Destination Branding by Means of Tourist-Created Content

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**Title of thesis:**

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**Abstract:**

In nation branding the aim is to create a simple and differentiating idea built around emotional qualities (Fan 2006). However, it is not an easy task to conduct in the era of “Web 2.0”. The aim of this thesis is to explore how professional travel bloggers communicate their experiences about Finland as travel destination. In order to facilitate the purpose of the study a deeper understanding about destination branding strategies, especially when using user-generated content as communication method, needed to be gained. The theoretical framework in this thesis is focused mainly on how destination brand experience can be created, and how the destination branding can be conducted in terms of tourist-created content.

A qualitative method and an abductive research approach was used in the study conducted for this thesis. The research data was collected with netnographic method from a predefined group of travel blogs. The findings from the blogs were analysed with qualitative content analysis and the conceptualized with grounded theory-method. The study was conducted between March and May 2015.

The results of the analysis conducted with grounded theory method indicate that main categories, which bloggers associate as brand essence of Finland, are nature, activities, culture, food-culture, history and residents.

**Keywords:** destination branding, tourism blogs, eWOM, user-generated content, tourist-created content, netnography, content analysis, grounded theory
# CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1  
   1.1. Finland’s tourism strategy ........................................................................ 3  
   1.2. Research problem ....................................................................................... 5  
   1.3. Aim of the study ........................................................................................ 7  
   1.4. Delimitations of the study ......................................................................... 7  

2 STRATEGIC BRANDING OF DESTINATIONS .................................................. 8  
   2.1. Definition of nation-brand ......................................................................... 8  
   2.2. Nation-brands identity and image .............................................................. 12  
   2.3. Nation-brand equity .................................................................................. 14  
   2.1. Brand experience ....................................................................................... 16  
      2.1.1. How to create brand touchpoints ......................................................... 16  
   2.2. Visit Finland’s brand promise ................................................................... 18  
   2.3. Tourism’s role in country-image creation ................................................. 19  

3 DESTINATION BRANDING IN TERMS OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT .......... 22  
   3.1. Tourism blogs .............................................................................................. 22  
   3.1. Electronic word-of-mouth ......................................................................... 26  
   3.2. User-generated content ............................................................................. 28  
   3.3. Tourist-created content ............................................................................. 29  

4 METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................... 31  
   4.1. Choice of research method ......................................................................... 31  
      4.1.1. Challenges of netnography ................................................................... 32  
   4.2. Collection of research data ......................................................................... 33  
   4.3. Methods for analyzing qualitative data ....................................................... 34  
      4.3.1. Content analysis .................................................................................. 34  
      4.3.2. Grounded theory method ................................................................... 36  

5 FINDINGS .............................................................................................................. 41  
   5.1. Presentation of the findings ......................................................................... 41  

6 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION ............................................................................ 61  
   6.1. The categories emerged from the GT analysis ......................................... 61  
      6.1.1. Nature ................................................................................................. 62
6.1.2. Culture 63
6.1.3. Food culture .................................................. 63
6.1.4. Activities 64
6.1.5. History 66
6.1.6. Residents .......................................................... 66
6.2. Implications and inferences of the study ............................................. 67

7 CONCLUSIONS ............................................................................. 70

SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING ......................................................... 71

REFERENCES .................................................................................. 80

TABLES
Table 1 Comparison between nation branding and product branding .................. 10

Table 2 4 C’s of Finland .................................................................... 19

FIGURES
Figure 1 Places as relational brand networks .............................................. 12

Figure 2 Procedure for qualitative content analysis ....................................... 35

Figure 3 Data analysis procedure of grounded theory method .......................... 39

Figure 4 The main categories of the analysis ................................................ 67
1 INTRODUCTION

Destination marketing professionals are increasingly counting on the power of social media as a way to gain interest of potential visitors; therefore co-operation with travel bloggers is at the moment a “hot topic” in area of country branding. The idea behind this new marketing communication medium is to achieve international visibility through the blog postings created by bloggers in their social media sites, and in this way to achieve a stronger nation brand for a country (Keski-Korpela 2014).

Marketing of services has changed dramatically when the world has become more digitized. The way in which consumers search information, and as well communicate their experiences about services or destinations has become web-based (Wenger 2008). The Internet has opened up and improved communications, distribution channels and transactions in ways, which could not have been imagined at the beginning of the 2000s. New global markets have emerged, consequently more effective segmentation, targeting and positioning strategies needs to be created by marketing professionals. One of the latest developments in ICT is the phenomenon known as "Web 2.0". This term describes a web which is "increasingly influenced by intelligent Web services that empower users to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating and distributing Internet content and customizing Internet applications" (Munar 2011:291). Therefore, marketing professionals have been developing new means for communicating with new potential target groups. On the other hand, Internets’ information tools will provide great benefit for savvy consumers, and tourism organizations and enterprises will have to show greater respect for consumers.

According to Oliveira and Panyik (2015) the greatest digital challenge of destination branding today is content generated by travellers, who post, comment and share information on social media channels. Travellers of all ages are increasingly using digital technologies to research, explore, plan and share their travel experiences, since there is an array of online channels available to use for this purpose. These channels, together with the shift towards traveller empowerment, are demanding new strategies in destination branding initiatives. (Oliveira & Panyik 2015). The trend towards so-called user-generated content has not just involved consumers. Businesses and government organizations have begun to reconsider how they can manage online content. One example of this trend is destination marketing organizations and tourism enterprises, which are using blogs as part of their business and marketing
communication strategies. However, here has been very little published research about the influence that Web 2.0 has had or may have on tourism marketing. (Carson & Schamallegger 2008)

Networked platforms have changed the interface between destinations, their brands and visitors. No longer the traditional vacation marketing mix is dictating the promotion rules; it is now the traveller who control the content, influence the context, and determine what is communicated about a particular destination. Consequently, destination-marketing organizations would achieve better results by using coherent branding strategies to engage with visitors through the multiple online channels available. (Oliveira & Panyik 2015)

Digital channels have driven a radical shift in customer behaviour, this is evident in the active role the customer takes in shaping the dialogue with the brands and brand reputations, including nation and destination brands. What it comes to deciding where to go on holidays, our friends’ recommendations are frequently quoted as being the most influential factor, and researching those recommendations, the information derived online occupies a critical role in destination choice. Online communities are contexts in which consumers often partake in discussions whose goals include attempts to inform and influence fellow consumers about brands. Therefore marketing environment has changed beyond all recognition, and pushing destination brand to skeptical audience is becoming less effective way when driving brand image and equity. (Kozinets 2002; Munro & Richards 2011: 141)

Tourism is often the most visible aspect of nation or place branding. Tourism is usually also the biggest spender, and the most competent marketing force. On the other hand, tourism only presents a part of the country-branding picture, and needs careful alignment with the other channels of communication in order to achieve its full potential as “flagship” for branding the nation, city or region. (Anholt 2003a: 215) According to Anholt (2003a: 219) most countries of any size or age already have a brand image, whether they like it or not. People have heard about them, and believe certain things about them. In many cases, the nation neither needs nor could sustain a totally new image, but it can benefit by challenging people’s prejudices, and opening their minds to hearing something new, and relevant about the place once in a while.

For the travel and tourism industry, national image is fundamentally important. The tourist board needs to ‘sell the country’ to a vast international audience of ordinary
consumers as well as a highly informed professional cadre of tour operators and other
influencers, and the background reputation of the country ultimately determines
whether that ‘selling’ process is easy or difficult, expensive or cheap, simple or complex
– and whether it gets gradually easier and more efficient over time, or whether it
remains forever a struggle. A country’s reputation determines whether its messages are
welcomed, and whether they are believed (UNWTO 2014). The Finnish tourism
organization Visit Finland will be presented in next chapter.

1.1. Finland’s tourism strategy

The Finnish tourism marketing organization is called Visit Finland, organization was
formerly known as Matkailun edistämiskeskus MEK. Visit Finland is a unit under the
Finpro, which helps Finnish SMEs go international, encourages foreign direct
investment in Finland, and promotes tourism. Visit Finland is responsible for actively
promoting Finnish tourism in its capacity as a national expert in the sector.
Cooperation with ministries, travel businesses and Finnish regions involve research,
product development, and marketing of tourism to Finland from abroad. Visit Finland
is represented in the following key target countries: China, France, Germany, Great
Britain, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Russia, Spain and USA. (Visit Finland 2014a)

According to Visit Finland, Finland’s brand identity is derived from four characteristics,
which are so called 4 C’s. As a travel destination Finland is “Credible”, there is positive
sort of “Contrast” and “Creativeness” in the country’s’ image, and therefore Finland is
on the one hand nice, relaxed, and current, and on the other hand pure, fresh,
consequently a “Cool” country. These brand attributes are examined more precisely
in chapter 2.2. Visit Finland states that when emphasizing Finland’s’ destination image
with aforementioned four C’s, Finland will be ever more desirable travel destination.
Visit Finland points out that these qualifications will be endorsed by appropriate
international visibility. (Finland’s Tourism Strategy to 2020)

Visit Finland’s marketing aim is to emphasize that Finland is an unique, non-
mainstream holiday choice for travellers who desire to experience a passionate and
uncompromising country. Visit Finland has developed three tourism themes on the
basis of its’ core values. ”Silence, please” presents Finland as a counterpart to the hectic
rhythm of daily life, providing peace and quiet, even in the heart of the city. ”Wild &
Free” displays the opportunities that the Finnish nature offers for nature activities such
as snowmobiling in Lapland or canoeing in the archipelago. ”Cultural beat” stands for
the Finnish culture such as design, and natural produces. In international destination marketing Visit Finland is focusing on four main areas: Lapland, Lakeland, Helsinki and Coastal areas—Archipelago. Annually Visit Finland imports around 200 travel journalists and bloggers to Finland in terms of media- and PR-work. (Visit Finland 2014b)

The Nordic Bloggers’ Experience (henceforth NBE) is a program designed for qualified, professional travel bloggers. It offers winter experiences in Helsinki and elsewhere in Finland, networking with Nordic Travel Fair Matka exhibitors. The NBE is organized in joint co-operation with Nordic Travel Fair Matka, Finpro, Visit Helsinki, Visit Finland, Radisson Blu, Finnair and Innastus Oy. (Nordic Bloggers’ Experience 2015)

The second NBE at January 2015 brought a group of 40 travel bloggers to Finland all around from the world, for instance from Peru and China. Bloggers’ publications about Finland at social media reached 2,5 million followers through the blogs alone, overtook 25 million followers on Twitter with 5200 tweets, almost 1600 pictures were shared at Instagram with 260 000 likes and 10 000 comments, and over 100 single blog posts were published with 14 different languages. The NBE organizers tell that they want to raise the knowledge about Finland and Helsinki as a great travel destination, and get people here to experience it. They are hoping that organizing the NBE has started a new era in Finnish travel marketing because there has been great interest among traditional medias towards this program. According to the organizers of the event, they have seen many good examples during the NBE week how the bloggers can be storytellers for a destination. (Nordic Bloggers’ Experience 2015)

At 2012, Visit Finland conducted a research where they investigated citizens of six European countries: Germany, Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy and Netherlands, and their perceptions of Finland as a travel destination. The target group of this research was so called modern humanists and their values and attitudes; the research overtook approximately 6000 European consumers. According to visit Finland, the notion modern humanism is characterized by responsibility, interest in different themes, new cultures and people. They are adventurers, who values when finding and meeting authentic difference, their essential feature is curiosity. Modern humanists are the group of travellers, which Visit Finland has as a core target group for their marketing operations. Assumption is that modern humanist find Finland interesting because it has unique, pristine and beautiful nature, people are friendly and hospitable, and because vacation in Finland can be combination of relaxing and activities. On the other
hand, modern humanists find Finland precarious, as journey can be too expensive since the remote location of the destination, and since the climate in Finland can be unpleasant. (Modernit humanistit 2012)

In addition to new kinds of distinct customer groups, the methods of marketing, comparing and purchasing tourism services have undergone a transformation. Internet-based applications have changed the way in which consumers arrange trips independently, familiarize themselves with travel destinations in advance, and assess and recommend destinations to other consumers. Consumer behaviour is being more effectively steered than ever before, by peer evaluations in the social media. In response, the tourism industry must take account of more visible consumer feedback. (Finland’s Tourism Strategy to 2020)

According to Anholt-Gfk Roper Nation Brands Index, Finland can be considered as a small, unknown country, since Finland’s ranking as tourism destination brand section at 2013 was 27th from 40 countries. Anholt-Gfk Roper Nation Brands Index is a system for measuring and managing national reputation around the world. Visit Finland points out that Finland can not become better known without active efforts to improve the image of the country in general and as a travel destination. The prerequisites for improving Finland’s tourism image have been weakened considerably in the last few years due to cuts in the Finnish Tourist Board’s budget (Finland’s Tourism Strategy to 2020).

1.2. Research problem

Tourists and travellers have on their command online resources, which enable research of possible destinations and leisure activities, and enable the purchase online of these products and services. Information available on the Internet helps tourists to make informed travel decisions, and likewise it helps tourist organizations at national, state and local levels to make important marketing decisions. (Wenger 2008) The Internet eases time and place constraints on consumers, therefore power has shifted from sellers to buyers, and consumption is not dependent on seller’s convenience anymore. Successful marketing in this new era involves mass-customization and personalization of all marketing mix elements, and a higher degree of customer involvement and control. Future consumers will be more demanding, more information intensive and highly individualistic. Therefore, targeted interactive digital media allows tourism
organizations to mass-customize messages, allowing user interaction and input (Oliveira & Panyik 2015)

Blog content generated by bloggers may provide tourism organizations with valuable market intelligence and on-going market research opportunities. On the other hand, this kind of blog content may on occasions be of unstructured and random output of individuals, and therefore difficult to analyze. (Akehurst 2008) Although social media strategies are a current theme in today's marketing research, Oliveira and Panyik (2015) point out that there is a lack of theoretical awareness and empirical research into the role of social media content in shaping destination brands. Therefore, there is a need for theoretical knowledge and empirical research to the role of the Web 2.0, the empowerment of the tourists, and the content they generate in shaping destination brands (Oliveira & Panyik 2015).

Since many countries and travel destinations promote similar attributes such as nature, history and culture, effective destination branding requires a unique selling proposition that is sustainable, believable, and relevant (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott 2002). Country or destination image plays a crucial role in influencing tourist decision choice, and decision-making. The literature on destination branding underscores that word-of-mouth or advice from friends often ranks as the most influential source of pre-purchase information. Destinations with positive images are more likely considered, and chosen in the travel decision process. (Aram 2011)

From a traveller's point of view, tourist blogs will provide an easy way to learn about destinations, as well as blogs can be a useful tool for communication with other travellers. From the viewpoint of tourism destination marketers, exploiting data contained in travel blogs can be a cost-effective method in understanding the strengths, and weaknesses of a destination as visitor experiences them. However, there are some limitations that need to take in consideration when using blog material for research purpose, since travel blogs might not fully reflect individual experiences. Some blogs contain both positive and negative feelings about places, while others simply describe travel information about the destination they visited. (Aram 2011)

For destination management organizations, one way to create a positive and tourist tempting nation image is to co-operate with travel bloggers. For travel destination organizations, co-operation with these digital influencers will provide a unique opportunity to build up identity of the attraction, with the means of bloggers’
experiences, expressed with words, pictures and videos. In addition, travel bloggers can have quite a big impact on nation brand when they create electronic word-of-mouth, and spread their positive or negative feelings about certain destination. These aspects raise questions, which are the main research themes of this thesis. These questions, which all regard nations branding via online communications, are:

- How travel bloggers experience Finland as a travel destination?
- Is Visit Finland’s branding strategy in line of the digital content created by the travel bloggers? Does the four characteristics “Credible”, “Cool”, “Contrast”, and “Creativeness” actually describe Finland’s image as perceived by travel bloggers?

1.3. Aim of the study
The purpose of this study is to explore how international bloggers’ communicate their experiences about Finland as a travel destination, and how these travel bloggers create Finland’s nation brand image in online world. This study will represent different methods how to brand a nation or destination, especially using user-generated content as a communication method. The aim of the study will also be attempting to interpret and understand how blogger of a certain type experiences Finland, and relays these experiences in his or her blog entries. In order for this to be possible, it is important to gain a deeper understanding about nation branding strategies, as well as about aspects of nation branding in context of social media. From a practical perspective this study is worth investigating because it will potentially bring out some new information how Finland is experienced in the eyes of international travellers.

1.4. Delimitations of the study
This thesis focuses on the problem of how countries should create a credible destination image by branding strategies, in order to tempt more visitors. Therefore the focus lies on the nation branding, particularly in how to brand a nation so that it will became attractive tourist destination, and how a destination brand can be communicated online through content posted by consumers, specifically in travel blogs. Both the theoretical framework and the empirical study are approached from an organizational point of view.
2 STRATEGIC BRANDING OF DESTINATIONS

This chapter will provide various aspects of nation branding strategies, as well as it will discuss debates on this topic from the field of tourism. While it is not certain whether nation branding can really generate results, this paper will provide both sides of the debate, and argue in favour of neither.

2.1. Definition of nation-brand

Studies around country branding are using different terms to refer nation branding. Place branding and place marketing are two umbrella terms preferred by the marketing discipline. Within place branding, some studies focus on city branding, region branding and country/nation branding. Tourism studies and vacation marketing tend to use the term destination branding, and the most recent expression is the term competitive identity, however that is intended to elude negative associations with the word branding (Kaneva 2011).

Although the historical roots of branding can be traced back to the late 19th century, branding within the context of countries and tourism destinations started to gain visibility with destination branding as the focal topic in 1998, at Travel and Tourism Research Association’s Annual Conference (Blain, Levy & Ritchie 2005). However, Blain et al. (2005: 328) argue, “Our knowledge of destination branding remains poorly understood, and is often misunderstood by practitioners”. Findings from their research indicate that although destination management organizations (henceforth DMO) executives generally understand the concept of destination branding, they are implementing only selective aspects of this concept, particularly logo design, and development is equated with the more comprehensive process of destination branding. DMOs, whose jurisdictions may cover a country, region or specific city, are a critical component of the tourism industry.

In terms of practical manifestations, nation branding includes a wide variety of activities, ranging from ‘cosmetic’ operations, such as the creation of national slogans, to efforts to institutionalize branding within state structures by creating governmental bodies that oversee long-term nation branding efforts, one example for such bodies is Visit Finland’s organization. Nation branding programs can be directed at both domestic and international audiences, and they are often funded with public money (Kaneva 2011).
Anholt (2003) points out that nation branding is an important concept in today’s world. As a consequence for globalization, countries compete with each other to attract the attention, respect and trust of governments of other nations, investors, consumers, and as in the context of this study, the attention of tourists. A country’s effort to build its positive image will be adapted by its own factors such as campaigning and trade promotions. Oliveira and Panyik (2015) state that in today’s competitive environment, in which visitors can only be attracted by unique attractions, it is a challenge to improve destination’s attributes and unique elements to become attractive places to visit. Therefore innovation, engagement and having a unique voice are the keywords for successful branding. Branding strategies should fit the desire of the travellers, however, it is not an easy task to assert strategies with divergent narratives produced on the same destination. (Oliveira & Panyik 2015)

There are several means how to specify a good brand. Successful brand can be defined as a name, symbol or design, which identifies the product of a particular organization as having a sustainable differential advantage, or a combination of them intended to identify the services of provider, and to differentiate them from those of competition. Brands can also be seen as clusters of functional and emotional values that promise a unique and positive experience between a buyer and a seller (Dinnie 2008:14).

According to Keller (2013:58), the strategic brand management process involves the design and implementation of marketing programs and activities to build, measure, and manage brand equity. Strategic brand management process have four main steps: identifying and developing brand plans, designing and implementing brand marketing programs, measuring and interpreting brand performance, and growing and sustaining brand equity. Brand-building process requires long-term commitment, because pre-existing national stereotypes may be established in consumers’ minds, and are therefore difficult to change.

According to Fan (2006: 6), “in nation branding the aim is to create a clear, simple, differentiating idea built around emotional qualities which can be symbolized both verbally and visually, and understood by diverse audiences in a variety of situations. To work effectively, nation branding must embrace political, cultural, business, and sport activities.” As we can see, there is complexity inherent in nation branding.

Fan (2006) states, that nation branding can be interpreted in several different ways. At the simplest, it is a synonym of product-country image, where the country’s name can
be used by an organization to emphasize the country-of-origin effect. This form of nation branding has the clear purpose of using the nation’s image to promote sales, and exports. Another form of nation branding is place branding – to promote the country as a destination for tourism. Other terms such as national identity and cultural stereotypes have little direct implication in branding, since they have a clear focus on the culture and people of a nation. However, nations and products cannot be branded in the same manners, since there are fundamental differences between them. For example, nations do not have tangible offers, or nations’ attributes are difficult to define, the only benefit a nation brand can create for its audience are emotional rather than functional. Differences between nation branding and product branding are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1  Comparison between nation branding and product branding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Product related</strong></th>
<th><strong>National level</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cultural focus</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>Nation/ country brand</td>
<td>Country stereotype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product-country image</td>
<td>Nation/ country image</td>
<td>National identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made-in country image</td>
<td>Country equity</td>
<td>National characteristic (e.g. Britishness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country image effect</td>
<td>Country positioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Fan (2006)

Fan (2006) claims, that the purpose of the nation brand, the message it is trying to communicate, and also the target audience must be identified before any campaign is launched. To gain successful communication of nation brands’ value, the message should be distinctive; it should enable the country to position itself against competitors. However, promoting a nation’s image to international audience is challenging, since national identity is difficult to define. Secondly, it is a challenge to communicate a single image or message to different audiences in different countries; the dilemma in nation branding is trying to be one thing to all audiences, on all occasions. Nevertheless, despite the communication efforts, Fan (2006) points out, that nation branding should be distinguished from nation brand, as there is not necessarily a direct link between the two; a nation’s brand exists with or without any conscious efforts in nation branding, as each country has a current image to its international audiences.
To make a difference from the competitors is not a simple task to accomplish. Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott (2002) state that in the tourism sector most destinations make identical claims regarding the beauty of their scenery or the hospitable nature of the local people. Therefore, the need for travel destinations to create unique identity, and differentiate them from their competitors is more critical than ever. In today’s globalized world, countries suddenly have to compete with each other for tourism. However, effective destination branding requires a unique selling proposition, which is sustainable, believable, and relevant, and that “the competition wants and is maybe able to copy but which they cannot surpass” (Morgan et al. 2002:21).

Hankinson (2004:110-111) proposes a framework, which is built around the concept of brand networks in which destination branding performs four main functions. These four categories of brand relationships enhance the brand reality and brand experience. First function is brands as communicators, where brands “represent a mark of ownership, and a means of product differentiation manifested in legally protected names, logos, and trademarks”. Secondly, brands act as perceptual entities, “which appeal to the consumer senses, reasons, and emotions”, thirdly, brands work as “value enhancers” which leads to the concept of brand equity, and fourthly, “brands as relationships”, where the brand is construed as having a personality which enables it to form a relationship with the consumer. Figure 1 (see page 12) illustrates Hankinson’s (2004:110-111) general model of the place brand, in which the place brand is represented by a core brand, and four categories of brand relationships, which enhance the brand reality, and the brand experience.

Blain et al. (2005) argue that the concept of the visitor experience needs to be incorporated into the process of destination branding. They state that research has demonstrated that although visitors purchase individual tourism services, the entire visitor experience is what is effectively being bought. Therefore the promise of the brand is just as important for destinations than it is for other service organizations. As with the other service organizations, if the brand promise cannot be delivered, the visitor is unsatisfied. However, the controlling over brand promise fulfilling is challenging for DMOs, because of the variable nature of the tourism products. The fact is that all the elements of the brand promise are not under the control, or even the direct influence, of the DMOs (Blain et al. 2005). Therefore, Blain et al (2005:331-332) suggest that DMO practitioners should execute marketing activities “that convey the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the
destination, and that serve to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience, all with the intent purpose of creating an image that influences consumers’ decisions to visit the destination in question”.

Figure 1 Places as relational brand networks

Source: Adapted from Hankinson (2004)

2.2. Nation-brands identity and image

The three of the key elements of branding theory are brand identity, brand image and brand positioning. Identity refers to what something truly is, its essence, whereas image refers to how something is perceived. Anholt (2010:144) defines, that the identity of country exists inside of the country and its population, and on the contrary, the image of the country is more complex and fragmented, it’s not located in country itself, it rather exists in the minds of people.

According to Dinnie (2008: 41-42), several nations struggle with the frustration of not being perceived by the rest of the world for what they truly are, because stereotypes can dominate perceptions of certain nations. There are five factors that organizations should consider when developing a country-brand identity; first is brand vision which describes the desired role and status that the brand hopes to achieve in the stated time;
second is brand scope, a document outlining the market segments the brand can enter into; third, brand positioning, refers to the place that the brand strives to get in customers’ minds; fourth is brand personality, how a brand can achieve a personality that keeps the customers connected emotionally with the brand, and a brand essence is the fifth factor, that refers to what the brand stands for and what makes it unique. However, it can be addressed, that nation brand identity originates from the country where as nation brand image refers to consumer perceptions of the country, and identity and image are thus distinct but related concepts. (Dinnie 2008: 41-43)

Dinnie (2008:46-48) argues that it is necessary to acknowledge that the nation-brand identity is built upon a limited range of all the constituent parts of national identity. Hence, it is essential to be selective when identifying which elements of national identity can be used in a nation-branding campaign. External audiences, for instance potential tourists, are not willing to receive amounts of information about a country’s history or culture. As a conclusion, the complex concept of brand-image constructs by the mental representations that people may have of different countries.

According to Dinnie (2008:47-48) people can have personal experiences of a country through holidaying, but when one does not have any experiences, can word-of-mouth influence country’s image. Other such inputs include pre-existing national stereotypes, for instance the behaviour of individuals associated with a certain country. Therefore segmentation of target audiences needs to be conducted in order to both monitor, and influence the image that is held by different groups of tourists. Nation-brands needs to segment their different audiences in order to understand existing images, and to develop functional ways to communicate to defend perceptions and to reaffirm positive perceptions. Consequently, particularly for smaller nations with limited promotional budgets, online marketing offers a relatively affordable means for attempt to establish a clearly defined nation-brand image. (Dinnie 2008: 47-48)

On the other hand, Anholt (2010:89) claims that tourism is one of the few means by which the overall brand image of the country can be enhanced, since people frequently abandon their preconceptions about a country once they visit it. If enough people visit the country, and communicate their experiences to other individuals, then over time this can create a real improvement in the country’s overall nation image. As a conclusion, destination marketing, in addition to its primary purpose of encouraging visits, can play an important secondary role in helping visitors to form a compelling personal narrative about the country, which enhances their role as informal
spokespersons for the country’s brand, for instance traveller bloggers can be considered as this kind of opinion formers (Anholt 2010:89). The concept of destination branding is important, since a country's reputation determines whether its messages are welcomed, and whether they are believed. The background reputation of the country determines if it is easy or difficult, or expensive or cheap for destination marketers to ‘sell’ the country to consumers or other influencers. (Anholt 2010: 91)

Jobber (2001: 205-206) defines positioning as the act of designing company’s image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market. He also suggests that the keys for successful positioning are clarity, consistency, competitiveness and credibility. However, Dinnie (2008:52) claims that if consistency is elevated to a status in brand positioning, it may lead to uninspiring communications. From a consumer perspective, points of difference must be relevance, distinctive and believable, national tourism marketing campaigns have been criticized for scoring weekly on the effective points of difference. Many campaigns make generic claims about their sunny climate, although those promotions should focus more on precise segmentation strategies in means of higher-end cultural tourism.

2.3. Nation-brand equity

The term brand equity refers to the value of the brand; in consumer perspective brand equity can be evaluated in terms of consumer awareness of the brand in question, consumer judgments regarding brand quality, uniqueness and prestige. According to Keller (2013:68-69), customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer has a high level of awareness with the brand, and holds some unique brand associations in memory. Many nations may assume that they are suffering from negative brand associations, when in reality there might be an almost complete lack of awareness of their nation-brand in the minds of external audiences. A similar view is taken by de Chernatony and McDonald (2003:50), who claim that brand equity describes the perceptions consumer have about a nation-brand, and this in turn leads to the value of a brand.

Anholt (2010: 91-93) points out that brand equity sums up the idea if a place acquires a positive, powerful and solid reputation; this becomes an asset of value because it represents the ability of the place to continue to trade at a healthy margin for as long as its brand image stays solid. Brand equity can also be described as the permission given by loyal consumers for the country to continue innovating, communicating, and selling
to them. Destination branding is important, since it takes into account questions related to the deliberate capture and accumulation of reputational value. However, when carried out with no long-term national strategy, tourism promotion can be an endless cycle that may not lead to real progress in the longer term. Therefore, every act of promotion needs to be seen as an opportunity to build the country’s image. (Anholt 2010: 91-93)

On the other hand, Anholt (2009) states, that doing branding to a country is impossible since all the available evidence suggests that the brand images of nations are remarkably stable, and highly resilient to deliberate manipulation. Furthermore, there is no correlation between these changes in image, and the efforts made by any country to affect its image, since some of the countries that have spent most money on improving their images have experienced the steepest declines in their brand equity, whilst others have spent virtually nothing, and seen their stock rise steadily throughout the last four years of the study (Anholt 2009). Consequently, The Anholt Nation Brands Index (NBI), which since early 2005 has been tracking and analysing the global images of 40 countries using a panel of nearly 30,000 respondents in 35 countries, shows that almost no country’s image has changed by more than 1% during this period. (Anholt 2009) Therefore, Anholt (2007:7) believes that the idea of nation branding is greatly misunderstood, and states the following: "Let me be clear: there is no such thing as ‘nation branding’. It is a myth, and perhaps a dangerous one", since he doubts that the principles of marketing can be applied in the same manner when it comes to tourism.

Anholt (2009) states that he nation’s image cannot be built through communications, and it cannot be changed through communications. Managing the nation’s image is not an advertising, design or public relations exercise, although of course these techniques are essential for promoting the things that the country makes and does: its tourism and heritage attractions, its companies and their products and services, its music and art and other cultural products, its sport, its people, its investment and employment opportunities. The quality of the marketing done by all of these stakeholders, and the consistency between the different messages they send out about the place, are important factors in the way the place builds up its reputation. (Anholt 2009)

According Anholt (2011:291) countries should concentrate on product development and marketing rather than chase after the chimera of branding. He points out that only a consistent, coordinated and unbroken stream of noticeable and relevant ideas can enhance the reputation of the nation that produces them. Strategy includes knowing
who a nation is, and where it stands today, both in reality and according to internal and external perceptions. The main difficulty associated with strategy development is reconciling the needs and desires of a wide range of different national actors into a more or less single direction (Anholt 2011:291).

2.1. Brand experience

A brand experience is a brand’s action perceived by a person, therefore every interaction between an individual, and a tangible or intangible brand artefact can be seen as a brand experience. In addition to a direct interaction, an indirect one can be considered as a brand experience as well. Indirect interaction can be such as friends, experts or celebrities sharing their perception of a product or service. These interactions between the brand and consumer are often referred as brand touchpoints. (Jordan 2012) Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantello (2009:52) describe brand experience as the following: “Brand experience is conceptualized as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments.”

Brand experience is related but also conceptually distinct from other brand constructs, it differs from evaluative, affective, and associative constructs, such as brand attitudes and brand personality. Brand experiences are not general evaluative judgements about the brand; they include specific feelings and behavioural responses activated by specific brand related stimuli. For instance, brand experiences may include specific feelings, not just an overall “liking”. (Brakus et al. 2009)

2.1.1. How to create brand touchpoints

Davis and Longoria (2007) state that if a nation is in control of brand interactions, so called brand touchpoints, the nation can be in control of its own destiny. By consistently reinforcing and strengthening what country’s brand stands for, through each of these touchpoints, nations can drive visitors satisfaction. Brand touchpoints are all the different ways that a brand interacts with and makes an impression on customers, employees and other stakeholders. Every action, tactic and strategy the brand has with stakeholders, whether it is through advertising or a merchandising display, is a brand touchpoint. These points can be tangible, a product or environment, or intangible like a service or word-of-mouth discussion around it. Touchpoints can be
created by the brand-owner with an advertisement, or by the brand user who is evaluating a service or a product, for instance by writing a blog entry. A shift is taking place from the tangible to more intangible touchpoints: from products to services. A similar shift is taking place from brand-owner created touchpoints to user-generated touchpoints. (Davis & Longoria 2003; Roscam Abbing 2010:170)

Davis and Longoria (2003) identify three brand touchpoint experience stages; pre-purchase experience touchpoints, purchase experience touchpoints, and post-purchase experience touchpoints. Specific pre-purchase experience touchpoint goals and objectives include heightening brand awareness by making prospects aware of the main differences between own brand and a close competitor’s brand. By driving brand relevance nation or company can ensure that customers link the benefits of the brand to important needs and wants in their lives, thereby recognizing the value the brand brings. This can be difficult to solve in nation branding but one example can be seen in the context of Japanese tourists in Finnish Lapland, and their desire to see the aurora borealis in, which they believe to bring baby luck.

The second stage, purchase experience touchpoint moves a customer from only considering the brand to actually experiencing it. Specific experience goals include maximizing the value that customer sees in the offering and ease any doubts they may have about making the right decision. At third stage, specific post-purchase experience touchpoint goals and objectives include delivering the brand promise by meeting or exceeding customer performance and usage expectations. This includes delivering brand value above and beyond expectations, as well as seeking new ways to delight customers. This will increase brand loyalty and advocacy, since customers not only look to the brand for repeat and future purchases, but they also endorse and recommend the brand in question to others. Involving the customer or the user of the brand in the process of creating touchpoints will form the brand experience. (Davis & Longoria 2003)

Roscam Abbing (2010:179) points out that the process of orchestrating brand touchpoints can be slightly more complex when the brand owner lets users become actively involved in creating touchpoints. Basically this means that the brand owner has to let go of the strict rules that define the brand to be translated into designed touchpoints. It means that the brand owner has to replace these rules with a much more open stage on which users have the liberty to interpret the brand as they wish. This requires from the brand owner courage, an open mind, and the willingness to
share and curiosity to actually find out how the brand users interpret the brand in question. (Roscam Abbing 2010)

According to Roscam Abbing (2010:179) user-generated content means facilitating users to actually create their own content based on the brand, and allowing them to share and discuss this content publicly. In this stage brand owner really has to let go, and allow the users to harness their own creativity, consequently, all the brand owner can do is to facilitate. Although the brand touchpoints that evolve from user-generated content can be difficult to orchestrate, they have much wider reach than co-created brand touchpoint. User-generated touchpoints will reach a much more representative section of the target group, and the marketing spin-offs from the efforts will be considerably larger.

Touchpoint orchestration is about taking the results of the design strategy stage and exploring how each individual touchpoint should function in making that strategy concrete and tangible. It also looks at how the design strategy can be filled in by detailing the consumer journey. It divides tasks amongst design disciplines, and allocates design layers to the individual touchpoints. Designing interactions between customer and brand requires careful touchpoint orchestration. This stage builds on the results of the human-centered branding stage as well, by creating branded experiences through touchpoint interactions, and by fulfilling the brand promise through tangible experiences. However, it needs to be taken in consideration in the context of this thesis, that for a tourism organization like Visit Finland it is very difficult to identify and orchestrate all the possible touchpoints the traveller will experience in a visit to Finland. (Roscam Abbing 2010:180)

2.2. Visit Finland’s brand promise

Visit Finland's brand promise is described to be as “Finland is a unique alternative beyond mainstream, a country where passion and authenticity represent themselves in an exceptional way, Finland is the indie country of traveling.” (Visit Finland 2015) Finland’s destination management organization Visit Finland states that Finland needs to take on a challenger mind-set and style in order to differentiate from its competitors. Therefore it has been crucial to determine the true strengths, the brand essence of Finland on which the brand level message is based. The development started from the brand promise, the attributes that are considered true and positive about Finland as a tourist destination were explored. More than a hundred attributes were shortlisted
down to four, and they all begin with letter C: Creative, Contrasting, Credible and Cool. These attributes illustrated in Table 2 were adopted as the cornerstones of Finland’s tourism country brand. However, the four C’s will not necessarily be used as such in the communication. (Lehtonen 2010)

Table 2 4 C’s of Finland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creative</th>
<th>Contrasting</th>
<th>Credible</th>
<th>Cool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finland is technologically,</td>
<td>Seasons, east/west, cold/warm,</td>
<td>Efficient infrastructure, services, safety and</td>
<td>Nice, happening, trendy, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academically and culturally</td>
<td>midnight sun/winter darkness,</td>
<td>security, and technology</td>
<td>refreshing crisp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attractive; architecture and</td>
<td>sauna/ice swimming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>design; with a touch of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creative madness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lehtonen (2010)

2.3. Tourisms role in country-image creation

Raising awareness is the initial step in nation branding: awareness of a country’s existence is necessary if people are to develop a positive attitude towards it, and before they can be expected to visit it. Hakala, Lemmetyinen and Kantola (2013) state that consumers’ thoughts about countries are on two levels: macro associations and beliefs about the country, and micro associations and beliefs about its products. Therefore, strong product categories versus country associations are likely to indicate strong
country awareness. Potential travellers generally have limited knowledge about the attributes of a destination they have not previously visited. Hence, the image and attitude dimensions of a country as a travel destination are critical elements in the processes of traveller’s investment and decision-making. In order to succeed in the tourism industry, a country must know what, and to whom it is marketing. The market is segmented in terms of nature, adventure, events, culture and history, for instance, but the image making must be based on reality. (Hakala et al. 2013:539-541)

Hakala et al. (2013: 542) distinguish three types of different sources for country-image perceptions: previous knowledge, previous experiences and stereotyping. Knowledge can be obtained via official information, news reports, articles, and commentaries in media. Knowledge can be also obtained via word-of-mouth or increasingly, by electronic word-of-mouth. The personal experiences of tourists are however crucial in terms of image formation and feelings of loyalty. Stereotypes can be superficial, but they place nations and peoples in categories, and national images tend to emerge through stereotyping, since they provide mental shortcuts to perceptions of attitudes and intentional orientations.

According to Anholt (2003b: 167-169) the tourism is often the primary stakeholder in promoting the national brand and the two are sometimes confused, since tourist promotion is usually the only way in which countries ever consciously engage in marketing themselves to the outside world. Tourism can be the only area of activity where a government minister and a director of marketing will work together, and it may be one the few areas where the division between public sector and private enterprise is unclear.

Dinnie (2008:246-247) claims that online branding is an integral part of most businesses in digital age. Internet allows any brand, however small, to become global simply by having a website. This can be encouraging observation for smaller nations that cannot realistically hope to compete with the global economic superpowers. Online branding offers small nations the opportunity to establish themselves as niche brands in a way that would not be possible through using more conventional branding techniques. Online branding can stimulate positive electronic word-of-mouth through techniques as influencer outreach initiatives, as user-created content can be described. Social media has shifted the paradigm of brand creation. Organization information has traditionally been available internally, and the organization has controlled information dissemination. However, today organization information can be exploited by
consumers through social media by posting comments, opinions, or sharing information with peers. (Lim, Chung & Weaver 2012)
3 DESTINATION BRANDING IN TERMS OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT

This chapter will provide a view about travel blogging in context of nation branding. Concept of the electronic word-of-mouth will also be defined and analysed, and the role of user-generated content and tourist-created content in destination branding will be discussed.

3.1. Tourism blogs

By social media platforms destination managers have the opportunity to connect with customers at several communications and experience touchpoints than ever before, to influence visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth (henceforth WOM) (Oliveira & Panyik 2015). Oliveira and Panyik (2015:54) state “among a range of social media platforms, travel blogs are becoming a more important mechanism for exchanging information among tourists, and for destinations and businesses to learn about the attitudes of their markets”. Therefore, the access for these freely written libraries of content represents an occasion for strategic tourism planners to explore the traveller in his/her natural mental environment, and to discover their experiences.

Munro and Richards (2011: 142) point out, that blogging is becoming synonymous with the Internet, and is seen as important within tourism and travel. The blogs come in many shapes and sizes, and contents can be categorized into different topics and posts. Corporate blogs are published by destination management organizations in pursuit of their organizational goals, and personal blogs by individual travellers based on their own experiences. There is an opportunity for DMOs to reach out to the blogging community, and influence what they are talking about in much the same way as traditional PR does to travel journalists. The main themes in travel blogs are general descriptions of destinations, such as climate, cuisine, transport, attractions, or region-specific stereotypes (Carson & Schmallegger 2008; Bosangit, Dulnuan & Mena 2012).

Blog content is uploaded directly by users on the website. Blogs provide primarily text information but increasingly video and audio files are uploaded. These blogs provide personal thoughts and commentaries on a specific destination, personal travel stories and details of trips, and are often frequently updated and displayed in chronological order. Blogs tend to be interactive and readers post comments. The activities of blogs and bloggers have become known as the “blogosphere” (Akehurst 2008: 54)
Motivations to write blogs include a need for self-expression, social interaction with like-minded people, and a desire to share positive and negative experiences with other travellers. Especially the latter presents a number of challenges for tourism businesses. Many tourism professionals fear that negative WOM on web sites could severely damage the reputation of their businesses, and it is often not clear how negative comments should be properly handled. Apart from negative WOM, it has been argued that most of the content in travel blogs does not have a big impact on tourism destinations. (Carson & Schmallegger 2008)

However, one of the main reasons for this phenomenon to exist is certainly the higher perceived credibility of consumer opinions as compared to traditional tourist information sources. It has often been argued that a main issue in tourism is the lack of direct experience with a tourism product, meaning that its quality and benefits can hardly be evaluated before the product is consumed. In response to this, WOM has been regarded as one of the most important information sources for travel planning, mainly due to the perceived independence of the source of the message. (Carson & Schmallegger 2008)

Travel blogs are likely to have an increasing influence on WOM communication since blogs in general have become among the most popular forms of online consumer-opinion platforms. The power of a blog journal story can serve to influence future visitors, positioning the nation or destination in question in their minds (Bosangit et al. 2012). Blogs have a number of advantages over other forms of content, even web-based content. They relatively easily updated, relatively flexible in structure, encourage interaction between authors and readers, and allow people to participate in information exchange who might not otherwise have the opportunity. (Carson & Schmallegger 2008)

Online reviews and electronic word-of-mouth recommendations are a growing and important information source since of the perceived independence of the message source. Consumers trust more sites with reviews than professional guides and travel agencies. In addition, other tourists’ comments and travel blogs has been founded as a popular online activity. In terms of communication, the majority of travel blogs are consumer-to-consumer communications publishing personal stories and experiences. Travels blogs can exhibit the human need to belong socially interact and share life experiences. (Akehurst 2008)
Tourism enterprises have realized that blogging may be cheaper and possibly more effective than advertising, and some researchers feel that blogs provide a new and novel way of helping to define a destination image. On the other hand, Mack, Blose and Pan, (2008: 141) found that in terms of overall credibility “nothing beats traditional word-of-mouth” and blogs were perceived to be "significantly less trustworthy than traditional word-of-mouth”. However, it can be stated when several years have passed by after their research that bloggers are widely seen as ‘opinion leaders’. According to Fill (2013:57-58), opinion leaders are individuals who are able to exert personal influence because of their authority, education or status associated with the object of the communication process. They are acknowledged and sought out by others to provide information and advice, because of the formal expertise that opinion leaders are adjudged to have. The influence of opinion leaders can be great, for example a writer of a travel blog may be recognized source of expertise, and any offering referred to by the writer in the media vehicle is endowed with great credibility. However, the credibility of opinion leaders is vital for brand communication effectiveness. If there is a suspicion or doubt about the impartiality of the opinion leader, then the objectivity of their views and comments is likely to perceived as tainted, and not believed. (Fill 2013:57-58)

Carson and Schmallegger (2008) points out that the most obvious form of blogs in tourism appears to be blogs from travellers who publish their personal travel stories and recommendations online in the form of travel diaries or product reviews. The blogosphere in tourism, however, does not solely contain travel blogs as a form of consumer-to-consumer communication. Instead it offers a much wider range of possible applications, including business-to-business, business-to-consumer or government-to-consumer blogs, all of which may have implications for tourism and destination marketing. One of the approaches which government-to-customer organizations use is to hire experienced and professional bloggers as opinion leaders to write topic-based blogs about their destination. Such bloggers mostly represent the demographics of a certain target market, and are perceived as very influential in targeting a special audience or niche market. However, knowledge about the potential use and benefits of user-generated content and blogs in tourism is rather limited, and at the best based on assumptions and speculations. (Carson & Schmallegger 2008)

Carson and Schmallegger (2008) state that blogging as a way of promotion is often considered as a cheaper marketing activity than traditional advertising, and many
researchers have suggested that traveller’s blogs are a new and non-traditional way to help define the image of a destination. The content of a blog should not be too promotional but clearly different to the content provided in conventional marketing information. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one possible strategy proven successful is to sponsor professional bloggers to write about their trips – either in destination’s own blogs or in the bloggers’ private blogs. Several state and regional tourism organizations in the USA, such as VISIT Milwaukee, started to use this marketing communication approach in 2005, and invited bloggers to tour in the region and write about their travel experiences. The aim was to get a variety of comments about the regions’ attractions. The benefits offered to the sponsored bloggers range from financial to value in kind rewards – most of the time the sponsoring organization covers all travel-related expenses. (Carson & Schmallegger 2008)

On the other hand, even though sponsoring blogs might be enticing it still raises considerable ethical issues. As it is most of the time not obvious whether positive blogs are from a sponsored or real traveller, sponsoring organizations will certainly have to deal with the allegation of doing ‘stealth marketing’, where consumers do not realize that they are confronted with a deliberate form of marketing. (Carson & Schmallegger 2008)

According to Carson and Schmallegger (2008) travel blogs and user-generated content are increasingly being considered as a new source of information that both academics and tourism marketers can use to conduct market research. It has been acknowledged that analysing blogs might reflect the opinions and attitudes of travellers in a more genuine and representative way than other, more traditional methods of marketing research, given the more casual flow of information and the wide range of experiences described. Several researchers have recently found that analysing of blog texts is a promising way to assess the image of a destination among particular traveller group, which is otherwise difficult to reach, or to reveal potential strengths and weaknesses of a tourist destination (Carson & Schmallegger 2008).

Perhaps the most immediately useful application of travel blogs for destination marketing organizations and tourism businesses is for monitoring the attitudes of travellers. However, adopting this as a business strategy can be problematic. Locating relevant content among the many millions of blogs is a challenge. Identifying the characteristics of the authors and readers, and assessing the extent to which these characteristics match those of key markets is challenging. Understanding how
influential specific blogs are among their readers is a challenge. The research has not revealed any well-developed approaches to these tasks that could be readily adopted. (Carson & Schmallegger 2008)

Feedback from visitors helps to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of a destination. Therefore, developing a successful destination image or brand requires careful attention to the current positioning of the destination in the minds of consumers. Understanding how visitors have interpreted their experiences in the destination sheds light on the WOM messages that are likely to be transmitted from past to prospective visitors. WOM has been consistently identified as a key source of trip planning information for a range of markets. Independent travel markets might include backpackers and youth travellers, and other self-drive tourists. WOM content is difficult to capture and analyse in the way that might be done for more formal sources such as guidebooks and popular media. (Carson 2008)

3.1. Electronic word-of-mouth

WOM-marketing can be described as firms' intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing techniques. It is known also as social media marketing, viral marketing, buzz, and guerilla marketing. The Internet's accessibility, reach and transparency have empowered marketers who are interested in influencing and monitoring WOM. (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner 2010) Marketers have become interested in directly managing WOM activities through targeted one-to-one seeding and communication programs, with the Internet allowing unprecedented new levels of management of these campaigns, and new professional organizations allowing the efficient development and diffusion of WOM knowledge. Consumers are regarded as active co-producers of value and meaning, whose WOM use of marketing communications can be idiosyncratic, creative, and even resistant. (Kozinets et al. 2010) According to Kozinets et al. (2010) there can be recognized two distinguishing characteristics of this new model of understanding. First is marketers’ use of new tactics and metrics to directly influence the consumer or opinion leader. Second is the acknowledgment that market messages and meanings do not flow unidirectionally but rather are exchanged among members of the consumer network.

The digital era has made some changes to the concept of WOM. Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008) discuss electronic word-of-mouth (henceforth eWOM) as a cost-effective means to marketing tourism and hospitality. They define eWOM as all informal
communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or other sellers. eWOM can also be defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via Internet” (Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen. 2013:21). When traditional WOM usually occurs between two persons, eWOM occurs between multiple senders and receivers, the conversation lasts longer, and measuring of the effects is easier. Therefore, eWOM is said to exert the greatest influence on purchase decisions today. (Kulmala et al. 2013)

eWOM serves two purposes: It provides information about services that the viewer could be considering, and recommendations whether the services or products should be bought. This implies that the increasing use of Internet within all the demographic segments could increase the possibility of customers or users actively driving some marketing efforts usually done by the organizations. (Litvin et al. 2008)

Information overload can decrease the effect in tourism eWOM. Park and Lee (2008:10) state that “high involvement services such as tourism could suffer from information overload, and this might result in diminished customers’ purchasing intentions”. High involvement service seems to be more dependent on the informative role of the eWOM while customers of low involvement products seem to rely on recommendation facts. Therefore, while low involvement customers can overcome the overflow and focus on popularity, the customers of high involvement service tend to focus on the informative aspects of the message (Park & Lee 2008)

As mentioned earlier, eWOM information is usually co-created between several people in consumer networks. eWOM content can be both organic and amplified due to a marketing campaign. If there is no direct marketing influence, the eWOM content is called organic, but if there is direct influence by marketer, the eWOM content is called amplified. Organic eWOM occurs naturally when a person wants to tell others about a positive or negative experience with a product or brand. However, amplified eWOM occurs when a marketer launches a campaign or in some other way encourages consumers to speak about a brand. Marketing managers are increasingly taking actions to influence customer-to-customer interactions by different campaigns or opinion leader programs. (Kulmala et al. 2013)
According to Kulmala et al. (2013) studies on amplified eWOM have mainly concentrated on examining the profitability, reliability, and ethicality of these marketing campaigns. It is important for marketers to observe the character narratives of the blogger, and how campaign blog content is created according to the character narrative, and pressures from the audience. Although the marketers try to utilize influence over the content of amplified eWOM, usually the content is in the hands of the eWOM creator. The blog content determines the popularity of the blog, and helps to understand the messages, writing style and tone of communication. Thorough analysis of the content helps marketers to identify the popular blogs and opinion leaders to whom to promote their services. (Kulmala et al. 2013)

3.2. User-generated content

A key phenomenon in the digital era is the emergence of consumer-generated media, or as it also can be called user-generated/user-created content. The business-to-consumer monologue has transformed into a dialogue in which the co-creation of brand value occurs in interaction between the nation-brand, and the consumer. Nations are taking an increasing interest in the blogosphere to engage with the increasing numbers of bloggers, many of who are writing about issues that can affect the nation-brand. The most obvious example is individuals who publish blog entries about their experiences as tourists visiting various nations. (Dinnie 2008:247)

There is not yet widely accepted definition for user-generated content (henceforth UGC), but it can be defined as creative effort, which is made publicly available over the Internet, and is developed outside professional practices (Munro & Richards 2011). Fill (2013: 756) considers UGC to be all of the ways in which people make use of social media, it describes the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users. UGC includes various forms of media creation, and most UGC activity is undertaken without the expectation of profit. Motivating factors include connecting with peers, achieving a certain level of fame or prestige, and self-expression. Munro and Richards (2011: 143) state that user-generated content is important, since “people trust other people more than they trust those trying to peddle their destination or hotel”. Although, it can be argued whether traveller bloggers create their writings outside of professional practices, since nowadays several of them practice blogging in professional manners.
3.3. Tourist-created content

Munar’s (2011) study presents a specific type of user-generated content: tourist created content (henceforth TCC). TCC refers to the active and creative contributions of tourists on the web as a participative end-user. Munar (2011: 293-297) claims that the organic evolution of the nation image, which is brought about by eWOM and all other types of information received about the country, is different from the induced evolution of the image that results from the DMOs’ brand promotion. DMOs do not have control over the specific attributes of the tourism experience. Therefore, their main effort is in brand awareness, and image formation. Tourists relate to the destination brand by participating in image formation, and by using these formal elements in their different types of generated content on the web.

The fluidity of genres that characterizes TCC, makes it difficult to monitor and control all the possible ways in which the different formal elements of the brand may appear. In addition, the features of openness and collaborative content are embedded in the system. Consequently, it can be argued that TCC is about communication and personal expression, and the content encourages both the knowledge sharing of tourism products, and the sociability of the tourism experience. Travel blogs’ content communicates the experience of the destination, including emotional and personal perceptions, beliefs and attitudes. Blogs have a high use of the geographical name and image formation, and a minimum reference to the brand formal elements. This type of content relates to individual opinions about specific issues. (Munar 2011)

Today, consumers often rely on social media posts by other consumers when they make a purchase decisions; the brand posting can have a positive or negative impact on the brand purchase. Therefore, destination branding has become a two-way communication. Consumers not only share their experience on a country brand but also create the brand by posting their own content. Consequently, social media has made it possible for marketer-generated content and consumer-generated content to coexist. (Lim et al. 2012)

The use of social media has changed the information search, and contributed to the five key marketing functions – promotion, product distribution, communication, management, and research. DMOs use especially blogs as a part of their business strategy for each of the above mentioned functions. Mutually, travellers use social
media in their online travel information stage of the purchase decision-making process. (Lim et al. 2012)

According to Lim et al. (2012), social media has converted the paradigm of brand creation. Traditionally, company information has been available internally, and the company has controlled the diffusion of information. With help of social media, consumers can exploit company information by either posting comments, or sharing information with peers. Consequently, a brand can be created or tailored by consumer-generated content with social media applications, and with this content, companies can provide better customer relationships. A consumer carrying over company content to peers is more effective way to advertise than traditional advertisements. Therefore, marketers have acknowledged the benefit of using CGC or TCC since it aids in brand image enhancement.

Lim et al. (2012) states that the success of nation branding strategies with social media depends on the quality of a small numbers of so called heavy uploaders having many subscribers. Consequently, marketers should identify popular uploaders on blogosphere, and understand their motivations. Then destination marketers can encourage them to post quality touris-created content on the destination or country, and create brand desired by marketers through postings on social media.
4 METHODOLOGY

The function of this chapter is to give an indication of the means by which the research aim is achieved. First the choice of research method is presented and motivated, the second part will present how and when the data collection was conducted. This will be followed by the presentation of data analysing methods.

4.1. Choice of research method

Because the aim of the study is to explore, and interpret a specific phenomenon in specific context, is a qualitative research method applicable for this study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009:324). Data collection method that has been applied is a netnographic approach, since with the netnographic method researcher can examine online phenomena in their natural settings (Kozinets 2002). By probing travel bloggers’ online postings, can their experiences about Finland be analyzed and interpreted.

Material for the empirical part of this study is collected with a rather new qualitative research method called netnography. Kozinets (2002) asserts that netnography is a useful, flexible, ethically sensitive, and unobtrusive method adapted to the purpose of studying the language, motivations, consumption linkages, and symbols of consumption-oriented online communities. Basically, netnography is a similar method to ethnography; only difference is in that netnography will be implemented in Internet. Traditional ethnography is an anthropologic research approach that has been used in consumer behaviour research in the fields of sociology and marketing (Kozinets 2010:58).

Since consumers are, as a part of their social life, increasingly joining online communities, and different networks, the development of new research method for understanding this new phenomenon has been important (Kozinets 2010:2). In netnography, the source of new information is communications send in the virtual world. Therefore, this method offers a great opportunity to investigate virtual communications from the consumer behaviour point of view (Kozinets 2010:60). Kozinets (2006:281-282) points out that netnography is a good method for investigation of blog postings, since it offers possibility to research narratives of a specific community.
Netnography is an adaptive research approach; therefore it is appropriate method for outside observation, which can include collection and analysing of data, as well as data interpretation. As a research method, netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography; therefore it works well for studies like this thesis, which may have scarce resources (Kozinets 2006:281). However, it is noted that one of the most important differences between traditional ethnography and netnography may be concerned with the research ethics.

4.1.1. Challenges of netnography

Marketing researchers desiring to use netnography as a method are obliged to consider, and follow ethical guidelines. Ethical concerns about netnography turn on two interrelated questions: first, are online forums to be considered a private or a public site? And second, what constitutes ‘informed consent’ in cyberspace? A clear consensus on these issues, and therefore on ethically appropriate procedures for netnography, has not emerged. (Kozinets 2002: 65)

Because the research involves people and their communication as research subject, are ethical issues something that needs to be considered. As a researcher, it needs to be determined if keeping the role of the researcher as passive or as active. According to Kozinets (2002: 65), when using netnography as a research method, should researcher expose his or hers aims to community in question. The researcher should contact community members or bloggers, and obtain their permission to use of any postings that are to be directly quoted in the research. The bloggers who originally has created the data do not necessarily intend or welcome the data’s use in researches, although the data in blogs are overtly published on web pages. On the other hand, Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2012) point out in their study, that if the researcher wishes not to interfere naturally occurring discussions in blogs, the research approach should be kept as covert. Therefore, I chose to have a covert research approach in my study.

On the one hand, online blog posts are already overt publications, but on the other hand publications can be considered as private and they can contain quite intimate information. Therefore, I have chosen to present the bloggers as anonymous in this study, they are labelled with numbers from one to 13. In addition, what needs to be taken account is that the chosen group of travel bloggers is invited in Finland, and they will get compensation in money for their blogging effort, because they will receive free
overnights and free experiences when staying in Finland. Basically they are already harnessed to serve Finland as destination branding communicators, and that might have some kind of influence to the content of blog posts.

4.2. Collection of research data

The data for the study was collected in March, April and May of 2015 from Internet. Since it is impractical for a researcher to collect data from the whole population, in this case from all the travel bloggers ever visited in Finland, it is obligate for the researcher to perform a limited sample of respondents. The researcher benefits from the limited sample since when using this method, it is easier to focus on details that have significant role in a study attempting to interpret a specific phenomenon (Saunders et al. 2009:212-213). Research data was collected from a limited sample foreign travel bloggers who joined Nordic Bloggers’ Experience in Finland January 2015. I used purposive sampling since it enables the researcher to use own judgement to select cases that will best enable the researcher to answer research questions. The visual content of the travel blogs were leaved outside of the analysis. This group of bloggers were chosen for the study since purposive sampling enabled to select case that is particularly informative in area of nation branding, especially when using grounded theory method (Saunders et al. 2009:237-239).

The travel blogs were found via Internet site www.nbe.fi, all the bloggers and their blogs who were participating NBE 2015 are linked in Internet site of NBE. After examining the web pages of these 40 bloggers, 27 were dropped from the list for one or more of the following reasons: blog entries could not be accessed or blogs contained mostly visual content as pictures or videos. There was even some language obstacles encountered during the data collection process since some of the blogs were written in other languages than English or Swedish. As a result, 13 bloggers qualified to be included in the final sample, two of them written in Swedish and 11 in English. The blog posts were published between 10th of January 2015 and 22nd of May 2015. There is danger that past content in travel blogs may be changed, therefore the data from these sample bloggers were archived by copying the text into a word document file, and labelling it accordingly. Each file contained blog posts with titles, dates, and places used as references. The data collected totalled 41,036 words or equivalent of 76 pages (approximately 500 word per page). Preliminary reading of these blogs identified that
data saturation had been reached when a pattern in the blogs’ contents had become clear.

4.3. Methods for analyzing qualitative data

When all the research data was collected and categorized, a content analysis and theory grounding were performed, by coding and fractioning the text among specifies themes. This process will be explained in more detailed way in chapter 6. Grounded theory approach and qualitative content analysis share similarities, since they are both used for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data, and “both are based on naturalistic inquiry that entails identifying themes and patterns, and involves rigorous coding” (Cho & Lee 2014:1). The data analysis in both approaches share similarities that both have a systematic coding process but the procedure is different. In grounded theory data collection and analysis are parallel, and the amount of data is not based on availability, it is based on data saturation. Another difference is that in content analysis, data reduction is achieved by limiting analysis to those aspects that are relevant when considering the research questions (Cho & Lee 2014).

4.3.1. Content analysis

Content analysis as a research method is a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena. It is also known as a method of analyzing documents. Content analysis allows the researcher to test theoretical issues to enhance understanding of the data. Through content analysis, it is possible to distil words into fewer content-related categories, words, phrases and the like share the same meaning. Content analysis is a method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts, and a practical guide to action. The aim is to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, and the outcome of the analysis is concepts or categories describing the phenomenon. Usually the purpose of those concepts or categories is to build up a model, conceptual system, conceptual map or categories. (Elo & Kyngäs 2007)

Miles and Huberman (1994:10-12) present three streams of data analyzing. Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data that appear in written-up transcriptions. Data reduction is not
something separate from analysis, it is part of analysis, data reduction is a form of analysis that sharpens sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such way final conclusions can be drawn and verified. Qualitative data can be reduced and transformed in many ways: through selection, through summary or paraphrase, and through being subsumed in a larger pattern.

The second phase is data displays: an organized assembly of information that permits conclusions drawing. The data displays can include many types of matrices, graphs, charts and networks. All are designed to assemble information into an accessible, compact form so that the researcher can see what is happening and either draws conclusions or move on to the next step of analysis. Creation of data displays is not separate from analysis; it is a part of analysis. Designing a display - deciding on the rows and columns of a matrix for data and deciding which data, in which form should be entered in the cells - are analytic activities. The third phase of analysis activity is conclusion drawing and verification. Final conclusions may not appear until data collection is over, but they often have been prefigured from the beginning, even when researcher claims to have been proceeding inductively. Qualitative analysis needs to be well documented as a process, mainly to help the researcher to learn (Miles & Huberman (1994: 10-12). Procedure for a qualitative content analysis is shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2  Procedure for qualitative content analysis**

![Diagram of qualitative content analysis procedure]

Source: Adapted from Cho&Lee (2014)

Content analysis is described as a method to classify written or oral material into identified categories or similar meanings; consequently these categories represent either explicit or inferred communication. It is implied that content analysis can be
used to examine virtually any kind of communication materials, since researchers can engage in data collection with or without direct contact persons studied, it can be described as an unobtrusive method. (Cho & Lee 2014)

Cho and Lee (2014) point out a unique characteristic of content analysis; it is the flexibility of using inductive or deductive approaches, or a combination of both, in data analysis. The key difference between these two approaches centers on how codes or categories are developed; an inductive approach is appropriate when knowledge regarding the phenomenon under research is limited, and then codes and categories are drawn directly from research data. In the deductive approach, codes and categories are derived from the prior relevant theory or research.

According to Elo and Kyngäs (2007) the analysis process in content analysis and the results should be described in sufficient detail so that readers can have a clear understanding of how analysis was carried out, and its strengths and limitations. The results are described contents of the categories, i.e. the meanings of the categories. The content of the categories is described through subcategories. Therefore, creating categories is both an empirical and a conceptual challenge, as categories must be conceptually and empirically grounded. To increase the reliability of the study, it is necessary to demonstrate a link between the results and the data. This is why the researcher must aim at describing the analyzing process in as much detail as possible when reporting the results. Authentic citations could also be used to increase the trustworthiness of the research, and to point out to readers from where or from what kinds of original data categories are formulated. (Elo & Kyngäs 2007)

4.3.2. Grounded theory method

The aim of this study is to explore a phenomenon that has not been studied so much yet, therefore Grounded theory (henceforth GT) methodology framework will be appropriate research method for the purpose of this thesis, since with GT the foundation of phenomena can be discovered and new theories can be developed. However, despite methodology’s name, it is rather a qualitative research methodology than a theory. According to Cho and Lee (2014:2), methodology is “the strategy, plan of action process or design”, and method is “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data”. However, based on its founders’ definitions, GT works as a method as well as a methodology.
The fathers of this methodology are Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strauss who published "The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research" at 1967. This methodological approach has traditionally been associated with sociology, nursing and health, but in recent years, GT has started to enter the repertoire of marketing research (Goulding 2005).

After Glaser and Strauss' introduction, GT developed in several directions with variations. Glazer emphasized openness and creativity in interpretation of data, whereas Strauss and Corbin emphasized rigorous and prescriptive routines in data analysis. Strauss and Corbin's approach has been criticized to be too normative and data forcing, whereas Glaser's approach has been criticized to be too open and too difficult for novice researchers to follow (Cho & Lee 2014). Based on these conclusions, this study will follow the rules of Strauss and Corbin's GT approach.

The purpose of the GT method is to build theory that is faithful to and illuminates the data under study (Strauss & Corbin 1990:24). The basis of GT methodology is that the research material, which is collected with qualitative methods, will be analyzed by emphasizing the empirical part, and after that, formulating theory by comparing and categorizing these findings. The basic principle is that literature is not prior to the research; it is rather consulted as part of an iterative and interactional process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The intention when analyzing in terms of GT is to conceptualize the data related to research phenomena, and to find relations between these concepts. (Goulding 2005; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2009).

The research question in a GT study is usually a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. GT questions tend to be oriented toward action and process, and they will tell to the researcher what he or she will specifically focus on, and what he or she wants to know about this subject (Strauss & Corbin 1990:38).

When implementing GT, data collecting and analyzing will be conducted at different stages. Collection of material will follow the principles of saturation, in other words, the data collection will proceed so long as data will not provide any new material for theory development (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Though GT is considered as data originated research method, it is not possible to exclude all the knowledge and experiences that the researcher can have regarding the research object. The research can also be unattached from other researches, if it is not connected to them in any form. Therefore, instead of inductive research approach, it can be seen that GT is an abductive research
approach. In the abductive research approach, researchers’ own thinking has the main role, but it is accepted that conclusions do not form without theoretical frameworks. (Eskola & Suoranta 2001: 79-83)

Coding is the essential part of the analysis in GT. Coding means conceptualization, fractioning and parsing of collected data. These operations are mutual when building theories based on data, through coding the researcher will seize the meaning of data (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 57-58). The coding of material can be proceeded in three steps; the first step of analysis is execution of open coding, where the researcher makes coding on the grounds of initial discourses. Figure 3 displays the data analysis procedures of GT method.

“Open coding is the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of data” (Strauss & Corbin 1990:62). During open coding, the research material are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data. By asking questions like “What is this?” and “What does it represent?” about each one incident or idea in data will help within the conceptualizing of paragraphs or sentences. Since open coding process may create amounts of conceptual labels, these concepts also have to be grouped. The process of grouping concepts that pertain to the same phenomena is called categorizing. (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 62-65)

The second phase, so called axial coding, is for creating detailed categories based on open coding; in this point coding occurs around elements that have been chosen to be pivotal. The aim is to put data back together in new ways after open coding by making connections between a category and its subcategories. In this stage researcher is still working with the development of the categories, but development occurs beyond properties and dimensions. In axial coding focus is on specifying a category or phenomenon in terms of the conditions that give rise to it: the context in which it is embedded (Strauss & Corbin 1990:96-97).

The third stage, so called selective coding, is procedure for finding the core category of analysis, where other categories will be later combined with theoretical framework. Selective coding’s role is to find the “red thread of research material” (Strauss & Corbin 1990:117). The core category pulls together all the concepts in order to offer an explanation of the phenomenon; therefore it should have theoretical significance, and
should be traceable back through the data (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 117-118). Cho and Lee (2014:2) state that GT involves the “use of an intensive, open-ended, and iterative process that simultaneously involves data collection, coding (data analysis), and memo-writing (theory building).”

**Figure 3  Data analysis procedure of grounded theory method**

**Theoretical sampling**
Based on concept
For representativeness & consistency

Source: Adapted from Cho&Lee (2014)

Consequently, GT summarizes material step after step - from small individual perceptions and coding, towards greater entities and theories about the phenomenon in research. The rigors of the approach force the researcher to look beyond the superficial, to apply possible interpretations before developing final concepts, and to demonstrate these concepts through explication and data supported evidence (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Goulding 2005).

Cho and Lee (2014:14) suggest the following as evaluation criteria for GT: “rigor in the coding and research process, quality of concepts, systematic relatedness among concepts, conceptual density, range of variations and specificity, significance of theoretical findings, and theoretical sensitivity.” Conceptual density means that categories should be theoretically dense, and tightly linked with one other. Developed theory from the research should be judged in terms of “the range of variations and the
specificity with which they are analyzed in relation to the phenomena that are their source” (Cho & Lee 2014:14). In addition, criteria for overall qualitative research methodology can be also used for enhancing the trustworthiness of the research. Triangulation via the use of multiple and different data sources, perspectives and theories is one of the basic strategies (Cho & Lee 2014).
5 FINDINGS

This chapter will present the summary of findings of the empirical study conducted by means of netnography, in order to explore how travel bloggers have individually experienced Finland as a tourist destination. Blog authors visited Finland as part of Nordic Bloggers Experience 2015, and based on their experiences, they have provided several insights that assist in understanding Finland’s destination image. These findings will then be further analysed and compared in the next chapter.

5.1. Presentation of the findings

Findings from the empirical research are divided into 13 parts; each travel blog is presented as one unit. Altogether results from the empirical research contain 41 individual blog entries, which altogether consist of 39,482 words and 194 phrases. The most comprehensive blog sample consists of eight posts (7340 words) and the shortest sample consists of one entry (338 words). I have chosen to keep bloggers identity anonymous in this study; therefore they will be referred to with numbers from one to 13. However, findings include some demographic profiling as the gender of the author and country of origin. This information is gleaned from the author profile but it is not systematically analysed, since the information was incomplete in some of the blogs. Locating information about the age of blog authors was difficult. Authentic citations are used to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Elo & Kyngäs 2007). Analysis has been done manually.

Travel blog 1.

26-years old Swedish female writes this blog. During her visit to Finland with NBE 2015 she has published four blog entries about her experiences during the visit in Finland; altogether posts consists of 1514 words, 92 phrases. She starts writing about her arrival to Kittilä, and how cold it was in the Lapland in January. According to her, the arrival feels like to step into a frozen fairytale, she has even wrote several quotes from Tove Jansson’s book Trollvinter. The first night she stayed at village Hetta where they get to meet some local craftsman, eat some traditional Finnish food like reindeer liver and berry pie, and trying to see some northern lights, although they were not lucky enough too see them.
Blogger writes about their experience in husky safari, which was conducted in -28°C. She describes how she has never seen so well maintained dogs and she states that the place is arctic oasis for dog lovers.

"Granarna var mer snöbekymrade än någonsin och solen tog tydligen återigen sovmorgon. Men de pigga huskyögonen och kramvänliga arktikpälsarna fick åtminstone mig att klarvaka. Den bästa nyheten: när hundarna inte längre orkar dra släden adopteras de bort – gärna till Sverige."

The posting about husky safari describes how cold and quiet it can be in Finnish Lapland, she tried to take photographs so long the camera didn’t get frozen in the ice-cold wind. There is also some exciting moments on the road since one of the bloggers fell off from the sled but fortunately everything ends up luckily. The writer points out that even though the ice-cold weather and frozen hands the husky safari was an amazing experience, it was worth of all the effort.

She writes about Kilpisjärvi and Saana fell, and describes how the fell has a central role in many Lappish stories. The weather is still described to be very cold.

"Under vår bilresa från Hetta till Kilpisjärvi hann temperaturen gå ner till minus trettioåtta grader. De stelfrusna landskapen som svishade förbi utanför taxifönstret kändes nästan skrämmande – vad gör vi om bilen går sönder mitt här ute i nowhere?"

The plan for the day was to experience the northern lights, which they managed to do. The next day they were planning to go to the snowmobile safari although safari was cancelled due to the freezing -40°C. Therefore they spend rest of the day inside of Tundrea Holiday Resort and wrote blog entries about their experiences.

The blogger finishes all of her four postings with the same disclaimer where she greets Visit Finland and Nordic Bloggers Experience for the trip but highlights that the opinions about experiences are merely hers.

**Travel blog 2.**

The blog is written by a British-American couple that describe themselves as travellers, photographers and writers “slowly exploring the world”. The posts about Finland are merely written by the male writer of the travel blog. During their visit to Finland he has published four blog posts, which consist of 6392 words, 316 phrases.

The first post tells about husky sledding in Artic Circle, the blogger writes that he normally does his best to escape cold places, but being a fan of new experiences he wanted to see how to cope with the cold, and wanted to experience the northern lights,
which was the main reason he chose Finland for winter get away. The first item of the agenda was a two-day husky safari including an overnight stay in a rustic wooden cabin in the forests.

“I’m not going to lie, it was damn cold. Leaving the warm confines of the airport into temperatures of around –15, as the darkness started to set in (sunset at this time of year being around 2pm!), was a little nerve wracking. I started to seriously worry that I hadn’t brought anywhere near enough clothes, and certainly not the kind of clothes that would keep me warm enough. I mean, look at this place. Does it look warm? I needn’t have worried though. After a short transfer from Rovaniemi airport I was being welcomed to Bear Hill Husky Safaris by Valentijn, the Dutch owner of the company, who kitted me out with warm overalls, boots and a balaclava. I felt somewhat more prepared.”

The blogger describes how they were given instructions as how to drive a husky sled, how the “off” was quite easy, and how he had been bit concerned over the general lack of directions given in terms of steering. However, he need not have to worried, the dogs knew where they were going, they went up and down hills, across frozen lakes and through forests. After arrival to the cabin, it was time for sauna, the outside temperature dipping below -30°C, which made for quite the temperature difference.

“The next day dawned clear and blue, with unbelievable light. With a sunrise time of around 10.30am and sunset at somewhere just after 2pm, you don’t get many hours of light, but those hours are truly spectacular. I have never seen such a phenomenal blue hour, followed by a golden hour that lasted for the entire time the sun was up. Pink never looked so good.”

At the end of the first posting the blogger told that he thoroughly recommends Bear Hill Husky if you are up in Lapland and looking for an incredible outdoors experience, he was absolutely delighted by the experience, in particular how involved one gets with the dog team right from the start.

In the second posting, the blogger shares his opinion about Iso-Syöte and the activities that can be done in the region. He tells that Iso-Syöte is popular with locals for its plethora of skiing options, and that it is wonderful for the visitor because you can do pretty much every winter activity from one location. Activities that the blogger experience are snowmobiling, ice-fishing, snowshoeing and chasing after northern lights.

“Ok, so I didn’t get to see the northern lights. I mention this now so as to save you from any heady anticipation followed by disappointment. It turns out the northern lights aren’t something you can just see on-demand. There has to be solar activity and flares and a clear sky and various other factors. I did get a clear sky and a warm campfire though, which at –35°C was very appreciated. Plus the opportunity to take photos like the below. Which made it all worth it.”
At the end of the post the blogger writes that if you are looking for a place where you can experience all the wonder of Lapland from one spot that also comes with a bar, excellent restaurant, great views and a plethora of post-activity relaxation option, then he can very much recommend Hotel Iso-Syöte.

The third posting describes the experiences that bloggers have had in Rauma. He points out that visiting a summer town in the dead of the winter is a weird experience, since the town’s street were oddly quiet at any time of the day or night. However, the exception was after the local team played ice hockey, at which point it appeared to flame into life. At the same time, the writer points out that he is not complaining about the quiet, because having one of the Finland’s world heritage listed sites to themselves to wander and photograph was quite the experience. When getting to know Rauma, the bloggers learnt to make lace with bobbin style, tried helming a tugboat in a ship-helming simulator at Rauma Maritime Museum, and got some exercise on a frozen lake with kick sled. It is pointed out that one can not visit Finland without having a sauna, since research suggests that saunas contribute to the Finns leading longer lives, and it is an integral part of Finnish life. Integral part of Finnish life was also ice hockey.

“We were given the full experience of a home game, standing with the most ardent fans, in a game against the local rivals. The atmosphere was tense and exciting, and I have to admit to really having no idea at all what was going on. People got on and off the rink, it seemed perfectly reasonable to skate behind the goal with the ball (I’m told it’s a puck), and every now and again a fight broke out. It was thrilling to watch, especially once I gave up trying to understand the nuance and just got on with cheering whenever the home team got the puck close to the goal.”

The last post about bloggers visit to Finland handles their experiences in city of Oulu. He describes that Oulu is world famous for being the home of the world air guitar championships, and in addition it is also Finland’s technology capital. In the list of what to do in in the city he mentions the science center Tietomaa, the 15 beaches of Oulu, bird watching at Liminganlahti Visitor Center, visiting the Bobby Statue and Marketplace, eating tasty food at Pikisaari, and visiting castle ruins at Linnansaari. For experiencing more of the Finnish outdoor, the author recommends to visit the Koitelinkoski rapids at river Kiiminki. As a disclaimer, the blogger states their trip to Finland was covered by Visit Finland but that the content and opinions remain their own.
Travel blog 3.

This Swedish female blogger has published three posts about her trip to Finland during Nordic Bloggers Experience 2015, altogether postings consist of 1761 words, and 58 paragraphs. She starts her travel story about how long her trip from Luleå via Stockholm to Helsinki has been. She describes how easy it is to fly inside Scandinavia, and how lovely it was to arrive to cozy hotel room in Radisson Blu Royal Hotel Helsinki. The next day she visits town of Porvoo, the bloggers get introduced to Finnish culture and history at Johan Ludvig Runeberg’s home, and she thinks that it is interesting to hear stories about how things used to be at the old times. The blogger admits that she didn’t have many expectations about Porvoo but she liked very much about everything, and would love to come back some day, since the town is so quiet and comfortable.

The next day in Porvoo started with guide tour round the town of Porvoo, after that bloggers went to Kannonnokka where they had the chance to experience zipline, take walk with snowshoes, and to take part in Finnish sauna rituals.


Travel blog 4.

21-year old female currently living in London writes the fourth blog explored in empirical research. She has posted three posts about Finland, which consists of 4257 words and 232 phrases. In the first posting she describes how she got to experience five different kinds of safaris in the Finnish Lapland. She gives a general overview how the different types of safaris work, and how travellers can prepare themselves for a safari.

“After these initial preparations, you will board your vehicle of choice and set out. Depending on which activity you selected, you’ll be laughing from ear to ear, gazing at the sky in awe or screaming with excitement. But just as your cheeks begin to turn a crimson red, the sleigh will stop and you’ll be led inside a cozy little hut. These wooden dwellings – called kota in Finnish – were used by the indigenous Sami tribes while following their reindeer herd in the cold season. Nowadays, people no longer live in them, but they are still used as a welcome source of warmth in the winter months. ”
The blogger points out that visiting Lapland anytime during the winter months is the best time to go there, even though it only gets light around 11am and starts to get dark again by 3am, but the blue hour is magical moment.

“After that, it’s permanent midnight. It’s not as dark as you might imagine and it’s just perfect for watching the northern lights, which are what makes Lapland a popular destination among travellers searching for unique experiences like... well, you and I. If you want to see the lights properly, make sure your tour takes place as far away from civilisation as possible – a place where no street lamps will interfere with nature’s paintbrush.”

According to the blogger, reindeer safaris are ideal for families with children, where as travellers looking after an adrenaline-packed activity can feel disappointed a leisure reindeer sleigh ride. The great option for all the “adrenaline junkies” is a husky safari, since the sight of frozen trees flashing by, as traveller reins sleigh through narrow turns can be exhilarating. In same manners is the snowmobile safaris recommended for “any adventure connoisseurs” by the blogger. Horse safaris are recommended for “all the hopeless romantics”, and car safaris are literally for anyone, recommendation is to hire a guide. After every safari activity written in the blog there is mentioned a company or person who has arranged the activity in question, and even the rates for some safaris are mentioned.

The second posting by this blogger describes her experiences at Luvattumaa ice hotel in Levi. According to the blogger Levi is a place which one never knew needed to be visited, since it is located so remote above the Arctic Circle, during her visit to the Luvattumaa she was the only guest in the hotel.

“It was equal parts amazing and terrifying! On the one hand, I was traipsing around like Olaf from “Frozen” all giddy and smiley. But on the other hand, listening to the sound of my laughter echoing down long narrow corridors was not really something I experience a lot in my small crowded bedroom in London. Either way, it was a magical experience unlike any other and one few people will ever get to experience...”

The blogger writes about the story behind the hotel, how the owners received a plot of land as a wedding gift, but it seemed far from the town of Levi, and not at all like the ideal location for a hotel. If traveller enjoys unique experiences, are not terrified of the cold, or wants to have a cool story to tell friends, should one definitely visit Luvattumaa. She states that “never has being frozen, abandoned and all by myself felt more magical to me”.

After spending time at Finnish Lapland, the blogger headed to Turku archipelago to find a “Neverland”. She writes that she was prepared to spend whole her life to looking
for “Neverland”, travelling far and wide in search of a fairytale island. However, now she had found it, it is called Herrankukkaroko and it is magical. Couple of times she quotes phrases from J.M. Barrie’s book Peter Pan. This third post describes how a traveller can reach the place, and all the experiences the blogger has had at Herrankukkaroko in Rymättylä.

“Upon arrival to Rymättylä island where it is located, you will find yourself in the quaintest, most picturesque fisherman’s homestead that I have ever seen. Traditional cottages are sprinkled around the island with the playfulness of a child, remote enough to offer privacy but close enough to promise tonnes of impending fun.”

The dining experiences get many compliments; she mentions that as to be expected, “there are no nasty additives in this Neverland – just loads of locally grown deliciousness”. The blogger points out that even the sleeping arrangements in Herrankukkaroko are exciting, since there is opportunity to sleep on a boat. The blogger ends up all of her postings with the disclaimer that her stay at Levi or Herrankukkaroko was part of a larger press trip with Visit Finland, courtesy of Nordic Bloggers’ Experience.

**Travel blog 5.**

The authors behind this blog are a Brazilian couple living in Berlin. The have published six postings considering their visit to Finland during NBE 2015, entire amount of words are 4531, and 245 phrases. They started their visit to Finland with a helicopter ride over Helsinki, which according to them was the “nicest and craziest moment” they had on NBE. The experience started at Hilton Helsinki Kalastajatorppa, the female blogger describes that the frozen landscape from the Hilton is chin dropping, and the place seem really quiet and the integration between the nature and comfort is prominent. The company responsible for the helicopter ride is Rotorway, she points out that they were fantastic and really competent, all the equipment were new, the helicopter was in a good condition and she felt safe.

In the second post, the female blogger describes herself as a “metalhead”, a person who likes heavy metal, and therefore she fell in love with Finland and band called Hevisaurus, which makes heavy music for children. She states that the love and fascination for metal and Finnish people is the main reason of this post.

“Besides having great landscapes, amazing food, lovable people and fantastic design, Finland is a country full of curious traditions and customs. One of them is related with
Heavy Metal and how the Finns teach their youngsters to listen to good music since the beginning. And you can see the result while you walk on the streets of Helsinki, Turku, Porvoo, Espoo or any other city there. Metalheads everywhere! Everywhere, anywhere, you will spot somebody who understands your love for guitar riffs and your fascination for GAN GAN GAN GAN.”

She writes that during her visit to Finland she was very eager to tell everybody about her fascination with this piece of Finnish culture, therefore the organizers of NBE arranged a fan meeting for her with the Hevisaurus band. Consequently, at the end of the second post she pronounces, “Finland, you have the best people, the best landscapes and the best vibe of all the countries we’ve ever visited!”

The third posting considers winter activities that can be conducted in Finland, the female blogger states the one of the reasons why she had made up her mind to move in Finland in the near future is the fact that Finns are so well prepared for the winter time. According to her “ice swimming is fun, it is amazing, it does not hurt, you should not be afraid, and it is scientifically proven to make your immune system to it's max capacity.” At the Green Window, a place for winter activities near Espoo, they get the opportunity to try ice fishing. She states that ice fishing is relaxing, a Finnish version of meditation, in pure nature and silence. At Oittaa the bloggers test cross-country skiing, she gets amazed a fun activity can be so healthy and good, and near Espoo, company called Eventure, helps them to try some hiking with snowshoes.

In Nuuksio near Espoo, with Sea & Mountain Adventures the bloggers are given an opportunity to get in touch with reindeers. In this post the female blogger describes how she gets to meet a reindeer with full of personality. The fourth post, which is written by the male blogger, has some darker tones, since it dives in the history of Lake Bodom murders. Since the both bloggers are fans of heavy metal, and especially one of the biggest heavy metal bands in Finland, Children of Bodom, the name Lake Bodom caught their interest. The blogger writes “some people say that it was death itself that came for the kids that died on that night in June 1960. To this day, nobody knows for sure what happened and we believe nobody will know.” The twists of the crime story are described in a detailed way, all from what happened in 1960’s to 2005.

“What we can say is that visiting the place where everything happened was a weird experience. It is not everyday that you can walk around a place where something as infamous at the Lake Bodom Murders happened. Luckily we had an axe with us and we even took some pictures there. This is what metal heads do.”

The last entry about Finland handles their visit to Herrankukkaro at Turku archipelago. The male blogger points out that the place, which used to be a fisherman’s homestead
complex could be perfect location for a terror movie, or a family trip, it depends on how one sees it.

“We arrived at there during a stormy night and it felt like were going a few decades into time. We looked around and saw wood houses and nature. We were surrounded by the beauty of the Finnish archipelago even though we couldn’t see much of it. It felt like we were getting into the roots and values of this area of Finland. And we can say it felt good.”

He writes that the feeling of being back in time got even stronger once the host of the place, Karioskari Kangas, shows them the flavors of the fish in an open fire. The bloggers get experience Finnish winter sauna in the world’s largest smoke sauna, and sleep on a boat on a stormy night. He also mentions that there is idyllic cottages or luxury “birdhouse” to sleep in. About the activities that can be performed in Herrankukkaro he names a boat trip to where bootleggers used to hide alcohol during the Finnish Prohibition. This post is ended at the same way as all the other posts made by these bloggers; they mention that they visited the places during their days at NBE.

Travel blog 6.

33-year old Australian male writes this blog, he has published one posting during his trip to Finland, and this post consists of 1052 words and 21 paragraphs. The blogger visits a place called Green Window near Espoo, a place which the host Pekka Väänänen has created for local and foreign visitors to use as a base to explore Finnish nature, just a short distance from the Finland’s capital city. Pekka Väänänen, “a man of the forest”, is described to be a rugged looking Finn with bright narrow eyes and rough skin. Väänänen states that “the forest is my friend and I feel it is the biggest lesson we can learn, that life is from the forest.”

The blogger describes Green Window; “the ground is covered in snow and the trees all around seem to rise magically out of this frozen earth. In the stillness and freshness of the Finnish winter, they give off an energy that I, as just a mere visitor, maybe can’t identify.” He spends the afternoon in the snow and ice, learns to play curling, tries his hand at sledding, and does some ice fishing on a frozen lake.

“This is my first time in Finland for winter and there is something unusually tranquil about it. For a country that is very proud of its silence, this is a whole new volume of nothingness. The long dark nights make you look inside yourself rather than around you. Even during the days, the sun stays low in the sky and the soft light hits you right in the eyes. It’s never too bright and I wonder whether I’ve ever quite woken up from my dreams.”
At next day he gets out for an expedition on snowshoes with outdoor activity company Eventure in Nuuksio National Park, which he describes to be the green belt that gives the Finland’s native animals the ability to roam freely across the land without the interruption of human development.

“I get to a frozen lake. An upturned boat on the shoreline seems out of place but it’s a reminder that, although the winter feels like it has encased everything in sight, it is ephemeral. The branches carry white passengers, the animals in the water are trapped by a hard thick covering, the air bites my face, and the ground crunches underfoot. Still, all of this will change in the coming months.”

At the end of the post the blogger mentions that he was a guest of Visit Finland but descriptions and opinions are his own.

Travel blog 7.

The writers of this blog are a couple settled in Italy, female author is originally from Italy and male from Australia. They have published two entries about their experiences in Finland, altogether 2391 words and 140 phrases, and both posts are written by the male blogger, he has visited Finland previously in summer time. The first post is telling about his experiences in Mikkeli region, it presents eight winter activities that can be conducted on a frozen lake.

“Finland is actually two countries in one. It changes so much between summer and winter, that your travel experience will be completely different. In summer, Finland is green and lush, berries grow from brambles in the forests and the days never end. In winter, the country is possibly even more magical. Covered in snow, with a few precious hours of sunlight a day, and brief blue twilights, before long nights under a star-studded sky. Yes, it is cold – but it’s a small price to pay for such a wonderful atmosphere.”

The blogger describes the area around the town of Mikkeli and lake Saimaa to be one of the most popular tourist destination in Finland, he tells that Finland has over 188,000 lakes, and therefore the Mikkeli region is called ‘The World of a Thousand Lakes’. He highlights the difference between summer and wintertime; during summer the lifestyle with cabins and summer activities from sailing to hiking is current, in winter it all changes. The tourists are few which means that everything is more affordable, the countryside and lakes are covered with ice, and if you love nature and silence, winter is the time to visit the region, since outside of the city there are only few locals out for a stroll.
He points out that Mikkeli is perfect choice for enjoying the “magical frozen scenery”, since it is easily accessible from Helsinki, and has much warmer temperatures than Lapland, and if traveller is lucky, northern lights can even be seen in Mikkeli. One of eight winter activities, which can be experimented at the region, is snowshoeing. Part of the snow on the frozen lakes is cleared over to make roads for people, sleds and even cars, the rest remains covered with a fluffy, snowy blanket, which is ideal for novices. The blogger portrays that as a child growing up in Australia he convinced that European children went to school skating on frozen rivers. The other activities that can be conducted at Mikkeli are horse sledding in the post-sunset blue twilight, which must be “everyone’s romantic dream”, kick sledding, and ice fishing, where the blogger spent a morning with the local fishermen, and afterwards brought the catch to the restaurant, which prepared a lunch for them. He mentions Sahanlahti Resort as a wonderful place to base you, since the owner Jaana is friendly and helpful. At the end of the posting he mentions he was the guest of Visit Finland/ Visit Mikkeli as a part of NBE, but as always, all opinions are his.

Watching the sky is one of the activities that he presents in the post, “the sky over Mikkeli is wonder. Deep blue during the day, multicoloured at sunset, streaked by a thousand stars at night, green and purple when the Northern Lights dance all around.” He states that the best thing to do on a frozen lake is to walk and enjoy the silence.

“The sun shone on the snow-covered lake, and let the black-blue expanse where the snow had been brushed off – it was beautiful and scary at times, only a thin layer separating me from treacherous, freezing waters. I could hear the crunch of my footsteps, every now and then, and see the difference in colour where the lake had melted and then frozen over, with bubbles trapper underwater and the abyss, beyond. An amazing place to stay.”

The second post considers the bloggers experiences in Helsinki and Suomenlinna, he has discovered Suomenlinna previously at summertime, and is now compering these two experiences. The visit to Helsinki starts with a helicopter ride, he portrays the city from above to be “nothing short of spectacular”, when nature and urban space are combined in the everywhere. Suomenlinna is described to be more than a sea fortress. “It’s a haven of peace, nature and history a short ferry ride from the city, a place to relax, unwind, and enjoy the famous Finnish silence.” The blogger points out that it is more than an open-air museum, since it is home 800 people with gourmet restaurants and café’s.
The blogger writes that he loved Helsinki in winter, since there is magical blue twilights, and the light is clear and bright, only for a few hours a day. According to him, Suomenlinna is a ghost town in the winter, since there was no one walking the frozen paths. However, he assures that winter is better time to explore the fortress since the peace and stillness of the deep winter have a meditative charm, you can be one with the nature.

“Helsinki is actually two cities in one, I thought. In summer you get to enjoy the wonderful urban nature, outdoors life and the long summer nights. But it is in winter, that the snow-dusted streets and the frozen harbour look their picture-perfect best. It's the time for steaming saunas and chilly dips in the sea, the time to eat blinis (a Finnish winter tradition) and gaze at the night sky, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights.”

**Travel blog 8.**

The author of this travel blog is a German female; her two entries about Finland consist of 2411 words and 88 phrases. When she arrived to Helsinki, the city was grey and cold, but the next day the place was completely transformed, since the city was covered in a fresh layer of snow. She tells that the main purpose of visit was the Matka Nordic Travel Fair and her schedule was so packed, that she didn’t get to explore as much of Helsinki as she would like to have done. She joined Helsinki Food Tour with Heather’s Helsinki and Amazing Race through Helsinki, which brought her to Helsinki cathedral.

The second post is called “A First-Timer's guide to Helsinki”, where the blogger describes some activities and experiences that can be performed in Finland’s capital city, “things you shouldn’t miss on a visit to Helsinki”, according to her. The quintessential Finnish experience is a sauna evening, which is arranged for the bloggers by the Finnish Sauna Society. She states that she loves the concept of Finnish sauna, “getting together with friends while enjoying the benefits of the sauna experience or simply sitting in silence taking time to reflect on the day is just the most wonderful invention. You just need to get over the fact that you have to get naked in front of strangers.” She tells that there are about 3.3 million saunas in Finland, and 99% of the Finns use a sauna at least once a week.

Culinary delights have leaved footprints to this blogger, she mentions Karl Fazer Café as the place where you cannot leave out without trying their chocolate, as well as other pastries in café “look and taste amazing”. In addition, she names that everyone should
taste a Korvapuusti, a cinnamon bun, which can be bought in most cafes. Other experiences she writes about are a free walking tour, or a tram ride, which will pass most landmarks as Helsinki cathedral, Temppeliaukio rock church or Kamppi chapel. Kiasma museum and Helsinki Railway station are mentioned as Helsinki’s most important architectural landmarks.

**Travel blog 9.**

A Dutch couple writes the blog, they have published one post about their visit to Finland, and this post consists of 338 words and 18 phrases. They tell about the visit to Saana fell at the nature reserve in Kilpisjärvi, which they write to be the most famous mountain in Finland, since the fell has a remarkable shape, which stands out like a giant rock. The blogger’s mention that a hike from the town to the top of the fell is nice, however there is a lot of snow in the wintertime, due to this fact they were not able to climb the Saana fell. Therefore they are planning to visit the place in the near future, they mention that the summer in the region can be a bit cold, and is one of the shortest in Europe. On the other hand, the top can be reached in the middle of the night in the daylight, since during the summer the sun does not set.

**Travel blog 10.**

This blog is written by British female, she has published one post about her experiences in Lapland; the post consists of 1504 words and 51 phrases. For some reason the blogger states that 100 years ago the Lapland did not have any country borders, it was simply the mass of land above the Arctic Circle that now forms parts of Norway, Sweden, Russia and Finland, which she visited in January.

“Lapland is no exception to the rule of how Finnish culture is strongly tied to a close relationship with nature, and it was here that I felt the most wild and free, despite my summer escapades. All year round Lapland remains a pristine, unspoilt wilderness, where life is unhurried and tradition remains. The perceived idea of winter in Lapland being a pure white snow-coated hinterland akin to Narnia doesn’t seem real, except when you finally see it for yourself, it really is…”

“Here, I found a stillness I’ve never felt anywhere else, a majestic calm under an ink blue sky pierced only delicately by a sun which remains under the cloak of darkness for much of the day.”

“Here, I felt an intense freedom, and a crisp, freshness of air that was exhilarating – something I’ve never once said that about the cold. Lapland truly was a sensory awakening.”
The blogger spent the first night out with the local adventure experts in the village of Inari, in minus 38 temperatures searching for the northern lights. However, she points out that catching a glimpse of the northern lights is as much about luck as it is about patience, but when you get to see them, you feel a powerful connection to nature. The next day she is invited to experiment the glass igloos of the Kakslauttanen arctic resort, which she describes to be a more relaxing and serene means of watching the northern lights without the minus temperatures. Since the resort is built on a vast patch of wilderness, the blogger highlights that the resorts in Lapland are built on acres of barren land, therefore the travellers need to be prepared to have to walk long distances between things, and front extra costs to get between other villages. The igloos themselves are a brilliant concept, although she writes them to be expensive.

The blogger writes that in Finnish Lapland traditions have morphed in tourist activities, keeping locals in business and allowing visitors to sample the arctic way of life. She experiences a husky safari, and tells that she spent that activity most in a daze of adrenalin, while staring astonished at path way cutting through a forest of white-coated magical looking trees. Reindeer safari she describes to feel a bit artificial experience, on the other hand she states that there are two sides of the coin in this debate.

“Reindeer herders were some of the first people to come into contact with the tourism industry, moving into the activities business in order to sustain their livelihood. Upon asking about the impact of tourism in a land still so untouched by mass modernity, one reindeer herder told me: “If there were no tourists, we wouldn’t use as many reindeer, and my children wouldn’t get to see such traditions, especially in a generation where snowmobiles are the popular choice of transport.”

She describes the Sami people to be as the only indigenous people of the European Union, which have through constitution and law protecting their culture. The blogger writes the life in Lapland to continue as it did many years ago, nature beating its own unique rhythm of the seasons. Therefore she states, “for those looking for a flawless patch on Earth, whose paths still remain largely untouched and whose skies spend much of the year dancing, this area of the world really is your calling”. She ends her post with the details how to reach Inari-Saariselkä region, how to get well prepared for the cold temperatures, and also mentions that Visit Finland and regional tourism boards helped facilitate her stay in this part of Lapland.
Travel blog 11.

The authors of this travel blog are a Canadian couple, but the posts about Finland are mainly written by the female blogger. She has published eight blog entries about their experiences, consisting of 7340 words and 352 phrases. The first post is reporting about her visit to Åland islands, where they get to experience the island’s only brewery Stallhagen, and to meet chef Michael Björklund at Smakbyn.

“On an island as small as Åland, as remote as it is and with a tiny population, the dedication to cuisine of such high quality was unexpected and seemed improbable. But as a group we feasted on delectable mutton stew, beetroot cakes, beer (of course) and more, before hauling our stuffed selves back on the bus and off on our next excursion.”

She writes that her favourite moments were spent on the water, the bloggers did some island hopping, where they encountered no others, and had it all to themselves. Therefore, she points out that Åland matched her mood and indulged her introverted and silence-seeking side. She concludes the post with the mention that her visit to Åland was a part of the Nordic Bloggers Experience and courtesy of Visit Åland.

After the journey to Åland they explored the city of Helsinki, which they have visited once before. She tells that at first glance, she found Finland’s capital to be quite daunting, since “the people, all stylish and slim and pretty, also seemed distant, and aided in my mounting self-consciousness as I took their indifference as a slight”. However, she noticed that she has made superficial judgments, since the people are still stylish, but also incredibly helpful and generous once a connection is made. The blogger describes Helsinki to be attractive, but that it does not have the obvious “jaw droppers” that other European cities offer, its beauty shines when you look a little closer.

“It’s in the Kamppi Chapel – also known as the Chapel of Silence – a small but sleek fixture of the busy Narinkka Square, a non-denominational space intended to provide a place of calm and quiet for all those who need it. It’s on the steps of the Helsinki Cathedral – not necessarily for the structure itself – but for the life that buzzes around its edges. For another unique place of worship, look to the Temppeliaukio Church, which was quarried out of natural bedrock. The beauty is along any stretch of the waterfront, especially when the sun chooses to shine. And finally it’s in the store fronts – while plain and polished on the outside – the glamorous style, quirky antiques, or the multitude of other beautiful displays inside are instantly magnetic.”

Helsinki’s café culture gets mentioned in this blog entry, she describes their favourite thing to do as tourist is to pretend they are locals by settling into a café to work whilst consuming large amounts of coffee. She states that in Helsinki they never had a bad meal, and she points out that “I’ve never heard Finland referred to as a culinary destination and perhaps that should change, what with their dedication to such
traditional foods as Karelian pastries, a savory and yeast-y pancake called blini, and of course, succulent reindeer on nearly every menu.”

After a week exploring Helsinki, the bloggers headed to Kemi, where they experienced LumiLinna snow castle and Sampo icebreaker. The blogger describes Kemi to be a model town for tourism, which defines how an offbeat destination can embrace their state, and turn the winter into something incredibly positive. The ride on the icebreaker’s deck in minus 25 degrees is described to be a formidable experience, the stunning sound of the ship sliding on top of the ice and continuously crushing it beneath will be something that stays with the bloggers forever. She even highlights that Finland is one of the only countries in the world where it is possible for all harbors to become completely frozen, and that Sampo is one of the many icebreaker ships in the country, which enables other ships to come and go. The bloggers got to swim in the frosty sea, wearing wetsuits designed for this activity, and she concludes that “Forget the white sand beach – this is the type of unique experience we came to Finland for. This is how you do winter.”

The fourth post tells about the bloggers trip to Rovaniemi, where they joined a snowmobile safari, tried to see some northern lights, and visited a reindeer farm. She states that all of three excursions were with Lapland Safaris’ excellent guides and gave them unique experiences each time. After these experiences they headed to the village of Hetta in Enontekiö where they got to join a 300 kilometers long husky safari with Hetta Huskies, each running their own dog team, and feeling for the first time that “this is how dog sledding was indented.” She describes the grounds at Hetta Huskie farm to be well laid out and clean, and the 150 dog’s are managed according complex formulas, for example to ensure that dogs are not overrun.

“Our nourishment and rest at the end of the first day came in the form of hot reindeer stew and then fried cheese for dessert, all served in the glow of a grand kota recently built on the property. The warmth came not only from the central fire, reindeer pelts that we slept on and the sleeping bags provided, but the cuddle partners that were included as a part of the excursion. Four of them in total were let in to sleep with us, one nestled in on the other side of my pillow. Each time I raised my head to turn my body over, I could hear his tail thumping against the wall in anticipation of affection.”

The blogger points out that their husky safari was not a normal tourist excursion, and it felt like a grand adventurous expedition. She describes how she went through several mishaps and was close to losing it all, but each time followed the number one rule of dog sledding: to never let go.
The subject of the sixth post is their excursion on Tampere, which she describes to be a city with “photogenic charisma of a former industrial city fully embracing its roots and celebrating its idiosyncrasies.”

“The residents we met were also a charmingly humble bunch – as evidenced by their tourism hashtag of #AllBright, a spin on what they normally say about themselves (that their city is alright, but #Alright was deemed not braggy enough for tourism). It’s easy to see that there is plenty of reasons to get to know more about Finland’s second biggest city.”

As a part of their Tampere experience they tried abseiling on a small tower of 26 meters, and felt a rush of euphoria after dip in a frozen lake. She describes the swimming experience as “the first few seconds, literally breathtaking and a bit uncomfortable, made the following few minutes totally worth it.” A part of the Tampere experiences was also cross-country skiing with skin-based skis through thick snow in a silent forest.

She describes herself as a blogger who often writes the story in her head as the experience happens, but sometimes there are experiences that leave her lost for words because she has got so wrapped up in it that she did not want to be disturbed. One of these experiences is their stay on Lake Saimaa by Finnish couple Mari and Henri; the blogger states that after the stay the only words were “these are our people”. As mentioned earlier, these bloggers have visited Finland once before, by that time they based their appreciation for the country on those qualities they were exposed to: a similar adoration of hockey, extreme love of coffee, and connectivity to nature. Nevertheless, what it comes for the Finnish themselves, they met many but got to know few. This visit to Finland was different, since on this trip the bloggers had more time. The more people they engaged with, the more connected they felt to Finland itself. They got indulged with the traditional food by baking Finnish rye bread, cinnamon buns and ‘laskiaispulla’, and were treated to food sourced locally and naturally. She concludes her post about this experience with the following words: “Our thrilling adventure ride across Finland was one thing to love, but those few days on Lake Saimaa confirmed that our favourite thing about the country is the people within. In the cold of a Finnish winter, we found nothing but pure warmth.”

The last post produced by these bloggers is considering silence. She points out that silence is a resource, since it is an invisible force for good, although an often forgotten and under-utilized one.

“In the busyness of daily life it is easy to forget to stop. To slow down. To rediscover
She writes that after a frantic pace they had been keeping for the couple of weeks, the last few days were to be spent indulging in Finland’s greatest natural resource of silence. They visited at the Järvisydän resort on Lake Saimaa for ice-skating, kick sledding and ice fishing, and naturally, the optimal experience of Finnish peace and silence ends in the sauna. All the posts written by this couple are ended with the mention that “this post was produced by us, brought to you by Visit Finland.”

**Travel blog 12.**

The writer behind this blog is a British male living in Norway. He has published one post about his visit to Finland; the post consists of 3398 words and 129 phrases. In the post he is describing the culinary experiments, which he has had in Helsinki, some of them during the NBE 2015, and some of them in previous years. He states that the Finnish capital has become the hottest place for food lovers in Scandinavia, and what surprised him was the sheer range and quality of restaurants, bars, food halls, markets and specialist shops in a city of just 600 000 inhabitants. What he especially likes about the food scene in Helsinki is “the idea of letting the ingredients do the talking – rather than zapping them into something vastly different using liquid nitrogen or altering their molecular structure.”

The blogger presents 10 reasons why Helsinki deserves to be “the king of the Scandinavian food scene”. One of the reasons is The Restaurant Day, which has been discovered in Finland May 2011, and is now the world’s biggest food festival taking place four times a year, in 190 cities in 31 countries. He names Hietalahti indoors market to be a place where one can find top quality ingredients, and eat there too, therefore he states that “the Finns clearly share the same fundamental belief as I do – that life is too short to waste on bad food”. The blogger mentions Anton & Anton grocery store to be an established part of the Helsinki food culture, which is forcing a path that an increasing number of locals are keen to follow.

“It can often feel a little overwhelming to consider reinventing the way we look at, buy and prepare food – which is why a fundamental part of the Anton & Anton philosophy is to employ staff with a passion for helping customers. This extends beyond recommending which produce to buy to include providing information about where it
comes from and how best to use it. It’s the way grocery shopping used to be and is supposed to be; an experience for the senses and a satisfying part of modern life rather than a chore to be completed as quickly as possible.”

He describes Finns to be nation that consumes coffee 10kg per person per year, and a tempting venue for that activity is the Karl Fazer Café. He mentions the company to be one of Finland’s best-loved brands, and its chocolates in particular a source of national pride. Restaurant Lasipalatsi serves high quality, traditional Finnish cuisine in a old-fashioned atmosphere, and at Restaurant Ask the customer can enjoy ‘farm to table’ experience, the blogger states that the meal was definitely one of the best meals he have had anywhere. He describes Restaurant A21 Dining to be a place where dinner is more of an experience than just filling your stomach, and at Manala customers can and should try reindeer tongue. According to the blogger, the landmark hotel of Helsinki is Hotel Kämp, which is a truly 5-star place, and a choice of visiting dignitaries and celebs. He recommends also visiting Klaus K hotels weekend brunch. He ends the post with mention that he has visited some of the places as a guest of Visit Helsinki and Visit Finland during a complimentary food tour, but all opinions are his own.

Travel blog 13.

The writer of this blog is Belgian female, who has published five posts about NBE and Finland, these posts consists of 2593 words and 162 phrases. The first is about Scandic Hotel Paasi in Helsinki, which she describes to be a hotel that has little something extra, that is a circus theme. Each room in the hotel is dedicated to another circus act or trick, and decorated in a unique way. She tells that she was happy with breakfast everywhere during her trip to Finland, since the hotels serve lots of healthy alternatives.

The blogger visited the city of Turku, which she describes to be the oldest Finnish city, founded in 13th century. She suggests that travellers should visit Turku’s indoor market hall called Kauppahalli, which contain 42 stores. At restaurant Smör the bloggers got to prepare their own lunch, and at Terraviiva tile store they got to create their own tiles. Turku’s history can be explored in Turku castle’s museum, and blue hour along the Aura River is perfect time to capture the light, since Turku has some photogenic spots.

The blogger points out that Finland’s archipelago is the largest in the world with over 40 000 islands, and that is where they visited old fisherman’s village Herrankukkaro. There they got experience campfire, taste warm tar drink, and prepare fish and sausage on the fire. Herrankukkaro’s smoke sauna is the largest in the world, with room for 124 people. She states that the highlight of their stay is the dinner, which is homemade,
almost all the ingredients coming straight out of the nature. The combination of the
cold, the sauna, and the amazing food lefts her completely fulfilled, after all that she
spends night sleeping in the boat. She ends her post with a disclaimer, where she states
that the visit was a part of larger press trip with Visit Finland and Visit Turku, and trips
like these allow her to travel more and gather fresh content for the blog, but they will
never affect her opinion.

In Helsinki she meets Stepan Sarpaneva, who is an independent watchmaker at the top
of the exclusive watchmaking. It takes years for his watches to be finished, and they
often have features no other watch in the world has. Uniqueness of his watches resides
in the design, details and mechanism. Therefore, the bloggers states that Sarpaneva is
an artist and craftsman in one, what he creates are works of art.

“Exclusive items. As in, highly exclusive, very limited edition, handmade luxury
exclusive items. I never understood how someone could pay huge amounts of money
for them. Even when €10,000 is like pocket change to someone, I just couldn’t
understand why you’d pay that for something like, let’s say, a watch. Until I met
Stepan Sarpaneva.”
6 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The research result will be now analysed and compared to each other in order to be able to achieve the purpose of the study. The results from the analysis will be compared to the theoretical framework, and the analysis of the study and the implications will be presented.

During open coding the empirical research data were analyzed sentence by sentence, the aim of the process was to identify concepts that will describe travellers’ experiences, and define how Finland’s destination image can take shape in manners of blog entries. These concepts were compared with each other during the process of constant comparative analysis when data were related to ideas, and after these ideas were related to other ideas. After the open coding, the concepts were linked together in the stage of axial coding; this is the how main categories were developed. These categories are presented in the next part of this thesis.

6.1 The categories emerged from the GT analysis

From analysis of the findings can be drawn one main core category and five sub-categories, these categories define how travel bloggers have experienced Finland as travel destination, therefore these categories can be considered as Finland’s branding resources. These categories are main category nature, and sub-categories culture, food culture, activities, history and residents. In some degree the dimensions of categories determined in selective coding are linked or overlapping with each other. After selective coding the analysis is conducted further by reflecting these found categories to the theoretical framework of the thesis, especially to Finland’s brand promise, the four C’s determined by Visit Finland. The categories found from the analysis are summarized in Figure 4 (see page 67). The mind-map in Figure 4 represents how I have classified concepts, which illustrate bloggers impressions defined in this study. The words written in small font are those concepts, which emerged from the open coding. After open coding, the relationships between the concepts were defined in axial coding, which resulted one main category nature, and five sub-categories that are all in some degree connected with the main category.
6.1.1. Nature

The main branding resource of Finland according to this study is nature. The Finnish nature has been experienced as contrasting; it appears from the findings that the travel bloggers experience the contrast between winter and summer to be astonishing. In winter Finland is covered with snow and ice but at spring, after a short period it all blooms up again. Finland is experienced as two countries in one; the travel experience is completely different depending on the season.

The difference between eastern and western parts does not appear in the findings of this study, but it probably depends on circumstances. Nordic Blogger Experience organization had this year chosen Lapland, Tampere, Helsinki, Porvoo, Turku Archipelago and Lake Saimaa to be the destinations promoted, and therefore the role of the other parts of Finland is faint on the findings. However, there can be sensed a contrast between southern parts and northern parts of Finland; southern Finland is described as combination of urban areas and nature, whereas northern Finland is more about pristine nature and unhurried life.

Northern lights have been perceived as a unique experience, since there is no guarantee to see them. Although the traveller can experience the stillness of nature to be in some degree intimidating, seeing northern lights creates feeling of a powerful connection to the nature. The same pattern can be recognized in activities performed on a frozen lake, since the frozen lake can concurrently be perceived as beautiful but scary. The variation between the winter darkness in polar night, northern lights and the magical blue hour has been seen as contrasting. For some bloggers the coldness is a negative thing, on the other hand the same bloggers admit that the freshness of air can be exhilarating, and sensory awakening. Even though in Lapland it can be so cold that it is impossible to perform any outdoor activities, the bloggers feel these circumstances to be positive thing, since it is nice to experience the contrast between the cozy warmness inside, and freezing coldness outside.

From the findings of this study it can be deduced that the bloggers have to great extent perceived Finnish nature as cool; the winter freshness had give energy to the bloggers, and interaction between nature and comfort has been perceived as authentic. Author of the blog 11 states that tranquillity and silence are nature resources that are easy to access in Finland, since nature and stillness is not more than few minutes from the biggest cities.
6.1.2. Culture

Visit Finland’s aim is to present Finland as a destination that is culturally attractive. From the findings of this study appears that the cultural concept is very multifaceted in its’ nature, since Finland’s culture is described to be in some degree odd, and full of curious traditions and customs. Sauna rituals are a thing that appears nearly in every blog, and contradiction between warm sauna and swimming in the ice-cold lake or sea has been noticed, altogether sauna is perceived as quintessential Finnish experience where on gets together with friend, however in silence. In addition, sauna culture has been perceived in some degree as cool and odd ritual, since one has to perform naked in front of the strangers, which can be quirky experience for foreigners. The relationship between sauna traditions and nature is evident, since travel bloggers sauna experiences have also included swimming in wild waters. Finnish music has been perceived as creative and cool, air-guitar world champion ship in Oulu is a unique event, and children are teached to listen heavy metal music right from the start. The creativeness also emerges from the finding describing how there are even exclusive items designed and prepared in Finland.

Sami culture in Finnish Lapland is seen as a tradition that has morphed in tourist activities and is keeping locals in business, consequently the tourism is keeping the Sami culture alive. Although, as the author of the travel blog 10 states, in generally tourists may have negative influence to native cultures, but in Lapland tourism have been acting as a sustaining factor that keeps the culture existing. From the findings of the analysis it can be drawn conclusions that travel bloggers have perceived Sami culture as cool, since it is unique and authentic, in addition it can be stated that Sami traditions even can be seen as credible, since Finland has managed to keep alive this kind of rare indigenous people and culture.

6.1.3. Food culture

An analysis of the findings shows that food culture in Finland has been perceived as creative and cool; the idea of the Restaurant Day has been discovered in Finland, in addition, in Finland it is possible to a tourist to catch his own meal and bring it to the restaurant to be prepared for a dinner, which can be seen as quite trendy thing. Commonly Finland’s brand image in the context of food culture has been underrated, for instance when compared with Italy. However, the author of the travel blog 12 states
that Finland is not seen as culinary destination eventhough there is a range of world-class restaurants in Helsinki, and the food is amazingly good, since the idea of letting ingredients to do talking. Among the travel blogs examined food culture has been perceived as traditional, food is sourced naturally and it is locally grown, therefore an implication can be made that relationship between main category nature and food culture is prominent. It can be sensed from the analysis of the findings that food culture in Finland is even contrasting; the traditional food is bound with the areas, in Åland and Turku Archipelago to great extent fish is main the ingredient, where as at the Mikkeli region rye bread is more common food or blinis, which are originally coming from Russia. The relationship between Finnish residents and food culture is perceived as stringent; the bloggers have experienced that local people in Finland are increasingly keen to reinvent the way they view, purchase and prepare food. This kind of fashion is even been perceived at the Finnish accommodation, when compared to other European countries and their hotels, there are plenty of healthy breakfast alternatives at hotels Finland.

6.1.4. Activities

From the findings of the study in can be deduced that activities, which travel blogger’s have experienced in their journey in Finland, have been perceived as credible, contrasting, and cool. The husky safaris’ have been great adventure experiences in cold winter, however, the blogger’s have felt theirselves to be secured and well prepared for the adventure. The husky safari dogs have been well maintained and blogger’s have felt that they are one with the nature. One of the few negative aspects that have been found in the analysis of the finding is that in Lapland there are long distances, it can be expensive for a tourist stay there. The other negative statement is that reindeer safaris can feel artificial. On the other hand, visiting the Lake Saimaa region at the winter has been described to be as more affordable alternative that is easier to reach. Nevertheless, Lapland is also perceived as a travel destination where the traveller can enjoy luxury amenities in wilderness. Luvattumaa ice-hotel has been experienced at the same time as amazing and terrifying unique experience, therefore it can be stated that the word odd describes the uniqueness and coolness of the Finland quite well.

Among the travel blogs examined, the city of Helsinki has been perceived as a place where nature and urban are combined. Helsinki is characterized as contrasting city, which beauty shines when the tourist looks at little closer. In winter Helsinki can be on
one day grey and cold, and in next day covered in fresh layer of snow, seasoned with blue twilights. Eventhough Helsinki is not filled with historical monuments as other European cities, there can be found glamorous style of shops or unique places of worship as Temppeliaukio church. One of the most exciting activities that some of the bloggers had experienced during their visit to Helsinki was a helicopter ride over the city, however it was be described to be credible, since due to the new equipments, the bloggers were feeling safe during the ride.

Based on the finding of the study, it can be stated that Finland is one of the few countries where tourists can visit a tranquil world heritage site. The city of Rauma was perceived by the bloggers to be an oddly quiet tourist attraction which propably cannot be experienced every place, in contrats for crowded word heritage sites in other countries. An analysis of the findings shows that creativeness is recognizable feature in the image of Finland; the author of the travel blog 11 highlights the city of Kemi to be a positive example of a small city where winter activities had turned a bizarre city to a model town of tourism. Finland is also highlighted to be a country where natural surroundings have inspired Finns to develop unique technical innovations; Finland is one the only countries where it is enabled for boats to come and go harbors in wintertime when the sea covered with ice. Due to the icebreakers, the tourists are able to try experiences like floating in the icy sea, which is not possible in many countries. The island of Åland is perceived in some degree to be cool; the tranquil lifestyle of the remote island has indulged the bloggers introverted and silence seeking side. In same manners, visit to Herrankukkaro in Rymättylä is experienced as a return to roots and values of the area, consequently travel bloggers have been excited about the authenticity of the place.

From the findings of the study it can be deduced that activities conducted in Finland are perceived quite healthy by the bloggers. Ice swimming is described to make swimmers immune system to go maxim capacity, and cross-country skiing is experienced as a good activity, which is healthy and fun at the same time. Ice-fishing is perceived to be the Finnish version of meditation, where the immediacy of magical frozen scenery produces emotional value and leaves touchpoints in the minds of travellers.
6.1.5. History

Among the travel blogs examined in this study has the history of Finland got minor comments. Naturally, history is something that is difficult to experience, and research has shown that potential visitors are not willing to receive amounts of information about a country’s history. The historical stories told about Finland by the bloggers are contrasting and in some degree cool, or more precisely odd. The author of the travel blog 5 has perceived the visit to Lake Bodom as a weird experience, since the lake is surrounded with tranquil nature, and it is difficult to imagine what has happened there. The stories about Finnish prohibition and the bootleggers have carried the bloggers back in time to roots and values of the Turku archipelago. Based on the analysis of the findings of this study, is Finnish architecture mentioned in some degree in the findings, and Suomenlinna and city of Turku are perceived as photogenical places with all the historical buildings.

6.1.6. Residents

The role of the Finnish residents is quite minor in the findings of this study, however it can depend on time of the year, since the bloggers had noticed that at winter time there was few locals strolling out. From the analysis of the findings emerges quite contradictory impression about Finnish residents. On the one hand Finnish people is perceived to feel bit daunting and distant, on the other hand they are described to be lovable people. A traveller’s first hand experience can influence a country’s image, since national stereotypes are easily associated with a certain country. However, analysis of the findings indicates that these stereotypes existing in travel blogger’s mind can be changed. The more Finns the bloggers get engaged with, more connected they felt to Finland itself. Analysis of the findings shows that to great extent Finns were perceived as charmingly humble bunch of helpful and generous people, when the connection is made.

It is challenging to find connection between Visit Finland’s 4 C’s and this concept emerged from the research data, but it can be stated that the contradiction between warm Finnish people and cold winter can be seen contrasting. In addition, among the travel blogs examined, residents of Finland were characterized even as cool metal heads or ice-hockey fanatics, or as a people who has strong connection with the nature, and can be considered as man of the forest. The connection with the nature was even
perceived to have some influence to the strict efficiency of communication conducted by Finnish inhabitants. Finns were even perceived as people who loves coffee and are well prepared for the coldness of winter, therefore it can be stated that Finns have been seen as creative people, who have assimilated to the unique natural surroundings.

Figure 4  The main categories of the analysis

6.2. Implications and inferences of the study

The most important implications and inferences that have been reached in this study will be now presented. The first research theme in this thesis is how travel bloggers experience Finland as a travel destination. The blog content created by the professional
travel bloggers were extremely versatile in its nature. Some of the bloggers were writing more about their feelings and emotions that the experiences in Finland had generated; whereas some of the blogger’s were only describing their experiences in quite superficial manners. The main category, which emerged from the analysis conducted by grounded theory was nature. Therefore it can be stated that nature is Finland’s strongest destination branding resource, since it has clearly created emotional value for the travel bloggers. The sub-categories emerged from the analysis are all in some degree connected to the main category and with each other. Even though the results received from previous research in area of nation branding suggests that destinations organizations should focus on some other qualities than nature and beautiful landscapes of the countries, it can be seen in the results of this thesis that nature has the main role in the experiences of travel bloggers. The categories from the analysis of this study indicate that travel bloggers perceive nature in Finland as contrasting and cool, the culture in Finland is perceived as creative, cool and credible, and the food culture has been perceived as creative, cool and contrasting, similarly the activities conducted are similarly perceived as credible, cool, contrasting and creative. The history of Finland has been perceived as contrasting and cool, and the resident are perceived as contrasting, cool and creative.

The second research theme was if Visit Finland’s branding strategy is in line with the digital content created by the travel bloggers? More precisely, does the four characteristics “Credible”, “Cool”, “Contrast”, and “Creativeness” actually describe Finland’s image as perceived by travel bloggers? When comparing the main and sub-categories found from the analysis with the brand vision described by Visit Finland, it can be stated that the travel bloggers have perceived Finland to great extent as a country of contrasts, and in some degree bloggers have perceived Finland brand image to be even cool, contrasting and creative.

During the open coding emerged the concept of sustainability, which was connected in some degree with nature and activities. Therefore Visit Finland could adjust Finland’s brand promise a little bit, and include the dimensions of sustainability in Finland’s brand essence. It emerged from the research data that for instance huskies at the husky farm were very well maintained, and the existence of the Sami culture was depended on the tourism business. Therefore, I think that sustainable development would be appropriate addition for the attributes, which define Finland as travel destination. Another attribute that I think has minor role in the branding of Finland is
the role of inhabitants. In the findings of the data of this study the amount of experiences concerning the Finnis people was quite faint, but these minor stories written about people the blogger had met during the visit were very positive. As it raised up from the findings, meeting of the local people will leave a stronger associations about a country.

Altogether the bloggers describe their experiences about Finland as destination in very positive manners. What I found interesting is that twelve bloggers from thirteen assures at end of their blog entries that postings about their experiences has been produces in collaboration with the local DMO’s but that the opinions are their own. Therefore, it can be stated that blog contents used for analysis of this study can be considered as amplified eWOM, which occurs when DMO’s encourage bloggers to write about their experiences. Consequently, it needs to be taken in consideration that Visit Finland is trying to influence consumers in a way, which raises considerable ethical issues, since it is not all the obvious whether positive blog entries are from sponsored or real traveller. If the blog entries written by bloggers collaborating with Visit Finland are credible or not, will at the end remain as conclusion of the readers, but it can not be underestimated that these bloggers are the opinion formers of their own branch, this is proven by the amount of followers in the platforms of social media.
7 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how international travel bloggers has perceived Finland as travel destination. The aim of the thesis was to attempt to interpret, and understand how a blogger writing in professional manners experiences Finland, and relays these experiences in his or her blog entries. In order for this to be possible, it was important to gain a deeper understanding about destination branding strategies.

Two different research themes were further presented with the hopes of getting a deeper understanding of the issues. The method used in this thesis was a qualitative research method conducted using an abductive research approach. The data material for analysis was collected from the travel blogs with netnographic method between March and May 2105. The research data material was analysed with qualitative content analysis, and further conceptualized with grounded theory method.

Based on the analysis of the findings of the study presented in this thesis, it can be concluded that the brand essence of Finland is the main category nature, which is linked whit sub-categories culture, food-culture, activities, history and residents. However, it can be stated that the tourist-created content in the blogs can even be considered as amplified eWOM. It can also be stated that Finland is perceived by professional travel bloggers to great extent as as country of contrats, and in some degree as cool, credible and creative.

The research questions posed in this thesis were answered by analysis the empirical findings as well as the theoretical framework presented in this thesis, and therefore the aim of the thesis can also be said to been fulfilled. In conclusion it can be determined that challenges of destination branding are becoming ever more difficult to handle when the interaction between consumers happens even more in social media platforms.

In future research it could be studied how travel bloggers who have come to Finland without any influence from the local DMOs have perceived Finland as travel destination. Another possible research area could be how the target market, meaning the readers of blogs, have perceived Finland’s image when reading the blog entries written by professionell travel bloggers.
SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING

Inledning


Användningen av digitala kanaler har på ett radikalt sätt ändrat konsumenternas sätt att bete sig, konsumenterna har tillägnat sig en aktiv roll angående dialoger med destinationsvarumärket och varumärkesrykte. Vänners rekommendationer anses vara den faktor som mest påverkar konsumenternas beslut. På liknande sätt är webbkollektiv en kontext där konsumenterna ofta engagerar sig i diskussionerna som har som ett mål att informera andra konsumenter om varumärkena. Därför har marknadsföringsmiljön förändrats mycket och det har blivit allt mer krävande att övertyga sin publik. (Munro & Richards 2011)

Turism är ofta den mest synliga aspekten av nation branding, men det måste tas i beaktande att turism är endast en del av branding-processen, därför behövs det en
försiktig sammanställning med andra branding-resurser för att uppnå turismens potential som ett "flaggskepp" för nation eller destination branding. Flera av länderna har redan en varumärkesimage, eftersom människorna har hört någonting om dessa länder eller tror vissa saker om de här länderna. Därför finns det ofta ett behov för en nation att utmana människors fördomar och öppna deras sinne för någonting nytt och relevant. (Anholt 2003a)

**Motivering av studien**

Turismbloggare och resenärer producerar och behärskar onlineresurser vilka möjliggör undersökning av resedestinationer och aktiviteter. Därtill finns det mycket information på nätet som hjälper turister att ta ett beslut före resan, och samtidigt hjälper denna information turismorganisationer att fatta viktiga beslut angående marknadsföringen av destinationer. Internet har underlättat konsumenternas sätt att kommunicera med varandra och även med varumärkesägarna, därför har makten övergått från försäljarna till inköparna, och konsumering är inte längre beroende av försäljarens beslut. Lyckad marknadsföring innebär att marknadsföringsmixen är kundanpassad och att det finns utrymme för konsumenterna att ta del i processen. Framtidens konsumenter kommer att vara mer krävande, informationsintensiva och väldigt individualistiska. Därför är interaktiv digital mediainnehåll ett bra verktyg för turismorganisationer att skapa kundanpassat budskap, samtidigt som det ger konsumenterna en möjlighet att ha onlineinteraktion med andra användare.

Blogginnehållet skrivet av turismbloggarna kan förse turismorganisationerna med värdefull marknadsinformation och forskningsdata för marknadsundersökningar. Även om social media är populärt ämne inom marknadsföringsundersökningar, finns det brist på teoretisk kunskap och empiriska undersökningar angående rollen av WEB 2.0, turisternas makt och det innehåll de producerar i avsikt att bygga upp ett varumärke för en destination. Eftersom flera länder och destinationer annonserar likadana egenskaper, så som natur, historia och kultur, kräver effektiv varumärkesprofilering av destinationer unika försäljnings propositioner vilka i sig skall vara hållbara, trovärdiga och relevanta (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott 2002). Landets eller destinationens image spelar en viktig roll eftersom den påverkar turisternas beslut. Litteratur skriven om destination branding betonar att "word-of-mouth" eller ett råd från vänner ofta betraktas som den mest effektfulla informationskällan före inköpet. (Aram 2011)

Syfte

Syftet med detta arbete är att undersöka hur internationella resebloggare kommunicerar ut sina upplevelser om Finland som resedestination. Detta arbete kommer att presentera olika metoder för hur länder eller destinationer kan brandas, speciellt när det används innehåll som är skapat av konsumenter. Syftet med detta arbete är även att analysera och tolka hur de här resebloggarna upplever Finland och förmedlar dessa upplevelser i sina bloggar. För att uppnå en förståelse över fenomenet är det viktigt att reflektera över hur nation branding-strategier opereras, så som aspekter som finns kring fenomenet nation branding i kontext av social media och bloggning. Från ett praktiskt perspektiv kommer denna studie att lyfta fram ny information om hur Finland upplevs som resedestination. Baserat på syftet kan arbetets viktigaste forskningsfrågor fastställas, och de är:

• Hur upplever resebloggarna Finland som resedestination och hur kommunicerar de ut dessa upplevelser in sina resebloggar?
• Är Visit Finlands brandingstrategi i linje med det digitala innehållet skapat av resebloggarna? Beskriver de fyra karakteristika ”Credible”, ”Cool”, ”Contrast” och ”Creativeness” Finland som en resedestination?

Presentation av tidigare forskning

Selektiva delar av destination branding, såsom logodesign. Strategisk brand leadning-process innefattar design och implementering av marknadsföringsplaner och aktiviteter för att konstruera, mäta och leda varumärkeskapitalet. Strategisk brand leadning-process har fyra faser: identifiering och utveckling av varumärkesplanen, planering och implementering av varumärkets marknadsföringsplaner, mätning och tolkning av varumärkesperformans, och ökning och bevarande av varumärkeskapitalet (Keller 2013:58). I nation branding är målsättningen att skapa en klar, enkel, urskiljbar uppfattning om landet som är grundad på emotionella egenskaper som kan vara symboliserade både visuellt och skriftligt (Fan 2006).

Fan (2006) hävdar att syftet med nationsvarumärket, budskapet det försöker kommunicera ut och även objektet för kommunikationen måste vara identifierade innan kampanjer läggas fram. För att uppnå framgångsrik kommunikation av landvarumärkets värde borde budskapet vara av speciell karaktär; budskapet borde möjliggöra att landet kan positionera sig mot konkurrenterna. Dock är annonsering av en nations image till en internationell publik en utmanande process, eftersom nationell identitet är svår att definiera. För det andra är det utmanande att kommunicera ut enstaka image eller budskap för olika publik i olika länder; dilemmat i nation branding är att forma en helgjuten helhet för alla publik och i alla situationer.

genomföring är en utmaning för turismorganisationerna eftersom det finns så stor variation inom turismprodukterna.


som finns i avseende med branding och ersätta dessa linjer med mer öppna processer där konsumenterna kan skapa användargenererat innehåll. Varumärket Finlands touch-points är Organiserade av turismorganisationen Visit Finland som konstaterar att de egenskaper som beskriver Finland som en destination är ”Creative”, ”Contrasting”, ”Credible” och ”Cool”.


Val av metod och genomförandet av undersökningen


Materialet i den empiriska delen av studien blev analyserat med hjälp av innehållsanalys och metoden ”grounded theory”. Dessa metoder har likheter eftersom de båda används för att analysera och tolka kvalitativt undersökningsmaterial. Med innehållsanalys är det möjligt att excerpera och gruppera ord i innehållsrelaterade kategorier där orden delar samma mening. Analysens syfte är att komma fram till en sammanfattad och tydlig beskrivning av fenomenet. ”Grounded theory” är trots metodens namn snarare en kvalitativ forskningsmetod än en teori. Syftet med ”grounded theory” är att forma en teori som belyser studerade data. När man analyserar med ”grounded theory” är meningen att begripa data som är relaterade till det forskade fenomenet och att hitta relationer mellan dessa koncept. ”Grounded theory” sammanfattar materialet steg för steg – från individuella observationer mot
större enheter och teorier om det undersökta fenomenet. (Cho & Lee 2014; Goulding 2005)

Resultatredovisning


En av bloggarna beskriver att Finland är ett land fullt av roliga traditioner och vanor, till exempel har finska barn lärt sig att lyssna på heavy metal-musik med bandet Hevisaurus. Finska ishockeyfanatiker blir nämnda i det empiriska materialet, såsom staden Raumos hantverkare som tillverkar spets på traditionellt sätt, dessutom är Tove Jansson och Johan Ludvig Runeberg välkända författare. Bastu beskrivs som en grundläggande finländsk plats med specifika ritualer; det är ett sätt att umgås med vänner eller njuta av stillheten, även om resenären kan bli generad när man måste vara naken framför främmade människor. Bloggarna har ätit traditionell finländsk mat såsom renlever, blåbärsplag, ”korvapuusti” och rågbröd, och de konstaterar att maten i största delen av Finland är lokalt producerad. En av bloggarna lyfter fram att även om Finland inte är betraktat som en kulinarisk destination, finns det ett stort utbud av högklassiga restauranger i Helsingfors vars idé är att låta råvaror ha ”huvudrollen”.

Aktiviteter som bloggarna upplevde under loppet av sin Finlandsresa var bland annat fantastisk huskysafari, snöskoterkörning, pilkning, vinterbadande och helikopterätning över Helsingfors. Bloggarna upplevde dessa aktiviteter som spännande och rafflande
men samtidigt kände de sig trygga. Åland upplevdes som ett ställe där man kan känna sig tillfredsställd. Historien var den minst representerade av kategorierna och invånarna i Finland upplevdes av bloggarna som tysta men gästvänliga. Baserat på analysen av undersökningens resultat framkom att Finland upplevs till största delen som ”Contrasting” och ”Cool”, medan ”Creative” och ”Credible” är egenskaper som inte beskriver Finland lika mycket.

**Avslutning**


Baserat på resultaten och analysen som presenterades i arbetet kan det dras slutsatsen att det är en utmanande process för nation branding-organisationer att stärka ett lands varumärke genom användargenererat innehåll. De två forskningsfrågorna som ställdes i arbetet besvarades genom att analysera resultaten från den empiriska undersökningen samt den teoretiska referensramen som presenterades i arbetet, och således kan det även konstateras att syftet har uppfyllts.
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