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Domesticating startup culture in Finland

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, startup entrepreneurship—understood not only in economic but also in cultural terms—has become increasingly important for nations' economic growth. This article examines startup culture as a global form and its domestication in local contexts. I analyse how startup entrepreneurship is made sense of in Finnish society, utilising Finnish startup guidebooks and non-fiction literature as research material. As a theoretical framework, I draw on the literatures of domestication of global trends and neoliberal, entrepreneurial subjectivity. The analysis reveals that the domestication of startup culture is founded on the juxtaposition of startup entrepreneurship and Finnish culture, constructing certain elements of Finnish culture as obstructive to and incompatible with startup entrepreneurship. Simultaneously, the books negotiate startup entrepreneurship in relation to Finnish historical meaning systems. The texts invite the Finnish audience to rework their national identity, which in part functions as the domestication of neoliberal, entrepreneurial subjectivity.

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KEYWORDS Domestication; entrepreneurship; Finland; startup entrepreneurship; subjectivity

Introduction

In Western economies, startup entrepreneurship has become increasingly important in recent years. In the postindustrial era, entrepreneurship and new ventures are seen essential in the effort to boost global competitiveness and creating jobs (for example Perren & Jennings, 2005). Countries from Europe, Asia, and Africa are in the pursuit of building institutional frameworks suitable for early-stage, high expertise entrepreneurship (see Atomico, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2013; 2014). Of note is that startup activities are not understood only in economic terms, but in cultural terms as well (Saxenian, 1996). The rapid success of firms originating in

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Silicon Valley, California,—such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, and WhatsApp—have led to discussions on a so-called startup culture, in which some of the aforementioned firms have a canonical role (Hyrkäs, 2016).

Finland provides an exemplary case of swiftly emerging local startup cultures. In Finland, startup entrepreneurship has been prominently discussed in the course of the 2000s and 2010s (see Autio, Rannikko, Handberg, & Kiuru, 2014; Lehdonvirta, 2013; Maliranta, Pajarinen, & Rouvinen, 2018). The success of notable Finnish startups, such as Rovio, Supercell, and Zenrobotics, as well as the noted startup event *Slush*, have helped define Finland as a place of innovative entrepreneurship and ‘buzz’, as startup activities are often colloquially termed. In 2014, for example, *The Guardian* wrote that a new culture of Finnish entrepreneurship is emerging from the ashes of the recently crumbled Nokia (Toivonen, 2014). According to Lehdonvirta (2013, p. 25), the Finnish ‘startup craze began around 2010 and is still hard to gauge’. Finland has allocated considerable resources to the startup sector in the 2010s (see Koskinen & Saarinen, 2019), which is partially explained by the fact that a high level of education and a skilled workforce have been framed as Finland’s advantages in the global competition and knowledge-based economy (for example Kettunen, 2011b; Moisio, 2018).

In this article, I examine startup culture as a global form (Collier & Ong, 2005) and its domestication in local contexts. As a case study, I analyse how startup entrepreneurship is made sense of in Finnish society, utilising Finnish startup guidebooks and non-fiction literature as research material. My research questions are: *How is startup entrepreneurship and its relationship to the Finnish society represented?* and *How is startup entrepreneurship domesticated in Finland?* As a theoretical framework for my analysis, I draw on the literatures of domestication of global trends (for example Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014; Collier & Ong, 2005) and neoliberal, entrepreneurial subjectivity (for example Brockling, 2016; Rose, 1990).

The rise of startup entrepreneurship in Western societies can be linked to the general trend of entrepreneurship spreading from the economic realm to all spheres of life in the postindustrial era, an idea which has been developed in the literature of political and cultural sociology (Brockling, 2016; du Gay, 1996; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1990; Scharff, 2016). Drawing on Foucauldian ideas on neoliberal governmentality, the ideal post-industrial citizen is constructed as an entrepreneur of the self (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1990)—proactive, self-reliant, and reflexive with regard to his/her wellbeing and life management. According to Aihwa Ong (2007, p. 5), neoliberal logic

works towards ‘re-management of populations’ by ‘producing educated subjects’ and ‘fostering self-actualizing and self-enterprising subjects’. In a neoliberal, postindustrial context, people are essentially to view themselves as enterprises: they are to constantly work for the betterment of their performance and productivity, thus allowing market logic to penetrate every and all relationships (Gershon, 2011).

According to numerous scholars, neoliberalism should be understood as situated. It is adapted or contested varyingly depending on the context and institutional frameworks in a given locality (Brown, 2015; Gershon, 2011; Ong, 2007; Stenning, Smith, Rochovska, & Swiatek, 2010; Zhang & Ong, 2008). Neoliberalism is not ‘a tsunami’ that sweeps over nations unaltered, producing identical, predetermined results everywhere (Ong, 2007, p. 4). In this article, I decipher startup culture in the light of the discussion on neoliberal subjectivity. I examine how startup culture—understood as a global form—is negotiated in the Finnish context. In my examination of these situated negotiations, I employ the concept of domestication, which refers to the local adaptation of a global phenomenon. Exogenous, global, and foreign elements are reinterpreted from the perspective of local cultural meaning systems until the foreign no longer seems foreign: it transforms from something that is thought *about* to something that is thought *with* (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014, p. 14). The literature on domestication emphasises the processual nature of domestication: phenomena are actively fitted to local contexts by reinterpreting them, thus making them appear familiar. However, this is not unidirectional diffusion: in the process of domestication, meanings are interpreted and adapted, which involves both accepting, challenging, and contesting the foreign, exogenous meanings. This results in the creation of an alternative version of the domesticated phenomenon. Domestication is a bidirectional, dialogic process: domesticating a phenomenon means altering both the foreign and the familiar. (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014; Nash, 2010, pp. 59–63; Stenning et al., 2010; Syväterä, 2016.)

With these considerations, this article contributes to the discussion on entrepreneurialisation of society in the postindustrial era, by examining the formulation of entrepreneurial subjectivity in the contexts of startup entrepreneurship and its cultural negotiation. By considering startup entrepreneurship as a global form (Collier & Ong, 2005), this article explores its migration (Ong, 2007) or glocalisation (Robertson, 1995), thus contributing to the emerging literature on startup culture (for example, see Hyrkäs, 2016; Egan-Wyer, Muhr, & Rehn, 2018). Through an examination of the ways startup entrepreneurship is legitimised in

the framework of local-global negotiation, the article furthers the sociological understanding of the global startup phenomenon. In my analysis, I note that startup culture in the Finnish context is familiarized through a juxtaposition of startup entrepreneurship and Finnish culture, and by examining domestication by juxtaposition, this article elaborates the understanding of domestication of global trends as a polyphonic, strategic process of meaning-making (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

The article unfolds as follows: I begin by considering the notion of startup culture in more detail and locating it within the discussion on global forms; next, I present my data and offer methodological considerations, after which I present my analysis and conclusions.

Startup culture as a global form

The term 'startup' is usually applied to young or fledgling companies that have discovered, or are developing, a novel innovation. They aim for rapid growth, and their product is usually thought to be scalable, meaning that it can be easily multiplied and tailored to new contexts (Blank, 2006; Blank & Dorf, 2012; Hyrkäs, 2016; Lehdonvirta, 2013; Ries, 2011). Egan-Wyer et al. (2018) note that the term 'startup' first gained popularity during the IT bubble at the turn of the millennium, and its usage has continued to expand with the rise of the global internet economy. Startup entrepreneurship is, therefore, somewhat routinely associated with technology and internet-based services.

Silicon Valley is usually conceived of as the cradle of the current startup trend. From the 1960s and 1970s onwards, the area has become a hotbed of technology and growth-seeking entrepreneurship, attracting entrepreneurs, professionals, and investors from all over the world. The region has developed a particular business infrastructure that is characterised by the close cooperation of academic institutions, public research facilities, private companies, and abundant financial resources. This results in a unique entrepreneurial culture based on open and mobile labor markets and an exchange of information and resources both between and within companies (Maas & Ester, 2016; Saxenian, 1996; 2006). Silicon Valley can be construed as the model of a successful startup ecosystem (see Valaskivi, 2012), and countries around the world are creating their own Silicon Valleys.

The notion of culture is central to the notion of startup entrepreneurship in Silicon Valley. Maas and Ester (2016) note that the Silicon Valley

culture is characterised by simultaneous openness and competitiveness. In this duality, ideas of sharing and self-interest go hand in hand. Openness refers to, for example, acceptance of and inclusivity towards new entrants to the market, and sharing one's ideas with the community—exemplified by Tesla Motors' CEO, Elon Musk, sharing the company's electric motor patents with the world in 2014. There is a strong belief in sharing one's knowledge and experiences, and, concurrently, appreciation and expectance of feedback and reflection. According to AnnaLee Saxenian (2006, p. 42), companies in Silicon Valley 'recognize the value of collaboration in a process of mutually beneficial bootstrapping, which some refer to as "growing up together"'. Many successful entrepreneurs remain in Silicon Valley to work as investors and business angels, circulating both knowledge and capital in the region (Saxenian, 2006). Self-interest, the other side of the duality of startup culture, has two indications. Firstly, it refers to an extreme devotion to work and achieving one's goals. Working hours are not counted, and successful entrepreneurs advertise their efforts spent in the building of their companies. Secondly, it points to the Darwinian rationale of the survival of the fittest: the competition is unrelenting, and only the strongest can achieve success (Maas & Ester, 2016).

Another central feature of the culture is the acceptance of failure and appreciation of risk-taking; failure of a business endeavor is separated from personal failure, meaning that bankruptcy is not a stigmatising event for an entrepreneur. This can be seen as stemming from, firstly, the startup environment that accentuates ceaseless competition and, secondly, the uncertainty associated with startup entrepreneurship (Maas & Ester, 2016; Saxenian, 2006). As the typical goal of startups is to develop an innovation or product on an emergent market, the risks are high and the circumstances uncertain at best (see Ries, 2011). Failure in the Silicon Valley culture is conceived of as a form of collective learning (Saxenian, 2006). In relation to this, innovativeness and the search for disruption (that is, startups' aim to initiate a profound shift in the market with its product), visionary leadership, and devotion to one's work are identified as the central features of startup culture in its global, popularised form (Hyrkäs, 2016).

In many ways, startup culture—and the implied subject of the startup entrepreneur that is brought about in the discourse—echoes the discussions on neoliberal subjectivity. With the notions of novelty, risk-taking and creative passion, startup entrepreneurship is articulated in the framework of a Schumpeterian understanding of entrepreneurship. The Austrian

political economist Joseph Schumpeter saw the entrepreneur as an innovator and a reformer, and, hence, the driving force of the economy. The entrepreneur's aim is to initiate creative destruction in the market, thus paving the way for new economic activities and accelerating the withering of unfit activities (Brockling, 2016; Schumpeter, 2010; Valaskivi, 2012). The entrepreneur is therefore envisioned as a trailblazer, who is continuously looking for new opportunities. This echoes the depiction of the post-industrial ideal citizen, who is construed as proactive, calculative and entrepreneurial in terms of self-reliance and rational choice (Brockling, 2016; Brown, 2015; Miller & Rose, 2008; Ong, 2007; Rose, 1990). Because of the combination of the ideals of risk-taking, vision, and collaboration, startup entrepreneurship can be viewed as the epitome of the entrepreneurial ideals of the post-industrial society. Numerous scholars have pointed out the masculinity of these entrepreneurial ideals (for example Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Brown, 2015), and indeed, the heroes of the global startup culture—such as Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, Apple's Steve Jobs, and Tesla's Elon Musk—are almost exclusively male. Startup culture remains altogether gendered and characterised by a masculine ethos (see Chang, 2018).

Although Silicon Valley is often seen as the emblem of startup culture (Valaskivi, 2012), startup entrepreneurship has been detached from Silicon Valley and become popularised in the last two decades (Hyrkäs, 2016). Startup jargon, semantics, practices and narratives have spread out of the realm of entrepreneurship, and are widely circulated in work life and popular culture. Startup entrepreneurial practices have been influentially disseminated by the works of Eric Ries (2011; 2017) and Steve Blank (2006; Blank & Dorf, 2012), whose models of business management—the Lean Startup and Customer Development Model, respectively—have laid the groundwork for an entire body of management literature and numerous business workshops, conferences and seminars all over the world (Egan-Wyer et al., 2018). Emigrant entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley also work as disseminators of startup culture. They bring their knowledge, experiences and practices, and utilise them in building local startup settings. Silicon Valley entrepreneurial practices are combined with local resources and customs (Saxenian, 2006). In this process, new startup cultures are created. Startup culture, then, can be conceived of as a global form that migrates to new locations via a complex process of domestication that brings about novel meanings and discourses.

Egan-Wyer et al. (2018) highlight the linguistic aspect of the dissemination of startup culture: cultural jargon and terminology of startups, such as

‘scalability’ and ‘disruption’, have spread to, and are widely circulated in, mainstream media and popular culture. The notion of startup culture, then, seems simultaneously to refer to specific practices and to ambiguous, widely circulated cultural meanings. Therefore, domesticating it involves a local, discursive negotiation. Startup culture is formed in a dialogic process: local actors manage and familiarise the external ‘foreign’, thereby reinterpreting it from the perspective of local meaning systems—global phenomena are not simply copied but reworked and reconstructed, creating new meanings and understandings. Simultaneously, the familiar is domesticated, or tamed by, the foreign: previously unfamiliar phenomena are eventually seen as natural and acceptable in the familiar environment (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014; Collier & Ong, 2005; Nash, 2010; Stenning et al., 2010; Syväterä, 2016).

In this article, I regard startup culture as an open-ended constellation of meanings and discursive practices—an entity that is not returnable to specific temporal or spatial conditions. As such, it can be read as a global form or ‘a migratory set of practices’ (Ong, 2007, p. 4), migrating to situated environments and thus transforming and gaining new meanings through discursive negotiations (Collier & Ong, 2005). I understand this process as domestication, whereby exogenous ideas or cultural meanings are interwoven into local cultural meaning systems, in which process a new version or reinterpretation of the exogenous phenomenon is conceived (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014; Syväterä, 2016). From this perspective, I examine how startup entrepreneurship is perceived in the Finnish context.

Research material and methodology

To study how startup culture is understood from the Finnish perspective, I have selected seven Finnish guide and nonfiction books that concentrate on the notion of startup entrepreneurship. I chose the books based on the following criteria: they are, firstly, written by a Finn and, secondly, aimed at a wide readership (not solely at, for example, academics or students). Thirdly, they concentrate on startup entrepreneurship in Finland as a phenomenon instead of a specific area of startup entrepreneurship, such as the financial or the judicial aspects of entrepreneurship. In this process, seven books, published between 2013 and 2018, were selected as research material.

The books are written by former or current Finnish startup entrepreneurs (Järvilehto, 2018; Järvinen & Kari, 2017; Kormilainen, 2015;

Kuusela, 2013; Saloranta, 2018) or people closely involved with the Finnish startup scene, such as management of the *Slush* event (Helaniemi, Kuronen, & Väkeväinen, 2018; Vimma, 2018). Several books are also based on interviews with Finnish startup entrepreneurs or members of the business elite, and they variably engage in discussion with popular management literature, for example. The readership of the books can be defined as everyone interested in the topic ('the layman'), but more specific audiences are also identified, such as aspiring entrepreneurs, investors, and business elites. The tone throughout the material is popular: terms and jargon are explained to an audience assumed to possess limited prior knowledge. In a global comparison, the books resemble popular startup literature, such as Eric Ries' *The Lean Startup* (2011). As such, the books can be seen as simultaneously guiding the reader into startup culture, and also constructing it. In my close reading of the research material, I focus on how startup culture is constructed in the material *dialogically* with Finnish historical, local, and situated discourses and cultural meaning systems: foreign elements are intertwined in local meaning systems utilising local resources and discursive practices (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015; Tiyanen-Qadir & Salmenniemi, 2017).

Using this understanding of domestication as a framework for my analysis, I read the material as a dialogue of the foreign and the familiar, examining the way the domestication of startup culture takes place. While familiarising myself with the research material, I noticed early on that startup entrepreneurship is explicitly juxtaposed to Finnish society—indeed, the construction of startup culture seemed to rely on the direct juxtaposition of the foreign and the familiar. The juxtaposed nature of the research material is exemplified by the pamphlet *Hupparihörhö ja Bisnesmies* [the Hoodie Dude and the Business Man] (2013), which is commissioned by the Finnish Business and Policy Forum (EVA).¹ In this book, Finnish entrepreneur and consultant, Sami Kuusela, attempts to decipher the nature of startup entrepreneurship and the reasons why Finland is allegedly poorly adapted to foster startup activities. He states that Finland is a 'third world country of startups'² (2013, p. 32), which results in the deterioration of national economy and migration of aspiring domestic startup entrepreneurs. Finland should strengthen the national startup ecosystem, which will not be possible unless the nature of startup entrepreneurship is explained to the Finnish business and the political elite. Kuusela assumes this task in his pamphlet. A similar mission characterises the rest of the research material. The books aim to describe the realities and underpinnings of startup entrepreneurship, drawing on

the authors' personal experiences and/or interviews with Finnish startup people.

It is curious that while Finland has globally become known as a favorable place for startups and tech entrepreneurship due to high level of education and talent base, extensive public-private cooperation, and support for startup activities (Atomico, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2014), the books repeatedly describe a friction between startup culture and Finnish society. It is construed that there is considerable difficulty in combining the two. Startup entrepreneurship, then, is constructed by distinguishing it from what is perceived as Finnish culture, producing a version of startup culture that is not as such returnable to Silicon Valley. In my analysis, I unravel the domestication of startup culture by concentrating on the juxtapositions of startup entrepreneurship and the Finnish society that the texts produce. In doing so, I take the viewpoint of domestication as strategic action: in the discursive process of domestication, the foreign phenomenon engages with a 'web of culturally and historically sedimented discursive practices' (Tiyanen-Qadir & Salmenniemi, 2017, p. 383). In the following, I identify and analyse the different modes of juxtaposition emergent in the research material, thereby examining the domestication of startup culture.

Antagonising Finland

In domesticating startup culture, the research material engages in a dialogue with certain aspects of Finnish culture, producing a version of Finnishness that seems incompatible with startup entrepreneurship. The Finnish mentality, for example, is seen as characterised by humility, quietness and modesty, which are in many ways antithetical to startup entrepreneurship. Finnish characteristics lead the entrepreneur, among other things, to think in too narrow a framework—for example, starting a business solely to ensure a livelihood for oneself:

In Finland, everyone's just dabbling on something inconsequential with the Finnish market in mind. There's no point in making things for 5 million people, when you could be doing them for 100 or 200 million. (Vimma, 2018, p. 103)

The Finnish culture is seen to produce an entrepreneurial climate that hinders startup entrepreneurship. On one hand, traditional entrepreneurship is envisioned as modest activity with meager aims—such as simply providing for one's family or 'creating work for oneself and perhaps for

other people' (Kormilainen, 2015, p. 162). On the other hand, traditional entrepreneurs are also disgruntled and potentially bitter, underlining the hard work that they, defying the odds, have put into their businesses. This trait is illustrated in the research material by regarding the act of emphasising long working hours as 'traditional entrepreneur bullshit, in which one is on the clock 24/7' (Kormilainen, 2015, p. 153).

Opposing this, startup entrepreneurship is internationally oriented, growth-seeking, and ambitious, while on the one hand also relaxed, inspired, and experimental. Finnish entrepreneurship is lonesome and solitary work, whereas startup entrepreneurship is inherently teamwork and a cooperative effort, as according to Helaniemi et al. (2018, p. 84), 'team is everything. Your team should be the best in the world'. The construction of traditional Finnish entrepreneurship draws on the stereotypical notions of Finnish people as modest, withdrawn and restrained:

The startup trend has done many good things to Finnish entrepreneurship as a whole. [...] The unnecessary humbleness has been shed from their pitches. The Finnish engineer rising up on a stage to pitch a product no longer praises the product by mumbling 'it's not totally useless'. (Järvinen & Kari, 2017, p. 34)

In this atmosphere, entrepreneurial progress is impeded by complacency and stagnation. Established business-owners are happy with their current situation and their established positions, and therefore regard the enthusiasm of startup entrepreneurs with suspicion or paternal mockery. For example, Vimma (2018, p. 157) describes that the news of the Finnish mobile game titan Supercell being sold to the Japanese Softbank for over 1.1 billion euros in 2013 caused the 'old capitalists and business magnates to choke on their morning coffee' and wonder whether there was a decimal error with the sum, implying that the game industry is, or at least was, dismissed as inconsequential among the business elite.

Business culture in Finland is also seen risk avoiding, and, as such, it is a product of broader Finnish culture of inherent suspicion and derisiveness towards upstarts and bragging:

The law of Jante that is typical in Nordic societies ensures that those individuals who in any way assert themselves are pushed back down – for example, by writing the entire startup field off by saying *bah, only hot air*. (Helaniemi et al., 2018, p. 209)

The above excerpt references the Law of Jante, a collection of laws in the fictional Swedish town of Jante that forbid one from promoting oneself or bragging. The Law was introduced by Dano-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose in his novel *A Fugitive Crosses the Tracks* in 1933, which was

intended as a satire on the pressures to conform to societal norms in the Nordic societies (see Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2018). By alluding to this, Helaniemi et al. (2018) portray Finnish society as an introverted community that scoffs at self-promoters and clips the wings of startup entrepreneurs' vital enthusiasm.

A similar stance underpins Finnish institutions. The banking sector, trade unions, education, and public support for entrepreneurship—broadly, the public sector—are laden with obstacles that hinder or prevent the establishment of a thriving startup culture. The overarching narrative is that due to the novelty of startup entrepreneurship, the traditional Finnish institutions are lagging. They are continuously described as inflexible and poorly adapted to the needs of startups, and they seem to harbor a skeptical attitude.

Despite the public startup craze, Finnish startups are in a bad place. The main reason is our archaic culture of finance and business. The amount of risk capital investments the Finnish startups have received has been getting smaller for years. There are even bigger problems in the so-called exit market. (Kuusela, 2013, p. 8)

Startups usually do not have up-to-date financial records required by banks' loan approvals, and the officials who approve business loans do not necessarily understand in the slightest what the company does. In the business of startups, there is usually a high risk and operation in an emerging market involved, causing the traditional banker to grind their teeth. (Vimma, 2018, p. 80)

The teeth grinding of the traditional banker in the latter excerpt above symbolises the risk avoidance of Finnish culture: without proper financial records, the banker cannot be sure of the outcome of the potential investment, causing dislike and antipathy towards startups, who in turn ask the investor to gamble and accept the possibility of loss.

The practices of startups are inappropriate for the requirements of the institutional funding bodies. For example, demanding a traditional business plan from startups is often pointless, as the plan of a startup is prone to change, and therefore 'writing down all ideas to produce a lengthy business plan is most often a waste of time' (Kormilainen, 2015, p. 139). The public institutions usually have 'no idea what a startup does' (Vimma, 2018, p. 80) and 'no clue as to the realities of startup entrepreneurship' (Vimma, p. 186). Public business development services are particularly misguided in their practices: they are rigid and concentrate on irrelevant matters, which results in inefficient use of money and, moreover, prevents the possibility of pivoting—that is, changing the business

model or even the whole founding idea of the company–, which is essential in startups (see Blank & Dorf, 2012; Ries, 2011).

Particularly in American popular culture, the tech-entrepreneurial subject is construed as a practical, learning-by-doing character, instead of a theoretical thinker; in this discourse, the command of theoretical knowledge is constructed inferior to practicality (Kohlenberger, 2015). Correspondingly, many of the heroes of startup culture, such as Apple's Steve Jobs and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, are university dropouts. This is echoed in the research material. For example, when listing the types of people with whom not to found a startup, Kormilainen (2015, p. 52) describes 'the Thinker', who has grand visions on how to change an entire industry but lacks the operational skills required in managing an actual business: 'The Thinker talks, philosophizes and thinks but does nothing. Send the Thinker back to the university to finish their PhD'. In this citation, incompetence and impracticality—the antitheses of startup culture—are linked to academia. In startup discourse, academia is often construed as 'stifling' with its focus on intellectual knowledge production, which hinders true innovation (Kohlenberger, 2015, p. 269).

Similarly, the Finnish education system is viewed as raising people who are oriented towards wage labor instead of entrepreneurship:

Despite all the well-earned praises, the Finnish education system heavily directs us to obey rather than question. [...] Us Finns are taught to speak only when the teacher grants us the permission. If something does not belong to one's job description, one might be timid, hesitant and way out of one's comfort zone when doing things on their own. (Helaniemi et al., 2018, p. 64)

Thus, the Finnish education system and academia are seen as producing people not compatible with startup entrepreneurship—the education system directs people to the drudgery of paid work instead of venture creation, whereas academia produces intellectual dilettantes who lack practical knowledge on business management. This yields 'clueless city officials' (Vimma, 2018, p. 186) and rigid bureaucrats whose job is to 'invent startup venture projects and development programs and other activities that have very little to do with actual business' (Kuusela, 2013, p. 17). This reflects the neoliberal idea of the public sector as inefficient, bureaucratic, and bloated, which has taken root in Finnish public discourse, especially among the business elite (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019).

However, there are ambivalences in the juxtapositions of Finnish society and startup entrepreneurship. It is noted that establishing a startup culture should draw more strongly on our national culture,

instead of opting to Americanise Finland and Finnish cultural traits, such as our matter-of-fact and unassuming demeanor: these Finnish cultural traits should instead be used as building blocks (Kormilainen, 2015, p. 145). In the research material, the desire for a particularly Finnish startup culture is voiced. Finnish culture is not only an obstacle: it is also a resource that, if approached appropriately, can be harnessed to create a unique entrepreneurial atmosphere.

Similarly, public institutions, despite their inefficiency, can potentially foster a thriving startup culture: the free and expansive education system provides people with ample skills to become startup entrepreneurs. The extensive welfare state provides a safety net for bankruptcy, which leaves room for experimentation and risk-taking. Institutional aspects are seen as products of culture, and therefore they should be used to the benefit of Finnish startup culture:

We should rather be proud of what we have achieved. Finland has been the home of Linux, Nokia and MySQL. They weren't created in the sunshine on a beach, but in the dark, miserable, slush and cold [of Finland]. (Vimma, 2018, p. 104)

We should stop belittling our Finnishness and instead see our high level of education and will to do quality product development as advantages. Within our cultural unity lies a huge power. (Kuusela, 2013, p. 43)

These ambivalences are central in negotiating the relationship of startup culture and Finnishness. Although startup entrepreneurship is seen as desirable, it is implicitly associated with overt positivity, self-promotion, and self-interest—qualities that, in the Finnish context, tend to have negative connotations. Instead of adopting practices and attitudes directly from Silicon Valley, it is interpreted that a thriving startup culture should be constructed by paying respect to the Finnish culture, approaching it from our own particular perspective. What does it mean, then, to be a Finnish startup entrepreneur? To unravel these ambivalences, I turn to examine startup subject the antagonistic representations of Finnish culture, society and mentality produce.

The modern Finnish startup entrepreneur

As the previous section demonstrated, an overarching theme in the research material is that startup entrepreneurship is a unique, novel phenomenon that has caught Finnish society by surprise. In describing the current startup trend, terms such as boom, hype and explosion are

used, highlighting the sudden expansion of startup activities. Therefore, the modern Finnish startup entrepreneur is envisioned as a young character keen to do things differently and think outside the box. He/she represents a new type of entrepreneur, from whom ‘we, the offspring of the corporation generation, have a lot to learn’ (Kormilainen, 2015, p. 163). The new and bold is contrasted with the old and traditional:

In order to make Slush happen, we needed a generation that hadn’t had to deal with the beat-up demeanor of the previous generation. Our generation could never have done it. (Kormilainen, 2015, p. 145)

As in the Silicon Valley startup culture, failure is a central motif in startup entrepreneurship. Uncertainty, high risks, and failure are integral parts of the startup environment. A known phrase coined by Ries (2011) cites that startup entrepreneurship equals creating a business under conditions of extreme uncertainty. In the research material, risks and failure are routinely defined as self-evident traits of the field. The statement ‘nine out of ten startups fail’ is mentioned in several books, and it becomes emblematic. Consequently, startup entrepreneurship is described, for example, as ‘a journey without a map’ or ‘a leap into the unknown’, which metaphorically equate startup entrepreneurship with expedition and entrepreneurs with explorers:

Startup is not a pursuit of a fixed goal but an expedition, the outcome of which could be something that no one could have thought of in the beginning. (Järvillehto, 2018, p. 53)

A key resource for withstanding the inherent uncertainty and failure in the startup world is the creative passion of the entrepreneur. Passion and confidence in one’s own abilities and the product enable the entrepreneur to withstand risks. However, the Finnish culture obstructs the establishment of startup culture with its tendency of risk avoidance, which needs to be reworked if startup culture is to thrive. For example, Vimma (2018, p. 108) quotes Steve Blank as saying in one of his lectures in Finland that ‘Finns should start celebrating risk-takers. This has not been the case in Finland, you are traditionally not a risk-taking country. You should embrace the revolution that is taking place at the grassroots level [–].’ The embrace of failure and risk is also important in the current, insecure labor market. The proactive attitude of startup entrepreneurs is vital for everyone looking to succeed, regardless of whether one is an entrepreneur or not. Startup attitude is seen as universally beneficial:

Startup entrepreneurs have grown accustomed to uncertainty, surprises and sharp turns. Even though not everyone needs to become a startup entrepreneur, startup attitude can be useful in the insecure job market. (Helaniemi et al., 2018, p. 210)

Some action to initiate such cultural revolution has already been taken by Finnish startups, however: several books reiterate the anecdote of Supercell celebrating a failed project with champagne. As well as a quirk of startup organisational culture, the practice can be read as a carnival that attempts to redefine failure and risk-taking in the Finnish culture. The embrace of failure also resonates with current Finnish political discussion concerning the so-called culture of experimentation. The 2015–2019 Government has promoted the role of societal experimentations to achieve reforms, initiating a widely reported experiment of Universal Basic Income for instance. It is notable that the culture of experimentation has been framed primarily as cultural change: in political discourse, a demand for entrepreneurial attitude of experimentation is called for (Ylöstalo, 2019). Proactivity and risk-taking are required not only from the individual, but from the society as a whole. In the research material, the modern startup entrepreneur's stance on proactivity is the result of his/her proneness to constantly questioning and reflecting on their surroundings: *Why is this done the way it is done? Could this be done differently?*

In many respects, the startup subject in the research material parallels the discussion on the neoliberal, entrepreneurial self. Market logic is the primary principal according to which the post-industrial ideal subject is to be constructed (Brockling, 2016; Brown, 2015). Under neoliberalism, 'the subject is a collection of processes to be managed' (Gershon, 2011, p. 539), meaning that reflexivity is to be conducted in terms of the subjects' personal wellbeing and life management. This implies that self-interest overcomes all other interests, unless the subject is continuously incentivised to think otherwise (Gershon, pp. 540–541). However, in the research material, the modern Finnish startup entrepreneur is also interested in the betterment of his/her community. Startup entrepreneurship presents itself as the solution to Finland's lack of competitiveness in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, thus entangling startup entrepreneurship with nationalism and communal spirit. The promotion and enhancement of startup entrepreneurship is justified with the wellbeing that startups potentially generate, especially in the framework of the current, turbulent global economy. The societal horizon is generally described as worrisome because of the volatility and insecurity of global capitalism. Startups are seen as way of

weathering this storm, especially because Finnish startup entrepreneurs are eager to benefit Finland:

‘I’m a Finn and so are my children. I wish that they live in Finland for their entire lives, and for my part, I want to contribute to Finland being as good and flourishing a country as possible. For that, we need entrepreneurship.’ – Risto Siilasmaa, founder of F-Secure (Helaniemi et al., 2018, p. 206)

Startup entrepreneurs, then, come to be depicted as patriots and benefactors who advance national, shared interests. It is construed that Finnish startup culture combines the Silicon Valley culture of openness and sharing with the Finnish cultural tradition of *talkoot*, a tradition of communal voluntary work (Vimma, 2018). *Talkoot* in Finnish denotes a culture-specific meaning of communal, unpaid cooperative effort done for the perceived benefit of the whole community, such as a gardening project or the renovation of a communal space. The members of a community are expected to participate gratuitously in *talkoot*. In Finnish political discourse, *talkoot* is often employed to describe a common goal, the pursuit of which different interest groups are invited to join by placing their particular interests temporarily aside. For example, the Finnish national competitiveness is often constructed via the notion of *talkoot*, which depicts competitiveness as a shared, nationalistic project, the fulfilment of which necessitates unselfish action from various interest groups (see Kettunen, 2012).

The coupling of startup entrepreneurship and *talkoot* has two implications. Firstly, successful startup entrepreneurs are eager to help aspiring colleagues. Secondly, on the national level, startup entrepreneurs benefit Finland by paying their taxes and making decisions with the national interest in mind, thus helping to maintain the welfare state. This idea of working altruistically for the greater good is also articulated as working for the betterment of the Finnish startup ecosystem:

If your company goes bankrupt, it’s not the end of the world. [–] You’ve contributed to the startup field and advanced the ecosystem, and even though the prize is given to someone else today, tomorrow could be your turn. (Järvilehto, 2018, p. 37)

Finnish startup culture interweaves nationalism and patriotic sensibilities with the growth-seeking, Schumpeterian motivations of entrepreneurship and the pay-it-forward spirit of Silicon Valley. This is articulated through the notion of *talkoot*, embedding pay-it-forward ethos to both the development of the Finnish startup ecosystem and the Finnish economy, and the welfare state. In this way, startup entrepreneurship is embedded in

the Finnish welfare system and its survival in the unstable, global economy. Startup entrepreneurship is therefore made part of the Finnish national project of competitiveness (Kantola, 2014; Kettunen, 2011a; 2011b; 2012; Moisio, 2018).

Hoffman (2008) notes that, in China in the new millennium, the neo-liberal ethos of calculative choice and entrepreneurial subjectivity are entangled with notions of nationalism. Young professionals who return to China after their studies or work abroad fuse their entrepreneurial sensibilities with the Chinese discourse of nationalistic responsibility. Hoffman calls this ‘patriotic professionalism’, by which she means that ‘the new professional [is] a self-enterprising subject who also is decidedly concerned with, and has an affinity for, the nation’ (2008, p. 170). A similar stance emerges in the research material: entrepreneurial drive is harnessed to the service of Finland. In terms of domestication, startup entrepreneurship is familiarised and legitimised by constructing it as nationalistic action, which places startup entrepreneurship in the continuum of ‘everyday nationalism’ typical to Finnish public discourse (Kettunen, 2012).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the domestication of startup culture in Finnish society. I have shown that the domestication takes place via a discursive, binary juxtaposition of the foreign (startup culture) and the familiar (Finnish society). Duality is typical in the discourses of entrepreneurship: in various contexts, entrepreneurship is constructed as desirable, justifiable, and morally good, whereas forces opposing entrepreneurship are seen as reprehensible (Ericsson, 2010; Scharff, 2016). In the duality evident in the research material, startup entrepreneurship represents the positive side: it is depicted as desirable and valuable. In the process of domestication, the foreign is looked through the familiar lens, and in this case, the negative connotations of startup entrepreneurship—such as overt optimism and self-promotion—are tweaked so that startup entrepreneurship becomes universally beneficial. Drawing on the Finnish nationalistic ethos, startup entrepreneurship is domesticated by constructing it as beneficial for both the individual and the society. The entanglement of startup entrepreneurship and nationalism shapes startup entrepreneurship necessary for Finland’s survival in the turmoil of global capitalism.

The domestication of startup entrepreneurship, by linking it with the notion of *talkoot* voluntary work, presents startup entrepreneurship as a

patriotic project that calls for citizens to participate in a common, shared endeavor. It obligates people to internalise the neoliberal, entrepreneurial ideals of self-management and withstanding insecurity to serve not only themselves, but also the community, which in this case presents itself as the nation-state. In this way, Finnish startup culture combines the ethos of the Schumpeterian, innovative entrepreneur, and the Nordic concern for the nation-state and 'our competitiveness' in the global world (Kettunen 2011b, pp. 79–80). Startup culture, then, aligns itself with the discussions on the reformulation of the welfare state into competition state (Kettunen, 2011a; Moisio, 2018).

The books engage in discussion with certain aspects of Finnish culture, which are considered obstructing the establishment of startup culture—the small-mindedness and humility of Finnish entrepreneurial spirit, the risk-avoidance of business culture and the rigid and inefficient public sector. These aspects are seen as products of Finnish culture in broader terms, the construction of which draws on stereotypical notions of Nordic culture, such as the 'law of Jante' (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2018). This is fused with notions of neoliberal discourse, such as the critique of public sector (see Brown, 2015).

There are ambiguities in these antagonisms: for example, the Finnish school system, albeit primarily guiding people to wage labour, provides the necessary skills and knowledge to become an entrepreneur. Similarly, state institutions can be reformulated to fit the needs of startup entrepreneurship. Thus, there is potential in the Finnish society to transform into a thriving startup nation: what is lacking is the initiative, and the texts invite Finland to reconstruct their national identity in order to embrace startup culture. The willingness to preserve welfare institutions through startup entrepreneurship is a means of negotiating startup culture from the Finnish perspective: the welfare institutions, and particularly the education system, have historically been held in high regard in Finnish public discourse (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019). In addition, the state has had an essential role in establishing innovative entrepreneurship as a component of Finland's national competitiveness (Koskinen & Saarinen, 2019; Moisio, 2018). The competition state has to a large extent been a political project (Kettunen, 2011b), and although Finland is globally known as a prolific startup country (for example World Economic Forum, 2014), the texts nevertheless construct a binary system of the foreign and the familiar where the two seem incompatible.

I conclude that in order to domesticate startup culture, the books need this dualistic system of the foreign and the familiar to make room for the

cultural negotiation of startup entrepreneurship. The opposition is drawn from Finnish culture, understood in terms of stereotypes of Finnishness and, more broadly, Nordic citizenship. The domestication of startup culture requires this fictive narrative of Finland in order to make the foreign elements understandable in the familiar context. In part, the domestication of startup culture in the Finnish context is also the domestication of neoliberal, entrepreneurial subjectivity and rationale into Finnish society; it is this that the juxtaposition between the reluctant cultural climate and ineffective institutions of Finland and the dynamic, flexible, and failure-embracing startup culture indicates.

The examination of startup culture as a global form reveals the cultural negotiations that are essential to its migration and global movement, and thus the approach illuminates the processes of establishing local startup settings. In the case presented in this article, startup culture is domesticated via juxtaposition, which unfolds an intricate process of cultural negotiation and meaning making. Juxtaposition thus serves as a lens through which to observe the domestication of global forms.

Moreover, analysis of local manifestations of startup culture shows the centrality of entrepreneurship in post-industrial economy, as well as the elasticity of the notion. On one hand, it presents itself as a metaphorical characteristic of the ideal citizen (for example Scharff, 2016), and on the other hand, a vital macro-economic factor (for example Perren & Jennings, 2005), and the aspects are entwined. Such considerations are meaningful to further studies of startup culture and the concurrent permeating of entrepreneurship.

Notes

1. Finnish Business and Policy Forum is an influential non-profit economic think tank that receives its funding from organizations of Finnish employers and industries.
2. All quotations are translated from Finnish to English by the author.

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