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Consuming Finnishness

Immigrants' engagement with local brands, acculturation and identity negotiation in Finland

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ABSTRACT:

Adjustment to a new society is not a simple process, as it requires the reconsideration of many everyday practices. One such practice is consumption. In the host society, local brands may function as cultural symbols that reflect the society's values, practices, and shared meanings. The objective of this study is to examine how immigrants living in Finland engage with and relate to Finnish local brands through consumption, and how these consumption practices connect to identity negotiation. The study focuses on Finnishness as the cultural context in which local brands are consumed. The theoretical discussion draws on consumer acculturation, cultural meaning, brand consumption, the cultural meanings of brands, and identity negotiation. At the end of the theoretical section, a conceptual framework is presented to structure the central levels of the study. At the first level, acculturation functions as the broader context in which individual actions and experiences are situated. At the second level, identity negotiation in the host society is examined. At the third level, the focus is on the consumption of Finnish local brands as an everyday practice, including both practical engagement with brands and the meanings attached to them. In this framework, Finnishness is understood as the cultural and symbolic environment through which local brand consumption becomes meaningful. The study was conducted within a qualitative, interpretivist research paradigm. The empirical material consists of ten semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, with attention to recurring themes, differences between participants, and contextual meanings. The findings show that Finnishness was understood not only as national identity, but also as a recognisable cultural style associated with calmness, order, personal space, honesty, nature, restraint, and practicality. In participants' everyday lives, Finnish local brands became visible especially through routine consumption, trust, familiarity, perceived quality, and social recognition. For some participants, consuming Finnish brands supported a sense of belonging and helped them feel socially accepted in Finnish society.At the same time, the findings show that Finnish brand consumption was not always conscious, symbolic, or guided by identity-related concerns. In many cases, Finnish brands gradually became a natural part of everyday life. Overall, the study suggests that Finnish local brands can function as cultural resources in immigrants' identity negotiation and sense of belonging, but their role is context-dependent and often subtle. Local brands do not operate as direct indicators of integration. Instead, their meaning is constructed through everyday practices, social recognition, and broader cultural meanings related to Finnishness.

KEYWORDS: Immigrants, consumer acculturation, identity, brand, consumption

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Sopeutuminen uuteen yhteiskuntaan ei ole yksinkertainen prosessi, sillä se edellyttää monien arkipäiväisten käytäntöjen uudelleentarkastelua. Yksi tällainen käytäntö on kuluttaminen. Vastaanottavassa yhteiskunnassa paikalliset brändit voivat toimia kulttuurisina symboleina, jotka heijastavat yhteiskunnan arvoja, käytäntöjä ja jaettuja merkityksiä. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tarkastella, miten Suomessa asuvat maahanmuuttajat suhtautuvat suomalaisiin paikallisiin brändeihin kulutuksen kautta ja miten nämä kulutuskäytännöt kytkeytyvät yksilön identiteetin muodostumiseen. Tutkimus keskittyy suomalaisuuteen erityisenä kulttuurisena kontekstina, jossa paikallisia brändejä kulutetaan. Teoreettinen tarkastelu rakentuu kuluttaja-akkulturaation, kulttuurisen merkityksen muodostumisen, brändikulutuksen, brändien kulttuuristen merkitysten sekä identiteetin ja kuulumisen käsitteiden varaan. Teoreettisen osuuden lopussa esitetään käsitteellinen viitekehys, joka jäsentää tutkimuksen keskeiset tasot. Ensimmäisellä tasolla akkulturaatio toimii laajempana kontekstina, johon yksilön toiminta ja kokemukset sijoittuvat. Toisella tasolla tarkastellaan identiteetin muodostumista vastaanottavassa yhteiskunnassa. Kolmannella tasolla tarkastelun kohteena on suomalaisten paikallisten brändien kulutus konkreettisena arjen toimintana. Tällä tasolla korostuvat sekä brändien käytännöllinen käyttö että niihin liittyvien merkitysten muodostuminen. Suomalaisuus ymmärretään tässä viitekehyksessä kulttuurisena ja symbolisena ympäristönä, jossa paikallisten brändien kulutus saa merkityksensä. Tutkimus on toteutettu laadullisessa ja interpretatiivisessa tutkimusparadigmassa. Empiirinen aineisto koostuu kymmenestä puolistrukturoidusta haastattelusta. Aineisto analysoitiin temaattisen analyysin avulla kiinnittäen huomiota toistuviin teemoihin, osallistujien välisiin eroihin sekä kontekstuaalisiin merkityksiin. Tulokset osoittavat, että suomalaisuus ymmärrettiin paitsi kansallisena identiteettinä myös tunnistettavana kulttuurisena tyylinä, johon liitettiin rauhallisuus, järjestys, henkilökohtainen tila, rehellisyys, luonto, pidättyväisyys ja käytännöllisyys. Osallistujien arjessa suomalaiset paikalliset brändit tulivat näkyviksi erityisesti rutiininomaisen kulutuksen, luottamuksen, tuttuuden, koetun laadun ja sosiaalisen tunnistettavuuden kautta. Osalle osallistujista suomalaisten brändien kuluttaminen tuki kuulumisen tunnetta ja auttoi heitä kokemaan itsensä sosiaalisesti hyväksytyiksi osaksi suomalaista yhteiskuntaa. Samanaikaisesti tulokset osoittavat, että suomalaisten brändien kulutus ei ollut aina tietoista, symbolista tai identiteettikysymysten ohjaamaa. Monissa tapauksissa suomalaiset brändit muuttuivat ajan myötä luonnolliseksi osaksi arkipäiväistä elämää. Tutkimus osoittaa, että suomalaiset paikalliset brändit voivat toimia kulttuurisina resursseina maahanmuuttajien identiteetin muodostumisessa ja kuulumisen kokemuksessa, mutta niiden rooli on kontekstisidonnainen ja usein hienovarainen. Paikalliset brändit eivät toimi suorina integraation indikaattoreina, vaan niiden merkitys rakentuu arjen käytäntöjen, sosiaalisen tunnistettavuuden sekä suomalaisuuteen liittyvien laajempien kulttuuristen merkitysten kautta.

AVAINSANAT: Immigrants, consumer acculturation, identity, brand, consumption

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1 Introduction

A more globalised world has led to more people moving across borders than ever before (Castles et al., 2014; Urry, 2007). In Finland, the number of residents with a foreign background has increased markedly over the past two decades (Statistics Finland, 2025). As migration becomes a more common part of contemporary societies, questions of adjustment to a new cultural environment have grown in relevance (Castles et al., 2014).

Research on migration and integration shows that adjustment to a host society extends beyond employment or language acquisition and involves wider experiences of life in the host society (Ager & Strang, 2008; Yijälä, 2019). One underexplored part of this process is everyday consumption, because routine marketplace practices are one way through which individuals encounter cultural norms and learn how local life is organised (Warde, 2005). This study uses acculturation as a framework for understanding that adjustment process (Berry, 1997). Ward and Geeraert (2016) describe acculturation as a process that "refers to changes in an individual's 'cultural patterns' (i.e., practices, values, identities) resulting from sustained first hand intercultural contact and subsequently affecting the individual's psychological well-being and social functioning" (p. 98). In this sense, markets and brands form part of the symbolic environment of acculturation, as they offer culturally meaningful cues through which shared norms, values, and socially recognisable ways of living may be interpreted and negotiated (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004; Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

Consumer research has long linked consumption to identity work by showing how engagement with brands can serve as resources for self-definition (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Reed et al., 2012). Recent integrative work likewise positions identity as a central driver of marketplace behaviour (Saint Clair, 2023). Classic contributions argue that possessions and consumption can become part of how people construct and experience the self (Belk, 1988), while cultural approaches show how marketplace practices are embedded in broader social narratives and meaning systems (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004). Relocation often requires learning unfamiliar cultural norms and rebuilding

routines, including consumer practices which can make these processes feel more sensitive and consequential (Peñaloza, 1994; Oswald, 1999; Üstüner & Holt, 2007).

For immigrants, the symbolic dimension of brands may be particularly important, because entering a new cultural environment often means having only limited access to implicit cultural knowledge and facing uncertainty about local practices and familiarities (Peñaloza, 1994; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Consumer acculturation research suggests that local consumption may serve not only functional purposes, but also exploratory and interpretive ones as immigrants learn about the host culture through the marketplace (Oswald, 1999; Üstüner & Holt, 2007).

Prior research suggests that marketplace choices, including local brands and culturally coded consumption, may support social positioning and perceived legitimacy in the host society (Leudicke, 2011; Üstüner & Holt, 2007). These insights point directly to the focus of the present study, which asks how immigrants understand Finnishness as a cultural context for consumption in Finland, how they engage with local brands, how they interpret the meaning of these choices, and whether such consumption plays a role in identity negotiation within the host society.

1.1 Research gap

Finland offers a meaningful context this inquiry. National identity here is continuously produced through narratives and public discourse (Paasi, 1997), and certain Finnish brands, especially in design, have become tightly woven into that national imagery, evoking ideas of everyday aesthetics and “good living” (Korvenmaa, 2009). Brands such as Marimekko actively mobilise this cultural heritage as part of their meaning and value (Lindberg-Repo & Dube, 2016).

Yet existing research leaves two important questions underexplored. First, work on national and heritage branding has largely theorised brands as *carriers of collective identity* (Beverland et al., 2021; Holt, 2004), without asking how, those who did not grow with

these cultural codes, come to interpret and engage with them. Second consumer acculturation research has established that consumption is a key site where immigrants learn culture (Peñaloza, 1994; Oswald, 1999), and that identity work in the marketplace can unfold under structural constraints and unequal power relations (Üstüner & Holt, 2007). However, this scholarship has focused on broader "host vs. heritage" consumption patterns, ethnic consumption, and acculturation outcomes (Peñaloza, 1994; Oswald, 1999; Üstüner & Holt, 2007), or on intergroup dynamics viewed through host-society responses to immigrants' marketplace practices (Luedicke, 2015). How immigrants engage with and make meaning of specific host-country brands remains largely unexamined.

This study addresses both gaps. In the Finnish context it examines how immigrants engage with local brands in everyday life, how they interpret with them, and whether such consumption becomes a resource for identity negotiation in the host society.

1.2 Objective of the study and research questions

The objective of this study is to explore how immigrants in Finland relate to local brands, and the cultural meanings of Finnishness these brands carry through everyday consumption, and how, if at all, this relates to their identity negotiation.

To meet the objective, the study addresses the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How do immigrants understand Finnishness?

RQ2: How do immigrants engage with local brands in their everyday consumption?

RQ3: How do immigrants interpret the meaning of consuming local brands?

RQ4: What role, if any, does the consumption of Finnish brands play in immigrants' identity negotiation in the host society?

Research questions guide the empirical investigation toward understanding local brand consumption as an everyday practice through which cultural meanings are interpreted, and identity may be negotiated. By focusing on the Finnishness and Finnish context, the study contributes to consumer acculturation research by clarifying how host-country local brands can function as both practical choices and symbolic resources in immigrants' identity negotiation and experience.

1.3 Research method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were selected as they allow for both consistency across participants, and flexibility in exploring individual experiences in depth (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 94). More detailed methodological choices are presented in Chapter 3.

1.4 Research structure

This work is organised into five main chapters they are also, each serving a distinct role in addressing the research objective and guiding the reader through the study.

1. The first chapter introduces the topic, presents the background of the study, defines the research problem, identifies the research gap, and outlines the objective and research questions.
2. The second chapter builds the theoretical foundation of the study by reviewing literature on acculturation, identity negotiation, and consumption and brands. These areas are brought together in a conceptual framework that guides the empirical analysis.
3. The third chapter describes the methodology, including the research design, data collection, and data analysis. It also discusses the methodological choices, ethical considerations, and issues of research quality.

4. The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings of the study.
5. The fifth and final chapter summarises the main results, outlines theoretical and managerial implications of the study, discusses the limitations and suggests directions for future research.

This overall structure of this thesis is illustrated in Figure 1. which summarises the progression from research context and theory to methodology, findings, and conclusions.

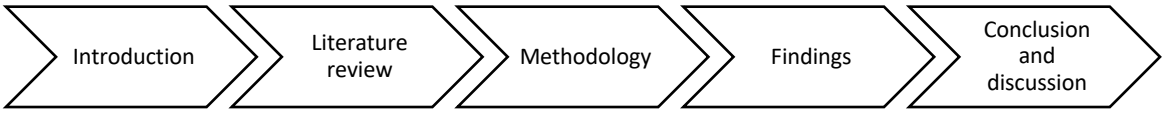

Figure 1. Structure of the thesis.

1.5 Key definitions

Acculturation refers to the changes that may occur when individuals live in sustained contact with a new cultural environment. The concept is understood as an ongoing and context-dependent process involving changes in practices, meanings, and orientations in relation to the host society, rather than as a fixed or linear outcome (Berry, 1997; Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

The term **immigrant** used in this thesis refers to individuals who move to a foreign country with the intention of living there long-term or permanently. By focusing on permanent or long-term settlement, the concept captures individuals who are likely to engage continuously with the host society and its culture. This definition follows the Cambridge dictionary, which defines an immigrant as *"a person who has come to a different country in order to live there permanently"* (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

A **brand** is understood as a dynamic, co-created entity formed through an interconnected network of relationships. Moving beyond the traditional firm–customer dyad, a

brand is seen as an evolving social construct shaped by the ongoing interactions, identity work, and value co-creation of multiple stakeholders (Farzana, 2016, p. 5).

Finnishness refers to a socially and culturally recognisable set of meanings associated with Finland. Finnishness is an imagined, collective national identity that lives in a mental "mind-scape" built from cultural memory, symbols and historical narrative (Paatela-Nieminen et al., 2016, p. 233).

In this work, **identity** is understood as an ongoing process of self-understanding and social positioning that is formed in relation to others and to the surrounding social world (Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2014).

2 Literature review

In this chapter, the theoretical foundation for the study is built. First, the chapter defines acculturation as the context of adjustment to a new cultural environment. It then discusses identity in the host society, focusing on belonging and social positioning. Next, it introduces consumption, brands, and Finnishness as key concepts for analysing acculturation and identity-related processes. The chapter ends with a framework that summarises these elements and clarifies the analytical logic of the study.

2.1 Acculturation and consumer acculturation

Berry et al. (2006, p. 305) describe acculturation process as one of cultural and psychological change that occur as a result of intercultural contact. These changes, it highlights shifts in group customs, as well as in economic and political life. It also includes psychological changes, such as changes in attitudes, cultural identity, and social behaviour.

In migration settings, acculturation is rarely a simple and linear journey toward a fixed end point. Instead, it develops over time, looks different across areas of life, and is heavily transformed by the social and institutional conditions of the host society (Ward & Geeraert, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2010). Recent research frames acculturation as situation dependent. The same person might feel strongly integrated in one context (for example, at work or in education) while feeling less integrated in another (for example, in social networks or informal cultural norms) (Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

Consumer acculturation extends this perspective into the marketplace. Early work set it as a process that unfolds through repeated exposure to unfamiliar products, brands, retail environments, and marketing messages through which immigrants gradually make sense of consumption in the host society (Peñaloza, 1994). This involves more than simply learning “new information.” It also means working through culturally patterned routines and norms that are built into ordinary consumption practices (Peñaloza, 1994; Warde, 2005).

Consumption can support practical settlement such as learning what to buy, where to buy it, and how local systems work, but it can also carry symbolic importance, such as managing social visibility, reducing feelings of difference, or building a sense of familiarity (Askegaard et al., 2005; Peñaloza, 1994). Acculturation helps make visible how marketplace behaviour can intersect with questions of identity, without assuming that these links are experienced in the same way by everyone (Schwartz et al., 2010, p. 10). Because consumption is social, this learning often happens through watching others and receiving feedback, while at the same time, prior cultural knowledge continues to matter and is carried into the new context (Peñaloza, 1994; John, 1999). In practice, then, consumer acculturation usually includes both continuity and change, immigrants draw on familiar consumption schemas, but modify them (Peñaloza, 1994; Schwartz et al., 2010).

Oswald (1999, p. 303) describes consumer acculturation as a process of cultural swapping. This adds a perspective on how immigrants transfer meanings across cultural systems and combine elements from both. In this view, acculturation in the marketplace is less about abandoning heritage consumption and more about combining and integrating elements from both cultural contexts (Oswald, 1999).

2.2 Identity in a host society

2.2.1 Identity

Identity is often framed as the answer to a simple question: *who am I, and how do I fit in?* In research, identity is generally understood as an ongoing way of making sense of oneself in relation to others and the social world (Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2014). Identity can be understood as an individual phenomenon or as a collective one that is linked to a group of people (De Fina & van Dijk, 2011, p. 268). Different cultural and national identities can be seen as examples of broader collective identity categories to which individuals belong and with which they identify themselves (e.g., Hall, 1999).

As social beings, people tend to form their identity through different categories. Just as this sense of identity is constructed from within, it is also transformed from the outside, through external factors such as recognition from others and the surrounding social environment. All of this helps individuals position themselves, define their identity, and work with it (Goffman, 1959; Jenkins, 2014).

People do not necessarily inhabit one stable identity across all situations. Instead, identity may shift across different settings and relationships, for example between home and work, private and public life, or interactions with co-nationals and members of the receiving society (Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2014).

2.2.2 Identity negotiation in the host society

Identity in the host society rarely stabilises once and for all. Instead, it can be modified in interaction and tested every day, in situation where a person may feel ordinary in one moment and marked as different in the next (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1996).

A useful way to make process more concrete is through belonging. Kuurne and Vieno (2022, p. 280) underline its fundamental importance: *"Human beings need belonging to survive. Exile and isolation have historically been among the most severe forms of punishment."* They develop the concept of belonging work to capture the effortful side of belonging: people actively try to accomplish belonging in specific situations, and these attempts become visible through speech, behaviour, and embodied cues that others interpret in context (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022).

Belonging work is closely related to identity negotiation as an interactional process. Identity negotiation refers to the ways people try to establish who they are in social situations, while others simultaneously respond to and redefine that identity claim. Swann (1987) describes it as a process through which interaction partners come to temporary agreements about the identities a person is to assume in a given situation (Swann, 1987; Goffman, 1959).

A key point in this perspective is that identity work always involves both individual effort and social response. Unfortunately, these components do not always align. As Kuurne and Vieno (2022, p. 284) note, “there is always potentially a gap between efforts made to belong and their recognition.” Negotiation takes place within this gap. What a person does to signal belonging may not be read as intended, because recognition depends on how others interpret these cues in context (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022; Swann, 1987).

Immigrants often move between identity positions over time, feeling more settled in some domains and more uncertain in others (Cárdenas & Sablonnière, 2020, p. 191). One domain where this negotiation can arise is consumption. The choices people make and the brands they engage with can carry signals that others read and respond to. The following section develops this argument.

2.3 Choosing local

2.3.1 How meanings form in consumption

When people take mass-produced objects and adapt them for personal use, they assign both personal and collective significance to them, turning simple material items into meaningful parts of life (Warde, 2005, p. 291). Meaning is not an optional extra added onto consumption, it is built into routines themselves, and people often learn counts in particular setting through repeated participation, without being able to clearly express the rules they are following (Warde, 2005, p. 287).

Not all forms of consumption carry the same symbolic weight. Brands differ from generic products because they condense culturally shared meanings into recognisable symbols, and for this reason brand choices can function as socially readable markers through which individuals communicate identity-related meanings (Holt, 2004; Reed et al., 2012; Saint Clair, 2023).

McCracken (1986) offers a convenient way to describe how these meanings move. Cultural meaning can become attached to goods through branding, design, and communication, and is reinforced through ownership and use over time. Importantly, meaning is not produced only by marketing, it is also formed and fixed socially through what others treat as normal (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 1995).

Finally, many consumption choices are guided by automatic processes rather than deliberate reflection, meaning that consumers may not always be able to express what their choices signal socially and may only become aware of this when the context changes or when someone else reacts to their choice (Kahneman, 2011; Wood & Neal, 2009; Zaltman, 2003).

2.3.2 Local brand consumption

The rise of “local” consumption has been discussed in relation to broader cultural narratives that frame local purchasing as a more sustainable alternative to globalised markets (Siamagka & Balabanis, 2015). Motives for choosing local often combine practical and symbolic layers. On the practical side, local options may be easier to access (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). On the symbolic side, localness can connect to ideas about community and authenticity and become part of how consumers signal their values (Beverland, 2005; McCracken, 1986). In addition, “choosing local” can carry moral language, for example, supporting the national economy, acting responsibly, or being a “good” consumer. In this sense, such choices are not always purely personal; they can also be socially evaluative (Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Siamagka & Balabanis, 2015).

In immigrant contexts, these general motives do not disappear, but they may be accompanied by additional ones. As discussed in section 2.1, consumer acculturation research shows that immigrants engage with the host marketplace through repeated encounters with products, retail settings, and social cues, gradually learning what everyday consumption practices represent in that society (Peñaloza, 1994). Local consumption can

therefore function as a cue of alignment with host norms even when the person's motives are mainly practical (Luedicke, 2011; Üstüner & Holt, 2007).

2.3.3 Brands as carriers of cultural meanings

Brand as a term can be identified in a several ways. It is often defined as a name, a logo, or a set of associations that used to identify the products (Briciu & Briciu, 2020, p. 96). Cultural research shows that brands work as symbolic objects that can carry shared meanings and provide recognisable cues about what "fits" within a particular society (Holt, 2004; Schroeder, 2009).

Holt (2004) argues that some brands gain cultural power by expressing widely resonant stories and symbolic "solutions" to collective tensions, becoming icons not only through product performance but through cultural relevance. In this view, meaning emerges through an ongoing cultural process in which brand communication, media discourse, and consumer practices interact over time (Holt, 2004).

A complementary argument comes from cultural analyses that describe branding as part of social infrastructure. Lury (2004) presents brands as interfaces that mediate relationships between producers and consumers, and then change meaning and value circulate in market life. From this perspective, brands make certain meanings more understandable and easier to "read" in everyday consumption contexts. They compress values, aesthetics, and expectations into concrete forms, so that cultural meanings become attached to goods in ways that feel recognasible (Lury, 2004; McCracken, 1986).

In addition, Torelli et al. (2010, pp. 114–115) conceptualise brand symbolism in relation to shared cultural realities. Brands can represent cultural values and group characteristics, and consumers may use them to communicate identity-relevant positions. A similar perspective is offered by Briciu and Briciu (2020), who analyse cultural and economic branding theory and argue that brands can be understood as symbolic structures that carry meaning within a cultural context. From this perspective, the importance of a

brand lies in its ability to connect products with shared symbolic references. They suggest that brand value often goes beyond functional utility and becomes part of identity work and broader cultural meaning.

2.3.4 Finnishness

“Finnishness” is not a universal concept that can be copied and applied to any country in the same way. It is a culturally specific label that gains importance because it is performed and recognised in Finnish society, and through the ways Finland is represented externally (Paatela-Nieminen et al., 2016, p. 233). In branding terms, Finnishness can be understood as a cluster of associations that helps people understand what is “typically Finnish,” even when its exact content is not explicitly defined.

A complementary perspective is offered by Tillotson et al. (2021, p. 265), who show how Finnish nation-branding discourses are interwoven with the sauna as a symbolic resource of Finnishness, and how this resource becomes part of legitimising and narrating the Finnish place brand. This illustrates how Finnishness can also be anchored in culturally specific practices and concepts with strong symbolic visibility.

More broadly, research that treats brands as cultural objects suggests that “national identity” can become embedded in specific brands that are publicly acknowledged as representing the country because they have been culturally positioned that way over time (Närvänen et al., 2016).

Thus, it can be argued that the concept of Finnishness outlines how many phenomena in the country are understood, and branding is only one of its possible expressions. At the same time, it remains an important component, as it forms part of the overall image of the brand.

2.4 Conceptual framework

At the end of the literature review chapter, a conceptual framework is presented to clarify how the key parts of the theory come together in one model.

The conceptual framework organises the literature review into three nested layers (see Figure 3). The outer layer represents acculturation, understood as the broader process of living and adjusting in a new cultural environment, shaped by host-society conditions and uneven participation across everyday domains (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Within this broader context, consumer acculturation captures the marketplace-related dimension of adaptation, where immigrants repeatedly encounter host-country consumption practices (Oswald, 1999; Peñaloza, 1994).

The middle layer represents identity negotiation in the host society. Identity negotiation refers to how people attempt to establish "who they are" in interaction, while others respond to, confirm, or redefine that identity claim (Goffman, 1959; Swann, 1987). This layer also includes belonging work, where efforts to belong may or may not be recognised depending on how others interpret cues in context (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022).

The innermost layer specifies Finnish brand consumption, where these processes become observable. Brands are seen as culturally meaningful objects whose significance extends beyond functional attributes (Holt, 2004; Lury, 2004; McCracken, 1986). Within this layer, the framework distinguishes between practical engagement with Finnish brands and meaning-making. Finnishness is positioned as a culturally circulating meaning that renders local brands socially readable as "Finnish" and provides the symbolic background through which brand meanings can be interpreted. The framework does not treat brand consumption as a direct measure of integration, but as an everyday domain through which acculturation and identity negotiation can be examined.

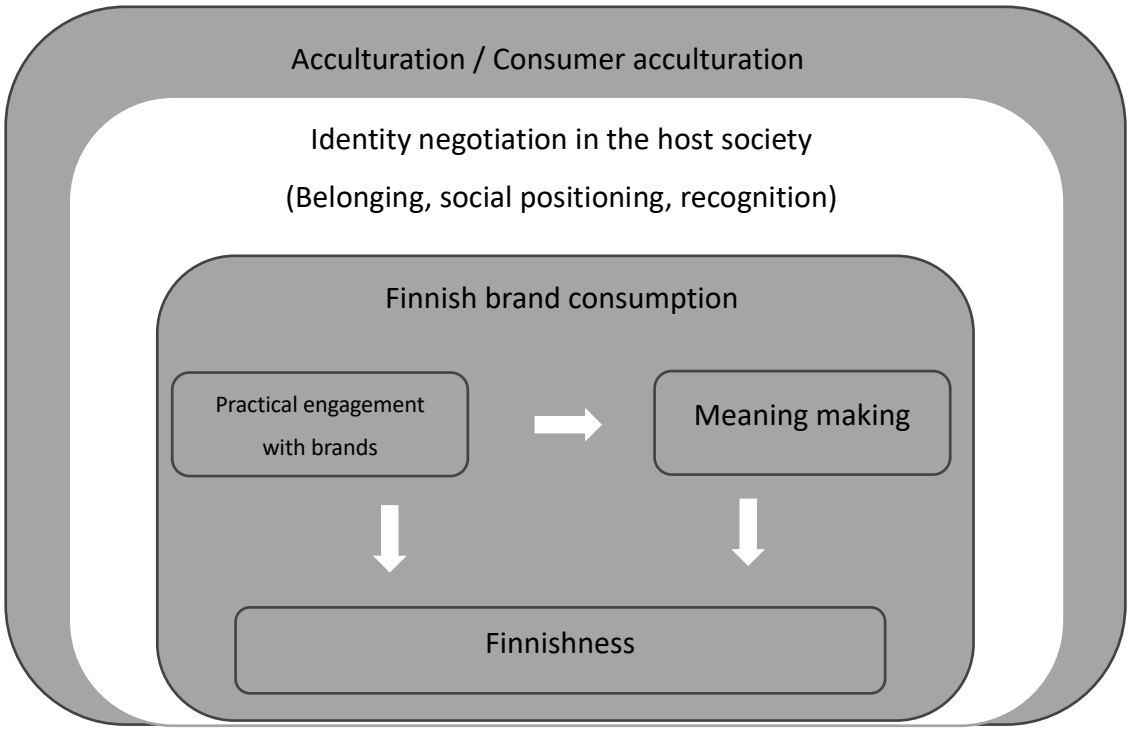

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the study

3 Research methodology

This chapter explains and justifies the methodological choices made in the study. It introduces the research approach and method, explains why interviews are used as the primary data collection technique, outlines the processes of data collection and analysis, and concludes with considerations related to reliability, ethics, and the use of AI in the research process.

The structure of the chapter follows the “research onion” proposed by Saunders et al. (2007, p. 112), which presents methodology as a set of interrelated layers: research philosophy, research approach, research strategy, methodological choice, time horizon, and techniques and procedures.

According to Saunders et al. (2007), the research onion consists of several interrelated layers that guide the design of a study. The first layer research philosophy concerns assumptions about how knowledge can be produced and what counts as legitimate understanding. The second layer research approach addresses the relationship between theory and empirical material, often discussed through deductive and inductive logic. This is followed by methodological choice and research strategy, which together shape the overall empirical investigation. The inner layers concern the time horizon of the study and the specific techniques and procedures used for data collection and analysis.

Figure 4 presents the “research onion” as adapted to this study. At the level of research philosophy, the study is aligned with an interpretivist position. At the level of research approach, the study follows an abductive logic. The research strategy is an exploratory qualitative interview study. Semi-structured interviews are choice of method. The time horizon is cross-sectional, meaning data capture participants’ interpretations at the time of the interviews, while still allowing temporal dynamics. Finally, the study’s techniques and procedures consist of purposeful participant selection, a theme-based interview guide grounded in the theoretical framework, and thematic analysis (Saunders et al., 2007).

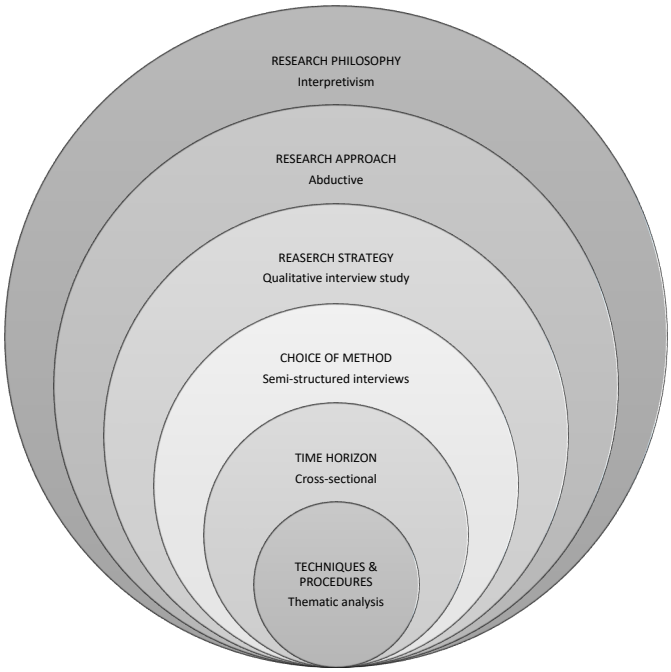

Figure 3. Research onion (Adapted from Saunders et al., 2007, p.102).

3.1 Research design

3.1.1 Research philosophy, approach and strategy

This study is based on an interpretivist research philosophy. Saunders et al., (2007, p. 106) describe interpretivism as an approach that seeks to understand social reality through the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. In contrast to positivism, which aims to identify objective patterns and generalisable laws, interpretivism assumes that social reality is subjective, socially constructed, and context dependent.

Interpretivism is particularly suitable when research focuses on human beings as social actors. People do not merely react to external conditions; they actively interpret their surroundings and interactions (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 106). Saunders et al., (2007, p. 107) link this view to phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, both of which

emphasise meaning making. In addition, interpretivist research requires the researcher to approach participants' perspectives empathetically and to understand their social world from their point of view (Saunders et al., 2007).

In terms of the relationship between theory and empirical material, the present study follows an abductive research approach. Saunders et al. (2007, p. 117) distinguish deductive and inductive reasoning by the direction of inquiry: deduction moves from theory to empirical testing, whereas induction moves from empirical observations to conceptual understanding. An abductive approach differs from both by combining these logics. Abductive reasoning involves continuous movement between empirical material and theoretical ideas in order to develop a more refined interpretation of the phenomenon under study (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

The present study adopts an exploratory qualitative research strategy. An exploratory strategy is appropriate when a research topic is not yet sufficiently understood in a specific context (Saunders et al., 2012). In the present case, although concepts such as acculturation and identity-related consumption have been widely discussed in prior literature, the specific question of local brand consumption in Finland remains relatively underexplored. For this reason, the study requires a flexible strategy capable of producing context-sensitive understanding.

3.1.2 Choice of method

Qualitative data are most often generated through interviews or other methods designed to elicit rich, descriptive accounts (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 135). Interviews can take many forms, including structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (open-ended), standardised, non-standardised, responded or informant and they may be conducted individually or in groups, either face-to-face or remotely (Saunders et al., 2007, pp. 312-313).

The primary data collection method in this study is the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research when the aim is to explore participants' views in depth while maintaining a clear connection to the themes of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Saunders et al., 2012). In this format, the researcher prepares a set of guiding topics and key questions in advance, but the order, wording, and follow-up questions can vary depending on the interview situation.

Most of the interviews were conducted online, while one interview was conducted face-to-face. Online interviewing made participation easier for interviewees living in different locations but also it supported flexible recruitment and access to participants (Salmons, 2015, p. 39). In methodological terms, both formats were suitable because the focus of the study was on participants' verbal accounts.

3.1.3 Time horizon

In terms of time horizon, the present study is cross-sectional. Saunders et al. (2007, p. 148) explain that a cross-sectional design can be understood as a "snapshot" taken at one point in time, whereas a longitudinal design is closer to a "diary" that follows developments over an extended period.

This work focuses on how immigrants in Finland describe their current or recent relationships with Finnish local brands, and how they interpret these experiences in relation to identity. Although the interviews included a few questions that invited participants to reflect on how meanings may have changed over the years, the aim was not to systematically track change over time.

As Saunders et al., (2007, p. 148) note, cross-sectional designs are common in academic projects with clear time constraints. In qualitative research, cross-sectional studies often rely on interviews conducted within a relatively short data collection window, which also applies to the present study.

3.1.4 Techniques and procedures

At the last layer of Saunders et al's (2007) research onion are the study's techniques and procedures. This layer concerns the practical implementation of the research design, including how data are collected and how they are analysed. In the present study, the techniques and procedures consist of qualitative, interview-based data collection and subsequent thematic analysis of the interview material.

The empirical material was collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed around the thesis's main themes and aligned with the central research questions. A semi-structured format ensured that the discussion remained relevant to the research aims while still giving participants space to introduce issues that mattered from their own perspective.

3.2 Choosing participants for the interviews

Participants were selected based on their relevance to the research topic. From researcher perspective, was important to recruit interviewees with varied personal and cultural backgrounds to capture wider variation in experiences and interpretations. Participants were recruited through the Facebook group *"Expats and Foreigners in Finland"* as well as through the interviewer's own network.

In total, 10 interviewees participated in the study. Their background information is presented in Table 1. The sample included participants from nine countries of origin. Participants had lived in Finland for between 4 and 24 years, allowing the study to include individuals at different stages of long-term settlement. The sample also included different genders and three age groups (25–34, 35–44, and 45–54). These characteristics were considered important for exploring whether similar themes emerged across different life situations and backgrounds.

Table 1. Interviewed participants and their background.

Interviewee	Age group	Gender	Country of origin	Years living in Finland	Method
H1	25–34	Male	Russia	16	Teams
H2	25–34	Female	Russia	14	Teams
H3	35–44	Female	Belarus	24	Teams
H4	25–34	Female	Poland	10	Teams
H5	25–34	Female	Greece	10	Teams
H6	25–34	Female	Latvia	14	Zoom
H7	25–34	Male	Bngladesh	7	Teams
H8	25–34	Female	Estonia	10	Live session
H9	25–34	Female	Lithuania	4	Teams
H10	45–54	Female	Romania	5	Teams

The final sample is not intended to be statistically representative of all immigrants in Finland. However, it provides a sufficiently diverse range of perspectives to support the qualitative aims of the study.

3.3 Data collection

Data collection for this study took place between 1 March and 13 March 2026. During this period, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews form the primary empirical material of the study and were collected within a short, clearly defined time frame, which aligns with the cross-sectional nature of the research.

All interviews were conducted anonymously. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and how their data would be used in the thesis. It was agreed with each participant that only limited background information necessary for analysis and reporting would be included. This information consisted of country of origin, years lived in Finland, age group, and gender. No names or other directly identifying details were collected or reported.
This approach was important for two reasons. First, using selected background variables made it possible to contextualise the interview material and explore how similar themes appear across participants with different life context. Second, anonymity helped create a safer interview setting, particularly because the discussions included personal reflections on personal themes.

Interview durations ranged from 44 to 74 minutes (see Table 2). This recorded duration does not include additional time spent before and after each interview. Before the formal interview began, time was often used to establish rapport and create a comfortable atmosphere. After the interview, there was typically a short concluding discussion during which participants could reflect on how the interview felt.

Table 2. Interview date and duration.

Interviewee	Interview date	Interview duration (min)
H1	1.3.2026	60
H2	6.3.2026	72
H3	6.3.2026	62
H4	7.3.2026	54
H5	8.3.2026	51
H6	9.3.2026	68
H7	10.3.2026	62
H8	11.3.2026	74
H9	11.3.2026	44
H10	13.3.2026	55

The interview guide (Appendix 1) was organised into six thematic blocks:

1. Background
2. Finnishness and cultural expectations
3. Acculturation
4. Everyday consumption and engagement with Finnish brands
5. Identity
6. Closing reflections (an open opportunity to add anything important)

The final section gave participants space to share additional thoughts that had not arisen during the main conversation. Several participants used this opportunity to add reflections outside the planned thematic structure.

During the early stage of data collection, the interview process was slightly refined. After the first two interviews, it became clear that certain key concepts were not equally self-explanatory to all participants. A brief clarification was therefore added before the main discussion to explain how terms such as *Finnishness*, *acculturation*, and *identity* were used in the context of the study.

All interviews were audio/video recorded for transcription. Participants were informed about recording in advance in the interview invitation and were asked again for permission at the beginning of the interview. This procedure supported ethical transparency and ensured that participants understood how the material would be used. Recordings were used solely for research purposes and enabled accurate transcription for subsequent thematic analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. This method was considered appropriate because it offers a structured yet flexible way of identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for interview-based studies when the aim is to move from detailed individual accounts to broader thematic patterns, while remaining grounded in participants' own expressions and experiences (Ahmed et al., 20225).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model remains a central framework for thematic analysis. It includes data familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and the final write-up.

The analysis began with familiarisation with the data. All interview transcripts were read several times to gain an overall understanding of the material and to become closely acquainted with participants' accounts. Since the interviews included both English- and Russian-language material, particular attention was paid to preserving the meanings expressed by participants during the reading and note-making process. At this stage, initial

observations were recorded regarding repeated ideas and notable similarities across interviews.

After this, the data were coded manually. Coding focused on segments of the interviews that related to participants' experiences of Finnish brands, their perceptions of Finnishness, their everyday consumption, and the ways these were connected to their identity.

In the next phase, related codes were compared across the dataset and grouped into thematic categories. This process involved moving back and forth between individual excerpts and the dataset to refine the developing themes and ensure that they reflected patterns present across the interviews.

Through this iterative process, four main themes were identified: *Finnishness as the phenomena, everyday engagement with Finnish brands, meanings attached to Finnish brands, and consumption and identity negotiation*. These themes formed the basis for the findings chapter.

Throughout the analysis, the aim was to remain close to participants' accounts while also identifying patterns across the data. The findings therefore present themes grounded in the interview material.

3.5 Ethics of the study

Ethical considerations were central throughout the research process, from participant recruitment to data collection, transcription, analysis, and reporting. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) argue, ethics in qualitative research is not confined to a single stage; it concerns the entire process, including how participants are approached, how data are handled, and how findings are presented. This is particularly important in interview-based research with human participants, where the researcher has a direct responsibility to protect participants' rights and privacy (Salmons, 2015, p. 148).

One key ethical principle in this study was informed consent. In line with Salmons (2015, p. 149), each participant was informed before the interview about the purpose of the study, the main themes to be discussed, the expected duration, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were also told that the interview would be recorded for transcription purposes and that only limited background information would be used in the thesis. Verbal consent for recording and use of the material was confirmed again at the beginning of each interview. This follows the basic ethical requirement that participants must understand the nature of the research and agree to take part without pressure (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Salmons, 2015).

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout. All interviews were treated anonymously, and participants are referred to only through interview codes (H1–H10). No names or directly identifying details were included in the thesis, and background characteristics were used only where necessary to contextualise the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 65).

Because most interviews were conducted online, particular attention was paid to secure handling of recorded material and protection of personal information (Salmons, 2015, p. 159). Participants were informed in advance about the recording and intended use of the data, and the online format was handled with the same ethical seriousness as face-to-face interviewing.

Finally, participation was entirely voluntary. Interviewees were not obliged to answer all questions, and each interview ended with a short debriefing during which participants could clarify or add anything they wished (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 70).

3.6 Validity and reliability of the study

In qualitative research, reliability is commonly discussed through the broader concept of trustworthiness. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016, p. 294) suggest four criteria for evaluating qualitative research quality: *dependability, credibility, confirmability, and*

transferability. These criteria focus on whether the research process is logical, transparent, well-grounded, and clearly linked to the empirical material (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

Dependability was supported by a logical and clearly described research process, proceeding from the research objective and theoretical framework through to the methodology and findings. The reader can follow how the study moves from research questions to conclusions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 294).

Credibility concerns whether interpretations are convincing and sufficiently grounded in both the topic and the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 294). It was strengthened through careful engagement with prior literature and by linking empirical findings to the theoretical background. Variation in participant backgrounds further supports the analytical value of the material, enabling comparison and showing whether similar themes appear across different contexts.

The third criterion is *confirmability*, which concerns showing that interpretations are derived from the data rather than from unsupported assumptions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 294). This was addressed through transparent description of the data collection and analysis process.

Transferability was supported by clearly describing the research setting, participants, and analytical approach, allowing the reader to judge the degree to which findings may be meaningful in other contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 294).

3.7 Usage of the AI

In this study, artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to support the writing and research process. Their use complemented the author's own reasoning and the other sources consulted in the study. However, the author retained full responsibility for the entire research process, the interpretation of the material, and the final written text.

ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026), developed by OpenAI, was used as a support tool for formatting, idea development, text editing, and for tracking the progress of the writing process step by step. It helped refine sentence structure, improve clarity, and support the overall organisation of the work. Its outputs were not accepted uncritically. When necessary, prompts were reformulated, responses were challenged, and additional explanations or justifications were requested. Any suggestions generated with the help of ChatGPT were critically evaluated by the author and, where relevant, cross-checked against scientific sources.

Fathom AI Notetaker (Fathom, 2026) was used during the interviews to support data collection. The tool generated meeting summaries and full interview transcripts, which helped ensure that the interviewer could focus fully on the interviewees and their responses during the conversation.

All interviewees were informed in advance that an AI-based notetaking and transcription tool would be used. This information was communicated both before the interview and again at the beginning of the interview itself. Permission for its use was requested from all participants before the interview proceeded. The author assumes full responsibility for the ethical use of these tools in the study. After the completion of the research process, the recordings and AI-generated materials will be deleted and will not be used for any other purpose.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical part of the study based on ten semi-structured interviews with immigrants living in Finland. The findings are organised into four main themes that reflect how participants perceive Finnishness, their everyday engagement with Finnish brands, the meanings they attached to these brands, and the relationship between consumption, and identity in Finland.

4.1 Finnishness

Almost all interview participants were able to explain in their own words what Finnishness means to them. In many ways, their answers overlapped, although each person still understood and interpreted it slightly differently. The responses are organised below into the three most frequently occurring codes.

Finnishness as calm and order. Across the interviews, Finnishness was most often described as a recognisable way of life. Participants repeatedly linked it to calmness, quietness, personal space, order, honesty, and a restrained way of behaving. In this sense, Finnishness first appeared in the material as something that is difficult to define explicitly, but easy to feel in everyday interaction. In some interviews, these qualities were described in clearly positive terms:

"A measured lifestyle, nature, harmony, cleanliness." (H1)
"Peace, personal space, freedom to be oneself." (H10)

At the same time, this picture was not entirely shared by everyone. H5 described Finnishness in more mixed terms: *"Finnishness? … seriousness, quietness, reservation, we can also say honesty, coldness also."*

These accounts show that the same qualities could be experienced in different ways. What appeared to some participants as harmony and calm could also feel distant or

emotionally cold. Finnishness therefore emerged as a familiar social style, but not one that carried the same meaning for everyone.

Finnishness as unspoken rules. Another strong pattern in the material was that Finnishness was understood through unspoken expectations. Several participants described Finland as a place where people are expected to know certain rules even when they are not stated directly. These were not usually described as formal demands, but as quiet assumptions about norms and what is socially appropriate: for example, not being too loud, not standing out, being reserved, and keeping to oneself. Here, Finnishness was not only a cultural image, but also a practical social logic.

A related version of the same idea appeared in H10 and H7, with a stronger emphasis on routines and self-management. For example: *"Care for nature, sustainability, recycling, and I would say doing your own things."*

These accounts suggest that Finnishness was also understood through discipline. It appeared in habits that gradually came to define what "proper" life in Finland looks like.

A theme of high professionalism also appeared in several interviews. Participants described Finnishness as being "precise" or "doing things properly," often connected to strict rules and a high expectation of quality.

In several interviews, this theme also had a shadow side. Some participants referred to a strong drinking culture (H5, H6, H7, H9). It was described as something that can function as an informal social norm in certain situations, and sometimes as a perceived requirement for easier socialising with locals.

Finnishness as concrete cultural symbols. Here, Finnishness appeared through specific things that participants immediately associated with Finland. Many participants mentioned tangible reference points such as *sauna, ice swimming, nature, mushrooms, pets,*

durable materials, and Finnish design. In these accounts, Finnishness looked less like an abstract value system and more like a set of concrete cues.

Design formed another clear part of this pattern. In H8, Finnishness was associated with a particular visual language and the recognisable style of Finnish brands. In H7, the same idea appeared through an emphasis on sustainable materials and durable quality. Design also appeared in H6.

A further cultural variation appeared through music. In the interview material, this was especially visible in H5, where Finnish rock and metal bands such as The Rasmus and Nightwish were described as an early point of connection to Finland.

4.2 Practical engagement with Finnish brands

Finnish brands as part of everyday routine. The first and most recurring pattern was that, for all participants, engagement with Finnish brands often began in an ordinary and practical way. Buying local products was described as the easiest and most accessible option, especially in grocery stores and similar settings. In these cases, participants rarely attached deeper meaning or symbolism to the choice; it was routine consumer behaviour.

At the same time, everyday life in Finland involved learning new habits and practices that had not previously been part of participants' routines, or had not been available in their home contexts. As H4 described:

"I learned to drink black coffee. I learned to love rye bread, and it makes sense for me that the Fazer chocolate is the best." (H4)

A similar pattern appeared in H10, where Finnish products had become so routine that they no longer stood out as special choices. H5 described a gradual process through the incorporation of products such as Valio cheese, rye bread, and Moomin items. H1 also showed that Finnish brands were most visible in practical categories such as groceries

and household products, while categories such as furniture or clothing were less clearly anchored in Finnish brands.

Trust in Finnish brands. Participants often described Finnish brands as reliable, durable, and suitable for the Finnish context. This trust was mainly practical, but it also carried an emotional layer and connected to earlier findings where Finnishness was linked to quality. Local brands were seen as safe choices because they were expected to work well, meet local standards, and fit everyday life in Finland.

H4 described Finnish brands as being chosen because of "*trust in the Finnish industry,*" "*Finnish standards*," and perceived quality, especially when the price difference was not too large. H3 similarly suggested that "Made in Finland" could operate almost automatically as a purchase cue, sometimes outweighing lower-priced alternatives. H6 and H8 supported this pattern from another angle by linking Finnish brands to value for money and distinctive aesthetics.

At the same time, trust in Finnish brands appeared strong but selective. H10 described product choice as a balance between price, quality, design, ethics, and localness "as possible," which meant that Finnish brands were important but not decisive in every case.

A strategic phase of social positioning. For some participants, engagement with Finnish brands was not steady or linear. Instead, there was a more intense phase when local brands became especially visible and intentional. In these moments, Finnish brands were not only practical choices; they were also linked to becoming more socially legible and reducing distance in social situations.
H3 offered the clearest example. One purchase changed how the participant understood Finnish brands:

"I actually had a period when I tried to use only Finnish brands, because I felt it would bring me closer to Finns. At that time, I worked in a government organisation and noticed

that everyone wore Marimekko. So, one day, I brought a Marimekko wallet to a coffee break and placed it on the table. They immediately reacted, started asking questions, and for the first time in about three months, we had a real conversation. I remember walking away thinking, 'Okay, I've cracked the code. I need to start using everything Finnish.'" (H3)

In this interview, the purchase of a Marimekko item triggered a reaction from Finnish colleagues and opened a conversation that had not happened before. After that, the participant entered a stronger phase of buying Finnish brands. The point was not simply liking the products. They became socially useful because they made the participant easier to "read" in the local environment. Similar patterns appeared in H2, H6 and H9. H4 supported this theme in a softer form: Finnish brands became socially useful by providing shared reference points and making conversations with Finns feel more natural.

From visible effort to settled preference. The data also showed that this more intentional phase often changed over time. For several participants, Finnish brands remained present later on, but their role became quieter. The emphasis shifted away from visibility and social approval and toward personal criteria such as taste, comfort, and quality.
This was especially clear in H2. The interviewee described how Finlayson towels had become meaningful through quality and personal associations:

"For example, with Finlayson towels, I genuinely enjoy the quality—they don't really change over time, they don't get worse. And when I go to someone's home and see those same towels, I immediately form a certain impression about the person. It creates this kind of association for me." (H2)
H4 described a similar trajectory more reflectively, comparing acculturation to a marriage: *"first there is infatuation, and later there is a more settled and balanced stage."*
Overall, everyday engagement with Finnish brands is not best understood as a straightforward progression from "less local" to "more local." The data suggest that Finnish brands could become especially important at certain stages, and later become less

strategic without disappearing. In this later phase, they remained part of everyday adaptation, but with less emphasis on social visibility.

4.3 Meanings attached to Finnish brands

Social entry points and signs of belonging. Across several interviews, Finnish brands gained meaning when they helped participants connect with locals. In these cases, the brand mattered not only as a product, but as something that made interaction easier. It provided a shared reference point and made conversation feel more natural. A Finnish brand could become meaningful because it reduced social distance.

This pattern appeared in almost half of the interviews. A clear example comes from H6, who described a skiing situation where others noticed the participant's equipment from a well-known Finnish brand. Even though they were beginners, the participant felt more easily accepted as "one of them." Conversations with locals started more naturally, and through this experience, the participant felt more included in society.

A similar pattern appeared in H4. There, Finnish brands were described as creating topics for conversation and making further contact with locals easier. In this sense, the meaning of the brand came from what it made possible between people: it created a small common ground through which participants could relate to Finns more easily.
H5 described a comparable experience of being noticed by locals:

"Yeah. For example, I like Moomin products, and I have quite a few Moomin things. People have noticed it and sometimes joked, in a friendly way, 'You're more Finnish than me,' because I have so many Moomin items." (H5)

Here, the products themselves mattered, but their social meaning became stronger when Finns recognised them and responded positively. In H5, this did not occur only once. Similar reactions appeared repeatedly across different Finnish brands the

participant used, which suggests that local brands could gain meaning through ongoing validation.

H7 added an interesting view by suggesting that not all brands carried the same symbolic force: *"Marimekko is more integrative and acceptance-type than Iittala."*

Feeling at home. In other interviews, Finnish brands were linked to comfort, familiarity, and a growing sense of being settled in Finland. In H2, H4, H5, H6, H8, and H9, local brands were described as part of ordinary life in ways that supported a broader feeling of "home." While the word itself is simple, its meaning here is important, because it suggests that Finnish brands had become integrated into routines closely enough to support a sense of stability.

A more settled version of this appeared in H10. Finnish brands were valued less as socially visible symbols and more as part of a social system the participant had come to appreciate. Their importance came from embeddedness, not from display.

H9 added another layer to this pattern. In that interview, the fact that something was Finnish did not carry strong emotional meaning at first. Over time, however, it began to feel warmer and more personally important, especially when encountered outside Finland. This suggests that brand meaning could develop gradually. It did not always emerge at the point of purchase, but could accumulate through lived experience and through the growing emotional significance that Finland itself gained in the participant's life.

4.4 Consumption and identity negotiation

Identity changed gradually. The relationship between consumption and identity was one of the most complex parts of the interview material. Unlike more concrete topics, such as product categories or brand preferences, identity was not always something participants described with certainty. It appeared more often as a reflective and subjective issue. For this reason, participants' accounts did not form one simple pattern. Still, a

broader tendency was visible across the interviews: living in Finland had changed how participants understood themselves, how they positioned themselves socially, and how they related both to their country of origin and to the host society.

H10, for example, described Finland as a place where she could be more fully herself, which suggests that settlement in the host country had become connected to self-experience. H7 described something similar from a different angle. In that interview, Finland was linked to becoming more self-reliant and resilient over time. In this sense, identity negotiation in the material often appeared through changes in self-perception.

For many participants, especially those who had lived in Finland for longer, identity no longer appeared as something clearly divided between "who I am in my home country" and "who I am in Finland." Over time, that distinction had become less sharp. This did not mean that national background had disappeared, or that one identity had simply been replaced by another.

The question of how one is socially understood in Finnish society often remained open. This was visible in H4, where the interviewee described herself as an "integrated foreigner," a phrase that captured both closeness to Finnish society and the persistence of difference. H5 expressed a similar tension in a more uneasy way, reflecting that living in Finland had made her feel "a bit weirder" in relation to her home country and that she was still trying to balance the two sides. H3 described her position as being "on the fence," and linked life in Finland to a different version of herself than the one she associated with her country of origin.

The role of consumption. Within this process, consumption sometimes played a role, but not in a simple or deterministic way. The interviews do not support the claim that buying Finnish brands directly produced a Finnish identity. At the same time, some participants suggested that they may not reflect on this process explicitly, even if consumption still influences identity in a more automatic or indirect way. Overall, the interviews

indicate that consumption could become one of the domains where identity was negotiated in practice. This was most visible when participants distinguished between socially useful consumption and deeper self-identification.

H2 offered a clear example. In that interview, Marimekko had earlier been used to “fit in” at work, but later this moved toward a less externally oriented way of choosing products. This suggests that local brands could be useful at certain stages of settlement without becoming the foundation of identity itself.

H3 similarly described a period when Finnish brands played a particularly strong role, followed by a later stage where this emphasis became hidden. A comparable tendency appeared in H6.

“I understand that owning certain products and choosing local brands can affect how a person is perceived in society. I think Finns may respond more positively when they see someone choosing local products. So, I do recognise that these purchases have a social dimension—they can influence how others see you and make acceptance easier.” (H6)

However, participants also underlined that personal preferences still mattered, even when a brand carried social meaning, choices were not made only for social reasons. This point was highlighted strongly by H8, who noted that if a product conflicted too strongly with personal style or self-understanding, it was rejected.

Counterpoints were also present. H1, for example, did not treat brands as a major tool for identity construction. Even though Finnish values and habits had become internalised over time, and buying local products could support a sense of non-verbal connection with society, consumption was framed mainly through pragmatism.

5 Conclusion and discussion

In the final chapter, the aim is to review the findings of the study while reflecting on the research purpose and the set objectives. Their applicability to the theoretical framework will be evaluated, and managerial implications will be presented. The chapter will also discuss the limitations of the study and provide suggestions for future research.

5.1 Summary of findings

To summarise the findings from the interviews, the material was organised into a data table (see Table 3) and divided into three main parts. The first part presents the main patterns identified within a specific theme and research objective, the second presents the counterpoint or variation found in the data, and the third outlines the analytical implications. Table 3 was created to provide an overview of the empirical findings in a structured form. Its purpose is to show how each major theme relates to the research questions, what kinds of recurring patterns were identified across the dataset, where variation emerged, and how these patterns were interpreted analytically. Although clear thematic regularities were visible across the dataset, participants' experiences were not uniform. This variation helped refine the boundaries of each theme and added depth to the analysis. In thematic analysis, themes are understood as recurring patterns of shared meaning across the data, not as claims that every participant experienced the same phenomenon in the same way (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The findings are organised around four themes (see Table 3). First, Finnishness emerged across the interviews as a recognisable social and cultural code that formed the normative backdrop against which consumption and adjustment took place. Second, the meanings attached to Finnish brands were layered and situational. Third, engagement with Finnish brands typically began through routine consumption of essentials, driven by practical trust, familiarity, and perceived local suitability. Finally, the relationship between consumption and identity negotiation was complex and varied.

Table 3. Summary of the main findings.

Theme	Main pattern	Variations and counterpoints	Analytical implication
RQ1: Finnishness	Participants understood Finnishness mainly through three recurring patterns: calm and order, unspoken rules, and concrete cultural symbols. Finnishness was described as quiet, restrained, and structured, but also through tangible references such as sauna, nature, design, music, and durable materials.	Calmness and restraint were sometimes valued as harmony and peace, but at other times described as distance, coldness, or pressure not to stand out. Informal norms such as drinking culture also complicated the more positive image of Finnishness.	Finnishness was understood both as atmosphere and as a set of concrete cultural cues.
RQ2: Engagement with Finnish brands	Engagement with Finnish brands often began through routine consumption, especially in groceries. Trust in Finnish brands was tied to reliability, quality, suitability for Finnish conditions, and familiarity over time.	Engagement was not always linear. For some participants, there was a stronger phase in which Finnish brands were used more intentionally as part of social positioning or fitting in. Later, this often shifted toward quieter and more settled preferences based on quality, comfort, and taste.	Engagement with Finnish brands was reflected adaptation to the host marketplace, trust in locally meaningful standards, and, at certain moments, a more strategic use of brands in social life.
RQ3: Meanings attached to Finnish brands	Finnish brands could function as social entry points, visible signs of belonging, and part of feeling at home in Finland.	Not all brands carried the same symbolic power. Some were more visually distinctive and easier for others to read as Finnish. Meanings also differed across participants.	The meaning of Finnish brands was layered and situational.

RQ4: Consumption and identity negotiation	Identity negotiation appeared as a long-term and multifaceted process. Consumption sometimes played a role, but not in a simple or deterministic way.	Some participants linked brands strongly to self-positioning, while others approached consumption more pragmatically and did not see brands as central to self-construction.	Finnish brand consumption formed part of identity negotiation for some participants, but only as one.

Variation within the themes was not a weakness of the analysis. On the contrary, it helped define the themes more precisely. Given (2008, p.552) argues that negative cases or counterpoints are not unusual, it's a natural part of qualitative research. The author further suggests that attending to such cases strengthens the quality of the analysis, because they help refine interpretations and prevent overly simplified conclusions.

5.2 Theoretical implications

This study adds to existing research on consumer acculturation, local brand meaning, and identity negotiation, primarily by supporting theoretical arguments developed in prior work. The findings are consistent with earlier consumer acculturation research showing that adaptation involves learning the host marketplace and adjusting consumption practices to a new cultural environment (Peñaloza, 1994; Oswald, 1999; Askegaard et al., 2005).

Finnishness was positioned as one of the meaning-related cues through which local brands could become culturally comprehensible. The empirical findings suggest that Finnishness appeared as a wider cultural context. This is consistent with research on national identity and place branding (Paasi, 1997; Holt, 2004) and suggests that the significance of local brands in acculturation contexts depends on the broader cultural codes of the host society.

Prior research has shown that brands can carry culturally shared meanings that people draw on (McCracken, 1986; Holt, 2004; Lury, 2004). The findings of this study are

consistent with this view. One thing the data also show is that not all Finnish brands worked this way equally. In several interviews, a brand became meaningful mainly at the moment it was noticed and recognised by others, which points to brand meaning in acculturation being as much about social interaction as about the brand itself.

Existing literature has long shown that identity is socially negotiated through recognition, categorisation, and everyday interaction (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The findings support this perspective. At the same time, the results complicate any overly direct assumption that consuming local brands produces host-society identification. Finnish brand consumption did not appear to create a Finnish identity in any simple sense. Instead, it sometimes functioned as one site where social legibility and belonging could be negotiated in practice. In addition, the role of brands in identity negotiation appears situational. Local brand consumption can be understood as a potential resource in acculturation, but not as a universal mechanism.

5.3 Managerical implications

The findings of this study also carry practical implications for marketers and organisations operating in multicultural consumer environments.

Immigrants should not be approached as a passive consumer group in relation to Finnish brands. On the contrary, the interviews suggest that many immigrants are genuinely interested in local brands across different product categories. This indicates a growing and potentially loyal customer segment whose interest in Finnish brands is already present, but not always fully supported by current market practices.

Several participants who did not speak Finnish fluently described situations in which local brands had not adapted their communication for an international audience. From a managerial perspective, this represents a missed opportunity. Many brands could benefit from offering English-language support as an additional channel, especially in contexts where consumers are making purchase decisions. This may include, for example,

websites and applications, product descriptions, packaging information, customer service interfaces, and key campaign messages. This audience is already interested in buying local brands; the absence of accessible communication can become an unnecessary barrier to purchase. Beyond inclusion, language accessibility is also a commercial issue.

Another important implication concerns timing. The findings revealed a visible phase during which some immigrants were especially interested in Finnish local brands consumption. This period appeared to be connected to stronger efforts to understand the host society, become familiar with the nuances of local life, and position oneself more comfortably within this environment. In managerial terms, the results suggest that openness to local brands may not remain constant over time. Instead, there may be a distinct stage when consumers are more interested in local products and more likely to respond to brand communication. Recognising this stage could help firms engage this expanding segment more effectively and build stronger long-term relationships.

The results also indicate that recognisable Finnish brands may have value beyond product utility alone. In some cases, brands became meaningful because they were socially visible and could be recognised by others as part of Finnish culture. Managers should therefore understand that distinctiveness can play two roles at once. It can strengthen brand identity, and it can help consumers use the brand as a culturally legible reference point in the host society.

5.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for the future research

A first limitation concerns the size and composition of the sample. The empirical part of the study was based on ten semi-structured interviews. While this number was appropriate for a qualitative study and allowed for rich, experience-based insights, it remains relatively small. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised to all immigrants in Finland. Experiences may differ significantly depending on factors such as country of origin, length of residence, language proficiency, and socioeconomic situation.

A second limitation relates to the qualitative methodological approach. The choice of semi-structured interviews was well suited to the research aim, since the study focused on participants' experiences. At the same time, interview-based qualitative research has its own limits. The findings are based on participants' reflections, which means they capture interpreted experience rather than directly observed behaviour with the deeper reflection.

A third limitation concerns the scope of the research topic itself. The study focused specifically on immigrants' engagement with Finnish local brands in Finland and examined this issue through the themes of Finnishness, everyday consumption, brand meaning, and identity negotiation. This thematic focus helped maintain analytical depth, but it also meant that certain related dimensions remained outside the scope of the study. For example, the research did not aim to compare different immigrant groups systematically, did not focus on a single product category, and did not examine the perspectives of Finnish brands or marketers themselves.

The present study was based on a qualitative sample, so one of the next steps would be to conduct research with a larger and more diverse group of participants. For example, future studies could compare participants with different migration and socio-economic backgrounds. Such variation would make it possible to assess more systematically how far the patterns identified in this study extend across groups, and whether the meanings attached to Finnish brands differ depending on variables.

Future research could also investigate the temporal dimension of local brand engagement more directly. One of the most interesting findings of this study was that engagement with Finnish brands did not appear linear but could involve stronger phases of interest at moments of settlement. A longitudinal design would therefore be especially valuable. Following participants over time could provide a profound knowledge of how these relationships evolve during the acculturation process.

Another avenue would be to focus more closely on specific brands. In this study, engagement appeared across multiple brands, but some were more widely recognised as representations of Finnishness than others. A case study approach could therefore be valuable for examining how particular brands become culturally “readable,” and how this symbolic value may matter for immigrant consumers as a growing segment in Finland.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview guide and themes

Background

1. Country of origin
2. What is your age group?
3. How many years have you lived in Finland?
4. What languages do you use in daily life?

Finnishness and cultural expectations

5. When you think about “Finnishness,” what comes to mind?
6. In your experience, are there expectations connected to being Finnish or being seen as Finnish?
7. Can you describe situations where you notice these expectations most clearly?
8. How (if at all) do these expectations influence your everyday choices or behaviour?
9. If you compare Finland and your home country, what feels most different in everyday life? What feels similar?

Acculturation

10. When you think about your first years in Finland, what felt like the biggest adjustments for you?
11. Today, what helps you feel settled or “at home” in Finland?
12. Can you describe one concrete example of something you learned to do differently in Finland?
13. Many people adjust through everyday practices like food, shopping, and services. How has everyday consumption (what you buy/use) been part of your acculturation process, if at all?
14. 14. Can you give one example of something you started buying/using because it made life easier, more comfortable, or helped you understand “how things work” here?

Everyday consumption and Finnish/local brands

15. Thinking about the last week or so: where do you usually shop and how?
16. What do you usually pay attention to when choosing products or brands?
17. How often do Finnish/local brands appear in your everyday?
18. How do you usually recognize or find out that a brand is Finnish/local?
19. Can you recall 2–4 Finnish/local brands you’ve used recently or that come to mind?
20. Over time, has living in Finland changed what you buy, use, or how you think about brands? How?
21. Looking back over your time in Finland, how has your relationship with Finnish/local brands changed (if at all)?

Meanings through concrete examples

22. Choose one Finnish/local brand you mentioned. Can you tell me the story of how it entered your life in Finland? What associations does it bring up? What does it represent to you, if anything?
23. For one Finnish/local brand you mentioned: can you think of a brand from your home country in the same category? What differences stand out to you between them?
24. Can you describe a situation where agerchoosing a Finnish/local brand felt like a deliberate decision? What influenced that decision in that moment?

Identity related questions

25. If you had to describe your identity in Finland in a few words, what would you say?
26. In what contexts do you feel most like yourself here?
27. Do you experience your identity in Finland as different from your identity in your home country? If yes, how?
28. Do you feel any connection between what you buy/use/wear and how you feel about your identity in Finland?
29. Are there items/brands/practices that make you feel more connected to Finland?

Wrap-up

30. Is there anything else I might have missed that feels important for understanding your experience?