those who want to make healthful choices will find suitable food products, but is not such a big issue.”

French food:

“People have an impression that in France there are wonderful small bakeries everywhere and cattle in fields on the countryside. And people also talk about wine villages and things like that. In my opinion France is in a better position than many other countries because it is clean in France and French food is cleaner.”

3.5. Affective meanings

The fact that Finns often assign the subcategory of “uninteresting” among affective meanings associated with Swedish food gives additional support for the above-mentioned Finnish perception that Swedish food was “common” everyday food. Finnish consumers did not consider Swedish food to be superlative in any way, and Sweden’s food culture did not seem to offer new insights or inspire enthusiasm in Finns. In the case of German food, the subcategory of “primitive enjoyment” was very much in evidence. Finnish consumers had the impression that German food was excessively indulgent in terms of amount and content (e.g. fatty and salty), but in a simple, peasant way. One affective meaning subcategory clearly characteristic of French food in Finnish minds is “esthetics”. Perhaps stereotypically, Finnish consumers think the French make artistry out of cooking: the French are culinary artists. The French have realized that the appearance and serving of food is as important as its taste. Moreover, Finnish consumers feel that festive occasions are especially suitable for French food (e.g. French pâté over Finnish liver paste at Christmas), which underlines the connection between esthetics and French food. Here again, the following three comments illustrate these interpretations.

Swedish food:

“Professionally I must be interested in Swedish food, but there does not exist that much literature. And when my students have made presentations about different food

cultures, no one wanted to take Sweden. There you see that Swedish food does interest students either.”

German food:

“I think that my most vivid memory of German food is the huge portions they have there. They will put literally a half of a pig in front of you, Eisbein or something...Two liters of beer, it was a hot summer day and that wonderful crispy pork shin. There cannot be anything more heavenly than that.”

French food:

“If you compare that to filled French baguettes you cannot talk about them on the same day, because just seeing them makes you lost, you want to have it right away, because it looks so nice and delicious. In many food cultures artistic aspects are ignored, but in France they have since the times of the Sun King and his artists known that food is art and that good appearance of food will make the food taste much better.”

3.6. Normative meanings

Finnish consumers made mild only moral statements in connection with Swedish food. Thus, the only normative meaning subcategory that appeared here was “*unproblematic favoring*”. Probably due to the long historical relationship between Finland and Sweden, the geographic nearness (shared borders), and the close similarity of the cultures and mental attitudes of the two peoples, the normative climate in Finland is relatively positive towards Sweden and Swedish food. Finnish consumers do not feel guilty buying Swedish food items. Only in the case of German food Finnish consumers presented some *ethical reservations* as a part of normative meaning aspects. Interestingly, the negative associations related to Lidl’s authoritarian leadership culture appeared to some extent to negatively affect Finnish consumers’ perceptions of German food (the so-called generalization effect). Some participants had also seen a critical TV-documentary on animal transportations in Central Europe, which has implied that this transport related to German food. A remarkable normative meaning subcategory concerning French food was “*prestige*”. Apparently Finnish consumers think that French food is most useful for impressing others, that is, to convey the image to guests that their host/ess is a quality-oriented and sophisticated person. The following comments may serve as definitions of these normative meaning subcategories.

Swedish food:

“I don’t get a bad conscience at all, if I buy a piece of Swedish cheese instead of Finnish, even if it is more expensive. If there would be so called Swedish weeks in grocery stores like they have French weeks telling what traditional Swedish food is like, I would certainly try it.”

German food:

“At least I have the principle, that I don’t go to the [German owned chain store] Lidl, because I protest that it is led in a

top–down fashion. I don’t like it at all. And the ethical thoughts are also there in the background. I saw a documentary film on TV. It was about animal transport in Central Europe and it was just appalling...”

“A thought occurred to me that what kind of picture is formed of a person wearing a fur and shopping at the Sokos [Finnish chain store similar to Penny’s or Sears] department store? In other words, what kind of image you want to convey to others. In my case it makes no difference whether I buy Finnish Aura-cheese or French Roquefort-cheese, the product is basically the same and both would satisfy my needs, but people want nowadays to express more their values and status and that makes these things [of French origin] matter more.”

4. Study 2: food origin as a determinant of consumers’ actual food choices

4.1. Method, sample, and data

The second study investigated the effect of food origin on consumers’ actual food choices using experimentation. The experiment focused on analyzing the influence of activating the concept of “domestic origin” on consumers’ choice of a brand of Edam-cheese. Edam-cheese served as the target of choice behavior because Edam-cheeses made in different countries are readily available in Finnish food markets. More importantly, Edam-cheeses represent quite a homogeneous product class, which reduces the number of factors involved in the choice: that is essential when studying the effect of abstract qualities such as food origin.

The methodology of the study is a combination of experimental designs of Dubé and Cantin (2000) and Jaeger and MacFie (2001). This study asked the participants to choose (for personal weekday use) among Finnish, Swedish, German and Dutch Edam-cheese. Before choosing the participants could examine the actual samples of the alternative Edam-cheeses if they wanted. The cheeses were available in their grocery store packages, complete with original labels supplying all of the product information. Additionally, the participants could smell and/or taste chunks of each Edam-cheese offered on small plates.

All persons in the study were Finnish nationals. Three groups participated in the experiments. The first group was the “Control Group” ($n=22$) receiving no manipulation beyond basic instructions to choose a brand of Edam-cheese. The second group was the “Cognitive Group” ($n=24$) and the third was the “Affective Group” ($n=20$). These two groups received manipulating information before they made their actual cheese choice. After arriving at the experimental location, the participants in these two groups heard a cover story while waiting in a separate room from that where the cheeses were. They learned that the arrangements in the choice room were still under way and that the researchers would like to take this opportunity to ask the participants to rank five statements that would supposedly serve as slogans in an upcoming “buy domestic”-campaign. In reality, the researchers carefully

Table 2
The effect of activation of domestic origin on the choice of Edam-cheese

	Control group (n=22)	Cognitive group (n=24)	Affective group (n=20)	Control vs. cognitive	Control vs. affective
Domestic choice:					
Finnish cheese	11/22 50.0%	2/24 8.3%	14/20 70.0%	50.0% vs. 8.3%	50.0% vs. 70%
Foreign choice:					
Swedish cheese	6/22 27.3%	7/24 29.2%	2/20 10.0%	27.3% vs. 29.2%	27.3% vs. 10.0%
German cheese	1/22 4.5%	6/24 25.0%	3/20 15.0%	4.5% vs. 25.0%	4.5% vs. 15.0%
Dutch cheese	4/22 18.2%	9/24 37.5%	1/20 5.0%	18.2% vs. 37.5%	18.2% vs. 5.0%
Domestic vs. foreign choice	50.0% vs. 50.0%	8.3% vs. 91.7%	70.0% vs. 30.0%	t-value=3.459 p-value=.000	t-value=1.353 p-value=.010

designed these statements (using Letarte et al., 1997) to activate the concept of “domestic origin”, either cognitively (e.g. Finnish vegetables are healthy fast-food) or affectively (e.g. Keep your conscience clear — buy Finnish food). The purpose of the cover story was to disassociate the activation task from the actual task of the study, choosing a brand of Edam-cheese.

After selecting the Edam-cheese, the participants sat down and filled in a questionnaire. Their first task was to freely describe their decision process that resulted in their choosing that particular brand of Edam. Second, they answered closed questions regarding the cheese usage. Next, the participants provided information about the country images they had of Finland, Sweden, Germany and The Netherlands. (This paper does not report these results). Then they filled in Shimp and Sharma's (1987) 17-item scale measuring their level of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism here refers to a consumer's tendency to prefer a domestic product to a foreign product. Finally, the participants reported their demographic background data.

Approximately 70% of the participants were female and 30% male. This was a natural outcome of the recruitment process, which focused on persons chiefly responsible for household grocery shopping in Finland. The majority of participants (c. 70%) were younger than 45. Almost half of them had an academic degree, roughly one third had an institute level of education, and the rest had vocational schooling or were students or unemployed. In regard to civil status, 45% of the participants were living with partners and had children, 33% had partners but no children, and 18% lived alone.

4.2. Results

The main results indicate that activation of domestic origin had a dramatic effect on participants' choice of a brand of Edam-cheese (see Table 2). Intriguingly, the nature of the activation task also influenced participants' cheese choice. A simple *t*-test revealed some statistically significant differences

Table 3
Testing differences between groups to explain the main effect

Factor	Control group (n=22)	Cognitive group (n=24)	Affective group (n=20)	Testing differences between groups
1) Gender	Male: 31.8%	Male: 25.0%	Male: 30.0%	Comp. vs. cog. t-value=.502 Not significant
2) Age	Female: 68.2%	Female: 75.0%	Female: 70.0%	Comp. vs. cog. t-value=.851 Not significant
3) Education	30–45: 68.2%	30–45: 79.2%	30–45: 70.0%	Comp. vs. cog. t-value=.851 Not significant
	46–60: 31.8%	46–60: 20.8%	46–60: 30.0%	Comp. vs. aff. t-value=1.375 p-value=.010
	Higher educ.: 86.4%	Higher educ.: 79.2% x	Higher educ.: 60.0%	
	Lower educ.: 13.6%	Lower educ.: 13.6%	Lower educ.: 40.0%	
4) General cheese choice criteria				
a) Taste	Among top 2: 77.3%	Among top 2: 87.5%	Among top 2: 55.0%	Cog. vs. aff. t-value=2.498 p-value=.010
b) Domestic origin	Among top 2: 18.2%	Among top 2: 12.5%	Among top 2: 25.0%	Cog. vs. aff. t-value=1.060 Not significant
c) Price	Among top 2: 18.2%	Among top 2: 29.2%	Among top 2: 25.0%	Comp. vs. cog. t-value=.887 Not significant
5) Edam-cheese consumption	Heavy user: 77.3%	Heavy user: 50.0%	Heavy user: 60.0%	Comp. vs. cog. t-value=2.013 p-value=.005
	Light user: 22.7%	Light user: 50.0%	Light user: 40.0%	Comp. vs. cog. t-value=.320 Not significant
6) Ethnocentrism (mean)	3.66	3.38	3.54	Cog. vs. aff. t-value=1.162 Not significant
7) Likeability of activation statements (mean)		3.26	2.73	

between the different groups in terms of domestic vs. foreign cheese choices. The cognitively activated participants, perhaps surprisingly, showed a distinct tendency to avoid Finnish Edam-cheese in comparison to the Control Group (difference significant at .000 level). In turn, and perhaps more logically, the affectively activated participants exhibited a tendency to favor Finnish Edam-cheese as compared to the Control Group (difference significant at .010 level). In other words, the main effect of activating the concept of ‘domestic origin’ was relatively great, and to some extent unexpected: the cognitive activation of domestic origin actually resulted in favoring foreign food products while the affective activation of domestic origin lead to favoring of domestic food products.

In the absence of pre-experimental hypotheses, various alternative explanations for the main results deserve attention (see Table 3). First, the groups may differ significantly in terms of certain background variables. A series of *t*-tests analyzed these differences. Table 3 presents the results of *t*-tests between the groups. In terms of gender and age distribution, and level of ethnocentrism, the groups do not differ statistically significantly from each other. As regards the educational level, the *t*-test indicates that the Affective Group has a lower level of education as compared to the Control and Cognitive Groups. This raises the question of whether they were more susceptible to the manipulation through activation of the concept of ‘domestic origin’: that, in turn, would in part explain the differences in the results.

The descriptions the participants provided of the process that led to their choice of cheese brand revealed the importance of different criteria in making a choice. The three experimental groups did not emphasize the general cheese choice criteria of ‘domestic origin’ and ‘price’ differently. In regard to other choice criteria, the Cognitive Group consisted of significantly more ‘taste’ oriented participants than did the Affective Group. However, the participants in the Cognitive Group did not justify their foreign cheese choice by referring to ‘taste’ any more than did the participants in the Control and Affective groups. Thus, the smaller proportion of ‘taste’ oriented participants in the Affective Group does not explain the differences in preference of the ‘domestic’ brand.

According to Table 3, the Control Group consisted of significantly more so-called “expert” Edam-cheese consumers. This could at least partially explain the main results, because heavy users of Edam-cheese may be loyal to the Finnish brand Valio (which has been on the Finnish markets “forever”), and they may not care so much that it has a higher price, since they also have a higher educational level and presumably a higher income than most Finns. However, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) have demonstrated that country of origin has a similar and equal effect on the decision-making of both normal and expert consumers.

A final check was to see whether the participants in the Cognitive and Affective groups equally liked the statements which activated the concept of ‘domestic origin’. Significant differences in how much the participants in the two groups liked the statements could have explained the differences in the results, but no significant differences were present. In fact, even though the Cognitive Group liked the ‘domestic origin’

activation statements more than did the Affective Group, the Cognitive Group nonetheless showed a tendency to reject the domestic Finnish Edam, while the Affective Group preferred the domestic over the foreign brands.

5. Discussion and implications

This study contains two separate but related studies: the first is on the creation in the minds of consumers of meanings related to the origin of food, and the second is on the effect of the origin of food as a determinant of consumers’ actual food choices. This combines both qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to investigate different aspects of the same phenomenon. One aim of the study was to address certain shortcomings in the existing body of research on the concept of ‘food origin’ in marketing and consumer behavior.

However, the relatively small size of the data sets in this study admittedly leaves open the possibility of questioning its reliability and the validity of its findings. Further, this is a study of Finnish consumers only, which means its findings may not apply to consumers in other countries. Nonetheless, the present study does contribute to the literature on the subject, and can certainly serve as a basis of comparison for consumer behavior among other nationalities. More research with larger and more diverse samples is necessary to confirm the findings of this study. A worthwhile idea would also be to do a similar study of consumers in other countries, and to then compare the results with those of the present study.

The qualitative study of the creation of meanings in the minds of consumers revealed genuine and fine-grained differences in meanings attached to food products of different origin, lying behind the stereotypes. This signals a need for a thorough inductive interpretive analysis of the meanings consumers attach to the origin of food (cf. Luomala et al., 2006). The dynamic nature of the formation of food origin meanings also presents a challenge. Numerous socio-cultural factors (e.g. values, norms, media, reference groups), and consumer factors (e.g. age, gender, personality, mood), probably influence how many and what kinds of meanings consumers associate with food of various origins. Furthermore, the nature of the food product itself has a role to play in the meaning formation. For example, the data suggest that the more processed the food is, the fewer and the less important are the meanings consumers attach to the country of origin of the food. At the general level, future research on this topic should address how consumers with differing attitudes, lifestyles and cultural values perceive the meanings of food products from different geographical origins.

The results of the small-scale quantitative study presented here were quite startling. First, they demonstrated that activation of domestic origin has a dramatic effect on consumers’ actual food choice. Second, the way in which a piece of information activates the concept of ‘domestic origin’ appears to be influential as well. Cognitive activation appeared to cause consumers to avoid food of domestic origin. This has far-reaching implications for ‘buy domestic’ — campaign planning. In Finland, for example, the majority of the ‘buy domestic’ — campaigns utilize a clearly

cognitive tone. In the light of the present results, an affective ‘buy domestic’ — campaign might be more effective. Some reservations remain though. In the present study, manipulation procedures activated ‘domestic origin’ unconsciously in laboratory-like surroundings. Activating ‘domestic origin’ consciously in a real store environment may produce different results.

Researchers understand surprisingly poorly the processes behind the effects of food origin (Van Ittersum et al., 2003). One possible explanation for the observed main effect in the present study involves considering the interplay of both cognition and affect in consumer decision making (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999). These researchers distinguish between ‘unconscious automatic’ and ‘conscious strategic’ thinking processes. A logical assumption appears to be that cognitive activation of domestic origin has caused the participants in this study to resort to ‘conscious strategic’ thinking processes while the affective activation has triggered ‘unconscious automatic’ thinking processes in participants. Consequently, the participants in the Cognitive Group could have been more consciously analytical processors of information and thus the fact that the Finnish Edam-cheese had the highest price could have contributed to this Group’s favoring of lower priced, foreign, Edam-cheeses. Such a possible explanation needs attention in future research.

From the marketing viewpoint, using the image of a place of origin to differentiate a product is equivalent to applying a branding strategy. However, using country of origin as a base for branding spares the marketer from the long, laborious process of creating brand associations, because most consumers already have certain associations attached to the country of origin. (Van Ittersum et al., 2003) Still, country of origin-based branding is challenging if not problematic, because the meanings consumers associate with food origin are partly uncontrollable. Hopefully this article will stimulate additional research that will help food marketers to more fully use the origin of food as a source of competitive advantage.

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