Dutch travel agencies' employees' images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination

Anu Rahikainen

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

Author(s)
Anu Rahikainen

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The objective and main research problem of the thesis was to examine Dutch travel agencies' employees' images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination. In addition the study was investigating what are the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images based on and what type of travel services would interest them in Finland.

The thesis was conducted for a commissioner Green Cap Tours, which is a Finnish tour operator that focuses on sustainable travel services and aims to provide their customers experiences and tours that many of them have not had before. The Dutch travel agencies were chosen as a target group as their employees are in an influencing role when customers make their decisions and therefore investigating their images could give a broader view than focusing on individual consumers.

The theoretical framework was gathered from literature, academic articles, and professional websites. It defines the concept of tourism destination, destination image and its formation as well as destination branding. Additionally, the theoretical framework gives an insight of Finland as a tourism destination and shares some statistical information of Dutch tourists' travel behaviour in Finland.

The research method was quantitative and data were collected by an online survey, which was sent as a link to different travel agencies email addresses. The data were collected during ten day period and 28 responses were gathered from different travel companies. The survey consisted mainly of close-ended questions, however there were also two open-ended questions and one Likert-scale question. The data were analysed by using different analysing methods and filtering.

The findings indicated that the Dutch travel agencies' employees based their image mostly on own experience, media sources – especially on social media and to word of mouth. Based on the findings the sample of Dutch travel agencies' employees had in general an image of Finland as a safe destination with multiple other attractive qualities, however cultural and historical factors were seen slightly less interesting and desirable as the nature elements, which were considered nearly as the backbone of Finland as a travel destination. Moreover, Finland was considered as a winter destination and often associated with Lapland, snow, and winter activities.

Keywords
Destination image, tourism destination, destination branding

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1 Introduction

Destination image is in a key role when individuals are deciding on their next travel destination, therefore it is necessary for destination management organizations and other tourism managers to be aware of and to understand the image of their destination, however, also to explore the critical factors which influence the image. (Baloglu & McClearly 1999, 868-869; Shani & Wang 2011, 139.)

The idea of the study raised from the knowledge of Dutch tourists being increasingly important part of the tourist flow in Finland, however also from the author's personal situation living in The Netherlands. The study is conducted for a commissioner Green Cap Tours, which is a Finnish tour operator founded in 2015 with the idea of helping travellers to explore and discover a side of Helsinki that many of them have not experienced before. Travel attractions and tour packages are designed with the thought of making the travellers explore the city in a different way, off from the beaten paths and while learning and becoming familiar of architecture, culture, history, cuisine, design, and local people. From the beginning of the company's operations the objective has been to offer travellers sustainable ways to discover Helsinki, therefore most of the tours are designed as walking tours or by utilizing public transportation when possible. Each year annual sustainable goals are set, and they are measured during the year to obtain the quality and to keep the operations as sustainable as possible. (Green Cap Tours 2021; Green Cap Tours 2021a)

The objectives of the study were created based on the commissioner's requirements on gathering information and knowledge of Dutch travel agencies' employees' images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination and of what kind of services they would be interested in Finland. The Dutch travel agencies were chosen as a target group as they are in an influencing role when customers make decision and therefore it could possibly give a broader view than examining from the consumers point of view. Additionally, it could work as a way of marketing and making Green Cap Tours' name familiar to the travel agencies, as well as to possibly gain some companies to cooperate with. Understanding the destination image provides valuable information and can help with future marketing plans and campaigns. Furthermore, it is essential to understand which factors influence individual's or group's destination image to be able to benefit from the image or to change someone's behaviour. (Shani & Wang 2011, 139.)

The main objective of the study was to examine and find answers to the main research question "What are the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination?" Additionally, the objective was to investigate what are their images based on and what kind of travel services would interest the Dutch travel

agencies' employees in Finland. The study was approached by collecting a theoretical background from literature, academic articles, and professional websites. Additionally, an online survey was created and sent via email to Dutch travel agencies to gather their images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination.

The thesis consists of literature review, methodology, findings of the study, discussion, and conclusion. Firstly, chapter two and three present the theoretical framework of the study which gives an understanding for the subject by explaining destination image, its formation and destination branding. Secondly, the chapter three introduces Finland as a tourism destination and its different tourism regions. In addition, the chapter gives an insight of statistical information of Dutch travellers' pre-pandemic travel, as well as what type of travel related data search they have done regarding Finland.

The literature review is followed with chapter four focusing on the methodology of the study. The chapter presents the research method, survey- and data collection, as well as the data analysis methods. The study was conducted with quantitative research method and data were collected with an online survey. The chapter describes the survey design process and what kind of factors were influencing its creation. Lastly, the chapter explains the analysis - and filtering methods used in this study.

Chapter five presents the findings of the survey. Graphs and diagrams are used in majority of the questions to make the outcome visual.

The findings are followed with chapter six that combines the key findings of the study with the theory in the literature review, as well as introduces few recommendations for the commissioner, commissioner's comments, validity, and reliability, as well as the author's self-reflection. Lastly the conclusion for the main- and sub research questions of the study are presented in chapter seven.

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2 Destination image and branding

This chapter introduces first part of the literature review, and it is gathered from literature, academic articles, and professional websites. First the chapter introduces the concept of tourism destination and what kind of elements influence its attractiveness. Secondly it introduces destination image and destination image formation process. Thirdly, it gives an insight of destination branding and its importance.

2.1 Tourism destination

Most of tourism activities take place in tourism destinations, therefore they form a baseline for the tourism system. Tourism destination can be defined as a place away from home, that attracts visitors for a temporary stay, at least for one overnight. It is a place where tourists are going to spend their time, and it can geographically vary in size. For example, it can be a town, a village, a city, a region, or an island, an entire country or even multi-country regions or continents. In morphology a tourism destination can be coastal, mountainous, island, urban or rural. Destination can be a single location, a set of multiple locations that form a tour, or even mobile destination, such as an ocean cruise. (Pike 2004, chapter 1; Lohmann & Panosso Netto 2017, 206-206; Wang & Pizam 2011, 115.)

It is suggested that there are five different elements that influence the attractiveness of a tourism destination. These elements are:

1. Tourist attractions,
2. Amenities,
3. Accessibility,
4. Image, and
5. Price

Tourist attractions refers to natural (climate, scenery, beaches), built (historical sites, amusement parks), cultural (museums, art galleries), and social (local inhabitants) factors that a destination has to offer. Amenities indicate for example lodging, transportation, food- and beverage services, shops, entertainment, and tourist information centres. Additionally, capacity and quality of accommodations offered are particularly important, for the success and development of a tourism destination. Accessibility refers to how easy it is to get to a destination, as well as to travel within it. Image is an essential part of tourism marketing as well as influencing tourist's ideas and impressions that they have of a destination. It is a key factor for tourist's destination choosing process. Increasing competition between destinations require efficient tourism marketing plan and strategy. There are various distribution channels that contribute to promoting destination's image, such as tour operators, and travel agencies, recommendations from family and friends, word of mouth,

different media channels, movies, literature, and previous experience, among other factors. Lastly, tourist's destination choice is influenced by price, which varies based on type or class of service, seasonality, and distance to destination. Price can also characterize which type of tourism destination a place is, and attract different tourist profiles, such as luxury travellers or budget travellers. (Cho 2000, 144-145; Lohmann & Panosso Netto 2017, 205-206.)

2.2 Destination image

Destination image is commonly defined as impressions of a place or perception of an area (Pan, Rasouli & Timmermans 2020, 2). It is representing a total set of place impressions or perceptions based on functional expectations, attributes, and symbolic meanings. Destination image is frequently induced as a central device to communicate with target destination consumers for abbreviating unique, positive, and desirable place identity. (Camilleri 2019, 22.)

Since its emergence in the mid-1970s destination image has become one of the most important concepts regarding tourism destinations and their marketing. Contemporary travellers have the option to choose from endless destinations. Therefore, to be able to compare destinations and decide, travellers often rely on mental representations they have regarding each destination. Numerous studies are showing that images play a key-role in tourists' decision-making process. Moreover, recognition of the importance of destination image has also exceeded the boundaries of tourism industry. Many destinations also have non-touristic goals, such as improving their national image or leveraging their international standing. (Shani & Wang 2011, 130-131.)

The study of destination image has become an important part in tourism research, as the destination image decisively influences the tourists' choice of a destination to be visited. Individuals always have an image in their mind, and whether it is positive or negative will affect their decision of desired travel destination. Destination image is constructed with time, and the same destination might represent different image for different people, for example depending on if the person has already visited there or has not visited yet. However, the term image is generally used to describe an overall mental picture, a stereotype of a destination. Therefore, even though an individual can hold somewhat unique mental picture of a destination, there also exists a public and common mental picture or stereotype of a destination. (Echtner & Ritchie 2003, 37; Lohmann & Panosso Netto 2017, 212.)

2.2.1 Destination image formation

It is necessary for destination management organizations and other tourism managers to be aware of and understand the image of their destination, however, also to explore the critical factors which influence the image. Understanding the destination image provides valuable information and can help with future marketing plans and campaigns. Furthermore, it is essential to understand which factors influence individual's or group's destination image to be able to benefit from the image or to change someone's behaviour. (Baloglu & McClearly 1999, 868-869; Shani & Wang 2011, 139.)

There are various elements that help forming destination image. The elements might be gathered from friends or family members experiences of the destination, different sources such as newspapers, magazines, or websites, seen on television or heard on different locations. For contemporary time the internet is highly important source of information, as it can be shared and reviewed by friends and acquaintances, travel agents, advertising, media, travel guides or documentaries. It is generally assumed that the internet is an induced source, and it can influence one's perception of a destination. (Lohmann & Panosso Netto 2017, 212.)

Beerli & Maartin (2004, 661) suggest that both information obtained from different sources and the characteristics of the individual effect the formation of destination image. Based on previous literature Baloglu & McCleary (1999, 870) propose a general theoretical model, which suggest that destination image is formatted by two major factors: stimulus factors and personal factors. Stimulus factors are ones that stem from external stimulus, physical object, and previous experience, and thus influence the forming of perceptions and evaluations. They refer to number of information sources which individuals are exposed to. It also includes information acquired after visiting destination. Personal factors are the social and psychological characteristics of the perceiver. They refer to individuals own needs, motivation, prior knowledge, preferences, and other personal characteristics. From consumer behavioural perspective personal factors refer to sociodemographic characteristics of the individuals, such as age, level of education, place of residence and other characteristics. Perceptual or cognitive evaluation refers to knowledge and believes of an object, whereas affective components refer to feelings about it. Figure 1 presents the general framework of destination image formation. (Baloglu & McCleary 1999, 870; Beerli & Martin 2004, 661-664.)

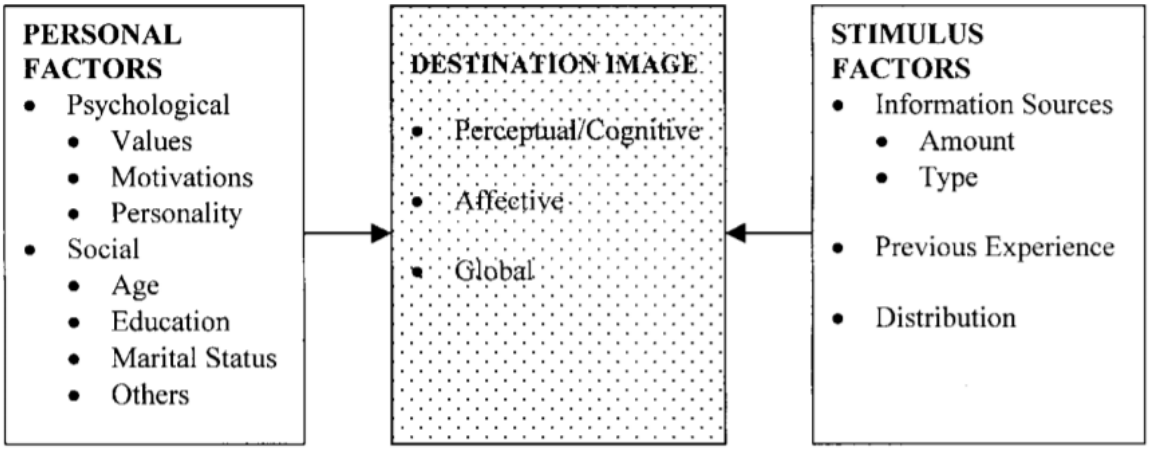

Figure 1. General framework of destination image formation. (Baloglu & McCleary 1999.)

A common agreement among diverse research is that affective evaluations are depended on cognitive assessment, which means that even though there is a distinction made between the two dimensions, they are also interrelated. Both perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations form the overall image of the destination. (Baloglu & McCleary 1999, 873.)

The process of destination image formation highlights two important features. Firstly, it suggests that an individual can have an image of a destination even though he or she has not travelled there or has not been exposed to any commercial material of the destination. Secondly, as there is difference between the images of the individuals who have visited a destination and who have not visited, it is important to separate these images. (Echtner & Ritchie 2003, 39.)

2.2.2 Destination branding

Destination branding has been in an important part of tourism literature in the last decades. Destination branding is considered as an asset for urban development, and it is deeply connected with the need of designing effective branding strategies to attract visitors, foreign investments, as well as skilled and talented manpower. Consumers are generally offered several destination choices that provide similar aspects, such as quality accommodation, beautiful scenery, and friendly inhabitants, among other things. Therefore, a destination needs to stand out, be unique and different to be selected as a final decision. Studying destination branding from this perspective is important and critical for a destination to be identified and differentiated from other alternatives that are in the minds of target market. It is often obtained that destination brand is product resulting from an interactive and ongoing process between governmental and private stakeholders, as well as locals. (Camilleri 2019, 61-62; Qu, Hyunjung Kim & Hyunjung Im 2010, 465.)

Branding is essential part of increasing knowledge of a destination and of creating positive attitudes towards choosing a travel destination (Ritchie & Ritchie 1998, 89). Aaker (1991, 7) defined brand as distinguishing name or symbol, such as logo, trademark, or package design, identifying products or services of either one seller or group of sellers, and to differentiate those from goods of competitors. However, brand is more than a symbol presented to consumers, a brand stands for a promise to the customer. Ritchie & Ritchie (1998, 17) propose that destination branding can be a name, symbol, logo, word, mark, or other aspect that both identifies and differentiates the destination from others; furthermore, it represents the promise of a memorable travel experience that is especially associated with a certain destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasant memories of the experience in the destination. Belch & Belch (2004, 14) suggest that a brand also includes an image or association of what comes to mind when consumers think about a brand. Therefore, a brand can be considered to represent an identity for the producer and image for the consumer. These concepts can be divided to brand identity, which refers to representing self-image and aspired market image, and to brand image, which represents the actual image held by consumers. As Figure 2 illustrates it is suggested that a third overlapping element is brand positioning, which is considered as an interface between brand identity and brand image. (Pike 2004, chapter 5.)

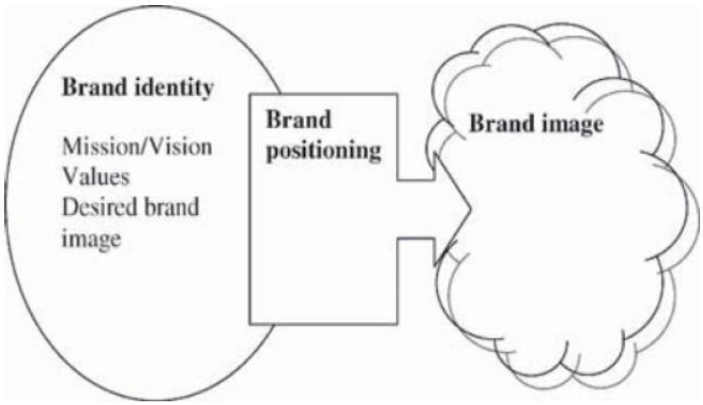

Figure 2. Brand identity, brand positioning and brand image (Pike 2004)

Tourism destination branding is focusing on the purpose of increasing tourism revenues. As tourism has become more economically promising activity, with growing economic impact globally, more destinations emerged to gain a share of travellers. The increase in number of tourism destinations, as well as the use of internet as source of information, have accelerated intense competition for same tourists. All destinations have some form of attractions, whether natural, historical, cultural, or recreational, which are substitutable to some extent. Therefore, tourism destination branding can be considered as strategic choice form destination management organisations (DMOs), of which destinations are marketed as products. The ideal result of destination marketing is to establish strong and

consistent destination brand directed at one or more target markets. It can be considered that all stakeholders in a destination contribute at different levels to creation of destination brand, rooted in social, economic, technological, political, and cultural aspects. (Camilleri 2019, 62; Wang & Pizam 2011, 113-115.)

As mentioned earlier Wang & Pizam (2011, 115) describes destinations as geographic locations with resources, attractions, infrastructure, superstructure, and facilities that are attractive for people to make them want to visit and stay there temporarily for diverse reasons. A tourism destination can be described in multiple layers of geographical entities, which range from small-scale public or private, operational tourism products, such as resorts, hotels, restaurants, or cruise ships to bigger-scale entities of countries, multi- country regions or continents. The branding of operational-level products such as resorts, hotels, and restaurants can both influence and be influenced by branding of encompassing-layer of geographical entities. Therefore, as Figure 3 shows for a destination to be successful in destination branding, they need to be consistent among different layers. (Wang & Pizam 2011, 115-116.)

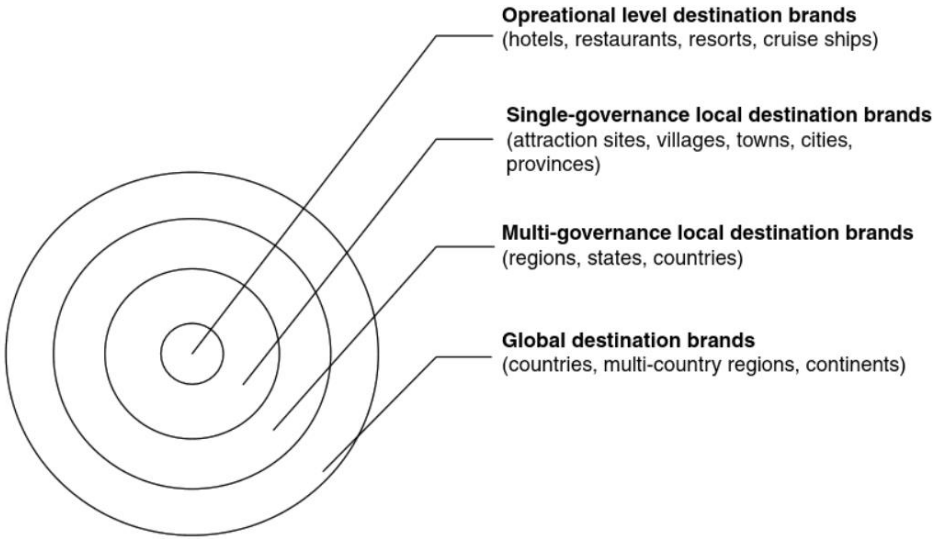

Figure 3. Destinations defined at multiple layers of geographical entities. (Wang & Pizam 2011.)

The bigger the entity, the harder it is to apply branding principles and to reach success due to the complexity of destination product, its tourism operations, and its stakeholders. Therefore, when the branding of individual layer is consistent and integrated, the results are suggested to be in synergy with the thought of whole being greater than its parts. (Wang & Pizam 2011, 116.)

3 Finland as a tourism destination

This chapter introduces Finland as a tourism destination and explains its four different tourism regions. The chapter also shares some statistical information of the Dutch tourists' travel behaviour in Finland pre-pandemic in 2019, as well as what kind of searches they have made online regarding Finland.

3.1 Finland as a tourism destination and its tourism regions

Finland can be considered as a fascinating destination for travellers from all over the world, however it has only quite recently reached the hub of the travel scheme. Nevertheless, it has been considered as a travel destination marginally already for hundreds of years. The tourism development in Finland has progressed rapidly and nowadays Finland is often described as a destination with diverse nature changing seasons, and Nordic exotism, as well as a reliable and responsible travel destination for demanding travellers. (Hemmi 2017, 5.)

Finland can be examined to qualify well as a tourism destination, as it obtains strengths such as attractiveness, modern infrastructure, and favourable location especially regarding wealthy European markets. Finland is in many cases portrayed as "the country of thousand lakes", however they are not the only attractions in the Finnish landscape. Finland has a rich hydrography which consist of lakes, lake chains, rivers and long archipelago coastline with islands and islets. The landscape is completed with forests and hill country, which in the north and east is sparsely inhabited wilderness. (Boniface & Cooper 2012, 186-187; Vuoristo 2002, 251-252.)

Due to Finland's climate, well developed economy, and geographical location, it is suggested to be best for active vacations and outdoor recreation, in which nature-based activities and experiences are dominant. Finland's appeal to foreign tourists lies mainly on its natural resources and it has capitalized to on the growth of ecotourism. However, as a tourism destination Finland is proposed as a modern periphery, indicating a symbiosis of general peripheral attractiveness, and modern services and facilities available for tourist nearly everywhere. Finland has been repeatedly chosen as the Happiest Country in the World, and it also has a reputation as a destination of providing safe and healthy travel for residents and visitors. As the other Nordic countries, Finland is considered as nonthreatening and a good choice for cautious travellers. There are no major safety issues for travellers, yet no country is ever crime-free. (Boniface & Cooper 2012, 186-187; Mapes 2020; Vuoristo 2002, 251-252.)

Finland is geographically a large country; therefore, as Figure 4 shows, Business Finland (2020) divides it into four tourism regions and marketing areas: Helsinki, Coastline and Archipelago, Lakeland, and Lapland. Boniface & Cooper (2012, 188) suggest similarly, however in their perception coastal areas are considered as one larger area which also includes Helsinki metropolitan area.

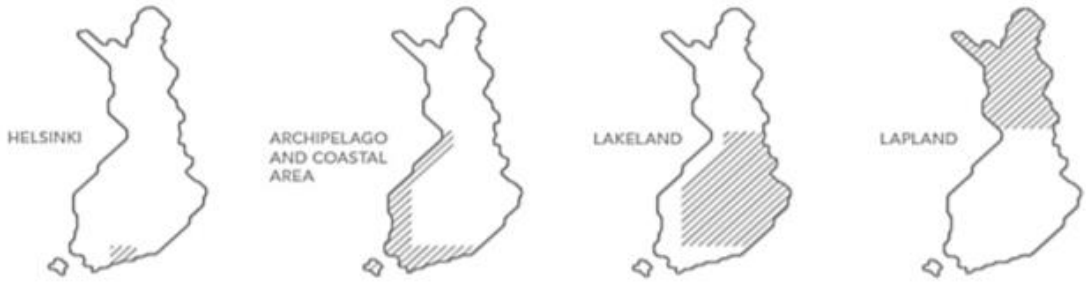

Figure 4. Tourism regions in Finland (Business Finland 2020)

Helsinki region has been continuously recorded as the most popular travel area and holding 43% of all overnight stays in 2019. Lapland comes as second, by holding 25% share of all the overnight stays in the same year. Coastline and Archipelago and Lakeland regions are both with 16% of share of overnight stays. In 2019 overnight stays were growing in all the areas, except Lakeland region as travel from Russia had decreased clearly compared to previous year. Overall, the foreign overnight stays in Finland increased three percent compared to the year 2018, and there were more than seven million overnight stays during the whole year of 2019. (Business Finland 2020)

3.1.1 Helsinki

Helsinki, which is also referred as Helsinki Metropolitan area, consists of Helsinki: the capital city of Finland, and two neighbouring municipalities Espoo and Vantaa. Also, historic town of Porvoo, Järvenpää-Tuusula area are considered as part of the region, as well as ironwork villages that lie west of Helsinki. Helsinki holds a strong stand in the tourism sector in Finland, as it is an international metropolis, with a connection to nature and sea, and therefore it has plenty to offer for local as well as international travellers. According to Visit Finland (2019) some of its key selling points are for example design, architecture, shopping, culture, and urban nature. It is a worthy destination for someone who enjoys different types of events or as a stopover destination. For international travellers, the objective is to promote Helsinki as sustainable holiday destination, increase the awareness of it as a Christmas getaway destination and to lengthen the summer season. (Visit Finland 2021; Visit Finland 2020)

The capital city Helsinki can be easily reached by plane, as well as there are boat connections for example from Estonia, Sweden, and St. Petersburg. The public transportations system has been ranked as one of the best in the world, and therefore commuting within Helsinki as well as to Espoo and Vantaa is convenient and easy. As an even more sustainable alternative, walking and biking is also easy and recommended, as Helsinki is a very compact city and can be easily explored. From Helsinki, there is an easy access to national parks, islands, and lakes, which offer a wide variety of activities. Helsinki region can be considered also as a great starting point or end for a visit in Finland. (Business Finland 2021; Visit Finland 2021)

3.1.2 Coast and Archipelago

Boniface & Cooper (2012, 188) combines Helsinki Metropolitan area together with the rest of the Coastline and Archipelago, and characterises it by its clusters of offshore islands, that offer opportunities for example for sailing and other activities. Similarly, Visit Finland (2019a) defines the key selling points regarding the islands and island hopping, as well as interesting landmarks such as wooden towns, iron villages, and lighthouses.

Finland’s coast boasts the largest archipelago in the world; therefore, it offers a vast maritime culture and laid-back island lifestyle, and coastline towns are especially lively during summer months, with different events, festivals, and markets. There are seven UNESCO World Heritage Cites in Finland, of which three are found and can be experienced in the Coast and Archipelago. (Business Finland 2021a; Visit Finland 2021a)

The autonomous Finnish province of Åland is also part of the Coast and Archipelago region. It is in the Baltic Sea, at the southern end of the Gulf of Bothnia between mainland Finland and Sweden. The Åland islands consist of more than 6,500 islands, however only 60 of them are inhabited. For travellers Åland offers plenty of different activities, such as island-hopping, fishing, boating, biking, and golfing. (Visit Finland 2021b)

3.1.3 Lakeland

Lakeland region offers great opportunities for outdoor recreation as it is vastly covered by forest and has numerous lakes that combine to more than 50,000 kilometres of shoreline. Lakeland region is considered as a popular area in the summertime both within foreigners and locals, as it offers great opportunities for activities, as well as for relaxing. Water activities, such as inland cruises, kayaking, fishing, sup boarding, and swimming are popular ways for spending the day. (Business Finland 2021b; Boniface & Cooper 2012, 188; Visit Finland 2021c)

For foreign tourists Visit Finland (2019b) sets key marketing and selling points such as its numerous, beautiful, and diverse lakes and waterways, as well as forest and opportunities for wildlife watching and photography. Lakeland region is also promoted for cottage holidays and local food. For 2020 the key goals were to raise awareness of Lakeland regions as all year around destination, and to increase its appeal to selected markets, as well as extend the summer season from May to October. (Boniface & Cooper 2012, 188; Visit Finland 2021c)

Lakeland region offers the typical scenery of Finland, with summer cottage by a lake surrounded by green forest. However, there is plenty more to offer for example nearly twenty national parks, lake cruises and water activities, UNESCO World Heritage sites, wildlife, cottages, resorts, and other types of charming accommodations. Also, it offers an opportunity to experience a different style European culture with its countryside charm and small-town traditions. (Business Finland 2021b; Visit Finland 2021c)

3.1.4 Lapland

The northern part of Finland is attractive for foreign tourists, as it offers scope of wilderness holidays, both for independent travellers as well as for package travellers. Lapland is principally considered as a winter destination and for leisure travel. Popular activities during winter are for example reindeer or dog safaris, as well as winter sports such as skiing. Compared to other Nordic countries, Finnish Lapland holds an advantage as it is strongly associated with Christmas and Santa Claus - the most famous Finnish person can be met all year around in Rovaniemi. Even though, Lapland is easily associated with winter during summertime there are also many activities on offer for example canoeing, rafting and mountain biking, which may appeal especially to more adventurous tourists. During summer and autumn, the Lappish forests are filled with wild herbs, berries, and mushrooms to pick. (Boniface & Cooper 2012, 188; Business Finland 2021c; Visit Finland 2021d)

Visit Finland (2019c) also suggests key selling points for Lapland, which are used to make it more visible for tourists. This list incudes for example outdoor resorts, Santa Claus, Sami culture and reindeer, as well as pure air and incredible light. As the objective for 2020 for Lapland region was to raise awareness and promote Lapland as a summer and autumn destinations, and to increase the length of the stay in Lapland.

What makes Lapland appealing to many is that it contains a lot of contrast as for example 24-hour light during summer months versus dark winter days with northern lights. Every season is different, unique, and clearly distinguished from one and another, and it is said

that there are even eight seasons instead of four. Finnish Lapland also has one of the purest and freshest air and water in the world, many national parks, extraordinary accommodation options and magical stories, as well as unique Sami culture. (Business Finland 2021c; Visit Finland 2021d)

3.2 Dutch tourists' travel behaviour in Finland

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of tourists coming from the Netherlands to Finland was growing rapidly. In general, the Dutch travellers had growing appetite for different destinations, and their tourism expenditure was growing. Active, outdoor lifestyle has become popular, as well as interest in design. Two other Nordic countries Norway and Sweden are accommodating approximately three to four times more of Dutch tourists than Finland, therefore it is estimated that there is potential for further growth also in Finland. The growing number of Dutch tourists also attracts product development and furthermore other tourists. (Visit Finland 2019d)

3.2.1 Statistical information of Dutch tourists' travel behaviour in Finland

This chapter introduces some statistics about the Dutch tourists' interests and travel behaviour in Finland. Due to Covid-19 pandemic and its severe effects on the travel industry the information is gathered from the time before the pandemic started, and therefore the information is mainly from year 2019 and before.

As Figure 5 represents, Dutch travellers' interest of Finland as a travel destination has been increasing during recent years and they have become an important part of Finland's tourist flow. In total, there were 262 000 overnight stays in 2019 which meant that they covered 4% of all the overnight stays during the year, and that the Dutch tourists ranked overall as the eighth in the foreign overnight stays. There was a 6% growth compared to the previous year (2018) and 15% growth to the year 2017. (Business Finland 2020a; Statista 2021)

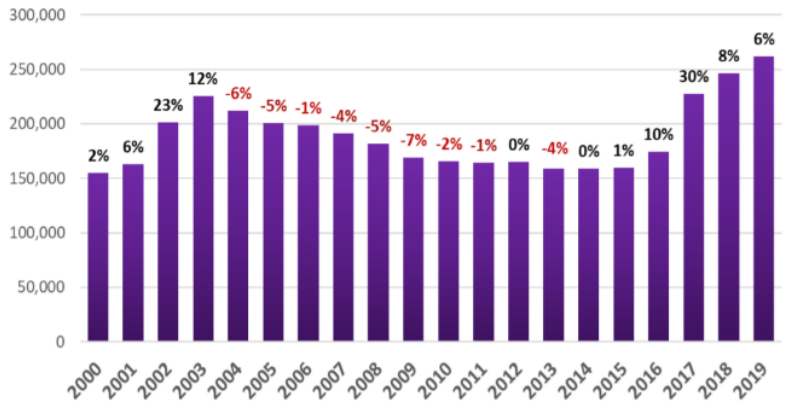

Figure 5. Dutch overnight stays in Finland 2019 (Business Finland 2019e)

As Figure 6 is showing the overnight stays of the Dutch tourists are divided between different regions and most of the Dutch travellers have been recorded to stay in Lapland with 47% share of the overnight stays. Secondly, they have stayed in Helsinki region with 29% share of the overnight stays. Both Coast and Archipelago -, and Lakeland regions welcomed 12% of the Dutch tourist in 2019. All the regions experienced overall growth in the number of Dutch travellers except the Lakeland region that had 6% decline in popularity. However inside different regions there were fluctuation in popularity of different destinations. (Business Finland 2020a)

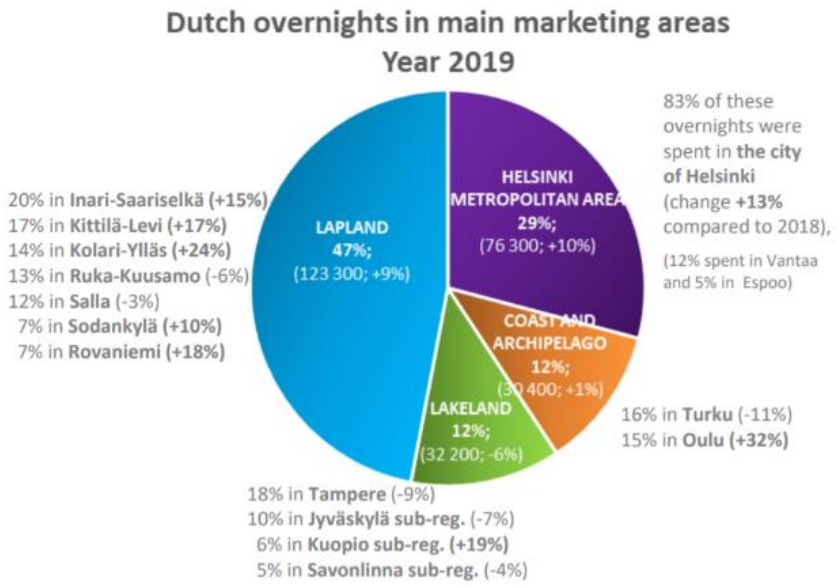

Figure 6. Dutch overnight stays in 2019 (Business Finland 2019e)

As the text in Figure 6 above indicates, there were quite significant increase in different destinations in Lapland, where five of seven destinations had between 10% and 24% increase in their overnight stays. However, the remaining two destinations on the other hand had three to six percent drop on the number of visitors. Nevertheless, the region had overall 9% increase, which is second highest of all the main tourism regions of Finland.

In Helsinki Metropolitan area 83% of overnight stays were spent in the capital city, Helsinki, which was 13% higher compared to the year 2018. Vantaa recorded 12% and Espoo 5% of the remaining overnight stays. Overall, the region had 10% increase in the number of overnight stays, which was the highest within all the main tourism regions. Coach and Archipelago had a one percent increase in their Dutch visitors' overnight stays. Oulu ranked the highest growth for an individual destination with 32% compared to the year 2018. Turku on the other hand was recorded at the other end with the highest drop on the visitors with -11%. Despite the drop of 6% of visitors in the Lakeland region, Kuopio sub-region had an increase of 19%, whereas the other destinations had decrease between four and nine percent. (Business Finland 2020b)

As Figure 7 demonstrates in 2019 the Dutch travellers came to Finland during all the seasons; however, winter months December to February stand out as the most popular with 41% of the overnight stays. Spring months from March to May were second popular with 24% percent of the overnight stays. Summer months from June to August were nearly equal with 22%. Least popular season was autumn, months from September to November with 13% of the overnight stays from all year around.

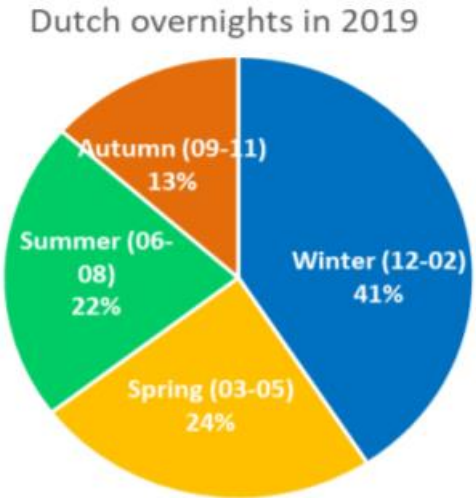

Figure 7. Dutch overnight stays by seasons (Business Finland 2019e)

Before the Covid19-pandemic started to spread all around the world, it was recorded that during January and February 2020 there were more Dutch visitors than during past three years on the same months. (Business Finland 2020b)

3.2.2 Dutch travellers' interests in Finland

Based on information obtained and data collected with the Digital Demand – D2© tool during 2019, Dutch travellers made overall 142 400 tourism related Internet searches regarding Finland, which was 28% more than on the previous year. The data were collected

from analysis of special keywords used by global citizens by using the most popular Internet search engines. (Visit Finland 2019e)

As Figure 8 indicates, in 2019 the most searched topic from the search engines by the Dutch people were holiday packages with more than 20 000 searches, which was 30% more than on the previous year 2018. Secondly the Dutch people were interested of saunas and thirdly about northern lights. Search for saunas had equally 30% growth and norther lights 32% increase compared to the previous year. (Visit Finland 2019e)

The largest percentual growth compared to 2018 was with searching for topic igloos ice hotels with 54% of growth and secondly camping with 41% of growth. There were no words or terms that would have been searched less in 2019 than it was searched in 2018. (Visit Finland 2019e)

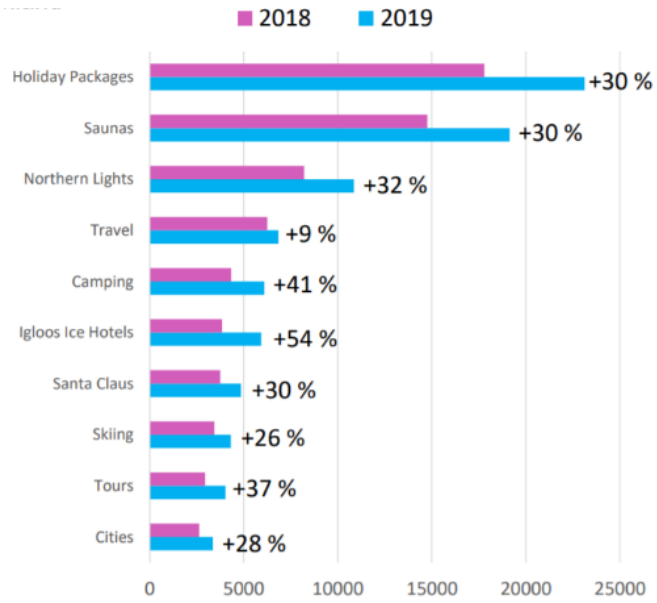

Figure 8. Finland related search terms by Dutch travellers (Visit Finland 2019e)

For both years 2018 and 2019 there were a growth in the searches towards the end of the year, and the highest peak of searches for both years were recorded in December. Similarly, for both years the lowest number of searches were during April, however starting from there, there were nearly continuous growth during both years until the end of the year. (Visit Finland 2019e)

4 Methodology

This chapter introduced the used research method, which in this study was quantitative research. The chapter also includes information of survey as a data collection method, survey design process in which the literature review is supporting the development process, and data analysis methods.

Firstly, the aim of the study was to create an answer to the main research question “What are the Dutch travel agencies’ employees’ images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination?” Secondly the study was finding answers to the questions “What are the Dutch travel agency employees images based on” and “What kind of travel services would interest the Dutch travel agency employees in Finland?”

4.1 Research method

There are two systematic approaches to conduct research: qualitative and quantitative methods, which differ for example in the form of the data collection. Quantitative research is aiming to determine how a variable affects another by quantifying relationships between the measured aspect, whereas qualitative research is aiming to develop an understanding of the context in which the researched phenomena and behaviours take place. Qualitative research is aiming to collect complete, detailed descriptions, whereas in quantitative research the aim is to classify features, count them and construct statistical models of the phenomenon being observed. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have their benefits and disadvantages, therefore mixed methods are also commonly used to receive a broader view and to benefit from both research methods. (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 93-94; Taylor 2010, 55.)

Quantitative data analysis is used to help researchers to answer their research question and to accomplish research objectives by expressing the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of people or characteristics of organization in quantitative terms. Quantitative data can be collected by using different research strategies, however commonly from surveys or experiments. The main purpose of quantitative research is to make reasonable and objective descriptions of a certain phenomenon. The researcher strives to achieve objectivity and try not to let personal biases influence analysing and interpretating the collected data. The aim of the researcher is to seek to understand the phenomenon by isolating and exploring the interrelationship among and between variables. When conducting quantitative study all aspects are planned and designed before data is collected and researcher has a clear idea of what he or she is looking for. In quantitative research the collected data is mainly in form of numbers and statistics. (Altinay & al. 2016, 241; Taylor 2010, 52.)

There are two main research designs within quantitative research: descriptive and experimental. In a descriptive study the main goal is to examine a sample at one specific point in the time without attempting to change its behaviour or its existence. In experimental study the primary goal is to test hypotheses under conditions that the sample is imposed. In this research design it is typical to take measurements, change conditions and make new measurements and compare the results to draw conclusions. The descriptive method was used in this study. (Altinay & al. 2016, 93.)

4.2 Survey and data collection

The design of a questionnaire depends according to the way of delivery, returning, and collection, as well as amount of contact with the respondents. Questionnaires that are self-completed are commonly referred to as surveys. Surveys can be distributed to respondents through different ways, such as web, mobile, post, face-to face or telephone. Quantitative research generally involves surveying many people and using a structured questionnaire with most part of closed-ended and forced-choice questions. Commonly surveys are customed and designed to answer a specific research question or questions. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2016, 440; Taylor 2010, 53.)

While creating a survey it is important to consider the type of data that is collected by using different scales as they play an influential role in analysing the results. Secondly the data needs to be prepared for analysis by being organized, coded, and entered to software packages. Thirdly it is important to consider analysing and calculating statistics, which can be done easily by computers and software. When the survey is involving a convenience sample data can be collected and analysed rather quickly. The result from the survey can be generalized if the survey includes a statistically valid sample and if the response rate is high enough. (Altinay & al. 2016, 241-242.)

The companies were searched from the internet by using business-to-business platforms as well as Google. In total three hundred email addresses were gathered into which the survey link was sent to. The survey was sent two times, to increase the number of responses. Each time the companies or company representatives were given approximately one week to respond to the survey. The initial object was to gather 100 replies from different companies and employees; however, it was discussed that to obtain a coherent sample, 20% of the object was considered as enough due to the target group being hard to reach. Researchers may have difficulties collecting enough data either because target group is small, hard to reach, data is sparse, data collection entitles prohibitive costs, or the participants are part of population that is prone to drop-out. A sample can be defined

as a set of target respondents that are selected from a larger population for the purpose of the survey. (Schoot & Miocevic 2020, 9; Singh 2016, 88.)

The study was conducted over twenty-day period, from June 10, 2021, to June 30, 2021. In total 28 Dutch travel agency employees or company representatives from different companies responded to the online survey and formed the sample of the study.

4.2.1 Survey design

An online survey was created by using Webropol, which is a versatile survey and reporting tool (Webropol 2021). When creating the survey, the commissioner's thoughts were consulted to collect relevant data especially regarding the background information of the companies. The survey draft was also tested by the commissioner and two other people. Based on feedback minor changes were made, however the content of the survey stayed the same.

The survey consisted of thirteen questions, however depending on the answers of the respondents' they were guided to answer between ten and twelve questions. The questionnaire was purposely kept short, to make it more likely to receive replies and for the respondents to pay more attention to it. The survey consisted more of close-ended questions in which the respondents are guided to choose from given options. Whereas in open-ended question the respondents are encouraged to answer with their own words. As open-ended questions are commonly more likely to be skipped, they were avoided. However, there were open-ended questions to receive more in-depth answers and greater variety of responses. The order of the questions was planned in a way that responses would not be too much impacted by previous questions. The survey language was English, therefore technical terms, special words and expressions were avoided to ensure that the questions were understood even though it was not in the native language of the respondents. Also, vague, and imprecise terms were avoided to offer an equal understanding of the meaning of the term. (Harrison 2007)

Before the first question there were a short introduction and instructions to the survey. There was also an indication, that some of the questions were marked as mandatory. There were only a few questions in the survey that were left compulsory, to maximize the data.

The first part of the survey consisted of background questions regarding the companies the respondents were working at. These questions were asked first, as they are commonly quick and easy to answer. The background questions determined the size of the company, what type of travel they organize and what type of customers they serve.

Second part of the questions were about where in Europe the companies sell trips to and to which countries the most, as well as if they organize travel to Finland. All the previous questions were close ended, except for the one that inquired which countries they sell most of their trips to and where in Finland they organize travel to.

The third part consisted of questions regarding the respondent's personal image of Finland as a travel destination. Questions opened and varied depending on if the respondent had travelled to Finland before or not. If they responded that they have, they were directed to answer questions of their image of Finland as a travel destination, what kind of services did they use while visiting and how likely would they recommend Finland as a travel destination on a scale from one to ten. If the respondents answered that they have not travelled to Finland, they were asked a question about their image of Finland as a travel destination, what is their image based on and what kind of travel services would interest them in Finland.

Both groups were asked to answer an open-ended question of what their image of Finland as a travel destination is, in which they were asked to describe their image with few words or adjectives. Everyone was also asked to fill-in a Likert-scale question in which they needed to indicate how certain words or adjectives describes their image of Finland as a travel destination. Likert-scale is one of the most popularly used scales on survey design. It is commonly used for measuring attitude-related propositions on a differentiative scale. In this survey the five - point scale was used with wording strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). The adjectives, statements, and terms used on the question were gathered based on the knowledge base of the study. (Chyung, Roberts, Swanson & Hankinson 2017, 1-2.)

At the end of the survey the respondents were able to leave their contact information if they wanted to receive a small present from Green Cap Tours as a thank you for participating on the survey.

4.3 Data analysis

The analysis of data is in an essential part of conducting research. To handle the collected data responsibly an analysis method was planned and created. In this study most of the questions were close-ended questions, which can be easily analysed as there were only a few options to choose from. The analysing of open-ended questions however requires a lot more attention and precise work to handle and analyse the collected data responsibly. Therefore, data categorising method was used, which groups subjects with similar behaviours, attitudes, or characteristics under same label or category, and eventually summarizes them. This helps to present the data in a clear and coherent way. (Wetcher-Hendricks 2011, 15-18.)

The Likert-scale question is a formal scale, that contains its own intrinsic coding system, therefore by choosing a value from one to five, where response of one suggests low level of agreement, and the value increases with the level of agreement. Therefore, the Likert-scale question does not need further coding. (Wetcher-Hendricks 2011, 18.)

Filtering is used as analysing method for some of the questions, as it allows the omission of certain subjects and filters the data between compared groups. With a relatively small amount of data filtering does not create much challenge and therefore is easy to use. In this study groups are divided based on their travel experience to Finland. The objective was to filter, compare and analyse the answers in three different groups, however due to insufficient number of responses on one of the categories, two categories are being combined as one. This is further elaborated on the following chapter. (Wetcher-Hendricks 2011, 15-19.)

5 Findings

In this chapter the results of the survey are displayed and analysed. The questions have been divided into background questions, which countries trips are mostly sold to, travel experience in Finland, travel services, and image of Finland as a travel destination. The percentages are rounded to even number and this might cause that percentages between groups are not exactly hundred percent. Also, in some questions the respondents were able to choose multiple options, therefore the overall percentages do not equal to hundred percent.

5.1 Background questions

The first background question was determining how many employees there are in the company the respondent was working at. As Figure 9 below shows, in this study, 64% of the respondents worked in a company with five or less employees, 14% in a company with six to ten employees and equally 11% worked in company with 11 to 20 or 21 or more employees.

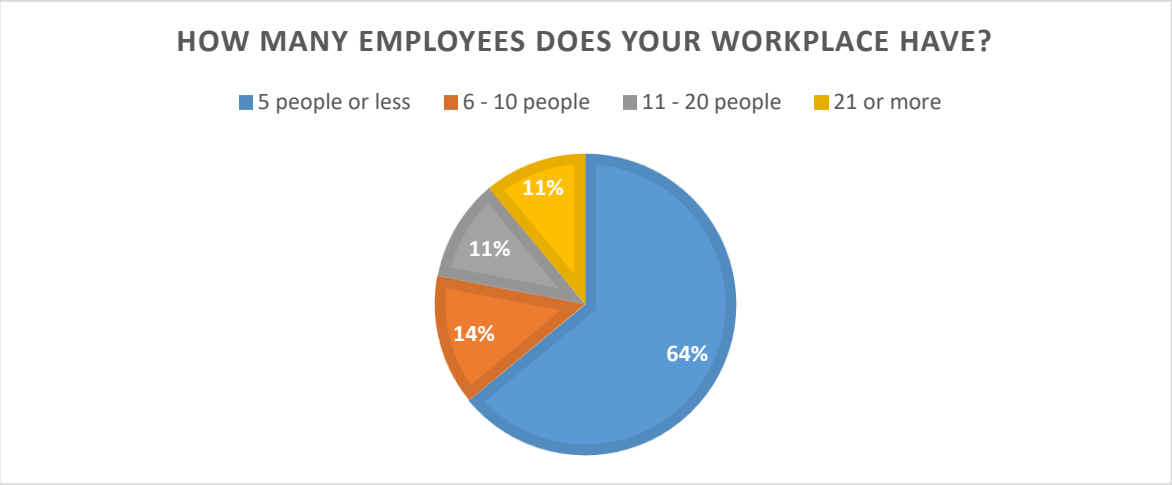

Figure 9. The size of the company (N=28)

Secondly the respondents were inquired what type of travel they organize. The respondents were able to choose multiple options, which means that one respondent may have chosen multiple categories and therefore the company might organize different types of travel. As Figure 10 indicates 71% of the respondents answered that they organize leisure travel and 61% outbound travel. Domestic travel was organized by 25%, outbound travel by 29%, business travel by 18% and other by four percent, which equalled one person replying “inspiration”.

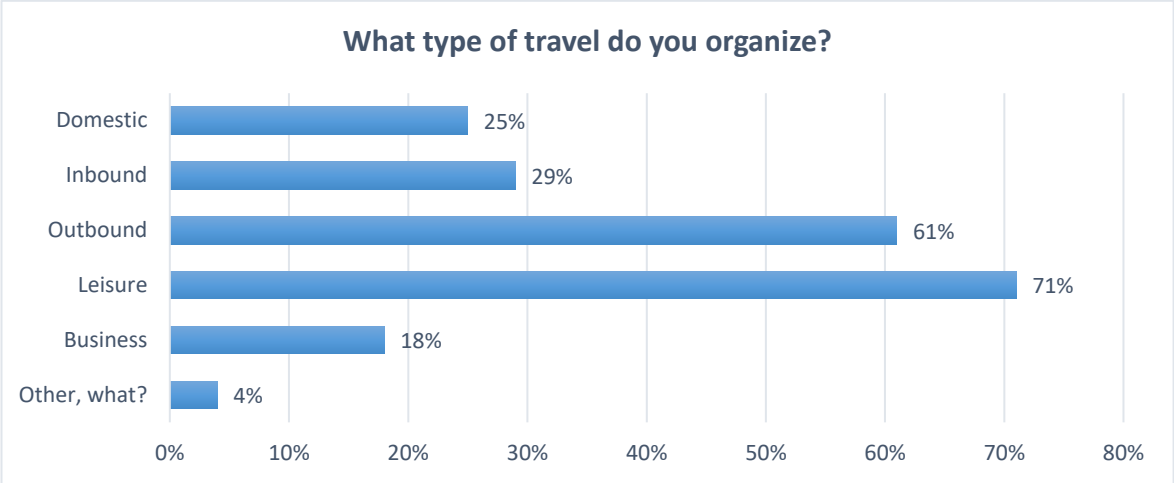

Figure 10. Organized travel types (N=28)

Third background question was regarding what type of customers their company serves. In this question the respondents were also able to choose multiple options, which means that the company may serve different types of customers.

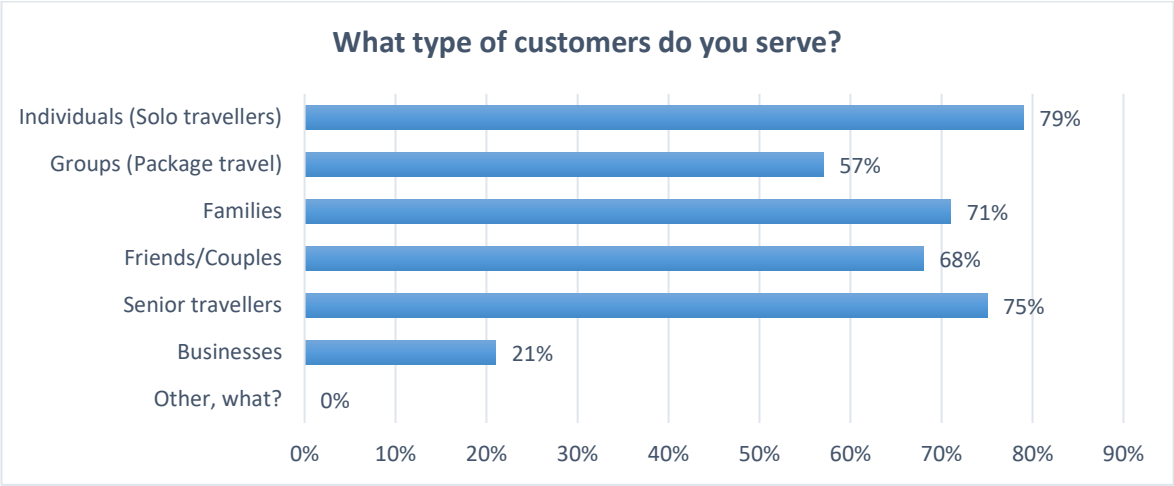

Figure 11. Customer types (N=28)

As Figure 11 above indicates all the options were chosen, however as the highest customer group were individuals (solo travellers) with 79%, secondly senior travellers with 75% and thirdly families with 71%. Friends and couples were served by 68% of the respondents and groups (package travel) by 57%. Lowest percentage of 21 were for companies that serve business travellers, and no other customer group was mentioned.

5.2 Countries to which trips are mostly sold to

There were two questions regarding where in Europe the companies sell trips to. In the first question the respondents were asked to choose of different parts of Europe where

they organize travel to. In this question the respondents were also able to choose multiple options. As Figure 12 below is indicating a large part of the respondents 68% answered that they organize travel at least to Southern Europe, and Western Europe was second largest with 60%. Northern Europe was the third highest with 57% of respondents organizing travel there. Trips to Central Europe were organized by 50% and to Eastern Europe by 42%. The respondents who did not organize travel to Europe were 14%.

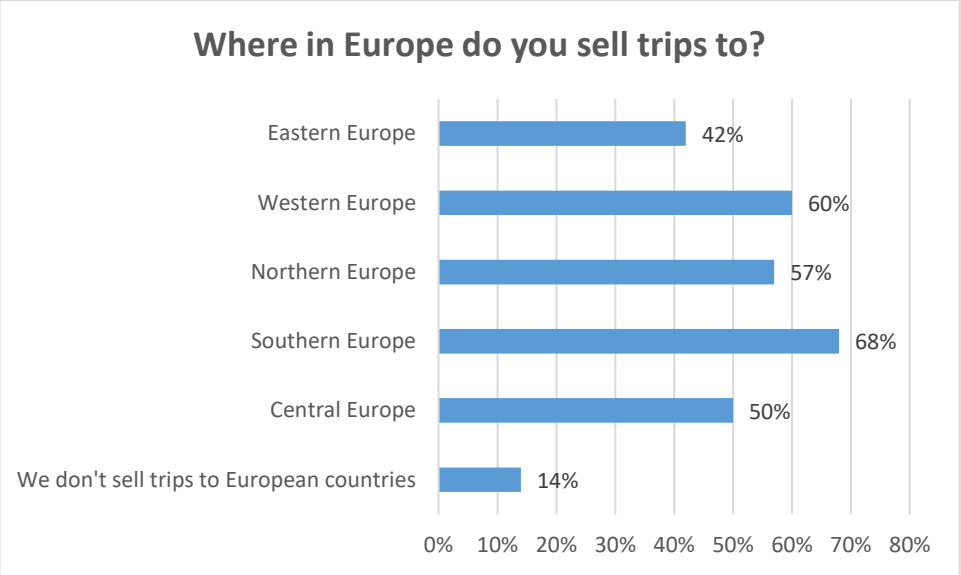

Figure 12. Trip sales around Europe (N=28)

From the respondents organizing travel to Europe, this question was further elaborated with an open question in which the respondents were asked to name three European countries, where they sell the most trips to. The mostly named country with 16% was Greece, secondly Portugal and Spain with equally 13%, and thirdly Italy and The Netherlands also equally with 8%. Trips to France were named by 6% and Finland was named by 5% percent of the respondents, equally with Belgium, Germany, and Austria. Figure 13 below is showing also the other countries named and their percentages.

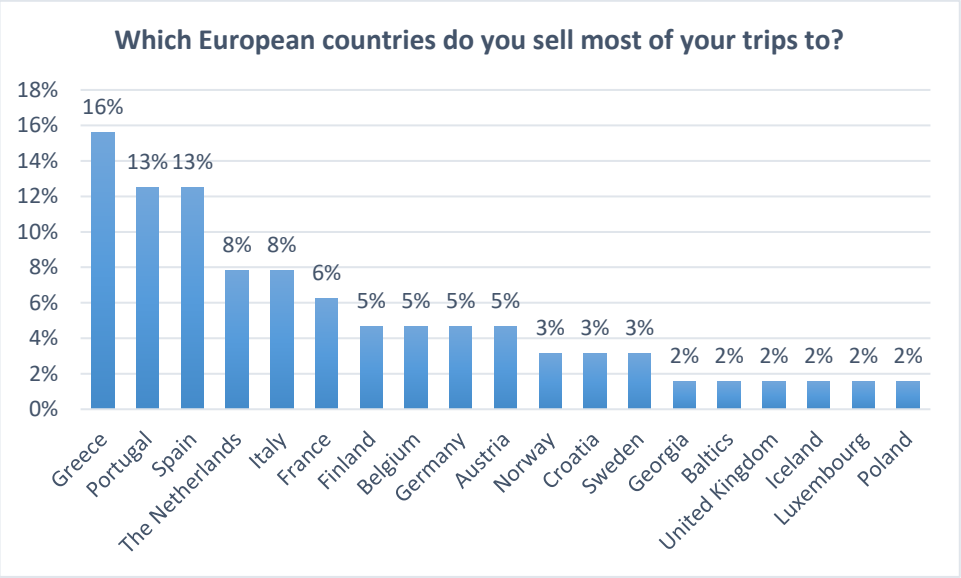

Figure 13. The European countries where trips were named to be sold the most (N=24)

The next question was inquiring if the company organizes travel to Finland. As Figure 14 below shows, highest percentage, 54% replied that they do organize travel to Finland. They were able to further elaborate their reply by where in Finland they organize travel to. Eight out of eleven responses indicated that they organize travel to Northern parts of Finland (Lapland), whereas rest were explained as “everywhere” and “business destinations”.

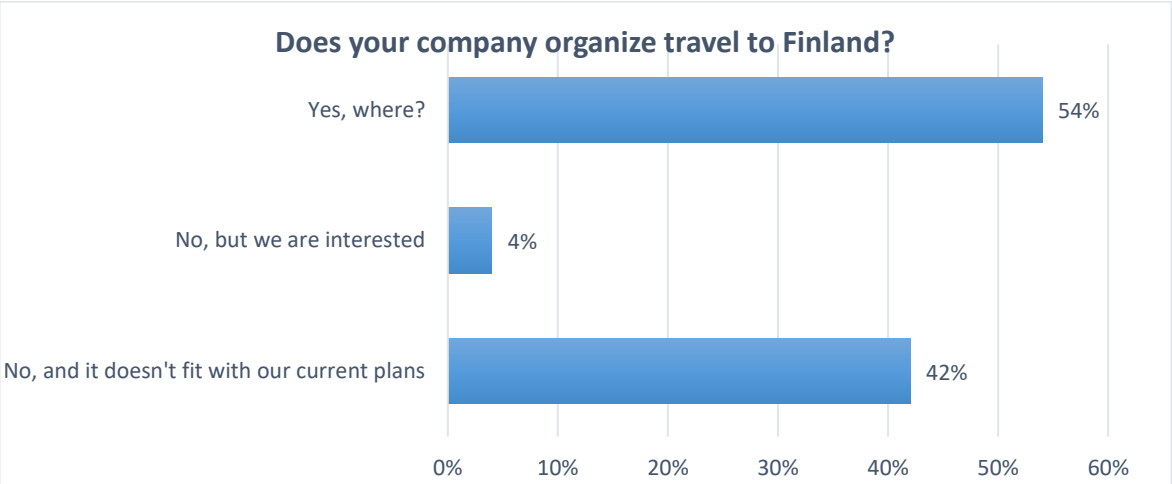

Figure 14. Companies organizing travel to Finland (N=24)

Four percent of the respondents did not organize, however considered themselves interested, and 42% replied that they do not organize travel to Finland, and it does not fit with their company’s current plans.

5.3 Travel experience in Finland

Regarding their image of Finland as a travel destination, the survey was inquiring if the respondent had visited Finland themselves. As Figure 15 shows four percent of the respondents had not visited Finland and did not have interest for it. Majority, 57% had not travelled to Finland, however, would like to, and 39% replied that they had visited Finland before. They were further directed to open their answer on where they had travelled to. In total there were 11 responses of which the respondents had commonly visited multiple places, however mostly different locations in Lapland. In addition, Helsinki was named three times, whereas Jyväskylä, Tampere, Åland , Karelia and Hyvinkää were each named once.

Figure 15. Own travel experience to Finland. (N=28)

The respondents who had visited Finland previously were also asked how likely they would recommend Finland as a travel destination on a scale from one to ten. The average of the 11 replies was 8.5 out of 10.

5.4 Travel services

The respondents who had visited Finland were also directed to reply to what kind of travel services they used while visiting Finland. The respondents were able to choose multiple categories, however as Figure 16 indicates most used services were accommodation services and activities with equally 73%. Secondly most used services were nature and outdoor services with 64% and thirdly transportation services with 55%. Package travel services were used by 27% and tourist travel information by 18% of the respondents. Booking and reservation of travel services were used by 9% equally with other, which was further explained as “visit a friend by train and boat”. As shown below (Figure 16) categories: cruises and sustainable travel services were not selected by any of the respondents.

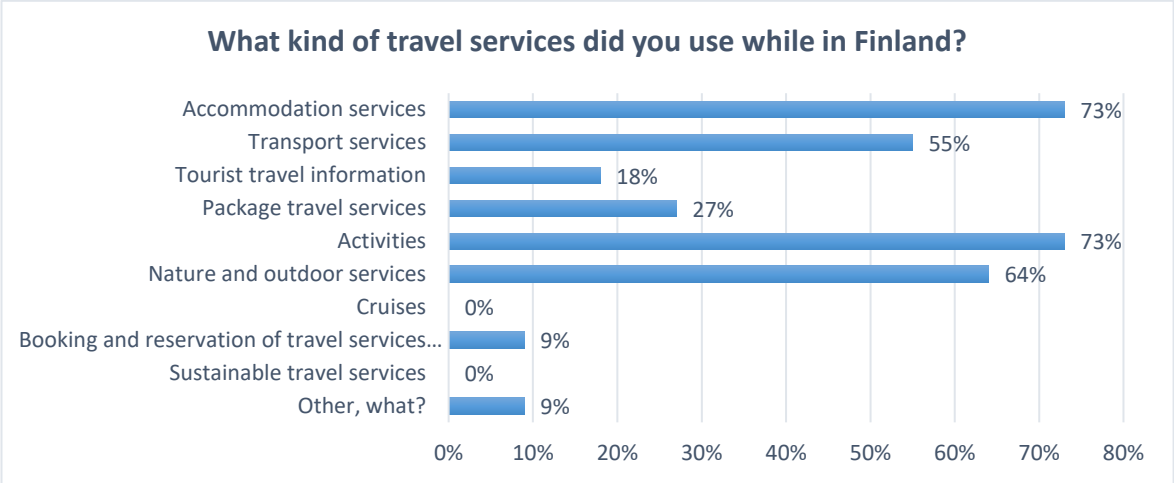

Figure 16. Travel services used during visit to Finland (N=11)

Similarly, the respondents who had not yet visited Finland, however, were interested to do so, were directed to question of what kind of travel services would interest them. The categories in the question were the same as with the respondents who has travelled to Finland, except option of virtual travel services was added to it.

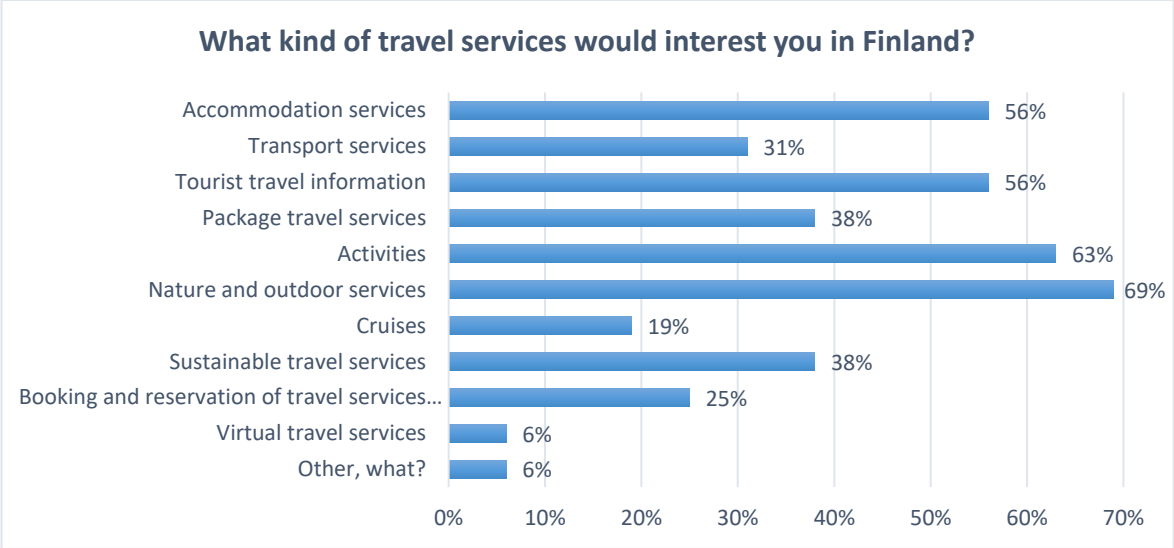

Figure 17. Travel services that would interest non-visitors (N=16)

As Figure 17 shows most of the respondents, 69% answered that they would be interested of nature and outdoor services, secondly activities with 63% and thirdly accommodation services and tourist travel information equally with 56%. Sustainable travel services were responded to interest 38% and transport service 31% of the respondents. Booking and reservation of travel services would interest 25% and cruises would interest 19% of the respondents. The category of virtual travel services would interest six percent as well as in other category that was further explained as “Trekking/Long distance walks.”

5.5 Image of Finland as a travel destination

The respondents who had not visited Finland were asked what their image of Finland is based on. The results are combined with the ones who were interested to visit and the one who was not interested, as the latter is too small sample to draw a conclusion.

As Figure 18 indicates, 53% of the respondents who had not visited Finland, responded that their image was based on other media: newspapers, magazines, radio, and television and secondly 47% of them replied that it was based on social media.

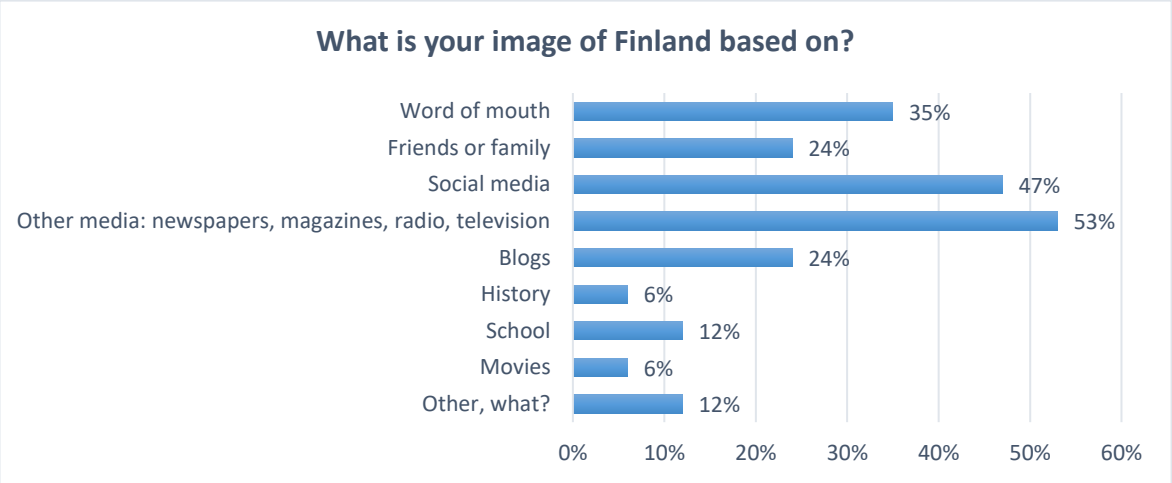

Figure 18. What is non-visitors image based on (N=17)

Word of mouth was responded with 35% and friends and family, as well as blogs equally 24%. History and movies were also equally 6%. School and other were equally 12 %.The other category was verbally opened as “tourist travel information” and “webinars”.

5.5.1 Open-ended question of respondents’ images of Finland as a travel destination

Despite what the respondent had replied of their experience and interest to travel to Finland they were directed to answer an open-ended question of their image of Finland as a travel destination and to describe it with few words or adjectives, therefore all 28 respondents replied to this question. As explained in subchapter 3.3. Data analysis, the question was analysed by using data-categorising method. The Figures 19, 20, 21 and 22 show the words that were used two times or more to describe same aspect, and other relevant words are mentioned in the text.

As Figure 19 shows 50% of the respondents mentioned straightforwardly the word nature in their response, and many of them were similarly describing it with adjectives and quantifiers such as beautiful, very nice and a lot of. There were also multiple other words that

can be listed under the nature category as the following explains. Finland was for example described as winter wonderland and as a winter destination, and plain word winter was used by 36% of the respondents. Other words fitting under the nature category and used several times were snow with 29%, lakes with 25%, forest with 18%, and cold as well as green equally with 7%. These previously mentioned words were also commonly used with quantifiers such as lots of and many. Two other words that can be considered under nature category were huskies and reindeer, which were also mentioned by 7% of the respondents.

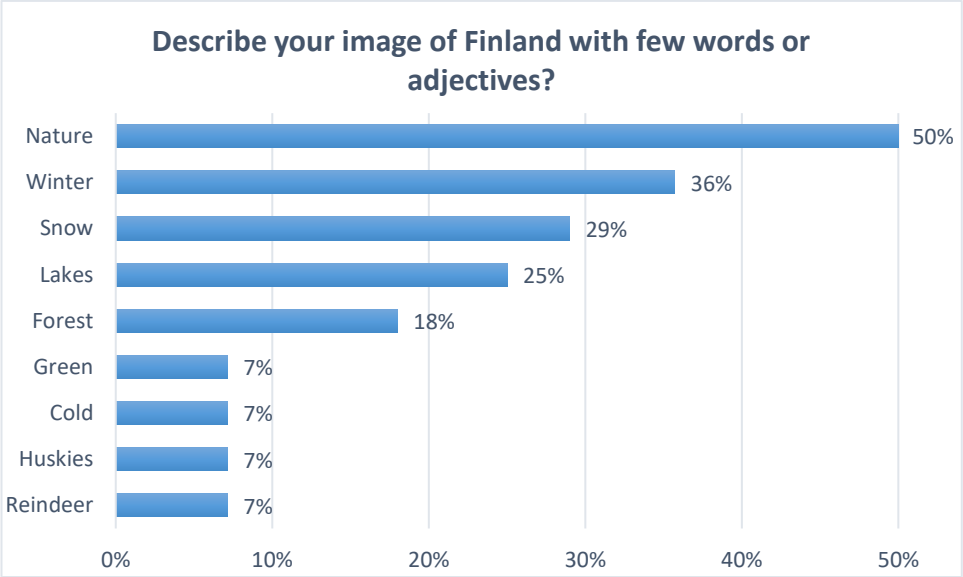

Figure 19. Nature related images (N=28)

As seen from below, Figure 20 indicates that Finnish people were mentioned by 21% of the respondents and they were commonly described as helpful, nice, and friendly. From different cities or regions only Helsinki and Lapland were mentioned, however they were both mentioned a few times which equalled to 14% of respondents mentioning them. Helsinki was described as a city trip destination and Lapland was commonly associated with snow and winter. In addition, northern lights and Santa Claus were mentioned in relation to Lapland, however each only once.

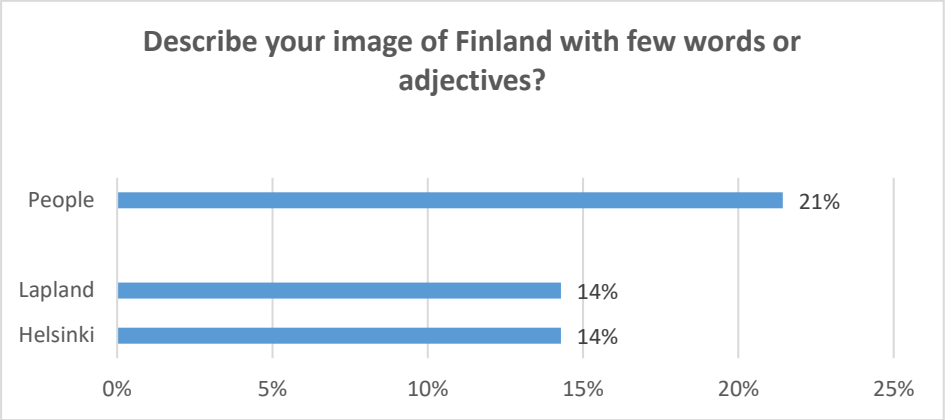

Figure 20. Inhabitants and locations (N=28)

Regarding the atmosphere and infrastructure, as indicated below (Figure 21) Finland was described as clean by 21% and peaceful by 18% of the respondents. The respondents also mentioned safe, modern and space with equally 7%. Space was often highlighted with quantifier such as lot of. Other words used by the respondents to describe their image of Finland as a travel destination related to atmosphere and infrastructure were authentic, adventure, culture, complex history, mountains, and wooden houses.

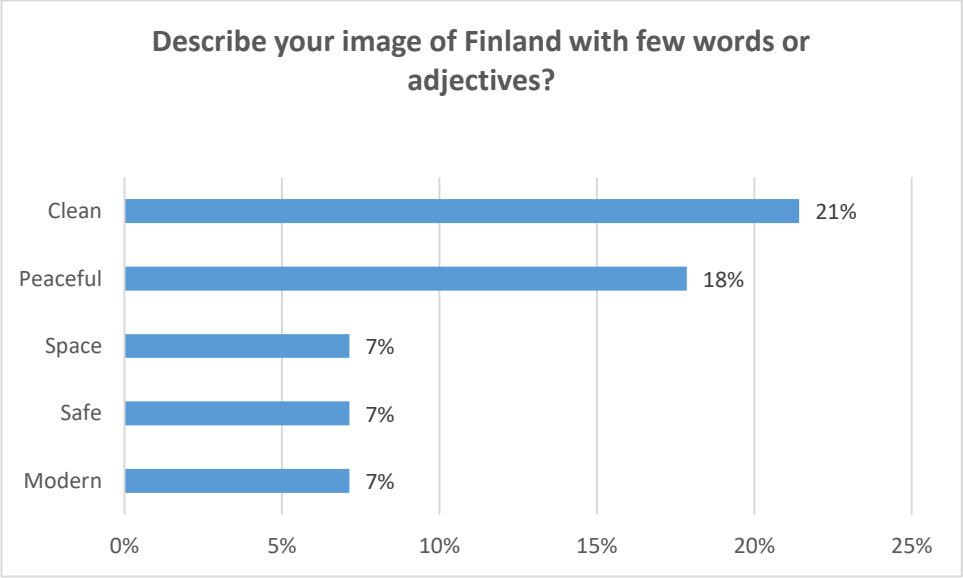

Figure 21. Atmosphere and infrastructure related images (N=28)

As shown in Figure 22 another word that on several occasions described the respondents' image was sauna, and it was mentioned by 14% of the respondents. Also, different activities such as husky trips, snowmobile trips, open fires, skiing, and biking were mentioned by 21%. Similarly, 21% describer food and beverages related aspects, and they were commonly described with adjectives good or tasty. Fazer chocolate, berries, and barbeque sausage were especially mentioned by name.

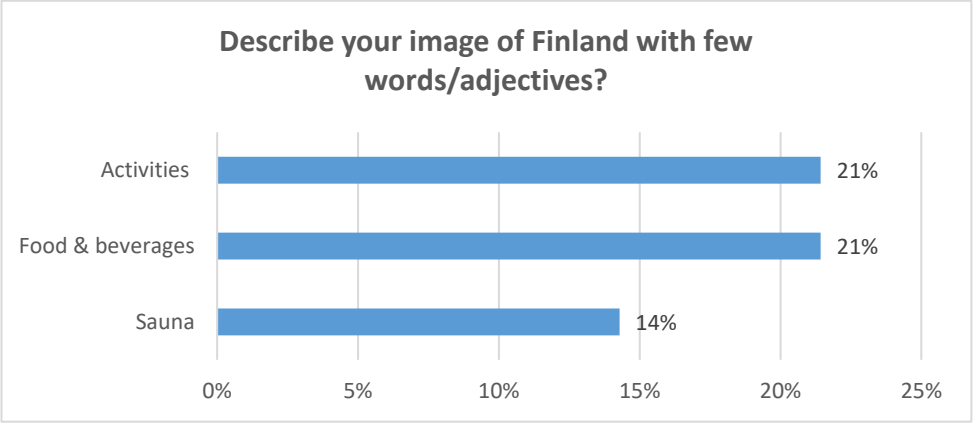

Figure 22. Other frequently mentioned categories (N=28)

There were only few comments that could be interpreted as negative image of Finland as a travel destination. These were “expensive”, “not so much” and “communication between people is less open between people”, therefore it can be calculated that 11% of the respondents had somewhat of negative image of Finland as a travel destination, yet these were all from different categories. Additionally, Åland was mentioned as unknown part and it was recommended to be promoted better in the Netherlands.

5.5.2 Likert-scale question of respondents’ image of Finland as a travel destination

All the respondents were asked to respond to the same five-point Likert-scale question of how 16 adjectives, statements, or terms described their image of Finland as a travel destination. The respondents could indicate if they strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), are neutral (3), agree (4) or strongly agree (5) with the given adjectives, statements, or terms. The outcome is divided based on if the respondent had visited Finland before and if they had not. For visual reasons and for easier readability the 16 statements are divided into two different figures, which show the comparison between the two different groups visitors and non-visitors.

Eleven of the respondents had visited Finland before. As Figure 23 and Figure 24 show none of them used section “strongly disagree” to any of the statements. The average of each category was always above neutral and 3.2 was the lowest average given to statement “interesting culture”, which meant that 46% of respondents who had visited Finland felt neutral about the culture. The highest average with 4.7. was for adjective safe, which indicates that the respondents strongly agreed with it, and 82% of them consider Finland as a safe destination. In general, the answers were commonly either neutral, agree, or strongly agree, and nine out of sixteen categories had an average of four or more, which indicates that the respondents were either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. In addition to safe, the categories with strong agreement were attractive with 55%,

modern with 36% and rich nature with 64%. The categories with highest number of respondents on point agree on the scale, were accessible with 46%, diverse with 37%, friendly inhabitants with 46%, historical with 37%, easy to communicate in English with 46%, variety of accommodation options with 73%, sustainable with 55% and good transportation system with 73%.

In addition to interesting culture, the respondents felt most neutral about value for money with 46%, seasonal weather with 55% and quality food with 46%. As mentioned previously strongly disagree was not chosen by any of the respondents, however highest disagreement of 27% was with historical.

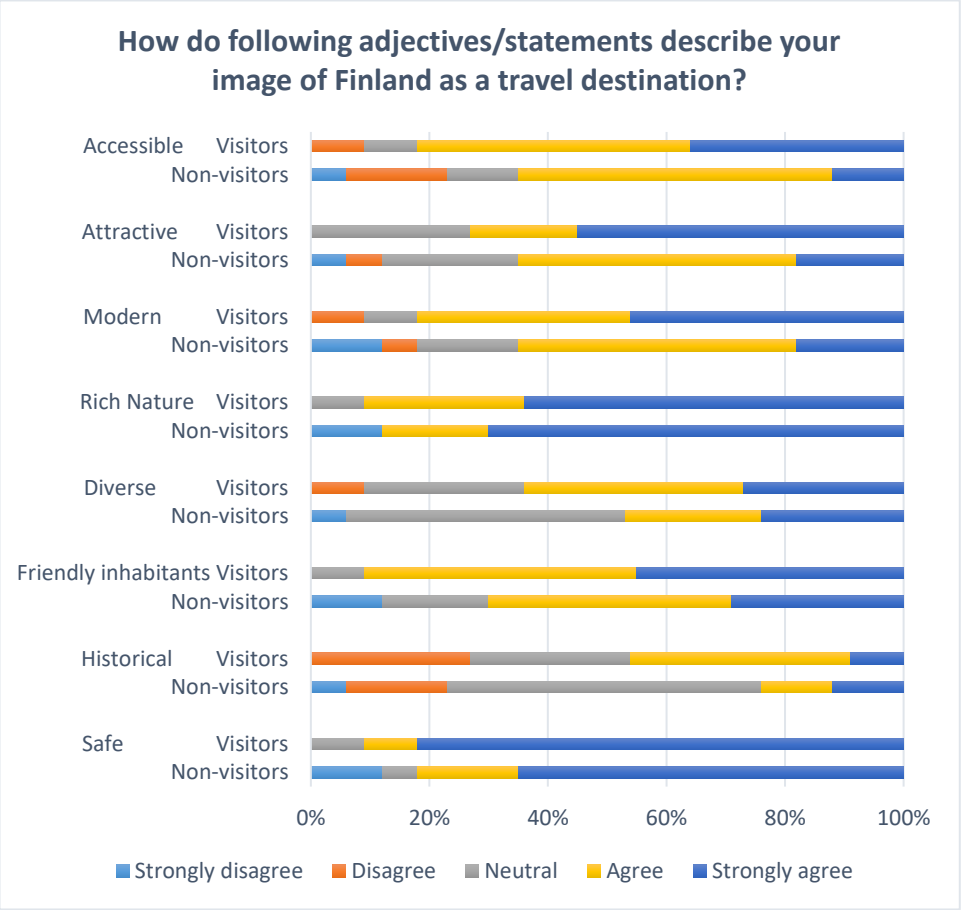

Figure 23. First part of adjectives/statements (N=28)

Seventeen of the respondents had not visited Finland before. Their answers were more spread and each point on the scale was used, therefore answers varied from strongly disagree to strongly agree on nearly all the categories. The highest average of 4.4 which, was given to rich nature which means that 70% strongly agreed with the statement. On the other hand, the lowest average was for historical with an average of 3.1, which equals to 53% of the respondents were feeling neutral about it. In addition to rich nature the other categories that received most value on strongly agree were safe with 65% and easy to

communicate in English with 47%. The highest percentages on the point agree on the scale were accessible with 46%, attractive and modern with 47%, friendly inhabitants and variety of accommodations with 41%, and sustainable 53%.

The respondents who had not visited Finland felt most neutral of diverse with 47%, historical with 53%, value for money with 65%, seasonal weather with 41%, interesting culture with 35%, quality food with 47%, and good transportation system with 59%.

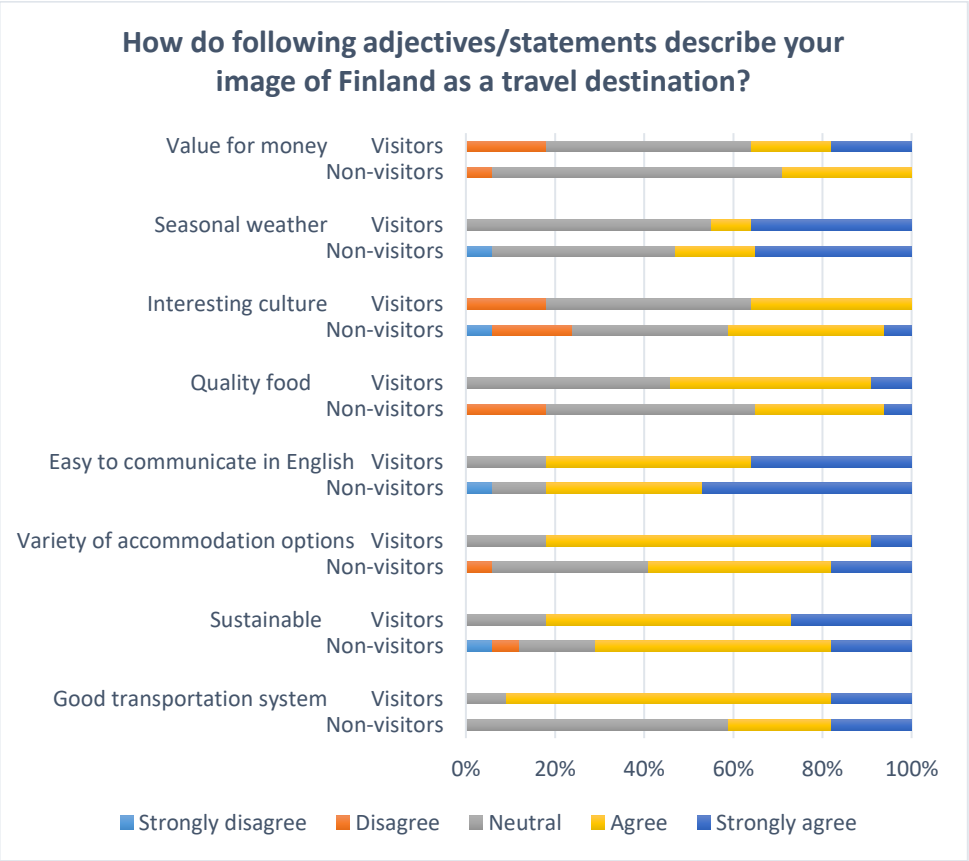

Figure 24. Second part of adjectives/statements (N=28)

Some of the non-visitors disagreed and strongly disagreed with most of the statements except with good transportation system, however it was commonly one or two respondent's perceptions, therefore in this analysis the values for disagree and strongly disagree are combined. Non-visitors described their image of Finland less than neutral, therefore disagreed or strongly disagreed with accessible with 23%, attractive with 12%, modern with 18%, rich nature with 12%, diverse with 6%, friendly inhabitants with 12%, historical with 23%, safe with 12%, value for money and seasonal weather 6%, interesting culture 24%, quality food and easy to communicate in English with 18%, variety of accommodation with 6%, and sustainable with 12%.

6 Discussion

The main objective of this study was to examine “What is the Dutch travel agencies’ employees’ images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination?”. In addition, it was investigating “What are the Dutch travel agencies’ employees’ images based on?” and “What kind of travel services would interest them in Finland?” In this chapter, the connection between the literature review in chapters two and three and the findings in chapter four are observed.

This chapter introduces also recommendations for the commissioner and commissioner’s thoughts of the study results. In addition, this chapter includes the consideration of reliability and validity, as well as self-reflection of the author.

6.1 Consideration of the results

The survey began with background questions regarding the companies, inquiring the size, as well as what type of travel they organize and where to. As the findings show the companies responding to the survey were mainly small companies, with five or less employees. In general, two of the most organized travel types were outbound - and leisure travel, and customers from all different groups were served. Over half of the respondents also organized travel to Finland and 5% reported it as one of the countries they sell most of their trips to. In general, the trips concentrate mostly to Southern – and Western Europe, and as the findings showed Greece, Portugal, and Spain were often mentioned. In this study Finland was the most mentioned Nordic country, yet also Sweden, Norway, and Iceland came up. However, based on the statistical information in the literature review, Norway and Sweden accommodated much more tourists from the Netherlands than Finland in 2019 (Visit Finland 2019d). Therefore, it can be concluded that with a larger sample the result could be different, and percentage of companies organizing travel to Finland as one of their most sold travel destinations could be less. The survey has most likely attracted respondents that organize travel to Finland, and therefore it could be explaining the higher numbers of Finland being mentioned.

As explained in the literature review consumers are usually offered several destination choices that provide similar aspects, for example quality accommodation, beautiful scenery, and friendly inhabitants. In addition, all destinations have some form of attractions, whether natural, historical, cultural, or recreational, which are substitutable to some extent. Therefore, a destination needs be unique and different to stand out and be selected as a final decision. Studying destination branding from this perspective is important and critical for a destination to be identified and differentiated from other alternatives that are

in the minds of target market. Thus, it could be concluded that to influence the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images of Finland as a travel destination and furthermore attract the Dutch travellers to choose Finland as a destination, it would be in importance to focus the destination branding on the unique and rare aspects that the country has to offer and differentiate it from the countries that offer similar qualities. (Camilleri 2019, 61-62; Qu, Hyunjung Kim & Hyunjung Im 2010, 465; Wang & Pizam 2011, 113-115.)

As the literature review indicates an individual's image of a destination is in an important role when choosing a travel destination. There are multiple factors that influence the formation of destination image for example own -, friends - or relatives experience, media source, such as newspaper, television, or magazine, websites, or simply something heard in different locations (Lohmann & Panosso Netto 2017, 212.). The findings indicate that 39% of the sample of Dutch travel agencies' employees' base their image of Finland to their own experience, whereas 61% who do not have their own experience base it mostly on media sources: newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Secondly the highest influencing factor was social media. Thus, it could be concluded that the image given in different media platforms is of utmost importance, and especially social media is in a highly influencing role. Thirdly the image was based on word of mouth, which indicates that experiences and stories shared between people are also in significant role forming the receiver's destination image. Thus, it could be also concluded that the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images of Finland could influence their customers' image and choice of travel destination.

When the respondents were asked to describe their image of Finland with few words or adjectives, nature and different nature related elements were mentioned in nearly all responses. The nature elements that were mostly mentioned were winter, snow, cold, green, forest, and lakes. Many of the respondents also mentioned Lapland, winter sports and – activities in their description. In addition, reindeer, huskies, and Santa Claus were brought up. Additionally, the findings on the Likert-scale question indicate that both the visitors and non-visitors strongly agree with the statement of Finland having a rich nature. When respondents were asked what type of travel services they had used while visiting or what kind of services they would be interested of, both visitor and non-visitors responded nature and outdoor services as one of the most used or most interesting services. Therefore, it could be concluded that the Dutch travel agency employees highly consider Finland as an outdoor destination that has beautiful and rich nature, however many of them consider and associate it merely as a winter destination and connect it more with Lapland. Helsinki is another more known destination, yet it is considered more as a city trip destination. The literature review supports these images, as it is commonly described that Finland has a diverse nature suitable for especially active holidays and outdoor recreation, in

which nature-based activities and experiences are dominant. Additionally, based on the statistical information Dutch travellers in general visit Finland mostly during winter months and nearly half of their overnight stays were spent in Lapland during 2019, which could be a result of it being promoted and marketed as a winter destination by the Dutch travel agencies. In 2019, second most overnight stays (29%) were spent in Helsinki metropolitan area, of which 83% in Helsinki. This could also be interpreted that Dutch travel agencies could be promoting Helsinki as a city trip destination or as a good way to start or end stay in Finland. (Boniface & Cooper 2012, 186-187; Business Finland 2019e)

No other region except previously mentioned Lapland and Helsinki came up in the open answers of the respondents' descriptions of their image of Finland as a travel destination. This could indicate that Coast and Archipelago, as well as Lakeland are a bit more unfamiliar regions for the Dutch travel agencies. This can be supported by the statistic that in 2019 both regions welcomed 12% of travellers from the Netherlands for overnight stay, which is quite much less than the other two regions. This could be a result of them being less-known and less-marketed as travel destinations by the Dutch travel agencies. Additionally, the Dutch travel agencies' employees' own travel experience focused mainly on the two regions of Helsinki and Lapland. Therefore, their own experience and image might be influencing what destinations they promote and market for their customers and thus the tourists' coming from the Netherlands concentrate to these areas.

Regarding used and interesting tourism services, nature and outdoor services, activities, accommodation services, and transportation services were commonly used or would interest the Dutch travel agencies in Finland. Additionally, package travel, cruises, and sustainable travel services were something that the visitors did not have used at all or only very little, yet the non-visitors reported that they would be somewhat interested of these services. This could be indicating that there is less of knowledge of the services, or that they are not commonly available or used, however that there could be a market for them regarding the Dutch consumers. Based on the findings package travel was organized by 51% of the respondents. Additionally, holiday packages were reported as one of the most researched topics online by the Dutch consumers regarding travel to Finland. Combined with the findings this could indicate that there could also be a growing demand and market for different holiday packages.

Based on the findings another image that the Dutch travel agency employees' – both visitors and non-visitors seemed to commonly have of Finland is it being a safe travel destination. This came up in the open-ended replies as well as in the Likert-scale question, where majority of the respondents in both groups strongly agreed that word safe describes their image of Finland as a travel destination. Therefore, it could be summarized

that in general the Dutch travel agencies' employees consider Finland as a safe travel destination and would promote it as such to their customers. Additionally, for both visitors and non-visitors the respondents felt mostly neutral of the statement interesting culture. However, one cultural element that was commonly brought up was sauna, which was also high in 2019's Finland related search terms amongst the Dutch inhabitants. This could indicate that sauna is a cultural element that the Dutch travel agency employees as well as the general population associate with Finnish culture and find interesting.

In addition to previously mentioned safe and rich nature the sample of Dutch travel agencies' employees both visitors and non-visitors mostly agreed or strongly agreed to the adjectives and statements of accessible, attractive, modern, diverse, friendly inhabitants, easy to communicate in English, variety of accommodations, sustainable, and good transportation system. Whereas their image was more neutral towards previously mentioned interesting culture, seasonal weather, value for money, historical, and quality food. This could indicate that in their perception Finland's nature, atmosphere, infrastructure, and inhabitants are pleasant and appealing as a tourism destination, whereas the history, culture, cuisine, monetary value, and seasonality of the weather are either less known about or considered more mediocre. Nearly all the respondents who had not yet visited Finland would be interested to do so, this also indicates that they consider Finland as a destination worth a visit and would therefore most likely promote and market it as such. In addition, the ones who had visited Finland responded that they would highly recommend it.

6.2 Recommendations for the commissioner

Based on the results of the study, it could be suggested that the commissioner continues working towards offering sustainable products and services, yet it could be an option to also consider creating and adding some type of packages or tour combinations in the selection.

In addition, to differentiate Finland from the other Nordic countries it could be advisable to focus on the factors that are especially unique for Finnish nature, culture, history, cuisine, and other factors that make Finland special – that cannot be found similarly anywhere else, and furthermore build products and services around these interesting and peculiar Finnish elements, for example to cooperate with a company that offers sauna boating and build an experience sailing shores of Helsinki while hearing fascinating facts about Finnish culture and history and tasting some typical food and beverages. It could be advisable to keep these peculiar elements in mind when marketing and creating content to company's blog and social media accounts, as well as share them in different channels targeted for Dutch audience.

It could also be recommended to highlight that winter does also exist in other parts of Finland and promote activities that can be also done for example close to Helsinki region, for example ice skating at Rautatientori (Helsinki main railway station) or skiing at Talma ski in Sipoo, as well as to promote Finland as all-year around destination with distinctive seasons and possibilities.

6.3 Commissioner's consideration of the results

The thesis was commissioned by a Finnish tour operator Green Cap Tours. The commissioner's considerations of the results are shortly discussed in this chapter.

The commissioner found that the results of the study were somewhat expected, therefore it was not surprising that the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images were dominated by nature, winter, snow, and Lapland. The commissioner considered that the comparison between visitors and non-visitors were most interesting, and that there were similarities and small differences detected in their perceptions.

The commissioner found it disappointing that the cultural and historical aspects of Finland were weighted less interesting, however it was positively surprising that attractiveness was strongly agreed especially by the visitors. Overall, the commissioner was pleased with the results, and the findings are planned to be used in the company's operations in the future. (Väärälä 30.08.2021)

6.4 Considering the reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are important factors in quantitative research. Reliability can be defined as the extent of data collection method giving consistent findings, gather similar observations, or conclude to other researcher's work. It refers to consistency in measurement of a concept, which means that a result of a sample should be the same during two different times and under same conditions. Changes in structure or question wording can likely create different responses. Validity can be divided to three different categories: content validity, internal validity, and external validity. Firstly, content validity refers to researcher's ability to create questions that reflect the issue that is being researched. Secondly, internal validity measures whether the question asked can explain the outcome of research. Lastly, external validity measures the extent of which the result can be generalized to the target group that the sample is representing. Survey design affects validity, and therefore it is important to create questions that are measuring what is wanted to be measured. (Bryman & Bell 2011, 158; Mora 2011; Saunders 2015, 726-731.)

Reliability was considered when creating the survey. The same survey was sent to all the respondents, however there were slight changes in the questioning depending on their responses. This however did not affect the questions regarding the main research question as they were the same for all participants. The structure of the survey was planned in a way that previously asked question would not have influence on respondent's next answer. Therefore, for example open-ended question was placed before Likert-scale question to avoid respondents to be influenced by the options and this way to give more authentic and spontaneous responses. The survey was pilot tested before publishing by the commissioner and few other people to ensure that questions could be understood properly, and that they were formatted in a simple and clear way.

To support the validity of the study, the questions were created to reflect the subject and planned in a way to receive relevant information for the study. However, after analysing the findings it was notable that some questions could have been asked differently for the result to be more descriptive. Nevertheless, it did not have a remarkable effect and especially in relation to the main research question the questions were supported by the theory of the literature review.

A quantitative research method was chosen, and the survey was sent to 300 different Dutch travel agencies' email addresses gathered from business-to-business platforms and Google. To maximize the reach and gather enough data, the survey was sent two times. During the data collection time 28 answers from different companies were gathered which then formed the sample used in this study. The sample size can be considered rather small, and therefore unlikely would represent all the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images of Finland as a travel destination, however similarities in the images can be detected.

6.5 Self-reflection

The thesis process was overall educating and interesting, and my personal relationship and connection with the Netherlands made the target group of Dutch travel agencies even a bit more appealing, yet it was a relevant target group to investigate from the point of view of the commissioner and possibly from other organizations as well.

Despite having a basic knowledge of destination image and the other parts of the literature review, I gained and increased my knowledge within all of them. In the beginning it was challenging to choose the relevant topics to include in the literature review, however by focusing on the main research question the forming of the theoretical background be-

came easier and relevant topics were chosen. Looking back at the survey creation process I would have formed at least one question differently, which in my mind could have created more accurate data. Nevertheless, the responses gave valuable data to analyse and form a conclusion.

It was clear from the beginning that gathering data from the target group could become a challenge, especially as the world had just started to open after restrictions related to Covid-19 pandemic and therefore, the travel agencies were getting busy. Therefore, if the timeline would have given more space, I would have continued collecting answers for a longer time to increase the number of responses. Nevertheless, after persistent work by searching for more new companies, enough responses were gathered to form a sample, which provided valuable data regarding the subject of the study. Afterall, the gathered findings were enough to form at least a glimpse of the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination.

7 Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to examine the Dutch travel agencies' employees' images and expectations of Finland as a travel destination. In addition, it was investigating what kind of influencing factors there are behind their images and what kind of travel services would interest them in Finland.

In conclusion, the study indicates that the sample of Dutch travel agencies employees have in general rather positive image of Finland as a travel destination, and they considered it worth visiting, which can be interpreted that they would also promote it as such to their customers. The respondents who had their own travel experience to Finland and the ones who had not visited Finland before did not seem to have a remarkable gap in their perceptions and overall, their images are somewhat similar, even though their images of Finland have been influenced by different factors, either by own experience or in most cases by different media sources – especially social media, as well as word of mouth.

When it comes to wanted travel services, it can be summarized that all types of services were considered desirable, yet especially nature and outdoor services, activities, accommodation- and transportation services were especially preferable in their perception. In addition, the findings indicated that there could be growing demand for especially sustainable travel services as well as travel packages.

As the findings indicated, there were no aspects that would have been repeatedly shown up and strongly instigated negative associations towards Finland as a travel destination. Overall, the Dutch travel agencies' employees' have an image of Finland as a safe destination with multiple other attractive qualities, however cultural and historical factors were seen slightly less interesting and desirable than the nature elements, which were considered nearly as the backbone of Finland as a travel destination. In general, the respondents' perception was dominated by nature and outdoor elements and moreover, Finland was in many cases considered more as a winter destination, as well as often associated with Lapland and winter activities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey

Haaga-Helia

Image and expectations of Finland as a travel destination

Dear tourism professional,

This survey is part of a thesis project of a student finishing her studies in the Degree Programme of Tourism and Event Management at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. The survey is commissioned and done in cooperation with Green Cap Tours, which is a travel agency operating in Finland.

Answering the questions will take few minutes (max. 5) and compulsory questions are marked with *, though it is highly appreciated if you would answer all questions. All the information is handled anonymously, and the results are used only for study purposes.

Thank you in advance!

Following questions are background questions regarding the company you are working in.

1. How many employees does your workplace have?

- ◯ 5 people or less
- ◯ 6 - 10 people
- ◯ 11 - 20 people
- ◯ 21 or more

2. What type of travel do you organize? (You can choose multiple) *

- [ ] Domestic
- [ ] Inbound
- [ ] Outbound
- [ ] Leisure
- [ ] Business
- [ ] Other, what? _____

3. What type of customers do you serve? (You can choose multiple) *

- [ ] Individuals (Solo travellers)
- [ ] Groups (Package travel)
- [ ] Families
- [ ] Friends/Couples
- [ ] Senior travellers
- [ ] Businesses
- [ ] Other, what? _____

4. Where in Europe do you sell trips to? *

- [ ] Eastern Europe
- [ ] Western Europe
- [ ] Northern Europe
- [ ] Southern Europe
- [ ] Central Europe
- [ ] We don't sell trips to European countries

5. Which European countries do you sell most of your trips to? (Top 3.)

6. Does your company organize travel to Finland? *

- ◯ Yes, where? _____
- ◯ No, but we are interested
- ◯ No, and it doesn't fit with our current plans

The following questions are regarding your personal image and expectations of Finland as travel destination.

7. Have you visited Finland? *

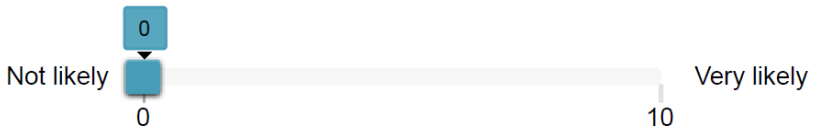
- ◯ Yes, where? _____
- ◯ No, but I would like to
- ◯ No, and I'm not interested

8. What is your image of Finland as a travel destination? Please describe with few words or adjectives. *

9. How do following adjectives/statements describe your image of Finland as a travel destination?
(1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree) *

	1	2	3	4	5
Accessible	○	○	○	○	○
Attractive	○	○	○	○	○
Modern	○	○	○	○	○
Rich nature	○	○	○	○	○
Diverse	○	○	○	○	○
Friendly inhabitants	○	○	○	○	○
Historical	○	○	○	○	○
Safe	○	○	○	○	○
Value for money	○	○	○	○	○
Seasonal weather	○	○	○	○	○
Interesting culture	○	○	○	○	○
Quality food	○	○	○	○	○
Easy to communicate in English	○	○	○	○	○
Variety of accommodation options	○	○	○	○	○
Sustainable	○	○	○	○	○
Good transportation system	○	○	○	○	○

10. How likely would you recommend Finland as a travel destination?



11. What is your image of Finland based on? *

- [ ] Word of mouth
- [ ] Friends or family
- [ ] Social media
- [ ] Other media: newspapers, magazines, radio, television
- [ ] Blogs
- [ ] History
- [ ] School
- [ ] Movies
- [ ] Other, what? _____

12. What kind of travel services would interest you in Finland?

- [ ] Accommodation services
- [ ] Transport services
- [ ] Tourist travel information
- [ ] Package travel services
- [ ] Activities
- [ ] Nature and outdoor services
- [ ] Cruises
- [ ] Sustainable travel services
- [ ] Booking and reservation of travel services (sightseeing tours etc.)
- [ ] Virtual travel services
- [ ] Other, what? _____

13. What kind of travel services did you use while in Finland?

- [ ] Accommodation services
- [ ] Transport services
- [ ] Tourist travel information
- [ ] Package travel services
- [ ] Activities
- [ ] Nature and outdoor services
- [ ] Cruises
- [ ] Booking and reservation of travel services (Sightseeing tours etc.)
- [ ] Sustainable travel services
- [ ] Other, what? _____

If you want, it is possible to fill in your company details below and we will sent a small thank you for taking part on this survey.

Note: Given information will be only for study purposes and for Green Cap Oy's use. It won't be handed to other parties.

Thank you for taking part on this survey!

Anu Rahikainen & Green Cap Tours

14. Contact information

Company name _____

Name _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

City/Town _____

(Email) _____