

Revealing the paradoxes of horsemeat – The challenges of marketing horsemeat in Finland

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse the different cultural meanings attached to horsemeat consumption in the context of the Finnish market. We take the “meat paradox” as a theoretical starting point and investigate the underlying cultural structures that guide consumers’ meaning-making and consumption decisions in regard to horsemeat. The data were generated after the horsemeat scandal, drawing on a wide variety of media texts about horsemeat consumption. The data were analysed through qualitative content analysis and the findings reveal five horsemeat paradoxes. Each paradox contains meanings that reflect both the justifications for and avoidance of eating horsemeat. The findings show how horsemeat consumption holds various and even contradictory meanings, elucidating how it may be difficult for consumers to take a stand towards eating horsemeat. Thereby, the study provides novel ideas for marketing that are grounded in our deep-rooted and ingrained cultural understandings.

Keywords: horsemeat, meat consumption, cultural meanings, marketing

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1 Introduction

The current paper examines a particular marketing and consumption context, namely that of the market for horsemeat in Finland. There are untapped opportunities in this market, as the supply and demand simply do not match. This poses marketing challenges that are grounded in the varied and contradictory culturally constructed and shared meaning structures relating to horsemeat that guide consumers' decisions on whether to eat it or not. For instance, one of the meanings attached to horses in Finnish cultural history is that of a heroic warhorse. Furthermore, contemporary horse enthusiasts have attachment-based pros and cons for eating horsemeat. This multiplicity of meanings poses a challenge to horsemeat producers and marketers; it may be difficult or even impossible to break these cultural norms and structures. Therefore it is important to acknowledge them in order to determine how to design marketing strategies that do not offend consumers, but instead correspond with their norms.

Besides the multifarious traditional and historical meanings related to horsemeat, marketers must also face a number of more recent challenges. Horsemeat consumption hit the news all around Europe in 2013 as a result of the so-called horsemeat scandal. At that time, horsemeat was discovered in several meat products that were labelled as beef (Gerrard 2013; O'Mahony 2013; Yamoah & Yawson 2014). The main products in Finland were Findus Lasagne, IKEA meatballs and sausage, and Karelian Lihajaloste's frozen kebab. Consumers were furious for two different reasons. First, they felt betrayed because they had not been told the truth about what they had eaten. Second, they were angered by the fact that it was horsemeat; the very nature of horsemeat seemed to evoke strong emotional reactions.

The scandal demonstrated how horsemeat consumption involves more than meets the eye. The strong reactions among consumers and the media illustrate how many different, overlapping and even contradictory cultural meanings are associated with horses, horsemeat and its consumption. It is indeed well acknowledged that the relation-

ship between humans and food is not unanimous (Mennell 1996; Levi-Strauss 1997) and that people are particularly ambivalent about eating meat (e.g. Berndsen & van der Pligt 2004; Holm & Mohl 2000; Ruby & Heine 2012; Schröder & McEachern 2004). To illustrate this, Buscemi (2014) has addressed how the idea of a living animal is often detached from the situation in which meat is eaten. To pinpoint the contradictory nature of eating meat, Loughnan, Haslam and Bastian (2010) present the concept of "the meat paradox", referring to situations where consumers simultaneously dislike hurting animals and like eating meat. However, it remains to be studied how a horse as a special kind of creature – one which oscillates between the extremes of edible food and pet-like animal – and the meanings attached to it could be understood through the lenses of these discussions. Accordingly, the present study aims to grasp the underlying cultural structures that guide consumers' meaning-making and consumption decisions in regard to horsemeat.

The challenges of horsemeat marketing have been highlighted on many forums in Finland. For example, the Finnish trotting and breeding association (Suomen Hippos), which promotes the marketing and consumption of horsemeat in Finland, has given suggestions on how to develop its promotion. The association reports that attitudes towards eating horsemeat are becoming more positive. The group that has the most negative attitudes towards eating horsemeat comprises teen girls who have horses as their hobby. The association suggests two main streams to advance the Finnish horsemeat market. First, there is a need to ensure the continuous availability of horses for butchers. The second challenge is marketing for consumers. (Suomen Hippos 2010.) However, despite the marketing efforts of Hippos, such as publishing a recipe book for horsemeat, the marketing of horsemeat has not been successful in enhancing its consumption on a larger scale, and its consumption has remained small compared to beef, pork and poultry (MMMTike 2014). It is evident that the producers and marketers need to understand the variety of these different mean-

ings and how they affect beliefs, attitudes and behaviour towards horsemeat and its consumption.

Therefore, the current study aims to *analyse the different cultural meanings attached to eating horsemeat in the context of the Finnish market*. To this end, we strive to reveal so-called *horsemeat paradoxes* in order to gain a novel understanding of the challenges faced in marketing horsemeat. We conceptualise horsemeat paradoxes as consumers' simultaneous dislike and like of eating horsemeat (cf. Loughnan, Haslam and Bastian 2010). The paradoxes are deeply entwined in our cultural meaning structures that create boundaries not only for how something constructs as an edible food and how certain foods are regarded as inedible (Levi-Strauss 1997) but also on social and more situational meanings that surround for example moral viewpoints on eating meat (e.g. Berndsen & van der Pligt 2004; Bratanova, Loughnan & Bastian 2011). Thus, it is crucial for marketing practitioners to comprehend these underlying, and somewhat unrecognised, paradoxes that guide consumers' everyday meaning-making and consumption decisions in order to create ways to market and sell horsemeat.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the prior research on meanings related to meat consumption, highlighting also the viewpoints on human-animal relations. Second, we contextualise the study by examining horsemeat markets and marketing, especially in Finland but also worldwide. After that we motivate the use of media texts as a data source and describe our method of analysis. We then identify five horsemeat paradoxes that illustrate the variety and contradictory nature of the meanings associated with horsemeat consumption. Each of the paradoxes reflects both sides of the coin: the justifications for and the avoidance of eating horsemeat. Finally, we construct novel suggestions for horsemeat marketing.

2 The Paradox of Eating Animals

We build our understanding of horsemeat consumption on two intertwined scientific discus-

sions; firstly, we lean on the vast amount of studies deliberating on the meanings related to eating meat, and secondly, we draw on prior studies on the various roles and meanings people attach to domestic and companion animals. The choice of these two debates is based on a profound juxtaposition that is labelled as the "meat paradox", signifying people's simultaneous love for animals and love of eating them (Loughnan, Haslam & Bastian 2010; Rothberger & Mican 2014). The origins of the concept of the meat paradox can be linked to postmodern consumer scholars in whose view consumption is characterised by paradoxes and contradictions (Brown 1995; Firat & Venkatesh 1995). Mick and Fournier (1998, 124) have further elaborated how a paradox centres on the idea that "polar opposite conditions can simultaneously exist or at least can be potentiated in the same thing". In the context of food, Leipämaa-Leskinen (2009) has examined how daily food consumption situations involve multiple contradictory meanings. Leaning on these views, we focus on those situations where the meanings related to both the justifications for and avoidance of eating horsemeat are negotiated. Below, we first discuss what kinds of concerns consumers attach to meat consumption in general and after that we focus on the relationship between humans and animals to shed further light on the meanings of eating (horse) meat.

It is acknowledged that humans, especially in Western Europe, separate the thought of the living animal from meat (Mennell 1996) and plenty of food consumption discussions have explored the moral concerns related to eating meat as well as the ways of resolving the conflicts of meat consumption (e.g. Berndsen & van der Pligt 2004; Bratanova, Loughnan & Bastian 2011; Schröder & McEachern 2004; Ruby & Heine 2012). Recently, Buscemi (2014) has shown how animal origins are detached from the stages of consumption, distribution and preparation of meat and that even in the production stage we can see the shift from farming animals to culturing meat. That is, those parts of the meat that are clearly parts of the animal, like heads, legs and tails, are eliminated from

situations in which consumers deal with meat.

Consumers tend to justify their meat consumption. This indicates that eating meat is regarded as a question of moral reasoning and full of emotionally laden meanings. To illustrate, Holm and Mohl (2000) reported that the comments made by Danish consumers in interviews regarding meat consumption were dominantly negative, Schröder and McEachern (2004) found that female consumers in Scotland had unresolved value conflicts in regard to ethical meat, and Roos, Prättälä and Koski (2001) noted that Finnish men emphasised the role of vegetables in their diet, even though they included meat among their favourite foods. It is even argued that consumers de-animalise meat consumption, as meat is often eaten without reference to its animal origins (Buscemi 2014; Vialles 1994). When looking more closely at the concerns that consumers have with regard to eating meat, we can separate those that focus on the quality of meat and health issues from moral concerns that focus on animal welfare.

In regard to the *quality of meat*, on the one hand, meat has traditionally held a central role in the Western food culture (Holm & Mohl 2000). Meat is privileged as a central part of meals (Douglas & Nicod 1974) and it is considered to have high nutritional value (Ruby & Heine 2012). On the other hand, in spite of these tendencies, even many of those consumers who are omnivores and eat meat regularly have critical concerns about meat. This ambivalence is often related to health issues, as consumers tend to consider vegetarian food to be healthier; recent meat crises and scandals have also increased suspicions related to health risks (Berndsen & van der Pligt 2004; Buscemi 2014).

Secondly, quite often both the avoidance of meat and justifications for eating meat revolve around discussions about *animal welfare*. Consumers are concerned about the ethics of eating meat, about livestock production, transportations and the origin of meat (McEachern & Schröder 2002), as contemporary consumers are out of touch with the realities of slaughtering and production of meat (Buscemi 2014), and even omnivorous consumers tend to mentally separate the meat they

eat from the living animals (Ruby & Heine 2012). It is acknowledged that people's sensitivity to animals' welfare influences their attitudes towards eating meat, leading them to more often favour free-range and organic meat as well as avoid eating meat (Hoogland, de Boer & Boersema 2005). In line with this, those who believe that animals share similar emotions with humans are more often vegetarians and those with a greater childhood attachment to a pet report greater meat avoidance as adults (Rothberger & Mican 2014).

Therefore, the meanings people attach to different animals undoubtedly have an influence on how willing people are to eat them and the way people classify animals (e.g. as pest, pet or food) has an impact on how they interact with them (Joy 2009). Accordingly, classifications and continuums in which all the animals are positioned have been created; on the one extreme, there are the most human-like animals (like dogs) and on the other extreme there are those animals that are most likely to be objectified and eaten, such as pigs or cows (Sahlins 1976; Hirschman 1994). In this regard, food taboos are most often attached to animals that are closely associated with house and home, such as cats and dogs in the Western culture (Fessler & Navarrete 2003). To illustrate, the classifications between various animals are related to issues such as whether the animal is allowed to live inside, the restrictions placed on it inside the house (e.g. is it allowed to sleep in the bed), whether there is a certain place inside the house that is regarded as dirty or clean, and whether the animal has been named (Hirschman 1994).

The key here is the degree to which the animal in question is anthropomorphised, meaning the natural tendency people have to attach human features to non-human entities (Serpell 1986; Hirschman 1994). Thus, due to anthropomorphism, eating pets is a taboo to most people (Beck & Katcher 1983), as loving pet owners treat their pets more or less like people (Holbrook 2008, 550). The closer an animal is considered to be to humans, the less likely it is to get eaten, and the most central boundary between a pet and a production animal is based on whether the

animal is regarded as being appropriate for food (Hirschman 1994). Therefore, the way animals are treated after their death shows their role in humans' lives; the corpses of more human-like animals are disposed of in a similar fashion to those of humans (e.g. burial).

Interestingly, horses could be claimed to be in a unique intermediate position, simultaneously holding features of both a pet (and even of a human-like subject) and those of a production animal. To open up the companion animal-related meanings further, a dichotomy may be discovered in prior research: animals are regarded as either human-like subjects/consumers or objects/products to be consumed (e.g. Beverland, Farrelly & Lim 2008; Brockman, Taylor & Brockman 2008; Hirschman 1994). When animals are viewed as subjects, they are experienced as, for example, friends or family members. On the other hand, when they are seen as objects to be consumed, animals are given the meanings of, for example, equipment for avocations, status symbols or ornaments. Similarly, there have been debates about the humanity/naturalness of animals and their "place" in the dichotomies of nature/culture and me/wilderness and inside/outside (e.g. Beck & Katcher 1983; Hirschman 1994; Serpell 1986; Tuan 1984; Wells 2002). The question of how agency is given to/taken away from animals has also been analysed (Cheetham & McEachern 2012). However, Jyrinki (2010, 2012) proposes a dynamic and multidimensional way of approaching human-animal relationships; thus, for instance, horse owners may not have just one kind of relationship to the horse, but may regard their horse simultaneously as a friend and as an equipment for an avocation, and even as being appropriate for food.

To date, only a few studies have focused on horsemeat consumption but it stands to reason that there are great cultural variations in how consumers respond to eating horsemeat. Therefore the viewpoints presented appear to be somewhat contradictory, as horses can be regarded as livestock, for instance from the point of view of the horse industry, and also as companion animals from the point of view of the public (Lenz

2009). For example, in France eating horsemeat has been historically a taboo and many unclean associations were attached to it, but these meanings have evolved to a qualified approval of horsemeat (Gade 1976). On the contrary, in Italy, horsemeat has traditionally been considered to be a healthy and nutritious food (Badiani et al. 1997) and the Italians consume the greatest amount of horsemeat in the EU (Martuzzi et al. 2001). Hence, horsemeat consumption offers an interestingly ambivalent and rather unexamined context to study the meanings that consumers attach to eating meat, and thereby it provides an opportunity to create a novel understanding to resolve the challenges related to horsemeat marketing.

3 Horsemeat Markets

In the following, we take a look at the specifics of horsemeat markets in both the Finnish and global contexts. To begin with, there seems to be a split in consumers' attitudes towards horsemeat consumption between English-speaking and French-speaking regions of the world. Whereas the UK, US and Australia respond to the eating of horsemeat extremely negatively, the French-speaking countries such as France, Belgium and francophone Canada nowadays favour horsemeat consumption. The title of a Huffington Post article from 2013 summarises this cultural split: *"Horse meat is taboo in UK but remains popular in France and Mexico and Central Asia"*. In this regard, Finland can be seen to be situated somewhere between these two extremes, as horsemeat has traditionally been eaten in Finland, although the quantities have remained small. For example, in 2012 Finnish consumers ate on average 0.5 kg of horsemeat (with bones) compared to total meat consumption, 77.5 kg per person. Horsemeat consumption is on a par with lamb (0.7 kg) and reindeer meat (0.5 kg). (MMMTike 2014.) The greatest amount of horsemeat is used in sausages.

The statistical report of Humane Society International (2012a; 2012b) reveals that the usage of horsemeat for human consumption is highest

in China, Kazakhstan and Mexico. In Europe the greatest horsemeat consumption takes place in Italy and Belgium. However, it has been shown that even if horsemeat products are readily available in Belgium, France and the Netherlands, this does not necessarily translate into broad social acceptance of eating horsemeat. Also relating to horsemeat usage, it should be noted that not all horsemeat is used for human consumption; most of it is utilised for feeding other animals.

Furthermore, the Humane Society International report (2012a) shows that China, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Argentina and Mongolia are the top horsemeat producers in the world, whereas in Europe, the top horsemeat producer is Italy, followed by Poland, Spain and France. Most of the horses are not bred for meat. However, at least in Mexico, breeding and herding for meat production is also common.

In Finland, 1800 of the 4000 horses that die annually are slaughtered. This amounts to around 520,000 kg of horsemeat. The rest of the consumed meat, 2,500,000 kg, is imported from Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. At the beginning of the 21st century there were only one or two slaughterhouses in Finland that accepted horses, and this led to challenges in transportation, ethical animal welfare and cost structure (Hevostalous lukuina 2013, MMMTike 2014). Nowadays there are twelve slaughterhouses that accept horses. Finnish horsemeat production is regulated and safe, yet there are great differences in attitudes towards eating horsemeat, as revealed by the data of the current study.

The marketing and promotion of horsemeat is still in its infancy in Finland. The meat is mainly available from regional butchers and at certain restaurants or it is used as an ingredient in sausages. Not all horsemeat is of domestic origin and its availability is not constant in food stores. All in all, marketing efforts remain modest and local; to illustrate, horsemeat is not branded under any trademark in Finland, unlike reindeer meat, for instance, which has been branded and is available in food stores throughout Finland as well as through internet shops such as tunturiporo.fi or deliporo.fi.

4 Methodology

The present data were generated in early 2013 onwards after the horsemeat scandal (Gerrard 2013, Yamoah & Yawson 2014). After that, the scandal and eating horsemeat were hot topics in the news, horse magazines and social media. This led us to focus on media texts that were collected from several sources, both printed and online. These texts included online news (such as Yle news from the Finnish Broadcasting Company) and their comment postings, Finnish horse magazines, online discussion forums, blogs and video postings. The online data generation was inspired by the netnographic research tradition in which for instance Web search engines are commonly used for gathering data (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley 2014). In this tradition, it is proposed that collecting online data with a research question in mind is akin to “purposive sampling” (Lincoln & Guba 1985). In the current research, we used search engines, employing key words that we considered to be relevant to the present study, such as horsemeat, horsemeat scandal, horsemeat consumption, horse transportation and slaughter transportation. As expected, the data we found led us to new data. To illustrate this snowball effect, examining the most obvious search words led us to look for new search words, for instance “horsemeat consumption” showed our way towards “horse transportation” and “slaughter transportation” as they were so commonly discussed together. In addition to the online data, we reviewed two printed horse magazines: *Hevosurheilu* from 2013 to the present and *Hevosnomistaja* from 2012 to the present. However, only two articles discussed horsemeat consumption.

Altogether the focal data include a) 35 Finnish online news items discussing the horsemeat scandal, production and consumption of horsemeat and their comment postings, b) threads in seven Finnish online discussion forums that had discussed horsemeat, and c) seven blog postings and attached discussions, and d) two printed articles from Finnish horse magazines that specifically discussed horsemeat. A more detailed data description is presented in Appendix 1.

The postings were mainly published in February 2013 when the horsemeat scandal was at its height. Another peak in postings was around 2010, when Hippos promoted horsemeat consumption by publishing a recipe booklet. However, some of the online material dates back to 2005. Thus, even though the data collection was timed in relation to the horsemeat scandal, the data contain meanings and events that go well beyond the actual timeframe of the scandal; after all, the culturally constructed meaning structures are tied to our heritage and shared understandings. That is, the data include for example newspaper articles on the history of horses as animals and people's reactions to eating horses, thereby situating the horsemeat scandal in a wider cultural context.

Further, the focal data produced in the Finnish media was complemented by media texts from the UK, USA, France and Australia, helping us to situate and discuss the peculiarities of Finnish horsemeat consumption. This international material was collected less systematically as its role was to create understanding of the context and phenomenon.

The collected media texts provide a vivid account of a variety of horsemeat-related cultural meanings, and thus the scandal-related media texts enabled us to collect the naturally produced cultural talk to reveal these meanings of horsemeat (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). Moreover, the media texts demonstrate how different actors – such as consumers, butchers, food producers, horse organisations and horse devotees – operating in the horse markets responded to the scandal, thereby creating a normative and ideological understanding surrounding the meanings of eating horsemeat. In this way, we are able to explore how horse markets as a particular cultural production system predispose different actors in horse markets towards certain kinds of thoughts and actions (Arnould & Thompson 2005).

The data were analysed through qualitative content analysis (Miles & Huberman 1984). The analysis revealed a multiplicity of culturally constructed categories that were identified through an inductive analysis and iterative readings of the

media texts. In the first phase, the collected media texts were read through several times and labelled initially in a descriptive, *emic*-manner. Secondly, the initial descriptive chunks of data were merged together and grouped into broader themes. Next, these themes were grouped together on the basis of similarities and differences in order to form even more abstract, *etic*-level categories. On the basis of the analysis, we could identify five culturally constructed and even contradictory categories of horsemeat consumption. These five categories are depicted in the following sections as *horsemeat paradoxes*, addressing their contradictory contents. Each of the paradoxes contains meanings that reflect both the justifications for and avoidance of eating horsemeat, referring to the simultaneous dislike and like of eating horsemeat. This emphasises the managerial relevance of understanding how consumers may end up either favouring or resisting horsemeat consumption.

5 Findings

The findings reveal five horsemeat paradoxes: Safe vs. Unsafe, Ethical vs. Unethical, Culinary Delicacy vs. Worthless Food, Sacred vs. Profane, and Human-like vs. Animal-like. Below, each of the paradoxes is elaborated and support is provided by verbatim quotations from the collected media texts.

5.1 Safe vs. Unsafe

Firstly, our findings highlight how people discuss and wonder about whether horsemeat is safe or unsafe to eat. This paradox is closely tied to meanings related to healthy eating. Worries about food safety and health-related risks have been pondered extensively in prior meat consumption studies. Although meat still holds a central role in the Western diet, researchers such as Holm and Mohl (2000) show that consumers not only often consider meat to be unhealthy (compared to vegetables, fruits and fish) but also reflect on the possible bacterial contamination and low quality of meat. Further, modern production and

processing of meat are often connected to fears of different health-related risks (Buscemi 2014; Holm & Mohl 2000).

In the same vein, the current data show that although some consumers have concerns about horsemeat, there are also pros that favour its consumption. When horsemeat is regarded as *safe*, it is seen as a nutritious and protein-rich food. For example, on a Finnish discussion forum for weightlifters and bodybuilders, horsemeat is appreciated for its high protein and low fat content, as this quotation shows: “... and apparently [horsemeat] is the best or at least almost the best as a protein source.” The data also reflect expert discussions (cf. Badiani et al. 1997; Gade 1976) about horsemeat, as the nutritional value of horsemeat and the recommendations on eating horsemeat in other countries, e.g. France, are referred to in an article in *Hevosurheilu* magazine. In this way, the current media talk relies on factual information when safety-related meanings are used to evaluate whether horsemeat is edible or not (cf. Ruby & Heine 2012).

However, the current data also demonstrate that horsemeat is seen as *unsafe* to eat. In these cases horsemeat is believed to contain something that may be harmful to one’s health, such as bacteria, allergens or drug residues. Someone argues in a Finnish discussion forum: “How do you know what kind of horsemeat you’re eating? Most of the horses are doped with antibiotics and unfit for human consumption. I wouldn’t eat Romanian horsemeat, especially if it has been sold as beef.” This demonstrates doubts that relate especially to racing horses and the risks of drug or steroid residues. Talk about these kinds of risks is especially relevant to horses, as the production of more commonly consumed meats, such as pork and beef, is more systematic and regulated. Therefore, the meanings of unsafeness may be evoked by uncertainties related to the origin of horsemeat. This is aligned with the “omnivore’s dilemma” discussed by Ruby and Heine (2012), who show that humans tend to have feelings of ambivalence about eating unfamiliar animals because there is a higher risk of eating harmful substances.

5.2 Ethical vs. Unethical

Secondly, our findings show how eating horsemeat is described as an ethical choice on the one hand, but also unethical on the other hand. This paradox revolves around whether a horse has lived a good life before slaughter and whether eating it is ethically favourable or not. When horsemeat was discussed as being *ethical*, it was assumed that the owners have loved and taken care of the horse, the horse has been fed well and it has been able to live a normal horse’s life in a herd. To illustrate, one Finnish forum poster explains: “Horse is one of the best ecological meats. Most horses get a long and happy life. They run in the yard every day and are well cared for.”

Furthermore, the ethical discussion leans on the domestic and local origin of horsemeat. To exemplify, one girl on a discussion forum writes: “Horsemeat is really good. It is a pity that it is so difficult to find domestic meat. I don’t want to buy foreign meat for ethical reasons. European slaughter transportation is extremely brutal and cruel. I don’t want to have anything to do with those people. Finnish horsemeat tastes good, even to horse lovers.” This appreciation is in line with contemporary attitudes on food in general; the domestic origin of food is highly valued in Finland (Jutilla 2014). However, when it comes to actual purchasing habits, consumers are still not very committed to buying local or organic meat, as also indicated in the study by McEachern and Schröder (2002) concerning organic meat consumption in Scotland.

While addressing the importance of domestic horsemeat, the quote above also shows how the origin of horsemeat may be a source of *unethical* meanings. These cultural meanings are highlighted in discussions referring to the living conditions of horses and the slaughter transportation of horses. Accordingly, the data reveal how it is argued that racehorses may live very harsh lives, where trainers and owners push them beyond their limits until they are hurt and injured, and ended up being slaughtered. A video posted by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is described as “an undercover investigation published as a youtube video in 2014 revealing chronic

misuse of drugs, reportedly to enhance horses' performance and mask their injuries in American galloping industry."

Further, the data show quotations debating about the living conditions of horses kept as pets. A journalist interested in meat production in Finland argues on her online blog: *"In Finland the animal welfare problems with horses have to do with them staying in their small pens without other horses for companionship. Many are left without proper physical exercise because their owners don't have the time to ride. Other problems include incorrect surroundings and feeding."* Indeed, prior research indicates that loving pet owners are expected to take good care of their animals (e.g. Holbrook 2008).

Finally, discussions of so-called slaughter transportations focused on their unethical aspects. European slaughter transportations in particular came under criticism on Finnish discussion forums, as exemplified by this quote: *"Slaughter transportations in Central and Southern Europe are complete cruelty to animals, brutal and sick. For centuries a horse has been man's servant and that is why it needs to be treated humanely until its death. A horse is a wise and intelligent animal. It feels horror, pain and suffering when subjected to cruel treatment by humans. Can its meat be more that stressed after this? This all has been done because of greed and maximum profit. Unfortunately other animals have the same destiny. Long live local food!"* This is aligned with previous studies that have addressed how consumers criticise and doubt the humanity of livestock transportations, but often these negative attitudes do not influence actual meat purchases (Schröder & McEachern 2004).

5.3 Culinary Delicacy vs. Worthless Food

Thirdly, the current data show how horsemeat could be positioned as a culinary delicacy, but also as a worthless food, pointing out the sharp distinction between high-quality food and inedible or low-quality raw material. Meat is generally regarded as an important part of the diet (Holm & Mohl 2000). In the Finnish context, Finnish men have been found to favour meat because of its good taste (Roos, Prättälä & Koski 2001). Similarly,

horsemeat can be seen as a culinary delicacy, as illustrated by a quotation from a discussion forum for weightlifters and bodybuilders: *"Last weekend I had horsemeat for the first time and it was really good. My friend had made a roast out of horsemeat in a cooking pit. Maybe a little chewier than beef, but otherwise delicious."* Horsemeat is further described as tasting a lot like beef, but more tender, sweet and similar to game, indicating that new flavours need to be categorised in terms of familiar dishes.

The gourmet aspect is also emphasised in the arguments of a Finnish meat producer, who says that horsemeat is a traditional ingredient in their sausages and one that they have used for 75 years. He describes one of their special products: *"It is a product that is decades old, it has won awards from abroad and it has always included horsemeat. We have discovered that horsemeat gives our products a better taste, so we are not going to give it up."* Horsemeat dishes indeed appear to be culinary treats in different parts of the world and are discussed vividly across the data. A Finnish forum poster tells: *"During my stays in Japan I had a lot of horsemeat. The best was basashi, which is sashimi made of horsemeat. In other words, raw horsemeat."* For a comparison, a Sardinian blogger describes the different cultural traditions in Italy: *"In Italy horsemeat is popular only in a few regions... In Sardinia, eating horsemeat is as natural as eating a 14 oz beef steak. It's on all the restaurant menus, in the butcher shops and in all large supermarkets across the island."*

The data also contain recipes for preparing and cooking horsemeat. Yle online news gave advice on how to prepare horsemeat: *"cook it as you would cook beef."* This was accompanied by several online comments about cooking horsemeat as well as a recipe booklet published by the Finnish trotting and breeding association containing recipes for several horsemeat dishes. Consequently, the data show how some people consider certain aspects of the discussion around the horsemeat scandal as absurd – *"horsemeat always beats beef"* – and further explain how horsemeat improves the quality of lasagne. Maybe somewhat surprisingly, the horsemeat scandal actually resulted in an increase in horsemeat consumption in Finland.

Some people were eagerly looking to add horsemeat to their diet, as shown by Yle news headlines: “Horsemeat is on the up and up” and “Gourmets have found horsemeat again”. One butcher explains in the news: “*This fuss has had a minor effect [on selling horsemeat], in a positive manner. Many people have remembered that there is also horsemeat available. Horsemeat sausage sells especially well.*” Moreover, the data include many comments in which Finnish consumers discuss how difficult it is to get lean horsemeat from supermarkets. Yle, for instance, reports an interview with a grandmother, whose grandson is attracted to horsemeat: “*Every time I take him to the marketplace with me, he asks me to buy horsemeat for him.*”

The data also reveal how the meanings of horsemeat as a culinary treat are contested by the meanings associating horsemeat as *worthless food*. Prior meat consumption studies have shown that consumers may escape the “meat paradox” by perceiving the animals they eat as being unworthy and unfeeling (Loughnan, Haslam & Bastian 2010). However, the meanings of worthlessness constructed differently in the current context, namely through the distribution of horsemeat. In these cases, horsemeat was seen as suitable only for poor people who cannot afford to buy “better” meat. Yle news described how packages of Findus lasagne were recalled from the market because horsemeat was found in the products. However, as the food itself was not of low quality or rotten, it was donated to homeless people. The news report also featured comments from poor people: “*For the poor, it is good. We are not picky.*” This exemplifies how the cultural meanings of horsemeat are produced and reproduced through social interaction and how the value of horsemeat is constructed in a unique way in this particular context.

Regarding horsemeat as a worthless food also has historical roots, as horsemeat has been eaten during tough economic times in different parts of the world. For example in Finland, horsemeat was eaten during wartime when there was no other meat available for soldiers (Schuurman & Leinonen 2012). This was common elsewhere as well. As *Hevosurheilu* writes: “*during the war, the Brits also*

ate horses – but they stopped doing so after the war.” An Italian blog writer describes how horsemeat has been called “a poor man’s food” in Italy. Thus, horsemeat can connote meanings of low quality and being unworthy of eating when there is better meat available.

The worthlessness of horsemeat comes up even more strikingly in historical writings (Egardt 1962; Shuurman & Leinonen 2012) that talk about how horsemeat was seen to contaminate other foods. *Hevosurheilu* writes: “*After slaughtering, the horsemeat was not to be stored together with other meat products. Sometimes, if some horsemeat had been even close to other meats, those other meats were not to be used for human consumption as it was feared that horsemeat had contaminated them.*” These associations of contamination have both factual groundings as more recent studies (e.g. Boireau et al. 2000; Gill 2005) have brought up not only the risk that horsemeat contains pathogens and parasites such as salmonella and trichinella, but also more emotionally laden meanings that denote the cultural construction of what food is regarded as being worth eating and what not (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1997).

5.4 Sacred vs. Profane

Fourthly, the current data demonstrate how eating horsemeat reflects both sacred and profane meanings. The *sacredness* of horsemeat is tied to the historical, religious and even mythical meanings attached to horses as animals. The magazine articles in the current data include varied discussions about the religious regulations related to horsemeat, reflecting prior historical studies on horses and their roles in culture and society (Gade 1976; Egardt 1962). These media texts address how horseflesh has been avoided by Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims and Christians, who follow closely the rules of their religion or cultural prejudices. To illustrate, *Hevosurheilu* magazine elaborates the development of the banning of horsemeat based on the spread of Christianity in Europe. Further, it argues that the negative attitude in Christianity towards horsemeat goes back to the fourth century A.D., but it was not until 732 that Pope Gregory III

specifically forbid Christians from eating it. This is in line with prior discussions acknowledging that religion has a strong influence on what is eaten and not eaten (Buscemi 2014). In Finland, the sacredness of horses is also culturally based on folk tales in which a horse is born in the sacred grove where ancestors lived. The horse was seen as a mediator between two worlds: those of the living and the dead. (Shuurman & Leinonen 2012.)

The current data further highlight how horses have special roles in the history of Finland. Especially, the attitudes towards Finnish warhorses express the valuable and even iconic status of horses. For instance, Helsingin Sanomat writes: “If someone mocked a club-footed horse, they would change their attitude when they learnt that the horse had been in the war.” The newspaper story describes how warhorses were only eaten when they were too sick or wounded to continue serving on the front in spite of their heroic status. This was considered to be the horse’s last service to the fatherland. Still, horses gained as loot from the enemy were easier to eat than own horses. These sorts of historically constructed associations about horses and eating them still live on in the Finnish cultural heritage, contributing to contemporary consumers’ consumption and meaning-making.

On the other hand, horsemeat has *profane* meanings, as a horse is also depicted as a living creature that eventually ends up dead. Here, horses construct as inferior to humans, and are to be aligned metaphorically with nature and otherness (Beck & Katcher 1983; Hirschman 1994; Serpell 1986). Hence, eating of horsemeat represents a way of classifying species in relation to each other, situating humans on top of the other species. Therefore a horse can be seen as an object that is naturally consumed as a good-quality, ordinary, and mundane food.

In Finland horsemeat is an everyday ingredient mainly in mettwurst, a salami-type sausage, as one forum poster explains on a teenage forum: “Healthy horses are used for sausage. Rye bread with mettwurst, cucumber and tomato is good food. Yum.” Further, one butcher wonders on the online news how we can bury edible food: “Personally I think

that we should eat everything that is good for eating, we have to use it. Why should we bury meat into the ground or somewhere else? Of course we should utilise it. I know a lot of horse enthusiasts who eat horsemeat and think it is quite natural to do so.”

Moreover, the meanings of profane food can be found in those texts that address how horsemeat is clearly cheaper than beef. Maaseudun Tulevaisuus informs: “At Reinin Liha, the horsemeat is almost half the price of beef.” Its cheaper price is also a common topic on several discussion forums where consumers share tips on where to buy horsemeat, as the discussion chain below exemplifies:

“...my grocery store often sells horsemeat for EUR 1.99 and I buy and freeze it.”

“Where can you get it so cheap?”

“Close to Turku. At least the local Prisma has locally produced horsemeat and it is almost always on sale for EUR 1.99.”

Indeed, horsemeat can be described as meat that everyone can afford and use even on an everyday basis. Also generally, consumers tend to focus on cheap prices in their mundane food consumption (Leipämaa-Leskinen 2009).

5.5 Human-like vs. Animal-like

Lastly, we discovered how eating horsemeat was grounded on understandings about the ways people regard the roles of horses in their present daily lives. The most prominent divide here is in the extent to which people anthropomorphise horses (Beck & Katcher 1983; Serpell 1986; Hirschman 1994): on the one extreme as almost *human-like* inedible subjects, whose eating would resemble cannibalism, and on the other, horses are seen (and in most cases loved) as *animal-like* creatures that are a part of nature and as such edible.

Thus, our findings first highlight that for many people horses represent a close companion rather than livestock. Indeed, a strong argument against eating horsemeat is experiencing the horse as a friend with many anthropomorphised qualities (Hirschman 1994; Serpell 1986). The horse is paralleled to a loved companion who does not belong

on anyone's plate (Beck & Katcher 1983; Ruby & Heine 2012; Rothberger & Mican 2014). As one Yle news headline states: "Horsemeat divides feelings also in Finland – who would eat a pet?" and another one in Helsingin Sanomat emphasises: "You don't eat a friend". In these texts, eating horsemeat is considered to be almost similar to eating humans, a friend or a family member. A journalist in Hevosurheilu comments: "Many horsemen that I know tell that they could eat horsemeat, but eating a horse that you've known feels disgusting. Or even a horse that has had a name, as one horseman explained last weekend." Indeed, Hirschman (1994) sees the naming of animals as one of the main ways of anthropomorphising animals, making them close to humankind and less likely to get eaten.

So, different animals may be classified in relation to their similarity to humans and their vulnerability to being eaten (Hirschman 1994; Sahlin 1976); however it seems that horses may also be situated in a position where they are not seen as human-like subjects, but still as subjects of their own, animals that are capable of sensing and feeling (Jyrinki 2010). Here, our data demonstrate that horses are regarded as animals that possess sensitivity, mental capacities and a capability for suffering (Loughnan, Haslam & Bastian 2010), and therefore hurting and eating them is perceived to be wrong. One poster on a Finnish online forum explains: "For me, eating horsemeat would feel wrong, like what most Finns would feel about eating a dog or a cat. I have lived with horses ever since I was a child. For me they are soulful animals and friends, not food." Similarly, one Finnish blog writer explains the contradictory emotions towards eating horsemeat in the following way: "Horsemeat is lot more ethical than beef or pork, but still I can't or don't want to eat it. It is similar to eating your pet. That would be ethical, but the human mind is weird." This showcases how humans may have difficulties with situating horses in relation to other animals, as horses sometimes appear to be situated simultaneously among pets and among production animals (cf. Jyrinki 2012, 2010). A similar debate is discovered on an international online forum, where a poster writes: "Cows, goats,

horses, sheep, pigs... why should horses be any more disgusting than the others? Such knee-jerk reactions are always worthy of close inspection." Someone else replied: "Why? Because we don't raise our horses for food. Horses are considered to be companion animals and we don't eat our companions."

On the other hand, sometimes even horse lovers end up eating horsemeat, as one of the many Finnish forum posters explains: "I could eat horsemeat (and have eaten), even though I do horse riding." Those who favour eating horses offer essentially the same argument as those who reject eating horses: they do it out of love. This is how one famous rider in Finland argues for eating horsemeat: "We horse lovers have an obligation to ensure that our hardworking friends do not have to suffer. If you are a real friend of animals, you should eat domestic and organic meat, and not meat that is produced in intensive production units or meat that comes from those animals that are abused by long slaughter transportations. Moreover, horsemeat tastes good." The interpretation here is that eating horsemeat is a right and proper way to treat animals after their death, and is considered as a last service for the horse, indicating a metaphorical way of relating animals to nature.

6 Conclusions and Implications for Marketing

The current study has shown how horsemeat and its consumption hold various and even contradictory meanings that we have labelled as horsemeat paradoxes: Safe vs. Unsafe, Ethical vs. Unethical, Culinary Delicacy vs. Worthless Food, Sacred vs. Profane, and Human-like vs. Animal-like. Indeed, the present analysis has shed light on how it may be difficult for consumers to take a stand towards eating horsemeat. Thus, those who promote horsemeat need to understand these different standpoints in order to develop products and design concepts that will succeed in the marketplace. Especially, our analysis has leaned on creating a novel understanding of the culturally constructed meanings and contradictions in relation to horses

and horsemeat consumption. In this manner, the cultural lenses give us a way to understand the underlying meaning structures that are tied to consumers' experiences of whether or not to eat horsemeat. Thus, the horsemeat paradoxes are non-exclusive and overlapping, permeating our cultural understandings of meanings related to horsemeat. Accordingly, instead of creating any orthodox and traditional suggestions for marketing and selling, such as following price competition or leaning on flamboyant advertisements, the current study aims to create ideas for marketing concepts that are grounded on our deep-rooted and ingrained cultural understandings.

We can conclude firstly that some of the meanings attached to horsemeat consumption appear to be rather similar to those attached to the consumption of more familiar meats, such as beef and pork. These meanings relate to discussions about the *ethicality* of meat production, transportation distances and slaughtering circumstances (Schröder & McEachern 2004). In this regard, discussions about horsemeat are comparable to those about general concerns over animal welfare (Hoogland, de Boer & Boersema 2005). Moreover, the meanings of what constitutes a *gourmet* meal seem to be transferable to other meat consumption situations, as meat is generally described as a tasty food that has traditionally held the highest status in the hierarchy of foods (Holm & Mohl 2000; Roos, Prättälä & Koski 2001).

However, the current findings also highlight cultural meanings that seem to apply solely to horsemeat. In this specific context, health-related risks were discussed in terms of the paradox of *safe-unsafe*, which may derive from the unfamiliar nature of horsemeat in comparison to other more common meat varieties (Ruby & Heine 2012; Fessler & Navarrete 2003). These sceptical meanings are partly grounded on the very nature of a horse as an *animal*, oscillating between a human-like, inedible subject and an object to be consumed (Jyrinki 2010; Hirschman 1994; Sahlins 1976). The current data showed how many people see a horse as a friend rather than livestock (Jyrinki 2012), and therefore the eating of horsemeat may be taboo

(Beck & Katcher 1983; Fessler & Navarrete 2003). Further, the sacredness of horsemeat due to historical traditions, myths and religious meanings related to horses makes its meat a unique context of consumption (Schuurman & Leinonen 2012). As a sharp contrast, the current data also demonstrated how horsemeat could be seen as worthless meat that is suited only for poor people or during tough economic times.

On the basis of all the five horsemeat paradoxes, we suggest that marketing professionals can use this versatile cultural knowledge in several ways. *First, the paradoxes reveal a variety of horsemeat-favouring meaning structures that marketers could employ when developing their strategies.* Examples from the data state that gourmet, health-oriented and responsibility-driven concepts could gain interest among contemporary consumers. Thus, there is potential for new product development. There is a market gap for instance for high-end gourmet horsemeat products such as filet mignon or culturally oriented horsemeat products including Italian veronese made of horse rump, Japanese basashi made of horse loin or the Kazakh delicacy zhai, made of smoked and dried fat from under the mane. Further, as health-related values are increasingly important for Finnish consumers, the high nutrition, low fat and high protein content of horsemeat offer new market opportunities. Moreover, the growing number of consumers looking for responsible solutions should be informed of the local and domestic origins of horsemeat.

Second, it is necessary to understand that there are consumers who will avoid eating horsemeat for different reasons, whether due to love of horses, ethical or safety concerns, and/or deeply-rooted meanings of the sacredness of horses. Thus, when horsemeat is used as an ingredient, the product packaging should make this transparently clear. Reliable and visible clear labelling creates value for meat consumers (Schröder & McEachern 2004) and helps consumers to trust the producers. Naturally, this information is also helpful to those consumers who are looking for horsemeat. In a similar spirit, contamination through drugs may produce challenges for marketing horsemeat, as it appears to

be one of the grounds for resisting the eating of horsemeat. In order to overcome this, any drugs given to the horses need to be openly reported and thoroughly registered, and meat for human consumption must be tested.

Third, the horsemeat producers must not overlook ethical considerations concerning horse slaughtering. The transportation distances should meet ethical standards and animal welfare during transportation and slaughtering must be humane. Several studies on meat consumption have shown that consumers – including omnivores – do ponder the morality of eating meat, and may find it difficult to connect the meat on their plate with its animal origin (Buscemi 2014; Berndsen & van der Pligt 2004; Loughnan, Haslam & Bastian 2010). It is also acknowledged that animal welfare is an increasing moral concern among consumers (Hoogland, de Boer & Boersema 2005). Therefore, ensuring that the horse has a good life – and even a local origin – may produce value for consumers.

As this is the first study to tackle the challenges of horsemeat marketing in Finland, it opens up several as-yet unexamined research avenues for the future. Finland provides an interesting intermediate position between the English cultural context that is mostly against eating horsemeat and French/Italian cultural context where horsemeat is more appreciated. Therefore, studying these more extreme contexts could provide a deeper understanding of the reasons behind horsemeat consumption and also shed further light on the Finnish setting. Moreover, we suggest investigating these multifarious contexts using a variety of methodological tools to gain an even more comprehensive picture of the horsemeat markets. For instance, following consumers in their everyday buying and cooking situations and practices would open up novel paths for research that the current study has only touched on. In conclusion, we hope that the current investigation will be richly elaborated in future studies.

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Appendix .

Horsemeat data description								
	Total	Name	Focus	Date	Topic in English			
A Online news	35	Hevosurheilu Online YLE Online Helsingin Sanomat Online MTV5 Online Maaseudun tulevaisuus Online Kaleva Online Uusi Suomi Online Aamulehti Online Suomen Kuvalehti Online Talouselämä Online Turun Sanomat Online Iltalehti Online Pohjalainen Online		26.4.2013 The Irish are astonished: beef turns out to be horsemeat 26.4.2013 Britain: Horsemeat scandal remains a hot topic in the media 26.4.2013 Britain: Most convenience-food lasagnes contain horsemeat 26.4.2013 UK: Burger horsemeat is of Polish origin 11.12.2009 People are enjoying horsemeat again 26.3.2010 Horsemeat grows in popularity 26.3.2010 Cook horsemeat like beef Horsemeat is an emotional and divisive subject in Finland - who would eat a pet? 18.2.2013 Scandal leads to a rise in horsemeat sales Ikea's horsemeat troubles continue - sausages are now being pulled from sale in Russia 27.2.2013 Free horsemeat kebab handed out in Vantaa 21.3.2013 Aftonbladet: Beef roast turned out to be horsemeat 22.3.2013 Fvria's random sampling reveals horsemeat in one product The hunt for horsemeat continues - consumers shop as usual in grocery stores Hundreds of horses suffer for years - slaughter would be merciful 7.8.2013 45 minutes: no money for food or care - horses are abandoned at stables 5.12.2013 27.2.2013 Do we believe in the purity of horsemeat? 5.3.2013 Horsemeat is as popular as lamb 2.9.2013 Less than half of horses are eaten 21.2.2013 A shortage of Finnish horsemeat in Helsinki 2.9.2013 Gourmets are now interested in horsemeat 24.6.2013 Outcome of the meat scandal: big profits for big companies? 14.4.2013 The EU performed 7259 horsemeat tests - one hit in Finland Outcome of the meat scandal. Newspaper reports that there is a "massive shortage of horsemeat" 22.3.2013 Kebab slices busted for containing horsemeat: pulled from sale 25.2.2013 Horsemeat products can be donated to charity 24.2.2013 German minister: give horsemeat products to the poor 21.2.2013 Poultu: At some point, horsemeat was added to the recipe 16.2.2013 Horsemeat scandal: the EU performs 2250 tests Origin revealed: This is where the infamous lasagne horsemeat came from 9.2.2013 4.11.2009 Horsemeat on the frying pan - an ecological act? Poultu's CEO: Our award-winning wursts have always contained horsemeat 23.6.2013 26.2.2013 Ikea's meatball provider did not find unlabelled horsemeat				
			B Online discussion forums	7	Suomi24 Demi Karppaus Martat Pakkotoisto Kotikokki Kemikaalikohtail	General	18.2.2006 Horse slaughter	
						Young girls	22.2.2013 Horsemeat	
						Low carb dieting	Finns have developed a taste for horsemeat	
						Cooking	16.9.2005 Horsemeat	
						Weight lifting	2009 Horsemeat	
						Cooking	Horsemeat	
			Chemical products	Horsemeat is a strong allergen				
			C Blog postings	7	Syötäväksi kasvatetut Marko Björs Suomen Kuvalehti Tunne hevonen Fifrock - home of happy dogs	Production animals	26.2.2013 Is horsemeat ethical? Rarely Yes, I've eaten Icelandic horse - and what the horsemeat scandal is really all about 17.2.2013 18.2.2013 Eat horsemeat 19.2.2013 In favour of horses	
						Top rider	11.2.2013 The topsy-turvy horsemeat scandal 18.2.2013 Can a horse lover eat horsemeat?	
						News		
						Rider		
						Dog devotee	27.2.2013 Is horsemeat ethical? Romanian horsemeat certainly isn't	
			D Printed journals	2	Hevosurheilu Hevosnomistaja		27.3.2013 Horsemeat. Still taboo - but why? 2/13 The horsemeat scandal in a nutshell	