Reti-Liis Saks

Enhancing Large Group Nature Tour Experiences

A Study of Taiga Times

Metropolia Ammattikorkeakoulu

Bachelor of Culture and Arts

Cultural Management

Thesis

18 September 2023

Tiivistelmä

Tekijä:	Saks, Reti-Liis
Otsikko:	Suurten ryhmäluontomatkojen kokemusten parantaminen
Sivumäärä:	44 sivua + 3 liitettä
Aika:	18.09.2023
Tutkinto:	Kulttuurituotanto
Tutkinto-ohjelma:	Kulttuurituotannon tutkinto-ohjelma
Ohjaaja:	Maija Sydänmaanlakka

Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli antaa matkailuyritys Taiga Timesille kattava yleiskuva siitä, mitkä tekijät ovat avainasemassa onnistuneen ja ikimuistoisen luonto-retki kokemuksen luomisessa suurille asiakasryhmille. Tavoitteena oli selvittää Taiga Timesin nykyisen tarjonnan keskeiset elementit, jotka ovat vaikuttaneet yrityksen menestykseen, keskittyen erityisesti niiden soveltuvuuteen ja mahdolliseen integrointiin suurten ryhmämatkojen puitteisiin.

Tietopohja on koottu keskittyen matkailun eri osa-alueisiin kuten kulttuuri-, luonto- ja elämysmatkailuun, sekä kestävään matkailuun, matkailutuotteiden tuntemukseen ja uusien tuotteiden kehittämiseen.

Tässä opinnäytetyössä seurattiin muotoiluajattelu- nimistä palvelumuotoiluprosessia, joka sisältää viisi päävaihetta. *Löytämisen* vaiheessa haastateltiin Taiga Timesin toimitusjohtajaa. *Konseptoinnin* vaihe sisälsi olemassa olevan asiakaspalautteen diskurssianalyysin, vastaavien yritysten vertailun ja aivoriihen. Kolmatta ja neljättä vaihetta, *suunnittelua* ja *rakentamista*, käytettiin viimeistelemään lopullista harkintalistaa hyödyntäen elämyskolmio -konseptia. Viimeinen *toteutus* vaihe jää Taiga Timesille toteutettavaksi.

Haastatteluprosessin tärkeimmät havainnot olivat Taiga Timesin sitoutuneisuus henkilökohtaisen kokemuksen tarjoamiseen asiakkailleen, kestävän kehityksen suuri rooli heidän kokonaistoiminnassaan sekä yrityksen nykyisten suurten ryhmämatkojen sisältö. Diskurssianalyysin avulla tunnistettiin asiakkaiden tarpeet ja parhaat käytännöt. *Benchmarking*-prosessissa tarkasteltiin vastaavia tuotteita tarjoavia matkailuyrityksiä ja saatiin arvokasta tietoa asiakaskokemuksen ymmärtämisestä. Aivoriihiprosessi tarjosi kattavan yleiskatsauksen isojen ryhmäkokojen liittyviin haasteisiin sekä luovista ratkaisuista.

Lopputuloksiin on listattu useita asiakaskokemukseen vaikuttavia tekijöitä, jotka perustuvat yksilöllisyyteen, autenttisuuteen, tarinankerrontaan, moniaistisuuteen, kontrastiin ja vuorovaikutukseen.

Avainsanat:	Luontomatkailu, kulttuurimatkailu, suurryhmämatkailu

Abstract

Author:	Saks, Reti-Liis
Title:	Enhancing Large Group Nature Tour Experiences
Number of Pages:	44 pages + 3 appendices
Date:	18 September 2023
Degree:	Bachelor of Culture and Arts
Degree Programme:	Cultural Management
Instructor:	Maija Sydänmaanlakka

The aim of this thesis is to provide Taiga Times with a comprehensive overview of the factors that are key to creating a successful and memorable nature tour experience for large customer groups. The objective of this thesis is to ascertain the key elements and attributes of Taiga Times' existing tour offerings that have contributed to their success, with a specific focus on their applicability and potential integration into the framework of large group tours.

The information base has been gathered by focusing on different subsections of tourism, such as cultural tourism, nature tourism, experiential tourism, and sustainable tourism, as well as knowledge of tourism products and the development of new products.

This thesis followed a service design process called design thinking, which includes five main steps. During the first phase of 'discovery' an interview with Taiga Times CEO took place. The second phase of 'conception' included discourse analysis of pre-existing customer feedback; benchmarking similar companies and a brainstorming session. The third and fourth phases of 'designing' and 'building' were used to detail the final list of consideration while utilising the Experience Triangle method. The last phase of 'implementation' is for Taiga Times to carry out.

The key findings from the interview process included Taiga Times being committed to providing a personal traveling experience to their customers, how sustainability plays a large role in their overall operation and what their existing large group tours entail. The discourse analysis section identified customer needs as well as best practices. The benchmarking process viewed tourism businesses providing similar products and provided valuable information on understanding the customer experience. The brainstorming process provided a comprehensive overview of challenges as well as creative solutions.

The final results include a variety of factors which influence the experience based on individuality, authenticity, storytelling, multisensory, contrast, and interaction.

Keywords:	Nature Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Large Group Tours

Table of Contents

Appendices 45

1 Introduction

This thesis is commissioned by Taiga Times, a Finnish-Canadian travel company that specializes in providing nature tours with cultural elements to international customers. The company operates from Helsinki, Finland. While their typical tour group sizes are no more than eight people, the company has received requests to accommodate larger groups of 20 to 40 people, which they are able to serve with some limitations. Currently, they offer one tour package for larger groups, yet they are aiming to expand their offerings.

In this thesis, I aim to provide Taiga Times with a comprehensive overview of the key factors for creating a successful and memorable experience for large groups and to propose actionable recommendations to optimize participant satisfaction and the overall quality of their large group nature tours. This thesis will only address tourism in Finland.

Despite having little experience in the tourism field, in my studies I have strived to become as multifaceted as possible, therefore, I wanted to take on a new challenge for my final thesis. While I have gained previous experience with service design and it was a process I enjoyed, I knew there was more to learn. The service design process is a well-suited skill to the versatile description of a cultural producer/manager. I was also particularly interested in working for a sustainable small business, where research would provide direct benefit to the company. The fact that the company happened to work in a field relatively unknown to me was more motivation rather than a deterrent, because there is much overlap within the two fields.

Culture and traveling have been linked for as long as there are written records: pilgrimages to historical and religiously significant places predate antiquity (Guzik, n.d.). This makes cultural tourism one of the oldest incentives for travel, making this form of travel an important part of the tourism industry globally to this day.

However, often one comes across the belief that culture and tourism are considered as two different industries. The concept of culture is broadly defined as all human activities i.e., traditions, values, and meanings (White, 2022). This affects people's social well-being, health, learning, economy, environment, and cultural sustainability. These elements appear from an individual level all the way to a societal level. White further writes, that the most significant influence of culture is created through personal experience, societal experiences, and giving meaning (White, 2022).

Tourism is defined by Encyclopaedia Britannica as an activity in which people travel outside their daily circle of life. This can be but does not have to be limited to traveling abroad. The main reasons for traveling entail relaxation, recreation, and pleasure, whether it be locally or internationally. Under the field of tourism, one could count also incorporate all services a traveller encounters. (Walton, 2023)

Cultural destinations and sights include the key factors which encourage and motivate travellers to visit the region. The development of both industries is important as it offers opportunities for both the cultural sector, as well as tourism operators. The cultural field is knowledgeable on how to provide the best customer experiences in a wide variety of events, while the tourism sector provides a constant flow of audiences to the cultural field.

While the Covid-19 pandemic did not fully change the attributes which affect the travel destination choice nor the ultimate value of travel, it did change the structure of domestic tourism within Finland. Domestic tourism has become less city-centric and leisure tourism has moved away from the capital region and other large cities (Visit Finland, 2022). Nature, wellbeing, and sustainability are one of the strongest rising trends in tourism, with the focus of intangible experiences that are authentic, exclusive, and customized (Visit Finland, 2021).

This thesis focuses on answering the question of "What factors are crucial in creating a successful experience for large groups within the context of 'Taiga

Times' nature tours?". Additionally, this study explores the challenges and opportunities for maintaining the company's culture and mission while adapting services to large groups.

The direct contributions of this study to the cultural production and management field are twofold. This thesis will contribute to the academic body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing large group tours in a small company context in Finland. While these factors are not universal and cannot be applied generally to the cultural field, it will provide a practical insight and increase the understanding of the specific dynamics and challenges associated with large groups within the tourism industry. Elements of the list of considerations can be applied to most events and productions in a specific context where the goal is a truly memorable event.

This thesis implements the 'design thinking' service design method. The data are collected through semi-structured interviews with Taiga Times founder(s). In addition, benchmarking of similar companies; secondary research; and a brainstorming session with Taiga Times founder(s) are also used for data collection. The data is analysed using content analysis to identify common themes, patterns, and insights. The theoretical framework focuses on nature tourism, cultural tourism, experience tourism and productization.

Acknowledging the potential constraints in this research endeavour appears essential. These limitations encompass aspects such data collection methods, time, and resource constraints, as well as the research design and other factors which may impact the generalizability and conclusions of the research. These elements may influence the extent of which the findings can be applied or generalized. It is critical to recognize and address these restrictions, as they can affect the validity and dependability of the thesis. It is vital to demonstrate an awareness of potential flaws in the research and offer suggestions for future research that could address these limitations.

2 An Overview of Tourism Subsections and Tourism Products

2.1 Tourism

Tourism industry is divided into various types of subsections in order to distinguish the tourism experiences that travellers seek and to provide clarity for tourism businesses, policymakers, and researchers. It aids in the development of tourism products that meet the interests and requirements of tourists as well as the characteristics and preferences of travellers. (Pesonen, 2013, pp. 22-25)

The division of tourism into subsectors has significant effects on the creation of tourism products. It can assist tourism businesses in focusing on specific markets and developing goods and services that meet those markets' requirements and expectations. This can enhance the quality of the tourism experience and boost customer satisfaction. It can also help businesses create unique selling points and differentiate themselves from competitors. (Pesonen, 2013, pp. 22-25)

However, the existence of subsectors in tourism also has disadvantages. They can create artificial boundaries between various sorts of tourism, which do not precisely reflect the diverse and complicated nature of the travel industry. It is essential for businesses in the tourism industry to approach subsector categorization critically and to be open to innovative approaches to the production of tourism products and services that satisfy the shifting interests and needs of travellers. (Pesonen, 2013, p. 24)

It is essential for this thesis to take note of various tourism areas, because it enables the researcher to comprehend the characteristics and requirements of each travel industry area. This knowledge is vital for the tailoring of the research methods and research questions. By understanding the qualities and requirements of various travel industry areas, research can be more targeted and viable, therefore, be more successful in its contributions.

2.1.1 Cultural Tourism

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the term "cultural tourism" implies a type of tourism activity in which the primary goal of the traveller is to experience (including learning about, discovering, and consuming) cultural products and attractions (UNWTO, n.d.). Cultural tourism can include many different areas, such as tangible heritage (such as monuments, historic places, etc.); intangible heritage (such as traditional festivals, music, religious / spiritual tourism, etc.); as well as contemporary culture (such as film, performing arts, design, etc.) (UNWTO, 2018, pp. 15-16). According to a study by UNWTO more than 40% of all international tourism can be credited to cultural tourism (UNWTO, 2018, p. 25).

Finland offers a wide variety of well-known cultural destinations that draw both local and foreign tourists. The year-round cultural offering is filled by a diverse array of artistic and cultural festivals as well as natural phenomena. The main physical tourist destinations have to do with cultural environments, different landscapes, and nature. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2022, pp. 29-30)

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the year 2020 can be considered "the worst year in tourism history" according to UNWTO with arrivals dropping by 74% internationally (UNWTO, 2021). As travel has resumed in many countries, it is an opportunity for cultural tourism: people are searching for a new lifestyle which includes safer spaces and a slower pace of life which will show in their consumption habits (Rodríguez-Vázquez , et al., 2023, p. 4). Travellers may end up choosing destinations with more safety and contact with nature while seeking a more meaningful sense of fulfilment, therefore, they may decide to opt for more ecological or healthier activities during their holiday (Rodríguez-Vázquez , et al., 2023, p. 4).

2.1.2 Nature Tourism

According to the UNWTO the term "nature tourism" does not have an agreed upon definition (UNWTO, 2021, p. 8). Nature tourism strives to reduce the negative effects on the natural and social environment to a minimum, while simultaneously aiming to help preserve natural areas that are used as nature tourism attractions. The main ways of executing this is generating revenue for the host communities, organizations, and authorities that are responsible for the management of natural areas for conservation purposes; providing alternative employment and income options for local communities; and engaging both tourists as well as residents in the preservation of not only cultural, but also the natural resources. (UNWTO, n.d.)

Travellers are becoming more interested in various types of low-impact holidays in response to the current climate emergency. One can see travel habits changing due to the rising desire for nature-based tourism. The Covid-19 pandemic as well as the detrimental effects of peak tourism on locations are other causes which have given rise to a newfound desire to leave urban areas and seek out more immersive and sustainable experiences in nature. Hence, tourism based on natural areas will continue to draw in tourists of all types; for this reason, all nature-based tourism goods and services must be developed with people and universal design principles at their heart. (UNWTO, 2021, p. 8)

The relationship between culture and nature has been recognized as a unique selling point for Finland in terms of cultural tourism. Culture and nature seamlessly coexist in cultural settings, including numerous cultural and historic landmarks. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2022, pp. 29-30)

2.1.3 Experiential Tourism

Experiential tourism is known by many different names, including "experience tourism" and "adventure tourism". Experiential and experience tourism are broad phrases that can refer to a variety of things and no official definition for

them seems to be agreed upon. It can include a variety of active and adventurous activities, but it is ultimately about actively and meaningfully connecting with the location and its people, whether you're traveling locally or internationally (Bharathi Rajan, 2015, pp. 121-122).

The 'experience triangle' method makes it possible to analyse and understand both tourism related products, as well as entertainment and cultural products. The term refers to an idealized product that has every aspect of the experience represented on each level. It makes it simple to evaluate the product and identify areas for improvement by identifying the weak points or crucial aspects. (Tarssanen, 2009, p. 11)
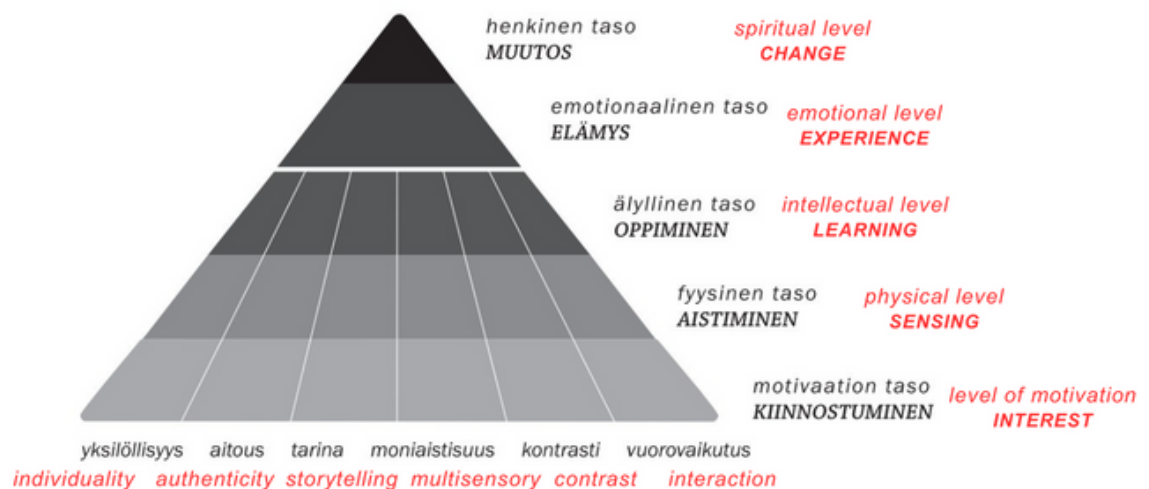
Figure 1: Experience triangle (Tarssanen, 2009, p. 11).

The model views experience from two separate angles. First, the level of the product's elements which influence the experience are represented on the bottom of the triangle from left to right as follows: individuality, authenticity, storytelling, multisensory, contrast, and interaction. The second level focuses on the customer's experience, which is depicted on the right of the triangle from bottom to top as: level of motivation (interest); physical level (sensing); intellectual level (learning); emotional level (experience); and spiritual level (change). The elements that influence the experience are represented in the bottom of the figure. (Tarssanen, 2009, p. 12)

Although it is impossible to guarantee an experience for every visitor, components that are likely to produce the experience can be added to the product. This guarantees that the experience's requirements are met and that the service is improved and refined as a whole. (Tarssanen, 2009, p. 12)

2.1.4 Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a branch of the tourism industry that is always developing. It considers the needs of tourists, tourism businesses, tourist sites, the environment, and the local population both today and in the future. Paying attention to the immediate and long-term consequences of a company on the community and environment is a key component of sustainable tourism operations. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2022, p. 26)

Sustainability, while widely acknowledged as a critical concept, can be considered somewhat elusive due to its broad and multidimensional nature. It encompasses a wide spectrum of environmental, social, and economic factors, and its precise definition may vary depending on the context and perspectives. This can make it challenging to establish concrete and universally applicable criteria for sustainability. Additionally, the evolving nature of environmental issues and societal priorities means that what constitutes as sustainable today may evolve over time. (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, pp. 153-155)

Continuous skill development is necessary for the creation and implementation of responsible operational procedures. Operating techniques must be reviewed and improved on a regular basis since one's understanding of sustainability and its different aspects is always expanding. As the demand for ethical travel increases, sustainable operating practices can potentially offer competitive advantages. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2022, p. 27)

The systematic monitoring and assessment of the impacts of tourism are essential aspects of sustainable tourism. There are several monitoring frameworks which businesses can use which include an indicator for assessing cultural and social sustainability. Such as the sustainable tourism monitoring method by

Metsähallitus (Parks & Wildlife Finland) and the Visit Finland 'Sustainable Travel Finland' program of sustainable tourism indicator system, as well as 'Green Activities' certification by Green Key, which is specifically designed for activity program operators. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2022, p. 28; Green Key, n.d.)

2.2 Tourism Products

To comprehend how the productization process in the tourism industry works, one must first understand what a tourism product is and how it is perceived, as it might be difficult to discern between a tourism service and a tourism product. A tourism product is always a service to the customer, or more accurately, a collection of services. (UNWTO, 2011, pp. 2-4)

Tourism products can be seen as all elements a traveller encounters during their visit, including infrastructure, accommodation, and activities. The traveller can view the entire journey and destination as a single product that starts with the trip preparation and concludes with their return home. The service provider, on the other hand, could view a product as a single service, such as transportation, lodging, or in this case a trip into nature, which is merely a portion of the customer's overall product. (UNWTO, 2011, pp. 2-4)

2.2.1 Developing New Products

The development of new experiences, products, and services is referred to as product development. The process of developing a product can take many different forms. It is exceptionally important to note that the definition of product development is different in the tourism industry because the service provider is not selling an actual physical item, which can be packaged and put on a shelf. Because the service provider is often selling an experience, the product development method must suit the needs of the product, this means implementing service design processes.

To successfully create a tourism product, the service provider must first identify a market niche. This is not an activity which is undertaken only once, tourism products require constant market research and development in order to provide an attractive and successful service. The link between the market and the product is fundamental. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the demand, as well as the target market. The needs of individual travellers are different from small to large groups. (UNWTO, 2011, pp. 1-2, 7)

While the present thesis does not develop a singular product, it does develop a set of considerations which are linked to a successful product. Therefore, the knowledge of how product development in the tourism industry works can be defined as essential.

3 Taiga Times

Taiga Times is a Finnish-Canadian nature tourism company which was founded in 2019 by Jeffery "Jeff" and Kiia Meneses which organises sustainable nature tours from Helsinki year-round. Their "off the beaten path" destinations allow the customer to see the wild side of Finland, while still near the capital. To ensure a safe and personal experience, the nature tours are mainly marketed for small groups, and include a professional wilderness guide, transportation, as well as traditional Finnish cuisine. Jeff is the main certified wilderness guide, leading the majority of the trips, while Kiia, with a background in tourism and hospitality management, takes care of the marketing, booking and administration side of the business. (Taiga Times, n.d.)

Taiga Times has been based on the following values: quality, sustainability, customer service, responsibility in the ecological, socio-cultural as well as economical (Taiga Times, n.d.). They take responsibility regarding the environment and their customers seriously and have been rewarded in their efforts by organisations as Green Activities, We Speak Gay, as well as Visit Finland with their 'Sustainable Travel Finland' -certificate. Taiga Times is also in partnership with

Metsähallitus and follow the principles of sustainable tourism. (Taiga Times, n.d.)

4 Research Questions

The main research question reads as follows: "What factors are crucial in creating a successful experience for large groups within the context of Taiga Times' nature tours?". The secondary research question is "How can the company maintain its culture, values, and atmosphere when catering to a large group?". This aim of this thesis is to provide Taiga Times with a comprehensive overview of which factors are key to creating a successful and memorable experience for large groups.

The objectives of this research are to ascertain the key elements and attributes of Taiga Times' existing tour offerings that have contributed to their success, with a specific focus on their applicability and potential integration into the framework of large group tours, and to understand the market saturation by examining comparable tour operators or similar businesses in the tourism sector.

5 Service Design Process

The present thesis will follow a service design model. The definition of service design is in its core a way of approaching the development of services, making it not only a process but instead, a set of tools. It is a framework with which to approach the development of services and with which the service developer can deepen their own expertise, build work methods and tools that are better suited to their own operating environment (Tuulaniemi, 2011, p. 30). The aim of service design is to make sure services are not only desirable and usable from the client's perspective, but also efficient and effective for the supplier (Mager, 2008, p. 355).

Service design expertise and methods develop as requirements grow and more of these frameworks are created. The core framework, i.e. the design of services, already existed before service design. Different tools and methods are used in service design; however, the main goals are as follows: to better understand people, their lives, and needs, detect new opportunities, design functional services, and implement the plans made. (Tuulaniemi, 2011, p. 50)

Iterative and incremental development methods are used within service design (Tuulaniemi, 2011, p. 50). Iterative development is a strategy in which the solution is developed further in each iteration until the target goal is reached (Cockburn, 2008, p. 27). Iteration, by definition, means involving repetition (Merrian-Webster, n.d.). Incrementality means that the development is divided into separate developments and integrated as they are completed (Cockburn, 2008, p. 27). The whole is, therefore built from partial deliveries: the solutions are designed into smaller parts of the development site. By definition, incremental means being or occurring in smaller parts. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

The present thesis will be implementing a design thinking technique, which relies on incremental techniques and consists of five main steps which are visualised in Figure 1: discovering, concepting, designing, building, and implementing. (Van Oosterom, 2009, p. 168) The first phase of 'discovering' includes mapping the current situation in order to identify challenges and opportunities, as well as other possible issues which need to be investigated (Van Oosterom, 2009, p. 168). During this phase, an interview with Taiga Times CEO Kiia Meneses will take place.

Figure 2: Service Design Process visualised.

The second phase of 'concepting' will deepen our understanding of the real needs of the service's target group. The goal is to expand the view of the challenge, gain a comprehensive understanding of the customer, and find hidden customer needs or aspects that affect the solution of the challenge (Van Oosterom, 2009, p. 168). During this phase, analysing any pre-existing data from customer feedback will take place, as well as benchmarking and a brainstorming session with the Taiga Times CEO.

The third phase of 'designing' includes developing solutions, guided by the organization's goals and customer needs (Van Oosterom, 2009, p. 168). The fourth phase includes 'building' the ideas. (Van Oosterom, 2009, p. 168). The labour of the third and fourth phase will be detailed last in the list of considerations. The final phase of implementation will be up to Taiga Times, after the completion of this thesis.

5.1   Discovering – Interview

An interview is a data collection method that can be described as interactive between the interviewer and the interviewee; thus, the interviewer is a part of the data generation process. There are many different interview techniques, and the type of information required to support the objective being developed influences the style chosen. (Ojasalo, et al., 2015, p. 106)

Interviews are a common method used for data collection. For this thesis, it is important to utilise the method, due to the knowledge of the customers and their needs by the company. For this research, the semi-structured method is utilised. The method was decided upon as the aim of the interview is to obtain the opinion of the interviewee and initiate a dialogue. The questions themselves are either open ended or semi-structured, to avoid influencing the answers on the interviewer's part. The interview questions are presented in Appendix 1. The interview is conducted in person.

5.2 Concepting – Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a type of research methodology used to examine language in its social setting. It entails investigating spoken and written language to comprehend how meaning is constructed, how social interactions are shaped, and how it reflects larger society norms and beliefs. Understanding how language is used to communicate meaning, create social realities, and reflect power dynamics in each situation is the main objective. The method investigates the underlying structures, patterns, and rhetorical strategies employed in communication, going beyond merely evaluating the content of language. (Halperin & Heath, 2012)

The data analysed for this section are the Taiga Times TripAdvisor customer reviews to gain a fuller understanding of what has worked and has not worked on the company's previous trips. It is important to note that these reviews will be largely from travellers which participated in smaller sized trips and, therefore this will aid in finding the best practices to be utilised in larger group tours.

5.3 Concepting – Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a method in which a company's operating models are compared to similar companies in the same field. The goal of the method is to identify the best practices from competing companies. Benchmarking is based on an interest in learning how others operate and succeed. The idea is to study successful companies, learn from what they're doing, and implement successful practices. It is important to remember that this does not include a copy-and-paste method, which refers to a practice of directly adopting or replicating specific processes or practices. (Ojasalo, et al., 2015, p. 186)

The goal is to identify companies from the same field who offer similar services, to understand the market for large group tours better, and to analyse which elements would be beneficial for Taiga Times to emphasise. The benchmarking will take place through the online websites of the company, in order to simulate

the way a potential customer might perceive the companies and what information is available to them. The information is systematically collected and the research results are analysed and evaluated critically.

5.4 Concepting – Brainstorming

Brainstorming remains one of the methods for generating ideas in a group setting. The aim of the method is to find creative solutions to specific problems. While brainstorming is just one of the many methods used in generating new ideas, the common elements that they all share are facilitating an environment where ideas can be developed freely, allowing for creative thinking, as well as the possibility to develop the ideas of others. (Ojasalo, et al., 2015, pp. 160-161)

Traditionally, a brainstorming session involves a warmup by the leader of the session, in order to make sure everyone is aware of the goal of the session. After this, the session moves to an idea phase where all ideas are documented but not analysed. After which there is open discussion where the answers are looked at and discussed critically and a conclusion drawn. (Ojasalo, et al., 2015, p. 160)

Due to the small size of the company and scheduling difficulties the brainstorming process had to be adapted from the traditional. The brainstorming process took place with only Kiia and Jeff Meneses, with thorough instructions from the researcher, and a conversation about the brainstorming results were had with Kiia Meneses and the researcher.

6 Results

6.1 Interview

The first method of data collection consisted of an interview with Taiga Times founder and CEO, Kiia Meneses. The permission to use the material has been confirmed by email and the questions were shared in advance. The questions

entailed topics such as the history of the company, past and present challenges, sustainability, goals for the future, as well as specific questions regarding the thesis. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

The goal of the interview was to broaden the understanding of Taiga Times' operational ideas, goals, values, as well as past and current challenges. Moreover, the focus was on which elements of their company culture and values they wish to translate to large group tours the most, as well as finding out what kind of tours they already provide. A deeper understanding of how the company operates serves as a starting point for the development of Taiga Times' operations.

6.1.1 Providing a Personal Experience

Ever since the founding of the company in 2019, Taiga Times has had a very clear set of core values they wish to incorporate into the business' daily life. Quality, responsibility with a particular emphasis on customer experience are included. With a mission to be the best and more reliable tourism company operating from Helsinki. (Meneses, 2023)

The target group for Taiga Times' tours are international travellers. Due to a limited target group, they have been able to refine and develop their products in a way that would have been hard to do if they were to cater to both domestic and international travellers.

The core idea of Taiga Times is focused on small groups, so the customer can gain a very personal experience. This gives both the guides and the customers the opportunity to learn to know each other, having conversations and asking questions. After receiving requests during the years to facilitate larger groups, they found that bigger group sizes in tours offer a whole set of new challenges and rewards. The future expansion to offer more tours for larger groups presents itself with several unique dilemmas. (Meneses, 2023)

6.1.2 Sustainability

A key topic which emerged in the interview was the presence of sustainability and safety within the company. Ever since the beginning, the company has made sure to consider social, ecological, and economic responsibility. All these responsibilities have some degree of overlap within the topics they contain, therefore, even though something is mentioned under one point, it does not exclude it from others.

Ecological responsibility is perhaps the most familiar to the average person. Within Taiga Times this means taking care of nature by, for example, using marked paths, minimising food waste, as well as only using reusable items such as proper raincoats and reusable locally produced dishes. The largest pollutant within the company is the vehicle they use for the trips, due to most of their destinations being inaccessible by public transport. This can be offset by the element of shared transport to the trail from Helsinki city centre, as well as avoiding overpopulated trails where nature might already be suffering from heavy foot traffic. (Meneses, 2023)

In addition to this, Taiga Times also promotes responsible tips to their customers and educates about the impact one can have on the surrounding nature with even the smallest acts, from the 'Leave No Trace' -principles to what the freedom to roam includes. Taiga Times has taken the educational route, which means their approach to minimizing the negative impacts on the natural environment is through the lens of humour and positivity. (Meneses, 2023)

Social responsibility has to do with taking care of the customers, employees, and themselves. Their tours are priced fairly. Social responsibility also includes elements such as incorporating and providing information about Finnish traditions and culture during the tours. In addition to this, Taiga Times is a member of the 'We Speak Gay' organisation, in order to promote LGBTQIA+ friendly and inclusive communication within the tourism industry as well as promoting a safe environment for their customers. (Meneses, 2023)

Economic responsibility includes besides fair pay for tour guides, paying taxes as well as all fees and generally keeping their finances in order. In addition to this, Taiga Times pays a fee to *Metsähallitus* to support the preservation and protection of Finnish wildlife. Within economic responsibility, we can also mention the use of as much locally produced items as possible, such as the reusable dishes produced by Kupilka, and collaboration with local businesses and guides. (Meneses, 2023)

Taiga Times undergoes a yearly process to receive the 'Green Activities' sustainability certification, which is a rigorous process and includes concrete proof for each action taken. (Meneses, 2023)

6.1.3 Existing Tours for Large Groups

The existing tours for large groups have mainly focused on the high season with multiple of them being either during summer or winter and only a few during autumn and spring (Meneses, 2023). Their current tour available to large groups can be seen on their website, with availability all year round with capacity for 45 people. The main destination they offer is the *Nuuksio* National Park in Espoo which the duration of 4,5 hours. There is a possibility for a longer duration trip to be arranged to *Liesjärvi* national park close to Forssa.

The tour includes an easy walk where no previous hiking experience is necessary, and the basic level of fitness is required, where the walk is led by Jeff. After the walk, a Finnish-style meal is cooked on an open fire which the group can enjoy together. (Taiga Times, n.d.; Meneses, 2023)

The tours for larger groups present unique challenges. Depending on the season, the tour needs to be booked either a week or a month in advance. During off-season it is easier to find transportation and the trails are generally less busy. Tours for the summer generally need to be booked already in May due to the high season being busy. The fact that most of Finland is on summer holidays is also an important aspect to note as many businesses are closed.

Another notable thing about large tours is the amount of food waste it produces and the limitations of what and where you can eat. In addition to this, the guide on these trips needs to be in more of a customer service role than a tour guide role, as larger groups are more difficult to keep as one, there are often internal cliques and making sure everyone gets the same information.

While there is no official data regarding how much food waste is generated by the tourism industry, according to the International Food Waste Coalition (IFWC) within Europe 12%, valued at 35 billion Euros, of the total food loss and waste is generated by the hospitality and food service industries. Making it a significant issue. (IFWC, n.d.)

6.2 Discourse Analysis

The analysis used 99 TripAdvisor reviews from between May 2022 and May 2023. The aim was to understand which elements of the existing tours for smaller groups worked well based on customer reviews. The reviews were analysed, first keywords were gathered after which key themes were identified. The results were recorded into a Word document, from which overarching themes were identified.

The keywords were analysed based on the number of times they appeared in the reviews. Keywords which appeared in 10% or more reviews were considered. First, they were recorded into a spreadsheet under broad titles such as "positive atmosphere/high quality experiences", "guides", "cultural engagement", etc. Into which keywords, excluding filler words such as "and", "the", etc., were inserted. An overview of the most popular keywords per category, with the number indicating how many times it was mentioned in total, can be seen in Figure 3.
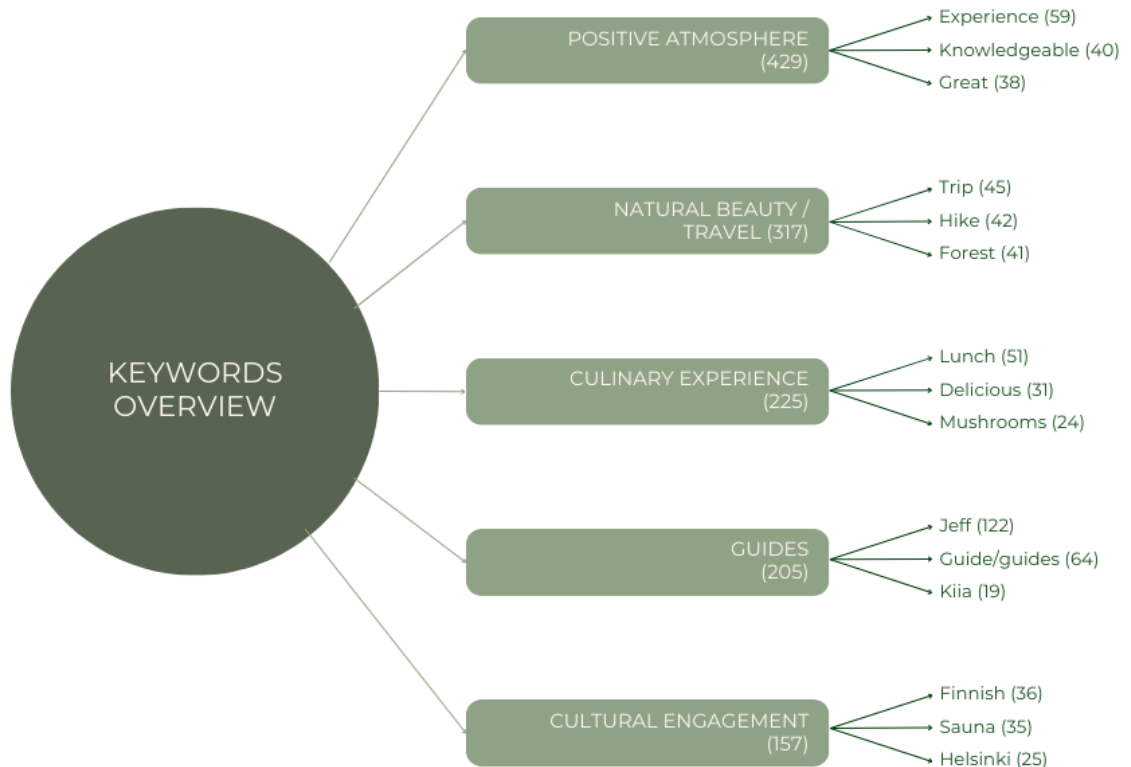
Figure 3: Keywords overview.

The positive and warm atmosphere created by the guides with their friendly and welcoming demeanour was often noted as a contributor to the overall enjoyment of the tours. Furthermore, the guides' expertise in flora, fauna, and cultural aspects are highlighted in multiple reviews. The guides are consistently praised for their knowledge, friendliness, passion, and professionalism. This expertise enriches the overall experience by providing educational and informative content.

Many reviews express satisfaction and a sense of exceeding expectations, indicating a consistent theme of high-quality experiences. Participants appreciate the ease of exploration facilitated by the guides and highlight the immersive and enchanting experience of being in the Finnish wilderness. Participants appreciate the opportunity to learn about plants, wildlife, and local traditions during the tours, which reflects a focus on interactive learning.

Participants value the authentic Finnish cultural experiences, such as traditional saunas and local cuisine, dishes prepared in a forest setting over an open fire, showing a strong emphasis on cultural engagement. The diversity of experiences demonstrates the incorporation of contrast and variety, as well as a unique multisensory experience.

Personalized experiences, attention to dietary preferences, and accommodating different needs contribute to a sense of individuality. Despite group settings, participants feel valued and receive individual attention. In addition, the tours facilitate positive interactions among participants, fostering a sense of camaraderie. It was also noted that small group sizes contribute to a more intimate and enjoyable experience for the participants.

The reviews frequently mention positive emotions, memorable experiences, and highlight specific moments which left a lasting impact, indicating a strong emotional connection with the tours. Participants consistently express their strong recommendation for these tours, emphasizing their satisfaction and desire to participate again.

6.3 Benchmarking

Benchmarking was crucial to understanding the market saturation for large group tours and what types of elements other existing tours provide, because it provides a comparative analysis of a company's performance, products, and practices against the industry standards and competitors. The choosing of the benchmarking subjects as well as the lens which they were analysed was carried out through the eyes of a customer.

The original goal was to find companies which offer hiking and nature tours based in Helsinki, as this proved to be difficult additional companies operating from Rovaniemi were chosen. The intention was to find two benchmarking subjects one slightly smaller, with only one employee, and one slightly larger, with three or more employees. A third company was chosen as they provide a larger array of tours with destinations in the Nordic and Baltic countries.

The starting point to finding the benchmarking companies was from the "Things to Do In Helsinki" page on TripAdvisor, which is the first page which comes up when inserting the same phrase into Google. From there with a focus on nature and hiking similar companies were gathered into a list with the original criteria of having at least two similar tours to Taiga Times, were based in Helsinki, and their tour could be found with less than 10 clicks from the starting page. This method was inherently flawed, as many companies do not gather reviews on TripAdvisor meaning the algorithm works against them and their services are not easily visible or not on the website. However, TripAdvisor is an internationally used review site for travel agencies and comparison.

A spreadsheet table (Figure 4) was created to make the comparison process easier and where all the data were collected to be reviewed. A copy of this spreadsheet table is in Appendix 2. The table consisted of several elements such as the company name, website address, place of operation, years operational, core product, core product pricing, additional products, additional products pricing, sustainability practices and certificates, trust adding elements, social media presence (other than TripAdvisor), additional notes, and ideas to incorporate.

Company Name	Backpacker Helsinki Tour	Beyond Arctic Adventurers	Nordic Unique Travels
Website	https://backpackerhelsinkitour.wordpress.com/	https://beyondarctic.com/	https://nordictravels.eu/
Place of Operation	Helsinki	Rovaniemi & Levi	Rovaniemi
Years operational	Since 2019	Since 2016	Since 2018
Target market	International travellers	International and domestic travellers	International travellers, especially ones looking for holiday packages
Core product	Hiking in a national park (Nuuksio or Sipoonkorpi)	Photography tours and small group tours	Northern lights tours, snowmobile safaris, husky and reindeer sleighrides
Core product pricing	88€ per person	85-175 € per person	60-160 € per person, depending on the tour type. Holiday packages from 900-7000€ per person
Additional products	Ice Fishing (Winter) Torronsuo National Park (Summer)	Skiing, tours revolving around arctic animals, activities such as ice fishing, backcountry skiing, fat bikes, etc. + Renting hiking and photography equipment	Finnish sauna, skiing and snowshoeing, party and dinner experiences, icebreaker experiences + international tours involsing the Nordic and Baltic countires
Additional products pricing	80-155 € per person	90-300 € per person (some tours only priced with a group price)	60-7000 € per person
Sustainability practices/certificates	Not mentioned on the website	Website has a sustainable travelling page with an environmental policy. Cooperation with the Protect Our Winters movement, Green Activities Environmental Award and participating in the Sustainable Travel Finland program.	Website has a responsible travel policy, no certificates mentioned
Trust adding elements	TripAdvisor has 54 reviews (as of 23.05.2023) Ranked as #14 of 208 Tours and Activities in Helsinki (as of 23.05.2023). 295 reviews on AirBnb and an "identity verified" badge.	TripAdvisor has 452 reviews (as of 22.05.2023) Ranked as #7 of 91 in Outdoor Activities in Rovaniemi (as of 22.05.2023) Very professional website and beautiful pictures. Website in English and Finnish. Privacy policy and Term ja Conditions both readily available as well as Covid-19 safety measures. A dedicated webpage which is a collection of how the company has been visible in the media.	TripAdvisor has 1547 reviews (as of 22.05.2023) Ranked as #11 of 91 in Outdoor Activities in Rovaniemi (as of 22.05.2023) Large variety of packages Professional website and good quality images Wesbite in 6 different languages Built in contact sheet with privacy policy available
Social media presence (other than TripAdvisor)	Not mentioned on the website	Yes: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp	Yes: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest
Additional notes	Simple website with very "real" images. Nuukiso trip only one with the mention of accomodating up to 30 people upon request.	Prices not listed clearly on the website, only when actually booking through Trip Advisor. More tours from Rovaniemi than Levi. Larger group option available (up to 70 people) but no concrete examples, only a contact form.	Large company with a wide variety of tours and knowledge. The "about us" page could be more personal. Mainly focused on the winter activities. Website doesn't have any easily findable information for large groups So many different types of tours perhaps not organised the best so it feels chaotic and overwhelming.
Ideas to incorporate	In general: Torronsuo national park Large groups: -	In general: Offering consulation services to film and production crews Webpage for invitation for partnerships Photography tours Dedicated hashtags with company name and a tagline Detailed introduction to each guide/employee Booking more than 2 tours results in a 5-15% discount for certain tours. Large groups: -	In general: Finnish sauna experience as a focal point Specialised island tours near Helsinki Safari type wildlife viewing Ice fishing Regarding large groups: -

Figure 4: Benchmarking table.

All data were found on the companies' websites within a few exceptions of validating the review amounts on TripAdvisor or other review platform in May of 2023. Any information presented on the website may have been modified after this. The data were attempted to be found with the fewest amount of clicks possible, indicating the availability of the information. The companies which were chosen for benchmarking were Backpacker Helsinki Tours, Beyond Arctic Adventures, and Nordic Unique Travels.

The first four elements aimed to offer the basic information about the companies to provide transparency and allow for the easy identification of the companies. This also highlights the geographic scope and longevity of the benchmarked companies, providing an insight into their market presence and related experience.

All companies chosen for benchmarking offered a lot of information especially regarding trips for smaller groups, as it is a part of their main product. Two of the companies provided information that trips for larger groups was possible, one noting the exact contents of the tour and the other only with a contact form and no concrete examples. This indicates that the market saturation for large group tours seems rather low, as the majority of tours available were for small groups.

Collected ideas to incorporate based on the benchmarking would be to investigate *Torronsuo* national park as a destination, offering consultation services to film and production crews as well as having a webpage for invitation for partnerships. An important point of emphasis for Taiga Times would be to note the sustainability of their group tours.

In conclusion, the market for large group nature tours is largely unsaturated based on this small snapshot which allows for innovation on the field. A key point to attract potential customers would be to make information as readily available as possible because there is a clear lack of it in the field.

6.4 Brainstorming

The brainstorming session was broken down into several small questions. A copy of the questions as well as the original images is included in Appendix 3.

Image 1: Brainstorming session, question 1.

The session started off with the question of "what makes a tour unsuitable for large groups?". This question was also approached with the mindset of what the challenges with tours for large groups consist of. The aim of this question was to understand specific factors that determine why tours can be unsuitable and to further understand the needs of the target audience.

The overarching themes included locational challenges which contained other issues such as bus access and the suitability of the trail itself, food logistics, and amenities. The trail needs to be big enough to be able to sustainably carry a large amount of people, meaning it should have sufficient width and structural integrity to accommodate the flow of up to 50 people without causing damage to the natural environment or posing safety hazards. Regarding food logistics, the

largest difficulty is for example carrying water and ingredients for up to 50 people. This means the food must be simple, meaning dishes which are easy to prepare, require minimal cooking, and use basic non-spillable ingredients due to their weight, therefore, it can result in the loss of a cultural touch point.

Another big theme entailed the limited possibilities with activities as well as the managing of those activities. Certain activities require focus as well as knowledge, which can be difficult to manage with large groups. For example, mushroom picking requires knowledge of which mushrooms are ready to pick and knowing which ones can be hazardous. If even one member of a large group does not pay sufficient focus it can have potentially life-threatening consequences.

The final notes to be made are regarding how the tours need multiple guides and the difficulty of making sure everyone receives the proper information about the tour, since usually one person oversees booking the tour. The next question to mirror the first was the following: "What makes a tour suitable for large groups?", with the same aim.

The question ended up having overlap with the answers of the third question "What is at the core of the tours for large groups?". To not lose context, they have been kept as one image, however, the analysing of results will happen separately. The aim of the third question was to identify the core values, themes, and objectives of the tours for Taiga Times.

Regarding the second question, the answers largely mirrored the answers of the first, like noting bus access, which was expected. The new things mentioned were the difficulty and length of the trail, which means it needs to be an easy walk and a relatively short distance, a maximum of 5 kilometres, to be suitable for participants of varied fitness levels. Another new thing pointed out was that the location needs to be close to Helsinki, a maximum of an hours' drive, and generally a location which is suited for larger groups.
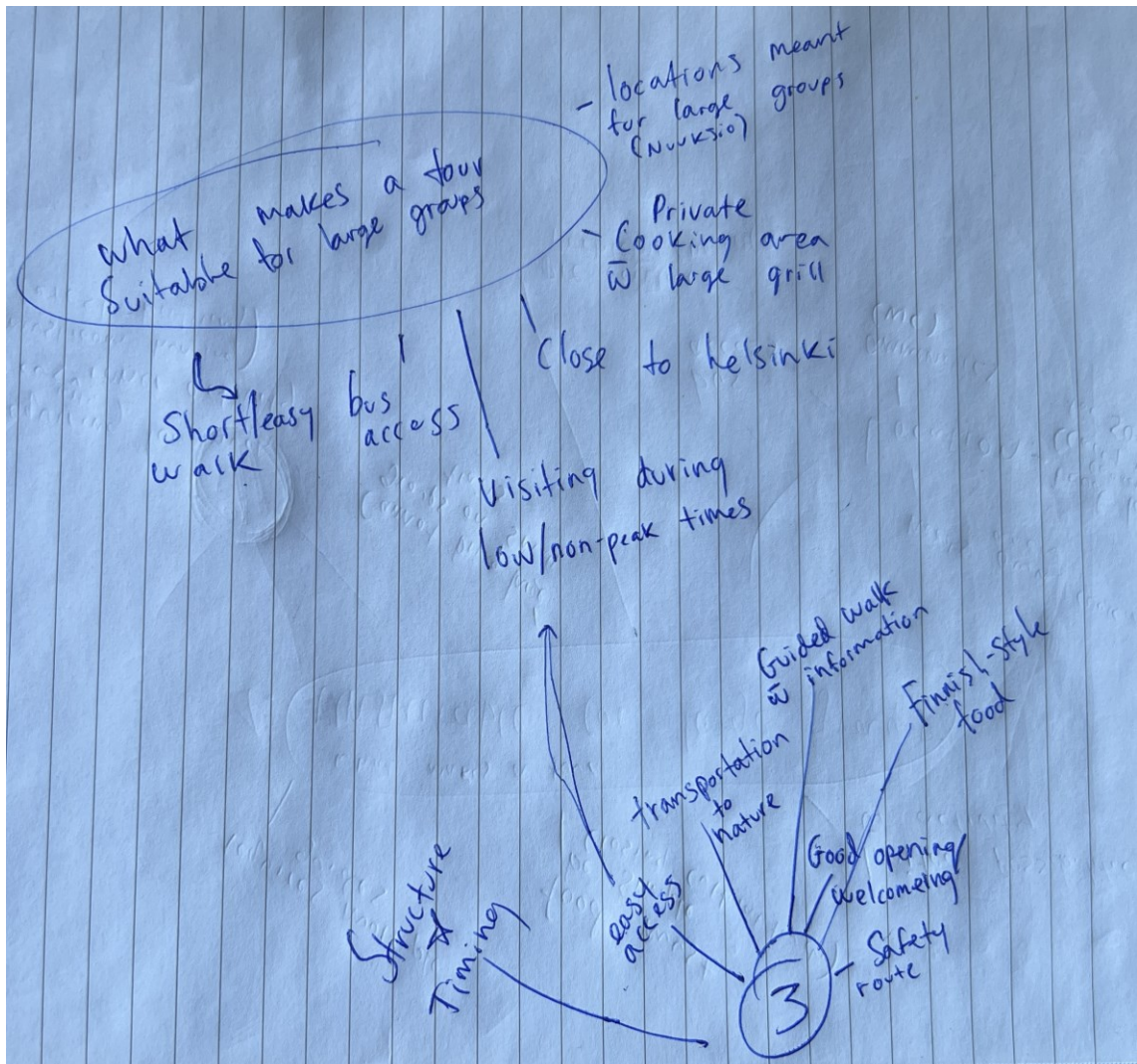
Image 2: Brainstorming session, questions 2 and 3.

The trail should have a private cooking area with a large grilling area which in-cludes enough places to sit in order to accommodate a large group. The last in-teresting point was how visiting the trail during low, non-peak season is favoura-ble.

Low season for visiting offers easy access which is one of the key elements of the tours for large groups. Easy access also includes transportation to nature as well as the guided tour element. Together they build structure, which is incredi-bly important when it comes to timing. Often the pace of large groups can be slower, therefore, good timing is key. Having an alternative or "safety" route is a good way to keep on schedule, since the tour guide can always fall back on it

should they notice a slower group, where it takes significantly longer to reach certain milestones.

Another key emphasis, which is at the core of the tours is a good welcoming of the group and the overall opening of the tour. This is vital to make sure everyone knows what they have come to do, as well as establishing personal contact with the group. The final core element of the large tours is the Finnish-style food, which currently includes potato salad and grilled sausages, at the end of the trail.

The fourth question of "What are the differences in the dynamic between a large and a small group?" inspired some comparison. The aim of this question was to compare and contrast the dynamics of small and large groups to understand how these differences can possibly affect the overall tour experience for both the customer as well as Taiga Times employees.
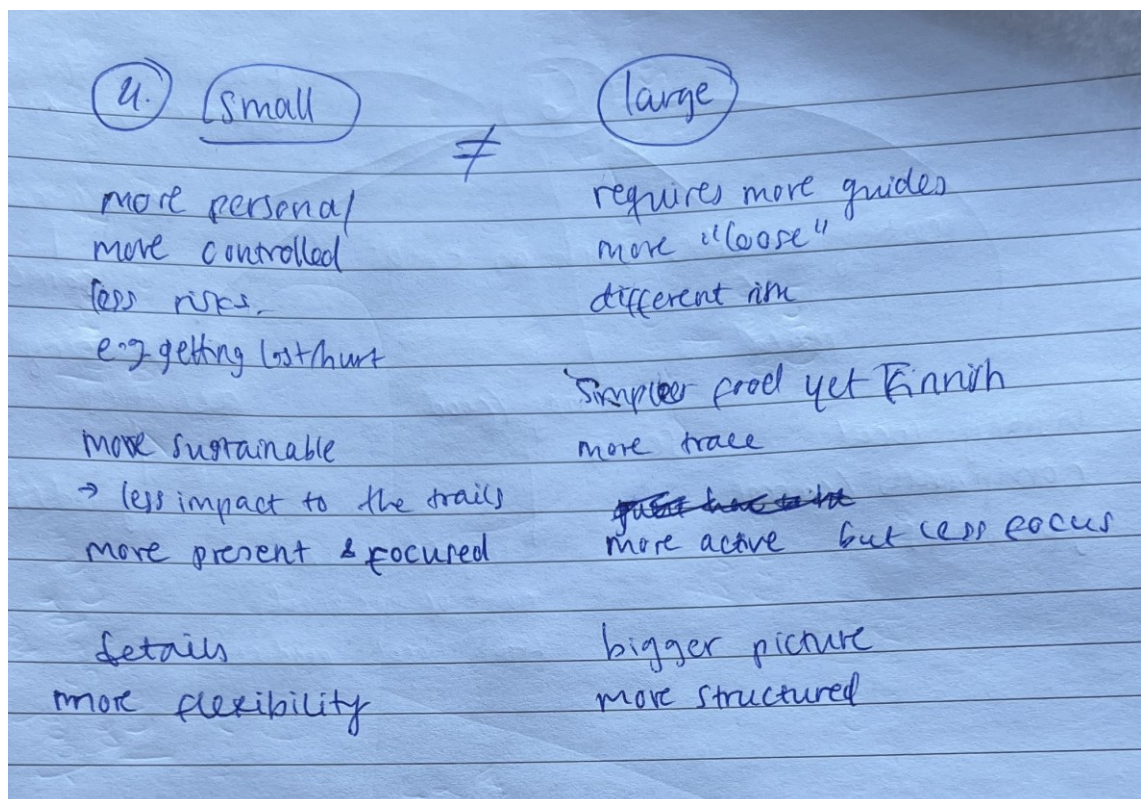

Image 3: Brainstorming, question 4.

Small groups, of six to eight people, were deemed to be more personal overall and more controlled. The large groups require more guides, making the personal connection to everyone less so. The tour was noted to be more relaxed than that of the small group, as larger groups usually have a generally slower pace and the tour has a less structured itinerary.

The tours for smaller groups pose fewer overall risks, while the tours for large groups pose different types of risk. The difference in risks is the key point, not that one has less and the other more. It's important to note that the tours for smaller groups can have for example more dangerous terrain, which can bring its own risks. However, the risks with larger groups contain things like somebody of the group wandering off and getting lost or hurt, which is less likely to happen with a smaller group size.

The small groups were noted to be more sustainable with less impact to the trails as well as less food waste, while the larger groups leave more trace. There was also a distinction between how smaller groups are generally more present and focused, while larger groups are less focused but more active. With smaller groups, the details and individual needs matter more, while with larger groups, the focus is on the bigger picture, the logistical and organizational aspects of the tour. Based on this, tours for less individuals can incorporate more flexibility, taking different routes based on the participants interests.

With a large group, this type of flexibility is difficult, the tours need to be more structured in order to be successful. The fifth question "With what can you provide personalized attention and ensure that each group receives a unique and engaging experience?", aimed to understand how Taiga Times can provide personalised attention to each group.

Many of the points raised were of the same vein as some of the questions before. The importance of multiple guides was raised, here with an emphasis on

being able to pay attention to everyone. An additional note was made regarding guides being talkative and outgoing, a people person.
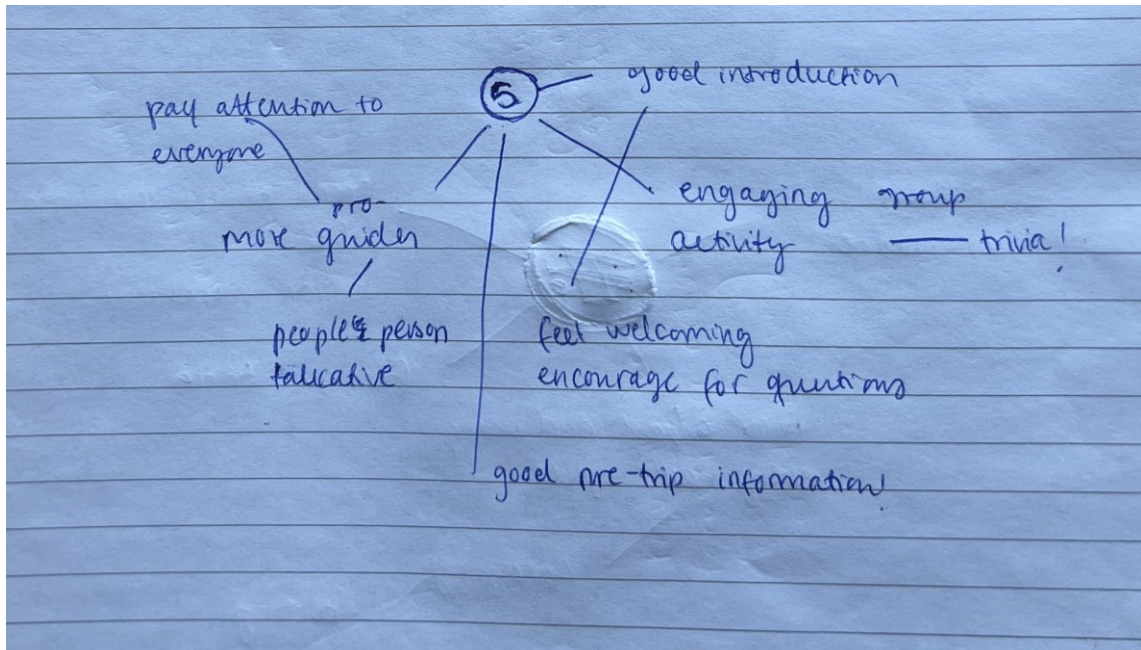

Image 4: Brainstorming, question 5.

Good pre-trip information is the heart of a successful trip, as well as good introductions. The emphasis being on creating a welcoming environment and encouraging all types of questions throughout the trip. In addition, encouraging group activities, like trivia, can help the group bond and add value to the trip. "How could the company collaborate with local businesses or attractions?" was the sixth question, to help identify potential opportunities for collaboration in order to enhance the tour experience and help promote local businesses and attractions.

This question produced a lot of good answers and ideas. First, visiting local companies and famous gift shops could be a good way to integrate culture and support local businesses. Planning the tour around the destination allows for an immersive experience, it offers guests a more concrete experience with the local culture, and it provides the ability to interact with local people. In addition to this renting facilities such as traditional Finnish huts, known as a *kota*, can provide a unique experience.
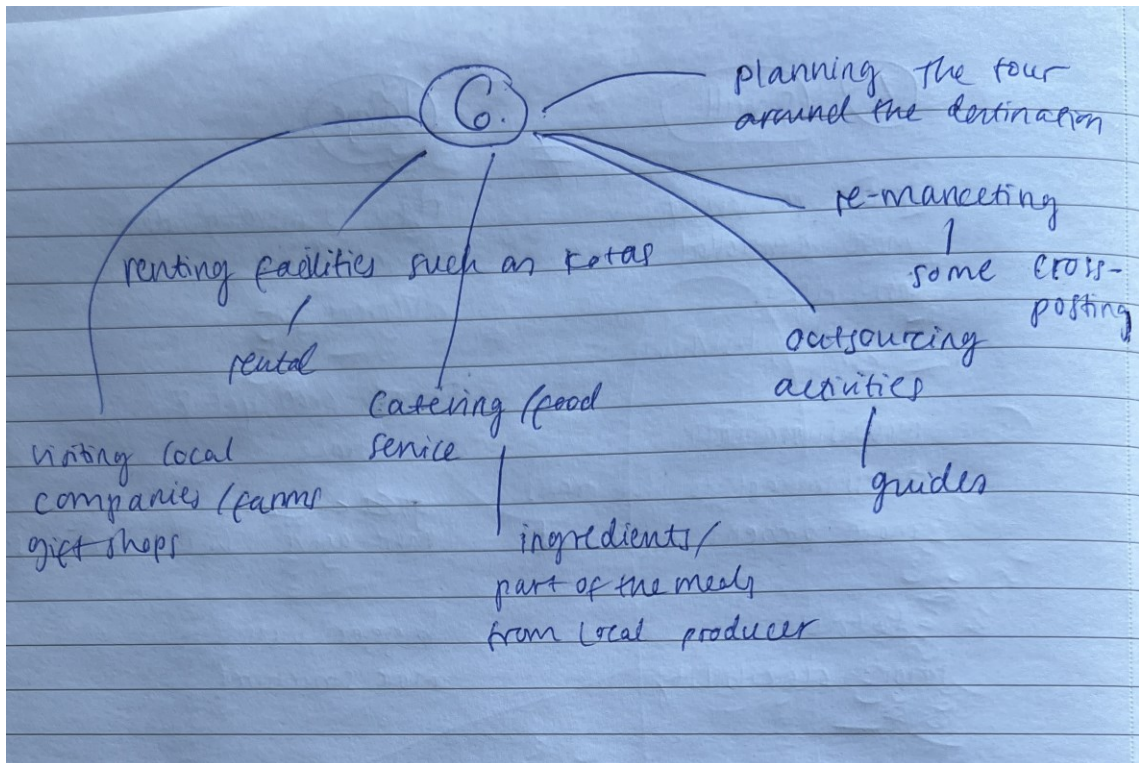
Image 5: Brainstorming session, question 6.

Outsourcing activities such as guides, and catering or other types of food ser-
vices can be a way of accessing expertise and resources which may not be
available in house. Local partners, often industry professionals who handle a
part of the itinerary, can bring their unique knowledge, and help create a multi-
faceted experience for the guest. Catering or food services would be all local
produce to create an immersive culinary experience into traditional Finnish food.
Moreover, this directly contributes to the local economy. We can include co-
marketing into this topic with various types of crossover posts with different
companies.

The final question of the brainstorming session was "What kind of cultural ele-
ments would you want to incorporate into the tours?". The goal of this question
was to ask Taiga Times what they would personally want to include and incor-
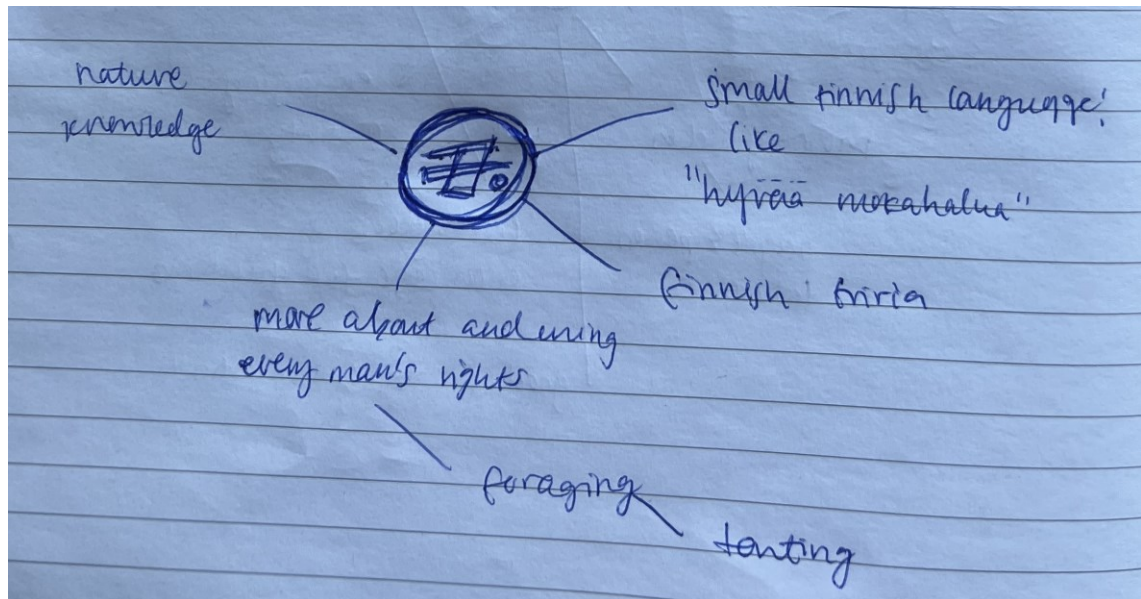porate in the future.

Image 6: Brainstorming session, question 7.

Nature knowledge is something the company is already providing in their tours. Providing guests opportunities to learn about the local flora, fauna, and providing ecological knowledge of the local area is a great way to enhance guests experience and to promote sustainable tourism practices.

Education was noted in two different ways. First, the focus on everyone's rights and how it connects to foraging and tenting, as well as educating about Finnish culture through teaching simple phrases of the language and having trivia sessions regarding the topics spoken about during the tour.

7   List of Considerations

The final list of considerations is viewed through the lens of the experience triangle and show key factors which are crucial in creating a successful experience for large groups. Figure 5 serves as a visual guide to how each consideration supports the overall experience.
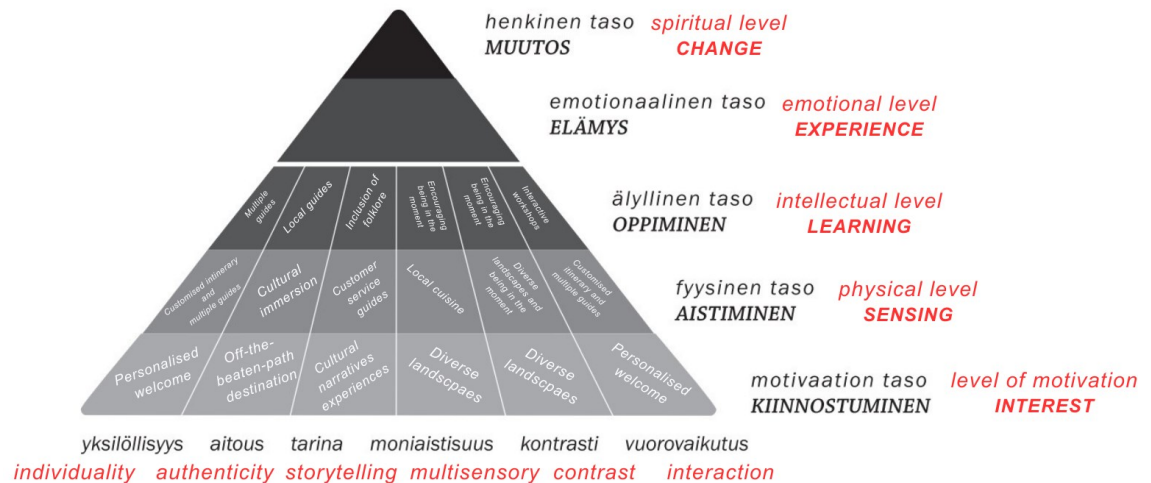
Figure 5: Experience triangle with translations and considerations.

Product elements to support individuality and interaction include personalised welcomes, customised itinerary, interactive workshops, and a focus on multiple guides. All these elements foster a sense of belonging from the start. The focus on multiple guides allows for each participant to experience the small tour, of six to eight people, atmosphere which the company is known for and a more personal connection with one (or more) of the guides. Interactive workshops or activities encourage active participation and hands-on experiences foster group cohesion and a sense of camaraderie.

Product elements to support authenticity are to employ local guides, off-the-beaten-path destinations, and cultural immersion. The inclusion of local guides helps engage the participants and provide a genuine insight into daily life as the guides possess in-depth knowledge of both nature and the cultural heritage and customs.

Product elements to support storytelling are guides who understand the importance of customer service, encouraging cultural narratives, and the inclusion of local folklore. Stories which intertwine nature with cultural history, folklore and legends can enhance participants' experience. The addition of guides who are customer service professionals' aids with keeping a conversation from the start of the tour to the end as well as providing a personal experience.

Product elements which support multisensory experiences and contrast entail a focus on local cuisine and an emphasis on being in the moment. Food was noted as an important part of the tour in the customer reviews. Being in nature is a multisensory experience for many with the different sights, sounds, and smells but it is also important to encourage participants to take a moment to truly take everything in. Transitioning between diverse landscapes as well as the incorporation of different spaces, such as the transportation vehicle, the trail, fireside sitting and indoor *kotas*, can furthermore enhance the multisensory experience and bring contrast to the tours.

Companies choose companies they are willing to work with based on a shared value basis, the emphasis which Taiga Times places on their sustainability efforts is a key element in securing new customers and can be utilised effectively in their marketing. As Taiga Times has found success with their small group tours it is crucial for them to incorporate best practices consciously and actively to large group tours.

8 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer two separate research questions and provide Taiga Times with a comprehensive overview of which factors are key to creating a successful and memorable experience for large groups. The objectives of this research were to ascertain the key elements and attributes of Taiga Times' existing tour offerings that have contributed to their success which was executed through the interview and discourse analysis. The applicability and potential integration into the framework of large group tours was further clarified by the brainstorming process. Understanding the market saturation was carried out by examining comparable tour operators in the benchmarking process.

The results of the research proved to be in alignment with what was aimed to be achieved. Understanding successful and meaningful experiences in this setting

requires a lot of the knowledge I have gained from cultural management studies. I believe these results can be applied with small adjustments to many different fields where the product's target audience is a group.

The key findings from the interview process included the following points: the level of commitment Taiga Times displayed to providing a personal experience to their customers; how sustainability plays a large role in their overall operation; and what their existing large group tours entail. The discourse analysis section identified customer needs as well as best practices Taiga Times is implementing. The benchmarking process viewed tourism businesses providing similar products and provided valuable information on understanding the customer experience. The brainstorming process provided a comprehensive overview of challenges as well as creative solutions. Based on all of this, factors which are crucial in creating a successful experience were inserted into the experience triangle paradigm.

On the basis on evidence presented, one could believe it is key knowledge for a cultural manager to understand the basics of product development as well as different service design processes, because these skills can be applied to many different fields. The Design Thinking process was a wonderful outline to structure this research on. The phases of discovering, concepting, designing, and building kept the research on track and provided a necessary structure.

There is a lot left to explore within this topic as well as with Taiga Times. The future expansion to offer more tours for larger groups presents itself with several unique dilemmas. For example, both groups of 20 people and 40 people are both large groups but can have different challenges in the same way that an increase from 8 to 20 people can have. How to most effectively market to large groups, especially when the focus is with international customers and groups of that size don't often travel as one. How to effectively market to companies? Furthermore, how not to not fall into the preconceived notions that can come with facilitating large groups?

The main limitations of this thesis included the data collection methods. The interview was too broad, as the interview covers a wide range of topics and does not directly contribute to addressing the main research goals as much as one would have liked, therefore, one should have been more precise and targeted on what one is looking for in the answers. As I say that now, it must be pointed out that the way the interview was structured was directly influenced and innkeeping with the first step in the Design Thinking process.

The benchmarking process proved to be the least fruitful of the research methods as there was very little information regarding what I was looking for available. While little results still carry their significance, it made it difficult to draw concrete results and key points. It would have been beneficial to have direct feedback from the large groups in the form of either a questionnaire or an open feedback form to have a clearer sense of what is working and what is not. This was not possible due to time constraints.

Undertaking this research provided me with an opportunity for personal growth and learning. I have gained a fuller understanding of the service design method used as well as the tourism field in general. I believe cultural managers have a lot to offer to this field even though it may not be the traditional place.

References

Bharathi Rajan, R., 2015. Experiential Tourism: Understanding Tourism Trends Today To Prepare For Tomorrow. *Shanlax International Journal of Commerce*, January, Issue Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 121-126.

Cockburn, D. A., 2008. Using Both Incremental and Iterative Development. *STSC CrossTalk, The Journal of Defense Software Engineering*, May, Issue 21 (5), pp. 27-30.

Green Key, n.d.. *Green Activities Certificate.* [Online]
Available at: https://greenkey.fi/en/green-activities/
[Accessed 10 May 2023].

Guzik, H., n.d.. *What is a pilgrimage?.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/discover/history/what-is-a-pilgrimage#cb-106974271-0
[Accessed 05 April 2023].

Halperin, S. & Heath, O., 2012. *Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills.* New York: Oxford University Press Inc..

IFWC, n.d. *Intro to IFWC.* [Online]
Available at: https://internationalfoodwastecoalition.org/intro-to-ifwc/
[Accessed 21 June 2023].

Mager, B., 2008. *Design Dictionary.* Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag GmbH.

Merriam-Webster, n.d.. *Incremental.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/incremental
[Accessed 04 April 2023].

Merrian-Webster, n.d.. *Iterative.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/iterative
[Accessed 04 April 2023].

Ojasalo, K., Moilanen, T. & Ritalahti, J., 2015. *Kehittämistyön menetelmät: Uudenlaista osaamista liiketoimintaan.* 3-4 ed. Helsinki: Sanoma Pro Oy.

Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2022. *Kulttuurimatkailun kansallisen kehittämisen tiekartta : Työryhmän ehdotus,* Helsinki: Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö.

Pesonen, J., 2013. *Developing Market Segmentation in Tourism: Insights fom a Finnish Rural Tourism Study,* Savonlinna: The University of Eastern Finland.

Rodríguez-Vázquez , C., Castellanos-García, P. & Martínez-Fernández, V. A., 2023. Cultural Tourism in a Post-COVID-19 Scenario: The French. *Societies,* Issue 13, p. 17.

Salas-Zapata, W. A. & Ortiz-Muñoz, S. M., 2019. Analysis of Meanings of the Concept of Sustainability. *Sustainable Development,* Issue 27, pp. 253-161.

Taiga Times, n.d.. *About Us.* [Online]
Available at: https://taigatimes.com/about-us/
[Accessed 01 April 2023].

Taiga Times, n.d.. *Nature Walk in Nuuksio Natioal Park.* [Online]
Available at: https://taigatimes.com/helsinki-national-park-group-tour/
[Accessed 23 April 2023].

Taiga Times, n.d.. *Our Responsibility.* [Online]
Available at: https://taigatimes.com/our-responsibility/
[Accessed 01 April 2023].

Tarssanen, S., ed., 2009. *Elämystuottajan käsikrija.* 6 ed. Rovaniemi: LEO Lapin elämysteollisuuden osaamiskeskus.

Tuulaniemi, J., 2011. *Palvelumuotoilu.* Hämeenlinna: Talentum Media Oy.

UNWTO, 2011. *Handbook on Tourism Product Development.* Madrid: UNTWO.

UNWTO, 2018. *Tourism and Culture Synergies,* Madrid: UNWTO.

UNWTO, 2021. *2020: Worst Year in Tourism History with 1 Billion Fewer International Arrivals.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.unwto.org/news/2020-worst-year-in-tourism-history-with-1-billion-fewer-international-arrivals
[Accessed 04 April 2023].

UNWTO, 2021. *Accessibility and Inclusive Tourism Development in Nature Areas – Compendium of Best Practices,* Madrid: UNWTO.

UNWTO, n.d.. *Ecotourism and Protected Areas.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development/ecotourism-and-protected-areas
[Accessed 06 April 2023].

UNWTO, n.d.. *Tourism and Culture.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.unwto.org/tourism-and-culture
[Accessed 03 April 2023].

Walton, J. K., 2023. *"Tourism". Encyclopaedia Britannica.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/tourism
[Accessed 06 September 2023].

Van Oosterom, A., 2009. *"Who Do We Think We Are?" from Designing Services With Innovative Methods.* 1 ed. Kuopio: Kuopion Muotoiluakatemia.

White, L. A., 2022. *"Culture". Encyclopaedia Britannica.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/culture
[Accessed 06 September 2023].

Visit Finland, 2021. *Kansainvälisen matkailun tulevaisuuden trendit 2022,* Helsinki: Visit Finland.

Visit Finland, 2022. *Valtakunnallinen ja alueellinen matkailutilinpito. Matkailun talous-ja työllisyysvaikutukset 2019-2020.,* Helsinki: Business Finland, Visit Finland.

Interview

Meneses, K., 2023. *Taiga Times CEO* [Interview] (19 April 2023).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Founders and employees

- Kiia Meneses position and areas of responsibility within the company?

- Jeffery Meneses position and areas of responsibility within the company?

- Does the company have other employees, if so how many and what do they do?

Taiga Times as a company

- Can you describe the history and evolution of Taiga Times, how it started and how it has grown over time?

- How would you describe Taiga Times' core values and mission? How are these values reflected in the day-to-day operations of the business?

- Taiga Times takes pride in the approach to sustainability and responsible tourism, as demonstrated by Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland and Green Activities accolades. Can you speak about the approach to sustainability and responsible tourism practices, and any initiatives the company has undertaken in this area?

- How does Taiga Times work with local communities? What is the impact of the company's activities on the surrounding environment and ecosystem?

- Can you describe Taiga Times' target market, and how the company differentiates itself from competitors in the industry?

- How does Taiga Times balance the interests of tourists and the natural environment, and what measures are in place to minimize negative impacts on the ecosystem?

- Can you speak to any challenges Taiga Times has faced, and how the company has addressed these challenges?

- How does Taiga Times measure the success of its tours, and what metrics are used to track the impact of the company's activities?

- Can you speak to any plans Taiga Times has for future expansion or development, and how these plans align with the company's core values and mission?

- How does Taiga Times ensure the safety and well-being of its guests and employees in remote or challenging natural environments?

Regarding the Thesis

- How many tours for large groups do you do?
    - How long have you been doing them?
    - What's the content of the tours?
    - Is it B2B only?
- What kind of scheduling flexibility is necessary to accommodate large groups?

Appendix 2: Benchmarking
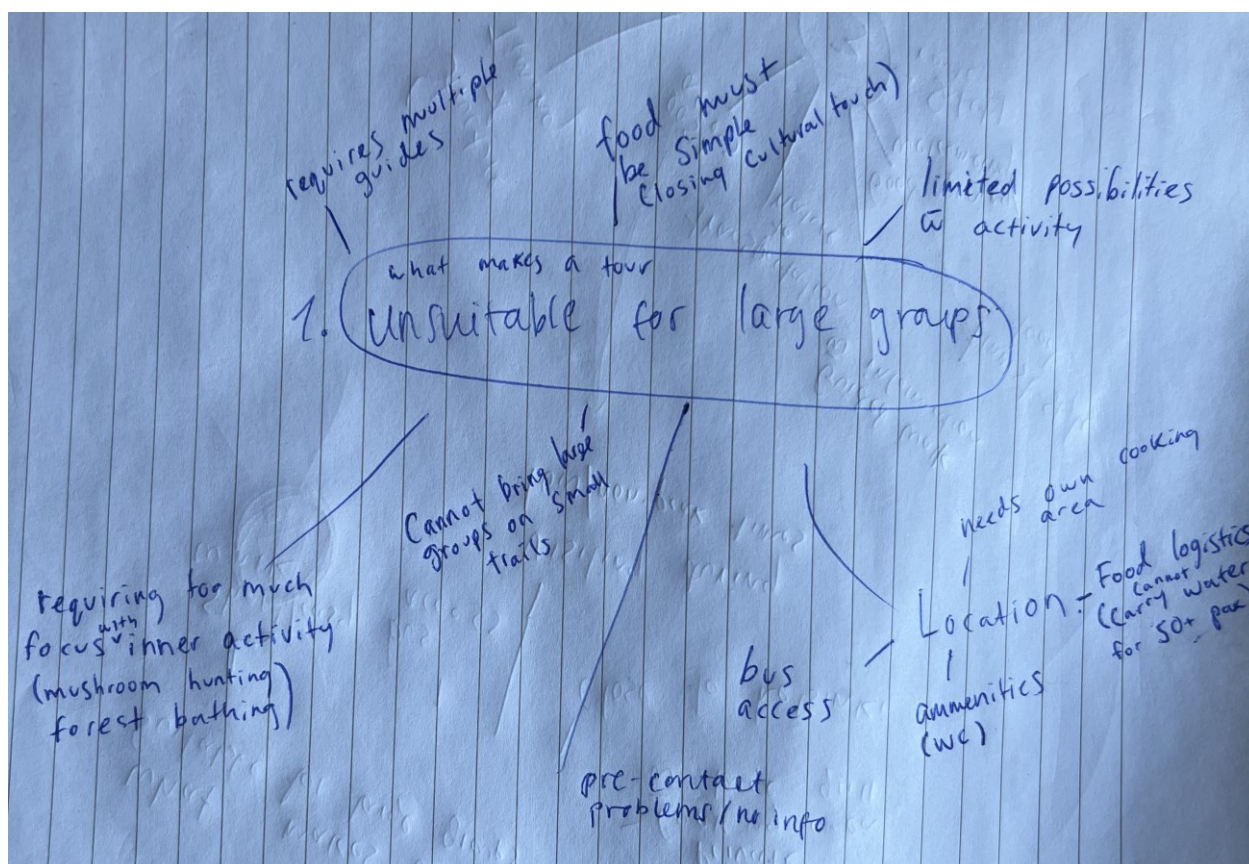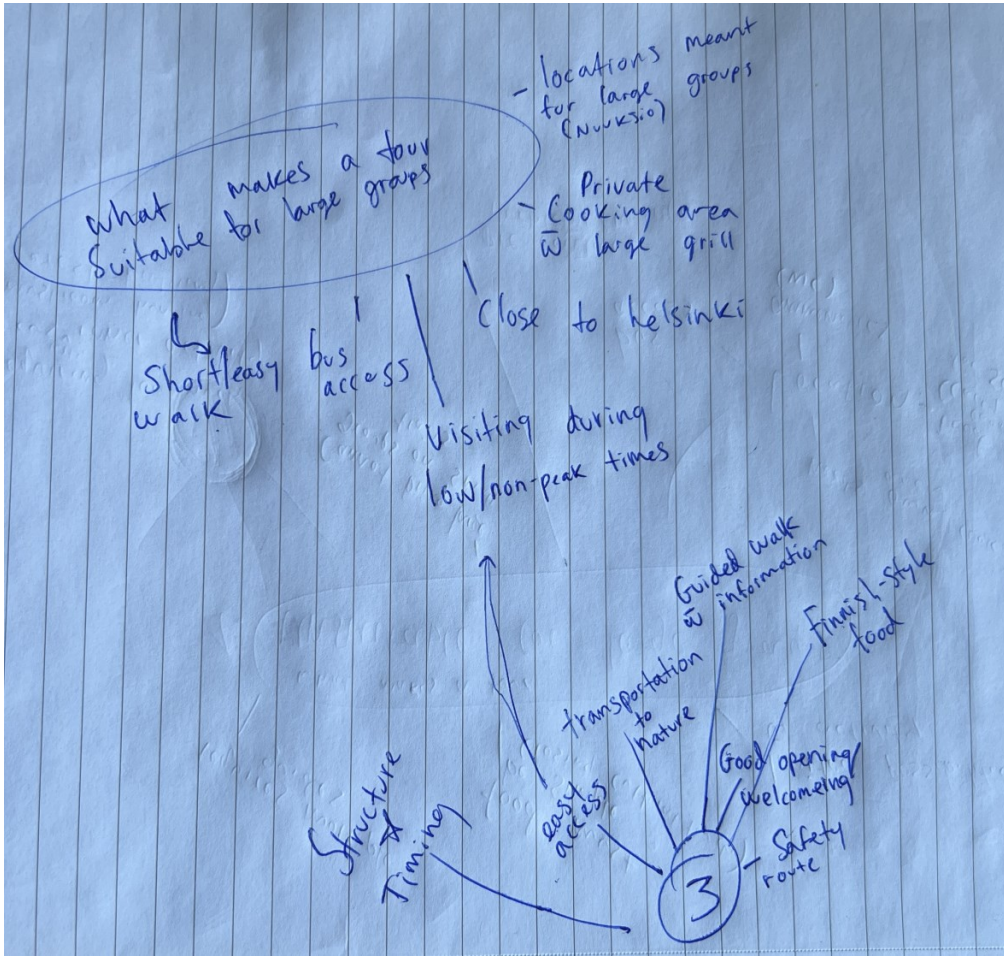
Backpacker Helsinki Tour

Beyond Arctic Adventurers

Nordic Unique Travels

Company Name	Backpacker Helsinki Tour	Beyond Arctic Adventurers	Nordic Unique Travels
Website	https://backpackerhelsinkitour.wordpress.com/	https://beyondarctic.com/	https://nordictravels.eu/
Place of Operation	Helsinki	Rovaniemi & Levi	Rovaniemi
Years operational	Since 2019	Since 2016	Since 2018
Target market	International travellers	International and domestic travellers	International travellers, especially ones looking for holiday packages
Core product	Hiking in a national park (Nuuksio or Sipoonkorpi)	Photography tours and small group tours	Northern lights tours, snowmobile safaris, husky and reindeer sleighrides
Core product pricing	88€ per person	85-175 € per person	60-160 € per person, depending on the tour type. Holiday packages from 900-7000€ per person
Additional products	Ice Fishing (Winter) Torronsuo National Park (Summer)	Skiing, tours revolving around arctic animals, activities such as ice fishing, backcountry skiing, fat bikes, etc. + Renting hiking and photography equipment	Finnish sauna, skiing and snowshoeing, party and dinner experiences, icebreaker experiences + international tours involsing the Nordic and Baltic countires
Additional products pricing	80-155 € per person	90-300 € per person (some tours only priced with a group price)	60-7000 € per person
Sustainability practices/certificates	Not mentioned on the website	Website has a sustainable travelling page with an environmental policy. Cooperation with the Protect Our Winters movement, Green Activities Environmental Award and participating in the Sustainable Travel Finland program.	Website has a responsible travel policy, no certificates mentioned
Trust adding elements	TripAdvisor has 54 reviews (as of 23.05.2023) Ranked as #14 of 208 Tours and Activities in Helsinki (as of 23.05.2023). 295 reviews on AirBnb and an "identity verified" badge.	TripAdvisor has 452 reviews (as of 22.05.2023) Ranked as #7 of 91 in Outdoor Activities in Rovaniemi (as of 22.05.2023) Very professional website and beautiful pictures. Website in English and Finnish. Privacy policy and Term ja Conditions both readily available as well as Covid-19 safety measures. A dedicated webpage which is a collection of how the company has been visible in the media.	TripAdvisor has 1547 reviews (as of 22.05.2023) Ranked as #11 of 91 in Outdoor Activities in Rovaniemi (as of 22.05.2023) Large variety of packages Professional website and good quality images Wesbite in 6 different languages Built in contact sheet with privacy policy available
Social media presence (other than TripAdvisor)	Not mentioned on the website	Yes: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp	Yes: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest
Additional notes	Simple website with very "real" images. Nuukiso trip only one with the mention of accomodating up to 30 people upon request.	Prices not listed clearly on the website, only when actually booking through Trip Advisor. More tours from Rovaniemi than Levi. Larger group option available (up to 70 people) but no concrete examples, only a contact form.	Large company with a wide variety of tours and knowledge. The "about us" page could be more personal. Mainly focused on the winter activities. Website doesn't have any easily findable information for large groups So many different types of tours perhaps not organised the best so it feels chaotic and overwhelming.
Ideas to incorporate	In general: Torronsuo national park Large groups: -	In general: Offering consulation services to film and production crews Webpage for invitation for partnerships Photography tours Dedicated hashtags with company name and a tagline Detailed introduction to each guide/employee Booking more than 2 tours results in a 5-15% discount for certain tours. Large groups: -	In general: Finnish sauna experience as a focal point Specialised island tours near Helsinki Safari type wildlife viewing Ice fishing Regarding large groups: -

Appendix 3: Brainstorming Questions and Results

- What makes a tour unsuitable for large groups?
- What makes a tour suitable for large groups?
- What is at the core of the tours for large groups?
- What are the differences in the dynamic between a large and a small group?
- With what can you provide personalized attention and ensure that each group receives a unique and engaging experience?
- How could the company collaborate with local businesses or attractions?
- What kind of cultural elements would you want to incorporate into the tours?

What makes a tour suitable for large groups

- locations meant for large groups (Nuuksio)
- Private cooking area w/ large grill

Close to helsinki

Short/easy bus walk / access

Visiting during low/non-peak times

Structure & Timing

easy access

transportation to nature

Guided walk w/ information

Good opening welcoming

Finnish-style food

Safety route

③

4. (small) ≠ (large)

small	large
more personal	requires more guides
more controlled	more "loose"
less risks.	different aim
e.g getting lost/hurt	
	Simpler food yet Finnish
more sustainable	more trace
→ less impact to the trails	~~just hunt till~~
more present & focused	more active but less focus
details	bigger picture
more flexibility	more structured

nature knowledge

small finnish language! like "hyvää mökahalua"

finnish friria

more about and using every man's rights

foraging

tenting