

Utilising virtual reality technology in tourism

Case: South Karelia region

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Abstract

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Title of the thesis Utilising virtual reality technology in tourism Case: South Karelia region		
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Abstract <p>This thesis is a qualitative design-based case study, implemented in collaboration with destination management company goSaimaa, in South Karelia.</p> <p>The goal of the study was to create a plan of implementation that utilises virtual technology, storytelling and brand image of Lake Saimaa in order to create an impressive and unique experience for Central European tourists. This product should create a competitive advantage that would enable the South Karelia region to promote itself and attract new Central European tourists to compensate for the recent decline in the number of foreign tourists.</p> <p>The theoretical part includes current state of tourism in Finland, in South Karelia and the concepts of experience, storytelling, brand and virtual technology. The empirical part consists of five theme interviews with tourism and virtual technology professionals.</p> <p>The plan of the implementation was developed with double diamond design process and the modelling was blue printed with interviewees. Feedback was reviewed and utilised. The final implementation is analysed with SWOT analysis.</p> <p>GoSaimaa may evaluate if this plan will be utilised in near future.</p>		
Keywords experience, storytelling, brand, virtual technology, destination marketing		

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Marketing a tourist destination has the challenge of convincing the consumer about the product when the product for sale is intangible (Griffin et al. 2023, 120). Important factor affecting the tourism industry is visitors' experience orientation. Customers expect to achieve more; they are thirst for experiences. This was recognised more than a decade ago when pioneers of experience stated this:

Goods and services are no longer enough (Pine & Gilmore 2011, preview to the updated Edition).

Customer experience affects directly to the success of the business, particularly in tourism industry, state Stickdorn & Schwarzenberger (2016, 261).

The destination image is formed both by the information provided by the promotion and by the emotions it evokes in consumers. An attractive destination image makes customers imagine themselves visiting the destination, which creates a bond between the consumers and the destination. Especially, the immersiveness of the marketing positively affects the destination image and the willingness to buy the service. (Echtner & Ritchie 1991; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier 2009; Van Kerrebroeck et al. 2017; according to Griffin et al. 2023, 120-121.)

Storytelling is an effective tool for destination marketing organizations. Storytelling shapes the destination brand image and offers possibility to enhance the experiences in destination. Also, storytelling strengthens the relationship between the destination and customers by generating emotional commitment. (Pachucki et al. 2022; Moin et al. 2020; Stienmetz et al. 2021; according to Jo et al. 2022, 14.)

Digital transformation has a comprehensive impact on people's lives at work and leisure. Advanced information and communication technology has fundamentally changed many functions in the tourism industry and, for example, purchasing decisions are increasingly based on marketing on digital platforms, such as social media. (UNWTO; Kane et al. 2015, according to Imtiaz & Kim 2019, 91-92.) Development of virtual technology has been very fast and it progressively offers possibilities in businesses in tourism industry. Both destination marketing, and experiences creation may benefit of new technology. (Tussyadiah et al. 2018; Bogicevic et al. 2019; Skard et al. 2021; Flavián et al. 2021; according to De Lurdes Calisto & Sarkar 2024, 1).

In recent years, there have been many difficulties in running the tourism business around the world. Global warming and awareness of negative impacts of consumption on a local society has reduced tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic and world political changes have affected the tourism industry worldwide. Some coincidences have affected the tourism industry, especially in Finland, in the South Karelia region. After COVID-19, in 2023, the domestic travel business in Finland has revived, but exports of tourism are not even near the level before the pandemic.

In this study the partner company is a destination management company goSaimaa. Katja Vehviläinen (2024), director of goSaimaa, states two things: Firstly, the South Karelia region has a lot of potential to increase the number of foreign tourists, and secondly, it is crucial to make up for the lack of international visitors, caused by market changes and geopolitical crisis of recent years. Growth-promoting measures are being sought. Modern virtual technology interests and the wish of the partner company goSaimaa is also to solve out is the virtual technology really what is demanded or is it just a well-sold idea of technology companies.

The main goal of this study is to draw up a plan for a virtual experience in South Karelia region that utilises the most suitable environment in South Karelia; storytelling, which is strengthened by brand image. This experience should attract especially international tourists from Central Europe.

1.2 Justification of the study

Justification for the study is examined in the following two sub chapters. The justification is viewed from the point of view of Finnish tourism, but especially from needs of South Karelia destination.

1.2.1 The state of tourism in Finland and in South Karelia

Visit Finland, the umbrella organization for promotion of the tourism in Finland, executed *The Tourism Industry Report 2023*, which reveals that foreign tourists were reduced by 70 percentage in Finland because of the COVID-19 pandemic in the years 2020-2021, compared to the year 2019, which is considered as the baseline.

The recovery of domestic tourism has grown as expected or even better, but the number of international tourists is still below the numbers of year 2019. In 2023, there were 81,4 percentage foreign tourists compared to year 2019. (Visit Finland b, 5-7.)

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started in 2022 (Ulkoministeriö), has affected the tourism industry both directly and indirectly: In 2019, there was a total 820 222 Russian visitors in Finland. In year 2023 the number of Russian visitors in Finland was only 4,9 percentage of the 2019 figure. Indirect effects include for example these symptoms: numbers of Asian tourists have decreased, costs of energy have risen, the profitability of companies has weakened, and the prohibition of overflights in Russia has hanged flight schedules and made some flights more expensive. (Visit Finland b, 5-7.) The change in tourism in Finland is illustrated in Figure 1.

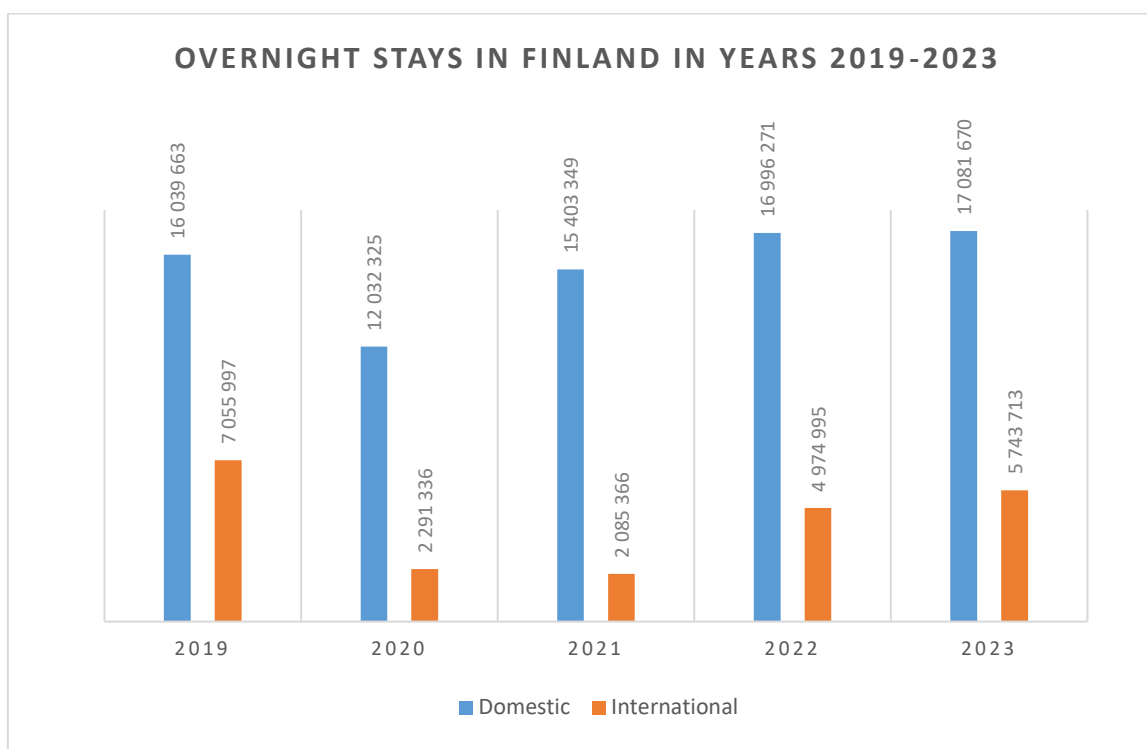


Figure 1. Domestic and international overnight stays in Finland in the years 2019-2023 (Visit Finland c)

In South Karelia, in 2019 which is the reference year to normal, there was registered domestic overnight stays 514 202 pcs and foreign tourists 235 516 pcs. About three quarters of foreign tourists were from Russia. The next most visitors were from Thailand, Germany, Estonia, and Sweden. Also, Italy was in top10 listing in year 2019. (Visit Finland c.)

In 2020 the economy of tourism collapsed because of start of Covid-19 pandemic. According to Ministry of labor and economy of Finland (2022) in South Karelian region the drop in tourism demand was 42 percent. The pandemic influenced to numbers of visitors also in years 2021-2022.

The current state of tourism is basically the same as in Finland as a whole: domestic tourism has recovered and even surpassed the year 2019, but international tourists are missing. The number of foreign tourists staying overnight in South Karelia in 2023 was only 15,5 percentage of the year 2019. There has been no relatively similar recovery in international tourism in South Karelia, compared to Finland as a whole, which can be seen in Figure 2.

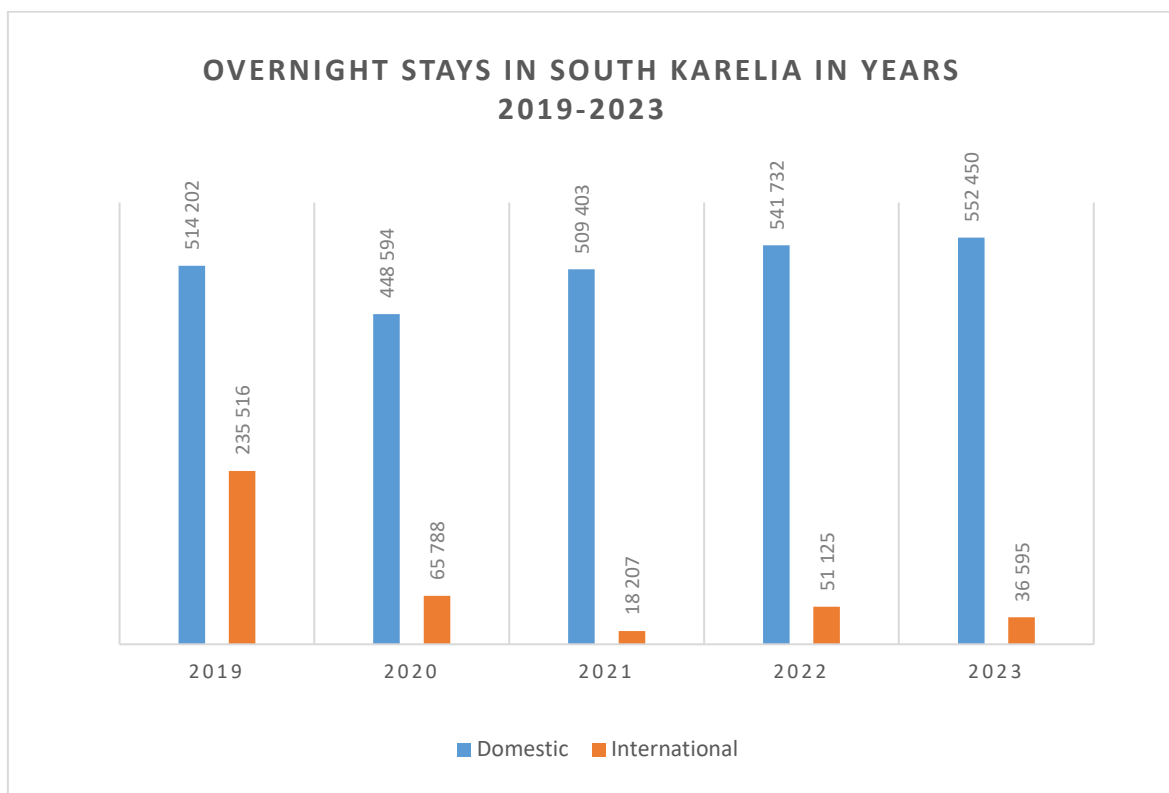


Figure 2. Domestic and international overnight stays in South Karelia from 2019 -2023 (Visit Finland c)

In 2022 the Russian invasion to Ukraine and closing the border between Finland and Russia prevented the recovery of Russian tourism to Finland. The decrease of Russian tourists affects especially regions near the border, meaning also South Karelia region. Since the share of Russian tourists in South Karelia region among international tourists were earlier even 75 percent, the recovery of international tourism will presumably not happen as quickly as in elsewhere in Finland.

It is noteworthy that figures of year 2023 after completion are even worse than year before, because in 2022 the Russian boarder was opened for two months, which increased the number of Russian tourists in that year (Vehviläinen 2024). The Figure 3 illustrates the change of Russian tourism in South Karelia in years 2019-2023.

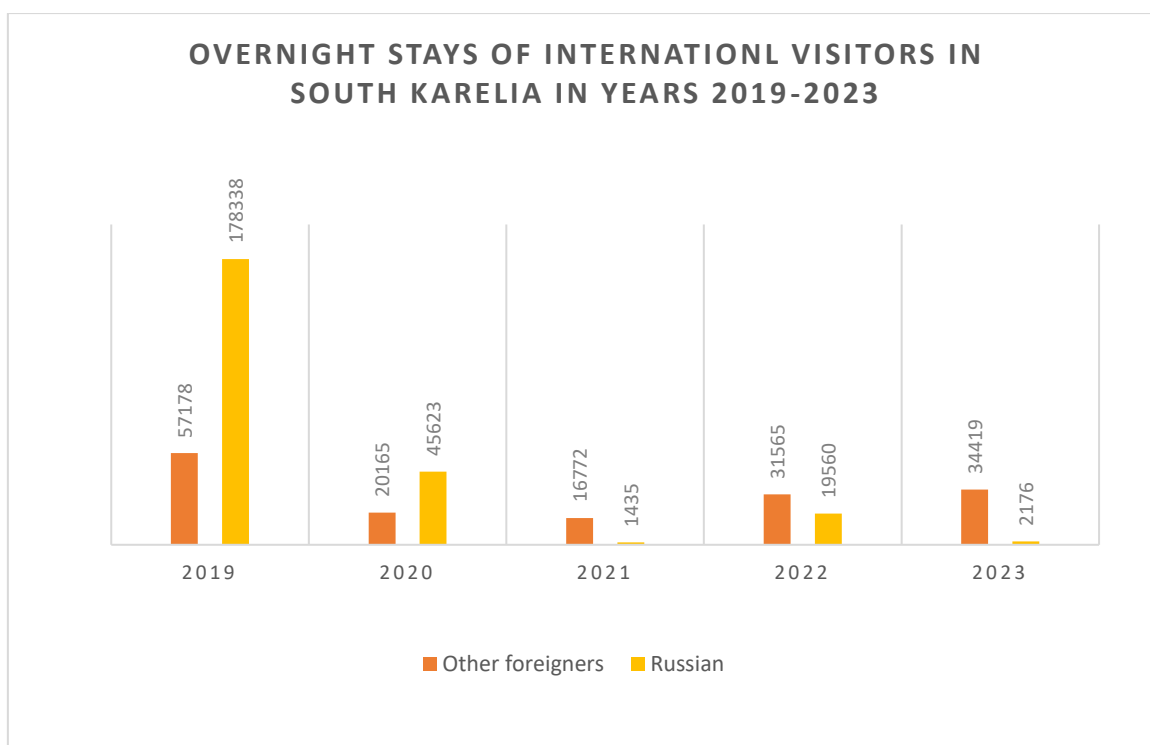


Figure 3. Russian and rest international overnight stays in South Karelia from 2019-2023. (Visit Finland c)

1.2.2 Future prospects of tourism in Finland and in South Karelia

According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the tourism industry is very important for the economy. Tourism business employs many people. It brings incomes to the economy and works as a key factor to improve and maintain local culture and heritage. OECD (2020, 15-16) lists *digital revolution* as a key driver to growth in tourism industry and Ministry of Economic Affairs (2023) estimates that in 2028 the tourism incomes in Finland is €20 billion.

Strategy of Visit Finland (2021-2025) details the core mission: promoting the interestingness of Finland in international markets as a sustainable and tempting destination and help companies in tourism industry to grow internationally and sustainably. The vision of Visit Finland is that Finland is going to be the best destination in world in among sustainable tourism industry and to ensure this, Visit Finland has created a program “Sustainable travel Finland”. By following the program, companies and destinations can achieve competitive advantage. (Visit Finland 2023a; Visit Finland 2024a.)

Visit Finland arranged a workshop in December 2020 to vision the future of travel industry. Values sustainability, but also digitalization and individuality were seen as key drivers in tourism industry, by the year 2030. (Business Finland 2024.) Also, OECD lists “digital revolution” as a key driver to growth in tourism industry. (OECD 2020, 15-16.)

The assumption of the potential growth of tourism targeted to Finland is supported by the statistics, according to which, online searches worldwide, including the word “Finland”, have increased by 13 percentage on the timeline Jan-Jun 2023, compared to the same period in year 2022 (Visit Finland 2023b). The data reveals that German and Swedish tourists are most active international travelers heading to Finland. Also, tourists from France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and USA have overnights in January-September 2023 in Finland more than before the pandemic. Lapland is the most attractive and appealing destination in Finland for foreign tourists and for example the winter season 2023-2024 is forecasting 6 percentage growth in international flights. (Visit Finland 2023c.)

According to Vehviläinen (2024) the tourism industry is significant industry for South Karelia region. However, the incomes from tourism industry have reduced from year 2018 to 2022 by 166 million euros and by 600 man-years in South Karelia. In 2022, tourism industry employed 1490 man-years directly and including indirect effects Vehviläinen estimated the number to be about double, as there are many part-time jobs in the tourism industry. In 2022 the incomes collected directly from tourism were 230 million euros, and with indirect effects even 310 million euros.

Seasonal change in demand of tourism is big. According to Vehviläinen (2024) summer season and, also winter season in short periods is doing relatively well. What comes to springtime and autumn, there is a big gap and need to develop the services and need to create demand is big. One of the challenges in tourism business in region South Karelia is precisely too big fluctuation of demand. Events, according to Vehviläinen, is one option to create demand to low seasons. New services in field of accommodation, food and beverage and activity services around the year are needed. As well as attention in existing services like up-to-dates, are needed to be able to succeed at consistent, good service. As a positive attention, Vehviläinen notes that cooperation between entrepreneurs in area has started to grow considerably. This is indeed one of the prerequisites for value-creating service entities.

To succeed in tourism industry South Karelia should manage to tempt new tourists and make them to arrive to destination. Vehviläinen (2024) points that fortunately, there are opportunities. For example, European holiday seasons differs from Finns. Also, Vehviläinen raises the utmost importance the interestingness of tourism supply and attractiveness of the

destination. Also, the ease of comparison and purchase is very important thing in competition compared to other destinations in Finland, even in the whole world. (Vehviläinen 2024.)

Tour operators are interested in sustainability and more often they require that all services have sustainability label in destination. Visit Finland has launched an official program to prove the sustainable operation principle. It is called Sustainable Travel Finland (STF). Vehviläinen (2024) states that all entrepreneurs should take this very seriously and make the effort to achieve this label.

Another condition, in order to be found by tour operators is to exist in digital platforms. There is for example a platform called Visit Finland DataHub where all services are presented. Vehviläinen states:

If the service cannot be viewed and purchased in digital form, practically it does not exist.

According to Vehviläinen (2024) efforts in promotion made by goSaimaa and by entrepreneurs are notable already now: in 2023 there were more German tourists than in previous years and it is obvious consequence of marketing measures that have been accomplished there. In 2023 according to Visit Finland's statistics the top 5 nationalities, travelling to South Karelia were Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland and Great Britain, as you can see in Table 1 (Visit Finland c).

Table 1. Number of visitors to South Karelia from Great Britain, Italy and DACH and Benelux countries in 2023

Country of origin	Number of visitors
Germany	3806
Netherlands	1298
Italy	1272
Switzerland	825
Great Britain	787
Austria	376
Belgium	364
Luxembourg	36

Visit Finland reports in January 2024 that Voigt Travel, a Dutch travel company is organizing charter flights from Rotterdam to Savonlinna in June 2024 (Visit Finland 2024b). This is a concrete fact that supports the assumption that interest toward Lake Saimaa region has already been aroused in Central Europe and objectively, it has many opportunities in the future.

Based on previous, expectations to benefit from tourism industry in South Karelia are justified and inventing modern, experimental services is topical issue right now in tourism industry all over the world.

1.2.3 Previous studies

Virtual reality in tourism industry has been researched in the 21st century from different perspectives a lot. Here are a few examples of those research:

Sussmann & Vanhegan (2000) researched if virtual reality could comprehensively substitute live tourism or only complement the experience. The findings encouraged to offer virtual services for disabled and elderly consumers. Also, the results indicated that virtuality only complements real holiday experiences. Even examiners of virtual technology shared a similar opinion of this issue with average consumers. Gender, age distribution, or other demographic factor in among respondents do not explain the survey results. However, the research support the idea of utilising virtuality in destination marketing as a preconception method. Karlsson (2020) explored VR in sense of marketing and also came to a conclusion that VR helps formulating the preunderstanding about the destination and helps especially in decision making when choosing accommodation.

In a thesis, Krasnov (2018, 31) highlighted how large players such as Coca-Cola or the travel agency Thomas Cook had benefited from virtual advertising in a statistically significant way. Coca-Cola started to use 360-videos part of the marketing and google searched increased by 36%. In the 2010s Thomas Cook brought virtual glasses into travel agency stores and presented virtual videos from exotic travel destinations to consumers. This was successful move and the return of investment was 40%.

Rauscher at al. (2021, 132) examined the same issue and findings were only a bit different: virtual experience could be a substitute for a short escape from everyday life like city tours, for example. According to research, virtual trips could not replace real travel if the purpose of the trip is, for example, hiking or a long, relaxing vacation on a sunny beach.

Adamec (2020) found that virtual reality technology offers a useful method to bring the heritage treasures available for standard tourists. For example museums and exhibitions could

benefit of virtuality and 3D implementations offer an immersive experience for customers; although the immersiveness is not of high standard. Adamec states that lack of user friendliness or poor implementations are bad for the commitment of consumers, and it is essential to continue developing implementations to achieve more beneficial user experiences in the industry.

Heino (2022) aimed to find a way to utilise virtual technology in producing experience in destination Pori, Finland. Heino aimed to clarify what aged people are most interested in virtual experiences in tourism and would they be willing to pay for those. The results pointed out that people aged 35-49 years were most interested in virtual experiences. Roughly a quarter of the respondents was not willing to pay for virtual experiences and destinations that are cultural heritage focused were seen more suitable destination for virtual experience than for example a national park destination.

Certainly, previous studies include same features which also this study processes. However, this study is important because it concerns region South Karelia, where significant virtual experiences have not yet been implemented. The local travel organization's interest in utilizing virtuality in the future also makes the research relevant now. Virtual advertising is easily perceived as an effective way to enhance the appeal of a destination as a travel location, as Krasnov's (2028) study demonstrated with numbers. Since there is a great need to reach international travelers in the South Karelia region, it is essential to explore all possible means to find the most attractive marketing methods. Virtuality is not yet commonplace in the tourism sector, so successfully leveraging virtuality would be a clear competitive advantage. Especially in the field of experience production, it is reasonable to assume that benefits can be gained from virtuality.

1.3 Purpose of the study, the scope and theoretical and empirical limitations

The goal of this study is to draw up an exemplary plan for a virtual implementation which provides an unique and impressive experience in South Karelia, targeted especially to Central European visitors. Storytelling and brand image are defined to be part of that experience.

The plan should be possible to be implemented with the technological solutions that already exist and are affordable to use. Specific technological descriptions are limited outside the scope of the study.

The target audience is Central European customers. Statistics show, that international tourism has not revived in South Karelia and as Vehviläinen (2024) stated, South Karelia needs also international visitors. In South Karelian markets Europe is nowadays naturally growing target, and it is tactical to choose it and work to strengthen the trend.

Secondly, actions are targeted to tour operators because the goal is to gain volume. Tour operators move tourist groups so actions are targeted also to decision makers in tour operators, if possible. This is the reason why this study aims to find an implementation that would serve both experience creation purpose but also destination promotion purpose.

In order to create an effective implementation plan, it is necessary to find answers to the following research questions:

- What is the attraction in South Karelia region that could most probably offer an experience to Central European visitors?
- What technical solutions in virtual reality technology could be useful to produce that experience?
- How the storytelling and the brand image could be utilised in that experience?

This Thesis is a qualitative design-based case study. Qualitative research methods aim to understand and interpret behaviour, experiences, and social phenomena. Methods for searching these complex issues are best implemented through non-numerical data. Qualitative research methods are for example interviews, observations, and textual analysis to unearth deep insights into various phenomena. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5-6.) Qualitative research is useful when existing knowledge about a phenomenon is limited (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2005, according to Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 6).

This case concerns understanding a phenomenon of utilising virtual technology in context of producing an experience in tourism destination in South Karelia in Finland. It has historical, economical, technological, social and cultural features.

The main purpose is to investigate the case in relation to its historical, economic, technological, social, and cultural context. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 115.)

The final goal of this Thesis is to produce a plan of new service. In service design process there has been utilised a Double Diamond Design method, which has been presented more closely in chapter 2.

The data of the framework has compiled from the literature of tourism, virtual technology, and concepts of the experience, brand and storytelling. Internet sites were utilised only when there was no academic material available for this research. The basic information of state of tourism in Finland was accumulated from Visit Finland websites. Basic information of South Karelian tourism was examined by interviewing the director of local destination management organization goSaimaa. Also, some basic information was collected from websites of Visit Finland, goSaimaa and other local organizations.

In order to form an understanding of the needs, wishes and possibilities from the perspective of the service provider and the customers, five interviews were conducted. The interviewees were selected from the tourism industry in Southern Karelia and Finland. One interviewee represented European view of the expectations of tourists. Digital technology and virtual technology professionals were also interviewed.

The interviews were theme interviews. Both common-alike and individual questions were prepared for each interviewee, depending on the professional field of the interviewee.

Thematic interviews comprised several key topics. Interviewees were asked if they had earlier experiences of virtual technology in tourism and how they see the potential of it in the future. The basic service level in South Karelia was observed. The images of the destination South Karelia and Lake Saimaa were analysed. Furthermore, the potential experience factors in destination were explored. The importance of unique experiences, storytelling and brand image were discussed. Finally, the professional of virtual technology were asked tips for good practices for production. Themes are collected to Table 2 below.

Table 2. Themes of the interviews

Tourists' expectations toward destination Lake Saimaa
Previous experiences from virtual technology in tourism
Future thoughts of the virtual technology in tourism
Basic service level in South Karelia
Strengths of the destination South Karelia and Lake Saimaa
Potential experience factors in destination
Thoughts of storytelling and branding in experience production
Applicable practices of virtual technology

The questionnaire was planned for each interviewee separately and those can be found in appendices. All interviews were conducted using Teams or Zooms applications. The interviews were recorded. Duration of interviews ranged from 43 to 90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed. The interview materials were stored securely, and the interviewees are handled anonymously in the research.

The blueprint method was used for testing the plan implementation. All the interviewees were asked for development ideas. This was conducted by email, a month after the interviews.

In summary, this is a qualitative and practice-based case study that explores a relatively unexploited phenomenon of virtual technology in producing experiences, in tourism industry in South Karelia for Central European tourists.

1.4 Key concepts

Key concepts of this study are experience, virtual reality, storytelling and brand. These concepts are briefly explained below.

Experience

Experience is connected to the service or goods. Characteristic to experience is the memorability and ability to create added value for the service or goods consumed. (Pine & Gilmore 2011, 17.)

Virtual reality

Virtual reality (VR) creates a real alike atmosphere by utilising technology like computers, VR-glasses, mobile devices, and electric elements that strengthens the experience (Bilińska et al. 2023, 2; Linowes 2015, 2).

Storytelling

Storytelling is the vivid description of ideas, beliefs, personal experiences, and life-lessons through stories or narratives that evoke powerful emotions and insights (Serrat 2008).

Brand

A brand is a name, terms, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition (American Marketing Association AMA, according to Schindehutte et al. 2008, 169).

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Double diamond design process

Service design is a valuable tool in the service creation process. Quality design aims to produce a service that creates value for both the entrepreneur and customers. One of the models used in service design is the double diamond design process.

The double diamond, launched by the British Design Council in 2004 (Design Council a) is a solution-oriented design method (Saad et al. 2020, Wang 2022, according to Wang et al. 2023). Micheli et al. (2019) note that the double diamond is an excellent tool in finding solutions to complex situations, when there is not only one possible right answer to the problem (Tuli et al. 2023, 1134). According to Tuli et al. (2023, 1134) the method is superior because it utilizes knowledge and views of different stakeholders, including customers when no one alone knows the best solution. The process is described in Figure 4 below.

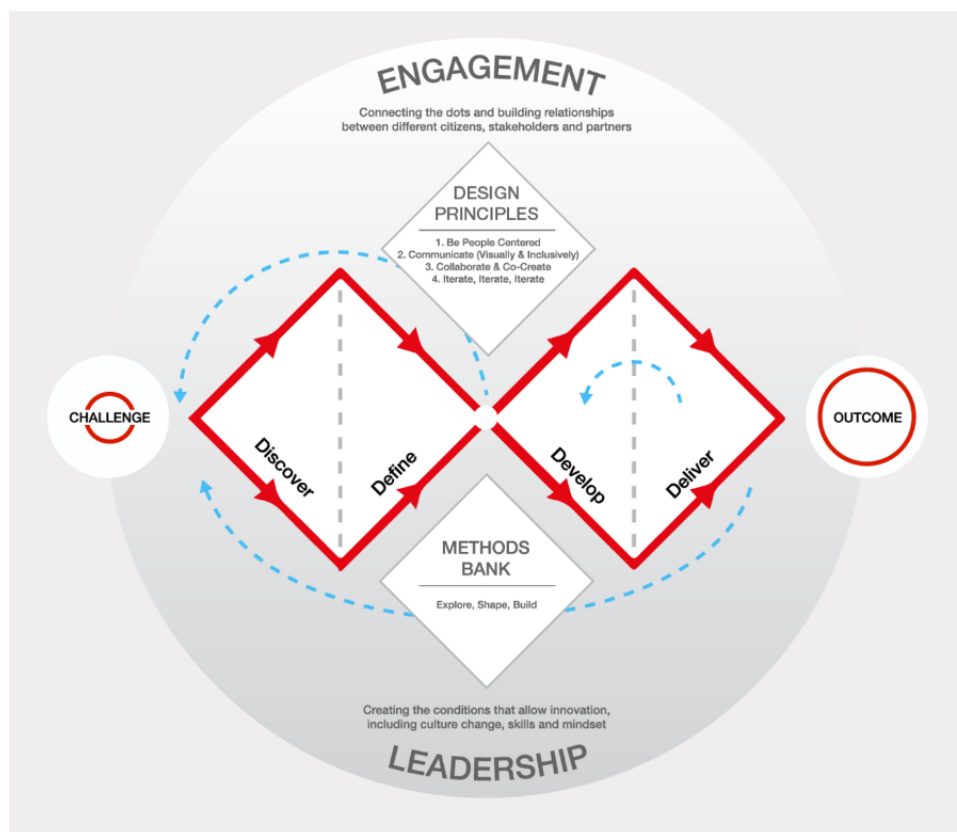


Figure 4. The double diamond design process (Design Council b)

In double diamond process there are two diamonds divided into four different stages. The first diamond symbolizes a method of broadening and deepening the knowledge and understanding of a topic and second diamond represents targeted actions that aim to the realizing the final product. (Design Council c.)

The first diamond concerns phases discovering and defining. Discovering phase identifies the problem and needs to develop the service or need to create something totally new. To understand the phenomenon information is collected and needs of the customers are clarified. The original idea develops further. Based on understanding and inspiration some kind of vision of what is going to be implemented begins to formulate. Beneficial working methods in this phase are for example a diary, user journey mapping and user shadowing. (Design Council, 6-10.)

The second phase of the first diamond is definition. The designer aims to comprehend potentiality, found in the discovery phase. In this phase the most valuable features of findings are distinguished from the others. Usable methods in definition phase are for example brainstorming and design brief.

The second diamond begins with a development phase. The final Implementation is generated, tested, and eventually refined. Through this process of experimentation, the original idea is enhanced and shaped to the form that is possible to implement. Useful working methods in development phase are for example service blueprinting, experience prototyping and business model canvas.

The last phase is launching. Perhaps the last test drives are accomplished in this phase too and feedback from the end customers is collected. This phase may lead back to development phase when customer feedback so demands. Along with collecting feedback scenario creation is a tool to proceed. (Design Council, 6-10.)

The core principles that guide the design process are:

1. People-centered approach. Understanding of needs and expectations of end users is essential.
2. Visuality and inclusive communication. Ensure stakeholders so everyone has a common understanding of the problem and the ideas.
3. Engage in collaboration and co-creation. Get inspired from others ideas; work effectively together.
4. Continuously iteration. Identify mistakes early, minimize risks, and strengthen confidence in your concepts.

The methods bank offers three different tools to identify the problem or the challenge. Those methods are exploring, shaping and building. These tools are adaptable to different needs of users.

In design process leadership is needed. Innovations and strengths of stakeholders need to be utilised determinedly. Engagement, cooperation and working on the ideas together is also essential in design process.

2.2 Experience

To be able to produce virtual experiences it is important to understand the concept of experience first.

Features that create an experience, varies for different persons. Pioneers of experiences, Pine and Gilmore (2011, 45-56) divides experiences to activating or passivating; absorbing or immersing experiences. Along this theory, the experience might include one, or more *realms*, that create the value for the experience and make the experience memorable. In below the experience realms are illustrated by Figure 5.

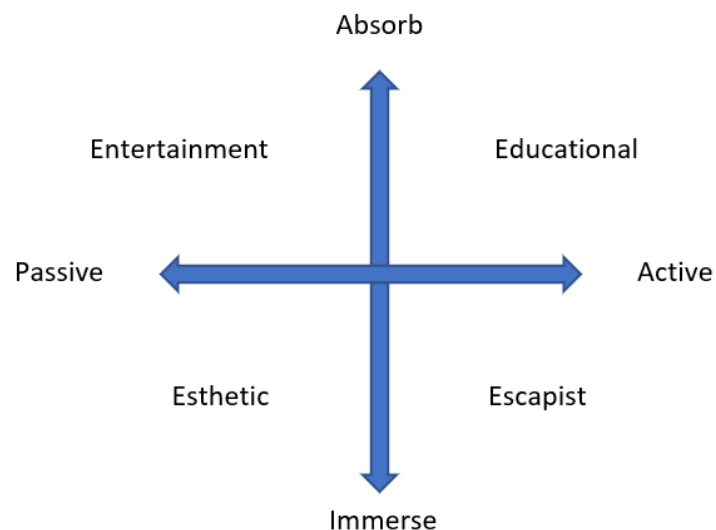


Figure 5. Experience realms (Adapted from Pine & Gilmore, 2011)

Entertainment, in form of art and commercial entertainment is probably the oldest form of experience. In entertainment the goal is to make audience amused while participant may stay passive during the experience. Another passive form of experiences is esthetic realm, in which the participant is just admiring the environment and immersing to the atmosphere.

More active role is achieved in educational realm, in which the participant is actively doing something and absorbing the information or a new skill to themselves. Escapist experiences are most activating experiences. By doing something the participant is immersed comprehensively and detached from everyday life or environment. In Table 3 there are concrete examples of experience realms. (Pine & Gilmore 2011, 47-56.)

Table 3. Examples of four experience realms (adapted from Pine & Gilmore, 2011)

Realm	An example
Entertainment	A concert, stand up show, magician performance, 3-D movie, theatre, light show, and circus
Esthetic	Nature formed landscape like Grand Canyon in Arizona US, human formed beautiful places like Flower park Keukenhof in Holland and virtual versions of these destinations
Escapist	Back to the Future -motion simulator ride in Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida US or some extreme sport experience like white-water kayaking or hiking in wilderness
Educational	Museums like Museum of Unnatural History at 826 DC in Washington D.C. US, 3-D Planetarium exhibition in Heureka, Vantaa, Finland

Travels are usually full of expectations and wishes. Visiting destinations, customers require fulfilment for some personal need or desire that makes the journey meaningful for that certain person (Prebensen et al. 2013, 253). In tourism business it is also worth noting that the customer is often willing to participate to the processes. Grönroos (2006) notes that possibility to be part of the process might add the value of the experience for customer (Prebensen et al. 2014, 1-2.).

Travel experience includes five phases of activities: pre-tour phase, travel to destination phase, time spent in destination phase, returning phase and memorizing afterwards phase. Before the trip, usually at least some issues are planned, and some attractions are decided to be visited during the travel. Information in addition to accommodation, like activities and restaurant recommendations, distances and transportation possibilities between tour objects etc. are needed to be able to make any plans. Experienced traveller finds information probably more easily, but service provider has a great possibility affect to success of the

whole journey of the customer by offering information in addition. (Clawson and Knetsch 1971, according to Prebensen et. al, 2014.)

According to Camilleri (2019, 4) there are four different motivations to travel: Physical motivation covers for example sports, wellness and for fun -travels. Cultural motivation on behalf is interest in history, architecture, or events for example. Personal motivation is for need of changing the environment. Prestige and status motivation is based to professional ambition or for purpose to increase the value of the personal image of their own.

Combining the phases, motivation of the travel and realms of experience there are many different variations of experiences that affects to the decisions making. Like already earlier in this study referenced, Camilleri (2019, 183) points out that virtual technology has lot of possibilities in every stage of the customer journey and virtuality makes these experiences more valuable for the customer.

2.2.1 Storytelling part of the experience

Barthes et al. (1969) claims that the history of storytelling is a continuum that has existed since the beginning of the time until present. Throughout the history, people have shared stories about their lives and the places they have seen in their travels. Storyteller who reflect the love toward the homeland delivers special emotional charge and the listener can identify with the story well and interest in the place is awakened. (Bassano et al. 2019, 10-11.) Myths are accepted in the stories (Guhathakurta 2002, according to Bassano et al. 2019). Story that awakens empathy helps audience to immerse to the story and commit to the target (McKee and Gerase 2018, according to Calvi & Hover 2022, 631).

Storytelling improves the destination image and it offers competitive advantage to reach customers (Bassano et al. 2019,10). Storytelling is a powerful tool to create a memorable experience for the visitors at the spot in destination, but it is also further beneficial when visitors share their experiences and stories to their acquaintances (Gabriel 2000, according to Calvi & Hover 2022, 630-632). Gravili & Rosato (2015) note that storytelling utilising history and the culture of the destination has beneficial effects to the tourist engagement to the destination (Howison et al. 2020, 328).

Storytelling is beneficial in marketing as well; stories are easy to comprehend, and stories are memorable. This makes the dissemination of information effective. (Choi 2014, according to Kim et al. 2018, 2.) According to Walters et al. (2007) when the customer has a truthful pre-understanding of the destination or service, there are lot better possibilities to succeed since the expectations of the tourist toward the service are relevant (Griffin et al. 2023, 121).

Storytelling, according to researchers is shown to be more convincing than plain information when customer makes decision (Ierardi 2021, 23).

Rasmussen (2005) highlights that a customer telling the story about the destination make advertising on behalf of the owners of the business (Howison et al. 2020, 328). Storytelling in traveling business has holistic effects in which interaction leads to increased and shared value through the whole process (Sil 2006, according to Choi 2016, 2).

According to Moin et al. (2020) examiners assert that storytelling improves value of the brand and makes consumers attach to the brand more easily (Jo et al. 2022). Denning (2006) states that customers that tell stories on behalf of entrepreneur or destination generates value for the brand (Howison et al. 2020, 328). The storytelling and the brand are very closely linked, therefore. An interesting finding is that the linguistic differences of the story told by different languages do not change the effect of the storytelling on the listener (Honey et al. 2012, according to Suzuki et al. 2018, 9468).

Digital storytelling differs from traditional storytelling in many ways. The obvious difference is the usage of technology in storytelling production and the concrete storytelling implementation. A digital story remains while orally told story is one-time experience.

Oral storytelling doesn't require so much time beforehand as digital storytelling. A digital script writer may have the opportunity to be more original and create an even more interesting story, and with the help of various digital effects, the story is easier to understand than a story told orally. (Choo et al. 2020, 47-48.)

Effect rich story allows the listener to immerse in the story and become more active participant (Atta-Alla, 2012, according to Choo et al. 2020, 47).

2.2.2 Brand and its influence on the destination image

A brand creates value for the consumer by brand identity, trustmark, experience and story, for example. Customers can create a relationship with the brand out of love and desire, and commitment. The bond between the customer and the brand is built on affection or longing, marked by dedication. A strong brand differentiates the service from others and helps consumer to make purchase decision between different options. The brand gives a warranty of the quality of the service and distinguishes it from the others. Schindehutte et al. states that a brand usually promises something more than the competitor and use superlatives in marketing. (Schindehutte et al. 2008, 169-174.)

Brand image is built up in all stages of the service; on the spot experiencing the service but also in digital channels already before the trip. Brands create emotions and expectations. It

is very important to maintain a coherent image from the beginning of the customer journey to the end of it. The final service should correspond to the image in the beginning. After producing the experience there is still couple of rounds to win. Is the customer returning and how the customer forwards the experience or the service or the destination. If company or destination succeed to manage the brand well it affects positively to the trading and finally also to the customer experience. (Visit Finland a, 9.)

The brand image has a significant role in destination image creation (Kotler & Keller 2016, 32) and in experience image creation (Ierardi 2021, 23). The image of the destination can be divided to cognitive knowledge and affective factors. Cognitive information includes for example the geographical location and cultural heritage. Affective factors, on the other hand are for example the sense of beauty or excitement of the experience. (San Martin & Del Bosque 2008, according to Griffin et al. 2023, 120.) Some researchers have found third factor shaping images, a conative image. That image arises from need of individual person to search for both cognitive and affective information from social media. This same factor wakens up also the need to share own experiences and information in social media. (Agapito et al. 2013, according to Griffin et al. 2023, 120-121.)

According to Moilanen & Rainisto (2008, 111-114), destinations compete of success and often there is no big difference between the destinations. Branding can be utilised in creating different mental images and differentiate from competitors. Branding a destination has unique features because the destination is not owned by one company but operators from various businesses. Another characteristic feature for destination branding is that consumers use many products and services at that certain point and choose those commodities themselves. For this reason, a brand image is made up of several different situations and products from several companies and producers. However, customers evaluate the entire destination, as a whole. In order to create a unified image and an integrated brand, a lot of cooperation must be done.

Generally, it has been thought the brand image of the destination is solely responsibility of DMOs ((Moilanen, & Rainisto 2008, 115). Lately it has been realized that all stakeholders and operators in destination has a role in a complex process of destination branding (Freire 2005, according to Ruiz-Real et al. 2020). Bhat (2004) claims that nowadays both national tourism organizations and private entrepreneurs acknowledge the interdependence of different sectors (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 115).

2.3 Virtual reality

History VR begins in 1950's when a cinematographer Morton Heilig created *The cinema of the future*, an amusement arcade which could show films that stimulated different senses of the viewer. That arcade is considered as a first virtual implementation in the world. In the 1990s, especially videogame companies made effort to publish VR experiences through their products, but technology was not ready for the revolution yet. Some of the products caused health issues and were not launched because of incompleteness. Displays that were attached to head of viewer were unpleasant to use, too expensive and the view itself was not large enough for the purpose. Finally, in 2010 new generation cost effective and ease of use headset *Oculus Rift* was launched. This was a start for commercialization of virtual technology. (Burdea & Coiffet 2003, 3.)

Features of virtual reality are illustrated in Figure 6. Immersion refers to a feeling in which the participant can imagine being somewhere else. Virtual surroundings can be imagined or created based on reality, for example environment of some fairy tale or some authentic geographic destination. Characteristic to all virtual experiences is this immersiveness of the experience. (Mealy 2018, 8-9, 15-17.)

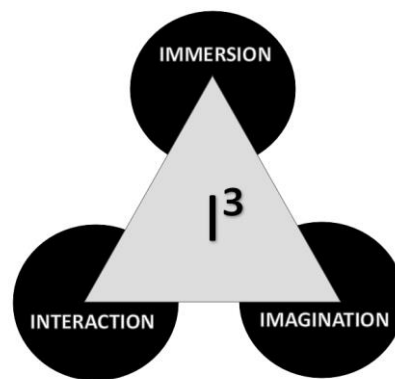


Figure 6. Virtual reality triangle by Burdea, adapted from Burdea & Coiffet (2003)

Purpose of VR is to solve some sort of need or problem and it has been utilised in many fields of industries. The imagination of a human being is in significant role in VR creation and development. Only the imagination is the source of new implementations of VR technology. In virtual reality the interaction is very important feature and feeling of immersion is the goal of the virtual reality. (Burdea & Coiffet 2003, 3.)

There are different forms of virtual technologies to produce virtual content.

Virtual reality (VR) is artificial reality which absorbs the participant so that there is a multi-sensory interaction between the VR and the participant (Burdea and Coiffet 2003, 2-3). Effects that make the immersion happen are for example the view, the sounds and interaction between the virtual implementation and user. A believable environment with equipment suitable for the imagined environment and a sense of touch complete the experience. (Arnaldi et al. 2018, xxiii-xxiv.)

Augmented reality (AR) is one potential feature of VR. It means that a virtual object has been added to the real environment. The object has been created digitally by utilising for example 3D technology. (Bilińska et al. 2023, 2.) That object could be drawn character, a sound or moving image (Mealy 2018, 9.) In these days probably the most common version of AR is in everyday use of some social media consumers as they filter their face and add for example mustache or make the face look like a cat (Tate 2021).

Mixed reality (MR) is also an advanced form of virtual reality and like the term says, it mixes the reality and imagined, artificial objects or parts of environment. (Mealy 2018, 9-11.) For example, human being and artificial object can communicate in MR (Business Finland).

In Finland, in university Haaga-Helia the multisensory, virtual experience is developed and taken into advanced level. The innovation is called *The Box*. The box is closed artificial environment that utilises 3D video, diverse soundscapes, props and scent marketing technology. All features VR, AR and MR are usable in the implementations that are created by The Box. (Haaga-Helia.)

2.3.1 Virtual reality in tourism industry

The history of virtuality in tourism can be thought of as starting from the early days when people saw works of art or heard stories about exotic places. Later the films and television allowed people sense the attractions in more visual form. Real virtual tourism was born in late 1990s with the contribution of the internet. In the 21st century there are already some implementations of virtual tours in museums and in historically significant sites, for example. (Vinnakota et al. 2023, 9.)

Virtuality enables various usable applications for use in the tourism industry. Operations that benefit from VR are for example teaching, service design, commercial purposes, amusement implementations, accessibility, sustainability, and preservation of heritage. Virtual tools have been utilised progressively in the tourism industry to deliver customers an immersive and interactive experiences. A situation where virtuality was the only possible way to travel was realized in recent years, during the Covid-19 pandemic. (Guttentag 2010, according to Bilińska et al. 2023, 2.)

Yenlo, the global specialist of integration in the application programming interface industry, reminds that success is about how companies succeed to transform already existing experiences they produce, into a new form with the help of digital technology. Using digitality because it is a trend of the time is not beneficial without efficiency or experimental aspect. In 2023 Yenlo listed 19 companies that have succeeded so far in digital transformation overwhelmingly beneficially. One of the companies listed is The Walt Disney Company. (Van der Zwan 2023.) Disney has succeeded to develop and deliver their stories and services with help of digital solutions and new services have improved not only efficiency but also experience of customers (The Walt Disney Company 2023).

2.3.2 Benefits and obstacles of using virtual reality technology

VR is a powerful way to effect to willingness to experience something new. VR can trigger eagerness toward some place and affect to purchasing behaviour by leading eventually a customer to book a real journey to some destination. (Moorhouse 2019; Ahn et al. 2019; according to Zeng et al. 2022, 314-315)

In marketing, the digitalization creates trust because of transparency which is characteristic to advanced digital solutions. The trust creates on behalf helps in building committed customer relationships. (Wang 2015, 69-70.) Hautz et al. (2014) points that especially if the producer of media is a consumer the trust to content is strong and the quality of the media is not in big role. If the content is produced with high quality, the origin of it does not matter so much, when evaluating the reliability aspect. (Pasanen et al. 2019.)

It has been scientifically proven that the more advertisement offers stimulus, like picture, sound, moving picture etc, the more effective the message is. This correlation has been named *media richness theory*. (Daft 1983; Daft 1986; according to Pasanen et al. 2019.)

In seeking information and in decision-making phases, VR can be in decisive role when potential customer has possibility to get valuable information but also experience the destination and ambience of it. VR has ability to create authentic sensations in the customer. (Rainoldi et al. 2018, 55.) Loureiro et al. (2020) and Young, & Khoo-Lattimore (2019) note that VR has ability to immerse the participants in the content and make them feel like they are already there (Griffin et al. 2017).

Volgger & Pechlaner (2014) state that the key factor for destination marketing to succeed in competitive international markets is the innovative promotion.

VR can be an option when there is no possibility to travel physically or the ability to travel is limited. This kind of situations are for example busy years of the family, high age, physical

restrictions, or personal weak economic situation in life could affect to ability to travel (Cammilleri 2019, 3). Also, in terms of sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism, virtual tourism is probably the most sustainable form of tourism (Vinnakota et al. 2023, 10).

However, using VR is not rooted fundamentally yet to tourism industry. One reason is the lack of information of VR solutions among the entrepreneurs (Ulrich 2015, according to Pasanen et al. 2019).

3 Tourism industry in region South Karelia

3.1 Basic information about South Karelia

Province South Karelia is located at eastern part of Finland, about 250 kilometers from capital of Finland, Helsinki (googlemaps 2023). South Karelia is located near border of Finland and Russia, and it consists of nine municipalities: Imatra, Lappeenranta, Lemi, Savitaipale, Luumäki, Parikkala, Rautjärvi, Taipalsaari and Ruokolahti. Lappeenranta is the biggest city in South Karelia.

In November 2023 there were 125 269 inhabitants living in province South Karelia. In year 2022 the turnover of all companies in the province were all together M€ 9 882. Employment rate among 20-64 years old employed was 73,8 percentage in June 2023. Gross domestic product were 41 921 euros per person in 2021. (Etelä-Karjalan Liitto 2023.)

The landscape of South Karelia was shaped during the last Ice Age and later by phases of the Baltic Sea. Multiplicity of islands and the formation of Salpausselkä ridges are visible consequences of that geological history. The terrain of the region varies from rough, rocky islands to flat pine forests. In South Karelia there are many significant waterways and smaller lake and river systems. Nearly a quarter of South Karelia's surface is water, aligned mostly with the Vuoksi river basin. (Etelä-Karjalan Liitto 2023.)

South Karelia is located next to Lake Saimaa, and it is tremendous advantage to the region. Nature of Lake Saimaa is unique, clean, beautiful and offers lot of variable landscapes for outdoor activities. This is why the label "Lake Saimaa Purest Finland" has been selected as the umbrella brand of the destination Vehviläinen tells and specify that the brand book of the destination is currently in updating. Unique experiences in the nature, services that reflect South Karelian culture and friendly people offer lot of possibilities to differ from competitors in Finland. Vehviläinen refers to the tourism strategy of a lake Saimaa region: Destination Lake Saimaa could be "the next Lapland" in tourism sector. To achieve that position, destination must recognize the most appealing attractions and those attractions must be promoted distinguishable. Vehviläinen points out that marketing is more and more audio visual and digital. Virtual and augmented reality is new, fascinating possibility that it could give an opportunity to introduce South Karelia region in a way that was not earlier even possible. Technology has not been widely utilised yet in South Karelia but big interest toward it exists. (Vehviläinen 2024.)

3.2 Destination management organisation goSaimaa Ltd

South Karelian municipalities founded a destination management organization goSaimaa Ltd in October 2009. In the beginning, the core mission of goSaimaa was to maintain joint marketing and increase usage of services in South Karelia. Lately the mission has expanded, also the service design is part of that mission. (GoSaimaa.) In the latest years goSaimaa has focused the marketing actions in Finland, Italy and Germany. According to Vehviläinen (2024) the goal is to promote region Lake Saimaa as an interesting and attractive, unique destination.

GoSaimaa has an ongoing five-years strategy for the years 2021-2025. The vision of the strategy is that destination Lake Saimaa, region Lappeenranta and Imatra, will be in the top three desired travel destinations in Finland, with Lapland and capital region. Lake Saimaa is a brand that is a strong leader in marketing. (Vehviläinen 2024.)

The core mission of goSaimaa is outlined as follows: to develop the tourism industry in the region Lake Saimaa and South Karelia; to plan and implement company-led joint marketing targeted to selected markets by utilising digital tools. Target markets according to Vehviläinen (2024) are domestic markets, Italy, Great Britain and DACH countries and Benelux countries. DACH countries are Germany, Austria, Switzerland (WorldCityDB) and Benelux countries are Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg (Benelux Union).

The main goal is to increase incomes from tourism industry in South Karelia. To achieve that, goSaimaa has outlined actions and operations: goSaimaa is heading to gain more tourists visiting to region South Karelia. The ambition is to extend the length of the stays of the tourists. GoSaimaa is helping local companies to network and develop the round year services and packeting the services to ease the sales in digital channels. GoSaimaa aims to promote and grow the demand for charter flights to the region. (GoSaimaa 2022.)

Vehviläinen (2024) states that nowadays there is a significant need for systematic advertising in modern networks and channels. One of those is social media and it needs management. GoSaimaa works systematically to search worthwhile social media influence contacts in target countries. GoSaimaa invites tour operators and media influencers to the destination, arranges scheduled program and presents the most appealing services and attractions in South Karelia so media influencer can get the best out of the tournee and destination gets value for the effort. Ease to book and buy services is one of the terms to be on the tourism market. Also developing these functions is strongly in focus of goSaimaa today. (Vehviläinen 2024.)

3.3 Points of interest in South Karelia

According to Vehviläinen (2024) the most overwhelming advantage in South Karelia is the pureness of the nature in South Karelia and Lake Saimaa; the forests and variable landscapes around it and experiences in the nature. Geopark destination of Unesco in the region appeals tourists. Saimaa seal interest tourists a lot.

There are three wood processing factories on the shore of Saimaa here in Lappeenranta region and still the water in lake is drinkable. This is one important dimension of brand Saimaa. As well as adorable Saimaa seal. (Vehviläinen 2024.)

Saimaa seal is one of the rarest seals in the world. There is alive about 480 Saimaa seal individuals in Lake Saimaa (World Wide Fund for Nature).

Environmental Performance Index lists the Finnish water as the safest water worldwide. Furthermore, Finnish wastewater treatment ranks at the top position. (Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment).

According to Vehviläinen (2024) cycling is on the rise and there is for example an event Saimaa Cycle Tour that brings cycling enthusiasts to destination even from abroad. Music is moving people and event Imatra Big Band is wakened again in this year, 2024.

Vehviläinen tells that safety atmosphere is valued; location is unusually quiet and peaceful. The sauna experience is interesting to foreigners as well. However, the object of interest varies depending on the target group. For example, Germans are more interested in nature experiences on Lake Saimaa and in sauna experience. On the other hand, Italians are more interested in the culture; food and events; manifestation of civilization; the town experience and people.

Food is part of the tourist experience, Vehviläinen reminds. Specialties in South Karelia are for example *Lemin särä* which is traditional meat dish; particularly tender roast lamb, cooked in wooden trough, stewed in wood-burning oven. Simple things are attractive and what is normal for local residents, might be very exotic for foreigners. Vehviläinen tells that for example Mrs. Diane Dodd, the President of Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism (IGCAT), was impressed by stick sausage fried on campfire. This is even everyday summer thing in Finland but for foreigner it was an experience. IGCAT aims to stimulate worldwide local cultures and well-being for example by raising the food culture in center and giving recognition of innovative implementations. Region Lake Saimaa is awarded as "European region of gastronomy" in year 2024. (Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism.)

Vehviläinen (2024) points that this award should be highlighted as much as possible, because it is a significant recognition.

South Karelia has a vibrant, distinctive culture. Friendly talkative, local residents and the style of Finnish living interest people abroad. The Finnish lifestyle as the happiest nation in the world interest visitors. (Vehviläinen 2024.)

Finland is the world's happiest nation according to World Happiness Report which a world-wide wide-ranging poll, published annually and conducted by reliable parties (World Happiness Report 2024).

When asked, what special part of the Finnish life style should be presented to foreign tourists, Vehviläinen excitedly says: *lavatanssit!*

“Lavatanssit” is a Finnish summer tradition in countryside, usually the dancing place is on shore of lake and it is intended only for summer use. Dances are standard couple dances like waltz and foxtrot. A live orchestra with a singer accompanies the dance. People arrive from neighborhood and enjoy the summer evening with music, dance and some refreshments. (Elävä Perintö.)

Vehviläinen (2024) highlights that stories are important part of tourist experience. Local stories and encounters with authentic people can be an experience that will remain in memory. Vehviläinen states:

People remember the stories and the feeling that some happening caused in them.

Finnish culture and history should be raised to new level and promoted too. For example, Region Imatra and Imatrankoski rapids, has been the very first tourist destination in Finland beginning 18th century, is interesting tourist. Architecture of special buildings like State hotel of Imatra and specialties, like sculpture park in municipality of Parikkala interests the tourist. On side the trends sustainability and digitalization are valued. (Vehviläinen 2024.)

4 Design process developing virtual experience in South Karelia

In this study the method used in designing process was Doble Diamond design method. Double Diamond method is flexible process, and it adapts to different needs. This study concerns relatively new phenomenon and there is no one correct answer to the research problem. To this study adapted Double Diamond design method is illustrated in Figure 7 below.

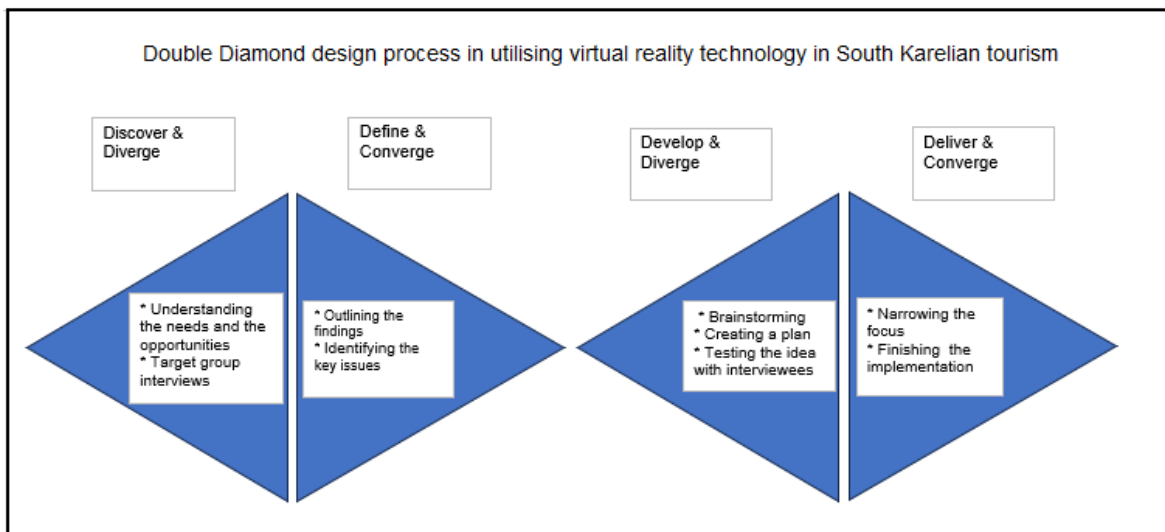


Figure 7. Double Diamond design -model in utilising virtual technology in South Karelian tourism (Adapted from Design Council, 2015)

4.1 Discovery phase

In this study, in discovering phase the state of tourism was examined from perspective of the whole Finland and South Karelia through statistics, and by interviewing Mrs. Vehviläinen from target company goSaimaa.

The framework, the concepts of experience, storytelling, brand image and virtual technology were discovered by the literature. Some books were researched and there exist plenty of scientific articles handling these topics.

There were five interviewees. The goal was to find the most suitable attraction, activity and best technical solutions for the implementation. The interviewees were carefully selected from the field of tourism and technology. Interviewees have been specified in Table 4.

Table 4. Interviewees

Interviewees	
R1	Tourism professional in partner company
R2	Tourism professional in region South Karelia outside the partner company
R3	Tourism and digital marketing professional in domestic organization
R4	Tourism professional operating in Netherlands
R5	Professional of virtual technology production in tourism in Finland

Interview with representative of the regional destination management company goSaimaa (R1) helped to understand the current state of the tourism in South Karelia. Also, it gave information about regional attractions in South Karelia. An interview with a local tourism professional (R2) outside the target organization brought either confirmation or increased opportunities in the form of different perspectives.

Two of interviewees (R3 & R5) provided insightful perspectives on the potential of virtual technology from a professional standpoint.

Interviewee R4 offered a European-centric viewpoint on the utilisation of virtual technology in experiences.

All the interviews were implemented by the Teams or the Zoom and the interviews were recorded. The interview language was Finnish. The questionnaires can be found in the attachments. Recordings totaled 359 minutes, about 6 hours. The recordings were transcribed, some by automation, some manually. The recording materials were stored securely and it was possible to return to those as the writing process progressed.

4.1.1 The role of virtual technology in tourism industry today

The fundamental question about the importance of the virtual reality technology in tourism industry received both support and doubts in among the interviewees.

Interviewees told that for example in 2024 at the biggest tourism industry fairs in Vakantiebeurs (Utrecht, Netherlands), ITB (Berlin, Germany) and, also in professionals' workshop in Milan, Italy; not a single business to business customer asked for this kind of services. Also, one interviewee told that despite a long and active professional career in the tourism industry in Europe with great experience of Netherlands and some experience of Scotland,

France and Italy, he has not encountered to virtual implementations in among tourism. However, interviewee told that one virtual experience comes to mind from IDFA Festivals; the biggest documentary film festival in the world, held annually in Amsterdam, that offered virtual movie experience in “DocLab”.

Some interviewees pointed out that present, as there is no proper digital channel even for basic services, this is not the most urgent issue to promote. Revealed in interviews, that there are only a few purely virtual implementations in tourism sector in Finland implemented yet. Some startups have been seen but the challenge is to reach continuity to these services. However, practical, and functional AR contents have been implemented and interviewees find those beneficial.

One interviewee, probably because of his professional orientation, knew quite many virtual implementations in Finland and listed some examples where virtual technology has been utilised: in museums, exhibitions, hotels, restaurants, nature trails, travel organizations and in among municipalities.

According to one interviewee, the beneficial aspect of whole virtuality is not clarified yet but operators in travel industry should be interested in this phenomenon.

Travellers who are interested in culture and rare destinations, which restrict the access, could benefit of virtual tours in destinations. (R3)

Interviewee notes that VR requires consumers to get used to it, but for example video players, people who spend time in virtual worlds already now, could buy the idea of virtual travelling easily in years becoming.

Interviewees told that contributions to develop digitality in tourism sector in domestic level is still focused on basic things like creating interesting content to webpages and effort to be involved in digital sales channels because especially small operators have challenges in basic issues now when digitalization driver over old sales channels.

Interviews reveals that the tourism industry does not have the resources to product as impressive content as gaming companies does. Collaboration with gaming companies could offer a possibility to move forward in this development in the future. Interviewees point out that in Finland there are available professional partners for content production in virtual reality sector and developing virtual tourism in South Karelia region according to one interviewee has lot of potential; in South Karelia there are two universities that has knowledge and potential to create VR content if there is common understanding and willingness to utilise the resources.

However, all the interviewees see the point of utilising virtuality in experience production; for example, winter experience in the middle of summer. Different kind of virtual options to multiple the information or the attraction is enriching the experience. All interviewees find the potentiality in virtuality to strengthening the experience, for example in museums and exhibitions, in the spot in destination. Interviewee mentions also elderly and disabled people who could benefit of virtual travel experiences. One interviewee sees that virtual experiences would be beneficial especially in destination marketing. Another interviewee believes that VR could probably serve the younger generation, but older consumers might still find it too strange.

Interviewee emphasized that although virtual travels from home sofa are possible, and some experiments have been implemented, there has been no real success yet in this kind of travelling.

Respondent R4 can not imagine VR replacing a genuine travel in whole in any circumstances and interviewee states:

Nothing can replace the enchantment of live encounters.

Utilising virtual technology in tourism industry was seen among interviewees as a trend that will probably strengthen in near future, probably on a 5-10 years.

Based on framework and interviews, the highlights of the findings how virtual technology is experienced in among tourism today are compiled in Figure 8.

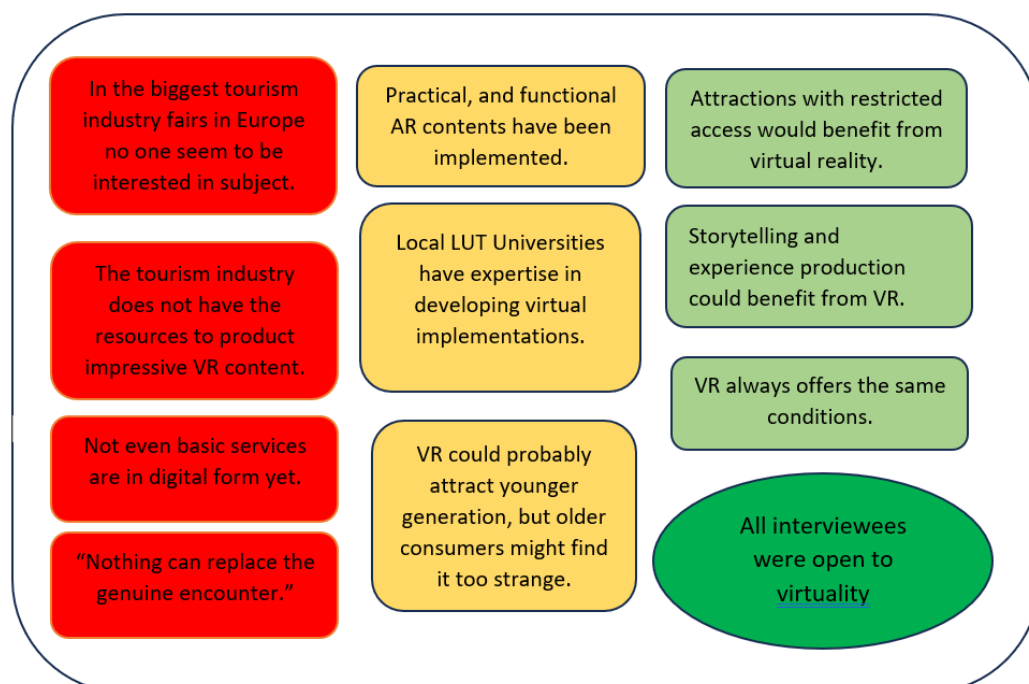


Figure 8. Attitudes and experiences toward VR technology in tourism today

4.1.2 Options to enhance the experience and technological limitations

Storytelling was seen as a significant factor from the point of view in terms of attractiveness of the tourist destination. R4 says that storytelling has a big role in marketing and in experience creation, and states:

Storytelling is the key to the whole tourism thing.

Interviewees remark that storytelling should be practised more in tourism industry and social media is natural and efficient platform that reaches people around the world. Respondents list topics and services that the story should be enclosed to stories: the history of Lappeenranta, the fortress of Lappeenranta, traditional dishes, local activities or accommodation places. All these features benefit of a storytelling, in differentiation aspect, according to interviewees.

Interviewees point out that the food traditions and the recent recognition of European region of gastronomy is something that should be utilised in tourism. According to one interviewee, know-how of nature friendly paper industry in South Karelia should be in focus in narratives too.

Interviews revealed that combining virtuality and storytelling has possibilities, and for example gamification involves especially children in attractions. Also, historical storytelling could benefit from AR technology according to interviewees. For example, different places could be presented as those looked before or how they are going to look in the future.

The brand image, as well, was seen by all interviewees as a very significant factor in experience creation. Interviewee points that all the experiences are built on destination brand; not vice versa. Interviewee told that for example Dutch are very brand-conscious and trend-oriented when they are choosing the destination to visit. Geographic diversity like different kind of nature from the country of origin, height differences in the terrain, etc. are attractive factors. Interviewee states that for Dutch the most attractive Nordic country is Norway because of the fjords, and next attractive is Denmark because of the ease of travel. The next is Iceland, Sweden and Finland is the least attractive Nordic destination to travel. However, interviewee sees lot of potential in Finland as a destination and sums up the positive factors:

Finland is very trendy, very safe and very exotic country and the strangest and the most interesting country in Nordic countries. (R4.)

Respondent refines that the exotism and *strange aspect* comes from the language and the people, the Lapland the distance and the cold winter. Another respondent mentions the Finnish nightless night as an exotic feature for foreigners.

Interviewees point out that all destinations around Lake Saimaa would benefit a lot if the marketing was united and clearly crystallized under one and same Lake Saimaa brand as well if the sales channels were combined and destinations were presented together.

Interviews reveals that the experience should be producible for both individual travellers but also for small groups.

Interviewees tell that STF certificate is also very important factor nowadays in international tourism markets. Visit Finland launched the STF certificate but only few operators in South Karelia have received it yet. Respondent believes that it is not about the lack of competence or lack of nature friendliness but lack of time and resources, which is emphasized especially with small operators.

VR offers possibility to differentiate from the competitors. The fact that not many operators in Finland have been able to utilise virtuality yet, could give competitive advantage when an implementation that creates added value for the service is invented. The novelty value is beneficial, but creating wau-effect demands that everything in a plan is in correct place.

Interviewees believe that virtuality has lot of potential in the future, when the developing technology solves out the quality and economical challenges. At the present VR/AR hardware is still too expensive and offers poor quality. Interviewee points out that even 360-videos on mobile device, for purpose of familiarization to destination before purchasing decisions, does not work well or impress consumers. According to interviewee, for marketing purpose, a showroom with VR productions could offer some kind of compromise but consumers are not willing to go away from their own location and they expect to get the information from internet. Interviewee notes that perhaps travel fairs could be the place for a showroom to present destination virtually in advance.

According to interviewee virtual reality technology in nature experiences still involves big challenges: The production of virtual clip requires a lot of time and, money. In addition, the implementations are not user-friendly. VR glasses must be combined to a laptop, and moving in nature with glasses on is not seen as an option, for many reasons. Also, for example, in AR implementations, changing weather conditions change the background of the "image" and it is very difficult to place a virtual object on the background so that it looks natural. Interviewee tells that also the prices of VR-glasses are still quite high.

Interviewees underline that the content of virtual implementation should be extremely impressive.

The content must be really “päräyttävää”. (R5)

Interviews reveal that if the VR experience is implemented unprofessionally, no customers want to use it. Interviewee recommends, to consider modest versions of virtuality in nature experiences and presents examples of implementation that combines info boards and mobile application to produce AR content or another that turns storytelling into immersive experience by utilising versatile audio technology. Third option that was recommended is an old fashioned YouTube videos with added objects created by artificial intelligence.

4.1.3 Most attractive features in South Karelia

In general, according to interviewees the awareness of the Saimaa region in Central Europe is not yet at a commendable level.

All the interviewees that were asked for this question, identified the nature of Lake Saimaa the most impressive attraction in region, especially for international tourists.

Few interviewees stated that in South Karelia, there are interesting places in downtown area too. One respondent pointed out that Saimaa also has urban culture, and it resembles strongly European city culture. Interviewee described a warm summer evening in harbour of Lappeenranta when local acquaintances and tourists are wandering along the shore, or gathered to terraces and café kiosks enjoying the local delicacies and the lively atmosphere along the lakeside. However, interviewee points, that the nature is strongly present in cityscape in Lappeenranta.

Interviews reveal that international tourists know only the Lapland and capital of Finland, “*the design Helsinki*”, but the rest of the country is still quite unknown. Although, interviewee told that in Netherlands, a big organizer of vacation trips, Voigt Travel, presents also destination Saimaa archipelago in very charming way. According to the respondent there is lot of potential to develop the demand toward South Karelian tourism in Europe. Respondent R2 stated that Lake Saimaa is one of the best-known lake areas in Finland and continues:

It is also surprisingly well known in Germany, though is it Lake Saimaa in South Karelia or for example in region Mikkeli, Savonlinna or Varkaus does not make any difference to the German tourist.

Interviewees brought up the bicycle tourism as a very trendy phenomena in among European tourists and the demand is for few hours sessions to 10 days bicycle trips. Interviewee

lists also hiking and paddling among interesting and easily accessible activities in South Karelia region. Status of Geopark attraction was seen also significant in among European tourists. One interviewee mentioned that often the problem is that Lake Saimaa is not reachable from lakeside. In the winter it is not guaranteed at all when the lake is frozen and safe for a walk. In the spring and autumn, the weather might be too cold or too rainy. In the summertime, there is neither no sun guarantee, never.

Interviewees mentioned few nature attractions in the interview: Kummakivi -boulder, scenic cruises in Lake Saimaa, Saimaa geopark, the Finnish Wilderness and Nature Culture Museum, in Imatra which is in preparation, ready in 2025.

4.1.4 Accessibility of the experience

Planning any experience for tourism requires objective understanding of the standards required. Interviewees and Vehviläinen from goSaimaa were consulted about these issues.

According to Vehviläinen (2024) in accommodation, food and beverage services and activity services there is lack of continuity and accessibility. Some services are not available even pre-ordered. Also, the quality of the services is not of equal quality in region. Some services are excellent, but some would require a little work to be of international standard. This is because some of the companies, running operations and activities, are small and the entrepreneurs are working full-time elsewhere.

The opposite assessment was given by interviewees; according to them the basic services are at a sufficient level. One interviewee points that though in South Karelia there are no luxury services available, such as catering delivered to cottages.

According to interviewee operating in tourism business in South Karelia, offering nature-based experiences for domestic and for international tourists are two different issues: Domestic tourists are not ready to pay almost anything for a regular trip to the forest. Instead, international tourists do not mind for paying for example €100 for two-three hours excursion. All-day tour including a lunch could cost even €200-300. Interviewees state the price level in Finland is high for the Central European clientele and the most potential customer is middle-income Central European customers. However, interviewee claimed also that sometimes entrepreneurs could also price their products more boldly.

Interviewees point out that experiences that work through a mobile device are easy to implement today when people have smartphones and use those smoothly.

Interviewee R4 notes that nature trails and paths are accessible and well directed in South Karelia and states:

Destination Lake Saimaa has the ready package for sale.

According to Vehviläinen (2024) the practical question how the tourist arrives at an experience destination is solved easily: foreign groups move around with their own bus, and for individual passengers, in Lappeenranta, for example, private cars can be rented for day use. According to Vehviläinen, the half-hour shift is a good guideline for day trips.

4.2 Defining

In defining phase the most significant findings and ideas that arose from them were collected into one frame:

Possibility to experience something new and different attract people; especially in tourism. Different people get excited about different things, but no region can offer something that they do not have. According to interviewees the nature of Lake Saimaa is the attraction that most expected impresses international tourists from Central Europe. The nature of Lake Saimaa is very different from Lapland and region Helsinki, so it is unique, and it arouses interest among Central European tourists and tour operators. Especially the Geopark status interest European tourists. Tourists want to experience the nature in the nature.

The experience should last 2-3 hours and it has to be implemented for individual tourists as well as small groups. The cost of the trip could be around €100-300 depending if the customer is domestic or international customer. The distance from city center should be around 30 minutes by car.

Storytelling is beneficial tool to create memorable experiences, and commitment toward the destination. By using stories in advertising there is possibility to create new demand. After a memorable experience customers make the advertising for the destination, so storytelling is the base of whole experience. Legends and myths attached to the story make the story unique, interesting, and memorable. A strong destination brand directs purchase behaviour, and it is beneficial to attach to the story. Combining the brand image of the destination to stories, creates added value for the experience and helps in building relationship with the potential or existing customer. South Karelia is not recognized for any certain story yet. However, Finland, as a whole has succeeded to create a myth of the happiest nation in the world. It is a myth, although proven true.

Because South Karelia needs desperately more international tourists the experience should be available for both groups and individual travellers. Because of this the experience should not require any special skills or athleticism.

The VR technology sets still limitations both physically and financially and, for example virtual reality glasses and AR in nature experience today is still unreachable. However, the experience should be impressive and bond customers to the destination. Professional of virtual experience in tourism recommends audio experience when the experience is implemented in nature. The final product of this study presents an example of a script for an experiential audio experience on the nature trail in South Karelia.

The Figure 9 collects guidelines of the manuscript, based on the theory and interviews to one picture below.

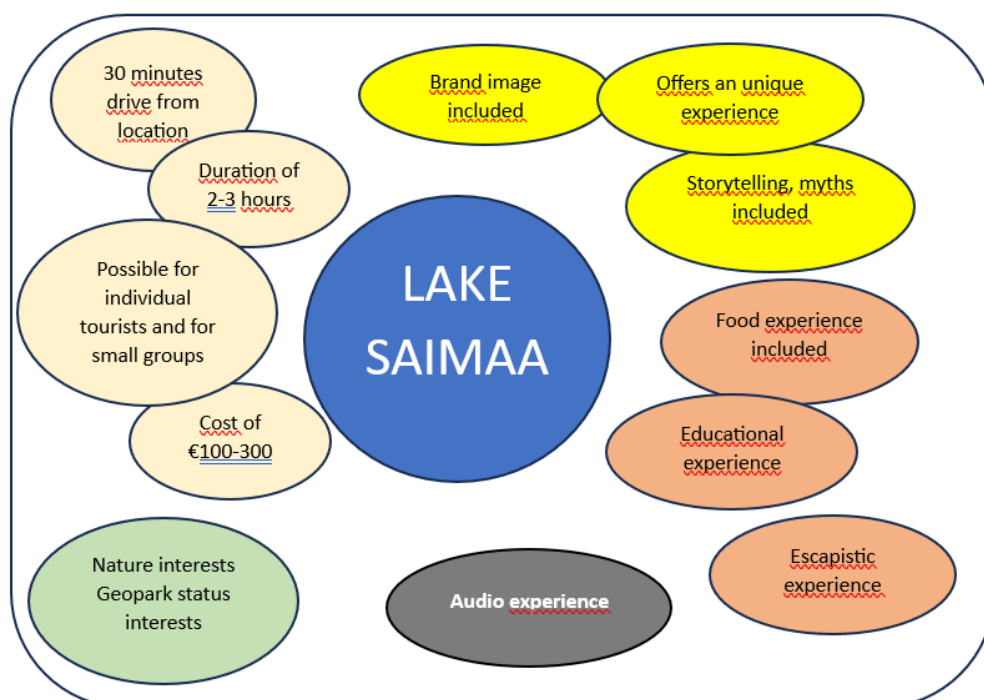


Figure 9. Guidelines of the manuscript of the implementation plan

The research process gave answers to research problems.

- Nature of the Lake Saimaa is the attraction that most probably offers an experience to Central European visitors in South Karelia.
- Audiovisual experience is currently the technical solution that can offer an impressive experience and it is possible to be implemented in cost- and time-efficient manners.
- Storytelling and the brand image should and can be utilised in this experience. Finnish life-style and the myth of happiest nation in the world is worth bringing up. The

purest Finland – Lake Saimaa brand is embedded to story and it is present through the whole experience.

Based on these findings and the understanding, the final service design in this study is a nature trail in South Karelia, enhanced with audio experience; interesting and immersive storytelling, which also includes a myth and brings out the Saimaa brand impressively. In the beginning of this study, equally an cultural experience was an alternative. There was a vision of virtual experience in Lappeenranta fortress, in which for example, tourist could have seen historical events in fortress centuries ago. Since the technological solutions are not ready for this kind of production yet, not at least with reasonable costs, the audio experience was accepted as a virtual experience in this study. The biggest influence to final implementation was the fact that became clear along the interviews. The nature of destination Lake Saimaa and South Karelia is the biggest wow-factor here for Central European tourists. South Karelian downtown will not impress tourist as much no matter what kind of implementation is created.

The trail chosen to this design process is part of Saimaa Geopark area. The trail is named *Traces of The Ice Age – Stone Age Man*. It is situated in municipality of Savitaipale, about half an hour drive from Lappeenranta city.

The season for this experience is from early spring to late fall, even early winter, taking into account the snow condition.

The idea is that the nature trail is walked through, partly with headphones on. Tourist is listening to a story narrated by a fictional character, which is a person from the Ice Age. The story is fictional.

The nature trail experience is produced primarily for tourists in the destination, but it can be utilised also as a promotion tool at fairs and workshops in Central Europe and in domestic markets as well. The product is launched to DataHub. To support the promotion of the product at fairs there could be a pocket brochure and 360-video material from the path. For groups the marketing would conduct in advance. Individual travelers would face the marketing before the trip in internet when big tour operators like Voigt in Netherlands promote the destination as well, as they already do. Multiple social media platforms should be utilised in promoting the experience. As many incentive groups as possible should be invited to familiarize the destination and the activity on the spot.

4.3 Develop and Diverge

4.3.1 The audio-experience Traces of The Ice Age – Stone Age Man

In this chapter there is a preliminary script for a audio experimental nature trail.

The Ice Age has conquered the nature. It's cold, the wind blows, and the ice cracks. How the Stone Age Man lives at time, what they ate and how they lived; what kind of roles the family members had and what were the biggest problems, threats and also biggest delights at that time is told in a story.

The iceberg begins to melt. As the ice melts, various layers and formations were born to the nature; and today the blocking ridges are visible from the space, is told. The ice melts completely, and Lake Saimaa is born. There is life in a lake: fish, insects and plants. As Lake Saimaa separates from Lake Ladoga, the Saimaa ringed seal becomes trapped in Saimaa. The story tells how over time the population of Saimaa ringed seals declined and how rare it became. The population has been revived, but it remains one of the rarest seals in the world. Today, in Finland people can drink the tap water, too. Finnish water expertise is globally recognized.

Finnish forest is unique. Trees grow for tens, even hundreds of years to their full height. In the north, winter is harsh for the forest, and deciduous trees have adapted to varying conditions by shedding their leaves in autumn. Animals live in the forest. The bear is a feared king of the forest, the moose more common, and many have seen the fox. Few have seen small animals like the wolverine, the pine marten, or the polecat. Beavers build their nests in thickets, and the raccoon dog arrived in Finland from Russia in the 1930s-40s.

The birdlife is rich, and some birds winter in Finland. A pair of swans always return to the same bay to nest when spring arrives. Bees make hives in settlements but also in nature, and the ladybug is the source of many children's rhymes. Wild vegetables are superfood and there are many medicinal plants in forests too. In Finland, there exist everyman's rights – you can pick berries; blueberries, raspberries, cranberries, lingonberries, and cloudberries for free, no matter who owns the land. Also, mushrooms are presented in the story and especially how the best mushroom places are big secrets for local mushroom pickers. The earliest mushroom is the morel, which emerges immediately in May, and the latest is the funnel chanterelle, which can still be collected after the first frost arrives in October-November.

At the campfire site, the Ice Age person tells what edible there is in in South Karelian woods: grains, berries, roots and game meat, Nowadays, it's trendy to grow your own herbs and

vegetables and grill the products of your own greenhouse in the summertime. Hunting is with permit and some people support it and some are against it.

In figure 10 there are photos from the path and the campfire. Saimaa Geopark board is found on parking place from which it is natural to start the nature experience.

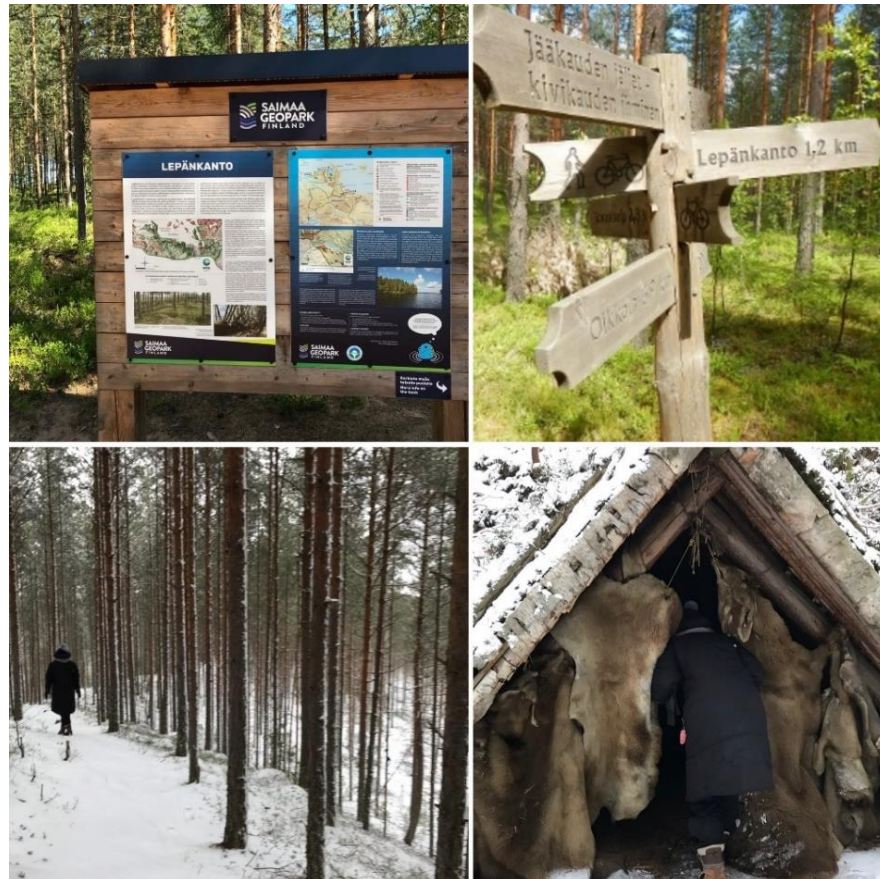


Figure 10. Nature trail Traces of The Ice Age - Stone Age Man, Saimaa Geopark attraction

At the campfire site, it is time to enjoy some snacks. For a group, the guide has brought soot pan coffee supplies, stick sausages and for dessert delicious blueberry pie. For individual hiker, they've been given a lunch bag with directions or just a bag of dried blueberries, for example.

After the campfire the Finnish forest is presented as it is: an enabler. Finns have made a living from the forests. Houses and summer cottages as well as lakeside saunas have been built from Finnish trees. During the industrialization years, wood was used to make pulp and

paper, even for export, but nowadays paper mills are more often established in South America and other countries where trees grow quicker, and production is cheaper. The know-how is exported more and more but paper and carton products are the number one export product even today. Almost 70 percentage of Finland is forests, but still today there is a genuine concern about what will happen to the carbon sink in the future and forests must be protected too.

At the end of the path, the Stone Age man sits on a stump and wonders: “In all places and at all the times, people have their own challenges. It is year 2025. Life is hectic and computers and applications control the lives of the people. Fortunately, there is still pure nature almost everywhere in Finland and people can breathe freely. Even a small break from everyday life in nature brings peace and happiness to life. Stone Age man listens to the sounds of the forest and Lake Saimaa. He takes a deep breath and states: This is where I belong. This is where I am the happiest man in the world.”

4.3.2 Blueprint of the plan

In blueprint phase the script written in chapter 4.3.1 was submitted to all interviewees for review.

The script received positive feedback:

The story is nice and, at least in my opinion, very interesting. I would love to go on such a trip. I could almost see the passage of time, the nature, and the changing seasons in my mind, and that seal definitely brings that feeling to our Saimaa landscapes. (R1.)

The theory is good and this needs to be tested somehow (R4).

It is a good blank! The storyteller gives a lot of good perspectives for the actual story. (R5.)

The interviewees found also good ideas for further development:

Illustration was requested to support the soundscape.

The existence of language versions was considered important.

Saimaa seal was seen as a very important detail that requires more attention.

A virtual experience could be implemented for example in Wilderness and Nature Culture Museum, which is under construction in Imatra.

Combining a stronger gastronomic experience to nature experience was suggested. For example, a traditional lamb meal *särä* in destination Lemi, next to location of this nature trail would complement the excursion with a food experience that fits the theme.

A genuine virtual experience was also wished for. There was a suggestion that there would be few stop points along the path where virtual experience could be provided.

The role and costs of guidance were also considered. One possibility seen as an effective option was that the audio-experience would cover the guidance along the path and only in campfire place there would be a guide waiting with coffee and snacks.

360-degree soundscape was recommended. This technology enables to create interesting and unexpected experience. In the background there is a common soundscape in both earpieces and some voice, for example the ice cracking or a chirping of the birds or the buzzing of the bees, only in another ear-piece.

The respondents confirmed the idea that Finland, the happiest nation in the world, is the myth that should be utilised in this story. Why Finnish are the happiest nation in the world deserves more attention in opinion of interviewees.

All these considerations are potential improvements to the original implementation plan.

4.4 Deliver

This study had a goal to deliver a plan of a tool that utilises virtual technology and serves the needs of tourism in South Karelia.

The implementation of the plan is now left for others to consider. If the plan is seen attractive and worth trying, there are some possibilities to make it happen.

Easiest way is that goSaimaa can buy the service from a company that implements such media. This option has not natural continuity.

Another possibility for goSaimaa is to strive for close cooperation with local higher education institutions and. For instance, could there be a future course at LAB University of Applied Sciences specifically focused on producing virtual elements for the benefit of the local experience economy? Also, professionals of virtual technology experience producers could be collaborated in this cooperation. In addition to companies' own funding, various grants could be obtained to finance the projects themselves.

Local companies might be interested in projects that create virtual material for advertising, education, and experiential purposes, for example. Professional virtual technology companies could benefit of several projects as well. This way, students would have a chance to

work on real projects and become familiar with and integrate into companies from various sectors. This would benefit students, education programs, and especially local entrepreneurs, thereby supporting the entire local economy.

In the story production, either a professional scriptwriter can be hired, or a local resident might provide folklore and enthusiasm to dig into history books and nature knowledge for guidance to support the story.

Financing these projects could be arranged at least partly by project finance. Funding the projects of tourism sector comes from various sources; including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), programs offered by Business Finland, and direct grants from government ministries (Ministry of Economic Affairs).

The second phase of this development could be the real VR experience. Delivery of it should be evaluated again when the technology is more commonly used in tourism and there is more experience of good practices. On the other hand, as a school projects implementations could be created and then evaluated the value of the implementations in different contexts.

No virtual experience as a purchase product is recommendable to implement by small entrepreneurs or organizations before it is certain that the implementation is functional and impressive. Implementation must be also user friendly and the costs of the production must be reasonable.

However, an alternative, also suggested by an interviewee that there would be real virtual implementations along side the nature path, even at fewer points, but with full effects is good suggestion as soon as the virtual implementation is realistically somehow possible. It requires lot of time and effort and funding. The full virtual experience manages to implement in stabile circumstances. As soon as the Wilderness and Nature Culture Museum in Imatra is coming true, this kind of experiences is recommended to be produced, surely.

In that script The Ice Age has really captured the scene. Viewer can see how the ice mountain starts to smelt and how the Lake Saimaa is formed, how the nature comes to life and beautiful plants rise from the ground. The insects arrive. The bee is building the nest. Fish jump in the water. Saimaa seal is trapped into Lake Saimaa and The Stone Age Man tells stories of happiness.

4.5 SWOT analysis

To assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the plan implemented in this study, a SWOT analysis has been used. It is drawn up in Figure 11.

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique Finnish nature • Unique experience • Worldwide known myth in the story • Sustainable brand: Lake Saimaa - Purest Finland • Geo Park attraction 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtuality in tourism is not well known yet • Saimaa region is not well known yet • Requires operator • Requires accessories • Limited season
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Novelty value • Possibility to create impressive and immersive experiences • Saimaa region will be known better • Cooperation with entrepreneurs, schools and professionals • Cooperation with large Central European players in tourism industry • Other service providers in region may benefit of this concept • Possibility to expand same concept to several destinations in Saimaa • Possibility to create 100% virtual experiences in the future 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No organization will implement this plan ever • Consumers reject the ideology of virtual experience • Accessibility problems in distribution and implementation • Technology develops fast and investment will not be profitable • Finnish price level

Figure 11. SWOT analysis of audiovisual experience Traces of The Ice Age – Stone Age Man

Strengths

Strengths of this plan is nature of Lake Saimaa. Finland is known for the nature but nature of Lake Saimaa is unique and magnificent. Possibility to walk freely in forests, pick up berries and swim in a lake is not self-evident. As stated earlier, a similar atmosphere is not offered elsewhere in Finland; neither in Lapland, nor in Helsinki region. For European tourists the lakeview, the silence and the pureness of surroundings is exotic.

An experience that includes storytelling, history and information is beneficial. It increases awareness and interests tourists. The myth, *Finnish people are the happiest nation in the world* is worldwide known and amazed. It gives advantage that no other country has. Tourists want to see and experience the happiness at the spot. Region of South Karelia has great advantage and there is easy access to nature; only half an hour transition from one place to an other. There are several nature trails and those are in good condition, on summer season.

The brand, *Lake Saimaa – Purest Finland* represents great and rare values. Finnish people take good care of the nature and require that also from tourism. In these days it is valued among consumers. The brand strengthens visitor by visitor. There are also other labels and as mentioned, a sustainability program STF, that support the perception of the brand.

Geo Park status of region Lake Saimaa is also valued in among Central European tourists.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses that was realized through the design process were recognition of South Karelia region. It is not as well known yet as for example Lapland and capital Helsinki in Finland. As a whole, Finland is not as known and desired as other northern countries. It requires still lot of work from destination management and local entrepreneurs to make the destination recognized.

Neither virtuality is not yet very well recognized in tourism. Consumers might not be ready to pay for the experience that has no recommendations yet. However, some consumers want to experience new things and be forerunners.

Another issue is that this service requires the service producer. As noted, many operators in South Karelia in activity and experience business are small operators. It was recognized that not always the demand and the offering encounter.

Although the audiovisual experience is implemented with reasonable investments, still some accessories and equipments are needed to be able to run the experience. For a small entrepreneur this investment could not be too big. Support in financing is needed. This issue could be seen even a threat.

The season is limited and varies yearly. It can not be forecasted for certain.

Opportunities

If this study or some other action leads to cooperation with local entrepreneurs and organizations, and schools that could produce different kind of virtual implementations, it could lead to big success and all parties would win; business would be promoted and technology will

develop even faster and further. Professional entrepreneurs of virtual technology experience produces could and should be involved to this collaboration as well.

Impressive and immersive experience produces novelty value for whole destination. Along the success the recognition of destination improves.

If tourists find the experience attractive, it has lot of potential in the future. Tour operators which are already organizing travels to region Lake Saimaa may be interested in offering the service to their customers. Also, this plan can be duplicated to other nature attractions as well. In the future, there is possibility to present the same scene in a museum for example. It could be a real virtual experience.

Other service providers may benefit of this product, for example restaurants in neighbourhood of the nature trails.

Threats

The biggest threat is that this study will not lead to any action. At the beginning of the research, there was a vision that this research would produce a ready-made virtual product. With out resources, nothing can be done. The question wheter consumers will buy the idea and pay for the service is still unresolved. The investment of time, effort and money is significant for small operators, and the option to observe what others do is possibly tempting.

Also, understanding how fast the technology develops in these days may cause hesitating what comes to investments.

And last but not least, the Finnish price level and global inflation causes uncertainty to many investments.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Processing this thesis was variable process and the final goal changed many times during the process. Originally there was planned to launch a ready-made virtual experience in the end of this process. However, the collection of the framework was time consuming and also the interviews planned in the beginning did not succeed. Interviewees were supposed to be mainly represents of Central European tour operators and the viewpoint of the expectations of international tourists would have been in focus. The plan to recruit many interviewees from Central Europe did not succeeded, only one such materialized. Eventually it was decided to focus on the strengths recognized by local operators and understanding which is gained from professionals from fairs and workshops with Central European operators. It's probably better this way, because basically destinations themselves know their own strengths best. Interviewees were quite unanimous about the main features, and it confirmed the previous assumption as true. It also made it easy to proceed in this study.

The last interview with R5 was more like a brainstorming. Only seven questions about the main topics were planned in advance. The discussion directed the brainstorming to several different topics and details. Already after the first question interviewee gave very much information about the industry and presented some implementations that were implemented so far. The brainstorming was more like active discussion and interview did not follow the original questionnaire. In brainstorming stage there was already an idea about the final implementation plan of the study. Interviewee commented it, gave good advice, and told what is possible to implement with reasonable costs and efforts today and more importantly, what is not possible. After the brainstorming the very first idea of the implementation that would have been a genuine virtual experience changed quite a lot and the study ended up implementing more simple audio experience plan, which can also be recognized as a virtual experience.

This study is only a little glance to the subject. It gives reliable information of strengths of destination South Karelia. Also, this research is reliable what comes to understanding of today's expectations of Central European tourists visiting Lake Saimaa region.

The question, how much virtual reality technology should be utilised in experience production should be studied further. Perhaps a quantitative research of expectations would be beneficial. Also the possibility to combine different stakeholders However, novelty value of new innovations is most effective for forerunners that survive. From this point of view, it would be worthwhile to start utilising digitality and virtuality also in experience production, as an element that enhances local stories, myths and unique experiences.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions to Katja Vehviläinen/ goSaimaa

Time: 6th Feb 2024 at 2p.m.- 3.15p.m.

Interview was conducted by application Teams

Background information of tourism in South Karelia

1. Kuinka monta henkilöä matkailuala työllistää Etelä-Karjalassa?
2. Kuinka paljon tuloja Matkailu tuo Etelä-Karjalaan vuositason tasolla? Mikä osa tuosta tulosta on kv-matkailijoilta?
3. Kuinka venäläismatkailun loppumisesta aiheutunut vaje voitaisiin korvata Etelä-Karjalassa?
4. Onko eri sesonkeina eroa matkailijamäärässä?
5. Mistä matkailijat Etelä-Karjalaan saapuvat ja mitä arvelet, mistä se johtuu?
6. Mikä on goSaimaa ja miksi se on olemassa? Strategia ja tavoitteet?
7. Mitkä kansainväliset kohdemaat ovat potentiaalisia matkailuviennille?

Tourists' expectations toward destination Lake Saimaa

Strengths of the destination South Karelia and Lake Saimaa

Potential experience factors in destination

8. Mitä erityisesti matkailija kohteessa Etelä-Karjala arvostaa?
9. Millaiset saatavuusehdot, kuten etäisyys ja hinnoittelu tulee toteutua kohteessa, jotta se on myytävissä kv-asiakkaalle?
10. Mitkä piirteet tai paikat Etelä-Karjalassa ovat mielestäsi kaikista viehättävimpiä, joita kannattaa hyödyntää matkailukohteen promootiossa?
11. Mitkä ovat kaikista viehättävimmät ja myyntiin jo valmiit kulttuurilliset tai luontomatkailulliset kohteet Etelä-Karjalassa (pyydetty nimeämään 3 kutakin)?
12. Haluatko nimetä lisää paikkoja näiden lisäksi?

Thoughts of storytelling and branding in experience production

13. Haluaisitko nähdä tarinankerronnan liitettävän näihin palveluihin promootio- ja tuoteistamismielessä?
14. Mikä on "Brand Lake Saimaan" määritelmä? Kerro brändiin liitetystä merkeistä.

Future thoughts of the virtual technology in tourism

15. Minkälainen visio sinulla on virtuaalitekniikan hyödyntämisestä matkailussa lähitulevaisuudessa ja milloin toimijoiden pitää olla muutokseen valmiita?
16. Näetkö, että virtuaalisuus tulee olemaan osa mainontaa vai osa tuotteistamista?
17. Luuletko, että asiakkaat ovat valmiita virtuaaliseen teknologiaan matkailussa ja esimerkiksi kulkevat VR-lasit päässä kohteessa tai menevät "virtuaalikioskiin" kokemaan jonkun elämyksen?
18. Luuletko, että virtuaalinen matkailu voisi korvata aitoa matkailua tulevaisuudessa?
19. Mitä odotat tältä oppinnytetyöltä?

Appendix 2. Interview questions to R1

Time: 4th Mar 2024 at 3p.m.- 4.26 p.m.

Interview was conducted by application Teams

Background information

1. Kerro kuka olet ja mitä teet työkseksi.
2. Millä messuilla ja workshoppeissa kv-kohteissa olet käynyt viimeisen puolen vuoden aikana.

Tourists' expectations toward destination Lake Saimaa

Potential experience factors in destination

3. Millaisia odotuksia keskieurooppalaisilla matkailijoilla on yleisesti matkaan liittyen?
4. Entä spesifioidummin, kun matkan kohde on Suomi?
5. Ja vielä yksityiskohtaisemmin, kun kohde on Lake Saimaa / Etelä-Karjala?
6. Millaisia elämyksiä matkailija odottaa saavansa meiltä Etelä-Karjalasta?
7. Paljonko kv-matkailija on valmis maksamaan elämyksestä?
8. Entä tour operatorin kautta järjestetyt kierrokset – millaisia vaatimuksia/odotuksia niihin kohdistuu?

Strengths of the destination South Karelia and Lake Saimaa

9. Mitkä ovat mielestäsi Etelä-Karjalan kiinnostavimmat matkailukohteet?

Thoughts of storytelling and branding in experience production

10. Miten tärkeitä kv-asiakkaille on matkailu-destinaation brändimielikuva? Miten se käytännössä näkyy?
11. Entä osaavatko matkanjärjestäjät jo vaatia elämyksiä ja tarinankerrontaa destinaatioissa?
12. Miten tärkeitä kv-matkailijalle on matkailuelämyksen yhteisöllisyys?

Appendix 3. Interview questions to R2

Time: 4th Mar 2024 at 3p.m.- 4.26 p.m.

Interview was conducted by application Teams

Back ground information

1. Kerro alkuun, miten sinun työsi on linkittynyt Etelä-Karjalan matkailuun.

Strengths of the destination South Karelia and Lake Saimaa

2. Miten näet Etelä-Karjalan alueen tarjonnan matkailumarkkinoilla? Arvioi kotimaan markkinoita ja kv-markkinoita.
3. Mitkä ovat mielestäsi Etelä-Karjalan kiinnostavimmat matkailukohteet?
4. Entä potentiaali – mitä kannattaisi ehdottomasti kehittää, jotta tarjonta loisi lisää kysyntää?
5. Näetkö selkeitä esteitä kv-matkailun elpymiselle Etelä-Karjalassa?
6. Nostaisitko kv-markkinointiin pääpainon paikalliskulttuurille vai luonnolle?

Basic service level in South Karelia

7. Onko Etelä-Karjalan alueella riittävän kattava palveluvalikoima, peruspalveluiden osalta? (Jos ei ole, kerro oma näkemyksesi, mitä täällä pitäisi olla toisin mitä ja miten).
8. Mitä ohjelmanpalvelu mielestäsi saa nykyisin maksaa kun ajattelemme ryhmämatkoja, joita olisi realistista tavoitella?
9. Mikä olisi ohjelmanpalvelun optimaalisin ajallinen kesto, kun otetaan potentiaaliset kv-asiakkaat huomioon?
10. Pitäisikö Etelä-Karjalan panostaa johonkin tiettyyn matkailijakohderyhmään sillä perusteella, että täällä on jo sopivaa palvelutarjontaa ko. kohderyhmää silmällä pitäen tai sillä perusteella, että ko. markkinoilta on helpompi saada asiakkaita alueelle?
11. Miten olemme mielestäsi onnistuneet Etelä-Karjalan ja Lake Saimaan alueen markkinoinnissa kotimaisille markkinoille/kv-markkinoille?

Future thoughts of the virtual technology in tourism

12. Miten näet digin matkailussa? (onko se työväline vai onko se myös driver saada asiakkaita?)
13. Oletko halukas näkemään virtuaalimainontaa tai virtuaalitoteutuksia matkailupalveluissa Etelä-Karjalassa?
14. Jos kyllä, millaisia visiota sinulla on näistä?
15. Entä kokemuksia muualta?
16. Luuletko, että virtuaalitoteutuksille matkailun saralla on jossain kohtaa selkeä kysyntä yleisesti/Etelä-Karjalassa?
17. Jos kyllä, osaatko kommentoida, miten se sataisiin resurssoitua?
18. Mitä muuta haluat kommentoida Etelä-Karjalan matkailullisista näkymistä tällä hetkellä?

Appendix 4. Interview questions to R3

Time: 7th Mar 2024 at 9.30a.m.- 10.17a.m.

Interview was conducted by application Teams

Back ground information

1. Kertoisitko alkuun, minkälainen työnkuva sinulla on Visit Finlandissa.
2. Milloin edellä mainitut digi-missio ja -visio on Suomessa saavutettu (olihan nämä vielä voimassa...)?
3. Mitä tarkoittaa smart destination?

Previous experiences from virtual technology in tourism

4. Minkälaisia virtuaalitodellisuusteknologiaa hyödyntäviä ratkaisuita näet toimivina/potentiaalisina matkailun saralla?

Thoughts of storytelling and branding in experience production

5. Miten näet tarinankerronnan tai destinaatiobrändin sekä virtuaalitekniikan yhdistämisen mahdollisuudet?

Applicable practices of virtual technology

6. Mitä ovat virtuaalitodellisuusteknologiaa hyödyntävien toteutusten edut ja haasteet matkailussa?
7. Arvioi lyhyesti matkailun seuraavien osa-alueiden kykyä hyödyntää digiä & virtuaalitodellisuutta nykyhetkessä maailmalla/Suomessa mainonnassa, palveluiden vertaamisessa, virtuaalitekniikalla täydennetyt palvelut destinaatiossa, virtuaalimatkat kotisohvalta jne.?
8. Minkälaiset asiakkaat ovat kiinnostuneita virtuaalimatkailusta?
9. Mitä osaamista/välineistöä tarvitaan virtuaalielämyksen luomiseen?
10. Onko Suomessa helposti saatavilla alan osaajia toteuttamaan virtuaalisia toteutuksia?
11. Mitä virtuaalisten toteutusten luominen maksaa, osaatko antaa jotain hintaesimerkkejä

Future thoughts of the virtual technology in tourism

12. Luuletko, että jossain kohtaa asiakkaat/osa asiakkaista vaatii virtuaalitoteutuksia matkailun saralla? Jos kyllä, missä kohtaa?
13. Mitä muuta haluaisit kertoa aiheesta?

Appendix 5. Interview questions to R4

Time: 12th Mar 2024 at 4p.m.- 4.40p.m.

Interview was conducted by application Zoom

Background information

1. Kertoisitko alkuun, minkälainen suhde sinulla on matkailuun.

Previous experiences from virtual technology in tourism

2. Minkälaisia toimivia virtuaalitodellisuusteknologiaa hyödyntäviä ratkaisuita olet kohdannut matkailussa?
3. Ovatko alankomaalaiset ”ostaneet” uudehkon tavan toteuttaa asioita virtuaalitek-
nologiaa hyödyntäen matkan eri vaiheissa (haaveilu, ostaminen, itse matka, jälki-
markkinointi)?

Future thoughts of the virtual technology in tourism

4. Mitä virtuaalitekniikan mahdollisuuksia näet vielä potentiaalisina/hyödyntämättö-
minä?

Thoughts of storytelling and branding in experience production

5. Miten vaikuttavana alankomaalaiset kokevat destinaatiobrändin matkailukohdetta
valittaessa?
6. Entä tarinankerronta – miten paljon se vaikuttaa elämysmatkailussa?

Strengths of the destination South Karelia and Lake Saimaa

Tourists' expectations toward destination Lake Saimaa

7. Minkälainen Suomi-kuva alankomaalaisilla?
8. Entä Lake Saimaa region – onko se jo tuttu Alankomaissa?
9. Onko mielestäsi Lake Saimaa -seutu mainonnassaan riittävän selkeästi/vakuutta-
vasti esitellyt vahvuuksiaan? Tulisiko jotain tiettyä aihepiiriä korostaa en-
emmän/toisella tapaa?
10. Mitä muuta sinulle tulee mieleen aiheesta?

Appendix 6. Interview questions to R5

Time: 7th Mar 2024 at 11.30a.m.- 12.45p.m.

Interview was conducted by application Teams

Background information

1. Kertoisitko yrityksestä jossa toimit ja omasta osaamisalueestasi virtuaalitekniologian parissa?

Thoughts of storytelling and branding in experience production

2. Miten näet tarinankerronnan tai destinaatiobrändin sekä virtuaalitekniologian yhdistämisen mahdollisuudet?

Applicable practices of virtual technology

3. Minkälaiset yritykset / organisaatiot hyödyntävät palveluitanne? Osaatko eritellä, mikä on elämysmatkailun osuus tästä?
4. Tiedätkö miten yritykset rahoittavat virtuaalisia projektejaan?
5. Mitä tulee ottaa huomioon, kun lähtee suunnittelemaan virtuaalista toteutusta elämyksen yhteyteen?
6. Missä elinkaaren vaiheessa virtuaalitekniologian hyödyntäminen matkailualalla on?
7. Mikä on minimibudjetti 1-2- tunnin virtuaalisen elämyksen tuotannolle?
8. Entä paljonko tulee varata aikaa projektin toteuttamiselle?