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Factors Shaping Finnish Consumers' Purchase Intentions Towards Automobiles from Different Countries

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ABSTRACT:
Globalization has broadened consumer choice and increased competition among international brands, increasing the relevance of country-of-origin (COO) cues in consumer decision making. In the automotive sector specifically, perceptions of quality, reliability, and trust are particularly important; evaluations related to COO may have a key role in shaping consumer intentions. Despite extensive earlier research on the COO effect, empirical evidence from developed markets without a domestic automotive industry remains limited.

This study investigates the impact of country-of-origin perceptions on Finnish consumers' purchase intentions in the automotive market. The specific focus is on the direct and indirect roles of brand trust, consumer ethnocentrism, and price consciousness. The study employs a quantitative design in which survey responses from Finnish consumers were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlational analyses, and multiple regression techniques.

The results show that COO perceptions exert a significant positive influence on purchase intention, and it operates as a direct driver and indirectly via its impact on brand trust. European countries of origin, particularly Germany and Sweden, were evaluated more favourably that non-European alternatives. Brand trust emerged as a key mediating mechanism in the relationship between COO perception and purchase intention. Consumer ethnocentrism exhibited a context-dependent and partial influence. Price consciousness showed a weak and negative relationship with purchase intention in the German reference case.

By focusing on Finland, a market in which all passenger cars are imported, this study contributes to the COO literature by illustrating how country-of-origin cues operate in the absence of domestic automotive production. The results also offer practical implications for automotive brands and importers, highlighting the strategic importance of COO communication and trust-building in brand positioning within the Finnish market.

KEYWORDS: country-of-origin effect, brand trust, consumer ethnocentrism, purchase intention, automotive industry, Finland

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TIIVISTELMÄ:
Globalisaatio on laajentanut kuluttajien valinnanmahdollisuuksia ja kiristänyt kansainvälisten brändien välistä kilpailua, mikä on lisännyt alkuperämaan (country-of-origin, COO) merkitystä kuluttajien ostopäätöksenteossa. Autoteollisuudessa, jossa laatuun, luotettavuuteen ja luottamukseen liittyvät mielikuvat ovat erityisen keskeisiä, COO-arvioinnit voivat vaikuttaa merkittävästi ostoaikeiden muodostumiseen. Vaikka COO-ilmiötä on tutkittu laajasti, empiirinen tutkimus kehittyneistä markkinoista, joilla ei ole omaa henkilöautoteollisuutta, on edelleen rajallista.

Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan alkuperämaamielikuvien vaikutusta suomalaisten kuluttajien ostoaikeisiin autoteollisuudessa. Erityisesti huomiota kiinnitetään brändiluottamuksen, kuluttajaetnosentrismin ja hintatietoisuuden suoriin ja epäsuoriin rooleihin. Tutkimus toteutettiin kvantitatiivisena kyselytutkimuksena, ja aineisto analysoitiin kuvailevien tilastojen, korrelaatioanalyysin ja regressiomallien avulla.

Tulokset osoittavat, että COO-mielikuvilla on tilastollisesti merkitsevä ja positiivinen vaikutus ostoaikeisiin sekä suoraan että epäsuorasti brändiluottamuksen kautta. Eurooppalaiset alkuperämaat, erityisesti Saksa ja Ruotsi, arvioitiin myönteisemmin kuin Euroopan ulkopuoliset vaihtoehdot, ja brändiluottamus nousi keskeiseksi välittäväksi mekanismiksi COO-mielikuvien ja ostoaikeiden välisessä suhteessa. Kuluttajaetnosentrismin vaikutus oli osittainen ja kontekstisidonnainen, kun taas hintatietoisuudella havaittiin heikko ja negatiivinen yhteys ostoaikeisiin erityisesti Saksan viitetapauksessa.

Keskittymällä Suomeen markkina-alueena, jossa kaikki henkilöautot ovat tuontituotteita, tutkimus täydentää COO-kirjallisuutta havainnollistamalla, miten alkuperämaavihjeet toimivat ilman kotimaista autoteollisuutta. Tulokset tarjoavat myös käytännön johtopäätöksiä autoalan brändeille ja maahantuojille korostamalla alkuperämaaviestinnän ja brändiluottamuksen rakentamisen strategista merkitystä brändin positioinnissa Suomen markkinoilla.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In the contemporary global marketplace, consumers are exposed to a wide variety of products originating from different countries. As production and distribution networks have become more international, information connected to where a product comes from has emerged as an important cue in consumer decision-making (Bilkey & Nes, 1982). Consequently, the COO effect is now widely recognized in marketing and consumer behaviour literature as describing how the country associated with a product shapes consumers' perceptions, evaluations, and purchase-related responses (Phau & Prendergast, 2000).

The importance of country-of-origin information is specifically noticeable in high-involvement product categories such as automobiles. Car purchases normally involve considerable financial investment, long-term usage, and high perceived risk, which increases consumers' reliance on external cues when they are evaluating alternatives (Han, 1989). Thus, in this context, information about a product's country of origin can act as a heuristic, that guides consumers when forming preliminary judgments about its quality, reliability, and overall value (Bilkey & Nes, 1982).

In the automotive sector, products are traditionally associated with strong national images and long-standing reputations. Additionally, earlier research suggests that consumers tend to link some specific attributes, such as engineering quality, reliability, or prestige, with products that originate from specific countries (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Hsieh et al., 2004). These associations that are country-related, may positively or negatively influence brand evaluations. This depends on consumers' personal experiences, preferences, and cultural background.

In the context of European Union, automotive markets are affected by economic integration and sustainability-related policy developments, which also influence Finland as

an EU member state (European Commission, 2025). Also, international evidence suggest that factors such as fuel efficiency, safety, price, and perceived quality are among the key factors in consumers' car-buying decisions, noting the emphasis placed on practical and value-related attributes in the automotive market (Statista, 2024). Research on Finnish consumers also points to a pragmatic approach to consumption, which may further extend to how cars are evaluated (Autio et al., 2009). This kind of pragmatic mindset may stress durability, safety, and long-term reliability, which may, in turn, heighten consumers' sensitivity to country-of-origin cues.

Economic and political factors, and concerns about sustainability, may also influence consumer preferences. Thus, in the Finnish automotive market, a varied set of factors influences consumers' preferences and purchasing decisions. Previous research shows that quality perceptions and brand trust have a major influence on the formation of purchase intentions; furthermore, cultural associations linked to the country of origin influence brand evaluations (Wang & Yang, 2008). Finland is a relevant context to examine the COO effect, as it is a Nordic country with a high standard of living and a strong emphasis on quality and sustainability.

There is lmited empirical research that has examined how Finnish consumers interpret and respond to country-of-origin information when they are evaluating car brands and forming purchase intentions. Even if prior studies have demonstrated that COO can influence consumer evaluations, the extent to which these perceptions translate into actual purchase intentions remains unclear, particularly across different market contexts (Josiassen & Harzing, 2008; Samiee, 2010). Understanding these relationships is important for companies that import, market, or sell automobiles in Finland, because it enables them to align branding strategies with consumer expectations and values.

This study tries to fill this gap. It is done by examining how the country-of-origin effect influences brand trust and purchase intentions among Finnish consumers in the automotive sector. The research aims to provide empirical evidence on how COO shapes Finnish consumers' decision-making and to gain practical implications for car brands operating in the Finnish market, by using a quantitative survey approach.

1.2 The automotive industry in Finland

Cars have long been one of the main product categories examined in country-of-origin research. Earlier work indicates that electronics, cars, and textiles are among the product types most often studied in COO research (Usunier, 2006). Compared to other durable goods, automobiles appear to be particularly sensitive to country image effects, which may stem from their symbolic value and association with national stereotypes (Pappu et al., 2007; Roth & Romeo, 1992).

The Finnish automotive market is characterized by a broad selection of international car brands, but it lacks a domestically developed passenger car brand. Although Valmet Automotive operates as a contract manufacturer in Finland, producing vehicles for global brands such as Mercedes-Benz and Porsche at its Uusikaupunki facility, these vehicles do not represent Finnish-origin brands, as their conceptual and corporate roots lie abroad (Valmet Automotive, 2023). This structural characteristic creates a unique market context in which all passenger vehicles are imported, and brand competition is inherently international.

According to official passenger car registration statistics for 2024, the most frequently registered car brands in Finland were Toyota, Volvo, and Škoda as illustrated in Figure 1 (Autoalan Tiedotuskeskus, 2025). These brands originate from Japan, Sweden, and the Czech Republic, respectively, highlighting the international nature of the Finnish automotive market and the wide range of country origins available to consumers.

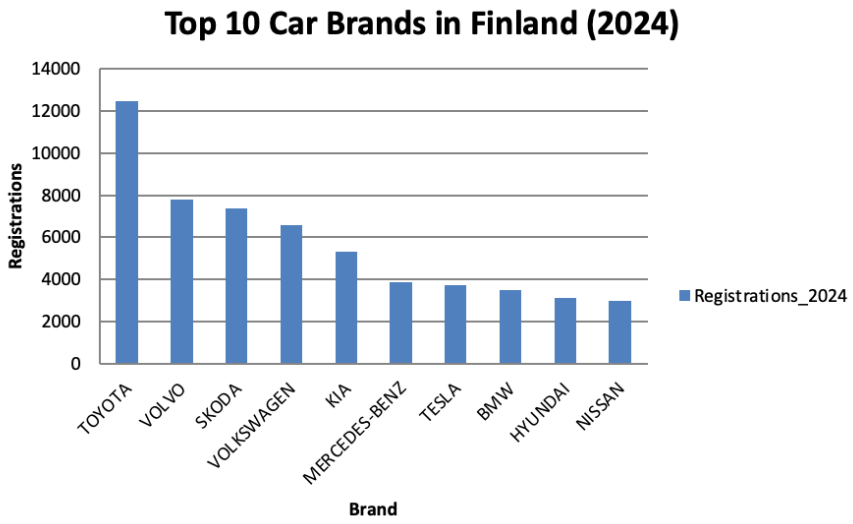

Figure 1. Registrations of cars by brand in Finland in 2024 (Adapted from: Autoalan Tiedotuskeskus, 2025).

Further registration data indicate that Japan, Germany, and Sweden were the most common countries of origin for passenger car brands in Finland in 2024, followed by South Korea, the Czech Republic, the United States, France, Spain and China (Autoalan Tiedotuskeskus, 2025). These figures demonstrate the dominance of European and Japanese brands, while also reflecting the presence of emerging country-of-origin categories with smaller market shares.

Chinese car brands' presence in the Finnish market is relatively recent, but they are included in the registration statistics. Chinese manufacturer BYD, for example, entered the Finnish market officially in 2023, and it marked the start of a broader Chinese automotive imports (Juntunen, 2023). Compared to European and Japanese brands, the number of vehicles that originated from China was relatively small in 2024. This may suggest a limited but growing market presence.

The strong presence of international brands shows how open the Finnish car market is. It also emphasizes how much consumers' views about different countries matter when they choose which cars to buy. And, because Finland does not have its own domestically developed car industry, Finnish consumers are likely to pay more attention to country-of-origin signals, for example a country's general reputation or its perceived production quality, when they assess different car brands (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Han, 1989). This kind

of market structure offers a distinctive setting for studying how country-of-origin perceptions relate to brand trust and purchase intentions in the Finnish car market.

1.3 Research gap

The influence of country of origin on consumer responses has been extensively investigated in both consumer behaviour, and international marketing literature (Pharr, 2005). Earlier research suggests that COO information can shape how consumers view and evaluate brands and, in some situations, may also influence purchase intentions by acting as a signal of perceived quality and reliability (Samiee, 2010; Magnusson et al., 2011). Evidence of these effects has been reported in different product categories, which include food, apparel, electronics, and automobiles (Usunier, 2006). Nevertheless, despite this extensive amount of research, only a few studies have investigated the COO effect within the specific context of the Finnish automotive market. Josiassen and Harzing (2008) note that country-of-origin cues tend to shape consumers' perceived quality and product assessments more powerfully than they affect their actual concrete intentions to purchase. This observation marks the need for further research on how brand perceptions translate into actual purchasing behaviour, specifically in the Finnish context.

Much of the existing research on the country-of-origin effect has concentrated on broad international contexts and major markets, when smaller national settings have remained relatively less examined (Magnusson & Westjohn, 2011). In contrast to this, the Nordic region, and Finland in particular, has received comparatively limited attention in COO research. Because a fundamental share of earlier studies has concentrated on larger or more frequently studied markets. The Finnish market may be viewed as relatively aligned with European integration and regional production narratives, which makes it a relevant setting for investigating COO dynamics. Further, much of the already existing literature addresses COO in a general or theoretical manner. It possibly overlooks how the COO interacts with practical purchase considerations, for example, perceived risk and long-term value in high-involvement product categories like automobiles. Vehicle purchases are complex and financially important decisions. As a result, understanding the role of

country of origin is important , as consumers may rely on country-related cues to lessen perceived risk and build trust (Han, 1989; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

This research aims to respond to these gaps by investigating the specific ways in which COO affects brand perception and purchase intentions among Finnish consumers in the automotive sector. This research focuses on localized consumer attitudes and behavior, particularly in relation to selected automotive manufacturing countries. Therefore, this research gives empirical insights that are timely and practically useful for car importers and marketers operating in Finland. This study aims to add to the broader country-of-origin literature which is done by extending its application to market that has not been researched as much, and by offering findings for brand strategy and consumer engagement in the automotive industry.

1.4 Research question and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate how the COO effect shapes Finnish consumers' purchase intentions in the automotive sector. Instead of aiming for universal conclusions, the study focuses on how COO perceptions shape consumer evaluations and decision making in Finland. The study has one theoretical and three empirical objectives based on the central research question:

What factors shape Finnish consumers' purchase intentions toward automobile brands from different countries?

The objectives of this thesis are:

1. To analyze Finnish consumer' perceptions and attitudes toward car brands originating from different countries.

2. To analyze the direct influence of COO perceptions on purchase intentions and how these perceptions are associated with brand trust.

3. To explore the influence of consumer ethnocentrism and price consciousness in realtion to purchase intention

These objectives help the study deepen understanding of consumer behaviour and offer guidance for automotive companies in adapting their marketing strategies to Finnish consumers.

1.5 Structure of the study

In this first chapter of this thesis, the research topic and the groundwork for this study are presented. This is done by outlining the background, relevance and research gap. In addition to these, the research problem, relevance and research gap are also presented.

In the second chapter, the theoretical foundation of the study is outlined. It discusses earlier research on the COO effect, purchase intention, and brand-related concepts such as brand trust, consumer ethnocentrism, and price consciousness within automotive context. This chapter therefore uses the literature to develop the theoretical framework and the research hypotheses (H1-H4).

The third chapter presents the overall research methodology. It details the specific approach and design that was chosen for this research. Additionally, the development of the research questionnaire, the ways the data were collected, the sampling strategy, the operationalization of variables, and finally the statistical techniques that were applied in the analyzation of the data are discussed. Considerations of reliability and validity are taken into account.

In the fourth chapter, all the empirical result are reported. It presents the outcomes of the analysis, to be specific the descriptive statistical analysis and the reliability and correlation analyses. The hypothesis tests using regression analysis are presented as well.

The fifth chapter summarizes the main results and brings the thesis to a close. It reflets the theoretical and managerial implications an recognizes the study's limitations. Finally, it outlines the directions for future research from this study's perspective.

2 Literature review

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundation of the thesis, drawing on prior research related to the COO effect, brand trust, and consumer purchase intentions. The aim of this chapter is to explore the main concepts and theoretical perspectives that underpin consumer behaviour in relation to a product's country of origin. Also, by synthesizing existing literature, this chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for the research framework and informs the development of the hypotheses evaluated in the empirical section of the research.

2.1 Definitions of key terms

Country-of-origin (COO) refers to the country associated with a product or either brand's manufacturing, design, or brand heritage, which influences consumer perceptions and evaluations (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). In this study, the concept of COO is understood as the nation with which a brand or product is primarily associated, typically based on the location of the company's headquarters. Although the actual production may take place in other countries due to global sourcing practices, the brand is generally identified with its home country in the minds of consumers (Johansson, Douglas, & Nonaka, 1985).

Brand trust refers to the confidence consumers place in a brand's dependability and in the benevolence of its intentions (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). It captures both the technical dimension, meaning the extent to which a brand reliably fulfils the promises it makes, and the intentional dimension, meaning the the conviction that the brand behaves in ways that serve consumers' best interests (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005).

Purchase intention (PI) describes an individual's conscious plan or willingness to move toward purchasing a particular brand or product (Spears & Singh, 2004).

Consumer ethnocentrism reflects consumers' tendency to evaluate products based on perceived national, regional, or cultural affiliation rather than purely functional attributes (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). In this study, ethnocentrism is conceptualized as a relative

preference for automotive brands from geographically or culturally proximate countries, rather than domestic production, as no Finnish passenger car brands exist.

Price consciousness reflects the extent to which consumers place strong emphasis on securing low prices and reducing their monetary sacrifice when making purchase decisions (Lichtenstein et al., 1993).In this study, it reflects the extent to which price considerations may reduce the influence of COO and brand-related cues in automotive purchase evaluations.

2.2 Country-of-origin effect and automotive sector

The effect of a product's country of origin has been studied across different product categories, and the automotive industry is a particularly prominent example. Automobiles are high-involvement products, which makes consumers more likely to use COO as a heuristic when evaluating quality and reliability.

In their study, Roth and Romeo (1992) explored the way in which consumers perceive the alignment between particular countries and specific product categories influences consumer attitudes. Their results suggest that countries like Germany, Japan and the United States were strongly linked to perceptions of automotive excellence, particularly in areas like engineering, innovation, and design. In contrast to this, countries with weaker reputations in these dimensions, for example Mexico, faced consumer scepticism when promoting cars based on national attributes. For instance, the term "German engineering" evoked positive associations, whereas "Mexican engineering" was less effective and could be perceived as inauthentic and potentially undermining trust (Roth & Romeo, 1992).

These results underscore the need to make sure that country-of-origin–based marketing strategies are consistent with how consumers perceive the brand and its origin, when thinking from the managerial perspective. When a country has a strong reputation in some product attributes, COO can act as a powerful differentiator. However, in cases where the country's image is weak or mismatched, it may be more effective to emphasize product-specific benefits instead (Roth & Romeo, 1992).

Adding further evidence for the importance of country image, Roth and Romeo (1992) identified a strong correlation between a country's general reputation and consumers' willingness to purchase vehicles produced there. Positive national images, such as those of Japan and Germany, boosted trust and purchase intent, while negative or unclear reputations acted as barriers Roth and Romeo (1992). Thus, COO cues can either enhance or hinder product appeal, according to how strongly the country's image is established in consumers' minds.

A classic contribution by Han (1989) provides an important theoretical distinction between direct and indirect effects of COO. According to Han (1989, pp.222-223), COO can directly influence consumer beliefs about a product's attributes (reliability, safety), or indirectly affect brand attitudes through emotional or symbolic associations (prestige, heritage). In the context of automobiles, this specifically means that a German car may be trusted because of its perceived technical quality but also because of symbolic values attached to "German-ness," for instance precision or status. Han's framework is useful when it is analyzed how COO perceptions interact with other brand dimensions, including brand origin, manufacturing location, and design source.

More recent research also suggests that in this age of global production, the perceived COO may weigh more than the actual manufacturing location (Magnusson et al., 2011). This suggests that brands may gain an advantage by highlighting some specific national identities, for instance, "designed in Germany" or "engineered in Japan", even when final assembly takes place in another country (Magnusson et al., 2011). These perceptions are still highly influential, particularly in markets where trust and quality assurance are important drivers of purchase decisions (Wang & Yang, 2008).

The complexity of COO perceptions in the automotive sector is further increased because modern vehicles can be described as hybrid products (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). Globalization has fragmented manufacturing across borders, meaning that a single car model might be designed in one country, developed or engineered in another, and finally assembled in a third country. As a result of this, the traditional idea of a single "Made in" label is no longer enough. Consumers are instead exposed to multiple COO cues such as

"designed in," "engineered in," or "assembled in" (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). This hybrid kind of nature blurs the distinction between domestic and foreign products and it complicates how COO information is interpreted (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). This suggests that for automotive brands, national associations are still influential. However they should be understood as part of a broader, multi-country production identity rather than a single country origin.

Taken together all of the above, prior research suggests that country-of-origin cues are significant in shaping consumers' evaluations and perceptions of automotive brands. Because there is high involvement and perceived risk associated with car purchases, these COO-related perceptions are also likely to go beyond brand evaluations and influence consumers' purchase intentions.

2.2.1 Multiple dimensions of country-of-origin

Globalization has resulted in production processes that are increasingly spread across national borders. Usunier (2006) points out that the COO concept in marketing research has become increasingly complex and no longer refers only to the place of manufacture of a product. In the globalized markets of today, products are often created in several countries at different stages of the value chain. Therefore, it is complex to identify the product's country of origin.

Pharr (2005) notes that product components may originate from different countries (Country of Parts, COP), while design (Country of Design, COD), manufacturing (Country of Manufacture, COM), and assembly (Country of Assembly, COA) can each take place in separate locations. As production becomes internationally fragmented, associating a products quality or reputation with one national origin becomes very challenging (Pharr, 2005). In this thesis, COO is operationalized mainly as the country of brand (COB), meaning the country that consumers most strongly associate with the brand, typically the place of headquarters, as this reflects how consumers commonly perceive brand origin in the automotive market despite globally fragmented production.

In addition to these categories, researchers have also introduced the concept of Country of Brand (COB). This refers to the country that consumers most strongly associate with a brand, regardless of where the products are really manufactured (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). Country of Brand (COB) can influence how consumers perceive brands and products, as it reflect symbolic and cultural meanings rather than just where a product is made (Pappu et al., 2007).

As noted, COO effects can be understood through three key dimensions: cognitive, affective, and normative (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). From a cognitive perspective, country of origin works as an extrinsic cue in product evaluation. It helps consumers to infer quality by signaling attributes such as reliability and durability (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Affectively, COO carries symbolic and emotional meanings, linking products to cultural identity, status, or personal experiences such as nostalgia or national pride (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Normatively, consumer evaluations are shaped by social or ethical considerations, for example, choosing domestic products to contribute to the local economy or a rejection of goods from countries with unfavourable reputations (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

2.2.2 Country-of-origin effect

The impact of country of origin has been the subject of extensive investigation in both international marketing and consumer behaviour literature (e.g. Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Roth & Romeo, 1992; Samiee, 2010). The concept has originated from the seminal study conducted by Schooler (1965), who demonstrated that consumers evaluated the same product differently when it had different country-of-origin labels, further suggesting that national stereotypes and cultural associations have an important role in shaping product assessments. This specific study laid the basis for decades of COO research across different industries, product categories, and cultural contexts. Then later, following Schooler's work, Bilkey and Nes (1982) did one of the first systematic reviews of COO research, which features its significant influence on consumer evaluations and decision-making. Han (1989) additionally contributed to COO theory. He did it by separating its effects into direct and indirect forms. It means that direct effects influence beliefs about product

attributes like quality and reliability, and indirect effects shape brand attitudes and symbolic meanings like prestige or heritage.

Subsequently, Roth and Romeo (1992, p. 490) put forward the notion of country image, that was described as “the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country, based on their prior associations with that country’s production and marketing strengths and weaknesses”. In this framework, special attention was given to congruence between country image and product category in shaping consumer attitudes.

With the globalization, researchers have recognized the complexity of the concept of COO. Usunier (2006) states that products often have multiple origins, including aspects like the country of design, manufacture and final assembly, or component sourcing, making COO a construct that is multifaceted. Also similarly, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) propose that COO effects can be grouped into three categories: cognitive, affective and normative. This gives a deeper understanding of how COO cues influence consumer evaluations.

In the 2000s, Pharr (2005) brought together earlier findings through a meta-analysis and demonstrated their relevance. Later, Magnusson et al. (2011) pointed out the importance of perceived country of origin, and that even wrong perceptions of a brand’s origin can strongly affect consumer trust and preferences. Building on this, Chen and Zhong (2024) showed how historical and contextual factors shape COO effects. They showed that consumer evaluations are also influenced by the historical reputation of a country. Altogether, these studies showcase the evolution of COO research. Moving from its early focus on simple product–country associations to a construct multidimensional construct, that is actually embedded in globalized production and consumer culture.

The COO effect has also faced criticism. Some researchers have questioned if COO is really an important factor in consumer decision-making and if its impact has been overstated in earlier academic research. For instance, Samiee, Shimp, and Sharma (2005) note that country-of-origin effects are often weaker than suggested. This is because consumers have shown to put more emphasis on brand-related cues and product-specific

attributes than on national origin information. Similarly, Josiassen and Harzing (2008) noted that COO research sometimes overemphasizes the phenomenon, and the findings show stronger effects on perceptions of product quality than on actual purchase behavior. These critiques showcase the need to interpret COO effects with some caution. And also, to consider them as part of a broader set of influences, including brand equity and price that jointly shape consumer decisions.

2.3 Purchase intention

Purchase intention reflects how likely it is that a consumer is going to buy a product, given its perceived value, the level of trust, and prior evaluations; it is commonly employed as an indicator of future buying behaviour (Kotler et al., 2016). In the automotive industry, purchase intentions are shaped by rational assessments, for example, safety, reliability, and price, and symbolic associations like brand image and social status (Hsieh et al., 2004). Automobiles represent high-involvement, high-cost purchases, implying that consumers place greater weight on extrinsic cues, for example country of origin, to alleviate perceived risk and uncertainty (Han, 1989). Previous studies indicate that COO influences consumers' perceptions of quality and brand trust, which in turn enhance purchase intention (Magnusson et al., 2011; Wang & Yang, 2008). For example, as mentioned earlier, German cars are frequently associated with engineering precision, while Japanese brands are linked to reliability, and these stereotypes can strengthen consumers' willingness to purchase vehicles from these origins (Roth & Romeo, 1992).

In the marketing literature, purchase intention has typically been measured through consumers' self-reported likelihood of choosing or buying a product, often operationalized using Likert-scale items. For instance, Spears and Singh (2004) conceptualize purchase intention as the intensity of a consumer's deliberate plan to carry out a purchase behavior, while Dodds et al. (1991) measure it through intentions to consider buying a product or willingness to buy. These scales provide a foundation for analyzing purchase intention in the automotive sector.

Furthermore, the consumer purchasing decision process is commonly conceptualized as a multi-stage process that involves need recognition, searching for information, evaluating alternative options, making the purchase decision, and engaging in post-purchase behaviour (Kotler et al., 2016). All purchases do not follow this sequence straightly and routine or habitual decisions may skip some steps, however the model helps to explain complex, high-involvement purchases such as automobiles (Kotler et al., 2016). It is important to note that the process starts before the actual purchase and continues afterwards, which emphasizes the emotional and experiential dimensions that shape overall satisfaction (Kotler et al., 2016). In this context, the perceived risk and trust have an important role in guiding consumer evaluations, especially for expensive and durable goods such as cars (Mitchell, 1999). COO functions as a heuristic that lessens uncertainty in the stage of evaluation, while brand trust increases confidence in the final purchase decision (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). For marketers, it is important to understand this full process. Earlier studies on the COO effect have mainly focused on large or international markets, with comparatively less attention given to smaller national contexts (Magnusson & Westjohn, 2011). Against this, examining brand perception and COO within the Finnish automotive sector may provide additional insights into how consumer preferences are formed and translated into purchase intentions.

COO, therefore, acts as a heuristic cue during the evaluation stage, which helps consumers lessen uncertainty (Han, 1989; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999), and brand trust increases confidence in the final purchase decision (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). In Finland, where no passenger car brands originate from (Autoalan Tiedotuskeskus, 2025), consumers may be particularly reliant on COO-related perceptions when forming their preferences (Han, 1989; Magnusson et al., 2011). Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: COO perceptions have a positive effect on purchase intention.

2.4 Brand

A brand can be understood as the collection of perceptions, feelings and associations that consumers link to a particular product, service, organisation or person (Kotler et al., 2016). It goes beyond logos and names, reflecting what the offering stands for and how it is experienced by its audience (Kotler et al., 2016). Brands have a central function in building consumer relationships by signaling meaning, identity, and trust. As Kotler et al. (2016) note, while products are made in factories, brands are formed through consumers' mental associations and often become an organization's most valuable long-term asset.

2.4.1 Brand trust

Before discussing brand trust in more detail, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the concept of brand perception, as it forms the foundation upon which trust in a brand is built.

Brand perception reflects how consumers interpret a brand's identity, image, and value (Aaker, 1991). Aaker (1991, p. 15) conceptualizes brand equity to mean "a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds to or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service". These elements include brand loyalty, awareness of the name of the brand, perceived quality, and the associations that are linked to the brand.

In his Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework, Keller (1993) stresses that brand equity is fundamentally shaped by what consumers know about the brand and the degree of resonance they experience with it. A strong brand perception is built when consumers have positive, robust and particular associations with the brand in their own memory (Keller, 1993). The COO effect is integrated into this framework because it shapes perceived quality and brand image (Pappu et al., 2007). For example, Chen et al. (2011) found that the country of origin can increase industrial brand equity by reinforcing perceptions of a firm's technological capability. Instead of using the entire Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, this study leans on its central idea that brand-

related associations formed in consumers' minds play an important role in brand evaluations.

In the automotive industry, country associations are rooted deeply in the consumers' minds and may strongly influence consumer perceptions. Magnusson et al. (2011) found that even false COO perceptions, such as only assuming Samsung is Japanese, can affect consumers' trust and preference for a brand. And even sometimes outweighing the factual manufacturing information. Building on these findings, COO communication strategies in the automotive sector may differ depending on brand positioning (Magnusson et al., 2011). Manufacturers from countries with strong reputations for quality may highlight their origin as a selling point, and those from less-known or modest origins may emphasize other attributes, such as price competitiveness, technological innovation, or sustainability for instance.

In addition to brand perception, brand trust is important to understanding consumer evaluations. Brand trust can be understood as consumers' expectations about a brand's dependability and the benevolence of its intentions and it is often measured through two components: reliability (the extent to which the brand fulfils its promises and meets consumers' needs) and intentions (the belief that the brand acts in the consumer's best interests) (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). Trust has also been shown to reduce perceived purchase risk, which is particularly important in high-involvement products such as automobiles (Wang & Yang, 2008). In survey-based research, brand trust is typically measured with Likert-scale items capturing the degree to which consumers perceive a brand as reliable, truthful and behaving in a responsible manner (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005).

In addition, beyond the traditional country-of-origin notion, researchers have pointed out that an entire nation can be viewed as a brand (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). In this context, Phau and Prendergast (2000) proposed the concept of country of brand (COB), which emphasizes that consumers not only evaluate a product based on its place of manufacture but also associate symbolic meanings with the country as a brand in its own right. This perspective underlines that a nation may carry brand-like attributes such as

reputation, identity, and credibility, which influence consumer evaluations similarly to conventional product brands. For example, countries that have strong reputations in engineering or design for instance, such as Germany or Sweden, may benefit from these associations across multiple product categories, including automobiles. In this sense, COO and COB jointly reflect how national images work as brand signals when shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions.

To sum up, earlier research suggests that COO perceptions influence how consumers evaluate brands by shaping both brand perception and brand trust. Positive COO associations may strengthen the confidence consumers have in the brand's consistency and integrity. This in turn increases purchase intention, specifically in high-involvement product categories such as automobiles (Wang & Yang, 2008). Conversely, not favourable COO perceptions may weaken brand trust and affect negatively to purchase decisions, even when objective product quality is high.

According to all of these findings, it is expected in this thesis that COO perceptions directly influence the level of trust consumers place in automotive brands. On this basis, the following hypothesis is derived:

H2: COO perceptions have a positive effect on brand trust, which in turn predicts purchase intention.

2.5 Consumer ethnocentrism

Another relevant concept associated with the COO effect is consumer ethnocentrism, which can be understood as consumers' inclination to see the purchase of foreign products as problematic or inappropriate, particularly when domestic alternatives are available (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Ethnocentric attitudes can lead consumers to prefer products perceived as domestic, regardless of their actual quality or price (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). To measure such tendencies, Shimp and Sharma (1987) developed the well-established CETSCALE, which captures the extent to which consumers consider buying foreign products as harmful or less acceptable compared to domestic consumption. Since

its development, the scale has been widely applied in COO research across different product categories and cultural contexts (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015).

However, in the Finnish context, consumer ethnocentrism cannot be expressed through preferences for domestic car brands, as the Finnish automotive market does not include passenger car brands that originate from Finland (Autoalan Tiedotuskeskus, 2025). Instead of this, ethnocentric tendencies may show as preferences for brands from geographically proximate or culturally similar countries, such as Sweden or other European Union member states (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). This reflects a view of ethnocentrism, in which ethnocentric tendencies are not necessarily limited to only domestic products but may also extend to culturally or regionally proximate in-groups (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). For example, Swedish brands like Volvo may benefit from positive associations that are tied to Nordic identity, regional trust, and cultural alignment. These can enhance brand perception and influence purchase intentions in the Finnish automotive market. Additionally, this perspective broadens the understanding of how COO influences consumer behavior in markets here is no national production. Furthermore, thia may suggest that COO evaluations may be shaped not only by the actual country of origin but also by perceived closeness or alignment with the consumer's own country (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Consumer ethnocentrism has a positive effect on purchase intention.

2.6 Price consciousness

Price consciousness reflects how strongly consumers prioritise obtaining low prices and using a minimum amount of money when making purchase decisions (Lichtenstein et al., 1993). Highly price-conscious consumers may rely heavily on price cues, which means often prioritizing affordability over other attributes, for example, aspects such as brand image, perceived quality and country of origin information (Han & Terpstra, 1988). In contrast to this, consumers with lower price sensitivity may place more emphasis on symbolic and emotional cues, including brand prestige and national image, when they are forming purchase intentions (Han & Terpstra, 1988).

In consumer behaviour research, price is consistently seen as one of the most influential extrinsic cues that guide product evaluations, specifically in high-involvement purchase contexts such as automobiles (Dodds et al., 1991). From the perspective of the cue-diagnosticity framework, consumers concentrate on cues they evaluate as most informative when they are evaluating alternatives (Maheswaran, 1994). When price is seen as one of the most important indicator of value, it can significantly shape consumers' evaluations and decision-making processes (Magnusson et al., 2011).

Earlier studies imply to the direction that price considerations can strongly affect perceived value and purchase intention. This is the case especially when consumers are highly conscious of costs or when price differences between competing brands are considerable (Han & Terpstra, 1988; Magnusson et al., 2011). In these kind of situations, price consciousness may have a very important influence on how willing consumers are to make a purchase, and potentially outweighing other evaluative cues.

To summarize, according to these findings, they may suggest that price consciousness is an important factor of consumer purchase intention in the automotive context. Consumers who place more importance on price considerations may view purchase decisions differently than those who are less price-sensitive. This might lead to differences in purchase intentions. Based on this view, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Price consciousness has a negative effect on purchase intention.

2.7 Summary of the theoretical background

As it is evident in this chapter, COO effect is a multidimensional concept that can be defined and understood in several different ways (Usunier, 2006). Its meaning has additionally changed over time, particularly as globalization has fragmented production processes and blurred the association between products and one national origin (Usunier, 2006). In this study, which concentrates specifically on the Finnish automotive sector, country of origin is considered specifically with reference to cars as the product category. Here, COO represents the country that is predominantly connected with the car brand in consumers' minds. Not as the specific locations of manufacturing or assembly. This

definition gives a clear and contextually relevant basis for analysing how COO influences brand perception and Finnish consumers' intentions to purchase cars.

2.8 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this thesis is based on earlier research on the COO effect, brand trust, consumer ethnocentrism and purchase intention. In research, country of origin is widely recognized as an extrinsic cue that consumers employ when they are judging a product's quality, reliability and overall value (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Roth & Romeo, 1992; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). In high-involvement categories, for instance automobiles, COO has an important role, because purchasing a car requires financial investment, perceived risk, and long-term usage (Han, 1989). COO perceptions might affect consumer behaviour directly through evaluations of tangible product attributes such as performance and safety, and indirectly, through symbolic and emotional associations that shape brand attitudes for example (Han, 1989).

Brand trust is placed as a key mediator, as a favorable COO image increases trust, which in turn increases purchase intention (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Wang & Yang, 2008). Consumer ethnocentrism is placed as an explanatory variable, with reflecting the idea that Finnish consumers, in the absence of domestic car brands, might demonstrate stronger purchase intentions toward cars from close or culturally similar countries such as Sweden or some other EU member states (Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). Price consciousness is placed as an additional explanatory variable, as prior research suggests that consumers who place more emphasis on price may approach purchase decisions differently than those who are less price-sensitive (Han & Terpstra, 1988). Price consciousness is examined in this study in terms of its direct relationship with purchase intention, rather than moderating the COO effect.

The study focuses on six COO categories or countries relevant to the Finnish automotive market: Germany, Sweden, Japan, France, China, and the United States. These countries were selected to represent both established automotive producers with well-documented COO reputations in the automotive sector (Germany, Sweden, Japan, France)

and countries characterized by more heterogeneous or emerging COO perceptions (China, United States), allowing for a comparative analysis of traditional and evolving COO associations in the Finnish automotive context (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Magnusson et al., 2011; Autoalan Tiedotuskeskus, 2025).

Germany and Sweden were included due to their strong historical reputations in automotive engineering and safety. Brands originating from these countries, such as Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, and Volvo, are well established in Finland (Statista, 2025a), and prior research suggests that such reputations tend to shape favorable COO-based perceptions of quality and reliability among consumers (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Magnusson et al., 2011).

Japan was selected because of the long-standing presence and popularity of brands such as Toyota in Finland (Statista, 2025a). Japanese car brands are frequently associated with reliability and fuel efficiency, attributes that have been extensively reported in the country-of-origin literature on automobiles (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Bilkey & Nes, 1982). These attributes have been shown to have a positive impact on how consumers evaluate products and on their intentions to purchase, especially for high-involvement product categories, particulary automobiles (Han, 1989).

France was included because of its strong tradition in design-oriented automotive manufacturing, represented by brands such as Peugeot, Renault, and Citroën, which are commonly associated with style and aesthetic appeal in country-of-origin research (Roth & Romeo, 1992). French brands are usually seen as stylish, which may reflect COO associations related to their design and aesthetic appeal.

China was included as a more rapidly emerging automotive producer, in particular in the electric vehicle segment. This has increased the visibility of Chinese brands in international markets. Prior country-of-origin research suggests that brands originating from countries regarded by consumers as having a less established automotive reputation may face skepticism that is related to quality and safety perceptions, especially for high-involvement products, with automobiles as an example (Magnusson et al., 2011).

Lastly, the United States was included mostly because of Tesla's more recent strong position in the Finnish electric vehicle market, as reflected in recent registration and sales data (Statista, 2025b). In the interpretation of the author, Tesla represents a COO case that is commonly associated with technological innovation rather than traditional automotive heritage (Magnusson et al., 2011; Roth & Romeo, 1992). To sum up, including these specific countries enables a thorough examination of how both established and emerging COO associations influence purchase intentions in the Finnish automotive market.

Drawing on this theoretical background, the following hypotheses are formulated and illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1. Hypotheses and expected effects.

Hypothesis	Path in framework	Expected effect
H1: COO → PI	COO perceptions → Purchase intention	Positive effect: Favorable COO perceptions increase purchase intention
H2: COO → Trust → PI	COO perceptions → Brand trust → Purchase intention	Mediating effect: COO perceptions enhance brand trust, which in turn increases purchase intention
H3: Ethnocentrism → PI	Consumer ethnocentrism → Purchase intention	Positive effect: Higher ethnocentrism strengthens purchase intention for proximate origins.
H4: Price Consciousness → PI	Price consciousness → Purchase intention	Price consciousness has a negative effect on purchase intention.

The Table 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. COO perceptions are positioned as the main independent variable influencing purchase intention through both a

direct path (H1) and an indirect path operating via brand trust (H2). Brand trust functions as a mediating variable explaining how favorable COO perceptions are translated into higher purchase intention. In addition, consumer ethnocentrism (H3) and price consciousness (H4) are included as independent predictors of purchase intention. Consumer ethnocentrism is expected to exert a positive influence on purchase intention for cars originating from geographically or culturally proximate countries, while price consciousness is hypothesized to negatively affect purchase intention. To summarize, the framework that is presented shows the hypothesized relationships that are investigated in the empirical analysis part. It also offers a structured overview of how COO-related perceptions and consumer characteristics interact in shaping car purchase intentions in the Finnish automotive market.

3 Research methodology

Quantitative research methodology is utilized in this thesis to examine how COO influences consumers' purchase intentions in the Finnish automotive sector. In this chapter, the quantitative approach is introduced, and its relevance and suitability is explained, according to this study's objectives. Additionally, the use of this specific quantitative method is justified. It stems from the need to obtain measurable, comparable and generalizable data. These enable the statistical examination of the hypotheses and the examination of relationships between the variables. This kind of approach makes it possible to systematically analyze consumer attitudes and behaviors toward brands from different countries of origin. To move further, described in this chapter are the data collection process and data analysis techniques that are used in this thesis. These are used to examine the hypotheses that are proposed and to evaluate the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.1 Research approach

This study employs a quantitative research approach informed by the principles of positivist research philosophy, because this was deemed the most appropriate for the study. The positivist paradigm assumes that reality is objective and that it can be investigated by using phenomena that are observable and measurable (Saunders et al., 2023). The approach emphasizes empirical hypothesis testing through statistical methods that are structured. This is therefore consistent with the aim of this study being to examine the relationship between the COO effect and consumer behaviour in the Finnish automotive market using numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The deductive research approach is used, in which this study starts with highlighting prior theoretical frameworks and develops hypotheses that are tested in this study by using empirical data (Saunders et al., 2023). The key concepts (COO, brand trust, and purchase intention) are derived from earlier literature and operationalized into variables that are measurable, through a structured survey. Also, this research emphasizes objectivity, generalizability, and replicability when following the deductive and positivist

approach (Saunders et al., 2023). The goal in this study is not to investigate individual experiences in depth, but to identify associations and patterns in a broad sample of respondents. It is seen that the findings can, for this reason inform decision making in a practical business context. In particular for marketers and importers that are seeking to understand how COO perceptions are influencing consumer's attitudes.

While this approach offers the benefits of rigor and generalizability, it also has limitations. For instance, reduced flexibility in capturing context-specific or emotional drivers of behavior (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Nevertheless, for the purpose of testing specific hypotheses regarding the influence of country-of-origin on brand-related outcomes in the Finnish automotive market, a quantitative, positivist approach is considered the most appropriate and aligned with the aims of this research.

3.2 Research design

The present research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive-explanatory research design**,** which is appropriate for examining relationships between predefined variables within a specific context and time frame (Saunders et al., 2023). A descriptive design is applied to offer a systematic overview of the main characteristics of the target population, in this case, Finnish consumers' attitudes toward car brands with different countries of origin. Descriptive studies are particularly useful for identifying patterns and summarizing the prevalence of attitudes or behaviors across a sample (Saunders et al., 2023). This study has an explanatory focus, in addition to describing the phenomenon. It aims to test hypotheses and also examine potential causal relationships, in particular between COO effect and purchase intention, which is treated as the dependent variable. Explanatory, or causal, studies are designed to investigate how one variable has an influence on another. They are therefore appropriate when the objective is to evaluate theoretical claims using empirical data (Saunders et al., 2023).

In this study, the design of it is cross-sectional, which means that data were obtained at one point in time rather than over several time periods (Saunders et al., 2023). Collecting data across several time points would have required more resources than were available

for this research. In business research, cross-sectional studies are usually used to examine patterns and relationships at a specific point in time, due to their efficiency (Saunders et al., 2023). This design is well-suited to survey-based research, because it enables the collection and analysis os responses from a broad sample in a way that is time-efficient and cost-effective (Saunders et al., 2023). The use of both descriptive and explanatory elements in a cross-sectional framework allows for a practical way to examine how COO perceptions influence consumer decision-making. This design also supports the use of statistical methods, like regression analysis, to evaluate the strength and direction of the study's hypothesised relationships between variables, in line with the aims of the study.

3.3 Questionnaire development

When it comes to the questionnaire of this study, it was developed to collect quantitative data specifically on Finnish consumers' perceptions of car brands that are associated with different countries of origin. As seen in the Table 2, COO perceptions, brand trust, purchase intention, consumer ethnocentrism and price consciousness were the five main constructs the questionnaire was divided to. The questionnaire was based on scales that are validated and were adapted from earlier research. Each of the questionnaire constructs were captured by several items that were assessed on a five-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. This was in line with commonly used measurement practices in consumer behaviour and marketing research (Saunders et al., 2023). Specifically for the COO related constructs, the same set of items was applied to each country that was included in this study (Germany, Sweden, Japan, China, the United States, and France). This was done to ensure comparability across all the countries of origin. Some constructs, however, were measured independently and were not country specific, consumer ethnocentrism and price consciousness in particular.

The questionnaire of this thesis was done in English and Finnish. This was done because it was important to promote the accessibility and linguistic accuracy for Finnish respondents. Additionally, this bilingual format improved comprehension and minimized potential for translation bias. Efforts were taken to organize the survey logically. It started with questions about COO perceptions, followed by items on brand trust, purchase intention,

consumer ethnocentrism and price consciousness. In the last section, demographic information, for example, age, gender, level of education and car ownership was gathered.

To improve clarity and support content validity, the questionnaire was tested before publishing with a small group of respondents, including colleagues and representatives of the automotive sector. This was done to verify that the wording, scale structure, and translations were clear and culturally appropriate as possible. Small things were changed according to the feedback received, to improve the readability, clarity and overall flow of the questionnaire For example, adding a note to the introduction part, about the questionnaire being meant for individuals living in Finland or those who consider themselves as Finnish consumers. Additionally, a preliminary question was included to confirm that the respondent had read the introduction text and consented to take part in the study. In addition, the educational background categories were adjusted to fit the Finnish school system better and to be easier to answer. The final version of the questionnaire was administered online using Webropol, which allowed for efficient data collection and ensured respondent anonymity.

Table 2. Survey question constructs.

Construct	Question items
Country of origin perception	(Country) car brands are of high quality.
	(Country) car brands are technologically advanced.
	(Country) car brands are reliable.
	(Country) car brands have a good reputation.
	I have a positive image of (Country) car brands.
Brand trust	I trust (Country) car brands.
	(Country) car brands keep their promises.
	(Country) car brands meet my expectations.

Construct	Question items
	I feel confident when choosing a (Country) car brand.
	(Country) car brands act in the best interest of consumers.
Purchase intention	I would consider buying a (Country) car brand.
	It is likely that I would choose a (Country) car brand.
	If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from (Country) brands.
	I would recommend (Country) car brands to others.
Consumer ethnocentrism	When choosing a car, I prefer brands that are geographically or culturally close to Finland.
	I consider it important that people buy car brands from European countries.
	Buying a car brand from culturally close countries feels more appropriate than from distant ones.
	I feel more confident buying a car from a country that I perceive as culturally or geographically close to Finland.
Price consciousness	Price is the most important factor when buying a car.
	I usually choose the cheapest car that meets my needs.

Construct	Question items
	I am willing to compromise on the brand or its country of origin if the price is more affordable.
	When comparing cars, price is a more important factor than the country of origin of the brand.
Demographics	How old are you?
	What is your gender?
	What is your level of education?
	Do you currently own a car?

All items were adapted to the context of the Finnish automotive market. Respondents indicated their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.3.1 Country of origin perception

Items measuring COO perceptions were primarily adapted from established COO research in the automotive context, particularly Sohail and Sahin (2010). The selection of quality, reliability, technological advancement, and overall image as key dimensions is further supported by broader COO literature emphasizing the cognitive evaluation of product origins (Magnusson et al., 2011). Respondents evaluated the following statements:

- (Country) car brands are of high quality.
- (Country) car brands are technologically advanced.
- (Country) car brands are reliable.
- (Country) car brands have a good reputation.
- I have a positive image of (Country) car brands.

3.3.2 Brand trust

Items measuring brand trust were adapted from Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005), who conceptualized trust as consumers' belief in the brand's dependability, integrity, and consistency in fulfilling its promises. In this study, brand trust was measured using statements that reflect consumers' perceived reliability and confidence in car brands associated with different countries of origin. Respondents evaluated the following statements:

- I trust (Country) car brands.
- (Country) car brands keep their promises.
- (Country) car brands meet my expectations.
- I feel confident when choosing a (Country) car brand.
- (Country) car brands act in the best interest of consumers.

3.3.3 Purchase intention

Items measuring purchase intention were adapted from Spears and Singh (2004), who conceptualized the construct as the degree to which a consumer is willing and intends to buy a particular product or brand. In this study, purchase intention represents the respondent's behavioural tendency and readiness to buy a car brand originating from a particular country. The measurement items were adjusted to fit the automotive context and to reflect realistic buying considerations among Finnish consumers. Respondents evaluated the following statements:

- I would consider buying a (Country) car brand.
- It is likely that I would choose a (Country) car brand.
- If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from (Country) brands.
- I would recommend (Country) car brands to others.

3.3.4 Consumer ethnocentrism

Items measuring consumer ethnocentrism were adapted from the original conceptualization by Shimp and Sharma (1987) and further informed by cross-national studies examining consumer attitudes toward domestic versus foreign products (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). Consumer ethnocentrism captures how strongly consumers view the purchase of foreign products as less desirable and exhibit a preference for products originating from culturally or geographically proximate countries.

Within the scope of this study, consumer ethnocentrism was operationalized by assessing Finnish consumers' preferences for car brands associated with culturally or geographically close countries. Respondents evaluated the following statements:

- When choosing a car, I prefer brands that are geographically or culturally close to Finland.
- I consider it important that people buy car brands from European countries.
- Buying a car brand from culturally close countries feels more appropriate than from distant ones.
- I feel more confident buying a car from a country that I perceive as culturally or geographically close to Finland.

This adaptation captures the attitudinal aspect of consumer ethnocentrism by reflecting consumers' preferences for familiar and regionally proximate product origins, rather than employing the full moral judgment emphasized in the original CETSCALE. The items were adapted to fit the Finnish automotive market context and to ensure cultural relevance when evaluating attitudes toward car brands originating from proximate versus distant countries (Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015).

3.3.5 Price consciousness

Items measuring price consciousness were informed by prior research on consumer price sensitivity and price-related decision-making, particularly the conceptual work of

Lichtenstein et al. (1993). In addition, earlier studies examining the role of price in country-of-origin evaluations, such as Han and Terpstra (1988), guided the contextualization of the construct for the automotive setting. In this study, price consciousness was measured by examining how strongly Finnish consumers prioritize price relative to other product cues when purchasing a car. Respondents evaluated the following statements:

- Price is the most important factor when buying a car.
- I usually choose the cheapest car that meets my needs.
- I am willing to compromise on the brand or its country of origin if the price is more affordable.
- When comparing cars, price is a more important factor than the country of origin.

These specific questions reflect the cognitive and behavioural aspects of price consciousness. And this entity emphasizes how price considerations might outweigh other evaluative cues, perceived origin, for instance (Liechestein et al., 1993; Han & Terpstra, 1988). These items were modified to better fit the context of automobiles, and also to better reflect the Finnish consumers' cost sensitivity in purchase decisions that are considered to be high-involvement.

3.4 Description of the data

The questionnaire of this research was designed and implemented using the Webropol platform. It was distributed online as a public link. Therefore, this research relies on primary data that was gathered by using quantitative methods. The most important aim of the questionnaire was to collect data and insights into Finnish consumers' perceptions of car brands in relation to their COO, trust in these brands, and purchase intentions. Also, the survey included questions to learn basic demographic information about the respondents. For instance, age, gender, and car ownership status. These provided context for the interpretation of the attitudinal responses.

The survey was structured by using closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items to collect quantifiable and standardized responses. The use of Likert-type scales is widespread

in consumer behaviour research, because they make it possible to capture attitudes, perceptions and behavioural intentions along a continuous scale (Saunders et al., 2023). Similar scales to measure have been used in previous COO-related studies in the automotive context, for example, the study by Sohail and Sahin (2010), which examined consumer preferences for cars from different countries in the Saudi Arabian market. The items used in the questionnaire were developed based on established constructs from prior country-of-origin and branding literature. These were modified to suit the Finnish automotive context. The questionnaire was offered in both Finnish and English. This was done to improve inclusivity and response quality, and respondents were asked to select their preferred language upon entering the survey.

This study's dataset consists entirely of data that is self reported. However, while it is efficient and suitable for assessing perceptions and intentions, it includes several limitations. These include social desirability bias and respondents' subjective interpretation of the questions (Saunders et al., 2023). Even though the participants were informed that responses were anonymous and confidential, which can help to reduce the impact of these biases mentioned.

There were no secondary data sources used in the analysis. The focus was on primary, original data specifically collected for this specific research purpose. This approach in particular, helps to guarantee that the data responds directly to the research questions and hypotheses tested. The collected data formed the foundation for upcoming statistical analyses. The analyses aimed at testing the hypotheses and evaluating the relationships between COO perception, brand trust, and purchase behavior in the Finnish automotive market.

3.5 Data collection and sample

In December 2025, the study's data were collected by publishing a self-completed online questionnaire that was designed in Webropol. The study's target population were the consumers aged 15 and above who live in Finland or consider themselves as part of the Finnish consumer population. Because of the nature of this study and the geographic

scope, a non-probability convenience sampling was used. This means that the survey was shared through different social media platforms and student and professional networks. Specifically, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp groups and discussion forums were used. This approach does not allow for full statistical representativeness, but it enabled access to a varied respondent sample from across Finland in a cost-effective and time-efficient way.

The sample size aimed for this research was a minimum of approximately 100 valid responses, which was exceeded in the final dataset. This goal was considered appropriate because of the study's quantitative design. And for conducting multiple regression analyses with a limited number of independent variables. In line with the recommendations from Pallant (2020), the sufficiency of a sample depends on different factors. Such as the complexity of the statistical methods used, the range of variables included, and the level of statistical power. For this study, a sample of around 100 respondents was seen as sufficient in order to provide reliable and interpretable results. But still remaining feasible taking into account the available time and resources of a master's thesis. Collecting a larger and fully representative dataset from Finnish car consumers would have been ideal. However, it was constrained by practical limitations such as time, access to respondents, and the voluntary nature of survey participation.

In order to contextualize the sampling framework, it is important to mention that 74,072 new passenger cars were registered in Finland in 2024, according to the Finnish Information Centre of Automobile Sector (Autoalan Tiedotuskeskus, 2025). The number of car buyers fluctuates every year based on economic and market conditions. However, this figure offers a general number for the active automotive consumer base in Finland. A fully representative, nationwide survey that would cover this population would have required substantial financial and logistical resources and was therefore seen as impractical within the limits of a master's level thesis.

In formulating the data collection plan, the potential use of both qualitative and quantitative techniques was considered in the beginning. Where qualitative techniques, for example, in-depth interviews with consumers and industry experts, could have provided

rich, context-specific insights, their limited generalizability was viewed as a drawback for addressing the research questions in my interpretation. Thus, a quantitative approach was selected to ensure structured data collection and to enable generalizable conclusions about the links between COO perceptions, brand trust, and purchase intention.

One of the main challenges or threats to using the quantitative survey method, was to ensure that there would be enough answers, in order for the sample to be large enough and also demographically varied. For this reason the use of the online survey that was shared to multiple channels was considered beneficial. As Saunders et al. (2023) mention, online questionnaires are good in reaching different geographic and demographic groups, which offer wide coverage and minimizie costs. In addition, this specific method is efficient, because when the data is collected digitally, there is no need for physical distribution or manual data entry.

This study relied only on an online questionnaire, even if mixed or multi-method strategies could enhance data richness (Saunders et al., 2023). This decision was made because of multiple reasons, such as time constraints, scope of the research, and the overall aim to obtain structured, quantifiable insights into consumer behaviour. Despite the limitations mentioned, the use of a single method is a valid and widely accepted practice in business research (Saunders et al., 2023).

3.6 Method of data analysis

The data gathered from the survey ware analyzed by applying descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. The main aim of the analysis was to assess the hypothesized link between COO perceptions, brand trust, consumer ethnocentrism, price consciousness, and purchase intention. To be precise, the analysis concerned the direct influence of COO perceptions on purchase intention, the indirect effect through brand trust, and the role of additional individual-level factors, which include consumer ethnocentrism and price consciousness, in the suggested research model.

First of all, the descriptive statistics were used to give an overview of the respondent profile. To be more specific, it was used to lay out an overview of the key variables in

terms of their tendency and variability. Descriptive measures, for example, means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were calculated. This was done to characterize the sample's demographic profile and overall patterns in attitude (Saunders et al., 2023). Second, reliability was investigated using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the internal consistency of each construct. In line with traditional guidelines, alpha coefficients greater than 0.70 were considered as acceptable, suggesting satisfactory reliability of the measurement scales (Pallant, 2020). Third, Pearson's r correlations were examined to determine the strength and direction of bivariate links among the main constructs (COO perceptions, brand trust, purchase intention, consumer ethnocentrism, and price consciousness). The correlation results gave an initial indication of whether the expected associations justified further hypothesis testing by using regression models (Pallant, 2020).

Further, to evaluate the hypotheses, the data were analyzed using multiple linear regression because this method is appropriate for examining how a single or a set of independent variables predict a dependent variable and for testing hypothesized relationships between constructs (Saunders et al., 2023; Pallant, 2020). More specifically, the analyses investigated the direct effect of COO perceptions on purchase intention (H1). Also, the influence of consumer ethnocentrism on purchase intention (H3), and the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between COO perceptions and purchase intention (H2). In addition to these, price consciousness was examined in relation to purchase intention for a single reference country (Germany) to assess its role within the proposed research model (H4).

The analyses of this thesis were done by using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The program has functionalities for conducting descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses efficiently (Pallant, 2020). Also, when it comes to the significance level, $p < 0.05$ was used for statistical significance in this study, which follows the traditional practice in social science research (Saunders et al., 2023).

3.7 Reliability and validity

To guarantee the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments and results is very important for protecting the credibility and methodological thoroughness of this research. These two concepts are central to evaluating the quality of measurement in quantitative research (Saunders et al., 2023).

Reliability is understood as the degree to which the measurement instrument gives consistent and stable outcomes when applied multiple times. In this study, reliability was supported by basing all survey constructs on validated scales from prior academic research in consumer behaviour, COO studies, and brand trust.

For assessing the internal consistency, which measures how well the items within a scale relate to one another, a separate Cronbach's alpha coefficient was derived for every construct. A coefficient value of 0.70 or higher was regarded as acceptable in this research, indicating reliable measurement scales (Pallant, 2020). This secured that the variables intended to capture the same underlying dimension, such as brand trust, purchase intention, or country-of-origin perception, produced consistent results.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was evaluated as a technique for assessing construct validity in this research. However, as the measurement items were adopted from well-established and previously validated scales in the country-of-origin and branding literature, and the factor structure of the constructs was theoretically well defined, EFA was not conducted. Instead, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to assess the internal consistency of every construct, which is regarded as suitable when validated measurement scales are applied (Pallant, 2020).

Validity denotes the degree to which a research instrument accurately captures the concepts it is designed to measure (Saunders et al., 2023; Pallant, 2020). Multiple forms of validity were considered during the questionnaire design and implementation process. Content validity was made sure through a review process, in which academic peers evaluated the questionnaire items for clarity and relevance. Additionally, a pilot test was

done to secure that the questions were clearly understood by respondents and well covered all relevant dimensions of the key constructs.

External validity, or generalizability, is more limited in this study because of the usage of a non-probability convenience sampling method and leaning on self-reported data (Saunders et al., 2023). This sampling approach was quite pragmatic given time and resource constraints, but it may constrain the extent to which these results are applicable to the Finnish car-buying population as a whole. Additionally, as mentioned, self-reported data may be vulnerable to biases, for example, social desirability and recall bias, which may influence the accuracy of respondents' assessments (Saunders et al., 2023).

Even with limitations, this study's structured design, careful development of the survey items, and transparency make this study a credible and meaningful investigation of Finnish consumers' perception of car brands and COO effects.

4 Findings

This chapter details the empirical findings that were obtained from this study's survey data on Finnish consumers. All of the analysis concentrate on examining how COO perceptions, brand trust, consumer ethnocentrism, and price consciousness are related to purchase intention in the automotive sector. Therefore, this chapter aims to test the hypotheses that were formulated earlier in this study. It also aims to evaluate if the perceived origin of a car brand significantly affects Finnish consumers' intentions to purchase.

The findings are gathered from SPSS statistical analyses. These analyses include descriptive statistics, reliability and correlation analyses, and regression modelling. All of the analyses were structured to investigate the hypothesized links between COO perceptions and purchase intention. In addition to this, to test the mediating function of brand trust and the direct effects of consumer ethnocentrism and price consciousness. The findings of this study give empirical evidence on how much COO perceptions and related constructs influence car purchase intentions in the Finnish market.

4.1 Sample and descriptive statistics

In this study, the final sample of 216 respondents, who all completed the online questionnaire in full. Furthermore, to describe the composition of the sample, the respondents' demographic characteristics are shown in Table 3.

Also, the respondents represented a wide range of age groups. The largest share of participants was in the age group of 25-34. This accounted for 37.0% (n = 80) within the sample. Following this, the next age group was 45-54 years (19.0%, n = 41) and 35-44 years (16.2%, n = 35). The participants who were aged 55-64 years accounted for 14.4% (n = 31) of the sample. 18-24-years-olds represented 8.8% (n = 19). The smallest group consisted of respondents aged 65 or older, accounting for 4.6% (n = 10) of the sample. Finally, there were no individuals who were under the age of 18.

The educational background of the respondents was relatively high. The largest group had completed upper secondary education, accounting for 38.0% (n = 82) of the sample. Respondents holding a Bachelor's degree represented 32.9% (n = 71), while 26.8% (n = 58) reported having a Master's degree. Only a very small number of respondents reported primary education (0.5%, n = 1) or a doctoral degree (0.9%, n = 2). Additionally, 0.9% (n = 2) selected the option "other." These results indicate that the sample is relatively well educated, which is typical for online survey-based research.

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In relation to gender composition, most respondents reported to identify as male, accounting for 68.5% (n = 148) of the sample. Further, female respondents represented 30.6% (n = 66). A small proportion of the sample identified as other, accounting for 0.9% (n =2) of the respondents. Overall, the sample was moderately skewed toward male respondents.

When it comes to ownership of a car, most of the respondents reported that they currently own a car. Specifically, 86.1% (n = 186) stated that they own a car, and 13.9% (n =30) stated that they do not currently own a car. This suggests that most respondents have direct experience with car ownership. This is relevant when considering the focus of this study on automotive purchase intention.

Table 3. Demographics (N=216).

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Age	15-17	0	0.0
	18-24	19	8.8

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent
	25-34	80	37.0
	35-44	35	16.2
	45-54	41	19.0
	55-64	31	14.4
	65 or older	10	4.6
Gender	Female	66	30.6
	Male	148	68.5
	Other	2	0.9
Education level	Primary school	1	0.5
	Upper secondary	82	38.0
	Bachelor's degree	71	32.9
	Master's degree	58	26.8
	Doctoral degree	2	0.9
	Other	2	0.9
Do you currently own a car?	Yes	186	86.1
	No	30	13.9

4.1.1 Descriptive comparisons

In order to maintain focus and avoid high fragmentation, the descriptive comparisons based on gender and age were conducted only for selected countries of origin. Germany and China were chosen for this, because of they were considered as differing COO stereotypes within the automotive sector. Germany was considered as widely recognized and generally positively perceived COO, and China as more recently emerging and comparatively not as familiar COO in the Finnish automotive market.

Independent samples t-tests were done to explore if there emerged demographic differences in COO perceptions and related constructs. All of the descriptive comparisons were done to complement the main analyses and also provide additional insights. It was

an interest of the writer of this thesis to explore how demographic factor may shape consumer attitudes in this context.

First, a statistically significant gender difference was observed in perceptions of German car brands. Female respondents reported more positive COO perceptions of German cars ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.64$) than respondents that were male ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.73$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(212) = 4.02$, $p < 0.001$, with an effect size in the moderate range (Cohen's $d = 0.60$), indicating a meaningful gender-based variation in evaluations of a well-established COO.

In contrast, no statistically significant gender difference was found in perceptions of Chinese car brands. Female respondents ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.73$) and male respondents ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.75$) evaluated Chinese COO perceptions similarly, $t(212) = 0.09$, $p = 0.929$. The effect size was regarded as negligible (Cohen's $d = 0.01$), suggesting that gender does not play a role in shaping attitudes toward a less familiar or more weakly perceived COO.

Gender differences were also examined in relation to consumer ethnocentrism. The results indicated a statistically significant difference between men and women, with female respondents ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.11$) reporting higher levels of consumer ethnocentrism than male respondents ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(212) = 2.14$, $p = 0.033$. Although the effect size ranged from small to moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.32$), this result suggests that gender may be associated with broader attitudinal tendencies toward domestic or familiar product origins.

As age was measured using predefined ordinal categories, respondents were grouped into younger (18–34) and older (35+) consumers to allow for meaningful and statistically reliable comparisons. A statistically significant age-based difference was found in perceptions of German car brands, with younger consumers reporting more positive COO perceptions ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.70$) than older consumers ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.78$), $t(214) = 2.25$, $p = 0.026$. The effect size fell within the small-to-moderate range (Cohen's $d = 0.31$), indicating a modest age-related distinction in evaluations of a well-established COO.

Conversely, no statistically significant variation by age was detected in perceptions of Chinese car brands. Although younger consumers (M = 2.45, SD = 0.74) evaluated Chinese COO perceptions slightly more positively than older consumers (M = 2.35, SD = 0.74), no statistically significant difference was detected t(214) = 1.06, p = 0.289. The observed effect size can be classified as small (Cohen's d = 0.15), suggesting that age does not meaningfully influence attitudes toward Chinese COO.

Finally, car ownership and education level were not included in further comparative analyses. As the vast majority of respondents reported owning a car (86.1%), while only a small proportion did not (13.9%), comparisons based on car ownership would have resulted in highly uneven group sizes. Similarly, due to the uneven distribution across education levels and the exploratory nature of the demographic analyses, education level was excluded from further comparisons.

4.2 Measurement model assessment

This section assesses the measurement model by examining the reliability and descriptive statistics of the central constructs that were used in the study. The analysis includes scale-level and item-level evaluations of COO perception, brand trust, and purchase intention across the examined countries, as well as reliability assessments of consumer ethnocentrism and price consciousness. Confirming that the measurement model is adequate provides a necessary basis for the hypothesis tests that will follow in this study.

4.2.1 Scale reliability and descriptive statistics by country

In this section, the descriptive statistics at the scale level are reported, and internal consistency estimates for COO perception, brand trust, and purchase intention across the six examined countries are presented.

Germany

The results indicate that German car brands are evaluated very positively across all three constructs, as seen in Table 4. The country-of-origin perception scale showed high internal consistency (α = 0.89), and the composite mean score suggests a generally favourable

perception of German car brands (M = 3.95, SD = 0.75). Similarly, brand trust toward German car brands was relatively high (M = 3.66, SD = 0.85), and it was supported by very good reliability (α = 0.91). Purchase intention toward German car brands was also moderately high (M = 3.84, SD = 1.14), and it showed very strong internal consistency (α = 0.95). Overall, Germany showed the strongest and most consistently positive country-of-origin evaluations among the examined countries.

Sweden

Swedish car brands were also perceived positively, although slightly less favourably than German brands. The COO perception scale demonstrated good reliability (α = 80). The mean score suggests generally favourable perceptions (M = 3.91, SD = 0.70). Brand trust towards Swedish car brands showed a similar level to Germany (M = 3.66, SD = 0.75), with very good reliability (α = 91). This suggests that respondents place a lot of trust in Swedish brands. However, there appeared to be lower purchase intention (M = 3.29, SD = 1.08), although high reliability (α = 0.94), which indicates that positive perceptions and trust do not translate into purchase intention as strongly as in the case of German brands.

Japan

Japanese car brand received positive evaluations in all constructs. There was a high COO perception (M = 3.88, SD = 0.72), with reliability that is acceptable (α = 0.81). Brand trust was slightly higher than for Germany and Sweden (M = 3.72, SD = 0.79). This was supported by good internal consistency (α = 0.91), which suggests strong confidence in Japanese brands. However, purchase intention was smaller (M = 3.22, SD = 1.16), regardless of very high reliability (α = 0.95). Overall, this pattern may suggest that although Japanese brands are perceived positively and trusted, purchase intentions are influenced by some other or additional factors.

China

Chinese car brands were evaluated less favourably than brands from other countries. The scale demonstrated high reliability (α = 0.88), but the COO perception was low (M = 2.40, SD = 0.74). Also, brand trust was low (M = 2.15, SD = 0.74), with high internal consistency (α = 0.90). This result suggests that there is limited confidence in Chinese brands

among the respondents. Purchase intention towards Chinese cars was the lowest of all countries that were examined (M = 1.72, SD = 0.87), with very good reliability (α = 0.95). These results suggest a clear negative COO effect that is associated with the Chinese car brands in the Finnish market.

America

Car brands from America received mixed evaluations. The COO perception was medium (M = 2.95, SD = 0.81), having a good reliability (α = 0.88). This result suggests neither clear positive nor strongly negative perceptions. The similar kind of pattern was seen in brand trust (M = 2.92, SD = 0.84), with strong reliability (α = 0.92). Purchase intention was fairly low (M = 2.53, SD = 1.03), although the scale showed strong reliability (α = 0.94). These findings suggest that even if American cars are not considered as negatively as Chinese brands, they do not show strong trust or purchase motivation in Finnish consumers.

France

French car brands were evaluated quite negatively overall. COO perception toward France was at a low level (M = 2.36, SD = 0.87), although high reliability (α = 0.90). This indicates weak country-of-origin associations. Brand trust was also considered to be at low to moderate level (M = 2.55, SD = 0.89), with very good reliability (α = 0.92). Purchase intention toward French car brands remained low (M = 2.15, SD = 1.08). The scale showed very strong internal consistency (α = 0.97). These findings together suggest that French car brands struggle to generate strong trust and purchase intentions in the Finnish market compared to Northern European and Japanese competitors.

Overall

Across all countries, European (Germany and Sweden) and Japanese car brands received more favourable evaluations in terms of COO perception, brand trust, and purchase intention than brands originating from China, the United States, and France. The consistently high reliability coefficients across all constructs support the consistency of the measurement scales. The results provide clear evidence that country of origin is

important in shaping Finnish consumers' perceptions, trust, and purchase intentions in the automotive sector.

Table 4. Scale analysis COO perception, brand trust, and purchase intention.

	N. of items	Germany			Sweden			Japan		
		Mean	SD	Relia-bility	Mean	SD	Relia-bility	Mean	SD	Relia-bility
COO perception	5	3.95	0.75	0.89	3.91	0.70	0.88	3.88	0.71	0.81
Brand trust	5	3.66	0.85	0.91	3.66	0.75	0.91	3.72	0.79	0.91
Purchase intention	4	3.84	1.14	0.95	3.29	1.08	0.94	3.22	1.16	0.95
	N. of items	China			America			France		
		Mean	SD	Relia-bility	Mean	SD	Relia-bility	Mean	SD	Relia-bility
COO perception	5	2.40	0.74	0.88	2.95	0.81	0.88	2.36	0.87	0.90
Brand trust	5	2.15	0.74	0.90	2.92	0.84	0.92	2.55	0.89	0.92
Purchase intention	4	1.72	0.87	0.95	2.53	1.03	0.94	2.15	1.08	0.97

4.2.2 Item-level analysis

Alongside the scale-level results presented in Table 4, item-level analyses provide a more detailed understanding of country-specific differences. Table 5 presents the individual items of the COO perception scale, showing that German, Swedish, and Japanese car brands receive consistently higher evaluations across quality, reputation, and overall evaluations relative to brands originating from China, the United States, and France.

Similarly, Table 6 reports item-level results for brand trust, indicating higher trust-related evaluations for European and Japanese brands, particularly in terms of reliability, confidence, and perceived consumer orientation. Finally, Table 7 presents the item-level purchase intention measures, which further reinforce these patterns, as respondents reported stronger willingness to consider, choose, and recommend car brands from Germany, Sweden, and Japan than from the other examined countries.

The detailed item-level results are presented in Tables 5–7.

Table 5. COO perception, each item in the scale towards six countries.

	Germany		Sweden		Japan	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
(Country) car brands are of high quality.	4.06	0.83	3.97	0.78	3.84	0.94
(Country) car brands are technologically advanced.	3.97	0.79	3.63	0.92	3.51	0.98
(Country) car brands are reliable.	3.64	1.02	3.93	0.85	4.19	0.93
(Country) car brands have a good reputation.	4.09	0.81	4.08	0.75	4.01	0.88
I have a positive image of (Country) car brands.	4.01	1.02	3.95	0.91	3.86	1.00
	China		America		France	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
(Country) car brands are of high quality.	2.34	0.85	2.93	0.98	2.34	1.00

(Country) car brands are techno-logically advanced.	3.21	1.13	2.87	1.01	2.64	1.06
(Country) car brands are reliable.	2.25	0.78	2.87	1.00	2.23	1.05
(Country) car brands have a good reputation.	2.01	0.76	3.02	0.93	2.13	0.88
I have a positive image of (Country) car brands.	2.17	0.96	3.07	1.05	2.48	1.13

Table 6. Brand trust, each item in the scale towards six countries.

	Germany		Sweden		Japan	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I trust (Country) car brands.	3.92	0.98	3.87	0.84	3.91	0.91
(Country) car brands keep their promises.	3.69	0.92	3.69	0.81	3.90	0.82
(Country) car brands meet my expectations.	3.83	0.89	3.60	0.91	3.54	0.99
I feel confident when choosing a (Country) car brand.	3.75	1.06	3.64	0.94	3.69	1.03
(Country) car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	3.08	1.08	3.49	0.88	3.59	0.88
	China		America		France	

	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I trust (Country) car brands.	1.94	0.85	2.96	1.06	2.39	1.11
(Country) car brands keep their promises.	2.43	0.88	3.00	0.94	2.78	0.95
(Country) car brands meet my expectations.	2.36	0.93	3.10	0.93	2.62	1.08
I feel confident when choosing a (Country) car brand.	1.85	0.84	2.86	0.94	2.26	1.04
(Country) car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	2.17	0.92	2.71	0.93	2.71	0.93

Table 7. Purchase intention, each item in the scale towards six countries.

	Germany		Sweden		Japan	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I would consider buying a (Country) car brand.	4.08	1.18	3.54	1.19	3.39	1.26
It is likely that I would choose a (Country) car brand.	3.79	1.23	3.16	1.19	3.05	1.23
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options	3.80	1.28	3.15	1.25	3.06	1.31

from (Country) brands.						
I would recommend (Country) car brands to others.	3.71	1.19	3.31	1.07	3.39	1.19
	China		America		France	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I would consider buying a (Country) car brand.	1.81	1.06	2.70	1.21	2.28	1.23
It is likely that I would choose a (Country) car brand.	1.63	0.89	2.39	1.12	2.04	1.08
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from (Country) brands.	1.63	0.91	2.45	1.17	2.08	1.13
I would recommend (Country) car brands to others.	1.81	0.89	2.58	1.00	2.19	1.11

4.2.3 Reliability and descriptive statistics of additional constructs

Consumer ethnocentrism

The reliability of the consumer ethnocentrism scale, in terms of internal consistency, was examined using Cronbach's alpha. As seen in the Table 8, the four-item scale demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), demonstrating a high level of internal consistency across the items. Following the reliability analysis, a composite mean variable was created and used in subsequent analyses. The composite mean score for consumer ethnocentrism was moderate ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.11$), suggesting that respondents, on average, exhibited a neutral to moderately positive tendency toward ethnocentric consumption

attitudes. The relatively high standard deviation indicates notable variation among respondents, implying that while some consumers show strong ethnocentric preferences, others display more cosmopolitan or origin-neutral attitudes.

To provide a more in-depth view of the ethnocentric attitudes of the respondents, Table 9 shows the item-level results. The item-level results of the consumer ethnocentrism scale illustrate each of the individual statements that were included in the measure and how the respondents evaluated them.

Table 8. Scale analysis consumer ethnocentrism.

	N. of items	Mean	SD	Reliability
Consumer ethnocentrism	4	3.14	1.11	0.91

Table 9. Consumer ethnocentrism, each item in the scale.

Consumer ethnocentrism	Mean	SD
When choosing a car, I prefer brands that are geographically or culturally close to Finland.	2.98	1.21
I consider it important that people buy car brands from European countries.	3.38	1.25
Buying a car brand from culturally close countries feels more appropriate than from distant ones.	3.11	1.25
I feel more confident buying a car from a country that I perceive as culturally or geographically close to Finland.	3.10	1.27

Price consciousness

Cronbach's alpha was used in examining the reliability of the price consciousness scale in terms of internal consistency. The four-item scale showed an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.74$) as shown in Table 10. This indicates a level of internal consistency among the items, that is satisfactory. A composite mean variable was created and used in subsequent analysis after the reliability analysis.

The composite mean score for price consciousness showed as moderate to low (M = 2.67, SD = 0.83). This suggests that on average, respondents did not strongly emphasize price as the most important factor in their car purchase decisions. The standard deviation was quite moderate, and it indicates some variation among the respondents. This implies that at the same time, some consumers are price-conscious, and many place more importance on other factors such as brand, trust or country of origin.

To gain a more detailed understanding of price-related attitudes, Table 11 presents the item-level results of the price consciousness scale, illustrating how respondents evaluated each individual statement included in the measure. Overall, the relatively low average level of price consciousness suggests that price considerations may influence purchase decisions primarily for a subset of consumers, rather than dominating decision-making across the entire sample.

Table 11 presents the item-level results of the price consciousness scale to provide a more detailed understanding of price-related attributes. The table illustrates how the respondents evaluate every individual statement that is included in the measure. Overall, the lower level of price consciousness suggests that price considerations may influence purchase decisions mainly for a specific group of consumers. And it does not dominate decision-making across the entire sample.

Table 10. Scale analysis price consciousness.

	N. of items	Mean	SD	Reliability
Price consciousness	4	2.67	0.83	0.74

Table 11. Price consciousness, each item in the scale.

Price consciousness	Mean	SD
Price is the most important factor when buying a car.	3.19	1.05
I usually choose the cheapest car that meets my needs.	2.45	1.12

Price consciousness	Mean	SD
I am willing to compromise on the brand or its country of origin if the price is more affordable.	2.46	1.06
When comparing cars, price is a more important factor than the country of origin of the brand.	2.57	1.21

4.2.4 Correlation analysis

Before hypotheses were tested with regression analyses, Pearson's correlation analysis was done. The reason for this was to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationships with the main constructs (COO perception, brand trust, consumer ethnocentrism, price consciousness and purchase intention). The main reason for this specific analysis was to figure out if the variables were significantly associated with one another. The aim was to justify the use of regression models in later hypothesis testing. In addition, correlation analysis was used as a preliminary diagnostic tool for identifying potential multicollinearity issues that could arise if independent variables were highly correlated.

Given the scope of the study and the aim of maintaining analytical clarity, Germany was selected as the focal country for the correlation analysis. Germany represents a country with a strong and well-established automotive country image in the Finnish market and therefore serves as an appropriate reference case for examining the relationships between COO perception, brand trust, and purchase intention. The other countries were primarily examined through descriptive and comparative analyses.

Pearson's correlation coefficient, r, takes values from –1 to +1 and is used to indicate the direction and magnitude of linear associations between variables (Pallant, 2020). Positive values indicate direct relationships, whereas negative values reflect inverse relationships. Following Pallant (2020), correlation coefficients of ±0.10 to ±0.29 are classified as weak, ±0.30 to ±0.49 as moderate, and ±0.50 or higher as strong relationships. In this specific study, correlation analysis provided an initial understanding of the associations

among the constructs and informed the interpretation of the subsequent regression results.

The results in Table 12 reveal that COO perception toward German car brands was strongly and exhibited a positive correlation with brand trust ($r = .857$, $p < .001$) and purchase intention ($r = .799$, $p < .001$). In addition, brand trust exhibited a strong positive correlation with purchase intention ($r = .823$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of trust are linked to with stronger intentions to purchase German car brands. Thus, these results offer preliminary empirical backing for the hypothesized relationships, suggesting that favourable COO perceptions are closely linked to both trust formation and purchase intention.

Furthermore, consumer ethnocentrism showed moderate positive correlations with COO perception ($r = .331$, $p < .001$), brand trust ($r = .346$, $p < .001$), and purchase intention ($r = .323$, $p < .001$), indicating that ethnocentric tendencies are associated with more favourable evaluations of German car brands. In contrast, price consciousness showed a weak but statistically significant negative correlation with purchase intention ($r = –.166$, $p = .014$). Its associations with COO perceptions and brand trust were not statistically significant. This suggests that higher price consciousness is linked to lower purchase intentions, while price sensitivity appears to play a limited role in shaping consumers' COO perceptions or trust in car brands.

Overall, the correlation results support the conceptual framework of the study and provide a solid basis for proceeding to regression analysis to test this study's hypotheses.

Table 12. Pearson's correlation.

	COO perception GER	Brand trust GER	Purchase intention GER	Consumer ethnocentrism	Price consciousness
COO perception GER	-				

Brand trust GER	0.857	-			
Purchase intention GER	0.799	0.823	-		
Consumer ethnocentrism	0.331	0.346	0.323		
Price consciousness	-0.092	-0.082	-0.166	-0.061	-

Note. N = 216.

** p < .01, * p < .05 (two-tailed).

4.3 Hypothesis testing

Linear regression analysis was chosen as the primary statistical technique purchase intention was measured as the dependent variable using continuous Likert-type scale treated as continuous. This method enables the examination of predictive relationships between variables and is therefore well suited to testing the hypotheses developed in this study (Pallant, 2020; Saunders et al., 2023). The outcomes of the regression analyses for all six countries are summarized in Table 13. Price consciousness was not included as an independent variable in the regression models, as preliminary analyses suggested that its relationship with purchase intention differed from that of the main explanatory variables. Consequently, it was examined separately through descriptive and correlational analyses.

4.3.1 Effect of COO perception on purchase intention

Across all country-specific regression models, country-of-origin perception proved to be a strong and statistically significant predictor of purchase intention. For German car brands, COO perception had a strong positive effect on purchase intention (β = .79, p < .001), indicating that favorable perceptions of Germany as a car manufacturing country substantially increase Finnish consumers' willingness to purchase German cars.

Similarly, COO perception significantly predicted purchase intention for Swedish (β = .64, p < .001), Japanese (β = .68, p < .001), Chinese (β = .66, p < .001), American (β = .71, p < .001), and French car brands (β = .80, p < .001). Among the examined countries, the strongest effect of COO perception was observed for French car brands, while the weakest, though still substantial, effect was found for Swedish brands.

Overall, the results demonstrate that COO perception consistently explains a significant proportion of variance in purchase intention across all six country models, with adjusted R^2 values ranging from .441 to .681. Taken together, the results offer strong empirical evidence for the hypothesis, that positive country-of-origin perceptions increase Finnish consumers' purchase intentions in the automotive sector.

4.3.2 Effect of consumer ethnocentrism on purchase intention

Consumer ethnocentrism showed a generally weak and context-dependent relationship with purchase intention when analysed alongside COO perception. In most country-specific regression models, consumer ethnocentrism did not emerge as a statistically significant predictor of purchase intention once COO perception was included in the model.

For German car brands, consumer ethnocentrism was not statistically significant (β = .07, p = .133), indicating that ethnocentric tendencies do not meaningfully influence Finnish consumers' purchase intentions toward German cars when COO perceptions are taken into account. Similarly, no statistically significant effect of consumer ethnocentrism was observed for Japanese (β = .08, p = .133), Chinese (β = .06, p = .209), or American car brands (β = .00, p = .961). In these cases, purchase intention appears to be driven primarily by evaluations concerning the perceived country of origin rather than by ethnocentric considerations.

Furthermore, consumer ethnocentrism showed only a weak but statistically significant positive effect for Swedish car brands, β = .12, p = .023. Similarly with French car brands (β = .10, p = .011). The results suggest that ethnocentric tendencies might slightly

increase purchase intention toward brands from countries that are geographically or culturally close to Finland. However, the effects related to consumer ethnocentrism were weaker than those of COO perceptions. As a result, its role in shaping purchase intention seems more secondary.

Overall, the results indicate that consumer ethnocentrism does not independently drive Finnish consumers' purchase intentions in the automotive sector. While ethnocentrism may exert a minor reinforcing effect in specific country contexts, its influence is limited compared to the consistently strong effect of COO perception. Consequently, the findings provide only partial confirmation of the hypothesised impact of consumer ethnocentrism on purchase intention.

Table 13. Regression results for the effects of country-of-origin perceptions and consumer ethnocentrism on purchase intention.

	Germany		Sweden		Japan	
	β value	Sig. (p)	β value	Sig. (p)	β value	Sig. (p)
COO perception	0.79	< .001	0.64	< .001	0.68	< .001
Consumer ethnocentrism	0.07	0.133	0.12	0.023	0.08	0.133
	Adjusted R2= 0.64 F=191.565 (P=< .001)		Adjusted R2= 0.44 F= 85.970 (P=< .001)		Adjusted R2= 0.47 F= 95.663 (P=< .001)	
	China		America		France	
	β value	Sig. (p)	β value	Sig. (p)	β value	Sig. (p)

COO perception	0.66	< .001	0.71	< .001	0.80	< .001
Consumer ethnocen-trism	0.06	0.209	0.00	0.961	0.10	0.011
	Adjusted R2= 0.45 F= 89.383 (P=< .001)		Adjusted R2= 0.50 F=108.018 (P=< .001)		Adjusted R2= 0.68 F=230.816 (P=< .001)	

4.3.3 Price consciousness and purchase intention

Price consciousness was examined as an additional attitudinal factor to complement the regression-based hypothesis testing. Descriptive analysis indicated that the overall level of price consciousness among respondents was moderate to low (M = 2.67, SD = 0.83), suggesting that price is not perceived as the dominant criterion in car purchase decisions. The item-level results also support this interpretation. Respondents generally disagreed with statements that placed a low price above brand or country-of-origin considerations.

Correlation analysis showed more insights into the role of price consciousness in the context of automobiles. There was a weak but statistically significant negative correlation between price consciousness and purchase intention toward German car brands (r = -.166, p = .014). The results suggest that the consumers who are more price -sensitive report lower purchase intentions. Although the strength of the relationship remains limited.

Price consciousness did not show a significant relationship with COO perception or brand trust. This may indicate that price considerations are mostly separate from country-related evaluations and trust. Overall, price sensitivity may matter for some consumers when forming purchase intentions. However, it appears to be less influential than COO perceptions and brand trust in car purchase decisions.

4.3.4 Mediation analysis brand trust

The mediation effect proposed in Hypothesis 2 was examined using a series of linear regression analyses. As summarized in Table 14, the results indicate that COO perception had a strong positive influence on brand trust, and brand trust, in turn, had a strong positive effect on purchase intention. When both COO perception and brand trust were included in the same regression model predicting purchase intention, both predictors remained statistically significant, however, the effect of COO perception was substantially reduced. This pattern points to partial mediation. In other words, COO perceptions influence purchase intention both directly and through brand trust.

Considering the exploratory character of the mediation analysis, the test was limited to only one, theoretically relevant country context. The mediation analysis was conducted for Germany only. Germany was selected because it demonstrated strong and consistent relationships between COO perception, brand trust, and purchase intention in the preliminary correlation and regression analyses. The study focuses on understanding how COO perceptions affect purchase intention. For this reason, a single, theoretically relevant country context was chosen for methodological reasons.

As shown in Table 14, COO perception strongly predicted brand trust ($\beta = 0.86$, $p < .001$), and brand trust strongly predicted purchase intention ($\beta = 0.82$, $p < .001$). When both COO perception and brand trust were included in the final model, the effect of COO perception on purchase intention decreased substantially ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), while brand trust remained a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$). All models were statistically significant, and the model's explanatory power remained high (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.71$). These findings provide empirical support for Hypothesis 2 and confirm the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between COO perception and purchase intention.

Table 14. Mediation analysis results for Hypothesis 2 (Germany).

Regression step	Independent variable -> Dependent variable	β	Sig. (p)	Adjusted R2
Step 1	COO perception -> brand trust	0.86	< .001	0.73

Regression step	Independent variable -> Dependent variable	β	Sig. (p)	Adjusted R2
Step 2	Brand trust -> purchase intention	0.82	< .001	0.68
Step 3	COO perception -> purchase intention	0.35	< .001	0.71
	Brand trust -> purchase intention	0.52	< .001	

Note. Standardized beta coefficients are reported. All models were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

4.3.5 Summary of hypothesis testing results

An overview of the results of the hypothesis testing is presented in Table 15, summarizing the empirical support for each hypothesis. The findings indicate strong support for the hypothesized positive effect of COO perceptions on purchase intention (H1). The effect of consumer ethnocentrism on purchase intention was found to be context-dependent, providing partial support for H3. The mediation hypothesis (H2) was partially supported, as brand trust was found to mediate the relationship between COO perception and purchase intention in the case of Germany. Finally, in the German reference case, price consciousness (H4) was found to be significantly related to purchase intention, although the relationship was weak and negative.

Table 15. Overview of the hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Findings
H1: COO perceptions have a positive effect on purchase intention.	Supported
H2: COO perceptions have a positive effect on brand trust, which in turn predicts purchase intention.	Partially supported / tested for Germany only
H3: Consumer ethnocentrism has a positive effect on purchase intention for proximate countries.	Partially supported

Hypothesis	Findings
H4: Price consciousness has a negative effect on purchase intention.	Partially supported based on correlational evidence (Germany).

4.3.6 Discussion of findings

This section aims to bring together the empirical findings of the study and discuss their theoretical implications in relation to existing COO literature. The results provide evidence that COO remains a relevant factor in shaping Finnish consumers' brand perceptions, brand trust, and purchase intentions in the automotive sector, thereby supporting prior research that positions COO as an influential extrinsic cue in high-involvement product categories.

The findings of this study suggest that car brands that originate from European countries included in the study (Germany and Sweden) are generally associated with higher levels of brand trust and purchase intention. In particular, when compared to brands originating from China. This kind of pattern is consistent with earlier research that indicates that consumers often link specific countries with favorable product related-attributes, for instance, quality, reliability end engineering competence (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Magnusson et al., 2011). Consistent with the cognitive dimension of the COO effect (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999), Finnish consumers seem to use COO information when assessing automotive brands. This may help them evaluate product quality and manage perceived risk.

The role of brand trust in the relationship between COO perceptions and purchase intention is next presented and further emphasized in the findings of this study. As earlier research suggests (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Wang & Yang, 2008), higher levels of trust were linked with stronger willingness to take into consideration purchasing a car brand from a certain country. This finding supports the view that country of origin affects consumer behaviour in more than one way. In addition to direct

effects, COO also seems to influence purchase decisions indirectly by shaping trust-related evaluations. Specifically in the markets where purchases involve high financial commitment and long-term use.

To move further with the findings, they indicate that the perceived importance of the country of origin varies among consumers. Also, it plays a different kind of role depending on individual decision-making priorities. The country of origin was generally relevant in purchase evaluations. However, in the German reference case, price consciousness showed a weak but statistically significant negative relationship with purchase intention. This might indicate that price can also play a role alongside COO-related cues. This finding is consistent with earlier research that suggests that country of origin functions as one factor among many in consumer evaluations, and not as a single determinant of consumer behaviour (Han, 1989; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

When it comes to the findings that are related to demographic variables, these contribute further to COO research. The findings illustrate that consumer characteristics might be linked to differences in how COO cues are interpreted. The results show that gender- and age-related differences in COO perceptions do not appear consistently across different countries. Instead, these differences seem to depend on how strong and familiar the country-of-origin stereotype is. Consistent with the previous research, the findings therefore suggest that COO effects are context-dependent and shaped by individual factors, for instance, consumer experience and involvement (Magnusson & Westjohn, 2011).

When all the findings are taken together, it can be stated that these provide empirical support for the existing COO theory in a less explored market context, Finnish automotive sector in particular. The findings showcase the importance of COO perceptions and brand trust in purchase decisions. Individual-level consumer differences seem to matter mainly in specific country contexts. This study focuses on the Finnish car market specifically, where all passenger cars are imported. Therefore, this it provides additional insights into how COO operates when there is no domestic automotive industry. In doing so, it contributes to the broader literature on COO effects.

5 Conclusions

This chapter concludes the study by summarizing the key findings and answering the central research question. It highlights the main theoretical and managerial implications of the results within the context of the Finnish automotive market. In addition, the limitations of the study are recognized, and directions for future research are proposed.

5.1 Answer to the research question

The findings of this study demonstrate that the COO effect has a significant influence on Finnish consumers' purchase intentions in the automotive sector. In case of favourable COO perceptions, they are associated with higher levels of brand trust and stronger willingness to purchase. This indicates that, still, COO remains an important evaluative cue in a market where cars are imported and where choices of brand are inherently international.

5.2 Practical implications

To move to the practical implications of this study, it is important to note that there are several implications for automotive brands, importers and marketers operating in the Finnish market. The results indicate that COO keeps influencing on brand trust and purchase intentions. Managers should consider COO to be a strategic element in brand positioning and communication. In this case, particularly in high involvement product contexts like passenger cars.

To start with, the preference for European (German and Swedish) cars may suggest that emphasizing the European origin can be effective as a branding strategy in Finland. Because of this, automotive companies with European manufacturing or heritage may benefit from highlighting specific attributes that are associated with Europe. These include for example engineering quality, safety standards or reliability. By communicating these associations in different marketing channels could strengthen brand trust and reinfore positive brand perceptions among Finnish consumers.

The second practical implication considers the result of underlining the importance of brand trust as a key driver of purchase intention. For this reason, managers should focus on building and maintaining trust. Which could be done through transparent communication, quality assurance and long-term brand consistency. The car brands originating from less favourably perceived origins, such as Chin was in this study; the findings indicate that trust-building strategies may be particularly important. In these kind of cases, emphasizing warranties, safety certifications, technological advancements or third-party endorsements could possibly help to reduce perceived risk and mitigate negative COO perceptions.

Third, it was observed through the role of price consciousness, that there could be a need for differentiated marketing strategies. Because some consumers are more price sensitive, the COO cues may have a secondary role compared to affordability and value for money. For this reason, automotive companies that target this specific consumer segment should focus on pricing that is competitive, transparency of costs, and financing solutions, but at the same time, still ensure effective communication of minimum trust and quality signals.

Furthermore, there were observed differences across demographic groups. This showcases that a one-size-fits-all approach may be insufficient. Taking certain segments into account in strategies, such as gender, age, and differences in consumer experience, may improve the efforts in marketing. For example, car owners who are more experienced may respond more strongly to COO cues, but first-time buyers may prioritise price or convenience, for instance.

To continue with the same idea of tailoring COO-related communication to different segments, young consumers or female buyers, for instance, may enhance the effectiveness of marketing. Younger consumers might consider traditional COO cues less important, and possibly concentrate on different factors, like price, technology, sustainability or digital features. While female buyers may prioritize trust, safety or reliability when evaluating car brands. All of this segment-focused marketing could enable firms to allocate resources more effectively. Additionally, it would help firms to develop messages that

resonate better with the specific values and different decision-making criteria of different consumer groups.

Overall, according to the findings of this study, it seems that COO should not be viewed as an isolated marketing tool. It should be a part of a broader strategic framework which consist of brand trust, price strategy and consumer segmentation. Automotive brands could improve their competitive positioning by aligning COO communication with the expectations of consumers. In doing so, this may help them respond better to the preferences of Finnish consumers.

5.3 Limitations

This study has its contributions, but it needs to be remembered that there are limitations also. Thus, this has to be kept in mind when the findings are interpreted.

First of all, the research is only limited to Finland. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other national or cultural contexts. The consumer perceptions of COO may vary in different countries. This occurs because of the different cultural values, economic conditions and overall market structures. For this specific reason, the findings of this study should be interpreted context-specifically and not universally applicable.

The second point concerns the research method, which was quantitative in this case. it was cross-sectional, which means that it captured the consumer perceptions at one point in time. This specific method enables data collection that is efficient and enables to statistically analyze it, but it does not take into account changes that may happen in consumer attitudes when time goes by (Saunders et al., 2023). There are factors such as economic fluctuations, geopolitical developments, and possible changes in the automotive market, that may influence COO perceptions, brand trust and purchase intentions in ways that are not possible to observe in a cross-sectional framework.

The third limitation acknowledged in this study is the use of non-probability convenience sampling as an approach. The reason for this is that it reduces the extent to which the sample can be considered representative (Saunders et al., 2023). Although there were

efforts taken to reach a diverse group of Finnish consumers, the sample may overrepresent certain demographic groups. For instance, younger respondents or individuals with higher education levels. Thus, the findings may not fully capture the views of the wider Finnish car-buying population.

The fourth aspect concerns the reliance on self-reported data because there is a risk for certain biases, in this case, social desirability bias and response bias (Saunders et al., 2023). The respondents may have reported different attitudes or intentions that do not actually represent their purchasing behaviour. Moreover, this study focuses on purchase intention rather than realised purchase behaviour. This means that the result cannot confirm if the stated intentions would translate into actual purchases.

Additionally, there are limitations regarding the survey itself. For example, the structure and ordering of the questions could have affected the respondents' evaluations. In particular, order effects could have occurred, which means that earlier questions may shape the interpretation of the latter ones (Saunders et al., 2023). Although the questionnaire was designed to be clear and consistent, it could be possible in the future, to randomize the order of the countries and items.

Another limitation is that this study concentrated only on selected countries (Germany, Sweden, China, Japan, United States and France). This enabled meaningful cross-country comparisons, but it may reduce the extent to which the findings are applicable to other automotive origin countries that were not included in the analysis. Also, other factors that influence car purchase decisions, brand specific attributes, financing models, dealer-related factors or macroeconomic conditions, for instance, were not in the scope of this study, and therefore not controlled for.

Finally, it has to be remembered that when examining the impact of country of origin, there is a risk that its importance may be overstated. In addition, earlier studies imply that COO has a stronger influence on the perceptions of quality and brand image than on actual purchasing behaviour (Josiassen & Harzing, 2008). For this reason, COO effects may appear more important in survey-based research than in real-life purchasing

situations. Price, availability and product-specific features may take a stronger role in these actual purchase situations. Thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution and this in mind. 100% OK

5.4 Future research suggestions

Although this study enhances understanding of the impact of the COO effect on Finnish consumers' COO perceptions, brand trust and purchase intentions in the automotive sector, many avenues for future research can be identified here.

First, future studies could broaden the geographic focus beyond Finland to allow for cross-country comparisons. Examining COO perceptions in other Nordic countries or in different European markets would make it possible to assess whether the patterns identified in this study are specific to the Finnish context or apply more broadly. In addition, comparative research between developed and emerging markets may be useful. It could help clarify how COO cues vary across different economic and cultural settings.

The second suggestion for future research could consider applying a mixed methods approach that combines survey data with qualitative approaches, for instance, interviews or focus groups. These qualitative insights could provide more deeper understanding of underlying motivations, emotions and personal experiences of consumers that shape the perceptions. The following are not fully captured through only structured questionnaires.

The third suggestion is for future research to focus on additional or different moderating variables that may shape the strength of the COO effect, including environmental consciousness, brand familiarity, perceived risk or technological orientation. Electric mobility is becoming increasingly important in the automotive market. Future research could therefore examine whether COO perceptions differ between conventional internal combustion engine vehicles and electric or hybrid cars.

Another potential direction for future research relates to the role of car financing models in shaping the influence of country of origin on purchase decisions. Consumers who

finance a vehicle using their own resources may approach evaluations of country of origin, brand trust and perceived quality differently than those who for example aquire a car through employer-provided leasing or private leasing arrangements. In leasing contexts, where the financial risk and long-term ownership responsibilities are more limited, consumers may place less emphasis on COO-related cues and instead focus on factors such as monthly costs, tax advantages or convenience. Examining these differences across financing models may help develop a more detailed understanding of how COO perceptions interact with consumer decision-making in the automotive sector.

Future research might also benefit from a more segment-focused perspective. That could considers how the COO effect differs across different consumer groups, such as younger consumers, female buyers or first-time car purchasers. Focusing on specific segments could help identify differences in consumer-decision making. It may also clarify how COO perceptions operate across different groups.

Another direction for future research would be to move beyond regional groupings and focus more closely on individual automotive brands. Examining COO effects at the brand level could help explain how origin cues interact with brand reputation, heritage and perceived strength. To be particular, it would be interesting to assess whether well-established global brands reduce the relevance of COO perceptions or, in some cases amplify their impact. This kind of approach could deepen understanding of how consumers balance brand-related and country-related cues when forming trust and purchase intentions.

As of the final suggestion for future research, is to use a longitudinal research design to examine how the COO perceptions develop over time. This kind of approach would make it possible to notice changes in consumer attitudes in response to factors like market developments, geopolitical events, or shifts in brand strategies. As there is an ongoing transformation in the automotive industry, and possibly a growing presence of new manufacturing or brand origin countries, the longitudinal perspective could give a deeper understanding into how consumer evaluations and trust are evolving over time, and this information could be valuable for theoretical and managerial perspectives.

5.5 Key conclusions

Based on the empirical results, four important conclusions can be recognized from this study. First of all, the findings suggest that COO perceptions have a meaningful influence on Finnish consumers' purchase intentions in all six countries that were in the analysis. In practice, car brands that were associated with certain countries tend to be perceived more positively, and these perceptions are reflected in a stronger willingness to purchase.

Secondly, the findings point to the importance of brand trust as a key factor that link COO perceptions to purchase intention. Further, the results suggest that COO influences consumer behaviour not only directly but also indirectly, particularly by strengthening trust in brands that are associated with positively perceived countries of origin. This is relevant in the automotive sector, where purchasing a vehicle usually involves a high level of financial investment and perceived risk.

Third, the results show that the influence of consumer ethnocentrism varies depending on the context. Ethnocentric attitudes appeared to strengthen purchase intentions mainly in situations that involved culturally or geographically proximate countries. However, ethnocentrism had a smaller influence than COO perceptions. This suggests that its impact is shaped by specific market conditions instead of operating as a general driver of consumer behaviour.

The final finding relates to price consciousness and its connection to purchase intention. Even though price consciousness was statistically significant in the German reference case, this relationship remained weak and negative. This may imply that although for some consumers price considerations are relevant, price is not the dominant factor that guides car purchase decisions among Finnish consumers. Rather, country-of-origin perceptions and brand trust continue to play an important role alongside price-related evaluations.

To summarize, all of these results demonstrate that country-of-origin continues to matter in how consumers evaluate car brands. Its influence is not limited to quality-related

assumptions, but it also extends to the formation of brand trust and to attitudes that vary depending on the market context.

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Appendices

Appendix. Survey

Car brand origin and consumer purchase decisions

Mandatory questions are marked with an asterisk (*)

Dear participant,

This survey is part of a Master's thesis conducted at the University of Vaasa and the University of Pavia, examining how the country of origin of car brands influences consumer perceptions, brand trust, and purchase intentions in the Finnish automotive market.

The survey compares perceptions and attitudes toward German, Swedish, Japanese, Chinese, American, and French car brands.

The survey is intended for individuals who live in Finland or consider themselves Finnish consumers.

Your participation is completely voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire takes approximately 5–7 minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your personal opinions and experiences.

To thank you for your participation, you have the option to enter a raffle for two Finnkino movie tickets at the end of the survey. Contact details for the raffle are collected separately and cannot be linked to your responses.

All responses will be treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes.
If you agree to participate, please continue to the next page.

Thank you for your valuable contribution!
Best regards,
Mirka Hotti

1. I have read the information above and agree to participate in this survey. *

◯ Yes, I agree

Section 1: Country of origin perception

Before you answer, please note:

In this survey, country of origin refers to the perceived origin or brand image of the car brand (e.g., German cars = BMW, Mercedes).
It does not refer to the actual manufacturing location of the car.

Please rate each statement using the 5-point scale below:
(1 = Strongly disagree … 5 = Strongly agree)

2. Country of origin: Germany *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
German car brands are of high quality.	○	○	○	○	○
German car brands are technologically advanced.	○	○	○	○	○
German car brands are reliable.	○	○	○	○	○
German car brands have a good reputation.	○	○	○	○	○
I have a positive image of German car brands.	○	○	○	○	○

3. Country of origin: Sweden *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Swedish car brands are of high quality.	○	○	○	○	○
Swedish car brands are technologically advanced.	○	○	○	○	○
Swedish car brands are reliable.	○	○	○	○	○
Swedish car brands have a good reputation.	○	○	○	○	○
I have a positive image of Swedish car brands.	○	○	○	○	○

4. Country of origin: Japan *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Japanese car brands are of high quality.	○	○	○	○	○
Japanese car brands are technologically advanced.	○	○	○	○	○
Japanese car brands are reliable.	○	○	○	○	○
Japanese car brands have a good reputation.	○	○	○	○	○
I have a positive image of Japanese car brands.	○	○	○	○	○

5. Country of origin: China *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Chinese car brands are of high quality.	○	○	○	○	○
Chinese car brands are technologically advanced.	○	○	○	○	○
Chinese car brands are reliable.	○	○	○	○	○
Chinese car brands have a good reputation.	○	○	○	○	○
I have a positive image of Chinese car brands.	○	○	○	○	○

6. Country of origin: America *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
American car brands are of high quality.	○	○	○	○	○
American car brands are technologically advanced.	○	○	○	○	○
American car brands are reliable.	○	○	○	○	○

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
American car brands have a good reputation.	○	○	○	○	○
I have a positive image of American car brands.	○	○	○	○	○

7. Country of origin: France *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
French car brands are of high quality.	○	○	○	○	○
French car brands are technologically advanced.	○	○	○	○	○
French car brands are reliable.	○	○	○	○	○
French car brands have a good reputation.	○	○	○	○	○
I have a positive image of French car brands.	○	○	○	○	○

Section 2: Brand trust

Please rate each statement using the 5-point scale below:
(1 = Strongly disagree … 5 = Strongly agree)

8. Brand trust: Germany *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I trust German car brands.	○	○	○	○	○
German car brands keep their promises.	○	○	○	○	○
German car brands meet my expectations.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident when choosing a German car brand.	○	○	○	○	○

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
German car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	○	○	○	○	○

9. Brand trust: Sweden *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I trust Swedish car brands.	○	○	○	○	○
Swedish car brands keep their promises.	○	○	○	○	○
Swedish car brands meet my expectations.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident when choosing a Swedish car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
Swedish car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	○	○	○	○	○

10. Brand trust: Japan *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I trust Japanese car brands.	○	○	○	○	○
Japanese car brands keep their promises.	○	○	○	○	○
Japanese car brands meet my expectations.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident when choosing a Japanese car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
Japanese car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	○	○	○	○	○

11. Brand trust: China *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I trust Chinese car brands.	○	○	○	○	○
Chinese car brands keep their promises.	○	○	○	○	○
Chinese car brands meet my expectations.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident when choosing a Chinese car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
Chinese car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	○	○	○	○	○

12. Brand trust: America *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I trust American car brands.	○	○	○	○	○
American car brands keep their promises.	○	○	○	○	○
American car brands meet my expectations.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident when choosing an American car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
American car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	○	○	○	○	○

13. Brand trust: France *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I trust French car brands.	○	○	○	○	○
French car brands keep their promises.	○	○	○	○	○
French car brands meet my expectations.	○	○	○	○	○

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel confident when choosing an French car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
French car brands act in the best interest of consumers.	○	○	○	○	○

Section 3: Purchase intention

Please rate each statement using the 5-point scale below:
(1 = Strongly disagree … 5 = Strongly agree)

14. Purchase intention: Germany *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would consider buying a German car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
It is likely that I would choose a German car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from German brands.	○	○	○	○	○
I would recommend German car brands to others.	○	○	○	○	○

15. Purchase intention: Sweden *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would consider buying a Swedish car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
It is likely that I would choose a Swedish car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from Swedish brands.	○	○	○	○	○

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would recommend Swedish car brands to others.	○	○	○	○	○

16. Purchase intention: Japan *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would consider buying a Japanese car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
It is likely that I would choose a Japanese car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from Japanese brands.	○	○	○	○	○
I would recommend Japanese car brands to others.	○	○	○	○	○

17. Purchase intention: China *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would consider buying a Chinese car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
It is likely that I would choose a Chinese car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from Chinese brands.	○	○	○	○	○
I would recommend Chinese car brands to others.	○	○	○	○	○

18. Purchase intention: America *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would consider buying an American car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
It is likely that I would choose an American car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from American brands.	○	○	○	○	○
I would recommend American car brands to others.	○	○	○	○	○

19. Purchase intention: France *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would consider buying a French car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
It is likely that I would choose a French car brand.	○	○	○	○	○
If I needed a new car, I would actively look for options from French brands.	○	○	○	○	○
I would recommend French car brands to others.	○	○	○	○	○

Section 4: Attitudes toward car brands from different countries

Please rate each statement using the 5-point scale below:
(1 = Strongly disagree … 5 = Strongly agree)

20. Attitudes toward car brands from different countries *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
When choosing a car, I prefer brands that are geographically or culturally close to Finland.	○	○	○	○	○

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I consider it important that people buy car brands from European countries.	○	○	○	○	○
Buying a car brand from culturally close countries feels more appropriate than from distant ones.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel more confident buying a car from a country that I perceive as culturally or geographically close to Finland.	○	○	○	○	○

Section 5: Price consciousness

Please rate each statement using the 5-point scale below:
(1 = Strongly disagree … 5 = Strongly agree)

21. Price consciousness *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Price is the most important factor when buying a car.	○	○	○	○	○
I usually choose the cheapest car that meets my needs.	○	○	○	○	○
I am willing to compromise on the brand or its country of origin if the price is more affordable.	○	○	○	○	○
When comparing cars, price is a more important factor than the country of origin of the brand.	○	○	○	○	○

Background information / Responses will be used only for statistical grouping. All data are processed anonymously.

22. How old are you? Please select your age group: *

○ 15-17

- ◯ 18-24
- ◯ 25-34
- ◯ 35-44
- ◯ 45-54
- ◯ 55-64
- ◯ 65 or older

23. What is your gender? *

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Other

24. What is your level of education? *

- ◯ Primary school
- ◯ Upper secondary education (high school or vocational)
- ◯ Bachelor's degree
- ◯ Master's degree
- ◯ Doctoral degree (PhD)
- ◯ Other

25. Do you currently own a car? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Raffle contact information

26. If you wish to participate in the raffle for two Finnkino movie tickets, please leave your email address below.