



**Vaasan yliopisto**  
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**How does the brand's country-of-origin effect the  
international brand-user engagement in social  
media?**

School of Marketing and  
Communication  
Master's thesis in  
International Business

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**VAASAN YLIOPISTO****Markkinoinnin ja viestinnän yksikkö**

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**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Kansainvälinen markkinointi on hyötynyt valtavasti sosiaalisen media käytön lisääntyessä kuluttajien keskuudessa. Yritykset saavat näkyvyyttä brändeilleen helpommin ja nopeammin kansainvälisille markkinoille. Yritysten on tärkeä ymmärtää miten he voivat hyödyntää alkuperämaa ajatusta kuluttajien kanssa sosiaalisessa mediassa. Aikaisempien tutkimusten perusteella kuluttajien oma sosiaalinen identiteetti, brändien alkuperämaa sekä kulttuuri vaikuttavat heidän mieltymyksiinsä sekä päätöksiinsä siinä, miten aktiivisesti he käyttäytyvät sosiaalisessa mediassa brändien sivuilla. Teorian perusteella syntyy neljä hypoteesia, joiden avulla halutaan saada parempi ymmärrys kuluttajien käyttäytymisestä brändien sosiaalisen median alustoilla. Kvantitatiivisen tutkimuksen avulla selvitetään, miten kuluttajat käyttävät sosiaalista mediaa ja ovat vuorovaikutuksessa brändien kanssa. Tässä tutkimuksessa tehdään kysely, joka on suunnattu suomalaisille sekä ulkomaalaisille kuluttajille. Kyselyssä tutkitaan heidän sosiaalisen median käyttöä ja ajatuksista brändien alkuperämaahan liittyen. Myös sosiaalisen identiteettiin ja kulttuuriin liittyviä kysymyksiä sisältyy kyselyyn. Kyselyn tulosten tulkinnassa käytetään apuna SPSS-alustaa, jonka avulla datasta saadaan tuloksia. Tulosten avulla hypoteeseja tutkitaan. Keskeisimmät johtopäätökset ovat, että brändien ymmärrys sosiaalisesta identiteetistä ja kulttuurista sekä näiden tekijöiden ottaminen huomioon sosiaalisen median markkinoinnissa lisää vuorovaikutusta kuluttajien kanssa. Myös alkuperämaa on vaikuttava tekijä siihen, kuinka usein he ovat vuorovaikutuksessa brändien kanssa sosiaalisessa mediassa. Tutkimuksessa todetaan myös, että sosiaalisen media käyttö vähentyy, kun kuluttaja on vanhempi. On tärkeä ottaa huomioon, että tämän tutkimuksen kyselyyn osallistuu merkittävän pieni määrä kuluttajia. Tämän seurauksena hypoteesit eivät ole tilastollisesti hyväksyttäviä. Tuleville tutkimuksille suositellaan tutki-maan aihetta brändien alkuperämaan vaikutuksesta sosiaalisen median vuorovaikutukseen, mutta ottamaan enemmän osallistujia kyselyyn, jotta tulokset ovat tilastollisesti hyväksyttäviä.

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**KEYWORDS:** International marketing, social media, country-of-origin, social identity theory, culture

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**ABSTRACT:**

International marketing has greatly benefited from the increasing use of social media among consumers. Companies gain visibility for their brands more easily and quickly in international markets. It is important for companies to understand how they can leverage the concept of country of origin with consumers on social media. Previous research suggests that consumers' own social identity, brand origin, and culture influence their preferences and decisions on how actively they engage with brands on social media platforms. Based on theory, four hypotheses are formulated to gain a better understanding of consumer behavior on brands' social media platforms. Through quantitative research, this study investigates how consumers use social media and interact with brands. A survey targeting both Finnish and foreign consumers is conducted to examine their social media usage and thoughts regarding brand origin. The survey also includes questions related to social identity and culture. SPSS software is used to interpret the survey results, providing insights into the hypotheses. The main findings suggest that understanding brands' social identity and culture, and considering these factors in social media marketing, increases interaction with consumers. Additionally, country of origin is a significant factor in how often consumers engage with brands on social media. The study also notes that social media usage decreases as consumers get older. It is important to note that a significantly small number of consumers participate in this study's survey. As a result, the hypotheses are not statistically acceptable. Future research is recommended to explore the impact of brand origin on social media interaction, but with a larger participant pool to ensure statistically valid results.

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# 1 Introduction

This section will provide the fundamental understanding of the thesis. First the background of the topic is discussed and then the research gap and research question as well as the research objectives are presented. The section is finished introducing the definitions of the key terms used in the thesis.

## 1.1 Background

Social media has become an important channel for companies together with brands and transformed the way of conducting marketing strategies and branding in the past decade (Hasan & Sohail, 2020). Companies have reconstructed their marketing strategies from formal and expensive traditional marketing into more inexpensive and informal style of modern social media marketing. Adapting into the new ways of marketing is crucial for companies as consumers have changed their habits of consuming media from traditional newspapers and television to social media apps and streaming services. With this change the companies can reach consumers effectively and allocate their marketing budget more suitably. Smaller companies have the possibility to very low budget marketing with using social media and on the other hand large companies can utilize new options and strategies such as influencer marketing which is one of the more expensive types of social media marketing. Social media usage in companies marketing has reformed the way they can interact with the consumers and how the relationships between the brand and the consumer are created. It also gives the brand the opportunity to decide how deep the relationship with the consumer is. Consumers are interacting internationally with companies in social media and sharing their experiences and preferences including their preferred brands (Hazzam & Wilkins, 2022).

The country of origin has become important concept in the field of international marketing as it has a deep influence on consumers' perceptions, preferences and decision making processes (Pecotich & Ward, 2007). In the past research the focus on country of origin has been on the origin of a product and which country consumers

associates the product or a brand (Passagem et al., 2020). In order to get international consumers to engage with the international brands on social media they need to understand the impact of country of origin and how it effects to consumers and their behavior for example in social media. Globalization has significantly affected how brands are perceived across different cultural and geographical landscapes. As markets become increasingly interconnected, the origin of a brand—once a definitive marker of quality and trust—now plays a nuanced role in influencing consumers preferences.

Social identity theory explains the consumers' way of categorization themselves and other people into social people and furthermore tending their in-group more. In other words individuals identify themselves based on which groups they are a part of which is called in-group bias (Han et al., 2023). In addition to social identity theory effecting the consumers and their way of engaging with brands on social media, it is important to understand how culture is shaping the social identity of consumers simultaneously (Han et al., 2023). Consumer behavior in relation to brand identity has become an intricate field of study, especially in the context of social media where consumer interactions can be directly observed and analyzed (Samiee & Chabowski, 2021). The ways in which consumers perceive, interact with, and respond to brands on social media platforms can provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of market behavior.

Culture is important factor in the context of international marketing and helps understanding consumers and the way the engage with brands. Culture profoundly influences brand identity, infusing it with values, symbols, and narratives that resonate with specific demographic groups (Kotler et al., 2016). Consumer behavior is significantly shaped by cultural backgrounds, which dictate norms, behaviors, and expectations in the marketplace (Gupta et al., 2018). These cultural dimensions influence everything from consumer decision-making processes to the ways in which individuals interact with brands on social media. Globalization challenges brands to maintain a coherent identity while adapting to local cultures.

## 1.2 Research gap

The previous research has focused more on the impacts of social media to international marketing and how it effects to consumers and the social media users ties to the brands (Gao et al., 2018). The focus has been shifting as the consumers' ways of using social media have become more interacting with the brands. Brands can use social media as a way of communicating to both directions if the consumers are willing to engage with the brands social media channels.

The country-of-origin research has been focusing to the origin country of a product for a long time however the focus has been shifting to the origin country of a brand and the effects it has to the brand (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). Similarly, the social identity theory has been used to look at the perspective of consumers to specific products on the contrary to the whole brand.

There is research conducted on the topic of international social media marketing and the importance of companies connecting to consumers on the platforms however there is not many researches focusing on international brands cultural positioning (Gao et al., 2018; Hasan & Sohail, 2020). The previous research documenting the cultural positioning of the international brands have concentrated on specific countries such as China and Saudi-Arabia which creates a research gap for the topic to be researched in more detail in the European countries. The personal ties, such as the country-of-origin, of social media users between the brand have not been studied although the personalized interactions are one of the main features in social media (Gao et al., 2018). In addition, international branding has been lacking in research even though international marketing has become growing interest in the past years (Melewar et al., 2007)

International marketing of brands on social media is more the rule rather than the exception today because of consumers using social media considerably more than ever. Considering the importance country of origin can be to a brand it is important to understand how consumers see and understand the connection between the brand and

the country of the origin of a brand. Companies could benefit from the information hence they could utilize the information to use their country-of-origin information better.

Social media has huge importance to companies and their branding as previous research (Alalwan et al., 2017; Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013) has stated which is why it is essential to explore the topic more broadly therefore companies can utilize their online presence. The previous research has been focusing mostly to particular geographical area which does not make it necessarily generalizable to the international market. It is important to get information of other geographical areas as well and possibly compare the results of the previous research to the new research. There has been little focus on the Nordic countries especially which makes a research gap for results especially from Finland.

There has been previous research on the important topics of country of origin, social media and international branding but not much research has combined all of these topics together. Companies want to get consumers to engage with their brand on the social media platforms and understanding the advantage they could get from utilizing the concept of country of origin in their brand marketing could be groundbreaking.

### **1.3 Research problem, questions, and objectives of the study**

Given the focus of this thesis, the main research question this study tries to answer is:

**Does a brand's country of origin effect the brand-user engagement in social media?**

In an era where global digital connectivity transforms how brands interact with consumers, understanding the influence of a brand's country of origin on user engagement in social media is crucial. This research question is particularly significant given the globalization of markets, where brands from diverse backgrounds compete for the attention of a global consumer base. As social media becomes a dominant platform

for brand-consumer interactions (Alalwan et al., 2017), deciphering whether these national stereotypes influence engagement levels can provide essential insights for marketing strategists and brand managers. Getting better understanding of the role of a brand's country of origin in shaping social media engagement can lead to more targeted and culturally aware marketing practices and ultimately enhancing consumer relationships and brand loyalty in diverse markets.

To answer the research question, the thesis focuses to topics of country of origin of brand and social media through different theories to find out if earlier research of country of origin of brands also applies to the consumer engagement in social media. Based on the theoretical findings, hypotheses are made and tested later to get good understanding of the topic. To strengthen the results of the theories and research done earlier the empirical part focuses on quantitative research done with questionnaire for consumers to get better understanding how country of origin of a brand effect to their engagement in their point of view.

#### 1.4 Definitions of key terms

Definitions of the key terms used in this thesis are defined in the table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Key terms

<b>Social media</b>	A web-based technology that create highly interactive platforms where users can share, create, discuss, and modify user-generated content	Kietzmann et al. (2011, p.241)
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<b>Social media marketing</b>	A complex of specific online marketing activities that influences the target audience through the channels of social platforms and aims to achieve the marketing goals of the organization or person	Savytska (2017, p. 33)
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<b>Social identity theory</b>	Individuals favor the in-group and view the out-group as relatively inferior to boost confidence and self-esteem.	Kuo & Hou, (2017 p. 255)
<b>Customer engagement</b>	The mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, either through direct or/and indirect contribution	Pansari & Kumar (2017, p. 2)
<b>Country-of-origin (COO)</b>	The country which the consumer associates a product or a brand, regardless of where the product is produced	Passagem et al. (2020, p.64)
<b>Branding</b>	The ultimate aim of branding is favourable response from consumers/customers, and it is one of the most valuable assets for a company	Kohli et al. (2015, p.36)
<b>International marketing</b>	The process of planning and conducting transactions across national borders to create exchanges that satisfy the objectives of individuals and the organizations	Czinkota & Ronkainen (2007, p. G-7)
<b>Culture</b>	The complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society	McCort & Malhotra (1993, p.97)

## 1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis has started with the introduction of the topic, research question and the key term used in this thesis and the remainder is organized as follows. The next chapter is focusing to the theoretical background which is divided in to three sections with the topics of social identity theory, country of origin theory and culture theory. The framework for this thesis is introduced in the third chapter with the hypothesis based on the theoretical part. The fourth chapter is aiming attention at the methodology of the thesis. The research design, description of the data, method of data analysis and

reliability and validity are looked through in this chapter. Fifth chapter will cover the findings of the survey conducted. Analysis is made and the hypothesis are tested in this chapter. In the last chapter the results are discussed and conducted with the similarities of the theoretical framework. The last chapter also covers the limitations of this thesis as well as the future research suggestions.

## **2 Theoretical background**

This section is for presenting theoretical background based on previous studies conducted on customer engagement on social media, culture, the social identity theory along with country of origin and the relevant theories and literature on the topics. The section presents the hypothesis of this thesis based on the previous literature which are tested later on the empirical part.

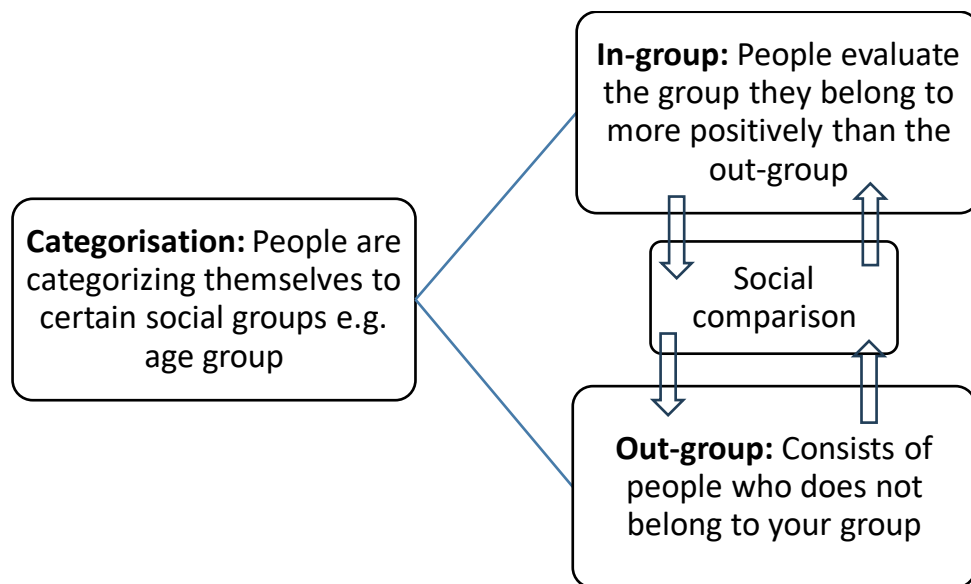
### **2.1 Social identity theory**

In the field of international marketing, the significance of understanding the complex relationship between consumers and brands cannot be overstated. Consumer behaviours, preferences, and perceptions are often influenced by multiple factors, among which the concept of social identity emerges as a relevant framework according to previous research (Samiee & Chabowski, 2021). This chapter aims to get understanding between consumers, brands, and social identity, with a particular focus on the context of country-of-origin branding. In pursuit of an extensive theoretical foundation to explore the dynamics of consumer engagement in the context of country-of-origin branding, Social Identity Theory has been selected as a central framework.

Social identity theory, initially developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, has been widely recognized for its applicability and relevance in understanding how individuals perceive themselves and others within the context of social groups (Lam et al., 2010). It is used in previous research to understand the consumer preferences of foreign vs. domestic brands (Han et al., 2023). Often researchers use the construct of consumer ethnocentrism when trying to analyze the consumers preference from their home country products over foreign substitutes which is conceptualized of the outlines by social identity theory (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015).

Social identity theory explains how people categorize themselves and other people into social groups. These group memberships influence the perceptions, attitudes and

behaviors people have. Even though the theory is psychological theory, it has been widely used in the marketing research (Lam et al., 2010). Individuals identify a part of themselves based on the groups they are a part of which can be based on various factors such as nationality, gender or hobbies for example. Referring to the views of social identity theory, individuals reinforce their self-esteem by associating with individuals and groups that match their desired identity (Mousavi et al., 2017). The main idea of the theory is that people often tend to favor their in-group and discriminate against out-groups (Han et al., 2023). This phenomenon is known as in-group bias. In other words, based on social identity theory, consumers often prefer brands and products of their home nationality or country rather than foreign brands and products based on their national identity and feeling of belonging to the in-group of their own country. Han et al. (2023) note that foreign brands are conceptualized as out-groups for local consumers and therefore not perceived as trustworthy or valued in comparison of domestic brands.



**Figure 1.** Basic framework of Social Identity Theory based on article by Trepte & Loy (2017)

On the contrary, Samiee & Chabowski (2021) mention how consumers might have orientation toward foreign products which is called xenocentricity. The appreciation for imported goods and foreign brands is usually connected with economically developed countries and appears to weaken the consumer ethnocentrism to some degree (Samiee & Chabowski, 2021). Their finding is quite opposite as the findings of the social identity

theory therefore it can be said the theory cannot be generalized to every country and every consumer. The state of economic development, culture and country of origin could be possible factors effecting the consumers decisions. Internationalization has grown the consumer cosmopolitanism which has been seen as the consumers' intentions to purchase global brands according to Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015). Nevertheless, they emphasis in their research that cosmopolitanism and ethnocentrism are negatively correlated as the liberal and diversity seeking consumer cosmopolitans make it challenging for them to support only their own country which has made it impossible to assume that individuals having high scores for cosmopolitanism to also having low on localism.

In this chapter of the thesis, social identity theory will be looked more closely which the examination of consumer-brand relationships in the realm of country-of-origin branding will be constructed.

### **2.1.1 Social identity theory and social media**

Social media has increasingly become popular topic of research in the past years (Alalwan et al., 2017; Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Charlesworth, 2018; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). Large number of social media users enables companies to get bigger coverage among the consumers and according to research, from beginning of the 2010's bigger corporations have started to use social media in their marketing as a norm (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). Social media has become an important source of information to the consumers when they are making purchasing decisions and they are often searching facts about company, brand, or their product before making the purchase decision (Alalwan et al., 2017). This suggests that companies are able to gather large amounts of data from consumers through social media and be more interactive with their customers.

Social media has changed the way companies communicate with consumer, promote their brand and create brand communities (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016) as it has impacts altering consumers behaviour and brand preferences (Kohli et al., 2015). Furthermore,

as a term, social media is moderately new and does not have one exact meaning. With constant change of the way people use and consume social media, the definition is becoming more precise. Charlesworth (2018, p. 2) has defined social media as “web presence where people can create and add their own content but do not have control over it such as one would have on their own website”. Gao et al. (2018) identify social media as “a resource that can be integrated into the marketing strategy even as it exists in the public domain and is not controlled by the company”. Both definitions emphasize the significance of not having control over what is going on in the platforms as everybody can create their own content. The focus has shifted from passive consuming of social media to interactive creation (Kohli et al., 2015).

Social media has significant impact with reaching consumers considering in 2022 it has been reported that over 4,5 billion people use social media and the number is expected to rise over a billion people by the year 2027 (Dixon, n.d.). Consumers’ easier access to social media platforms has resulted in to dramatic growth in social media use (Kohli et al., 2015). Consumers are using platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok and those have replaced the previous primary source of information online which was email before (Tsai & Men, 2017).

Consumers today have access to much more information of companies and their products or services than decade ago because of internet and social media. This change has had an influence on the traditional model of marketing communications and has changed the way companies plan to be communicating with consumers and build their branding strategies (Venciūtė, 2018). Utilizing social media as a marketing tool and benefiting of the many advantages that it brings; companies can also improve the performance of the company. Improvements social media marketing allows companies to achieve are diverse. Companies can create or change the established reputation of the brand, carry out constant monitoring of the brand audience, increase brand exposure, increase target traffic and customer interaction (Ahmad et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2017; Rugova & Prenaj, 2016).

On these platforms consumers have power to interact with other consumers as well as brands and they have increased access to do it on a global scale. They can express their opinions and thoughts in real time. Consumers often share content that might express their identity and join communities and groups to connect with people who share similar interests. The interactions consumers have on social media addresses their social needs to belong and be involved in a certain group (Tsai & Men, 2017).

Based on the previous assumptions of people categorizing themselves positively with their own in-group explained by the social identity theory, it can be said consumers on social media are engaging with groups and brands they feel connect to in positive manner making those their in-group. In other words, brands on social media create networks for people that they can be and feel to be part of. Understanding the customers' behavior is important as what customers consciously and unconsciously know and think about a brand can have significant effect to their attitudes and behaviors toward the brand which can ultimately affect the brand success (Mousavi et al., 2017).

### **2.1.2 Social identity theory and customer engagement**

According to Tsai & Men (2017) customer engagement on social media has been speculated as important strategic essential for brands to create competitive brand advantage and enhance consumer relationships. They discuss also how companies can engage consumers in constant conversation and create meaningful relationships with them. Engagement is the foundation of social media as consumers look for interaction with brands and companies and voluntary expose themselves to the company social media content, for example following the company (e.g. on Instagram or TikTok) (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Customers are inclined to engage with brands due to the anticipation of receiving certain benefits from their behaviors and actions (Groeger et al., 2016; Gummerus et al., 2012).

In other words, customers choose to allocate their time and resources to engage with a brand in a particular manner in order to derive personal benefits.

Social identity theory, which is centered on the importance of consumer identity, is relevant how the consumers associate to the country and product at this moment but also the social groups and experiences the consumer has (Samiee & Chabowski, 2021). Home country bias and national identity consistently become common based on the consumer need for self-enhancement.

**Table 2.** Research of Social identity theory and social media

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Topic of research</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015)	Consumer Ethnocentrism, National Identity, and Consumer Cosmopolitanism as Drivers of Consumer Behavior: A Social Identity Theory Perspective	Consumers' preference for domestic over imported products, tested with two countries with the view of social identity theory.	There are many undiscovered patterns regarding consumers ethnocentrism, national identity and consumer cosmopolitanism as drivers of consumer behavior.
Han et al. (2023)	Perceived brand localness of foreign brands and its impacts on brand trust and purchase intentions in developing countries in Asia: a	Perceived brand localness and how it affects consumer trust and purchase intentions for foreign companies from the point of	The research findings support the social identity theory conceptualization of perceived brand localness for foreign brands.

	social identity theory perspective.	view of social identity theory.	
Kuo & Hou (2017)	Oppositional brand loyalty in online brand communities: Perspective on social identity theory and consumer-brand relationship	The deeper investigation of oppositional brand loyalty which is a phenomenon in the psychological field among a brand community's members who have negative views about rival brands.	The results of the research show that members who identify with their online brand community build brand commitment and self-brand connection which is leading to oppositional brand loyalty.

## 2.2 Country-of-origin

In the field of international marketing, the concept of "country of origin" has emerged as a pivotal and multifaceted approach that applies a deep influence on consumers' perceptions and decision-making processes (Passagem et al., 2020; Pecotich & Ward, 2007). Godey et al. (2012) acknowledge that consumers commonly rely more on intrinsic attributes when composing their opinions however, in certain situations they might prefer extrinsic attributes for the reason that they are more credible and reliable than their own estimate. Understanding the implications of a product's or brand's origin on consumer behaviour and attitudes has become increasingly critical for businesses as well as brands operating in the global marketplace (Godey et al., 2012). As reported by Samiee & Chabowski (2021), the previous research on the topic is focused on customer evaluation and potential choice behaviour as regards propositions influenced by or sourced from host countries.

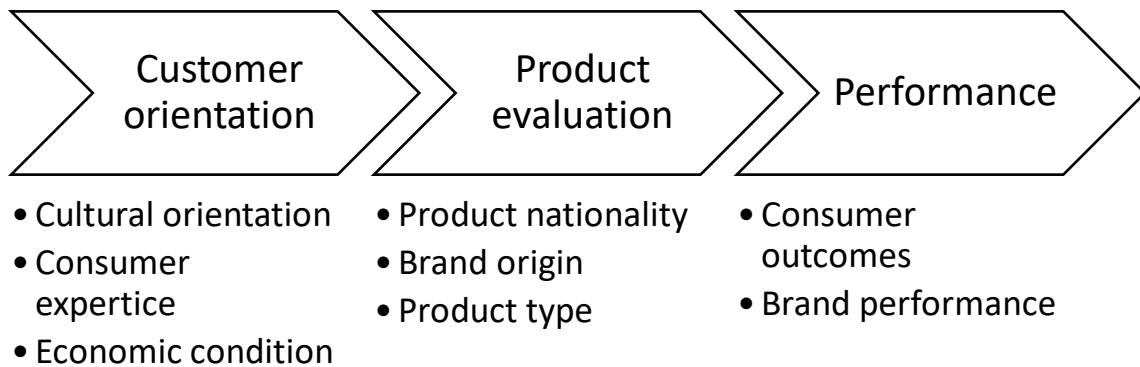
This chapter primarily revolves around the concept of "country of origin." Country of origin represents the geographic location from which a product or brand originates, and it carries substantial significance in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions (Passagem et al., 2020). This theory and concept is chosen as part of this research due to its intrinsic relevance and profound impact within the realm of international marketing (Huang et al., 2022; Samiee & Chabowski, 2021). Furthermore, according to Samiee & Chabowski (2021) there is an alternative measure to country of origin which is brand of origin. Their research presents the location of the headquarters of the company whereas the country of origin is used to tell where the product is manufactured. In this research the overall term country of origin is used to describe the brands origin as well.

### **2.2.1 Country of origin and international brand**

In today's globalized marketplace, brand's country-of-origin has become an important factor in shaping consumer perception and behaviour towards a brand (Pecotich & Ward, 2007). Consumers often make decisions about a product, or a brand based on its country-of-origin, which can influence their overall engagement with the brand (Phau & Prendergast, 2000; Safeer et al., 2022) as brand is one of the most visible factors that gives identification of a company to the consumer (Pecotich & Ward, 2007).

Historically consumers have been influenced by the country of origin of the products they have been consuming but the research has shown the focus turning more towards consumers attitudes of specific brands and their country of origin (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). Passagem et al. (2020 p. 64) define country-of-origin as "the country which the consumer associates a product or a brand, regardless of where the product is produced". In other words, the country of origin point out to the perception of products or brands that customers have based on their presumption about the production quality in the producing country (Huang et al., 2022). Naturally this association has an influence what the consumers are thinking of the brand and therefore affecting the engagement of consumers in social media platforms of brands. Consumers might rely to the overall

image they have of a brand or a country to decide how much they engage with a brand (Pecotich & Ward, 2007). Phau & Prendergast (2000) discuss the benefits of country of origin being used to create long-term brand image with attributes for instance head quarter location of a brand, brand identity or consistent internal and external communication.



**Figure 2.** Topics COO research is consisting of based on research by Samiee & Chabowski (2021)

The main purpose of branding is to get favourable responses from consumers and it is one of the most valuable assets for a company (Kohli et al., 2015). As a part of international marketing differentiation is important for a company considering it allows companies to be in control of their prices and command loyalty (Kohli et al., 2015). Kohli et al. (2015) acknowledge how emotional connection as a part of differentiation might be more important than physical one which connects to the importance of the country of the brand and how company can utilize it for the beneficial differentiation of the brand. As brand's country of origin might be for example an indicator of product quality for consumers (Passagem et al., 2020) it is important to think country of origin as a part of the branding. For example, the Finnish brand Marimekko states clearly in their webpage that they are a Finnish brand (Marimekko, 2024). Finland has a good reputation and consumers have good image of the country (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2024) which makes Marimekko able to utilize the image consumers have of Finland for their own benefit.

On the contrary, according to (Samiee & Chabowski, 2021) consumers might have difficulties to correctly identify the country where a brand originates even if the brand is well-known. They further observe how consumers are more likely to take into consideration the correct country of origin for a brand if it is more favourable than the original incorrect observed origin.

### **2.2.2 Country of origin and social media**

In recent years, social media has become prominent platform for brands to connect with consumers and build brand awareness (Alalwan et al., 2017). However, the impact of country-of-origin on consumer engagement on social media has obtained relatively little attention in the academic literature even though the research of country of origin and its importance in international marketing strategies has been considerable in volume (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). The next part of the thesis will explore more how country-of-origin affects consumer engagement with brands on social media and what are the key factors that influence the relationships.

Country-of-origin of a brand has many factors that are affecting to consumers when they engage with brands on social media for example perceived quality, cultural associations and trust and credibility of a certain country. Consumers often associate different good and bad qualities of countries with brands from the specific countries which makes it important for marketers to decide which qualities they want to emphasize (Pecotich & Ward, 2007). Huang et al. (2022) recognise, how in social media marketing it can be anticipated that individuals are behaving differently on brand pages as a result of the brand's different country of origin. For instance, in the emerging markets customers might also prefer foreign brands considering the perceived exceptional quality of brands produced in developed countries.

Brands originating from certain countries might have higher perceived quality than others which can translate into higher engagement of consumers on social media.

Consumers can have some stereotypes of certain countries which gives the countries either positive or negative influence towards the brand. Developed countries are usually associated with higher quality brands (Pecotich & Ward, 2007). For example, countries with long history with good quality products and established brands for instance France, are perceived higher quality than China which is less developed industry country. This applies for trust and credibility as well as political and social issues affecting to the consumers engagement with the brand. Certain countries might be perceived more credible than others which results in better engagement with the brand on social media whereas brands from countries which have political issues are less likely to get engagement from the consumers.

Many researches have established that national identity and familiarity to their own country results in domestic preference (Pecotich & Ward, 2007; Phau & Prendergast, 2000). Phau & Prendergast (2000) point out how consumers might have often strong sense of national pride and at the same time they might be unfamiliar with the foreign brands which drives the consumers to engage with the familiar domestic brands on social media.

**Table 3.** Research of Country of origin

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Topic of research</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Samiee & Chabowski (2021)	Knowledge structure in product- and brand origin-related research	Identify the most influential research contributions to country of origin literature and the topics that form rational understating of the	The research has a data base of 482 articles which the researchers have divided into different sections explaining different structures and

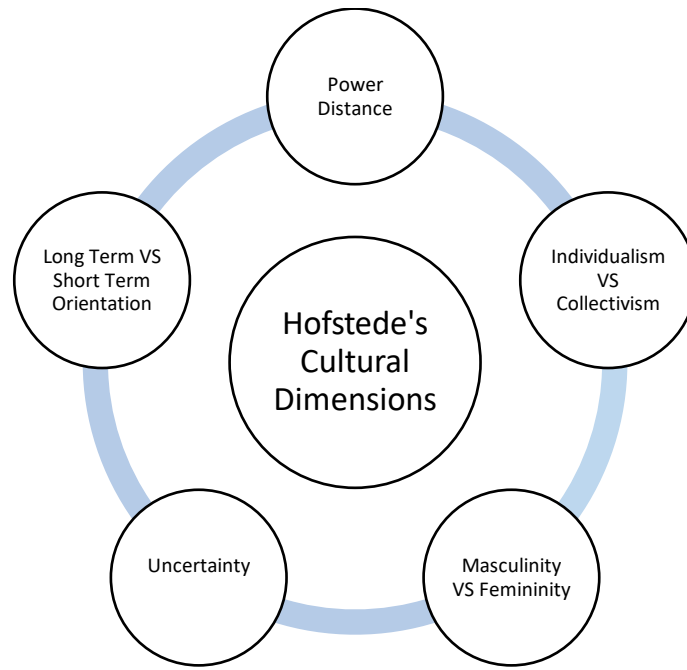
		knowledge of the topic as a whole.	directions the research is formed.
Pecotich & Ward (2007)	Global branding, country of origin and expertise: An experimental evaluation	As globalisation of markets has created a paradoxical situation with rise of nationalism, there are concerns about the importance of interaction with of global brand. This research evaluates the decision making process with respect to international brand names, COO and the quality differences	The research found that differently knowledgeable consumers used the information country of origin gave them of brand or a physical product. Experts used the information better where as the novices did not use the information far less.
Phau & Prendergast (2000)	Conceptualizing the country of origin of brand	The research extends the prior research on country of origin and uses the origin	Country of brand is good evaluation tool as consumers are conditioned to the fact that

		of brand as an evaluation tool highlighting the strategic, conceptual and practical relevance.	products are not made in the same country as the brand is from. Brand image is not affected by the location of manufacture as the consumers see the brands through its brand personality for example.
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### 2.3 Culture theory

In the context of international marketing and consumer behavior, the understanding of cultural influences holds a predominant position. Consumers make many buying decisions, engage with brands on daily basis and could give companies competitive advantage as they provide feedback for the brands which makes it important for companies to research the behaviour of consumers (Gong, 2018). There are many characteristics of behaviour that are affecting consumers and even the way consumers are engaging with brands. The characteristics are cultural, social, personal and psychological (Kotler et al., 2016). Culture plays a significant role in creating consumers' attitudes, values, preferences, and behaviors (Kotler et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand cultural differences when expanding to new countries as it can have an affect directly to company profits (Gupta et al., 2018). A powerful theoretical framework of culture is essential to grasp the versatile impact of culture on the international marketing landscape. Culture is defined in many ways and the researchers still have no consensus of just one correct definition (Gupta et al., 2018) analyse. One definition of culture by Hofstede (1984, p. 21) is “the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group from another”. Gupta et al. (2018)

acknowledge there is an overlap between the different culture definitions as well as theories as they all contribute dimensions of national culture. In other words, culture has multiple definitions but for this thesis, the definitions by Hofstede is used.



**Figure 3.** Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

### 2.3.1 Country of origin and Hofstede's culture theory

For the purpose of this thesis, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory stands out as a foundational and comprehensive framework for analyzing cultural differences across nations and is the most widely used theory in psychology, sociology, marketing or management studies (Soares et al., 2007). Developed by Geert Hofstede in the late 1970s and expanded in subsequent research, this theory offers a systematic approach to categorizing and comparing cultural values and dimensions among different societies (Soares et al., 2007). Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory identifies several key dimensions of culture, including individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. These dimensions provide a structured framework for evaluating cultural aspects that are integral to understanding consumer behavior and communication styles in international markets.

Referring to the views of Hofstede in the variable individualism/collectivism, the consumers in individualistic societies think more about themselves whereas in the collectivists cultures consumers think in terms of the group (Gupta et al., 2018). In individualistic cultures people care more of their immediate family while individuals in collectivistic cultures are part of groups that look after them in exchange for loyalty (Soares et al., 2007). Masculinity/femininity designates the extent which a society displays assertive behaviours as opposed to nurturing behaviours (Gupta et al., 2018). In other words, masculine countries value more achievement and success whereas feminine countries value care for others as well as the overall quality of life (Soares et al., 2007). Uncertainty avoidance is the level of uncertainty a society can tolerate, long-term orientation is the level of future-oriented perspective a society has and power distance is the level of power distribution people in the society accept (Gupta et al., 2018). All of the dimensions can be displayed in a scale which different cultures have different levels of. The scale created by Hofstede shows how countries or cultures are not just in one or the other end of the scale but have multidimensionality.

Gupta et al. (2018) elaborate the variables relationships to customer engagement found in the earlier research of the Hofstede's culture theory. According to them collectivists societies are more sensitive to price and reputation however individualistic societies are sensitive with service, communication, and customization. Therefore, individualistic societies are more likely to give feedback of the service they are getting.

### **2.3.2 Culture's effect on customers engagement on social media platforms**

The previous research has shown that culture has been acknowledged as influence how brands are communicating with consumers, according to Tsai & Men (2017). Numerous research (Gong, 2018; Tsai & Men, 2017) have demonstrated variations in the usage of social media within individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Hofstede's cultural dimensions may explain some of the consumers behaviour and engagement on social media. According to Goodrich & de Mooij (2014), collectivist countries are more likely to use social media in their purchase decision compared to individualistic countries.

Consumers in collectivist cultures may accentuate more word of mouth whereas in individualistic cultures consumers rely on themselves when making decisions. As reported by Tsai & Men (2017), their research show collectivist cultures establishing stronger engagement levels towards brands on social media as well as being more proactive in contributing by commenting, sharing posts and recommending brands compared to individualistic countries which is natural behaviour for people in collectivistic cultures. Furthermore, Tsai & Men (2017) found consumers in collectivistic culture to be more dependent on social media which would impact their level of engagement and motivations to invest time to the brand pages in comparison to individualistic culture that would not consider the identification with the social media brand communities as personal.

However, on the contrary, long term oriented and collectivist cultures people want to be more passive and anonymous in their interactions compared to individualistic cultures (Goodrich & de Mooij, 2014) which is contradictory to the findings on the research mentioned earlier. Consumers are getting practical benefits, social benefits, social enhancement, entertainment, economic benefits by engaging online (Gummerus et al., 2012).

**Table 4.** Research of culture theory and international customer engagement

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Topic of research</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Soares et al. (2007)	Hofstede's dimensions of culture in international marketing studies.	Different approaches to conceptualize and operate culture in marketing studies and the advantages of using cultural dimensions in	Culture can be unclear concept with definitional, conceptual, and operational obstacles for research however Hofstede's

		particular Hofstede's values.	framework constitutes a simple and practical shortcut to the integration of culture into studies.
Goodrich & de Mooij (2014)	How "social" are social media? A cross-cultural comparison of online and offline purchase decision influences	The research looks into the best ways of marketers to use social media to electronic word of mouth as well as the international differences in consumer usage of social media.	Culture effects significantly to the use of information sources that influence online purchase decisions but culture affects the social medias influence on purchases differently than the influence of traditional word of mouht though family and friends.
Tsai & Men (2017)	Consumer engagement with brands on social network sites: A cross-culruta comparison of China and the USA	The study evaluates how culture influences consumers' engagement levels and activities on brand pages of social network sites.	The research confirms the effects of the proposed antecedents and reveal both cultural differences and similariteis between Chinese and Amercian

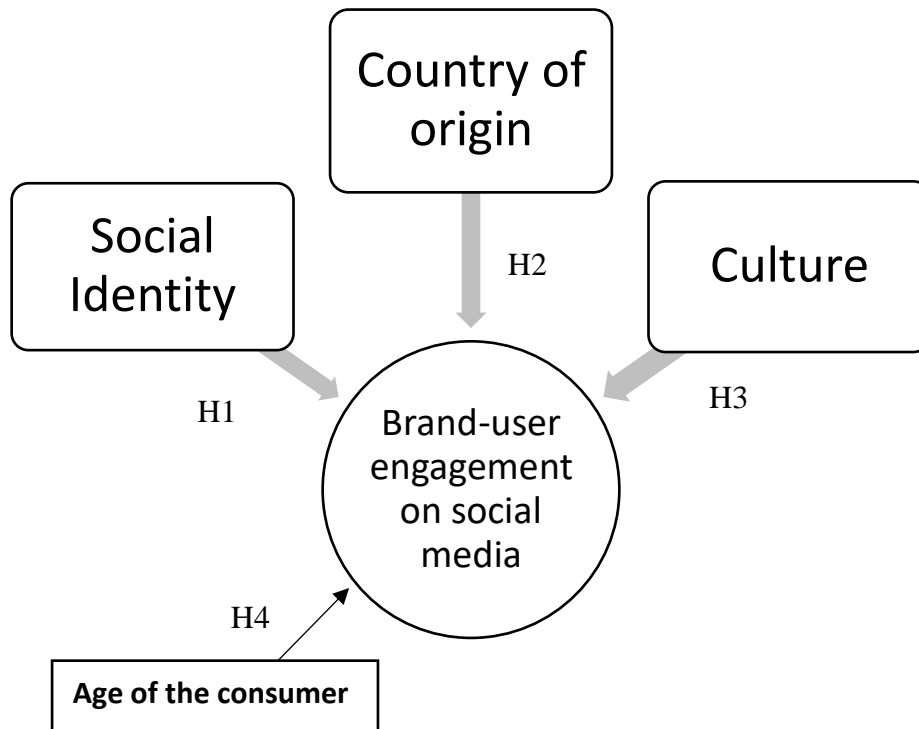
			consumers' engagement with brands on social net work platforms.
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### 3 Framework

The conceptual framework of the thesis can be built after the theoretical background of the topic has been thoroughly examined. This chapter is presenting the conceptual framework that is describing the components effecting to the brand-user engagement in social media. The framework is illustrated in the Figure 4 below.

Various earlier research has been looking into the topic of country of origin of products and lately more of the point of view of brands, the perspective being on the customers and which brands and products they prefer based on the country they are and which country the brand is. There are researches (Godey et al., 2012; Gong, 2018; Pecotich & Ward, 2007) explaining why consumers might make these decisions but on the other hand the research on customer engagement on social media based on brands country of origin is still lacking. Based on the explored research before, brand's country of origin has an effect how consumers engage with brands on social media.

Social identity is influencing to purchase decision the consumers make (Han et al., 2023), and culture is a part of that identity of the consumers. Culture is a huge factor for brands and their country of origin. Brands can utilize the image the country of origin gives them and for example use it to get more followers on social media and engagement with consumers (Samiee & Chabowski, 2021). Brands interact with consumers and try to best align with their values and culture and social media is an important medium for this currently. Therefore, country of origin, social identity and culture are all factors that are impacting to the engagement of brands and the consumers. In other words, the frequency of consumers engaging to brands social media platforms is influenced by the brands country of origin and consumers' cultural behaviour and social identity.



**Figure 4.** Framework of the thesis

As before mentioned, social media has become important platform for consumers to engage with other people but also with brands they like. As consumers interact with one another and brands they are creating groups where they are mostly connected to others people in the same group. Explained by the social identity theory, when people are in the group they tend to favor their in-group and at the same time discriminate against out-groups (Han et al., 2023).

In the case of international marketing, it is note-worthy to notice that local consumers often perceive local brands more trustworthy as foreign brands are conceptualized as out-groups and therefore not preferred (Han et al., 2023). In this thesis research the focus is on consumers from number of different countries this suggests that the first hypothesis of this thesis is built on the concept of each individual consumers engagement on social media based on their own social identity with the brands they are interacting themselves. It is considered to positively correlate with the engagement

levels on social media as previous research show that consumers prefer their in-group (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015) which in this case is the brand community and social media platform.

Therefore, based on the literature concerning social identity theory and its effects on consumer engagement and social media, it is hypothesized that:

**H1: Consumers' identification with a brand's social identity positively correlates with their engagement levels on social media.**

Consumers are influenced of the brand's country of origin by the perception they have of certain countries and how high quality products and brands it can have (Huang et al., 2022). International brand's can take advantage of this in the form creating good brand image with the idea of country of origin. As Pecotich & Ward (2007) suggest, consumer rely heavily on the overall image of the brand when they are deciding if engaging with a brand. Considering that country of origin is important for company's branding as consumers are influenced to consider the quality of the brand by it (Passagem et al., 2020), there can be seen more engagement toward the brands social media platforms if consumers think the country of origin is effecting positively on the brand.

Therefore, based on the literature review on country of origin, international brand and social media, the following hypothesis is made:

**H2: The brands country of origin influences positively to the frequency of engagement it receives from consumers on social media platforms.**

Considering culture plays a huge role in creating consumers' attitudes, values, preferences and behaviors (Kotler et al., 2016), it is worth mentioning how important it is from companies to understand this impact so they can utilize it the best way in their marketing practices. Tsai & Men (2017) point out that culture has influence how brands

are communicating with consumers which is parallel to the fact that consumers coming from different cultures have different behaviors on different situations based on their culture. For instance people from collectivistic countries are more likely to use social media in their purchase decision (Goodrich & de Mooij, 2014)

Based on the theory on culture and its connection to social media and consumer engagement, the following hypothesis is made:

**H3: Importance of culture impact positively consumer's engagement behaviors with brands on social media.**

In addition to the three main hypothesis of the thesis there is supporting hypothesis regarding the respondent's age. It has been made clear based to the previous theory (Hruska & Maresova, 2020) that it is important for companies and brands to understand their consumers and potential customers based on their culture for example but it is as well important to understand how old the consumers are and which way to implement marketing for the correct audience. In Finland the older the people get, the less they use social media (Tilastokeskus, 2024). This suggests brands should focus the most on the younger people as their target because they use social media the most. In the survey of this thesis the age of the respondents was asked and based on this the following hypothesis is made:

**H4: Age of the consumer has a negative impact to the brand-user engagement on social media.**

## 4 Research methodology

This chapter discusses the research methodology of this thesis. First there is discussion about the research approach and after the research design and collection method as well as the sample are explained in more detail. The end of the chapter focuses to the reliability and validity of the research.

### 4.1 Research approach

The research approach of this thesis is deductive, and the research philosophy is focused to the principle of positivism. The theoretical framework of the thesis is constructed on former research and literature, and then the hypotheses for the research are conducted from this previous literature. The principle of positivism as research philosophy emphasizes using the existing theory to develop hypothesis and those will be tested with the gathered data from the research and the confirmed (Saunders et al., 2007). They underline how research philosophy consists of assumptions of the way the world is seen from the perspective of the research which in this case is focused more on facts rather than feelings and attitudes.

Saunders et al. (2007) point out how positivism as a research philosophy usually affects the research to use highly structured methodology, emphasis being on quantifiable observations and statistical analysis. In this study, the previous literature is first studied thoroughly which is followed by the construction of the hypothesis. This is followed by the data gathering with questionnaire therefore making the philosophy of positivism appropriate way of conducting the research. Intention of this approach is to get the answer for the research question *“does the brands country of origin effect to the brand consumer engagement on social media?”*.

Quantitative methods are often used to conduct studies in business and management (Saunders et al., 2007), which is the reason this method was chosen appropriate for this thesis. The research method enables the analyzation between different variables and

testing the hypothesis with a statistical way (Saunders et al., 2007). Characteristically quantitative research is conducted by surveys and questionnaires which are explained in more detail in the following chapter.

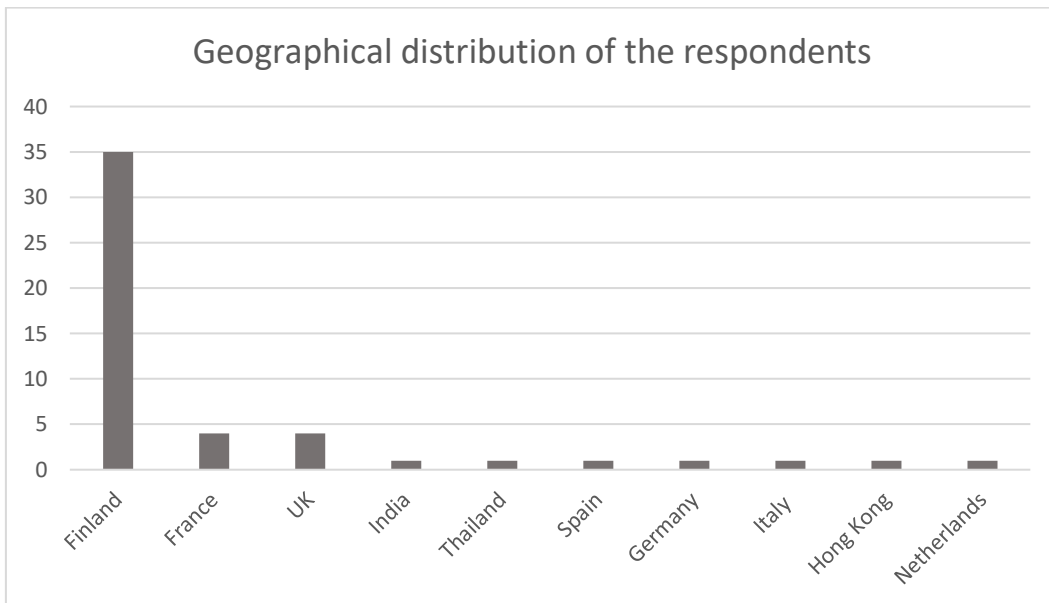
## **4.2 Research design**

This thesis uses the structured model. In this thesis the data is collected through a survey which suits the deductive approach. With using a survey as the data gathering method, the sample size needs to be large enough for the results of the study to be concluded (Saunders et al., 2007). With using surveys, it is possible to get answers to questions: who, what, where, how much and how many (Saunders et al., 2007). Surveys allows the collection of large amounts of data from large groups of people economically and it is easily comparable as the data is standardized. However, there is a limit to the questions that can be answered which needs to be kept in mind. Furthermore, the use of surveys is dependent on the respondent's willingness and ability to answer which effects to the reliability and validity as well.

The question types in the survey can be open-ended and closed questions. Most of the questions in this survey were closed questions with response options for the respondent to choose from. There were few questions that included a possibility for the respondent to fill their own answer in addition to the premade choices available. Planning the questionnaire is extremely important stage as the data gathered need to be very precise in order to be able to answer the research question furthermore there will likely be only one opportunity to collect the data (Saunders et al., 2007). There are 15 questions in the survey which is thought to be good number of questions for getting best possible answers from the respondents. The questions were developed to get best possible answers to understand the objective of the study and get answers to the hypothesis. Furthermore, the questions were made specifically for this research and there was not any existing scale used. The questionnaire is only in English thus the respondents are also from other countries than Finland.

### 4.3 Description of the data

The research data consist of 50 respondents (N). The respondents are mostly from Finland. Around 30% of the respondents are from some other country that Finland. They are for example from France, United Kingdom, Thailand, India, Italy, Germany, Hong Kong, and Netherlands. The geographical location of the respondents has been collected to show possible differences in answers between people from different countries and cultures. Majority of the respondent are 18-25 years old. There are 28% of 26-35 year old respondents and 18% of 43-58 year old respondents which is seen also in the table 5. Only one of the respondents is 59 or older and three respondents are 36-42 year old. The age groups have been grouped to show how different generations might have different answers and opinions. In other words, the sample is relatively young social media users from Finland.



**Figure 5.** Geographical distribution of the respondents

**Table 5.** Age distribution of the respondents

<b>Age</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative</b>
18-25	23	46 %	46 %
26-35	14	28 %	74 %
36-42	3	6 %	80 %
43-58	9	18 %	98 %
59 or older	1	2 %	100 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100 %</b>	

In the questionnaire, it was asked from the respondents as well which social media platforms they used, and all the most popular and mainstream social media platforms got selected by respondents nevertheless Instagram was the most used platforms out of the platforms used. The next most used platforms were YouTube and Facebook. There were also platforms reported used that were not options in the survey. Some of these platforms were Snapchat, X (known formerly as Twitter) and Pinterest.

#### **4.4 Data collection and sample**

The data for this thesis was collected through an internet-mediated questionnaire which was conducted with self-administered way. Questionnaire surveys are usually rather economical way of getting large amounts of data (Saunders et al., 2007). All the data is anonymous, and it was made clear for the participants. The data was collected in the autumn 2023 though linking the survey online in Instagram on a free platform by Google Forms. The questionnaire was visible only to people who had the direct link to the survey. In other words, only people who the researcher knew had the access to answer to the questionnaire and it was not publicly distributed. The participants have done the questionnaire voluntarily and not everybody who has been given the opportunity to take the questionnaire have done it. After seven days there was responses from 50 participants.

The survey was divided into the following four sections after the first few questions of the respondent's basic information. The thesis consists of three chapters discussing of social identity theory, country of origin therefore those topics being the sections of the survey likewise.

The process of the survey went as follows. There was a draft survey made and sent to two University of Vaasa master's students who did the survey. After they made the survey, there was a discussion with the author and there were few adjustments done to make more understandable version of the survey. The survey was in English from the beginning, and it was not problem regarding the basic understanding of the survey. Nevertheless, there were some questions that needed to be clearer with the wording to be understood correctly and those changes were made to the final version of the survey. The survey was built in layout which would be attracting to the respondents and be as clear as possible at the same time. The topics in the survey were constructed in the order of most understandable topics to the respondents first and the newer concepts and theories were put to the end. The pre-words of the survey were specified hence the respondents would answers as truthfully as possible.

#### **4.5 Method of Data Analysis**

The collected data is analyzed with statistical methods and IBM SPSS Statistics is used to describe the data analysis. First the data was coded from the collected data of the thesis questionnaire into SPSS Statistics and each item was named. The statistical analyses are executed to get better understanding to the hypotheses of the thesis. Regression of the data is measured to test if there are correlations between the dependent and the independent factors. The dependent factor in this research is the frequency of consumers engaging with brand's social media and independent factors are the consumers' country of origin, culture and social identity.

The mean is used in this thesis, and it is used to encapsulate the crucial elements on the measurement scales and to enable the data to be compared. The mean is the sum of all

values within a variable in the series divided by the sample size, in other word the average, and it is one of the most commonly and frequently used measure in statistical analysis to measure central tendency (Saunders et al., 2007).

Relationship between on dependent variable and on or more independent variables are tested with linear regression which is the most used statistical tool to test the linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables (Darlington & Hayes, 2017). The linear analysis examines first the link between the variables by applying a test of independence which is followed by the determination of the strong degree of the relationships among variables. The last aspect is the linear regression contributing to find a mathematical expression that permits and action from researchers to find out the score of one dependent variable from their knowledge about the score of the other independent variables (Darlington & Hayes, 2019). As follows the frequency of engagement is the dependent variable and independent variables are the country of origin, culture, and social identity. Referring to the views of Darlington and Hayes (2019), the linear regression model can be written as:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + \dots + b_kX_k$$

Where:

Y = the dependent variable

$b_0$  = regression constant

$b_1, b_2, \dots, b_n$  = the regression coefficients (Beta value) of the independent variables.

$X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n$  = the independent variables

#### **4.6 Reliability and validity**

According to Sauders et al. (2007) the reliability of research is determined by the reliability and validity, and it is important to use primary and secondary data to strengthen the quality of the of the research. The reliability in this thesis is provided by acquiring different point of views from variety of sources, both secondary and primary.

There can be the possibility that the reliability of the study is affected by the respondent's sincerity. Considering the respondents might not have enough information to answer correctly they might answer incorrectly on purpose or by accident.

The questionnaire is done in English which might decrease the reliability as few of the respondents' first language is English hence there is possibility for understanding the questions incorrectly. The vocabulary used is directed towards consumers which should not make it excessively difficult to understand. In this study the questionnaire is done anonymously and confidentially which should make the answering easier for the respondent. Furthermore, the questionnaire in this study focuses on the respondents' own opinions and experiences which makes it impossible in this case for anyone to give wrong answers. It is important to take into consideration that possible mistakes affecting the reliability of the study could be from coding and analyzing of the data. The validity of the study indicates how well the questionnaire is able to measure what it was intended to measure (Saunders et al., 2007).

## 5 Empirical research and results

In this chapter of the thesis the findings of the thesis are presented. The findings in this chapter are based on the questionnaire that international consumers have answered. The main objective for this thesis is to find out how the brand's country of origin effects to the brand-user engagement which is looked into through the finding from the questionnaire answers. The hypotheses of this thesis are tested in the chapter, and it will be seen are those supported.

### 5.1 Findings

#### 5.1.1 Scale analysis

For studying the statistics of frequency of engagement with brands, a 5-item scale is used to understand how often consumer are engaging with brands on social media platforms. The responses are recorded on a 5-point scale from 1 – rarely to 5 – several times a day. The descriptive statistics of each variable are shown in their own tables below and the values have been divided into answers from consumer from Finland and consumers from some other country than Finland therefore considered as foreigners. The mean for Finnish respondents' engagement with brand is 3,64 which indicates that most people engage with brands at least a few times a week or more often. The mean for foreigners is 3,43 which indicates to some extent lower engagement with brands nonetheless they still engage with brands a few times a week or more likewise the Finnish respondents.

**Table 6.** Engagement with brand scale analysis

	Finnish			Foreigner		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
<b>Engagement with brand</b>	3,64	1,35	36	3,43	1,83	14

The importance of brand's country of origin is studied with a 3-item scale, responses recorded on a 3-point scale from 1 – it does not matter to me at all to 3 – it matters a lot to me. Recurrently the mean is profoundly similar to the same degree as with the engagement with brand. Finnish respondents' answers mean is 2,08 and the foreigners 2,00 which indicates that the Finnish respondents perceive the importance of brand's country of origin somewhat more important. According to the answers, the respondents think the country of origin nevertheless matters to them either a lot or somewhat rather than the country of origin not mattering at all.

**Table 7.** Importance of country of origin scale analysis

	Finnish			Foreigner		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
<b>Importance of country of origin</b>	2,08	0,50	36	2,00	0,56	14

Culture has been measured on a 4-item scale where the responses from each item in the scale have been recorded on a 4-point scale from 1 – not important at all to 4 – very important. For Finnish respondents the mean is 2,67 which indicates that Finnish consumers find the brands understanding of culture slightly important or moderately important. For foreigner respondents the mean is a little bit higher with value of 2,93. This points out that for foreigners the importance of brands understanding the seriousness of culture on brand's social media platforms is valued more compared to the Finnish consumers.

**Table 8.** Culture scale analysis

	Finnish			Foreigner		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
<b>Culture</b>	2,67	0,76	36	2,93	1,14	14

Social identity has been measured on a 4-item scale where the responses from each item in the scale have been recorded on a 4-point scale from 1 – not important at all to 4 – very important. Furthermore, the importance of social identity in brands social media content has a mean of 2,72 for Finnish respondents and a mean of 3,00 for foreign respondents.

**Table 9.** Social identity scale analysis

	Finnish			Foreigner		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
<b>Social identity</b>	2,72	0,850	36	3,00	0,88	14

As it can be seen in the tables 6-10, there is variation between the variable means between the Finnish and foreign respondents.

### 5.1.2 Correlation

In the table 10, there are the correlation values between the different variables. The correlation coefficient is one of the most common ways of measuring a linear correlation. It is measuring the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables and the number is always between -1 and 1 (Saunders et al., 2007). However it is mentioned by Saunders et al. (2007) that it is extremely unusual to obtain perfect correlations within business research.

**Table 10.** Pearson Correlation

	Engagement with brand	Importance of country of origin	Culture	Social identity	Age	Foreigner
Engagement with brand	1,000	0,007	0,134	0,045	-0,315	-0,064
Importance of country of origin	0,007	1,000	0,127	0,214	0,197	-0,074
Culture	0,134	0,127	1,000	0,147	0,063	0,136
Social identity	0,045	0,214	0,147	1,000	0,004	0,147
Age	-0,315	0,197	0,063	0,004	1,000	0,214
Foreigner	-0,064	-0,074	0,136	0,147	0,214	1,000

### 5.1.3 Other interpretation

The independence of observations of the data can be checked by examining for independence of errors with the Durbin-Watson test if using regression for analysis (Saunders et al., 2007). The result should be close to two but not less than 1 and no more than 3. It can be seen for the table 11 that the Durbin-Watson test value is 1.837 which is in the desired area of values.

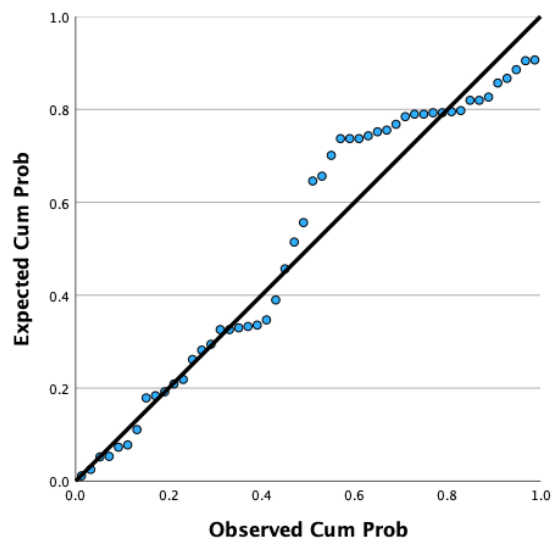
**Table 11.** Model Summary

<b>Model Summary<sup>b</sup></b>					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.355 <sup>a</sup>	.126	.027	1.466	1.837

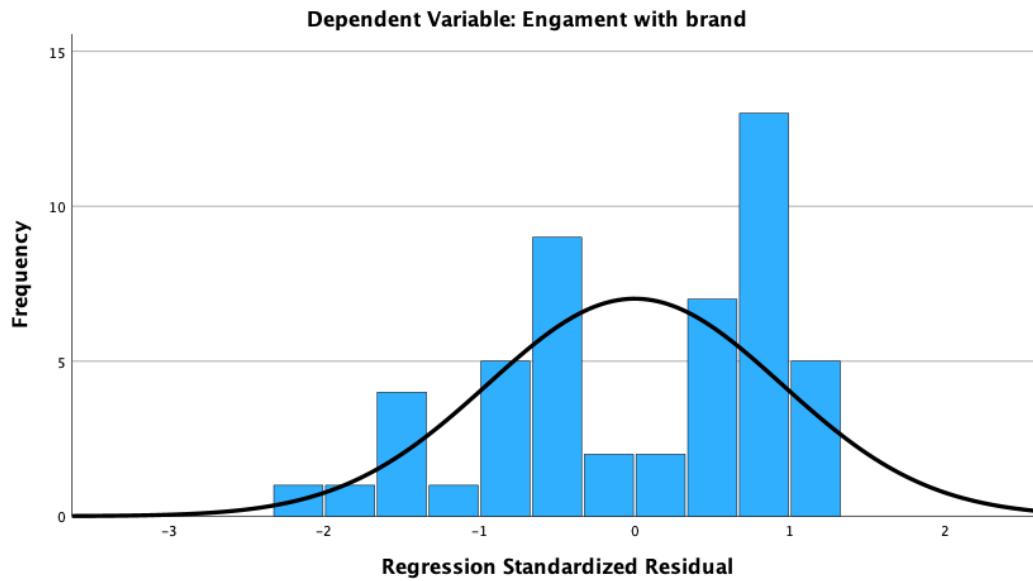
a. Predictors: (Constant), Foreigner, Importance of country of the origin, Culture, Social identity, Age

b. Dependent Variable: Engament with brand

The normality of residuals can be tested with the P-P plot. It can be seen in the Figure 6 below that the dots in the normal P-P Plot of regression standardized residual are lining up almost in a 45-degree line which would be the desired result if wanting to know if the data has normality of residuals. Despite the other tests show results that are good it cannot be said this data is normally distributed. In the figure 6 it can be seen that the dependent variable does not distribute normally. Therefore, this could be one sign of the too small data set for this research.



**Figure 6.** P-P Plot



**Figure 7.** Histogram of dependent variable of Engagement with brand

## 5.2 Hypothesis testing

The hypotheses are tested using the multiple linear regression analysis and the results are shown below.

In the following table 12, the p-value of the variables can be seen. To be considered statistically significant result, the p-value should be 0,05 or lower. A high p-value indicates that there is weak evidence against the null hypothesis. The P-value measures the probability of obtaining the observed results, and therefore the null hypothesis is considered true (Saunders et al., 2007). This suggests that the only statistically significant result from the variables in this research is the age with p-value of 0,031 which is  $p < 0,05$ . All the other variables have p-value greater than 0,05 which in this case makes them not statistically significant. All the other values are furthermore quite far exceeding the common significance levels used in hypothesis testing which makes it clear that most of the values give weak evidence. This is good to understand when looking at the results.

**Table 12.** Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3,359	1,139		2,948	0,005
Importance of country of the origin	0,143	0,436	0,049	0,328	0,744
Culture	0,251	0,245	0,148	1,024	0,311
Social identity	0,027	0,256	0,016	0,106	0,916
Age	-0,409	0,183	-0,331	-2,233	0,031
Foreigner	-0,040	0,488	-0,012	-0,081	0,936

a. Dependent Variable: Engagement with brand

The first hypothesis is that “Consumers’ identification with a brand’s social identity positively correlates with their engagement levels on social media.” (H1)

In the table 10, it can be seen that the correlation between social identity and consumers’ engagement with brand is 0,045. The value is positive which indicates that consumer’s engagement with the brand rises when they find brands take social identity in to consideration in their content for example. The value is adequately small-scale which makes it not very significant. The coefficient of 0,027 indicates also a very small positive relation. However, the p-value for the dependent social identity can be seen in the table 12 above which is 0,916. As it is greater than the limit for the statistically significant value it indicates that there is no effect of consumer’s identification with a brand’s social identity on their engagement levels.

It is hypothesized that “The brands country of origin significantly influences the frequency of engagement it receives from consumers on social media platforms.” (H2)

The coefficient value 0,143 suggest that there is a positive relationship between the brand’s country of origin and the frequency of consumers engagement on social media.

It implies that for every one unit change in the coding of the country of origin, there is increase of 0,143 units in the engagement frequency. However, the p-value of 0,744 is high and it is exceeding the significance levels and this way making the evidence weak against the null hypothesis. Given the p-value, the effect on the county of origin on social media engagement is not statistically significant. The correlation of 0,007 between the variables indicates a very weak linear relationship between the variables. It technically suggests a positive relationship but the as the magnitude is small, it is practically insignificant.

It is hypothesized that “Importance of culture impact positively consumer’s engagement behaviors with brands on social media.” (H3)

Between the importance of culture and the consumer engagement on social media is a positive relationship, based on the coefficient of 0,251. This suggests that as the perceived importance of culture increases consequently the engagement behavior of consumers with brands does too. Despite this, the p-value of 0,311 is high indicating that the results are not statistically significant. Therefore, the data do not present strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis, which would manifest that there is no effect of cultural importance on consumer engagement. There is positive correlation between the importance of culture and consumer engagement, but the relationship is quite weak. In practical terms, this suggests that the importance of culture might not be a strong predictor of consumers engagement behaviors on social media.

In addition, the three main hypothesis of this thesis, it is also hypothesized that “Age of the consumer has negative impact to the brand-user engagement on social media.” (H4)

The coefficient value of -0,409 indicates that there is a negative relationship between the age of the consumer and their engagement on social media. This insinuates that as the age of the consumer increases, their engagement with brands on social media decreases. The correlation value of -0,315 further confirms a moderate negative

relationship. The p-value of 0,031 is indicating that the results are statistically significant, providing strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis, which would state that there is no effect of consumer age on engagement. The statistically significant negative coefficient along with a correlation that supports the same direction effect means that age is a reliable predictor of decreased engagement on social media.

## **6 Conclusions**

In this part of the thesis, further discussion will be provided of the findings of research and the theoretical contributions it has as well as limitation the research has. Future research and suggestions will be provided in the end of the chapter.

### **6.1 Findings and theoretical contributions**

The primary aim and main objective for this thesis was to examine how the brand's country of origin effects the brand-user engagement on social media. It was explored how various factors influence brand-user engagement on social media. The research is done on international respondents to identify differences between Finnish and foreign consumers. Through the analysis of four distinct hypotheses, the research sought to uncover the relationships between brand and consumer characteristics, such as the brand's country of origin, cultural influence, consumer age, and the identification with a brand's social identity, and how these factors affect consumer engagement behaviors on social media platforms.

The analysis began by evaluating the impact of social identity on brand-user engagement. The first hypothesis posited that consumers' identification with a brand's social identity positively correlating with their engagement on social media is not supported as a result of the values not being statistically significant. Based on previous research (Samiee & Chabowski, 2021), it is known that consumers social identity has an effect to consumers behavior and preferences. The survey is trying to get answer from consumers if they use social media more when a brand fitting to their social identity. However, in the results there was a small but very small-scale positive correlation between the two variables. These results suggest that simple identification with a brand's social identity is insufficient to drive meaningful engagement on social media. The hypothesis is not supported considering the values are not statistically significant.

Then it is hypothesized that brands country of origin influences the frequency of engagement it receives from consumer on social media platforms. There is a positive correlation found between these two variables which is aligned with research done before stating from example that consumers make decisions of a brand based on its country of origin (Pecotich & Ward, 2007; Safeer et al., 2022). However, the hypothesis is not supported as the values are not statistically significant. There is still a small positive correlation found between the variables. These findings nonetheless suggest that the country of origin is not a significant predictor of engagement levels, indicating that global consumers might prioritize other factors such as brand values, product quality, or customer service over the geographic origin in their engagement decisions.

The third hypothesis is about the cultures positive impact to consumer's engagement behaviour with brands on social media. Culture has found to have significant role in consumers' attitudes, values, preferences and behaviors (Gupta et al., 2018). Based on the previous research the results give similar direction. The correlation is positive between the variables however there is no statistical significance on the values and therefore the hypothesis is not supported. This outcome suggests that while cultural alignment might affect consumer perceptions, it does not substantially drive engagement behaviors on social media. However, the hypothesis is not supported as the values are not statistically significant.

Contrary to the findings from the first three hypotheses, the fourth hypothesis provided a clear insight. It asserted that the age of the consumer negatively impacts their engagement with brands on social media. This finding underscores the need for brands to tailor their social media strategies according to the age demographics of their target audience. The findings contribute to theory by supporting earlier research findings such as Hruska & Maresova (2020) state that expectedly social media usage decreases when the age increases. The results show that younger demographics, who are typically more tech-savvy and integrated into the digital world, respond more actively to brands social media marketing efforts. Brands are hence encouraged to adapt their digital content and

engagement strategies to appeal to younger audiences, getting advantage from the latest digital trends and technologies.

Considering most of the hypothesis were not supported because of the values were not statistically significant, the findings of this thesis should be addressed accordingly. Despite this the marketers and brand managers should focus on age-specific engagement strategies and potentially deprioritize broad assumptions about cultural influence and country of origin effects. Moreover, given the weak impact of brand social identity on engagement, brands should consider more nuanced aspects of identity and perhaps focus on creating strong emotional connections that might better the drive to engagement.

This thesis contributes to the understanding of social media dynamics in marketing by delineating the influence of various consumer and brand characteristics on engagement. While some factors such as consumer age show a clear effect, others like the importance of culture or brand origin provide new paths for inquiry, suggesting that the factors driving social media engagement are multifaceted and context-dependent. The nuanced insights provided here not only challenge traditional marketing theories but also offer a strategic guide for optimizing social media engagement in contemporary digital marketing practices.

**Table 13.** Summary of the hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Findings
H1: Consumers' identification with a brand's social identity positively correlates with their engagement levels on social media	Not supported
H2: The brands country of origin significantly influences the frequency of	Not supported

engagement it receives from consumers on social media platforms	
H3: Importance of culture impact positively consumer's engagement behaviors with brands on social media.	Not supported
H4: Age of the consumer has negative impact to the brand-user engagement on social media.	Strongly supports

## 6.2 Managerial implications

In the light of the findings of this thesis which focused on the impact of brand's country of origin from the point of view of cultural importance and identification with brand's social identity on consumer engagement on social media, several managerial implications emerge. First, the insignificance of brand's country of origin to the brand-user engagement suggests that marketers should focus on universal brand qualities and making the brand appealing to consumers across borders. It is recommended that the brand values should resonate with broad audience as the influence of cultural importance on engagement is also quite weak.

Moreover, the minimal influence of identification with a brand's social identity on engagement focuses to the need authentic connections through storytelling and transparency. This way brands can have deeper sense of loyalty and involvement with their consumers. Lastly, the significant impact of consumer age on engagement highlights the importance of age-specific marketing on marketing strategies. It is important for brands to tailor their social media content and engagement tactics to their target market. To conclude, these insights advise emphasizing adaptability and seeking universal appeal to engage a diverse consumer base effectively. Managers and marketers should consider these factors in their efforts to optimize consumer interaction.

### **6.3 Limitations**

Every research project has certain limitations, including this master's thesis can impact the conclusions and generalizability of the findings. The empirical results reported should be considered in the light of some limitations. First, the sample size of the represented population is too small to conclude the best understanding of the research in addition to the results of the study cannot be generalized as the sample size is small. In other words, the statistical significance has not been able to reach as wanted in this research because of the limited data. In order to get more reliable results, there needs to be more answers and data from the consumers. Furthermore, the sample diversity has limitations as most of the respondents are from Finland. The results could be more generalizable if the sample diversity is greater.

As there has been limited ability to get responses to the survey questions the results might have sample bias as the people may not be genuinely a random sample. Most of the respondent are from Finland and the foreigners are from multiple different countries which does not give specific answers from any one foreign country. This study also uses its own scales that are developed for this specific research to examine the brand's country of origin effecting to consumers engagement on social media. It creates difficulties when coding the data for analyzing purposes. In addition, the results are mostly not statistically correct as a result of the lack of using already made and used scale as well as due to the small sample size. The limitations to resources and time have have an effect to the scope of this thesis and to the extent to which data has been collected and analyzed. The key variables could also limit the study. In other words, how these variables are defined and measured can significantly affect the outcomes of the thesis research.

### **6.4 Future research suggestions**

Considering this study did not use an existing scale to research the topic, it is therefore suggested to use some existing scale on this topic in the future research. This way the

research can be compared better to another existing research for example. The topic of brand's country of origin is considerably new term in the field of country of origin field which makes the topic perfect for future research. Considering the internationalization of marketing and the huge impact social media must marketing for brands, the country of origin is important topic to understand better. Brands can benefit from implementing the country of origin in ways that are influential considering the types of consumers they have. In addition, the aspect of social media is more and more important in the field of international marketing therefore it is a good frame of reference for any future research on the topic of country of origin.

Considering most of the hypothesis were not supported as a result of the values were not statistically significant it might be useful review how the different variables are defined and measured. There would be need for more detailed or different measurement approach in order to yield different insights. Moreover, there could be more exploring of additional variables or larger datasets to understand the dynamics between the variable better. Factors like brand loyalty, consumer trust or emotional connection could be considered in the future research. Investigating different segments of the consumer base or different types of social media platforms could give more insights, for example, are there difference between different ages, cultures, or platforms.

The future research could be done revising the research design. There should be larger sample size which would provide more power to understand the consumer behavior better. With the larger sample size, the demographics could be more diverse as the focus is on international consumers. On this research the sample consisted mostly of Finnish consumers. The most important part for future research would be to use existing scale on the questionnaire which is preferably already used in another research. This would increase the validity of the research and make the results more standardizable with another research on the same topic.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Questionnaire

#### QUESTIONS FOR THE ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How old are you?
  - a. 18-25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-42
  - d. 43-58
  - e. 59 or older
  
2. Where are you from?
  - a. Different options
  
3. What social media platforms do you use?
  - a. Instagram
  - b. TikTok
  - c. YouTube
  - d. LinkedIn
  - e. Facebook
  - f. Other (please specify)
  
4. How frequently do you engage with brands in social media?
  - a. Several times a day
  - b. Once a day
  - c. A few times a week
  - d. A few times a month
  - e. Rarely

5. How do you mostly engage with a brand on social media?
  - a. Liking posts
  - b. Commenting on posts
  - c. Sharing content
  - d. Taking part in giveaways/contents
  - e. Other (please specify)
  
6. Does social media affect to your purchase decisions?
  - a. Yes, it affects my willingness a lot
  - b. It affects my willingness somewhat
  - c. No, it does not affect my willingness at all
  
7. What factors influence your decision to engage with a brand on social media?  
(Select all that apply)
  - a. Quality of the product
  - b. Price
  - c. Brand reputation
  - d. Personal values and beliefs
  - e. Influencer/celebrity endorsements
  - f. Country-of-origin
  - g. Other (please specify)
  
8. Are you aware what country your favourite brands that you engage with are from?
  - a. Yes
  - b. Somewhat aware
  - c. No
  
9. How much do you care about the country-of-origin of the brands you engage with on social media?
  - a. It matters a lot to me

- b. It somewhat matters to me
  - c. It does not matter to me at all
10. Do you have a preference for brands that originate from your home country?
- a. Strongly prefer
  - b. Somewhat prefer
  - c. No preference
  - d. Slightly prefer brands from other countries
  - e. Strongly prefer brands from other countries
11. What factors influence your preference for brands from your home country?
- a. Familiarity
  - b. National pride
  - c. Perceived quality
  - d. Trust
  - e. Cultural alignment
12. How important is it for you that brands on social media platforms understand and respect your cultural values and preferences?
- a. Not important at all
  - b. Slightly important
  - c. Moderately important
  - d. Very important
13. Have you ever disengaged or stopped following a brand on social media because you found their content culturally insensitive or inappropriate?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

14. Do you actively follow and engage with brands on social media that endorse or support social causes and movements that align with your social identity?
- a. Yes, always
  - b. Yes, Sometimes
  - c. No, not usually
  - d. No, never
15. How important it is for you that brands on social media authentically represent and include diverse social identities and cultures in their content and campaigns?
- a. Not important at all
  - b. Slightly important
  - c. Moderately important
  - d. Very important