

Saimaa University of Applied Sciences
Faculty of Business Administration
Degree Programme in International Business

**Content Optimization Driving Brand
Awareness for Companies in Russian Social
Media;
Case: Visit Finland in VK**

Helen Preis

Thesis 2014

Abstract

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Content Optimization Driving Brand Awareness for Companies in Russian Social Media; Case: Visit Finland in VK, 60 pages, 03 appendices

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Instructors: Lecturer Sami Lanu, Saimaa University of Applied Sciences
Managing Director Minna Ikävalko, Visit Finland.

The following study has been conducted in order to answer a general question: “how can international brands optimize their content in VK in order to drive brand awareness?” The research narrows down to the case company, Visit Finland, in order to determine what kind of content will drive brand awareness for this particular brand in VK.

The research path starts with the general overview of Visit Finland’s current situation in social media, and continues with exploring the audience of VK to the most popular social networking site, Facebook. After acquiring certain findings, Russia has been analysed according to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, where the effect of these dimensions on consumer behaviour is discussed.

The study continues to research how these dimensions also affect the Russian nation’s relation to Tourism, as well as their perception of visual stimuli. The theoretical findings are supported by empirical data gathered from a created and conducted online survey. The focus in the survey is on the perception of images, due to the lack of sufficient theoretical resources on the topic of the way Russians perceive images.

Presenting a structured outline of what type of content is more appealing to the average VK user concludes the research. A more detailed outline is given due to suit Visit Finland’s needs and to answer the key research question in relation to the case.

Keywords: Social Media, Cultural Dimensions, Consumer Behaviour, Tourism, Visual Perception

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Topic Demand

The following thesis topic development began parallel to searching for a research sponsor. When deciding on the nature of the research, personal preferences have overpowered and lead to a decision upon a topic applicable in marketing communications, particularly branding.

Approaching approximately 20 advertising and marketing agencies in Helsinki, it has become clear that much of their work is focused on digital branding and social media. When meeting one particular digital marketing agency (requested to stay anonymous) a list of possible research topics has been requested. Due to personal interest in Social Media (SM) Branding, the existent and potential client companies of the agency have been researched in terms of social media branding. The topic has then been narrowed down to Russian social media, considering the findings that most of the agency's client companies have Russia as a market of priority, and that the findings have shown that their presence in Russian social media was mostly insufficient and did not drive enough earned media.

The majority of recreational literature on the topic of the use of social media for brand building until this day excludes Russian social media networks as potential platforms for effective brand awareness enhancement. There is no doubt that most authors creating guidelines for social media brand building focus on the biggest worldwide-used networks as a base for their research and writing due to their desire to target a large audience of potential buyers. Companies and entrepreneurs from the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and most of Europe can make great use of the provided guidelines for successful marketing or branding in social media, but what about Russia and the CIS? Of course, they can make use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram branding, but the question is: will it allow them to reach out to their national audiences? And what about foreign companies, who have Russia as a market at the pinnacle of their priorities?

The above questions arise when thinking from a corporate perspective, and considering that social media is a powerful tool in digital marketing today, these questions are difficult to dismiss without receiving an answer. Besides the fact that there is not enough educational material for brands on how to be successful and popular in Russian social media, it is important to highlight the high demand for such material to be developed. The demand for such material is evident through viewing some statistical material discovered with preliminary research.

According to an online analytical agency, Russians are stated to be the nation to spend most time on the Internet after Italians, with 47 million social media users and 33% social media penetration. However, the important fact to consider for a company, looking to expand onto Russian markets and engage with Russian customers via SM, is that Facebook is not nearly as popular in comparison to VK (VK.com, the most popular Russian social networking site – otherwise commonly referred to as Russian Facebook) amongst Russians. "Eastern Europe is still a VK stronghold, with users in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus accounting for more than 60 million active accounts"; in comparison to Facebook accounting for only 12.4 million Russian users (We Are Social 2013). Thus, it is relevant to conclude that Russian SM, VK in particular, is a marketing- and brand awareness-building tool that requires research in order to help brands further develop their digital marketing and branding strategies when targeting the Russian Markets.

1.2 Objectives and Limitations

The first and the largest objective of the research, is to find out whether the Russian consumers possess qualities that set them apart from Westernized consumer mentalities. This objective is to be achieved through theoretical research and analysis, relying on academic resources providing scientifically acquired data, and empirical data gathered through a reliable online SM analytics tool. For the comparison to produce focused, demonstrative results, the research will be specific to the comparison of the following social media platforms: VK and Facebook. The second objective derived from the first objective is to identify whether the average demographics of the audiences of these social

media platforms differ. These findings will provide an average estimate of the majority of the audience concerning age, nationality, ethnicity, education level, marital status and family, as well as socio-economic status.

The third, and a narrower objective, is to research the VK platform in terms of interests and audience preferences of content. This objective will enable the research to conclude on the nature of content that drives brand awareness and consumer-generated content. Holistically, the objectives narrow down to the case company, Visit Finland, and its presence on Facebook and VK. The company is present on both platforms but lacks sufficiency on the latter one. The fourth objective is to analyze Visit Finland's VK competitors, and roughly outline the obstacles of Visit Finland to its success in VK.

The case company, Visit Finland distinguishes themselves as an entity that prides itself on publishing high-quality images and videos as their SM content. According to Visit Finland's SM strategy position, the last objective based on gathering empirical data through an online survey, is to recognize the visual content that proves effective specifically with the audience on VK.

The first major limitation considers theoretical research on the topic of Russian consumer psychology. There is a sizeable amount of consumer psychology literature written in Russian, but the application of this literature seems to be very general. The solution to this limitation is to rely upon the famous research by Geert Hofstede: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions. Hofstede's research is highly applicable in most spheres of business administration, including marketing communications.

The second difficulty encountered is the acquired demographical information of Facebook and VK. The source that is used to gather this empirical data may not be completely trustworthy. There will be an attempt to receive this data directly from Facebook and VK, but there is a possibility that the companies may appear unresponsive.

The third limitation is that the topic of research can develop into covering a voluminous amount of topics. To avoid this problem, the research will focus on Russian consumer mentality, whilst other topics will be researched briefly to

support or argue assumptions. The empirical data gathered with the online survey will be purely exploratory and meant to provide the case company with some insights about visual preferences of the VK audience. The last limitation is the risk that the responses to the survey may not be reliable. As with all online surveys or polls, there is hardly any certainty of the honesty of respondents, which is why the survey is classified as provisional.

1.3 Research Questions

The research topic translates into the following key research question: How should a brand's social media content be optimized for Russian social networks to drive brand awareness? The complete and reliable answer to this question will be almost impossible to provide, therefore considering all limitations, the conclusion of the thesis should answer the following: How should Visit Finland's social media content be optimized for VK to drive brand awareness? The key research question is increasingly complicated and requires numerous supporting questions which will be answered throughout the research:

- 1) What are the core differences in audiences on Facebook and VK?
- 2) What are the specialties in Russian consumer mentality, that set the nation apart from other cultures?
- 3) Considering the Cultural Dimensions of Russia, what are the distinguishing features of Russians as tourists?
- 4) What are the effects of Russian culture on their visual perception and aesthetic taste?
- 3) What are the core preferences of the VK public in terms of visual content?

1.4 Research Methods

The complete approach to the research is comprehensive. The research will begin by addressing the key research question and proceed to answering supporting questions; this will enable conclusions upon the main research question.

The study is also characterized to be explorative, as the empirical results may lack reliability.

The method in gathering data will be quantitative. Applying the use of analytical tools, and conducting an online survey composed of closed-ended questions will gather the empirical data. The questions will only be in the format of “Yes or No” and multiple-choice. The questionnaire will consist predominantly of multiple image-choice questions to identify the VK audience’s preference of visual content.

The analysis of the data will be exported as visual reports (graphs, charts) from the survey-building platform. The exports will be demonstrated as figures in the thesis and analyzed textually. The data will then be discussed in relation with the theoretical framework and the initial hypotheses, which will lead to conclusions.

1.5 Case Company: Visit Finland

Visit Finland is the official corporate body representing Finland’s tourism industry. Managed by the Finnish tourist board, visit Finland is a governmental entity that is responsible for the evolvement of the Finnish economy. The Finnish tourist board is an organization under the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, promoting Finnish tourism in its capacity as a national expert in the sector. The concerns of the Finnish tourist board are to market, advertise and promote traveling, leisure, products and services in Finland. Some key facts about Finnish tourism over the last year tell more about the growth of visit Finland and their efforts:

Index	Growth
Number of nights spent in Finnish accommodation establishments	0.5%↓
Overnight stays by resident tourists	1.1%↓

Overnight stays by foreign tourists	1.1%↑
Largest markets for overnight stays	Russia, Sweden
Biggest Growth of inbound tourism	Asian countries, 17.3%↑

Figure 1. Finnish tourism statistics 2013 (Visit Finland 2013).

Visit Finland is one of the most active, if not the most active Finnish brand on social media. They have accounts on: Facebook, Twitter, VK, Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest, YouTube. Although they are already present on VK, the difference between consumer engagement in VK and Facebook is rather large. On Facebook, Visit Finland has over 400 000 “likes”, whereas their VK account only shows to have a bit above 3 500 followers. Visit Finland has shown to be successful in all social media but VK, therefore the research conducted for this thesis may help them improve their performance on VK.

2 The Significance of Social Media in Building Brands

Before going into the research of the specific features of VK that make this social media network different in brand-building application, it is important to identify the actual significance of social media as a phenomenon in marketing, and to outline the phenomenon’s nature as a general subject of the research. In this chapter, the theoretical research supports the idea of why the use of social media in brand-building purposes is a necessary feature of a brand’s organizational existence.

In concern of the research itself, it is important to separate branding from marketing, to avoid any confusion between purchased marketing communications, and cost-efficient and often free of charge opportunities for companies to raise awareness about their presence on the market. Nonetheless, branding and marketing are closely related. Brand building, unfortunately, does not have a

direct and traceable effect on sales. However, creating brand awareness is one of the fundamental steps in endorsing a product and since Visit Finland does not market a specific line of tangible products, the promotion heavily relies on brand awareness.

David Kerpen (2011), as an introduction to his book, "Likable Social Media" metaphorically describes the phenomenon of Word-of-Mouth by referring to Adam and Eve, and the offered apple as the "first marketing interaction in history of human kind". Kerpen (2011) also states that until the occurrence of print advertising Word-of-Mouth was the most efficient way of marketing for thousands of years. To interpret Word-of-Mouth as a marketing interaction may not be exactly precise, as the influencer most probably does not benefit from the influenced party purchasing a product. In this case, Word-of-Mouth can be classified more as a brand-awareness building tool. If a brand gets audiences to talk about them, it is likely that if the brand's reputation is sufficient, they will eventually sell more. However, brand-awareness is only a small step towards any sort of consumer action upon a product or service.

To clearly identify the difference between marketing and branding, it is important to define both terms. Marketing is defined as the action of promoting and selling products or services, whereas branding is described to be a process of idea or image creation, that will enable larger audiences to recognize the company and its products through their slogans, advertisements, packaging or general visual identity. Theoretically, branding becomes only a part of marketing, as it is a promotional process that may or may not lead to recognition and sales (Zenker and Martin 2011)

Today, with print, radio and TV-advertising produced in immense amounts, the information, that is meant to reach the consumer, is no longer recognized as well as it used to be. People do not pay as much attention to commercials and advertisement as they used to, and media and the advertising industries are evolving faster than ever (Kerpen 2011). Through all this marketing noise, most people still strongly rely on other people's experience with products: they would rather listen to a family member or friend than pay attention and believe a commercial aired on television. Hence, Word-of-Mouth is until this day the most effective and trustworthy way of not only creating brand awareness, but also enforce sales. Unfortunately, Word-of-Mouth is not only outside of businesses'

control, but it is also intangible, invisible and almost impossible to record (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006).

People still talk every day, but there is no way you can record anything what has been said for example, between two girlfriends discussing a moisturizing face cream while enjoying a coffee at a local coffee shop. Fortunately, social media is a solution to record part of those types of daily conversations, and make Word-of-Mouth a more or less analyzable marketing channel. Social media has given companies a wonderful opportunity to keep an eye on a small part of people's lives, their interests, hobbies, favorite books and movies, fashion tastes and so on. For a company being able to "listen" to their customers or their potential customers, is one opportunity, being able to "talk" is another.

Scott and Jacka (2011) define social media as a set of web-based broadcasting opportunities that allow liberalization of content, allowing people to become publishers rather than simply remain consumers. According to Kerpen (2011), the main reason why social media has become a powerful tool for brands to build awareness of their values, missions, products and services is because "everybody loves to feel heard". Kerpen (2011) also states that "communication is 50 percent listening and 50 percent talking", and highlights that "for years, companies have done a disproportionate amount of talking, shouting even". However, if the "talking" and the "listening" are implemented properly, not only does the company have an opportunity to hear conversations about their business, but also listen to what consumers have to say about their competitors.

As with Word-of-Mouth, the main risk that social media networks present companies with is that the companies are no longer in control of their public image. There are ways to report content of course, but content is noticed and shared very quickly. Despite the lack of control over social media, companies are at an advantage of capacity to develop deeper and more significant connections with stakeholders, which enables them to create customer value (Scott and Jacka 2011).

Scott and Jacka (2011) also define social media to be a "minefield of opportunity and Risk" and supporting it with studies by Herder (2009) that state that 51 percent of managers do not use SM because they do not have enough knowledge about it. Besides that, 81 percent consider that SM can be a safety

hazard to the business and fear it could not only be disadvantageous to employee output but also harm the organization's status.

However, the phenomenon of social media in terms of digital marketing has grown so big, that even if a brand chooses to stay outside of the social media networks, it does not mean there will be zero discussions about the brand online. "The organization, no matter how much it longs for the good old days, is no longer in control of the conversation" (Scott, Jacka 2011). The absence of a brand in consumer-created discussions can nowadays also be a threat to the organization: "this basically sends a message that the organization doesn't care about its stakeholders and that, if they want to engage with the organization, they have to do it on the organization's terms" (Scott, Jacka 2011).

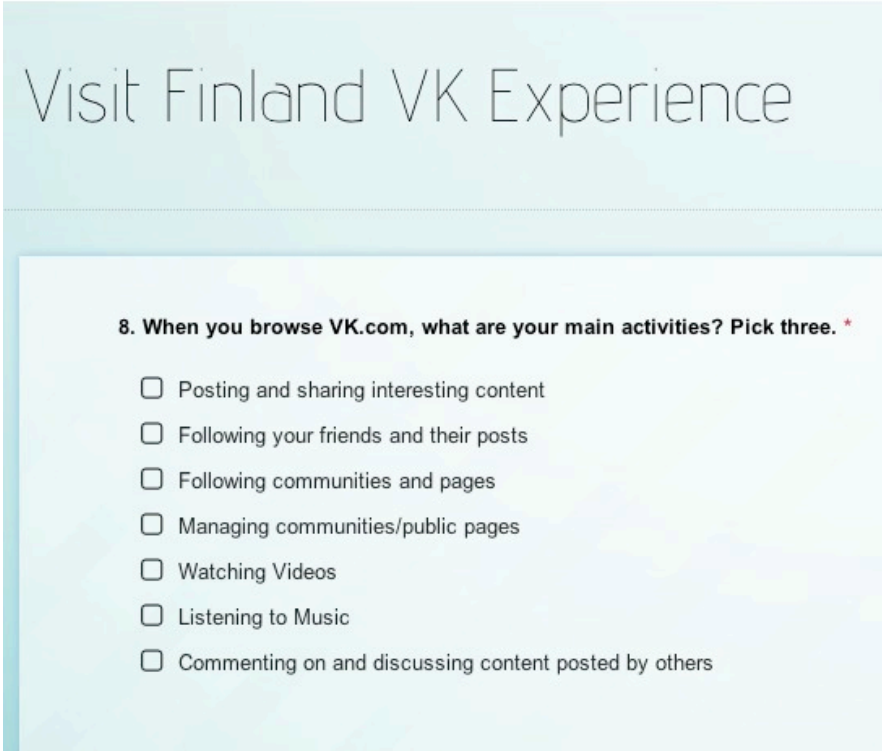
The quote above technically states that the average consumer expects the company to be consumer-oriented and respond to the consumer's initiative, and this leads to the topic of a company's CRM strategy, which social media is slowly but surely establishing its place in. According to the Harvard Business Review Journal (2005), Gulati and Oldroyd state that a truly honest customer relationship management strategy begins with the establishment of a organization-wide depository tracing each interaction a consumer has with the business, systematized not by service, product or location, but by the consumer.

While many companies still nowadays miss many of the conversations going on about them in SM, the ones that pay attention and listen may not always be aware that they're not in control of the conversations that affect their company's public image. If these conversations turn out to be negative or critical, the only thing the company can do is to improve the product or service the social media "publishers" are unhappy with. "Letting go" of the conversation will produce better results, creating a positive image of the company by demonstrating that the organization does not attempt to force it's views upon the customer (Li and Bernoff 2009). Li and Bernoff have conducted an extensive research on the phenomenon of SM, and have identified 7 different groups of participants in social media as a whole. When the empirical part of this research has been conducted, one of the questions in the survey was asked in order to identify the

general behaviour of VK users. The seven different groups are described as follows:

- 1) Creators – publishers of content on blogs such as images, video, podcasts etc.
- 2) Conversationalists – people providing mostly status updates
- 3) Critics – people who offer comments and reviews
- 4) Collectors – people who vote on and tag articles
- 5) Joiners – people creating profiles in large SM networks
- 6) Spectators – users who are more passive but spend a significant amount of time reading, watching, listening to SM created by others.
- 7) Inactive – people who simply do not participate in any form of social media.

The question in the survey (Figure 2) was meant to provide an idea of what kind of social media users are the users of VK. One hundred and forty-seven respondents completed the survey and the results were reported as a graph of percentages (Figure 3).



Visit Finland VK Experience

8. When you browse VK.com, what are your main activities? Pick three. *

- Posting and sharing interesting content
- Following your friends and their posts
- Following communities and pages
- Managing communities/public pages
- Watching Videos
- Listening to Music
- Commenting on and discussing content posted by others

Figure 2. Question asked to determine the type of SM user (Survey Gizmo).

While the last group defined by Li and Bernoff does not apply to the target of the research, others may give the research some foundation for the case and help identify the type of active participant the VK account holder is. The survey has provided the following results:

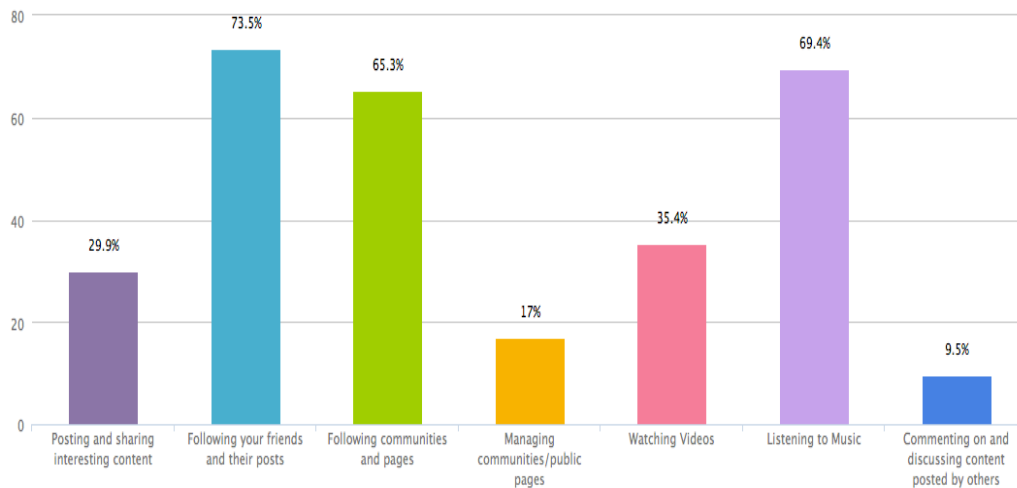


Figure 3. Survey results for the question about SM usage (Survey Gizmo).

According to Figure 3, the target audience can be identified as spectators, who are mostly following the content posted by their friends and communities, and who listen to music and watch videos. These results give a good insight into what type of content the user may appreciate, and help companies develop a more effective brand-building strategy in the social media networks. It is evident that the average VK user, or in this case the target population of the survey, is not too eager to engage with a brand, but the fact that a whole 65.3% of respondents stated that they follow communities on VK may give companies hope that the audience is “listening” to them. Engagement is a “two-way street” and requires action on the organization’s behalf in order to for consumer to become engaged with the brand.

Engagement can create customer value by fulfilling a promise of how the content published will be managed, how requests or complaints will be fulfilled and how responsive is the brand. Engagement is first of all, the willingness of the

company or organization to hear what their customers have to say. The business needs to genuinely crave all sorts of feedback from the consumer, and engagement in social media is the best way to receive it (Kerpen 2011). Of course, engagement is a core feature to any company's presence in any type of social media networks, but does the communication presume that the whole target group shares the same values? Unfortunately, not all social media networks are equally popular across cultures. For example MySpace is very popular in the USA, with about 74 % of the market share despite its famously cluttered layout, but captures only 2.9% of the Japanese market share (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009). Could this fact be attributed to differences in American and Japanese culture?

The hypothesis of this study strongly considers the cross-cultural differences and applies this idea on the case company and its community page in the social network in question. Any brand has to select a strategy of actions when entering international markets, where the commonly known strategies are as follows: standardization, localization (adaptation) strategy or compromise approach between standardization and localization (Alimiené 2008). The concept of these strategies should also be applicable for a social media branding approach, as networks are normally predominated by some type of nationality. As a social network, VK is indeed predominated by Russians – this is supported by both analytics and survey results (Figures 4,5).



Figure 4. Showing that 65.5% of VK users are Russian (Alexa).

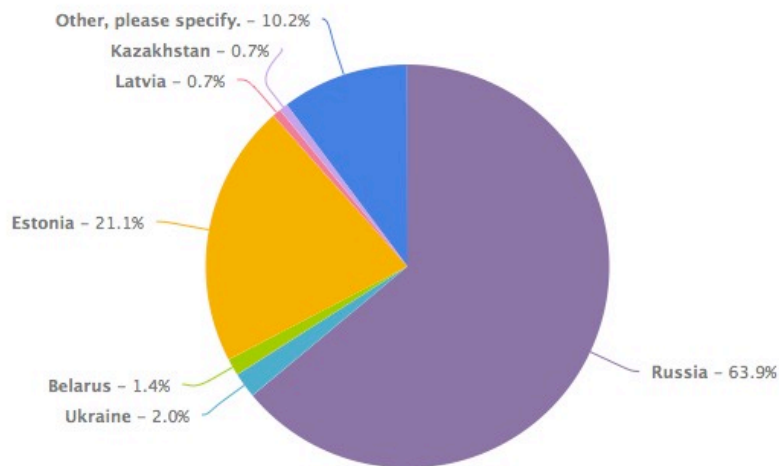


Figure 5. Showing that 63.9% of the 147 survey respondents are Russian (Survey Gizmo).

The idea that social networks and a brand's social media strategy should also consider either localization or standardization leads to discovering specific features of a target audience. Since the majority of Visit Finland's target audience is Russian, Russia will be analyzed according to the trustworthy and famous research by Geert Hofstede, who suggests a concept of cultural dimensions as such: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance and Confucian dynamism. Although Hofstede's work is mainly focused on Human Resource Management and the organizational structure of businesses, he suggests that all of the above mentioned dimensions have a strong affect on all types of human behaviour, including decision-making (Hofstede 2005) Decision-making is a big part of any daily behaviour, including behaviour in social media. The cultural dimensions will be applied in the research in reference to Russia as a market, and will discuss features of the Russian consumer psychology and their application in suggestions for content optimization in VK.com.

3 Russian Social Media

The Russian SM is a rather wide area for brand building in Russia, but several networks are also strongly internationalized. The social network in subject of this research, VK.com, is the biggest and most commonly used social network in Russia with over 60 million daily users (vk.com), and approximately 240 million registered accounts in Russia and internationally. According an amazon-powered analytics website, Alexa.com, VK is ranked as the second in Russia (after the yandex.ru search engine) and 23d website in the world by usage popularity. Other social networks are Odnoklassniki (a website where you can connect to your old friends and classmates), Mail.ru or Moi Mir (an e-mail service similar to Google+), other SM platforms are blogs such as Livejournal.com and forums like Rambler.ru. It is important to note, that although the above mentioned analytics providers may not be completely reliable, other analytical websites (e.g. socialbakers.com, wearesocial.com, and Nielsen.com) provide very similar information, which adds value to the presented data in this research.

Further into the exploration of the social media phenomenon in Russia, it is important to emphasize that Russians are ranked as the most active internet users after Poland, with a total of 6,2 hours a day spent online (4,8 accessed through a laptop or PC, 1,4 through mobile devices). Although not ranking high amongst other countries by social media penetration (which is only 33%), Russians are placed second after Italians by the amount of time spent on social media networks (We Are Social 2014). With the given information, it is relevant to state that social media marketing of a brand in Russia can reach a large population with continuous exposure. We Are Social, a social media marketing and communications agency, provides some very useful insights on Eastern Europe in General, giving a good understanding about Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian social media landscapes (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Eastern European SM usage statistics (We Are Social 2014)

To show how significant the Internet is in Russia in general, it is relevant to present We Are Social's research on Internet penetration per country (Figure 7).

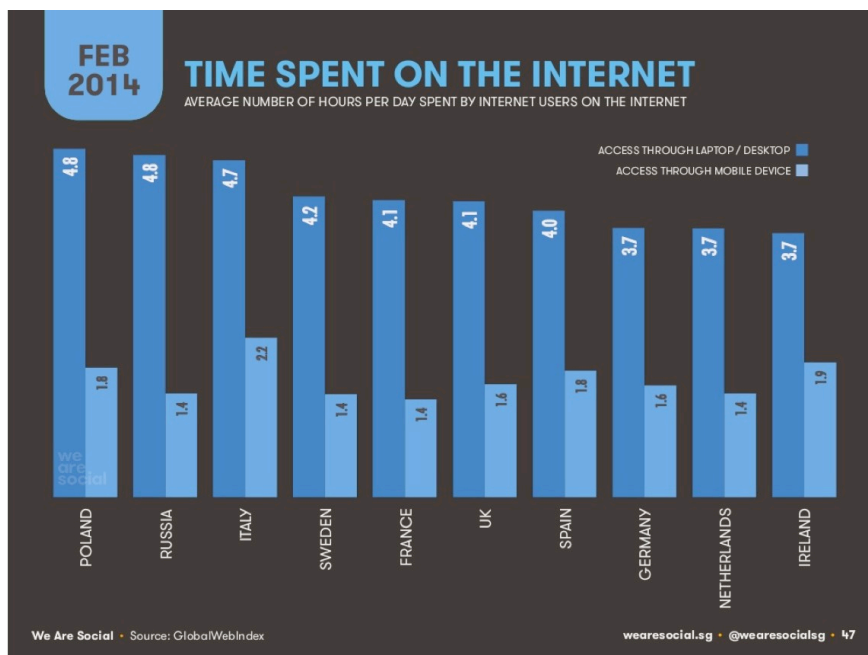


Figure 7. Time spent on the Internet per country (We Are Social 2014).

To show that the average social media user in Russia is not very active what comes to engagement, social media penetration stats are also a useful supporting matter (Figure 8).

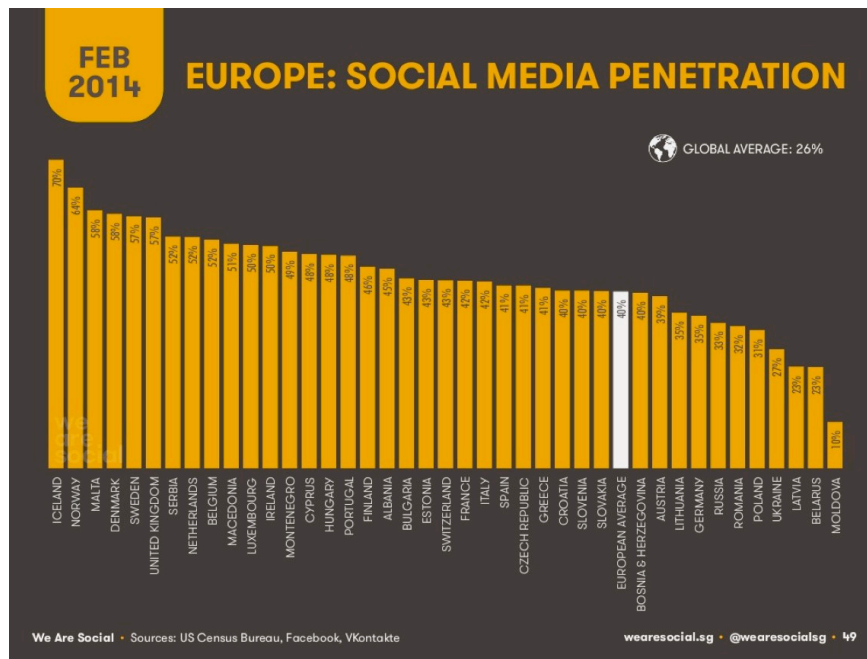


Figure 8. European social media penetration: “likes”, comments, sharing (We Are Social 2014)

Although Russians are not too active upon published content and do not penetrate social media to the extent that Iceland and Norway do, Russians are the ones to spend significantly more time on the SM networks (Figure 9). This phenomenon can also be explained by the fact that Russians are mostly spectators, as identified by researching secondary material as well as acquiring empirical data through the published survey. VK is also a social network that gives users the opportunity to watch videos and listen to music, and often, due to the fact the general audience of this social network is younger (see chapter 3.1) many find the network useful for personal entertainment. Nonetheless, as discovered through conducting the online survey, VK users also follow communities and personal pages and simply read, watch and view content posted by others.

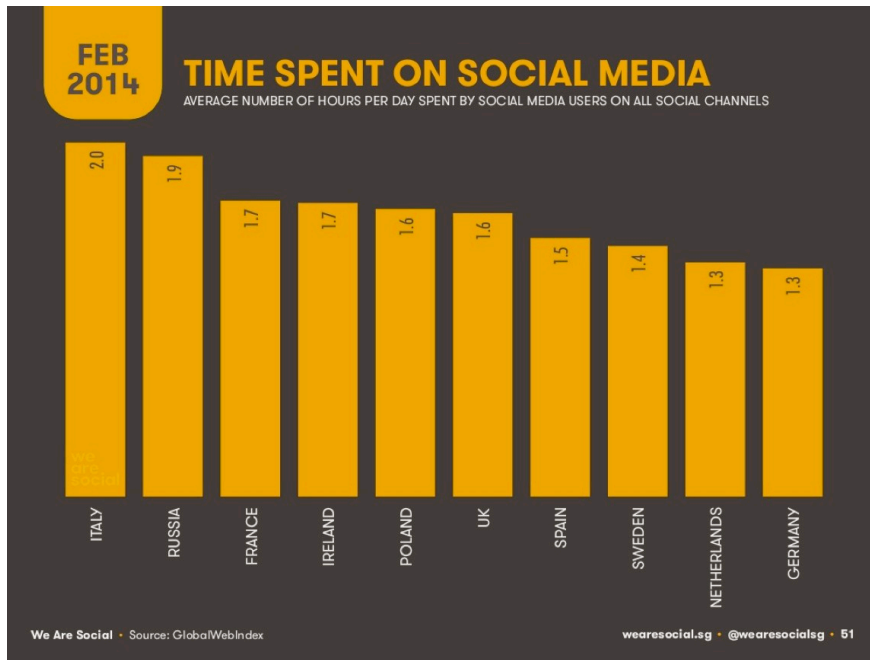


Figure 9. Nations with most time spent on SM (We Are Social 2014)

VK is stated to be the most popular website after Yandex, the search engine. To demonstrate the significance of the social network, it is relevant to refer to the following stats also provided by We Are Social (Figure 10).

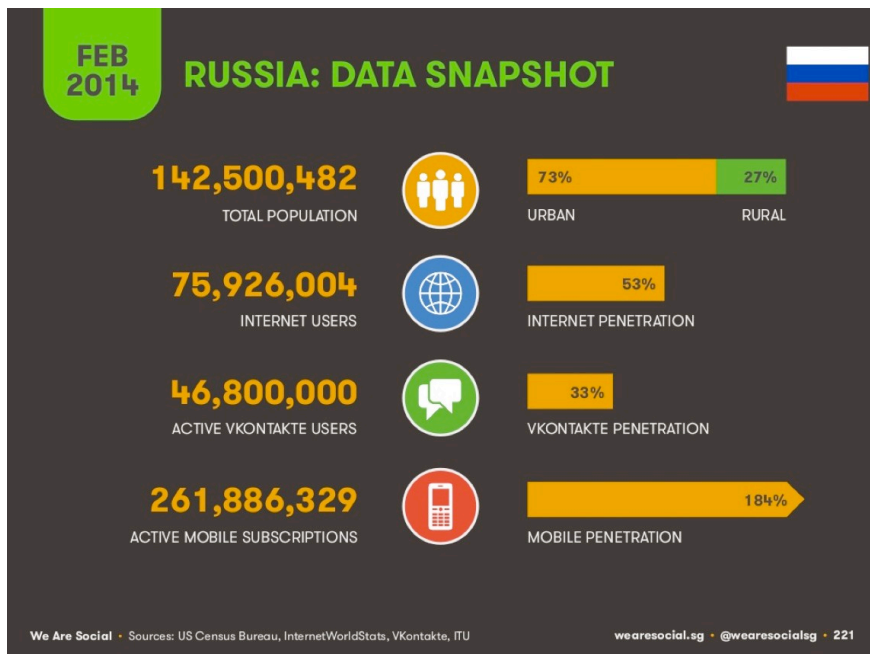


Figure 10. Russian total population, total Internet users, VK users, and total active mobile subscriptions (We Are Social 2014)

In order to show the ratio between the usage of VK and other social networks, it is suitable to refer to the statistics about social media use in Russia (Figure 11).

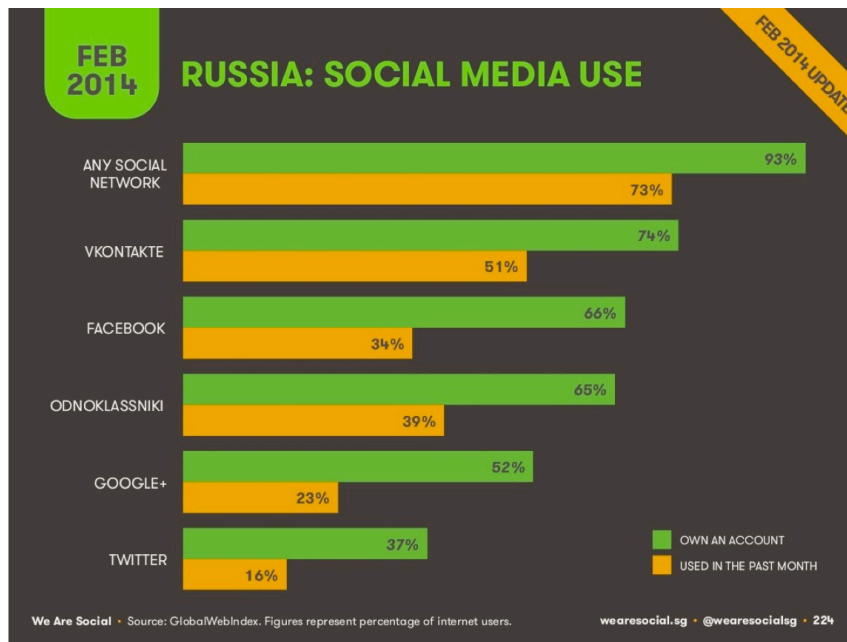


Figure 11. Social media use in Russia: popularity of the different social network sites (We Are Social 2014)

Last but not least, it can also be useful to identify what is the way that the VK users access social media. We Are Social provides some interesting social media usage trends, that Visit Finland may find useful in terms of publishing content (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Russian “Social Indicators” (We Are Social 2014)

All of the above statistics can hopefully be useful for general application in social media strategy, as well as in content localization. The collected insights may provide companies, and in this case Visit Finland, with some ideas as to what kind of content may be suitable for the type of public the VK users are (spectators). Also, considering that almost half of the social media population uses mobile phones to access the SM networks, the published content needs to be easily accessible through mobile devices.

3.1 VK as a Digital Marketing Tool for Visit Finland

To identify what are the possible options for Visit Finland to optimize their content in VK.com, it is important to study the trends of the platform. The first thing to be done is to view the possibly available information on the SM network’s demographics. Pointing out that the provided demographics may not be reliable but are supported by several platforms mentioned in the previous chapter, it is important to still possess a certain level of scepticism towards the discovered data. According to Alexa, an analytical tool that is owned by amazon and collects its data from browsers who have agreed on the installation of their script, the demographics of VK.com (comparison to internet average) are as follows:

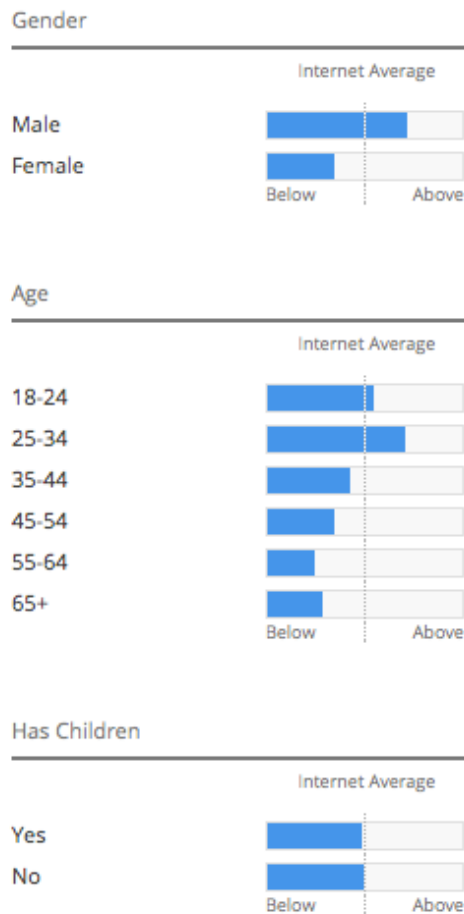


Figure 13. VK demographics by Gender, age and family status (Alexa 2014).

The following demographics demonstrate that the majority of VK users are male, aged 25-34, with no children. The audience in question can be classified as “Millennials”, or generation Y, as referred to by numerous researchers in their work. “Millennials” are defined to be people born in the span between 1981 and 1993, who are children of the so-called “baby-boomers”. They’re also characterized as: techno-savvy, connected 24/7, optimistic, independent, success driven, lifestyle centred, diverse, inclusive, community-minded and entrepreneurial (Deloitte Consulting 2012). The previously mentioned descriptions can provide a variety of companies and Visit Finland in particular, a better understanding of their target social media audience. And although there is little material specifically on Russian “Millennials”, the research will consider these qualities when studying the audience’s cultural dimensions. Besides age, gen-

der and family status, Alexa provides other statistical data that may help with the understanding of the general audience of VK.

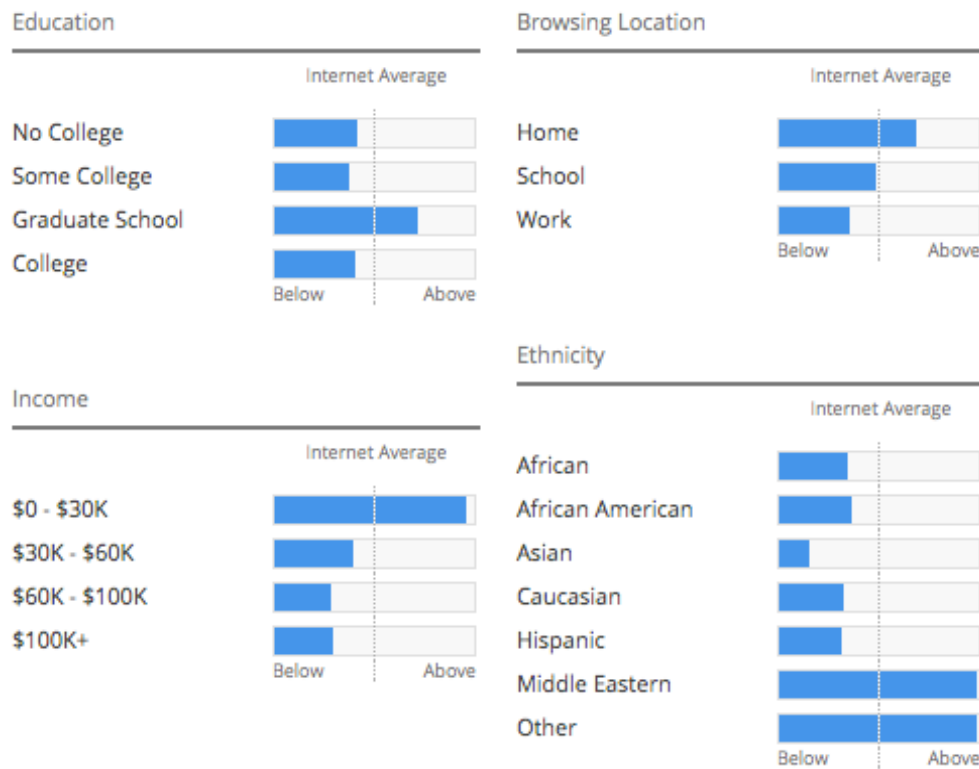


Figure 14. Trends of VK in terms of income, ethnicity, education and browsing location (Alexa 2014)

Whereas ethnicity or browsing location may have some impact on the consumer's perception of content, level of education and financial income play a rather large psychological role. This also gives the research a more specific guideline as to what kind of a target group is predominant in VK and how to create appealing marketing to that specific group. The statistics show, that the predominant amount of VK users are male, aged 25-34, have higher education, but earn under 30 thousand USD a year. This information allows us to perceive the core target group with a higher level of precision.

3.2 VK Versus Facebook and the Russian Market

Since the study is meant to research the Russian market, it is important to consider that Facebook initially was used to also provide Visit Finland exposure in Russia. Therefore there is a Visit Finland (RU) page, made especially for Russian-speaking Facebook users. Let us first compare the numbers: VK.com has 3 688 followers, Facebook has 13 061 likes. (VK, Facebook) The Visit Finland RU has been established later than the Visit Finland page on VK.com, and what is strange, is that VK.com shows Visit Finland to have much less followers and a lot less engagement. For Visit Finland, it is safe to say that somehow their content is more adapted to Facebook users, whereas with a larger Russian crowd VK has not brought Visit Finland much consumer-generated content. This phenomenon only supports the idea that content should be optimized for VK, in order to reach larger audiences in Russia.

One of the key questions of this research, formulated according to an initial assumption is: “What are the core differences in audiences on Facebook and VK?” The initial assumption, or in this case, a hypothesis, is that the audience in VK is generally younger than the audience on Facebook. This hypothesis has been supported with the following comparative findings through Alexa.com. According to these findings, VK is a social network that is indeed younger than Facebook, and the majority of VK users are aged between 25 and 34.

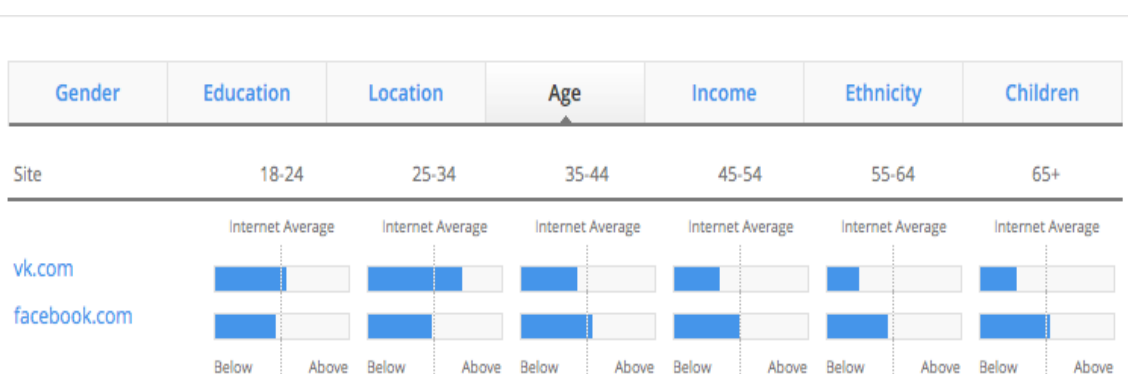


Figure 15. Statistic comparisons of VK and Facebook (Alexa 2014)

The previously displayed statistics are also confirmed by the results of the survey, where the respondent (VK user) is asked to state their age group (Figure 16).

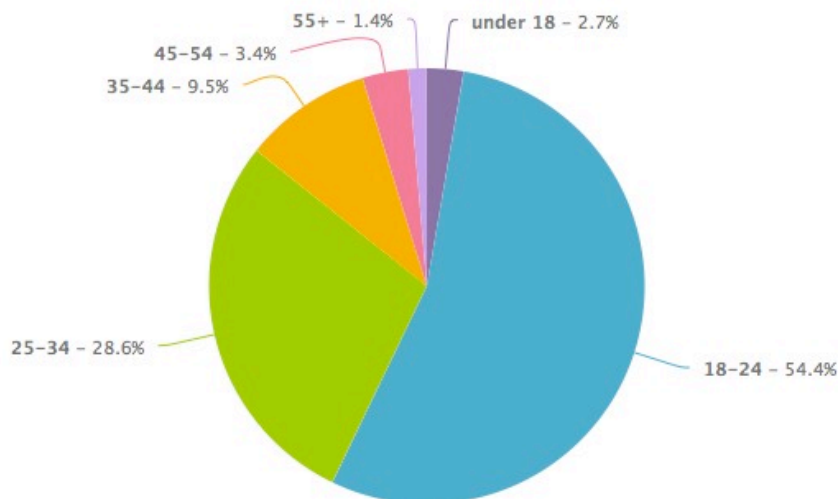


Figure 16. Survey respondents' age pie chart (Survey Gizmo).

With these statistics in mind, it is important to focus on how the content can be optimized for the perception of a younger age group. Also, as Visible from Figure 15, it is important to notice that VK as a social network also has a significantly larger group of users aged between 18 and 24. This implies that the social media brand building strategy would be more effective if the target group is to be considered younger. In reference to Chapter 3.1, and the topic of Generation Y or the "Millennial's", it is relevant to emphasize that people aged 18-24 possess certain characteristics of social behaviour, and amongst the long list of them, here are some to consider when publishing content on VK: "Millennial's" are innovative thinkers, they love a challenge, they seek to make a difference, desire to be a hero, are impatient and thrive for flexibility to explore (Deloitte Consulting). On the other hand, considering the cross-cultural comparisons of Facebook and VK, it is also relevant to highlight the finding that Facebook's audience appears to be predominantly feminine. This may be an influential cause of why content published in VK does not present the same

effect as it does on Facebook. Info-metric marketing can be referred to in order to outline some of the differences in marketing to not only different age groups, but to also highlight the difference in marketing perception by men and women.

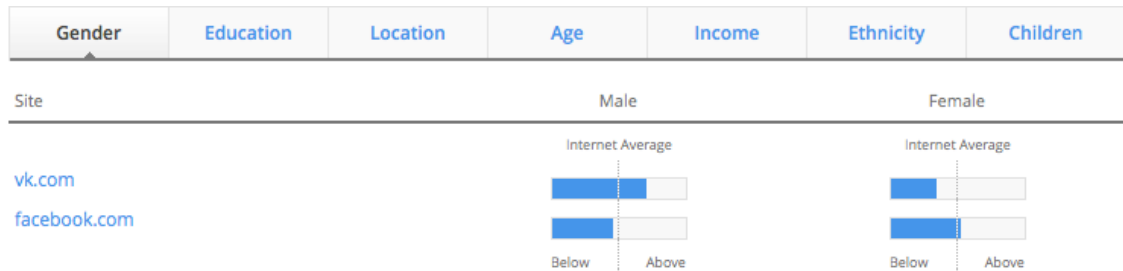


Figure 17. The difference in gender predominance between VK and Facebook (Alexa)

Gender-based social network demographics can be an index that is an implication to advertising, marketing and brand building. Numerous studies have been conducted on the topic about the perception of marketing by genders. A study by Sanjay Putervu (2001) suggests that men respond better to visual and audial influences, whereas women are more driven by verbally descriptive messages. These conclusions have been drawn through analysing the hemispheric activities of the brain of both counterparts exposed to the same the of marketing material. Another influential index in targeting is income, or otherwise socio-economic status. When devising a brand-building strategy, whether through traditional advertising or social media networks, this index should be considered strongly. There is a significant difference in socio-economic classes in the two networks subject to comparison.

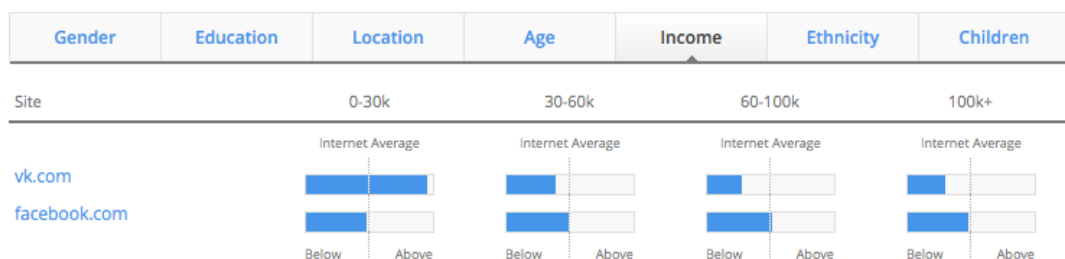


Figure 18. Comparison of income statistics of users in VK and Facebook (Alexa 2014)

All these demographical factors (age group, gender predominance, socio-economic class) about the VK audience will be reviewed more thoroughly, analyzed and referred to secondary sources in chapter 4.2. The theoretical findings are to either argue or support the given empirical findings and drawn hypothesis about marketing approaches, and will help draw a relevant conclusion upon the key research question.

4 Specialties of Russian Consumer Mentality

The following two subchapters of this chapter will be reviewing scientific material and other secondary sources on the topics of consumer psychology, Russian cultural dimensions in relation to history and culture, cross-cultural studies on the perception of marketing. The chapter will also attempt to identify certain specialties of consumer psychology in Russia in its relation to social media. These concepts will be studied in order to further narrow it down to the suggestion of possible applications of content optimization for Visit Finland in VK.com.

As an introduction, consumer psychology as a general topic is relevant to discuss in relation to one of the sub-questions of this research: What are the core preferences of the VK public in terms of engagement with social media content? According to Foxall and Goldsmith (1994) the cumulative demands of highly competitive brand-building circumstances make it vital that firms know their consumers, and consumer decision making as they pursue to advance amongst their competition. This statement has been applied to most successful branding building and marketing strategies for many years; however, many brands still manage to mistreat this important success-driving factor. One of the business organization philosophy implications stated by the authors is that the consumer's desires must be recurrently observed and measured so that throughout product and market evolvment, the business stays ahead of its

competitors (Foxall and Goldsmith 1994). Simple, but what if there is no actual product, or service? What if a business entity is based solely on the provision of content? The content then becomes the product in the equation of successful brand building.

Visit Finland is solely a governmental entity, which is responsible for the marketing and promotion of inbound international and national tourism, to raise governmental revenue through the tourism market. In this case, considering that a large amount of such marketing and promotional activities happen online and in social media, it is relevant to perceive the content and the responsiveness of the brand as product and service. The product in this case will be referred to as the content providing high-quality images and videos, posted by Visit Finland on a regular basis, and the service will be perceived as the responsiveness of Visit Finland towards customers who have questions, requests and opinions. Responding to consumer behaviour is noted to be one of the key factors in consumer-oriented marketing, and according to Foxall and Goldsmith (1994) responding presumes the following three tasks:

- 1) Reflecting consumer needs in new product development
- 2) Establishing and Maintaining brand loyalty
- 3) Ensuring consumer satisfaction during product decline

All three tasks can also be applied in terms of creating, maintaining and revitalizing content after its lifecycle has expired to keep the (potential) consumer interested. Considering these actions, it is now relevant to discuss how they can be applied on the Russian SM “market”. The following chapter discusses the Russian Cultural Dimensions and the possible effect on the nation’s consumer behaviour.

4.1 Russian Cultural Dimensions

Considering the general geographical statistics of VK displayed in Figure 4, and VK usage percentage shown in Figure 10, we can clearly identify that VK is indeed a powerful tool for companies to enter the Russian market or to improve their existing position in it. In order to make the best of VK as a brand

building tool, it is crucial to understand the population of this social networking website. Given that Visit Finland has its focus on the Russian population of VK, the research will now discuss the cultural dimensions of Russians as a nation. For better understanding of the difference of approach to creating and publishing content, cultural dimensions of Russians will be compared to that of Finns due to the origin of the case company.

In order to provide reliable theoretical data, the analysis of cultural dimensions will be taken directly from Geert Hofstede's official website, where a tool of viewing any country's cultural dimensions is available. This tool has been devised through social research that has been in for over two decades. New cultural dimensions have been added to the study, and unfortunately not all countries have yet been researched in the new dimensions' terms. Originally, Geert Hofstede identifies that each culture falls under certain categories and levels of power distance, femininity and masculinity, individualism and collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. Geert Hofstede, Michael Harris Bond and Michael Minkov have added three new dimensions throughout 1991 and 2010, which are defined as: Long-term orientation (otherwise called Confucian Dynamism), Pragmatism and Indulgence. In order to create a clearer and more comprehensive analysis of both Russia and Finland, it is vital to define the cultural dimensions.

Power distance is described as the dimension that deals with the fact that all persons in cultures are unequal. The dimension demonstrates the nation's general moods and attitudes towards these inequalities. Power distance is expressed as the level to which the less-dominant members of organizations and communities within a nation anticipate and agree that power is allocated unequally. Individualism addresses the amount of co-dependency within a society. Simply, it could be understood as the concept of whether a person in the society defines his self-image either as "I" or "We". Individualist societies comprise of people who attribute care to themselves and their immediate family only. Collectivist societies can be defined as people who consider them selves belonging to bigger groups, and providing care for the communities they belong to. Masculinity - a society is determined to be masculine in the case when its members strive for competition, achievement and success. A femi-

nine society, on the other hand is more focused on selfless care for others, quality of life and level of comfort.

Uncertainty avoidance is the dimension that defines the extent of comfort with given uncertainty, or in other words, the lack of knowledge about what the future holds. The society can be defined by either being able to “let the future happen” or by attempting to control it. Different cultures express a different level of anxiety towards uncertainty and have their own coping mechanisms that have developed a certain way due to their history. The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by indefinite or unfamiliar conditions can be helpful in understanding decision-making in individuals of that culture. Confucian Dynamism otherwise defined as the cultural index that represents an individual’s behaviour either as long-term oriented or short-term oriented. Confucian dynamism defines a society’s time perspective. Long term-oriented societies attribute meaning to future plans. They adopt reasonable principles positioned regarding rewards, involving perseverance, saving and ability of adjustment. In short-term oriented cultures, values fostered are linked to the past and the present, involving calmness, admiration for tradition, and protection of one's face, correspondence and gratifying social responsibilities.

Pragmatism is the dimension that describes how a society has to preserve some connections with its past, dealing with the encounters of the present and future. Different societies arrange these two existential aims contrarily. The cultures that grade low on pragmatism, favour to maintain long-standing traditions and rules whilst seeing social transformation with mistrust. A culture that scores high, takes a more matter-of-fact tactic: they support thrift and determination in modern learning to prepare for the future. Indulgence is a dimension that is defined as the level of how much people attempt to govern their wants and compulsions, according to their upbringing. Comparatively frail level of control is the so-called “indulgence” and solid control is the so-called “restraint”. (Hofstede Centre 2014)

Now that the cultural dimensions have been clearly identified and described, the research can progress into analysing Russia in terms of the dimensions. Unfortunately Russia has not been researched in terms of Confucian Dynamism, but other sources will be referred to in order to attempt the analysis of the nation upon the missing dimension. Further, several of the presented di-

mensions will be taken into consideration of how they can affect certain social behaviours of Russians, and applied to a narrower understanding of Russians as the target audience for Visit Finland. Only some dimensions will be taken into account due to the limitations of the research, as well as due to the reason that some dimensions are stated to have more effect on decision-making than others. As seen from Figure 18, Russia scored high in dimensions such as Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and Pragmatism. The nation has low scores in Individualism, Masculinity and Indulgence. What these scores mean exactly is explained more thoroughly below.

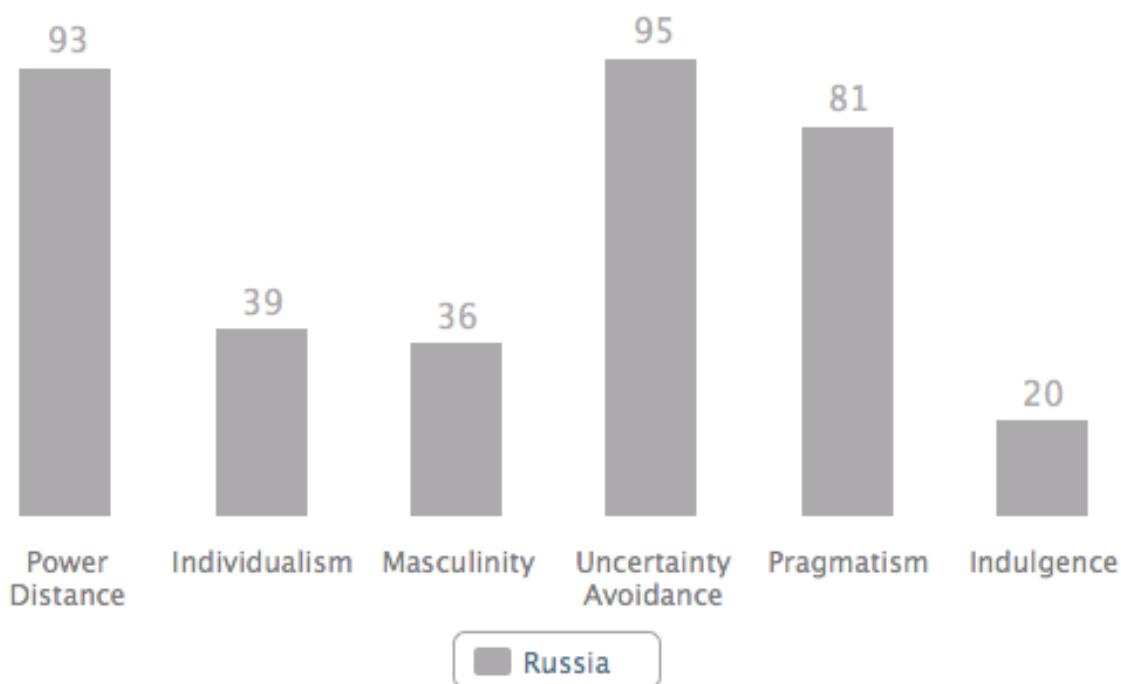


Figure 19. The scored on the 6 cultural dimensions of Russia (Hofstede Centre 2014)

As previously mentioned, the analysis does not provide us with the index of Confucian Dynamism. However, through extended literature research, it has been discovered that Russians are short-term oriented and prefer to live “now”. Regarding the Confucian Dynamism dimension, Russians prefer to live for the moment, accentuating the past and the present (Balykina 2006). Further it is reasonable to discuss the scores on all other available dimensions presented by Hofstede’s cultural tool. First up, in the Power Distance dimen-

sion, Russia scores as high as 93, which signifies that in this society, hierarchical structure is a norm. This high score can be explained by the circumstance that being the largest country in the world, Russia is exceptionally consolidated: two thirds of all external investments are assigned to Moscow where also eighty per cent of all monetary prospective is condensed. The colossal difference between the less and the more powerful individuals indicates to a high meaning of status symbols. Behaviour of individuals has to reveal their status in all parts of business interactions. Secondly, in the dimension of Individualism Russians score as low as 39. This means that the nation is strongly collectivist, and individuals often identify themselves with the groups or communities they belong to. Which is why when a Russian person tells about their plans to go out with their friends for example, they voice their plans with "We" sentences. This low score has a particularly strong manifestation in the Russian language, where activities with family, friends, colleagues or other groups are mostly referred to as activities by a single "we" unit. In Russia, relationships are vital in attaining knowledge, getting acquainted or for beneficial concessions. Relationships are truly valued when they are personal, genuine and trustworthy prior to when one can focus on tasks when working in a group. This dimension also reflects strongly on the perception of marketing communications: Russians are very sceptical of advertisements, therefore, before purchasing or product or service it is sure that they will first turn to their friends or family for advice and opinions. In the Masculinity dimension, Russia's comparatively low score of 36 may be surprising, with regard to its power distance index and the behaviour which highlights status symbols. However, with the combination of a high Power Distance and a low Individualism indexes, Russians actually care more for the well being of others and the general comfort and quality of life. Their language also reveals their feminine nature: Russians mostly talk discreetly about themselves. Self-proclaiming and dominant behaviour is accepted from bosses at work, but not appreciated amongst peers. In the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance Russians possess a very high score of 95. This means that they feel anxious when it comes to ambiguous situations. Russia also has one of the most complex bureaucracies in the world, and that can be a strong sign for a high index of Uncertainty Avoidance. At work, Russians prefer detailed briefing for tasks, and either present very

thorough and complete results or come unprepared whatsoever. Concerning decision-making, it takes time for a Russian consumer to evaluate the worth and the value of the product and service they are about to purchase, and in relation to the Indulgence index, the question that usually closes the decision is “do I really need this?” Russians will also advise at least one close person before purchasing a product or a service, especially ones that are considered to be luxury items. In the Pragmatism dimension, Russia also takes place rather high, scoring 81 points. As a society of a pragmatic mind-set, Russians believe that truth depends strongly on the situation, time and context. The nation has a rather high level of ability to adapt to changing conditions, and is willing to put effort into investing thriftiness and persistence in reaching set or given goals. In terms of consumer behaviour, this index in Russians means that believing what is said can only be trusted when applied in practice. Therefore advertisement or brand messages may not be perceived with trust, which is why Russians prefer to obtain as much practical information about the offered products or services. Given that Russia scores high in both pragmatism and uncertainty avoidance, it is crucial for companies to understand that providence of practical, concrete and useful information about the company, its products and services will have a higher chance of acquiring a Russian follower, buyer or loyal customer. This dimension will be discussed more thoroughly following an example of an indirect competitor of Visit Finland in VK.

Russia scores very low on the Indulgence dimension. This signifies that the nation can demonstrate a high level of scepticism and even pessimism in their social behaviour. Russia, being a restrained society, does not promote emphasis on leisure, luxury and fun in comparison with indulgent societies. This phenomenon can be explained by two affecting factors: religion and political history. Orthodox Russian churches often highlight gluttony as one of the biggest sins, adding that the political structure of the communist Soviet Union had made leisure shameful, and prohibited most public celebrations. This orientation can be viewed differently in terms of consumer behaviour. Although a restrained nation may feel that indulging is judged by society and is somewhat wrong, they feel entitled to indulge when they feel that they have deserved it. This also explains why status symbols such as luxury cars are shown off with

pride. Russians are proud of what they have earned to deserve. (Hofstede Centre 2014)

These analyses on Russian cultural dimensions have now given a rather clear perspective on what the Russian mentality in general is like and what are the effects of these cultural indexes on the Russian consumer behaviour. However, before identifying how these analyses can be applied in terms of brand-building in social media, it might give a more clearly cross-cultural perspective to the study if we compare Russia's cultural dimensions to Finland's.

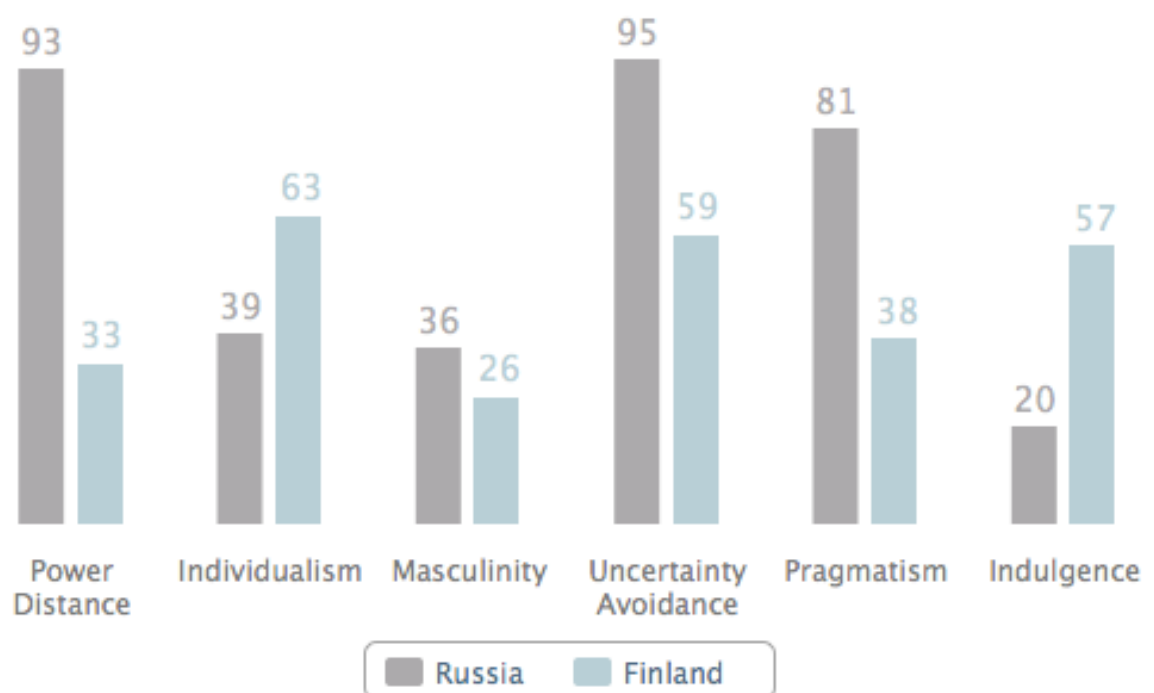


Figure 20. The difference of scores in cultural dimensions of Russia and Finland (Hofstede Centre 2014)

Knowing what these dimensions signify, the study should be limited to not identify each of these dimensions for Finland with textual analyses. What is visible from the graph is that there are significant differences in each of the dimensions; therefore it may be logical to assume that the same approach to marketing in Finland will not bring the same results in Russia.

According to Kogut and Singh (1988) attitudes of uncertainty avoidance and cultural distance are crucial to entering a new market. Since Visit Finland has only been present in VK for a bit over a year, it is still considerable as a new entrant. The most significantly noticeable differences according to Figure 19

are in power distance, uncertainty avoidance and indulgence. A derived hypothesis of this research has occurred when analysing the above findings: the cultural attributes of Russia, as well as other countries falling under Hofstede's analysis have derived from the country's history and political structures.

To support or argue this hypothesis, it is crucial to turn to some scientifically supported secondary data. According to a study by Bollinger (1994) the degree of uncertainty avoidance is in a straight relationship with the level of freedom in the country. Fretfulness points to tolerant practices of controlling uncertainty, which leads to accepting limitations on individual freedom. This statement presumes that Russian people have had a limited personal freedom influenced strongly by the government and its actions. Exploring the ratio between freedom in the country and uncertainty avoidance in behaviour of Russians, it is obvious that political control has been strong not only with media and religion but has also set taboo on many things concerning people's personal lives: under the reign of Stalin, a more imposing policy was initiated: abortions were prohibited, homosexuality was forbidden, and divorces turn out to be much more complex (Ayvazyan 2013).

A lot of fear has been imposed upon the Russian society in USSR, which is why the index of uncertainty avoidance in Russia is still very high. Given that, uncertainty avoidance has a strong advantage for companies attempting to market products/services to a society with a high score in uncertainty avoidance: individuals with a high level of uncertainty avoidance are more prone to trust decision heuristics, thus they should be more likely to be affected by scarcity. "The scarcity effect is a powerful social-influence principle used by marketers to increase the subjective desirability of products" (Jung, Kellaris 2009)

As a conclusive interpretation of the above secondary findings, it can be derived that: uncertainty avoidance index shall be paid close attention to when building brand awareness in Russia. Russians are to be most driven by trustworthy and transparent brand messages and content that is created with close attention to practical details. As Russians are also a collectivist nature, in terms of brand building in the area of tourism, it can be derived that they prefer traveling with family or friends, as well as group tours appeal to Russians significantly more than individual and independent traveling. Russians are also

attracted to program trips, for example all-inclusive packages, where personal decision-making upon plans and schedules are not frequent.

The general conclusion about the Indulgence index of Russians as a community implies that travel should promote more knowledge and practical pleasures than luxurious experiences, although Russians of a higher socio-economic class do like to indulge and are active shoppers for luxury items. However, the target group for social media marketing is predominated by a rather low-income socio-economic group, therefore the low index of indulgence should be taken into consideration. Based on Hofstede's Masculinity dimension, Russia is Feminine therefore relationships are valued, religion is not important, women are more often in higher job positions and family structure is flexible: femininity accounts for a society where gender roles overlap, where both men and women are expected to be modest, gentle, and thriving for a better quality of life (Hofstede Centre 2014).

4.2 VK Audience: What Type of Content is Effective?

The VK Audience is rich in variety of people as any social network would be, however, the derivative from previous statistical findings signify that on average, the VK user is Russian, male, aged 25-34, earning below 30 thousand USD annually, has no children, has a higher education and browses VK.com from home. Based on theoretical findings, Russians have high indexes of power distance and uncertainty avoidance, are "feminine" and highly collectivist, pragmatic and self-disciplined. So how can these descriptions be valuable for brand building in VK? In order to answer this question, it is sensible to address similar pages that appear to have more consumer engagement. Therefore the research is to overlook and outline what seems to be effective when it comes to the VK user looking to travel to Finland.

As a reasonable example, discovered directly from VK through searching the word "Finland", many more VK users and travellers to Finland prefer to turn to the page "Finland for the Weekend" (Финляндия на Выходные), which is a locally produced community page that provides practical information concerning transportation, costs, visas, shopping opportunities and sightseeing tours and

other tourist packages. The page “Finland for the Weekend” has nearly 84 thousand followers. Yes, it is supposedly a commercial entity, that provides touring packages and other offers, but they also publish a large amount of content that simply provides the user with adequate knowledge about traveling to their destination. The information this page provides concerns traveling with children and pets, information about the car queues at the Russian border, useful information about cruises to neighbouring countries e.g. Estonia, as well as frequently arranged online lotteries and competitions. Besides that, the page posts articles about Russian people residing in Finland and about their achievements and contributions. The page even lists practical information about employment in Finland. Besides, the discussions on this page often involve more than 25 thousand customer posts per thread. “Finland for the Weekend” is although indirect, but a strong SM competitor for Visit Finland. Their advantage is that being an “Open Community”, they provide the freedom for users to create their own discussion topics where they can express their opinions, and to share practical information with others. In addition, “Finland for the Weekend” creates polls concerning different current and actual topics such as visa applications, travel expenses, transport choice (VK Finland For The Weekend). Visit Finland, also allows group members to create posts, but for some reason, there are no consumer-generated posts on their page. So why does the VK user choose to rely on “Finland for the Weekend” – which markets commercial services, instead of turning to Visit Finland for inspiring information? This question is difficult to answer, but several assumptions can be made. The page Finland For The Weekend has existed for a longer time than Visit Finland; it provides more useful and practical information; it allows users to have extended discussions not only by commenting on images, but creating their own discussion threads in the “forum” section. As mentioned in chapter 2, consumers want to feel important, and many would rather publish content and create threads than simply comment on existing content posted by the brand itself. This idea would probably apply to any social media channel; however, the case with VK in relation to the Russian consumer mentality is to be discussed focusing solely on the predominant group of VK users identified in chapters 3.2 and 3.3, where the average VK user is a so-called spectator, rather than a publisher. Considering the competitor page, there is a conclusion that can be drawn upon the findings

about cultural dimensions. Russian VK users are drawn to content that includes extended practical information. This conclusion is drawn due to the fact that Russians as a nation are highly avoidant of uncertainty. Therefore, when they travel, they want to know as much detail as possible.

5 Russian Cultural Dimensions and their Effects on Tourism-Related Consumer Behaviour

Unfortunately, there is a limited amount of scientific information that could be discovered on the topic of the effect of Cultural Dimensions on tourism-related consumer behaviour, so the following conclusions are more or less explorative and may or may not be feasible for optimizing content. However, the conclusions are highly analytical and logical and may be used as suggestions in an attempt to improve brand awareness in VK.

Products of tourism should be paid close attention to, as these products often require larger investments. The purchase of a product, which cannot be physically evaluated and experienced prior to the buying decision, inflicts eventuality on the buyer. Together with the high spending aspect of tourism, this signifies that tourism for the buyer is a risky decision-making process. Therefore, the consumer will be highly involved in the purchase decision. (Swarbrooke and Horner 2007) Considering that tourism is in general a product that imposes a feeling of uncertainty upon the buyer, Russians are an even more critical case as an audience due to the high uncertainty avoidance index. Individuals in countries with a high uncertainty avoidance index feel insecure about the consequence of investments, hence the existence of the predisposition to avoid investing in undertakings especially if they are perceived as high in risk (Shah 2012). As a suggestion to the preceding dimension being discussed, it may be effective to infuse content with more practical information, as described in the example of Finland For The Weekend in Chapter 4.2. In support of the suggestion, the conducted survey contained an “image-select” question, where one image did not have any textual information, the other included information about the restaurant itself and about approximate lunch and brunch prices. The results can be seen in Figure 21.

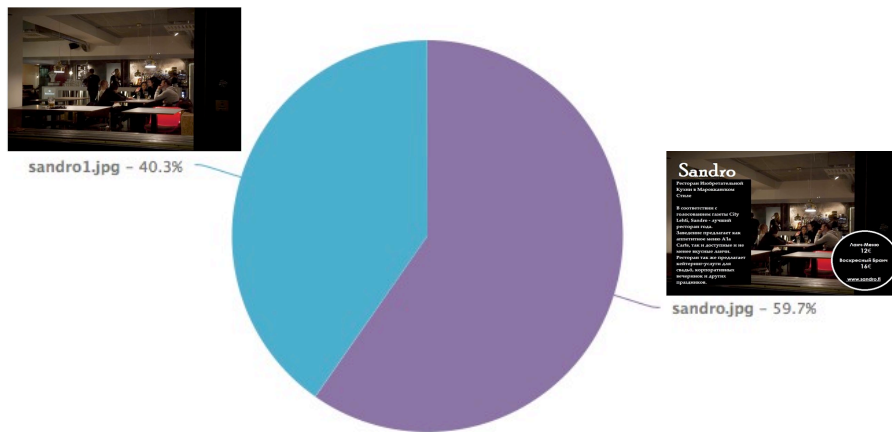


Figure 21. The preference of the Survey Respondents in terms of images and the information provided in them (Survey Gizmo)

The survey also contained another similar image-choice question, where two identical pictures of Aleksanterinkatu in Helsinki was provided, with one image having a text box with very vague information about the shopping opportunities, and the other had no text added (Figure 22).

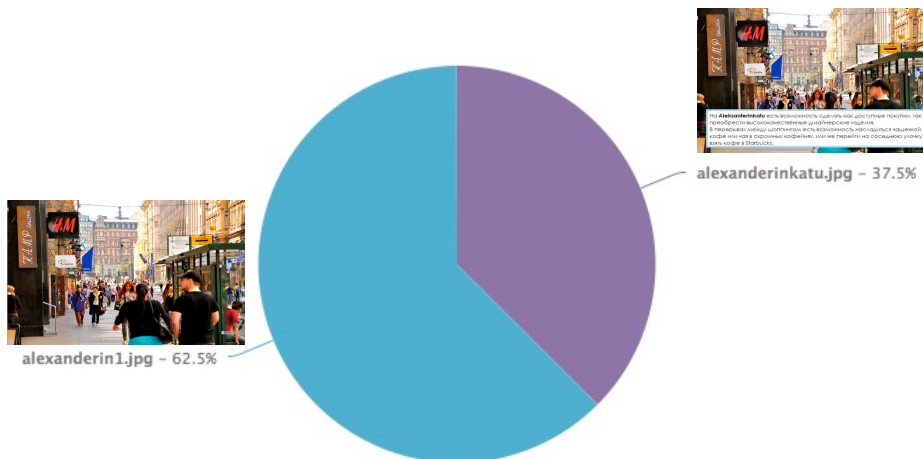


Figure 22. The preference of the Survey Respondents in terms of images and the information provided in them (Survey Gizmo)

As Uncertainty Avoidance is discussed, the next reasonable cultural dimension to be discussed in terms of its effect on tourism-related consumer behaviour is the Pragmatism dimension. Uncertainty Avoidance fosters pragmatism, as

pragmatism is a quality that evokes a natural tendency for an individual to learn about products and services through practice. As tourism can not be experienced physically prior to the purchase of a tourism product, review articles, personal reviews and ratings are highly valued by an individual with a pragmatic mind-set. Therefore one suggestion regarding the high index of pragmatism in Russians can be that social media content feed of a brand is more likely to be trusted if it occasionally contains review articles by experiencers and links to websites such as for example, Trip Advisor, where people have the opportunity to rate tourism products such as hotels, airline companies, restaurants and so forth.

The next cultural dimension, which can allow a brand to understand the motivations of Russian tourists, is the Indulgence dimension. Whereas Russians score very low on this dimension, it is clear that Tourism in itself is more or less a luxury. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that an average Russian person would most likely travel due to a well-deserved holiday, or an earned-at-work bonus. As Russians are highly restrained, or in other words, self-disciplined, it is relevant to provide this target group with social media content that will portray a tourism product as a reward. The preceding suggestion allows the research to now discuss the final dimension that may affect a Russian person's tourism-related consumer behaviour. The low index of individualism is in a strong relationship with both uncertainty avoidance and pragmatism, and is more or less related to self-discipline. As mentioned in Chapter 4.1, the low level of indulgence can be attributed to the feeling of being judged by others. This demonstrates the strong bond between collectivism and decision-making, and implies that Russians look for the approval of their peers, family and friends, when making any sort of decision. This can also be accounted for investment and purchasing decisions. Also, as mentioned previously, Russians are most likely to acquire knowledge about experience from their closest first, before turning to public reviews, but in the case where it is impossible to receive the needed information from immediate family or friends, public opinion matters most. This can be a solid base for a suggestion that social media content feed can also include an occasional extended testimonial

about a certain tourism product: this will infuse a potential Russian buyer with more trust and will allow them to make a buying decision with more certainty.

6 The Russian Aesthetic and its effect on the Nation's Visual Perception

In this chapter, the research will outline an exploration of the Russian aesthetic and the reasons why Russians prefer certain visual stimuli over others. The assumption is that the cultural dimensions discussed in Chapter 4.1, also have a strong effect on Russian aesthetic tastes. Before discussing these dimensions and their assumed effect on the Russians' visual perception, it is important to emphasize that the conclusions drawn in this chapter have not been supported by scientifically proven facts. Deriving a logical interpretation through acquired survey results and the possible effect of cultural dimensions on the choices draws these conclusions.

First of all, the Power Distance dimension is taken into account. Russians are known to be attracted to luxury and glamour, and the derived logical conclusion from Chapter 4.1, is that Russians admire luxurious and glamorous lifestyles due to the fact that the Power Distance index of the culture has a very high score. As previously explained, Russians are prone to highlighting and proudly demonstrating status symbols (Hofstede Centre 2014). These status symbols can include luxury items such as expensive cars, watches, jewellery and other physical indicators of wealth. However, to contradict this statement, it is vital to note that the index of Power Distance of Hofstede's cultural dimensions has been devised as early as in 1980, therefore this dimension isn't necessarily applicable to all age groups of Russian consumers.

As mentioned in Chapter 3.1, the environment in VK is mainly comprised by the so-called "Millennial's", who are tech-savvy, innovative thinkers who strive to make a difference. Making a difference means a certain way of differentiating oneself from the rest, which also contradicts the collectivist nature of Russian people. Although Russians are often more loyal to national brands, Western culture has a strong effect on Russia's youth. Therefore there is a certain

amount of people who strive for individuality; hence visual preferences can often be cool, innovative images, no matter what type of image. This suggestion can be supported by the survey results, where the respondents were provided with pictures of different restaurants’ interiors: some more contemporary and cool, some – more classical. Figure 23 demonstrates the acquired empirical data.



Figure 23. The preference of the survey respondents on interior design Finnish in restaurants (Survey Gizmo)

According to Region Media, a Russian advertising agency, recent consumer preferences in advertising have progressively transformed in favor of the subsequent standards: advertising needs to be interesting, involving and humorous. Consumers, today they desire to see a performance, something captivating, vigorous, and something completely new and attention grabbing (Region Media). This description goes well with the qualities of the “Millennial” described earlier in Chapter 3.1, and supports the idea of the Russian youth preferring visuals that are unusual, interesting and somehow innovative.

The second cultural dimension in question of its effect on the Russians’ visual perception would be the Masculinity index. In reference to Chapter 3.2, it is relevant to turn to the concept of advertisement perception being influenced by gender perception. It is irrelevant to conclude that although the Russian society is feminine by Hofstede’s definition, that visuals that Russians are exposed to should consider what appeals more to women. Yes, the society is feminine,

however, the majority of the VK audience is in fact, male. The info-metric studies on the perception of advertising conducted by Putervu (2001) only consider the effect of natural gender on perception of visual, audial or verbal stimuli in advertising. Due to this, a conclusion that can be drawn is to consider that in order to appeal to the majority of the VK audience, the male perception is to be considered. Men are more prone to be affected by visual and audial messages; therefore a brand's social media content feed shall contain more images, videos and maybe even music (as VK provides such an option). Other cultural dimensions do not provide much of an idea of how they can affect the VK users' visual content perception; therefore no further conclusions shall be drawn. Further conclusions will be drawn upon the survey reports, and will only serve as an exploration of possible reasons for the respondents' choices.

7 Extended Empirical Data and Its Analysis

Survey results have already been demonstrated in several chapters of this research, however, the survey conditions and its full extent has not been described or demonstrated. To begin with, the survey started with a conditional question whether or not the respondent was a VK user (Figures 24, 25). The condition was defined so, that if the person stated that they are not a VK user, they have been disqualified from the survey. This enabled the research to avoid the risk that the target population of the research would not be familiar with the VK social network. Also, it is crucial to mention that all questions in the survey have been required to be answered; therefore there was no possible way the respondent could continue with the survey unless they have given a positive answer to the question.

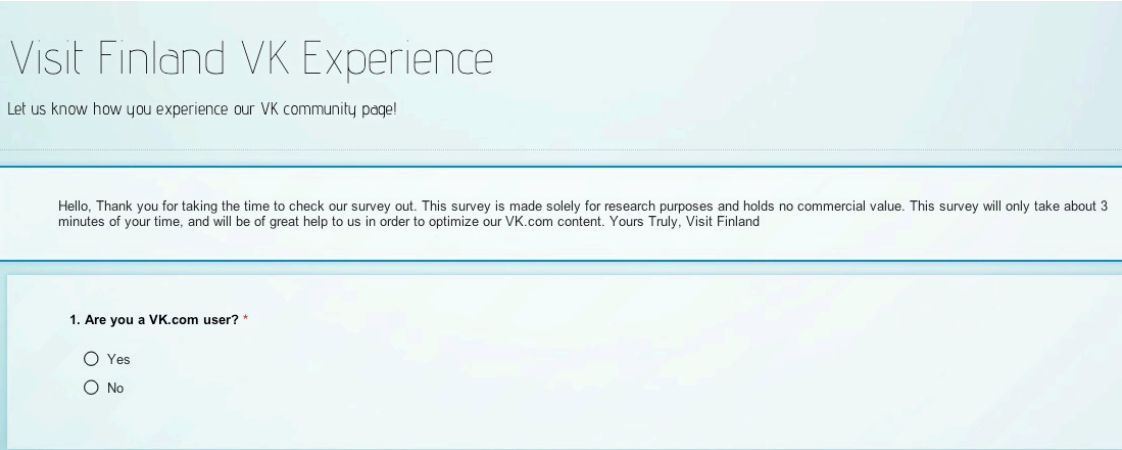


Figure 24. The conditional question asked at the beginning of the survey (Survey Gizmo)

1. Are you a VK.com user?

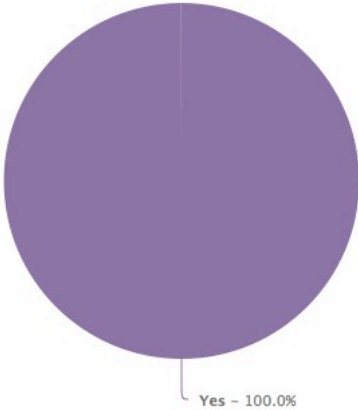


Figure 25. The chart that demonstrates that all of the respondents stated to be VK users (Survey Gizmo)

The following questions were asked in order to determine the respondents' nationality, the federal district of Russia (if nationality is chosen to be Russian), age, whether or not they have visited Finland, whether or not they are planning to visit Finland in the near future, what are the destinations they have visited or would like to visit in Finland, and what are their main activities as users of VK; and the results are demonstrated as the list follows in Figures 5, 26, 16, 27, 28, 29, 3.

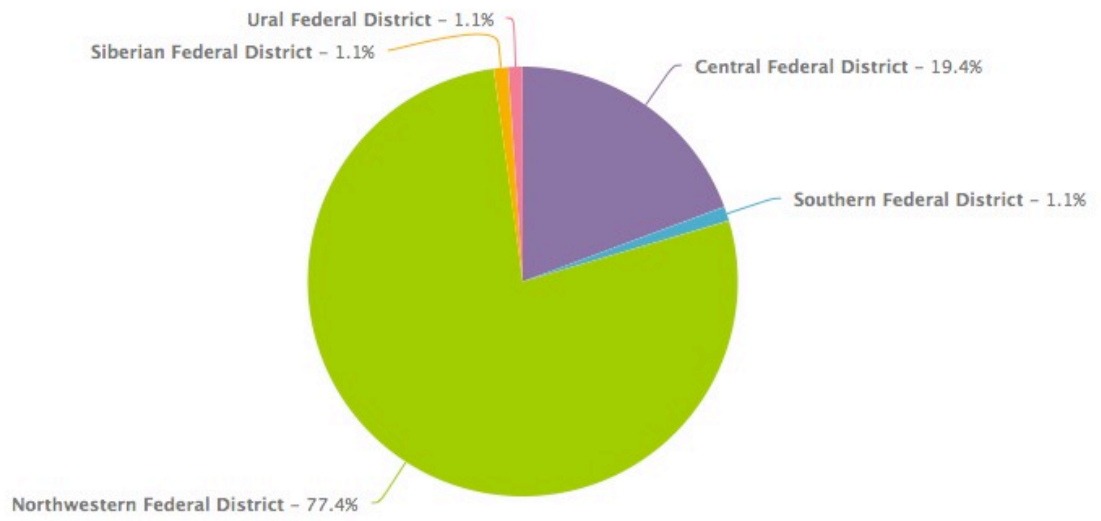


Figure 26. Survey results concerning residence areas in Russia (Survey Gizmo)

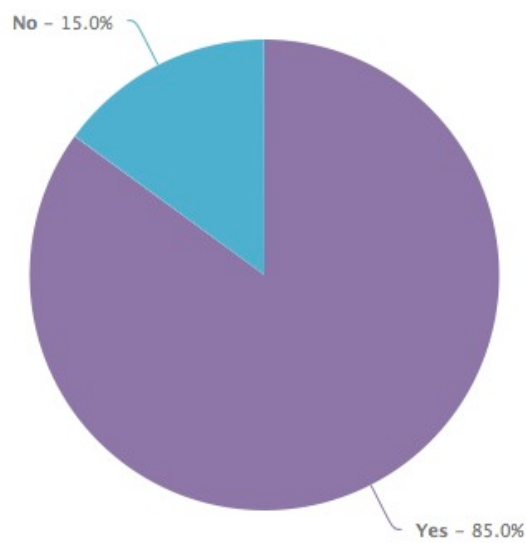


Figure 27. Survey results on the question "Have you ever travelled to Finland?" (Survey Gizmo)

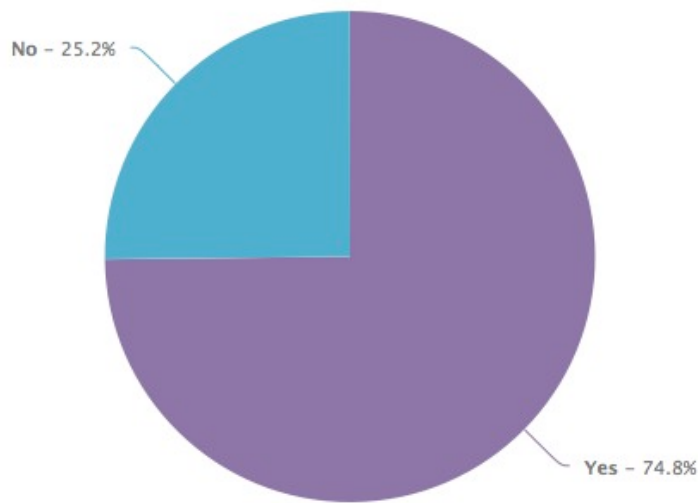


Figure 28. Survey results on the question "In the near future, are you planning to travel to Finland?" (Survey Gizmo)

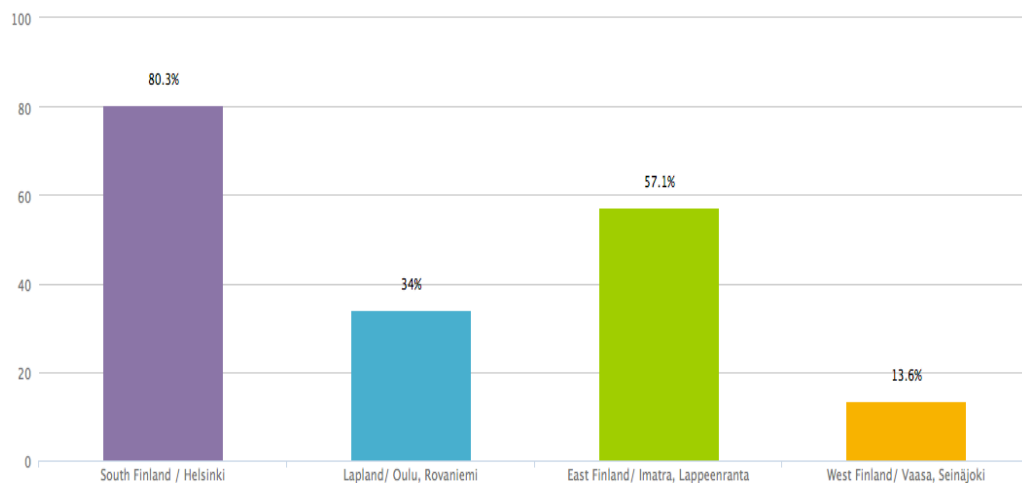


Figure 29. Survey Results on the question: "Tick the destinations you have visited, or would like to visit in Finland" (Survey Gizmo)

These results have provided support for some theoretical findings and assumptions throughout the research, but the results considering the popularity of Finland as a destination i.e. the willingness of VK users to travel to Finland have not yet been shown or discussed. According to the survey results, a whole 85% of respondents have already travelled to Finland, whereas a total of 74,1% are planning to visit Finland in the near future. This looks like a good prospect for

visit Finland in consideration of promoting Finland's tourism products in VK. Another set of useful data has been acquired by receiving responses for the question about visited or desired destinations in Finland. The question was asked in this dual format in order to determine the most popular destination in Finland. Helsinki scored highest on popularity, and Eastern Finland (Lappeenranta and Imatra) scored second, with Lapland scoring third. It is clear, that Helsinki is most popular for the reason that it is the capital city of Finland, and Lapland is a desired destination due to the types of entertainment it offers. But why is Eastern Finland so popular? The first assumption, is of course, that it is the nearest to the Russian border. However, it is feasible to state that many Russians from Vyborg, Saint Petersburg and surrounding towns travel to Eastern Finland in order to open their Schengen visas (which have been made at the Finnish embassy in Saint Petersburg), have a brief shopping spree and maybe a cup of coffee. Opening their visas in Finland is absolutely necessary due to the legislation, and they cannot enter the European Union from anywhere else but Finland, and when that is done, they are free to have their next trip to any destination they choose. So Eastern Finland is popular as sort of a "transit" for Russians. However, this statement is not supported by any scientifically proven data, therefore it can only be considered as somewhat reliable information, and it is the brand's choice whether to take advantage of this or not. Visit Finland could consider providing practical information for such short trips, by posting some photos of shops and shopping centres, coffee shops, lunch places and so forth. The preceding part of the survey was based on multiple-choice questions, where answers were expressed verbally.

The second part of the survey focused on visual content and the respondents' preference in its terms. The survey contained 6 questions, each corresponding to themes such as the northern lights, the midnight sun, fishing, dining, wellness, and shopping. In each of the questions, 3 images were chosen from the Visit Finland media bank, others were chosen from publically available images found on Google image search. Each question was the same: "Which of the images would you "like" in VK? Please choose 2"; six images were provided as answers in total. Results are displayed in Figures 30, 31, 32, 23, 33 and 34.

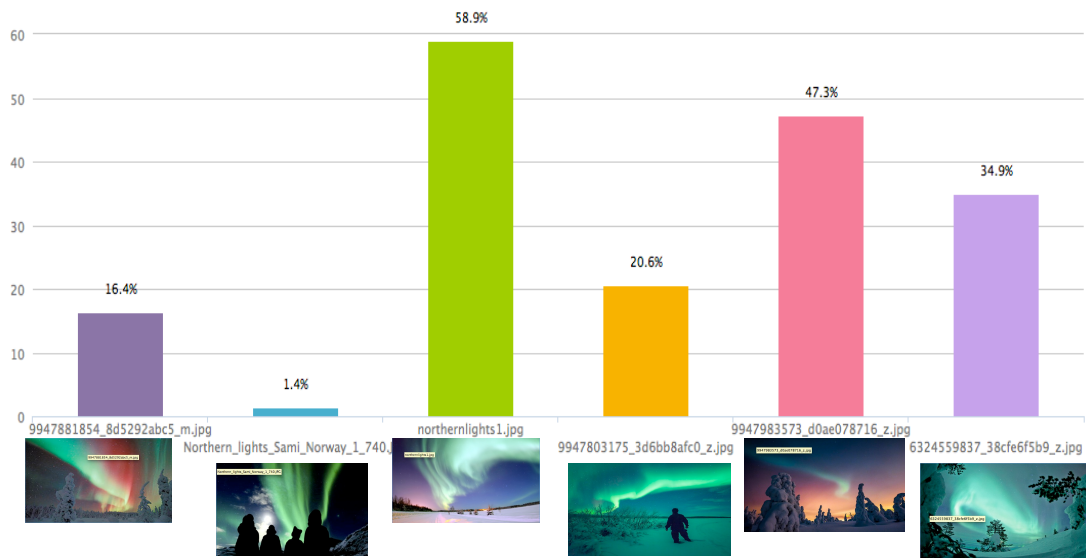


Figure 30. Survey results on the topic of northern lights (Survey Gizmo)

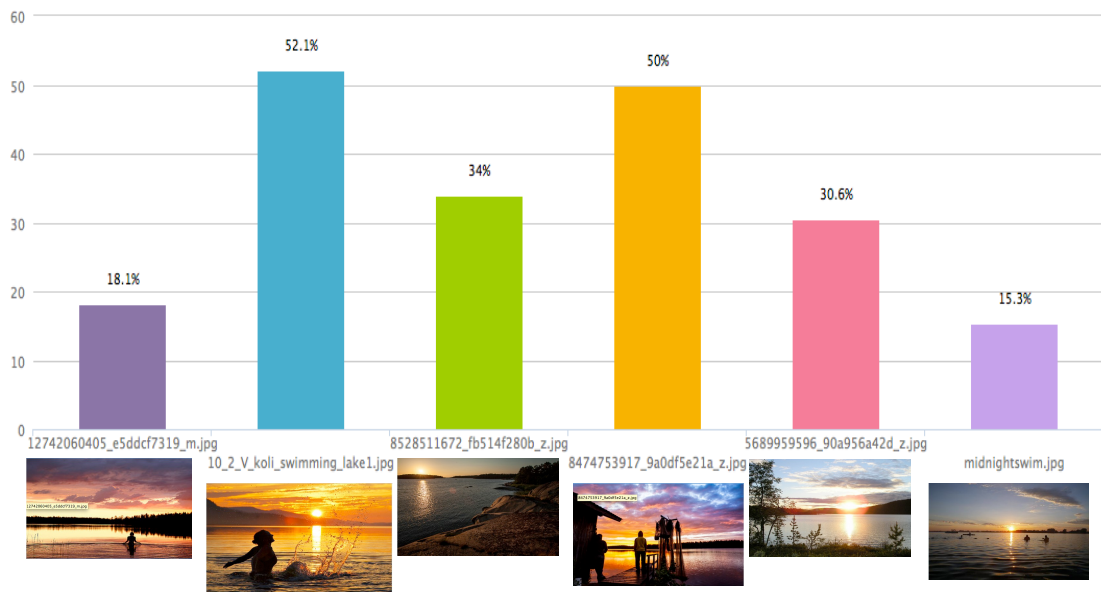


Figure 31. Survey results on the topic of midnight sun (Survey Gizmo)

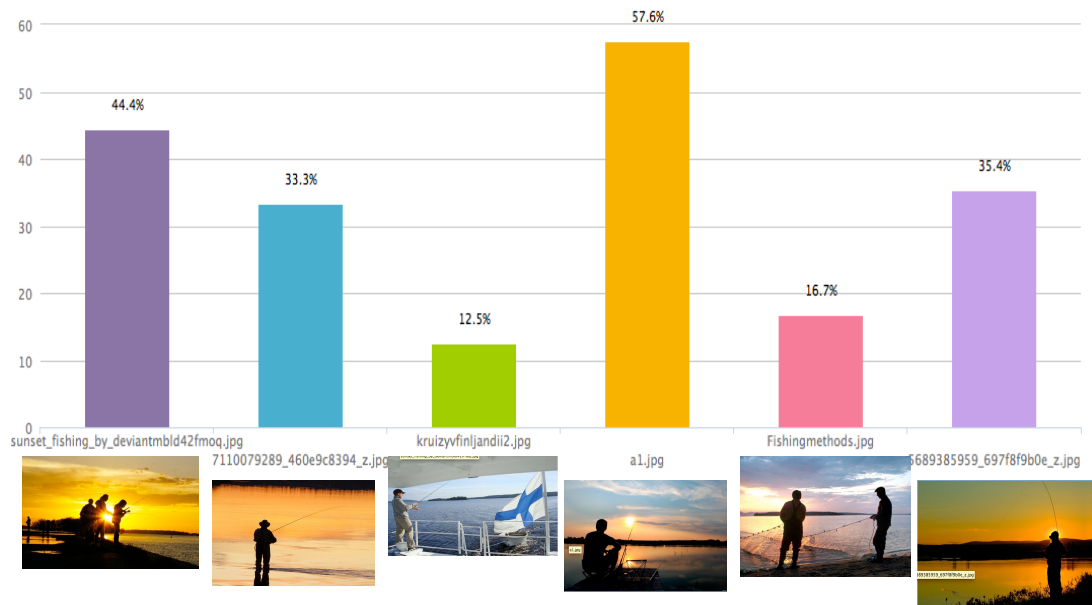


Figure 32. Survey results on the topic of fishing (Survey Gizmo)

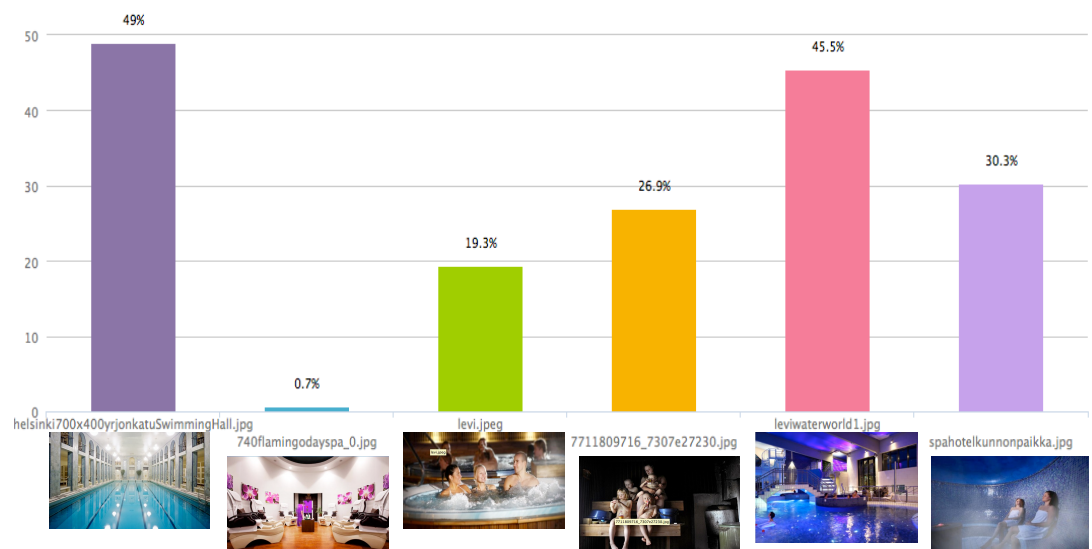


Figure 33. Survey results on the topic of wellness (Survey Gizmo)

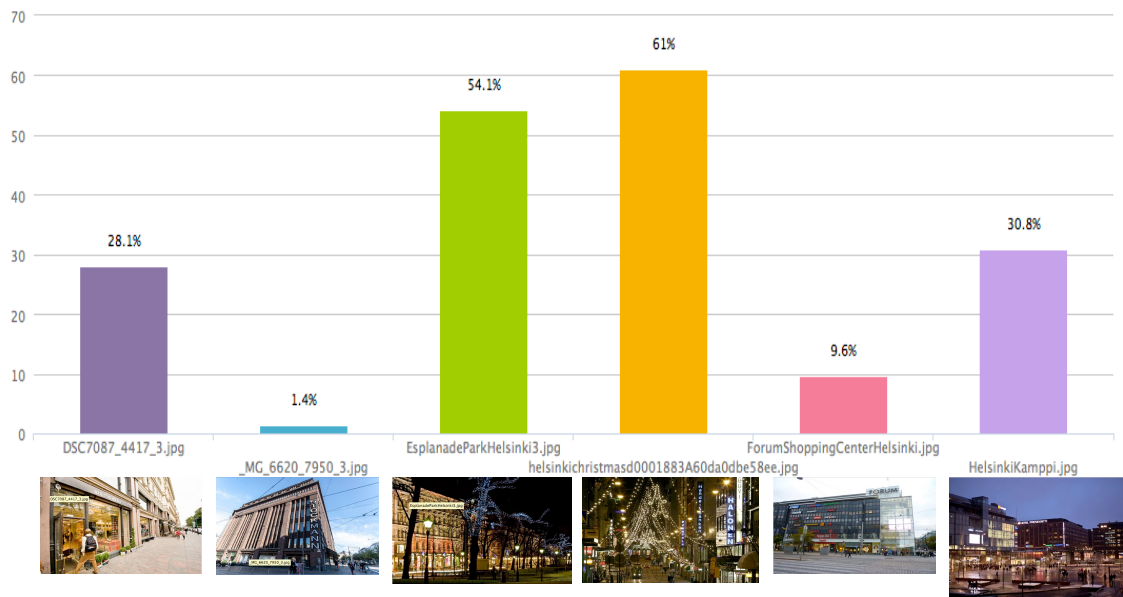


Figure 34. Survey results on the topic of shopping (Survey Gizmo)

The images that have been voted best are analysed and described for each of the questions. The most popular image in Figure 30 is an image acquired from publically available media sources and found through Google. The image was posted on the website of Visit Norway, a similar entity as Visit Finland. The image, in comparison to other provided in the multiple-choice question seems to be slightly more natural: where other images are probably colour-corrected and added contrast to, the image that has won in the poll looks to have least amendments and presents a more believable picture of the northern lights. This can be assigned to the respondents demand for transparency and truthfulness of content. The most popular image in Figure 31 was acquired from the Visit Finland media bank, and seems to be different from others because of the dynamicity of the person in the image. Images with more movement seem to resonate more with the respondents – other images that were not as popular appear to be rather static.

The image in figure 32, pictures the person in the image to be more relaxed than people present in other images. In other images, people are standing or pulling a net, which makes them look like there is a certain level of physical strain they may experience. It is probable, that fishing is associated with relaxa-

tion amongst the respondents, which is why the choice fell upon the image where the person appears to be more relaxed. The most popular image in figure 23 has already been discussed in Chapter 6, but a more thorough description can be useful. The image came from the official page of the Bulevardi Social restaurant, and demonstrates the highlights of the interior, the interior in this image is more interesting than in others, it has unusual details such as the wooden surfboard on the wall as decoration, or the vintage-looking liquor shelf. The interior in the image seems to be a bit more clustered, which may also create a higher level of comfort.

The most popular image in the results of the question concerning wellness is possibly more attractive due to its symmetrical outlook. Also, water and reflections are known to captivate humans, and this assumption can also apply to the second most popular image. The image with the highest amount of votes was taken from the Visit Finland's media bank, and has obviously had a positive effect on the respondents. The most frequently chosen image concerning the theme of shopping in Figure 34 is crowded with Christmas lights. The photo, in comparison to others, also has a larger depth of field, which allows the viewer to see more of the item, in this case, the street. Not only is the image attractive due to the Christmas atmosphere, but the image also includes people walking down the street. The image creates a heart-warming Christmas spirit that most Europeans enjoy, not to mention, that Russians have admired the Catholic Christmas traditions for a long time.

Given the exploratory analysis, hopefully Visit Finland or other readers of this research can make use of the acquired data. Visual content is nowadays more feasible than ever, as people prefer to see rather than to read. There is no concrete conclusion that can be drawn from these survey results in order to outline a guide on visual content optimization, but the analysed images and the responses can create a clearer idea of what the VK user prefers visually.

8 Summary and Discussion

Throughout this research, there have been many theoretical findings in order to identify the differences between Facebook and VK, to determine what kind of consumers are Russian people, what kind of a target group is the VK audience, what kind of content seems to work in VK, and what are the effects of Russia's cultural dimensions on its nations' consumer behaviour in tourism, and on its visual perception. Additional concepts such as the different types of social media users, info-metric marketing, and decision-making in tourism consumer behaviour have been discussed in relation to the topic of content optimization in VK, targeting the Russian market.

The study has outlined several important factors to consider when building a brand in VK. Russian people are highly avoidant of uncertainty; therefore they prefer having a good amount of practical information provided in the content feed. Besides that, the average VK user is a "Millennial", which implies that they are modern, up-to-date with technology, lifestyle-oriented, ambitious, innovative thinkers. VK users like to make a difference; however, the majority of the survey respondents have shown to be "spectators", which means they prefer following content published by others. Also, Russians often feel that in order to indulge, they need to work hard first – which means that traveling for them is mostly a reward, just like any other type of leisure activities. A very important combination of VK demographics is that the average VK user is a young male, highly educated, earns below thirty thousand dollars annually and has no children: this demographical data may help Visit Finland to alter their VK content to a rather large extent.

What comes to empirical information acquired through survey results, it is reasonable to conclude that: most respondents are from Russia, confirming that VK is mostly "populated" by Russians; that most of these Russian respondents, who have travelled to Finland and are planning to travel there in the near future, live in the North-western Federal District (i.e. Saint Petersburg and surrounding areas). Another important factor is that Helsinki is, in fact the most popular destination in Finland amongst VK users (therefore it is safe to assume that Russians enjoy exploring urban areas), Eastern Finland is the second most popular

destination, and Lapland has taken the honourable third place amongst VK users.

The multiple choice image questions' results provided the study with some relevant exploratory conclusions, but could not define a solid conception of how the visual content can be more effective. These results can hopefully help the reader intuitively choose more suitable visual content for VK. Overall, the study has been successful, most hypotheses have been supported rather than argued, and all supporting research questions have been answered. The two preceding paragraphs are meant to answer the key research question: "How should Visit Finland optimize their content in VK to drive brand awareness?" As a brief self-evaluation, the study has given some good general and even some specific outlines and examples of how content in VK could be optimized in order to be more appealing to the majority of the VK audience.

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Visit Finland VK Experience

Let us know how you experience our VK community page!

Page exit logic: Page Logic

IF: Question "Are you a VK.com user?" #1 is one of the following answers ("No") **THEN:**

Disqualify and display:

Sorry, this survey is only meant for VK.com users! But thank you for taking your time! :)

1. Are you a VK.com user? *

- Yes
- No

Nationality

2. Where are you from (Nationality)? *

- Russia
- Ukraine
- Belarus
- Estonia
- Latvia
- Kazakhstan
- Lithuania
- Uzbekistan
- Other, please specify. *

(untitled)

LOGIC Hidden unless: Question "Where are you from (Nationality)?" #2 is one of the following answers ("Russia")

3. Which Federal District of Russia are you from? *



Central Federal District
Southern Federal District
Northwestern Federal District
Far Eastern Federal District
Siberian Federal District
Ural Federal District
Volga Federal District
North Caucasian Federal District
Crimean Federal District

Age

4. How old are you? *

- under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55+

(untitled)

5. Have you travelled to Finland? *

- Yes
- No

(untitled)

6. In the near future, are you planning to travel to Finland? *

- Yes
- No

(untitled)

7. Please tick the destinations you have visited and/or would like to Visit in Finland. *

- South Finland / Helsinki
- Lapland/ Oulu, Rovaniemi
- East Finland/ Imatra, Lappeenranta
- West Finland/ Vaasa, Seinäjoki

(untitled)

VALIDATION **Min. answers = 3** *(if answered)* **Max. answers = 3** *(if answered)*

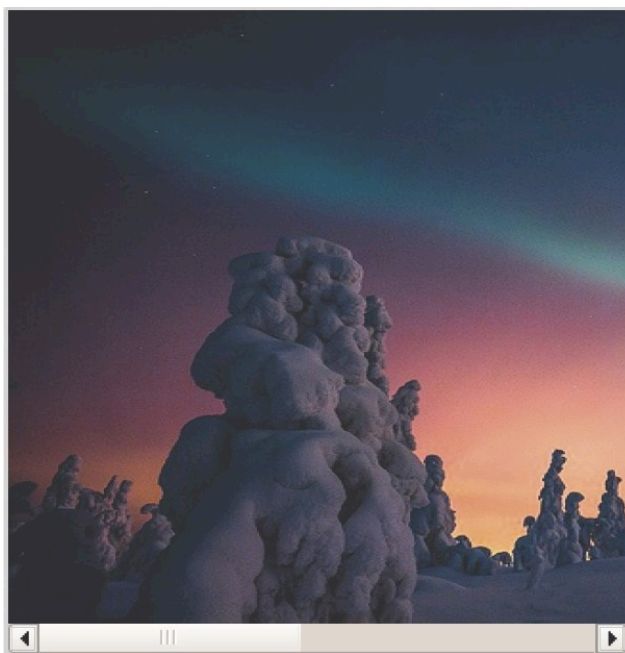
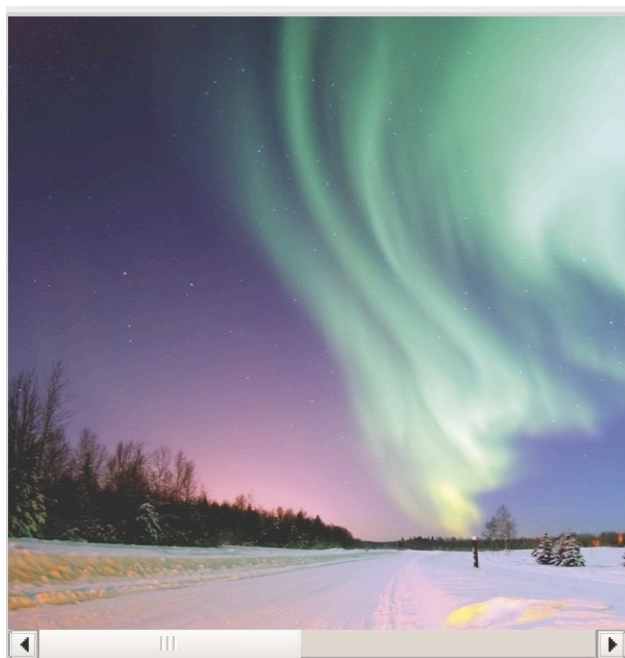
8. When you browse VK.com, what are your main activities? Pick three. *

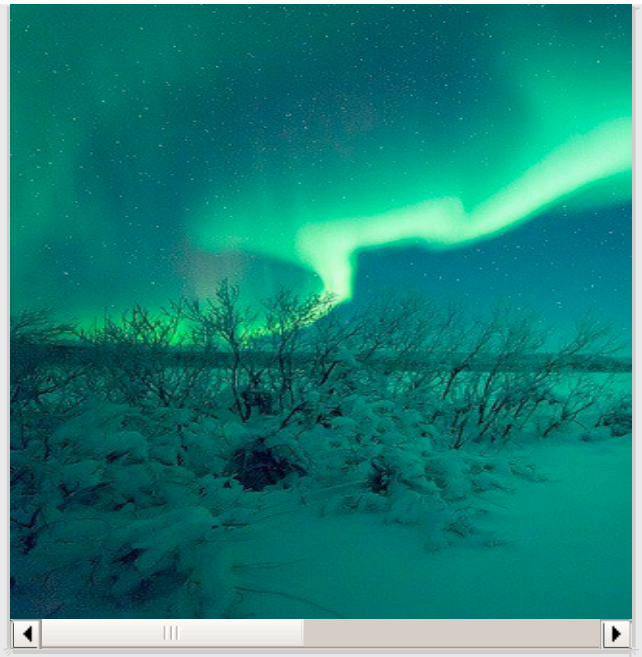
- Posting and sharing interesting content
- Following your friends and their posts
- Following communities and pages
- Managing communities/public pages
- Watching Videos
- Listening to Music
- Commenting on and discussing content posted by others

(untitled)

hdi t.:t.iii Min.answers= 2 (if answered) Max. answers= 2 (if answered)

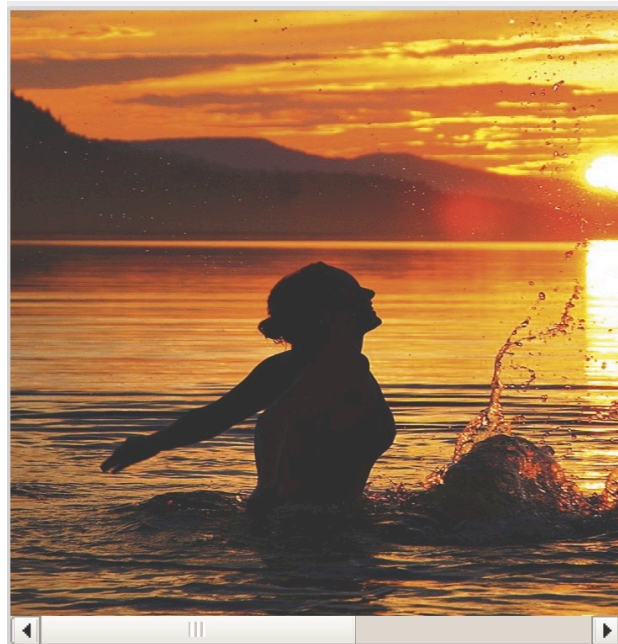
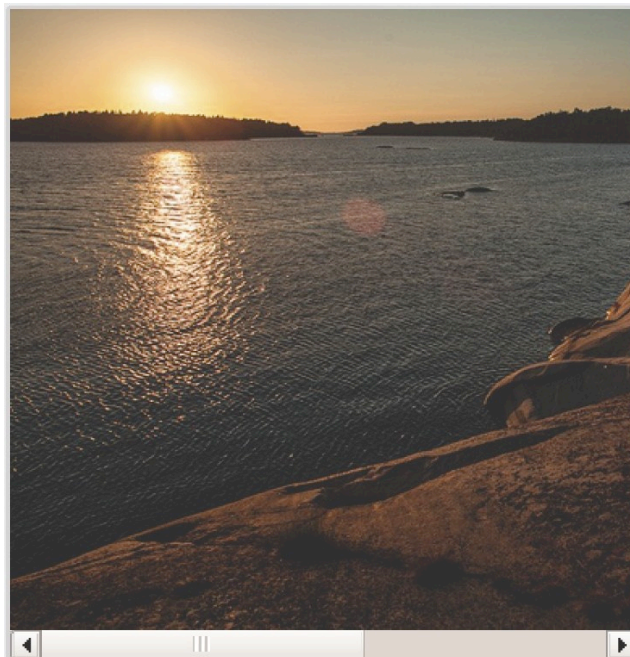
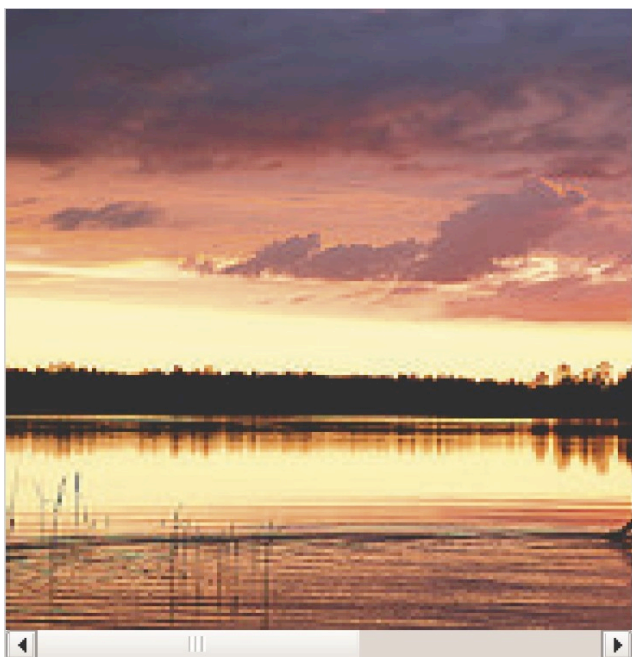
9. Which of the images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2. *

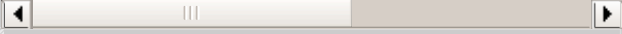




ifh.l.r.n.::: **Min. answers= 2** (if answered) **Max. answers= 2** (if answered)

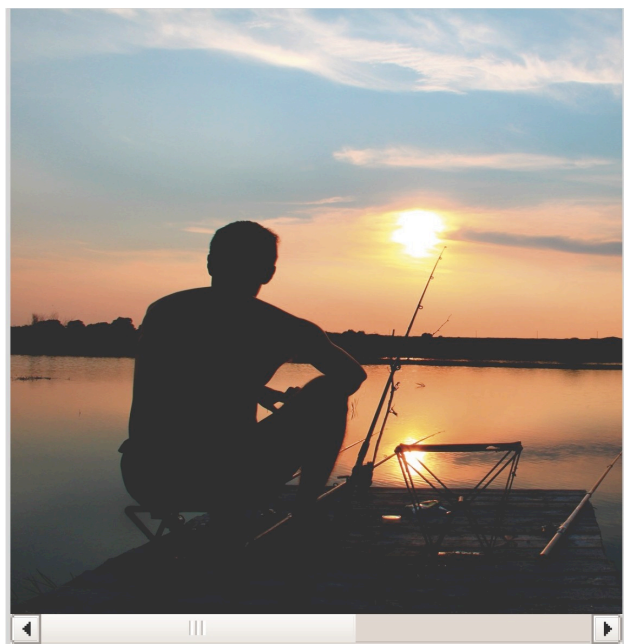
10. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2.*

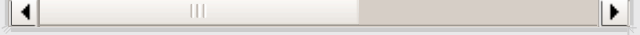
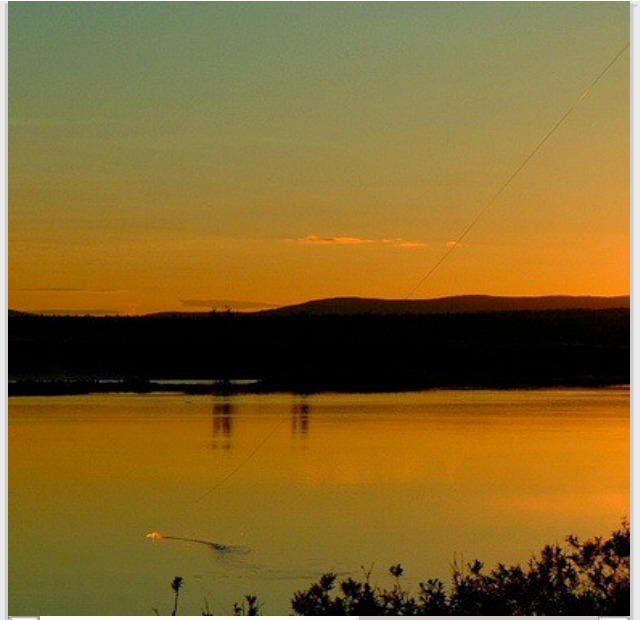
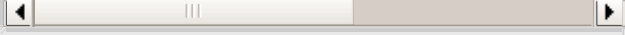




Min. answers = 2 (if answered) Max. answers= 2 (if answered)

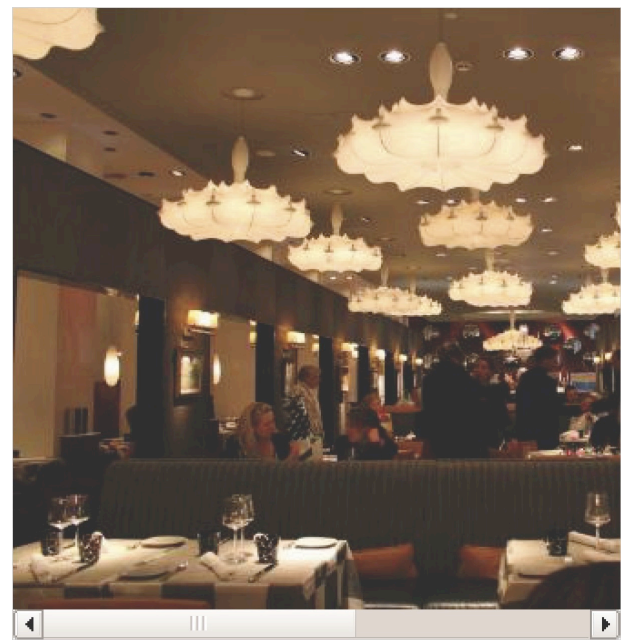
11. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2. *





h,!,ijlt.i\$1Min. answers = 2 (if answered) Max. answers = 2 (if answered)

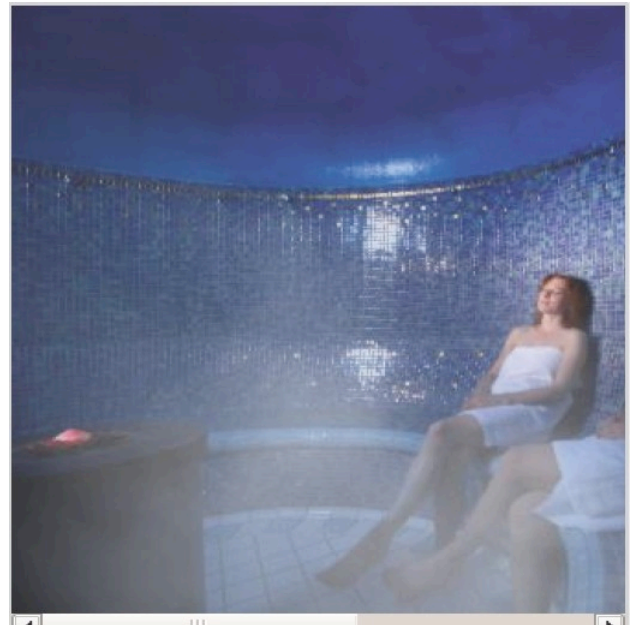
12. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2*

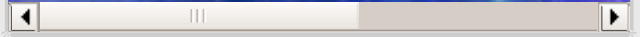
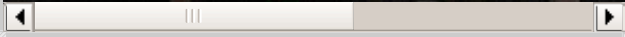




Mli·hill·iii Min. answers = 2 (if answered) Max. answers = 2 (if answered)

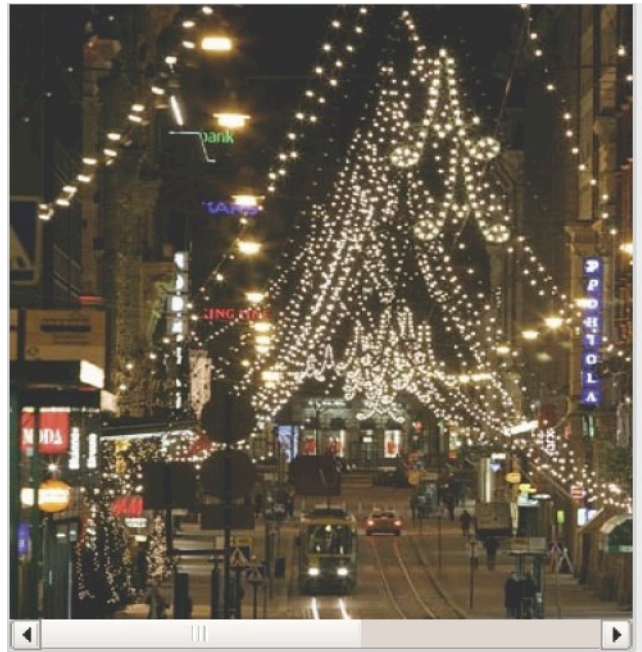
13. Which of the images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2 *

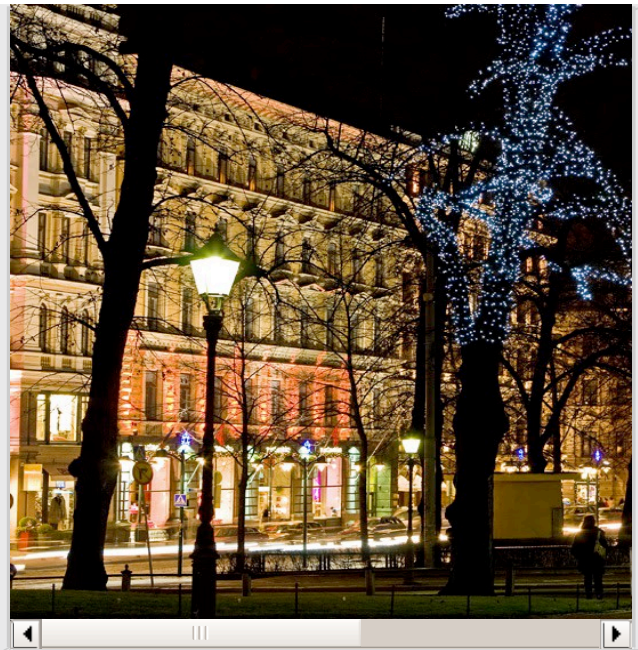
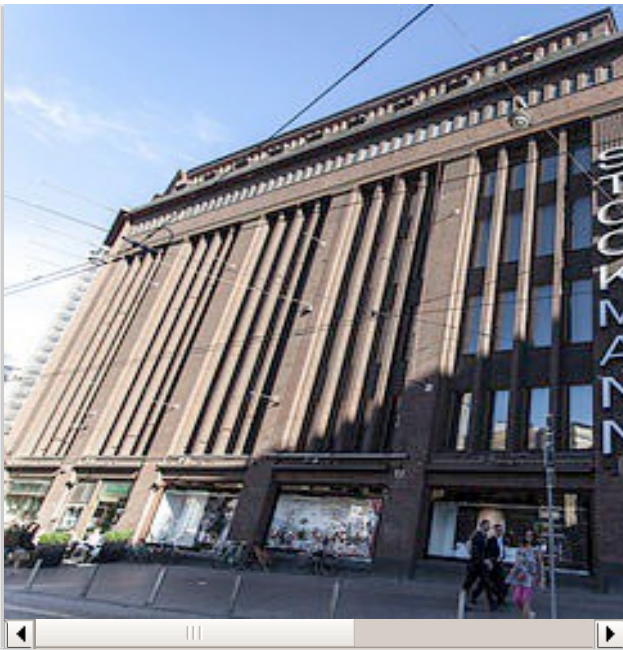




i%4!.7dll.ii Min. answers = 2 (if answered) Max.answers= 2 (if answered)

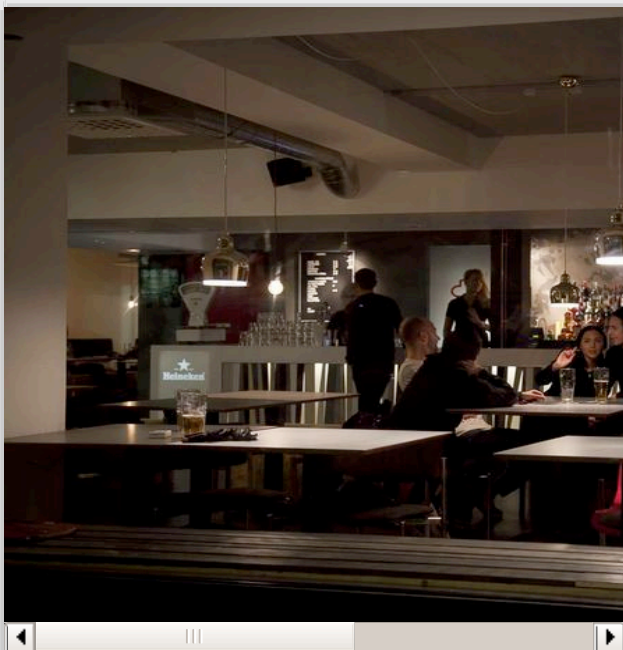
14. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2. *





Acouplemorequestions...

15. If Visiting Visit Finland's VK Community page, which one of the images would you prefer to see? *

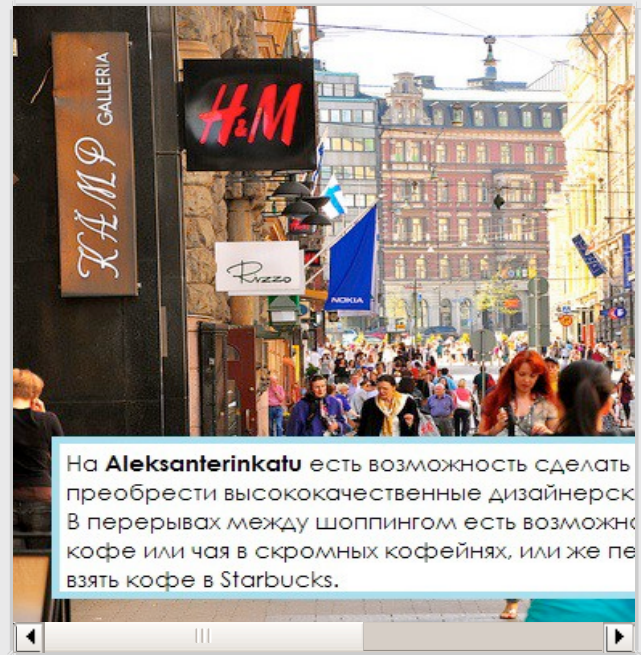
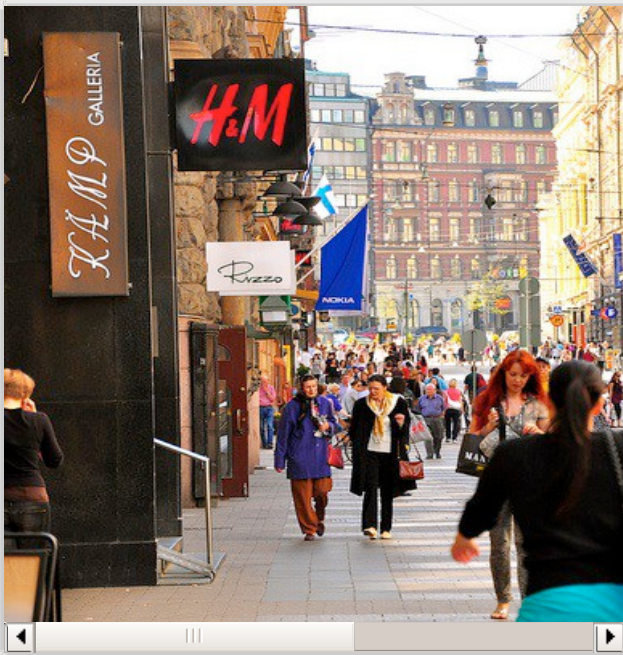


Sandro

Ресторан Изобретательной Кухни в Марокканском Стиле

В соответствии с голосованием газеты City Lehti, Sandro - лучший ресторан года. Заведение предлагает как аппетитное меню A'la Carte, так и доступные и не менее вкусные ланчи. Ресторан так же предлагает кейтеринг-услуги для свадеб, корпоративных вечеринок и других праздников.

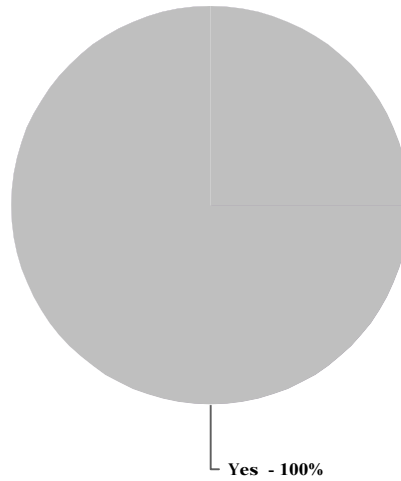
16. If Visiting Visit Finland's VK Community page, which one of the images would you prefer to see? *



Thank You!

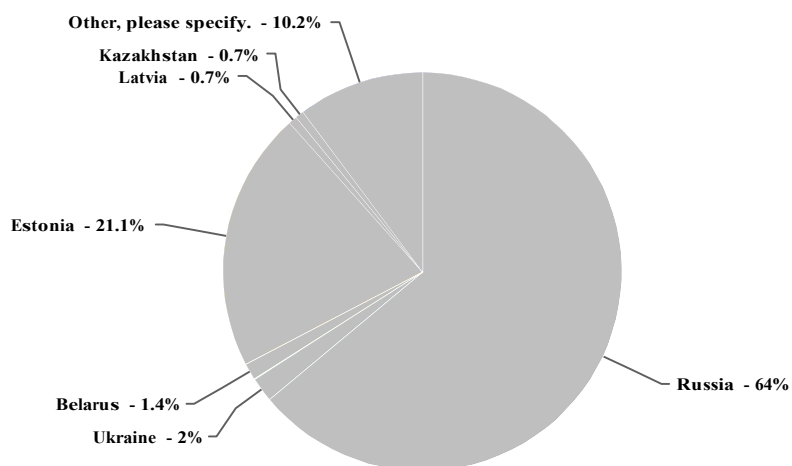
Thank you for taking our survey. Your response is very important to us.

1. Are you a VK.com user?



Yes	100.0%		147
No	0.0%		0
Total			147

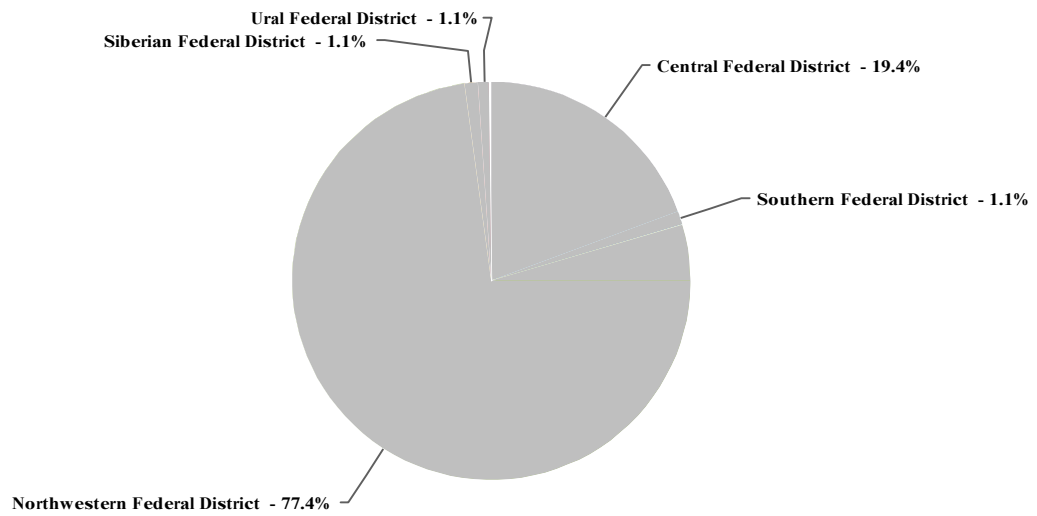
2. Where are you from (Nationality)?



Russia	64.0%	
Ukraine	2.0%	

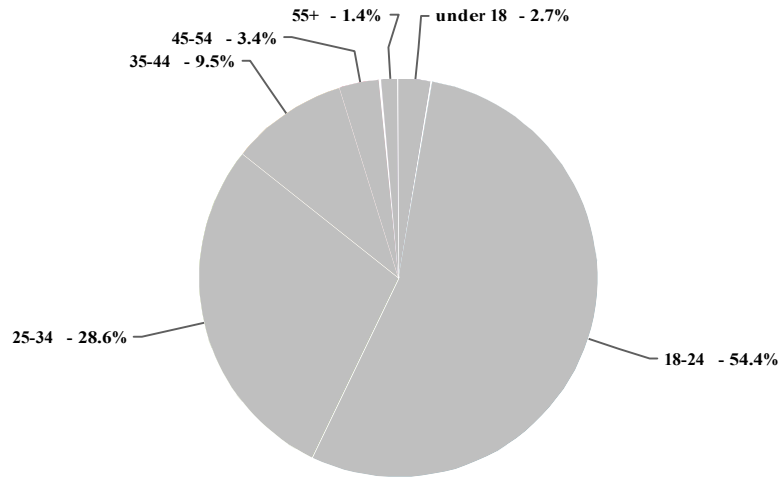
Belarus	1.4%		2
Estonia	21.1%		31
Latvia	0.7%		1
Kazakhstan	0.7%		1
Lithuania	0.0%		0
Uzbekistan	0.0%		0
Other, please specify.	10.2%		15
Total			147

3. Which Federal District of Russia are you from?



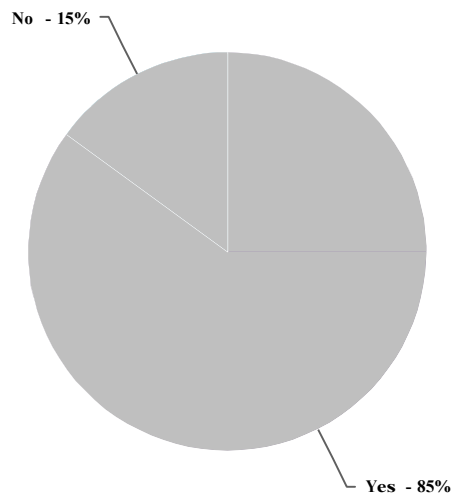
Central Federal District	19.4%		18
Southern Federal District	1.1%		1
Northwestern Federal District	77.4%		1
Far Eastern Federal District	0.0%		0
Siberian Federal District	1.1%		1
Ural Federal District	1.1%		1
Volga Federal District	0.0%		0
North Caucasian Federal District	0.0%		0
Crimean Federal District	0.0%		0
Total			93

4. How old are you?



under 18	2.7%		4
18-24	54.4%		8
25-34	28.6%		
35-44	9.5%		14
45-54	3.4%		5
55+	1.4%		2
Total			147

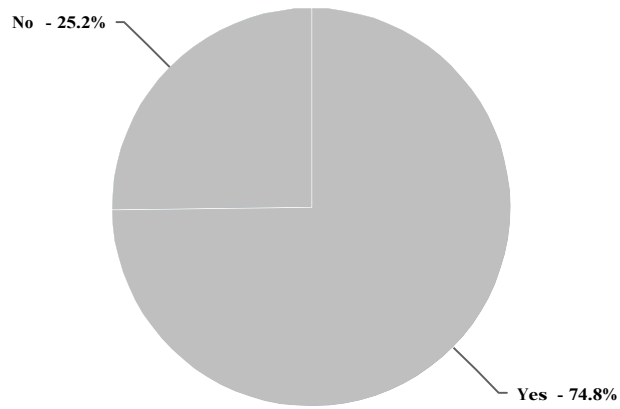
5. Have you travelled to Finland?


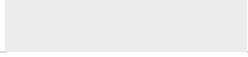


Yes	85.0%		125
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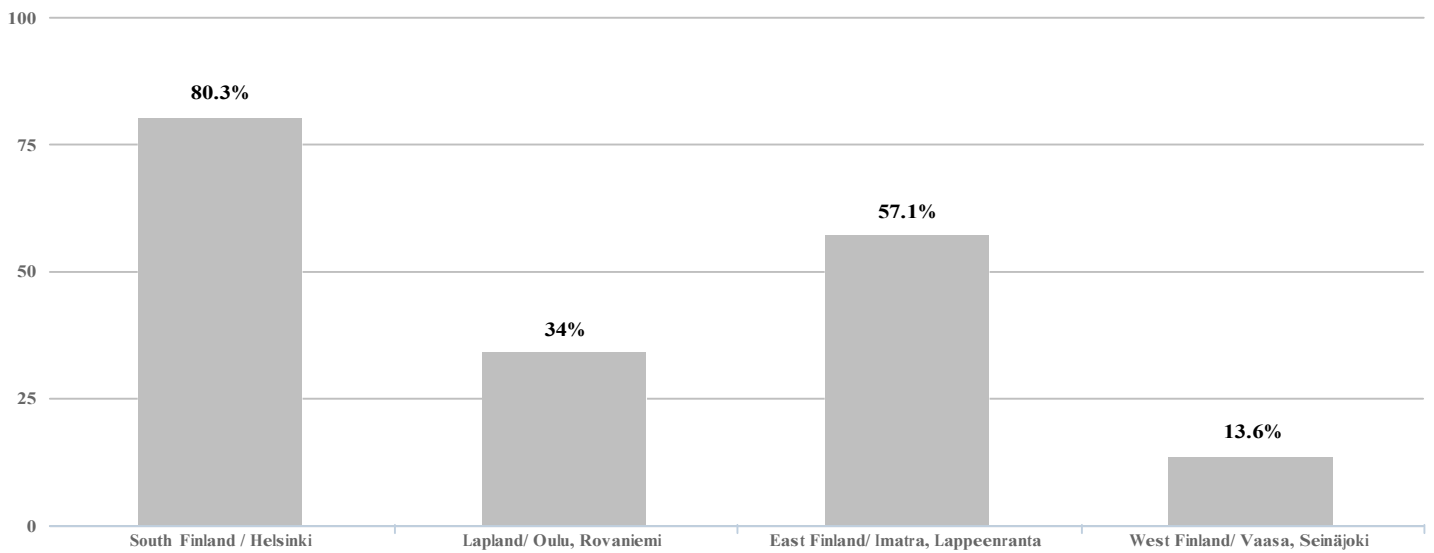
No	15.0%		22
Total			147

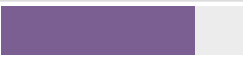

6. In the near future, are you planning to travel to Finland?



Yes	74.8%		110
No	25.2%		37
Total			147

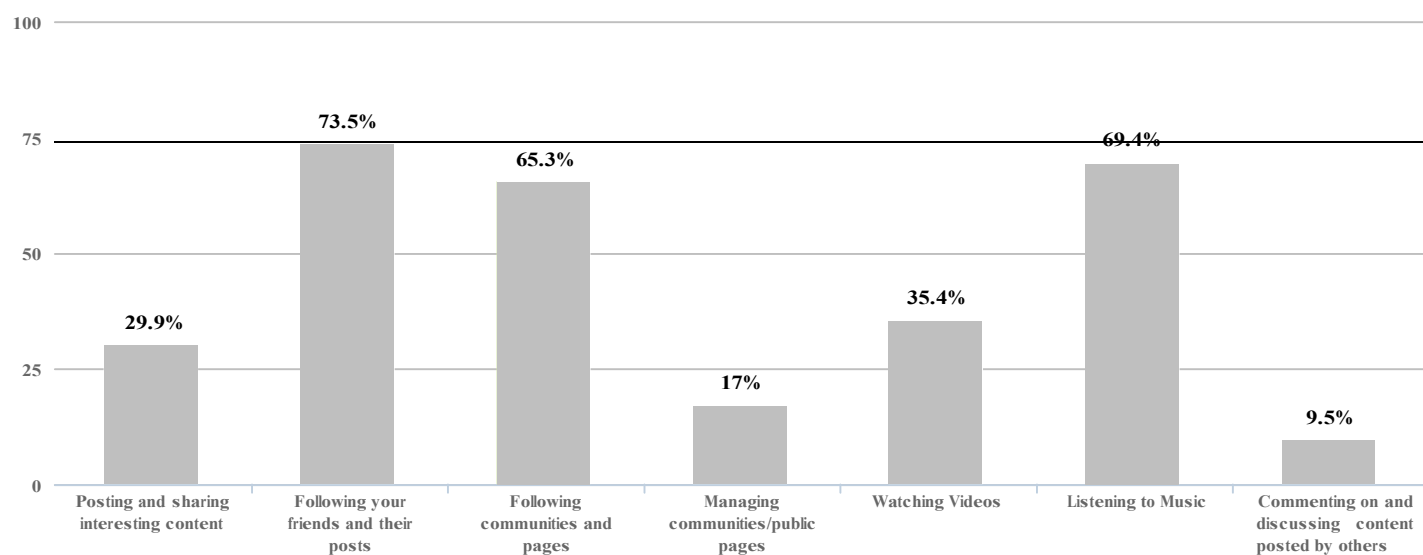
7. Please tick the destinations you have visited and/or would like to Visit in Finland.



South Finland / Helsinki	80.3%		118
Lapland/ Oulu, Rovaniemi	34.0%		50

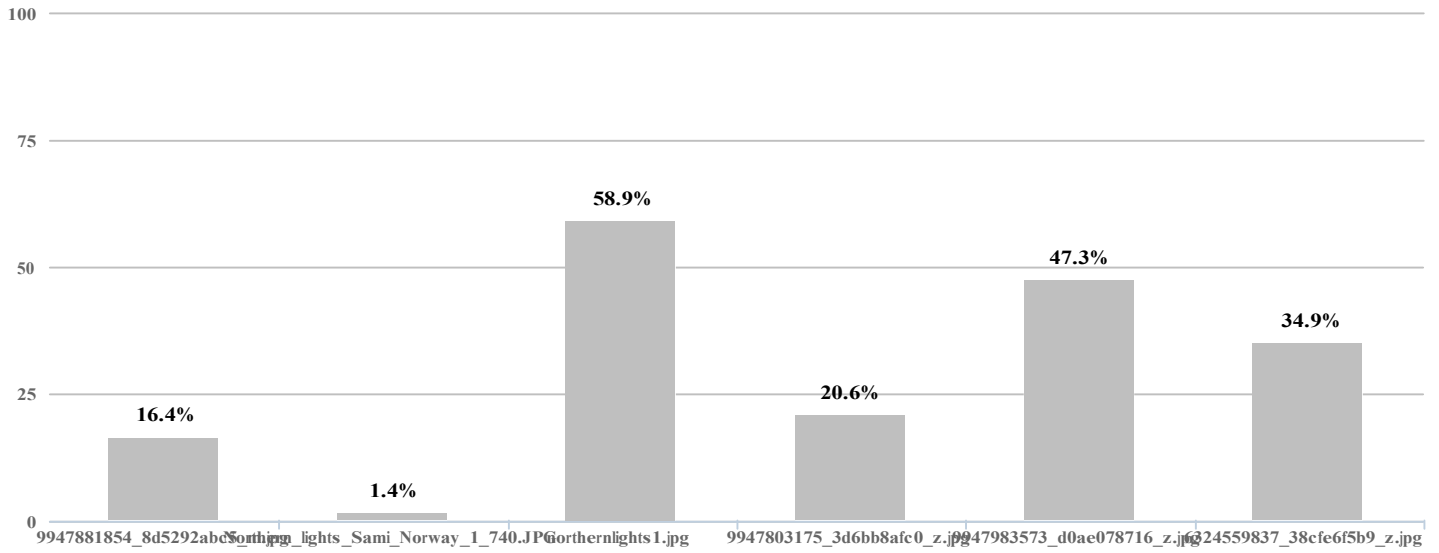
East Finland/ Imatra, Lappeenranta	57.1%		
West Finland/ Vaasa, Seinäjoki	13.6%		20
		Total	147

8. When you browse VK.com, what are your main activities? Pick three.



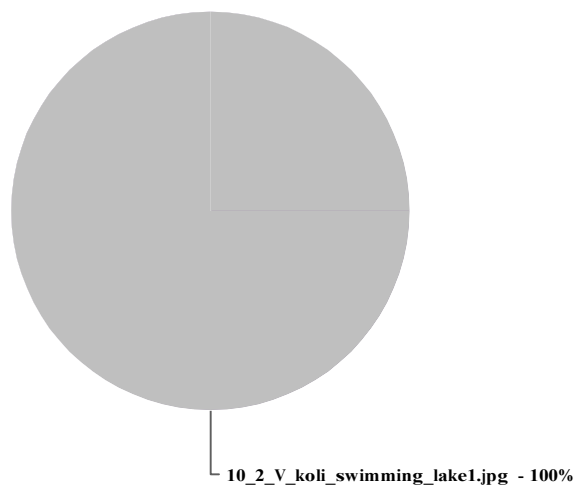
Posting and sharing interesting content	29.9%		
Following your friends and their posts	73.5%		
Following communities and pages	65.3%		
Managing communities/public pages	17.0%		25
Watching Videos	35.4%		
Listening to Music	69.4%		
Commenting on and discussing content posted by others	9.5%		14
		Total	147

9. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2.



9947881854_8d5292abc5_m.jpg	16.4%		24
Northern_lights_Sami_Norway_1_740.JPG	1.4%		2
northernlights1.jpg	58.9%		
9947803175_3d6bb8afc0_z.jpg	20.6%		30
9947983573_d0ae078716_z.jpg	47.3%		
6324559837_38cfe6f5b9_z.jpg	34.9%		
Total			146

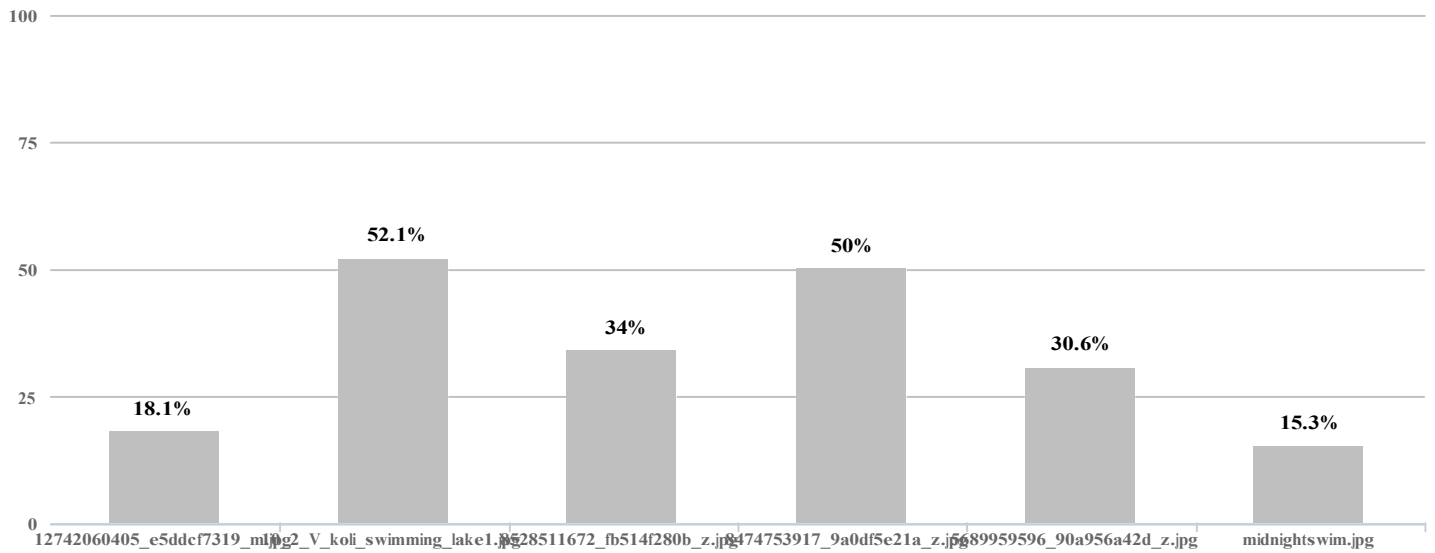
[OLD VERSION] Which of the images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 4.



12742060405_e5ddcf7319_m.jpg	0.0%		0
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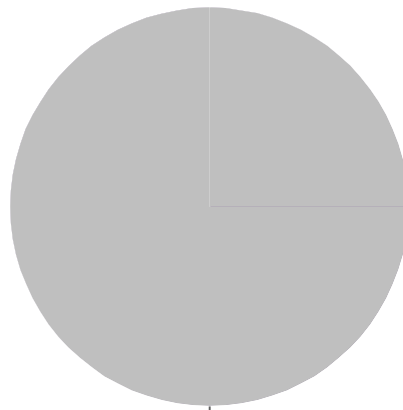
10_2_V_koli_swimming_lake1.jpg	100.0%	<div style="width: 100%; height: 15px; background-color: #663399;"></div>	2
8528511672_fb514f280b_z.jpg	0.0%	<div style="width: 0%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	0
8474753917_9a0df5e21a_z.jpg	0.0%	<div style="width: 0%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	0
5689959596_90a956a42d_z.jpg	0.0%	<div style="width: 0%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	0
midnightswim.jpg	0.0%	<div style="width: 0%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	0
Total			2

10. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2.



12742060405_e5ddcf7319_m.jpg	18.1%	<div style="width: 18.1%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	26
10_2_V_koli_swimming_lake1.jpg	52.1%	<div style="width: 52.1%; height: 15px; background-color: #008080;"></div>	
8528511672_fb514f280b_z.jpg	34.0%	<div style="width: 34.0%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	
8474753917_9a0df5e21a_z.jpg	50.0%	<div style="width: 50.0%; height: 15px; background-color: #ff8c00;"></div>	
5689959596_90a956a42d_z.jpg	30.6%	<div style="width: 30.6%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	
midnightswim.jpg	15.3%	<div style="width: 15.3%; height: 15px; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>	22
Total			144

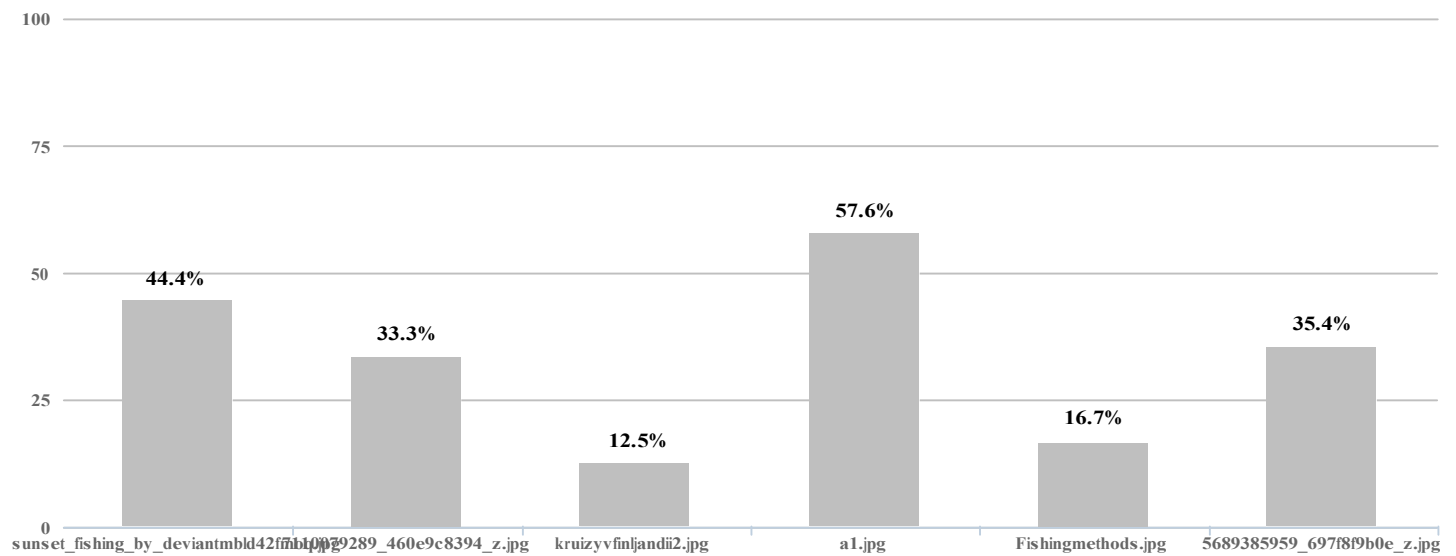
[OLD VERSION] Which of the images would you "like" in VK.com? Pick 4.



sunset_fishing_by_deviantmbld42fmoq.jpg - 100%

sunset_fishing_by_deviantmbld42fmoq.jpg	100.0%		1
7110079289_460e9c8394_z.jpg	0.0%		0
kruizyvfinljandii2.jpg	0.0%		0
a1.jpg	0.0%		0
Fishingmethods.jpg	0.0%		0
5689385959_697f8f9b0e_z.jpg	0.0%		0
Total			1

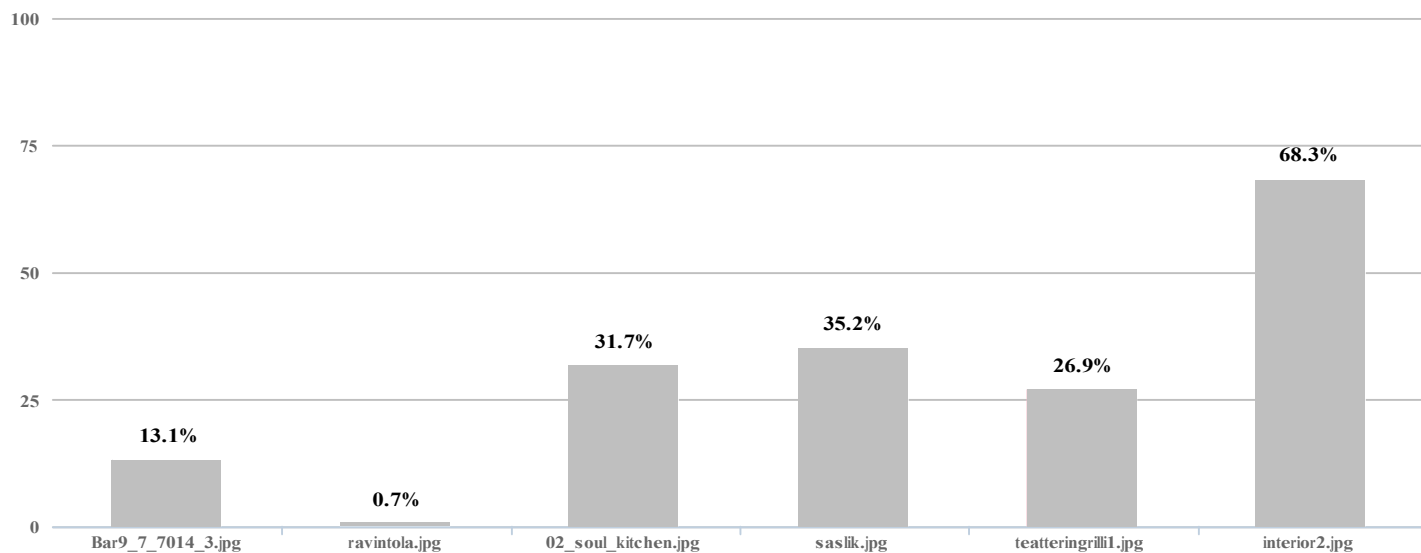
11. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2.



sunset_fishing_by_deviantmbld42fmoq.jpg	44.4%		64
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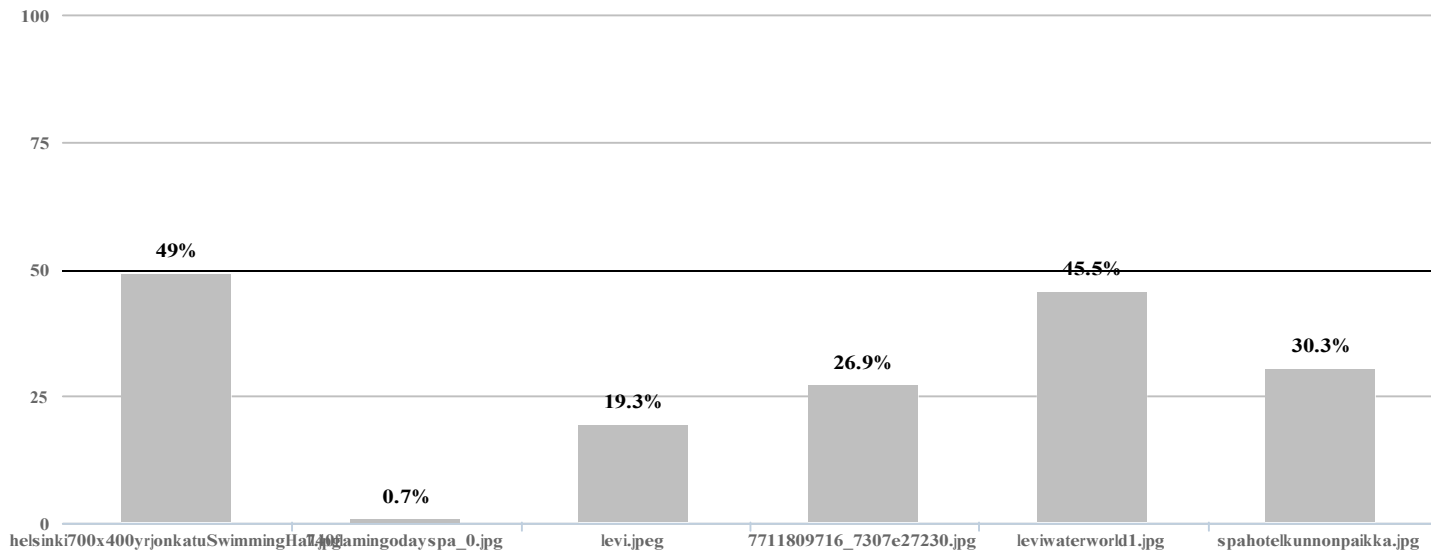
7110079289_460e9c8394_z.jpg	33.3%		
kruizyvfinljandii2.jpg	12.5%		18
a1.jpg	57.6%		
Fishingmethods.jpg	16.7%		24
5689385959_697f8f9b0e_z.jpg	35.4%		
Total			144

12. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2



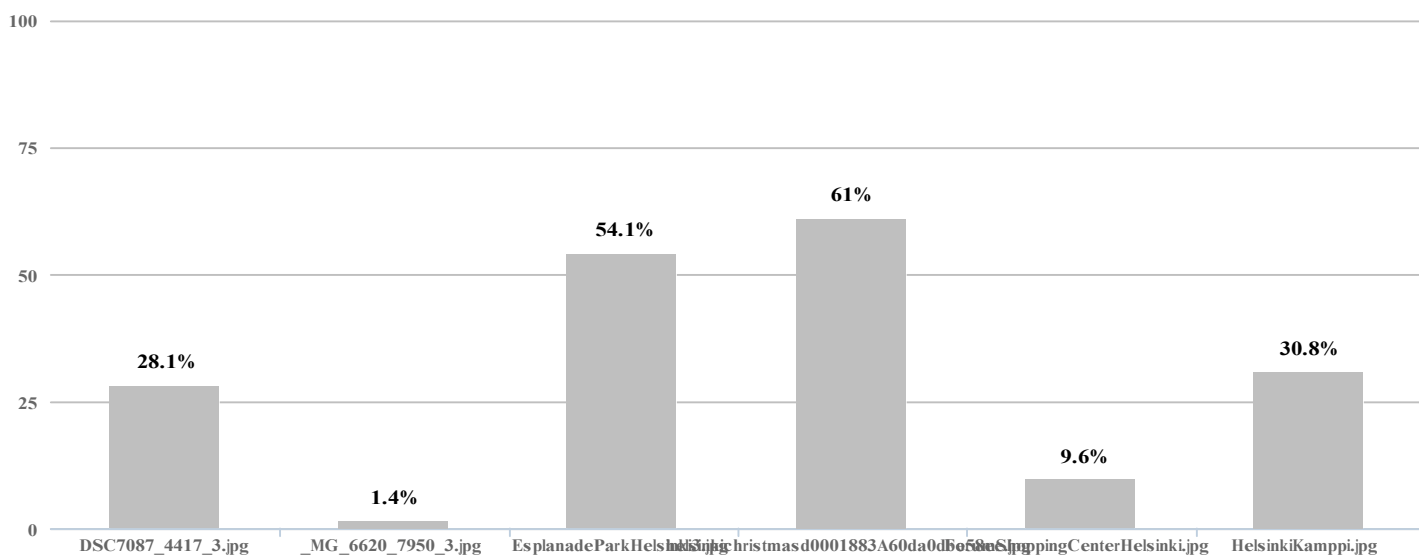
Bar9_7_7014_3.jpg	13.1%		19
ravintola.jpg	0.7%		1
02_soul_kitchen.jpg	31.7%		
saslik.jpg	35.2%		
teatteringrilli1.jpg	26.9%		39
interior2.jpg	68.3%		95
Total			145

13. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2



helsinki700x400yrjonkatuSwimmingHall.jpg	49.0%	
740flamingodayspa_0.jpg	0.7%	1
levi.jpeg	19.3%	28
7711809716_7307e27230.jpg	26.9%	39
leviwaterworld1.jpg	45.5%	
spahotelkunnonpaikka.jpg	30.3%	
Total		145

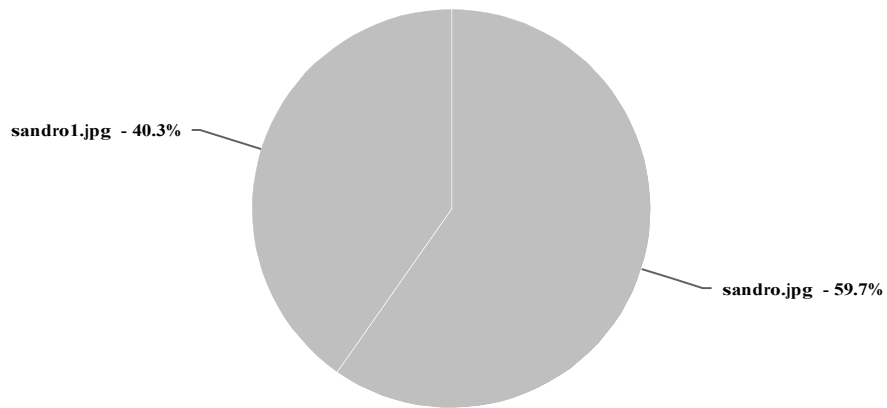
14. Which of the Images would you "like" in VK.com? Please choose 2.



DSC7087_4417_3.jpg	28.1%	41
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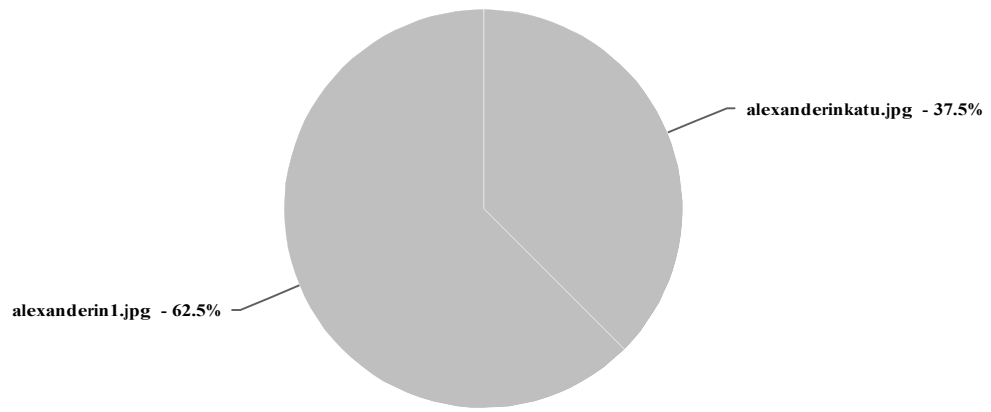
_MG_6620_7950_3.jpg	1.4%		2
EsplanadeParkHelsinki3.jpg	54.1%		
helsinki christmas d0001883A60da0dbe58ee.jpg	61.0%		
ForumShoppingCenterHelsinki.jpg	9.6%		14
HelsinkiKamppi.jpg	30.8%		
Total			146

15. If Visiting Visit Finland's VK Community page, which one of the images would you prefer to see?



sandro.jpg	59.7%		8
sandro1.jpg	40.3%		
Total			144

16. If Visiting Visit Finland's VK Community page, which one of the images would you prefer to see?



alexanderinkatu.jpg	37.5%	
alexanderin1.jpg	62.5%	
Total		144