



# **Tourism SMEs and Visit Finland: Perceptions of Support in the Tourism Ecosystem in Lapland**

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### **Tourism SMEs and Visit Finland: Perceptions of Support in the Tourism Ecosystem in Lapland**

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#### **Abstract**

The purpose of the thesis was to examine how small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMEs) in Lapland perceive the support and destination marketing services provided by the national tourism organization, Visit Finland. The thesis aimed to understand which services are most valued and how these services help SMEs cope within the broader tourism ecosystem. The goal was to provide insights into the strengths and limitations of current support and identify areas for development.

The thesis was conducted as a phenomenological study using qualitative research methods. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives from tourism companies operating in the Lapland region. The data was analyzed anonymously using inductive thematic analysis, and the results were categorized under key themes reflecting the participants' perceptions.

The interviews highlighted the importance of visibility through international marketing efforts, the strategic value of the Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) program, and the role of regional tourism organizations as intermediaries. While Visit Finland's services were generally appreciated, challenges were identified in communication, access to resources, and the applicability of certain tools to niche businesses. The results also emphasized sustainability as both a core value and competitive asset.

Based on the findings, suggestions were made for improving communication, tailoring sustainability support, and enhancing regional coordination to strengthen the competitiveness of tourism SMEs.

**Keywords: Tourism Ecosystem, Destination Marketing, Sustainability**

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### **Matkailualan pk-yritykset ja Visit Finland: Näkemyksiä tuesta Lapin matkailun ekosysteemissä**

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### **Tiivistelmä**

Opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tarkastella, kuinka Lapin pien- ja keskiuuret matkailuyritykset kokevat kansallisen matkailuorganisaatio Visit Finlandin tarjoaman tuen ja matkakohdemarkkinointipalvelut. Tavoitteena oli ymmärtää, mitkä palvelut tuovat yrityksille lisäarvoa ja kilpailukykyä Lapin matkailun ekosysteemissä. Työn tavoite oli tarjota näkemyksiä nykyisen tuen relevanttiudesta, sekä tunnistaa kehityskohteita.

Opinnäytetyö toteutettiin fenomenologisena, laadullisena tutkimuksena, ja aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoituina haastatteluina. Kohderyhmänä oli Lapissa toimivien matkailualan pk-yritysten edustajat. Aineisto analysoitiin anonyymisti induktiivista temaattista analyysimenetelmää hyödyntäen, ja tulokset ryhmiteltiin keskeisten teemojen mukaan osallistujien kokemusten pohjalta.

Haastatteluissa korostui kansainvälisen markkinoinnin kautta saavutetun näkyvyyden merkitys, Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) -ohjelman strateginen arvo, sekä alueellisten matkailuorganisaatioiden rooli välittäjänä. Visit Finlandin palveluja arvostettiin yleisellä tasolla. Kuitenkin haastatteluissa nousi esiin myös koettuja haasteita, liittyen viestintään, resurssien saatavuuteen, sekä tiettyjen työkalujen soveltavuuteen. Tuloksissa painottui myös vastuullisuus niin arvona, että kilpailuetuna.

Tulosten perusteella esitettiin kehitysehdotuksia viestinnän parantamiseksi, kestävyyyteen liittyvän tuen räätälöimiseksi ja alueellisen koordinoinnin vahvistamista matkailuyritysten kilpailukyyn tukemiseksi.

**Avainsanat: Matkailun Ekosysteemi, Kohdemarkkinointi, Vastuullisuus**

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# 1 Introduction

Finland has attracted international customers for decades with Polar nights, and rural nature. Promotion of the Arctic experience has impacted on the construction of a strong regional tourism presence in Lapland, Northern Finland. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2022) noted the tourism industry as one of the significant contributors to the region's employment and economic growth, together with the forestry and mining industries. The Finnish Government coordinated a tourism strategy together with tourism actors to increase the co-operation and engagement within the field, which is mostly constructed by small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). According to the European Commission (2024), "SMEs are enterprises which have fewer than 250 employees, and have either an annual turnover of less than EUR 50 million or a balance sheet total of less than EUR 43 million" (p. 96). Further, the growing need to develop tourism in a more sustainable direction in line with the European Union was highlighted whilst the uncertain economic and political environment was challenging the local and global economy. Recently, research focusing on responsible tourism emphasized that co-creation is an important element in the development process within tourism ecosystem (Ahonen et al., 2021). The lack of resources is often an issue for SMEs which creates the gap between the perceived actions and what is actually possible in everyday business (Pike, 2018). Therefore, collaborations in the field enable shared resources among other benefits.

Furthermore, as collaborations have an important role in the tourism industry, a shift towards the tourism ecosystem approach has taken place both in practice and in research fields. The approach goes beyond the stakeholder theory as it considers the interconnections between the vast set of actors including the ones that does not form a contractual relationship with others (Hillebrand, 2022) and implies that the cooperations can both benefit and strain the actors within the system (Giannopoulos et al., 2021). It also acknowledges how the ability to influence can be connected to the level they operate in. In literature, also terms *network* and *clusters* are used to issue different tourism actors (Hillebrand, 2022). Further, the official definition by The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2022) states the tourism industry cluster to include accommodation and restaurants, tour operator and guided activities, passenger transport and rental services, and cultural and wellness services. However, in addition to these directly tourism related industries, also indirectly related ones are taken into consideration in the tourism ecosystem perspective (Hillebrand, 2022). This is partly because of the positive economic impacts of tourism, since it is seen to

contribute to regional development more widely (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022). The Ministry estimated that each tourism related euro generates 0,61 euro in other industries, such as retail, construction, and finance. However, ecological and social impacts permeate industrial boundaries and make way for ecosystem thinking. Generally, tourism businesses balance between cooperative and competitive mentality which can build tension between the actors over time and challenge the joint projects (Hillebrand, 2022).

Moreover, in Giannopoulos et al. (2020), the tourism ecosystem is divided into three levels, *micro, meso, and macro levels*, reaching from local community to tourism companies and operators to the national authorities. A macro level actor in scope, Visit Finland, is a national tourism organization (NTO) whose goal is to support Finnish tourism actors and increase customer demand and visibility on the international markets to strengthen the national tourism industry (visit Finland, b.2021). In Yang and Pesonen's (2024) policy brief, Visit Finland's role and impact on the national tourism network was evaluated from the perspective of regional Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) by utilizing hyperlink network analysis." The research suggests that the absence of Visit Finland would lead to significant fragmentation of the network, decreased innovation, and reduced information flow. This likely leads to a loss of competitiveness in the tourism sector, especially in the international markets" (Yang & Pesonen, 2024, p. 1). Based on these preliminary research findings, increased funding was recommended for strengthening the national tourism network. Despite the support from academic research, the budget of Visit Finland was cut from January 2025 onwards, affecting the organization to scale down and indicating the strategic focus to shift from the support given for national actors to the international markets (Visit Finland, 2025). Therefore, it became increasingly relevant for understanding the tourism SMEs' perceptions of the current situation.

Considering that the large stakeholder network has been widely recognized in literature (as cited in Hillebrand, 2022), the SME perspective has been underrepresented (Pike, 2018), even though they represent most of the businesses in tourism industry and contribute on the national service offering. In Seppälä-Esser et al. (2009) the Finnish Tourism Board's (Visit Finland's predecessor) role for the tourism SMEs' resource dependence was found to be moderate, and support was needed in terms of marketing knowledge and destination marketing. Kotler et al. (2020) define "...marketing as the process by which companies engage customers, build strong relationships,

and create customer value in order to capture value from customers in return” (p. 6). More specifically, this process includes five steps, including marketing research, creating a customer-driven marketing strategy, constructing a value-centric marketing program, relationship building, and finally capturing the customer value in the form of purchases. While Visit Finland publishes reports and marketing research, there is a limited number of academic research examining the tourism SMEs’ perspective, and particularly, how they perceive Visit Finland to bring value for their businesses within the national tourism ecosystem. Therefore, a qualitative study brings understanding to this area. By conducting semi-structured interviews, individual experiences can be explored and rich data collected, since the participants can highlight the factors that they find both meaningful and vague in their interaction with Visit Finland. That said, this thesis does not have a dedicated commissioner even though Visit Finland has a central role in it as a representative of a public authority. To conclude, when working on this paper, generative AI was utilized in line with JAMK University of Applied Sciences (n.d.) ethical principles for information retrieval, tutoring and idealization, and outlining the structure. The generated content was critically evaluated to maintain academic integrity.

## **1.1 Objectives and the research question**

This bachelor’s thesis intends to contribute to the field specific academic research by examining tourism ecosystem phenomenon in terms of SME-NTO related literature. The aim is to explore tourism SMEs’ perceptions of how they value a national tourism organization Visit Finland as a member of the tourism ecosystem, by understanding which of Visit Finland’s services benefit their business development and competitiveness. The tourism ecosystem framework is utilized as it highlights the interconnectedness of different tourism actors. By studying how tourism SMEs perceive Visit Finland as a tourism actor, and what value its services bring to them, can reveal valuable insight on their preferences for future support which Visit Finland could consider for the coming marketing strategy. Moreover, this study is relevant and timely, as Visit Finland has gone through an organizational change caused by change negotiations (Visit Finland, 2024), which has implied to shift their strategic focus and hence impact on their service offering. In addition to these academic and social reasons, this study increases my personal understanding of the tourism industry and hence supports my professional growth. Finally, for the main target group, companies located in Lapland were chosen for the interviews as Lapland region is one of Finland’s main tourist destinations and seasoned in tourism development. Therefore, the participants are valid

informants for answering the following questions, which are formed to describe the phenomenon studied from subjective and objective perspectives.

### **Research question**

How do destination marketing and support services provided by Visit Finland help tourism companies to cope in the tourism ecosystem in Lapland?

## **2 Literature Review**

The following section of the study presents findings and relevant concepts from previous research to build a knowledge base that supports answering the research question. This includes defining the tourism ecosystem in Finland, Visit Finland as an organization, its relation to tourism SMEs via destination marketing and sustainable development. In addition to JAMK University of Applied sciences' hand library, the databases Janet Finna and Google scholar were utilized for the information retrieval and finding relevant, peer-reviewed academic literature, also enhancing reports, policy briefs, and statistics by Visit Finland, The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, and UN Tourism (previously known as United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO), the authority of the international tourism development.

### **2.1 The Tourism Ecosystem: Theory**

As mentioned in the introduction, Visit Finland and the tourism SMEs can be considered as a part of the tourism ecosystem. In Hillebrand (2022, p. 517), a modern tourism ecosystem perspective is argued to advocate a deeper understanding of the challenging issues that lie in the tourism value chain and supports actors in coping with the environmental impacts and radical innovation. Further, tourism is defined as follows:

Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure. (UN Tourism, 2025).

During these relatively short, less than one year, time periods outside of one's usual environment, various business opportunities can take place. Tourism companies serve both international and domestic tourists attracted to destinations, natural and man-made attractions, and new experiences, and hence are required to collaborate with other companies (Page, 2015). However, in the tourism ecosystem approach, businesses are only a part of a larger community. To understand how tourism is developed and supported in practice, it's essential to examine the other actors involved and the systems they operate in.

The concept of tourism ecosystem has foundations in biological ecosystem concept and systemic thinking and has similarities with the stakeholder theory (as cited in Hillebrand, 2022). It has been acknowledged in natural sciences, marketing and management studies, and social sciences, in addition to tourism management. In terms of biological ecosystems, living organisms interact with each other, forming an interconnected community within a specific environment both benefiting and restraining the individual actors (Hillebrand, 2022). Similarly, different stakeholders in the tourism industry, such as privately owned businesses, and authorities from different levels (European Commission, 2023, p. 2) are perceived to form an interconnected community. The difference to biological perspective is that the business approach emphasizes value proposition and goes beyond specific regions (Hillebrand, 2022). This is particularly important in the contemporary tourism business due to technological advances with digital platforms such as Airbnb, which has impacted globally on the accommodation industry by giving the common a possibility to provide authentic, local experiences while acting as a service provider.

Furthermore, the tourism ecosystem has foundations as well on Leiper's tourism system model framework from 1979, which described the extent in which the tourism companies and organizations operate (as cited in Fennell & Cooper, 2020). It considers fundamental elements such as *tourists, generating regions, transit routes, destination regions* and *tourist industry*, and connects them to physical, cultural, social, economic, political, and technological environments (as cited in Fennell & Cooper, 2020, p. 11). Despite having a systemic approach, the model is argued to be outdated, partly because it does not consider indirect businesses and industries (such as retail and infrastructure) that support the actors which are directly related to tourism (Fennell & Cooper, 2020; also in Fletcher, 2023). Further, unlike geographically bound clusters, business ecosystems are defined by a shared value proposition rather than location (Hillebrand, 2022). The value proposition means the benefits that can be expected from the product and services that the service

provider has defined (Osterwald et al., 2014). Tourism ecosystems can include global actors and often overlap with other ecosystems, influencing one another. Thus, an individual actor may be central to multiple distinct ecosystems, depending on the service offering (Hillebrand, 2022). One example from Visit Finland's services is the digital platform *Datahub*, which supports tourism companies to increase their market visibility and access to up-to-date tourism statistics. When an outdoor-activity oriented company adds its business details into this free-of-charge platform, it becomes a part of the region's and niche's service offering and can be discovered by various tourism actors from both national and international markets (Visit Finland, b.2021). In this way both the SME and Visit Finland participates in co-creating value for the tourism ecosystem.

Moreover, a tourism ecosystem refers to a dynamic and interdependent network of actors from the public and private sector which co-create value through interaction. As Hillebrand (2022) notes, "it starts from the premise that, ultimately, ecosystem management aims to build and maintain support for the value proposition from ecosystem actors" (p. 520). Each participant can shape the non-linear system in terms of their capabilities and actions, and therefore the interaction's success depends on both how it is coordinated, but also, how these participants perceive the value and relevance of the actions. Hillebrand (2022) conceptualized four distinct dimensions as tourism organizations' capabilities when operating within tourism ecosystems: *Mapping the ecosystem, dealing with ecosystem tension, involving ecosystem actors, and effectuating the ecosystem*. He categorized ecosystem actors based on their influence on and sensitivity to a value proposition and described them as *interdependent, heterogeneous, and dynamic members* of the ecosystem. The capabilities are supported by organizational elements such as knowledge, skills, technical systems, and shared norms. By identifying the linkages on who influences (either directly or indirectly) their business, organizations are more aware of the opportunities and threats of these interconnections and can better position themselves strategically. Since different stakeholders have their own preferences that might be opponent to other actors, the increased tension can cause conflicts in the ecosystem (Hillebrand, 2022). Consequently, the tension might challenge interactions and impact on the perceived outcome.

Moreover, due to the ever-changing nature of the ecosystem, actors are continuously faced with new situations they must respond and adapt to, which may result in one actor becoming more or less relevant within the ecosystem over time. In Giannopoulos et al.'s (2020) service-ecosystem

framework, stakeholder interactions were examined by applying institutional theory to identify three-level service-ecosystem. It emphasized the value co-creation and engagement within this system, considering regional, national and international levels, also aligning with modern non-linear ecosystem, where actors are interconnected through dynamic, value-driven relationships. Conclusively, even though they are not utilized in the analysis phase per se, these earlier studies help to understand the general ecosystem logic and reflect on the tourism ecosystem in Lapland, where national-level actor Visit Finland influences alongside SMEs and regional tourism actors.

## **2.2 Tourism in Finland**

As described in the introduction of this paper, tourism in Finland is seen as an important industry in terms of its social and economic impacts. As there is a wide network of actors within the Finnish tourism industry, the main actors are presented in table 1, in which the roles and responsibilities are described based on the official publication by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2022, pp. 31–34). The table gives a clear overview of how actors are positioned in the tourism industry. Including public sector institutions, national tourism organization, regional tourism organization, development bodies, research and education institutions and finally tourism businesses, this categorization clarifies the systemic context in which tourism SMEs operate in and presents the different levels of support and interaction available to them. The current business environment is about to recover to its pre-pandemic conditions, since according to the latest accounts by Visit Finland (b.2025), total tourism demand reached 16.6 billion euros in 2024, slightly surpassing the 2019 figure of 16.5 billion euros. Tourism's share of Finland's GDP was 2.4% in 2024, almost reaching the 2019 peak of 2.8%. Employment in tourism sectors recovered to 146,600 jobs in 2023, representing 5.3% of the total workforce. Finland's tourism strategy expects to reach 20 billion euros in tourism demand by 2028, meaning that tourism is forecasted to grow well beyond its pre-pandemic accounts.

The current national tourism strategy is updated from the 2019 version and covers the period 2022–2028. Its effectiveness is followed by the Tourism forum, which consists of various tourism actors from both the private and public sectors. A complete follow-up on its effectiveness is evaluated every two years, but the accounts annually. In the December 2024 gathering, it was stated that Business Finland will focus on sales growth and destination marketing, while measures to enhance competitiveness will be scaled back and target markets narrowed (The Ministry of Economic

Affairs and Employment, 2024). As seen in table 1, Visit Finland operates under the authority of Business Finland, which is a semi-governmental body with a legal obligation to promote inbound tourism (Visit Finland, b.2021).

Table 1. Finnish tourism actors and their roles. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. (2022).

<b>Actor</b>	<b>Main Roles &amp; Responsibilities<sup>1</sup></b>
Public Sector (e.g. Ministries, Metsähallitus, ELY, municipalities)	Develop a stable, sustainable, and competitive environment for tourism through legislation, equal opportunities, funding tools, and infrastructure investments. Promote Finland's image and support innovation and collaboration.
Business Finland	Support the modernization of industries via technology and innovation, encourage international connections, foreign investment, and tourism to Finland.
<b>Visit Finland (part of Business Finland)</b>	Lead Finland's international tourism branding, assist businesses in marketing and sales, provide research, and support product development and stakeholder cooperation.
Regional Tourism Organizations (RTO, or Destination Management Organization, DMO)	Coordinate local tourism efforts, bundle services into larger offerings, manage joint marketing efforts, ensure service continuity, and act as intermediaries with Visit Finland.
Regional Development Companies	Deliver business advisory services, attract investment to their regions, and oversee tourism projects aligned with local strategies.
Research & Education Institutions	Provide education and training for tourism professionals, support skill development, produce research for sustainable tourism, and manage regional R&D projects.
<b>Tourism companies (SMEs)</b>	Handle their own business development and marketing, engage in tourism networks, and often participate in advocacy through industry associations.

Furthermore, the strategic focus points that help reach the previously presented national tourism development goals are based on the current tourism trends, which were identified as culturally

authentic, personalized experiences and intangible luxury, wellbeing tourism, and digital connectivity (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022). Aligning with these focus points, Visit Finland's current marketing strategy covers the period 2021–2025 in which Finland is visioned as the most sustainable destination that brings value to society and clientele (Visit Finland, b.2021). The goal is to market Finland as a safe, spacious, and sustainable year-round destination, and to achieve these strategic goals, Visit Finland has different measures for each theme (Tourism demand, Sustainable tourism, Digitalization, Knowledge management, Network and collaborations). Since the latest gathering of Tourism forum issued Business Finland's reductions on measures in strengthening competitiveness, Visit Finland's measures on digitalization, knowledge management, network and collaborations might be at risk of being reduced, as they are connected to competitiveness in their strategy (Visit Finland, b.2021). Currently, Business Finland and EU provide co-financing for growth-oriented companies when the emphasis is on digitalization, sustainability, and internationalization, hitting the similar targets (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022). If this hypothesis on reduction were the case, the support for tourism SMEs could decrease from many perspectives. Fletcher et al. (2018) maintains that NTOs are in most cases impacted by political decisions challenging them to reach their goals. Nevertheless, since the municipalities, regional tourism organizations and regional development Companies have active cooperations with tourism companies, it is possible that some responsibilities are shared with them.

### **2.3 Visit Finland's responsibilities**

According to Fletcher et al. (2018), European NTOs differ from each other in their relation to the government, mentioning that for example NTOs in Eastern Europe, France, and Spain are governmental bodies, comparing to others which only receive financial support such as United Kingdom. In addition to marketing, development and market research are identified as the most important measures by NTOs, often ignoring the promotion of domestic tourism. Further, Visit Finland is financed by the government, with responsibilities such as international brand building, product marketing, and business-to-business measures (Visit Finland, b.2021). Visit Finland has also an advisory role, providing reports and market research for the tourism industry so that the service providers can manage changing customer demand (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022). One particularly important topic for advising tourism actors is sustainability. Visit Finland established Sustainable Travel Finland –program in 2020 to offer practical advice on how

to make business more sustainable and sustainably, as in applying long-term thinking and considering ecological, economic, and social aspects of the business measures (Visit Finland, n.d.). According to the statistics, in September 2023, the seven-step program was completed by five destinations, and 367 tourism companies. After completing the program, participants can obtain the STF-certificate, which they can apply for responsible marketing communication.

About marketing measures Fletcher et al. (2018) mentions that they have the largest employment effect when interactions with overseas offices are included. Listing both traditional and digital marketing measures, such as website maintenance, marketing campaigns and publicity materials, content creation, media and the travel trade sales promotions, most of them promote international marketing. The travel trade promotion includes familiarization trips which are provided by the host, participating in international travel trade events, and sending regular publications (p. 456). This is done to generate sales, media exposure, and build customer relations through networking. During the planning period 2022–2025, Visit Finland has focused on maximizing their service offering in Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom for short-term effects, and enhances market potential with proactive sales in USA, France, Spain and Italy, Japan, Russia, India, and China for long-term benefits, in addition to other potential markets they've recognized (Visit Finland, b.2021, p. 26). However, in 2025 the emphasis is on United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain and Italy, and USA, Japan, and China, which are overlooked in collaboration with the overseas offices (Visit Finland, a.2025).

Moreover, NTOs have placed greater focus on building partnerships, as it seems to improve local community involvement and connections between tourists and local residents, ultimately leading to better customer experiences (Fletcher et al., 2018). Visit Finland interacts with SMEs through Regional travel organizations (RTOs) or Destination management organizations (DMOs), whose main responsibility is to manage the tourism development in the region and act as a uniting head for different stakeholders (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022). In Finland, these tourism actors differ in scale and methods but are responsible for managing larger service offerings in cooperation with tourism companies. In Fletcher et al. (2018), DMOs are indicated as the most active and engaged stakeholders for tourism companies, as they approach destinations holistically considering local community, tourist experiences, and tourism actors, with a similar approach to tourism ecosystem. However, it is also mentioned that these cooperations are usually

formed because of the need to survive in the competitive tourism industry, rather than only goodwill.

## **2.4 Tourism SMEs operating in Lapland**

Finland's northernmost region, Lapland, holds an important position in the country's tourism landscape. It has become a significant destination for both domestic and international tourists because of the Arctic environment promotion, indigenous Sámi culture, and winter attractions such as the Northern Lights and Santa Claus Village (Kugapi et al., 2020). The seasonality of the tourism demand is an issue for the service providers as well as the environment and Visit Finland has strategically improved the situation by promoting other seasons (Visit Finland, b.2021). Additionally, its remoteness challenges achieving sustainability goals, as it's dependent from air travel. The city of Rovaniemi experienced overcrowding in the winter season 2024-2025, as overnight stays increased from the previous year by approximately 20% with 1.1 million overnight stays between November-March (Yle, 2025). Even though an increase in tourism demand is good for the economy it gives an opportunity for the regional actors, as in DMOs, and tourism companies to reflect if there are indicators of increased overtourism risk for the future, and if it could be mitigated by collaborations, or even prevented. Tourism SMEs form the foundation for the Finnish tourism industry, especially in regions like Lapland. In 2019, the Finnish tourism industry involved 28,000 companies of which most were microenterprises (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022). These businesses provide experiences that define a destination brand and customer satisfaction. Pike (2018) states that small enterprises experience resource scarcity and therefore they need to apply different marketing strategies than larger companies to stay competitive, arguing that collaborations with other tourism actors, particularly mentioning DMOs, are essential for them. He emphasizes that entrepreneurs benefit from a marketing-oriented approach when interacting with stakeholders. According to Pike (2018), particularly the contemporary clientele demands high-quality services, arguing that the common is more aware of the good service than ever before. If a service provider fails to deliver satisfactory experience, this may influence negatively on the overall destination image.

As some tourism actors had a broad responsibility description by the government (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022), tourism companies' obligations were to manage their own business and keep track on the needs on talent management and research and development,

in addition to managing their own marketing and product sales, and collaborate with other actors in the region. In Fletcher et al. (2018), this activity is called destination collaboration, mentioning that especially tourism actors located in remote areas can broaden the destination domain by collaborating with others which can bring value to both parties. However, competition and mistrust can inhibit collaboration within destinations, and the small size often limits their ability to independently market internationally. Therefore, national tourism organizations, such as Visit Finland, can position as essential ecosystem actors that can strengthen SMEs' visibility, create possibilities to collaborate with other stakeholders, and offer strategic tools such as Datahub or STF.

### 3 Implementation

According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), qualitative research can be conducted with an empirical or theoretical approach, and disciplines differ in how objectivity is considered, and how the theoretical frameworks are used. They stated that studies conducted with such an approach can differ greatly from each other because of the field-specific traditions. This methodological part presents reasoning for choosing the determinants for gathering and analyzing the research data.

#### 3.1 Qualitative analysis

The qualitative approach is a widely used research method because of its advantage in providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). While the quantitative approach utilizes statistics and answers the question "how many...", in qualitative approach words and phrases are utilized for revealing how the social reality is formed by individuals, groups and cultures (Holloway, p. 1, 1997). Moreover, Creswell (1998) states that it is utilized to understand the problems that people encounter from a wider perspective, by conducting research in a natural setting. Conclusively, researchers using qualitative approach aim to learn the meanings that the participants have and give on the studied problem or phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). It was pointed out that the required depth to form, for example, a phenomenological study is determined by the way the respondents reflect on their perceptions, experiences and/or the reasons behind the thinking. The aim is to provide a *thick description* of these experiences and interpretations, for the readers to understand the respondents' social reality (as cited in Holloway, 1997).

## 3.2 Collection and description of data

According to Holloway (1997), the chosen data collection method such as interview and observation depends on as well as impacts to the perceived outcome. The semi-structured interview method was chosen as it enabled utilizing preplanned, open-ended questions to maintain the focus on the relevant information, still leaving room for participants personal insights on the topic (Holloway, 1997). This method is often used by early researchers, as the structure provides some frames for the interview setting, but enough flexibility to adjust to the emerging content in each interview. Consequently, as each participant is asked the same questions maintaining the same base structure in each interview, the themes discussed may lead the conversation to different topics through specifying questions raised during the interview, considering their relevance to the topic.

### Interviews

As mentioned earlier, the tourism ecosystem has a sturdy foundation in Lapland. Therefore, three tourism SMEs from this area were chosen for the research. From these companies, three tourism managers with sales or marketing orientation were interviewed. In 2023, the turnovers varied from 1,7 million to 3 million Euros, employing two to 31 people. The case companies were oriented on outdoor activity services and animal tourism, of which they targeted both national and global markets. Finally, the recorded interviews were conducted in Finnish, since it was the participants' mother tongue. The interviews were conducted in September-October 2024 remotely via Microsoft Teams -software due to distance, and they lasted approximately 30 minutes. Since the participants had received the questions beforehand, they were given the opportunity to prepare themselves for the occasion. However, they also had time to discuss the topic with others and therefore a chance to be influenced. Still, the participants discussed their personal experiences without any indication of being influenced. Following the nature of semi-structured interviews, each discussion had its own storyline. The interview questions were formed to gain understanding on tourism SMEs perceptions of Visit Finland's role for their business, its impact on region's development, and for understanding the nuances affecting the tourism ecosystem. Due to the topicality of Visit Finland's organizational change, it was embedded in the third question. The aim was to reveal the factors that the participants were the most satisfied and valued with. The questions can be viewed in Appendix 1.

### 3.3 Content analysis

After conducting the interviews, the collected data must be prepared (transcribed), analyzed, and reported (Elo et al., 2022). According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), content analysis offers a way to analyze written data objectively and systematically to find patterns or themes and reach logical conclusions. The emphasis is on the content rather than the theories as it better describes the true social reality (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009), and in this case, the perceptions of the participants. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) state that content analysis can be applied as a theoretical framework, or an individual method, hence it is also applicable for describing quantitative data. In content analysis, data is analyzed by *categorizing*, *thematizing*, or *coding*. It can be divided into deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches, depending on whether the analysis is based on a theory or content or a combination of both. Moreover, in a phenomenological study the analysis is generally interpretive, whereas in inductive analysis method for example, the findings are also observed objectively, but in aim to form a theory or generate patterns and work hypotheses (Holloway, 1997; also in Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Considering that the aim of this research is not to produce a new theory but to understand the existing phenomenon, an interpretive approach and thematizing is followed.

Agreeing with Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), content analysis is challenging to conduct, as in research theoretical framework is generally prioritized yet, in this approach, it should only act as a support element for understanding the research foundations and be irrelevant of the findings. The main difficulty is the differentiation between the existing interpretations and prejudices that researchers have and to see pass them to achieve objectivity when facing the research data. They maintain that the reliability of the study can be increased when researcher is aware and transparent about these factors that may affect the outcome of the study, and therefore, need to be considered especially by beginning researchers. Personally, the awareness of these different analysis forms increases the probability of success in achieving objectivity in the analysis phase. From one perspective, an interpretive approach is manageable still during data collection phase but from that onwards an abductive approach starts influencing (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 114). In an abductive approach, the presence of existing theories is acknowledged to exist yet; the collected data remains the main resource for the analysis.

Furthermore, a widely utilized method of *thematizing* was chosen for the analysis of organizing and constructing the collected data. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), the aim of thematizing is to identify themes relevant to answering research questions. The process begins by reviewing the transcribed data from the filler words so that the content is easier to interpret. Then, the data is reviewed several times to recognize the relevant content in relation to the research topic. Finally, after finding the relevant information from the data, it is ready for interpretation. In terms of this analysis, the initial topics revealed implications of the need to reformulate the research question, but now it answers well to the research question.

## 4 The Perceptions

In this section, the findings of the collected data are introduced for further interpretation. After thematizing, a table (in Appendix 2.) was created to visualize the results and to support the analysis process. Focusing on the roles and relationships, the main themes were formed as *Strategic value of Visit Finland*, *Collaborations and co-creation potential*, *Communication and access issues*, and *Sustainability as a priority*. The themes handle the needs and challenges companies face in everyday life, and their relation to other tourism actors. The details of how many participants discussed each topic are highlighted in the table for more transparency. Finally, these themes bring light into tourism SMEs' social realities from different viewpoints. The interviews began with mapping the contemporary situation on how aware the participants were about Visit Finland's activities.

### 4.1 Strategic value of Visit Finland

This theme contains issues related to the perceived strategic value that Visit Finland's operations bring to the participants' businesses. The main theme considers four different sub-themes, *Visibility*, *STF*, *Seasonality*, and *Destination marketing*. In terms of Visibility, the issues that the respondents perceived as the most relevant were related to the international marketing fairs, FAM-trips organized in the region, and the digital platform Datahub. First, destination marketing measures were highlighted by each respondent as one of the most important activities Visit Finland does for the domestic tourism. Each respondent perceived FAM-trips important for promoting tourism in the region, and Visit Finland was said to have an important role in organizing them in cooperation with regional actors. One of the respondents stated that still, there is no guarantee whether the

efforts to participate in and organize such events will increase sales, saying that it is impossible to measure, and can only be observed as the increased clientele groups such as Chinese. This was taken further to mention that measurability and follow-up would be easier if the company organized these kinds of events directly with the potential buyers, since then it would be easier to influence on the decision-making process and maintain the customer relationship. However, the lack of resources was noted to restrict taking action. All respondents stated that they would not have the resources to maintain these activities by themselves affecting that Visit Finland's measures are seen as valuable at the company level. It was also questioned whether the regional authorities would have the same possibility to maintain the measures on this level if Visit Finland's focus was to shift, since the municipalities are battling with strict budgets and this would most likely mean the need for extra recruitment, there would probably be some prioritizing.

In the same breath, it was mentioned that international fairs is one particularly expensive activity that Visit Finland takes part in, and there was controversy on whether attending many fairs is justified considering the economic situation. One respondent stated that establishing a complete section abroad is expensive while agreeing that international marketing is important. Another respondent stated these fairs to be a crucial customer acquisition tool for their company as they attend many fairs annually. Further, the respondent stated that their personal participation at the fairs enables networking with other stakeholders, deepens cooperation particularly with regional Visit -organization and companies, and affects positively on sales growth which they can measure in detail while being on the spot, and thus, the attendance fee is seen as an investment for the future. One of the respondents did not see the fairs as a contemporary marketing measure in today's technology-driven markets, arguing that it is made very accessible for the tour operators to find the service providers directly without third parties. Also, the word of mouth (WOM) recommendation was mentioned to be so successful that there is no need to focus on marketing that much, and therefore they did not find it relevant to putting too much effort into marketing. Finally, Visit Finland's Datahub was highlighted as an important marketing visibility tool for sharing business information with other stakeholders, particularly on the websites of regional Visit -organizations, and Metsähallitus. The other respondent mentioned using it every day to view regional statistics and found it to be a relevant strategic tool.

The second sub-theme was constructed around STF-program, which was described as a determinant for sales. Two respondents stated that Finland's sustainability program gives a competitive advantage in the markets especially in the eyes of European tour operators. For this reason, they perceived the STF-certificate to bring them leverage over businesses which do not have them. Further, the third sub-theme Seasonality included only few notions which highlighted the satisfaction towards Visit Finland's measures for increasing the demand on low season. Visit Finland also hosts a *Sustainable routes* -project which aims to create a network of STF-certified tourism operators for providing the customers an easy-access information for planning a trip or tour. It was mentioned that the respondent had participated in the planning workshops already some time ago when the project was still under development but was not sure how the planning had progressed. Finally, the Destination marketing as the fourth sub-theme combined statements about how Visit Finland's actions support company's long-term thinking. One respondent stated that currently there is a marketing project that Visit Finland hosts, for which the companies will produce and receive marketing material from. Further, one respondent pointed out that technology has changed the way companies can be found by tour operators. In conclusion, while national-level marketing and visibility services are highly valued, the ability of SMEs to access and benefit from them often depends on the strength of regional collaboration. Therefore, examining how these partnerships function and what co-creation opportunities exist provides a fuller picture of how tourism companies manage within the ecosystem.

## **4.2 Collaborations and co-creation potential**

The respondents pointed out topics relating to the interactions with other tourism actors and their cooperative element, what supports their growth, and what they see bringing value in the future. Therefore, the Collaborations and co-creation potential theme was divided into sub-themes, such as *Regional actors*, *Training and webinars*, and *Future hopes*. Regarding the first sub-theme Regional actors, the topics mentioned by each respondent related to collaborations and their impact on the companies. First, each respondent saw collaborations essential for regional Visit-organization as a primary information source for regional tourism matters and found them being directly influenced by Visit Finland and hence, being indirectly influenced themselves as well. One respondent mentioned that collaborations with others allow individual actors to participate in regional tourism planning via co-creative projects. One said that most likely their participation in

fairs would drop if there would not be someone planning and organizing the trips and actively asking them to join. One respondent stated that Visit Finland's role is being an organization that promotes all the regions together, and it has a unifying approach to these interactions. Moreover, during the pandemic, the collaborations proved impactful as with strong established value chains, some service providers had excessive cash flow despite minimal marketing efforts after being in the end of the line, as pointed out by one respondent.

The STF-program was seen to unify tourism companies in terms of a sustainable approach and also perceived to have co-creative potential. Thus, the second sub-theme Training and webinars presents statements on how Visit Finland supports tourism actors' professional growth. Two respondents have completed the STF-program and have the STF-certificate and access to additional information in STF-hub. Moreover, one of the respondents pointed out that Visit Finland organized informative webinars on responsible tourism and perceives it important that sustainability is valued among stakeholders, of which another respondent stated that it is one of the determinants for collaborations with subcontractors.

One respondent hoped for an update on the certificates to fit the demands of different niches, mentioning that since STF-program considers mainly ecological issues, for example the *Green activities certificate* could offer a solution. Also, two respondents highlighted the need for developing the products for Summer, as it has been under discussion. Considering the marketing measures, it was mentioned that they should be very carefully considered, as the respondent had some poor experiences from years ago from influencer marketing gone wrong. It was said that it took a lot of resources compared to the brought value, and the respondent hoped that in such projects all the participants, especially regional representatives, would be engaged in the planning process. Despite the positive impacts of regional collaboration, several respondents pointed to challenges in communication and unclear responsibilities among tourism actors. These issues can limit the effectiveness of partnerships and create confusion about who is responsible for what, making it necessary to explore the barriers SMEs face in accessing support.

### **4.3 Communication and access issues**

The third theme pinpoints challenges related to communication and access, and includes sub-themes on regional projects, lack of direct communication, and resource limitations. Although

none of these issues were perceived as dominant in the interviews, they offer another perspective on stakeholder relationships. Some initial uncertainty emerged during one interview, where a respondent found it difficult to make separation between events organized by the regional Visit-organization and those by Visit Finland. Concerns were also raised about potential overlap between projects, particularly in the absence of centralized coordination by a lead organization such as Visit Finland. The presence of multiple regional actors, such as Lapinliitto, Finnish Lapland Tourist Board ry (LME), and House of Lapland, alongside private sector stakeholders, can lead to overlapping initiatives depending on their interests. A previously mentioned case related to influencer marketing also reflected communication challenges. The respondent felt they did not receive adequate value from the collaboration, possibly due to unclear expectations. However, it was emphasized that this experience took place several years ago and that communication has since improved under Visit Finland's coordination.

Another issue raised was the difficulty of measuring the impact of FAM trips, especially in terms of tracking follow-up sales, which was described as a significant challenge. Respondents also noted that direct communication with Visit Finland was active during the STF training process, but became less frequent afterward. Regarding resource limitations, all respondents pointed out that restricted resources affect their operations in different ways. For instance, one respondent mentioned that the demands of daily business leave little time for tasks like market research or reviewing databases, sometimes not even for reading emails. Despite these structural and resource-related constraints, sustainability remained a consistent priority across all interviews. Even when external support mechanisms were unclear or insufficient, the commitment to sustainable values persisted, underlining both the strategic and ethical significance of sustainability for tourism SMEs.

#### **4.4 Sustainability as a priority**

Sustainability raised as a foundational theme across all interviews. As Visit Finland's actions related to the Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) program were mentioned repeatedly, these insights were organized into a dedicated sub-theme. In addition, since values were closely linked to a sustainable approach, they were highlighted under a separate sub-theme. All respondents viewed the STF program as Visit Finland's most significant effort to encourage companies to adopt sustainable tourism practices and to communicate their sustainability efforts. Under the Values sub-theme, all

respondents identified sustainability as an important part of their daily operations, even though not all of them were STF-certified. While Visit Finland's national-level sustainability initiatives were generally regarded as important, one respondent raised concerns about the potential for greenwashing if sustainability certifications can simply be purchased. Sustainability was also described as a key factor in choosing and cooperating with subcontractors. In summary, sustainability was seen not only as a value-based commitment but also as a strategic necessity shaped by market expectations and certification systems. These findings, together with previously discussed themes, illustrate how tourism SMEs operate within the tourism ecosystem by relying on both formal support mechanisms and informal strategies. The following discussion reflects on these findings in relation to existing literature, examining how they confirm or challenge current perspectives on destination marketing, collaboration, and ecosystem dynamics in tourism.

## **5 Discussion**

The discussion section aims to reflect the analyzed data for answering the research question on the role Visit Finland has on tourism SMEs, considering the tourism ecosystem in Lapland. The research was to understand the social reality in which Lapland tourism SMEs operate in and how they benefit from Visit Finland's presence within the tourism ecosystem. The results seem to implicate that there are multiple dimensions on how Visit Finland influences on these companies, particularly focusing on destination marketing and support services. The findings reveal that while Visit Finland provides important support for visibility and sustainability, there are still challenges related to communication, accessibility, and the practical use of available tools. The following discussion compares these findings with existing research.

### **5.1 Strategic support and destination marketing**

The results indicate that tourism SMEs view Visit Finland's efforts in international marketing, FAM-trips, and fairs as highly valuable. These tools offer visibility that small companies could not otherwise afford due to resource limitations. This supports Yang and Pesonen's (2024) view that Visit Finland is a key factor in the tourism network, and its absence could weaken innovation and reduce competitiveness. However, the findings also show variation in how SMEs perceive the actual impact of these tools. For some, fairs are essential for direct networking and customer acquisition,

while others see them as outdated in today's digital environment. This suggests that while destination marketing remains important, its effectiveness is not uniform and may depend on the business model or existing customer base. Hillebrand (2022) highlights that tourism ecosystems consist of diverse and interconnected actors operating at different levels, and that macro-level actors like Visit Finland influence the overall coordination and flow of information. The findings reflect this, showing that while strategic tools exist, the degree to which they support SMEs depends on how effectively they are connected to the everyday realities of smaller operators.

## **5.2 Collaboration and the role of regional actors**

Regional Visit-organizations emerged as critical intermediaries between SMEs and Visit Finland. This confirms the tourism ecosystem model's emphasis on multi-level relationships (Giannopoulos et al., 2020). The respondents highlighted that collaboration enables participation in national projects, especially when time and knowledge are limited. However, power relations and dependency were also implied, especially when participation relies on being invited or supported. Hillebrand (2022) notes that ecosystems can both benefit and strain the actors within them. This was visible in the varied access SMEs had to collaborative projects and fairs, depending on how well they were connected to regional networks. While cooperation allows for shared resources and increased participation, it also risks reinforcing structural inequalities if not all actors have equal access or voice in decision-making. These results reflect that while co-creation and collaboration are valued, they require balanced and well-managed coordination to be truly effective. The presence of strong regional actors helps SMEs cope, but also creates variations in access across the ecosystem.

## **5.3 Communication, access, and systemic gaps**

Respondents described challenges related to role confusion, overlapping responsibilities between regional and national actors, and limited direct communication with Visit Finland. Although not dominating the interviews, these issues influenced how SMEs perceived their ability to engage with national-level support and projects. From an ecosystem perspective, Hillebrand (2022) emphasizes the importance of transparency and coordination across the system. Without clearly defined roles and consistent communication, the potential of macro-level actors to support micro-

level businesses is weakened. These findings underline the need to improve communication pathways and ensure that SMEs can navigate the ecosystem without relying solely on strong regional connections or informal relationships. Resource limitations further complicated access, as many SMEs lacked the time or staff capacity to fully utilize the tools available to them, such as reports or marketing data. These internal barriers reinforce the idea that accessibility is not only about availability but also about usability within the operational realities of small businesses.

#### **5.4 Sustainability as strategy and value**

Sustainability was a shared value among all respondents, whether or not they held the STF certificate. The STF program was seen to enhance credibility, particularly in the eyes of international buyers. This aligns with Ahonen et al. (2021), who suggest that co-creation and shared sustainability practices are increasingly important in tourism development. Still, not all respondents felt that the certificate matched their specific business, pointing to a need for more flexible or niche-focused sustainability support. Hillebrand (2022) frames sustainability as a cross-cutting theme that affects actors across ecosystem levels and boundaries. The results demonstrate that sustainability is embedded in the daily values of SMEs but must be supported in a way that acknowledges their diversity and operational limitations. If tools like the STF program are perceived as inflexible or symbolic, they risk creating barriers instead of enabling progress. These insights show that sustainability is not only a regulatory expectation but also a competitive asset. However, its implementation is influenced by the compatibility of the tools with SME realities. Reflecting on this, it is clear that sustainability programs should be adapted with SME diversity in mind to avoid becoming symbolic or burdensome.

To summarize, this discussion section examined how tourism SMEs in Lapland perceive the support and services provided by Visit Finland within the tourism ecosystem. The findings show that while Visit Finland plays a valuable role in strategic areas like destination marketing, international visibility, and sustainability, the benefits are not equally accessible to all SMEs. Participation often depends on regional collaboration and available resources. The discussion highlights the need for co-created, flexible support services that reflect the diversity of tourism SMEs and hence, improving communication, ensuring access, and strengthening coordination across ecosystem levels are essential steps for building resilience and long-term competitiveness in the tourism sector.

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis explored how tourism SMEs in Lapland perceive the support and destination marketing services provided by Visit Finland, and how these services help them cope within the tourism ecosystem. The study was based on semi-structured interviews with SMEs operating in Lapland, a region where tourism is a significant economic driver. The results showed that Visit Finland plays a strategic role in providing visibility, international reach, and sustainability tools. Services such as FAM-trips, international fairs, and the Datahub platform were appreciated, especially because most tourism SMEs do not have the internal resources to carry out such actions by themselves. The STF-program was also presented as an important tool, although it was questioned due to its suitability for certain niches. Sustainability was found to be both a shared value and strategic consideration across all participating companies, especially in regard to visibility. At the same time, the findings highlighted key challenges. SMEs often experience limited access to information, lack of direct communication with Visit Finland, and confusion over the division of responsibilities among regional and national tourism actors. Regional Visit-organizations were identified as essential intermediaries, but the level of support may vary depending on the region and available resources.

These results align with Hillebrand's (2022) tourism ecosystem perspective, which emphasizes the complex interconnections and power dynamics within tourism ecosystems. The tourism SMEs are not isolated actors, but part of a system where both direct and indirect relationships shape their ability to act, as seen in how collaborations can enable tourism actors to influence their regional tourism development. While Visit Finland provides essential tools at the macro level, the true impact depends on how well these tools are accessed and implemented through meso-level actors, such as regional organizations. Addressing issues in access, communication, and coordination will be essential for building a more resilient and inclusive tourism ecosystem. This can be reflected to the main responsibilities of these organizations, as regional tourism actors have the mandate to interact with tourism SMEs, in contrast to Visit Finland.

These results support maintaining a multi-level, ecosystem-based approach to tourism development. National organizations like Visit Finland provide essential tools, but their impact is shaped by local collaboration and SME capacity. As Visit Finland undergoes strategic changes and resource

reductions, understanding the needs and realities of the tourism SMEs becomes even more important. In practical terms, this study suggests the need for more flexible and personalized sustainability tools, and continued support for regional coordination with emphasis on communication. Further research could expand the perspective by including more regions or by comparing experiences across different sectors within tourism and utilizing the triangulation method to allow a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

## **6.1 Limitations**

Like any research, this study has its limitations. This research is a small scale study, and the number of interviews is limited to three tourism SMEs operating in Lapland, hence the results are not generalizable to all tourism businesses in Finland or even the broader Lapland region. This was partly due to time constraints, as originally, this bachelor's thesis was planned to be finalized in December 2024. A wider target group would have given more insight into the phenomenon itself, as this study only focused on the company perspective, despite it being important. The semi-structured method relies on participants' willingness and ability to express themselves, which might affect the responses' focus and depth. Also, the interview setting challenges the beginning researcher, as it requires skills to listen and interpret the topics discussed simultaneously.

## **6.2 Reliability and ethicality**

According to the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2023), research integrity must be followed throughout the research, which should be conducted with a reliable, honest, respectful, and accountable manner. This part of the paper reflects the research process from the beginning to the end, and how these principles were achieved. A data management plan was created. In the beginning of the work, it was decided that only peer-reviewed academic resources will be utilized for the research as their reliability is validated. However, due to the large descriptive section constructed for introducing the Finnish tourism industry, a variety of reports were utilized to access relevant information for creating valid knowledge base. As most of the reports from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment's, Visit Finland's and Business Finland's databases, they can be considered as reliable sources. In some cases where there was no access to primary sources, secondary sources were utilized. This was done only if the content was the most relevant

for understanding the topic. Together these materials formed a reference list which included a selection of reliable sources.

When conducting the data collection, prior planning was made to identify and mitigate anything that might occur during the interview and impact on trust formation and maintaining an ethical manner. This was confirmed with maintaining transparent communication with the participants, such as sending the interview questions, consent form, and the Teams-invitation prior the meeting, and by informing the interview structure in the beginning of the interview session. Holloway (1997) maintains that these procedures are part of ethical considerations, which include mitigating the chance of causing any harm for the participants. Throughout the analysis, research methodology was followed in detail, and reporting was conducted by maintaining neutrality and self-reflection free from evaluation. Discussion is conducted on the basis of the collected data, and the knowledge base is used for reflection. Finally, limitations of the research are clearly stated as they affect in the reliability of this study.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview questions

<p>1. What kind of role Visit Finland has for your organization?</p> <p>In Finnish: Millainen rooli Visit Finlandilla on edustamasi yrityksen liiketoiminnalle?</p>
<p>2. How do you perceive Visit Finland's role in building a responsible country brand has influenced the development of tourism in Lapland?</p> <p>In Finnish: Miten koet Visit Finlandin roolin vastuullisen maabrändin rakentamisessa vaikuttaneen Lapin matkailun kehitykseen?</p>
<p>3. What kind of direct or indirect impacts do you believe Visit Finland's resource cuts will have on your organization or the regional development in the future?</p> <p>In Finnish: Millaisia suoria tai epäsuoria vaikutuksia uskot Visit Finlandin budjettileikkauksen tuovan edustamasi yrityksen ja alueen kehitykseen tulevaisuudessa?</p>

## Appendix 2. Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Responses	Number of respondents
<b>Strategic value of Visit Finland</b>	Visibility	Company information in Datahub from which the data goes to other stakeholders	3
		VF's inputs on international marketing are important for the region	3
		It is important for us to attend on international events, and if being unable to do that will impact negatively on our company's visibility, networking, and growth	1
		VF's role in searching and organizing international sales events is important	1
		FAM-trips and tournees are an important customer acquisition tool for the region	3
		We already have an established customer base and WOM-recommendations. There is no immediate need for intense marketing	1
		The division of 4 areas is beneficial especially for Lakeland region	1
	STF	The European travel organizers value sustainability and some are restricted to buy only from sustainably certified suppliers. Having STF-certificate is an important factor when they choose their destinations	2
		STF-certificate brings competitive advantage	2
	Seasonality	Visit Finland has done important work for seasonality issues	3
	Destination marketing	VF activities support long-term thinking	3
		Marketing material	1
		The marketing need has changed because companies can be found globally by the stakeholders via internet	1
	<b>Collaborations and co-creation potential</b>	Regional actors	VF communicates indirectly through regional actors
STF-program has had a cocreative element			3
Primarily we interact with regional Visit-organization in regional matters			3
Regional tourism actors are an important resource			3
Projects to increase demand on Summer season			2
We got marketing material from regional project			1
We have participated various international fairs in cooperation with Visit-organizations			1
Collaborations with other tourism actors, especially VF, enables FAM-trips in the region			3
Unclear about the roles regarding regional tourism actors, for example municipal tourism authorities.			2
Some tourism companies locating in the end of the value-chain have such strong cooperations with local			1

		company and tour operator, they get customers without too much effort	
	Training and webinars	Sustainable matters	
		We have completed the STF-program	2
		Webinars on responsible communication	1
		In recent years, not many events in which Visit Finland would have attending to	1
	Future hopes	Support with product development for Summer	2
		Influencer marketing should be managed by regional actors	1
		Information about the certificates: The existing selection and suitability for different niches (E.g., Green activities)	1
		More communicating about the certificates	1
		More information about the marketing	2
<b>Communication and access issues</b>	Regional projects	Uncertainties whether some events are organized by regional Visit-organization or Visit Finland	1
		Should be controlled by regional tourism actors. A poor experience from before, as influencer marketing project failed to deliver (managed by NTO)	1
		Overlaps occur when different actors work together in a silo	1
	Lack of direct communication	The sales follow-up after fairs or FAM-trips is challenging	2
		During STF-training we had a straight line with VF	1
	Resource limitations	No time to do market research and view Visit Finland's reports	1
		Participation in events decreases	2
		Many regional tourism actor has limited resources	3
<b>Sustainability as a priority</b>	STF-program	VF's priority is to engage companies to complete the program	3
		The certificate brings credibility	2
		The certificate does not consider our niche in animal tourism to justify the effort put into completing and maintaining it.	1
		Additional services for companies that carry the certificate	1
		Doubts whether the certificate enables <i>greenwashing</i>	1
	Values	Sustainability is a part of everyday life	3
		We confirm that our sub-contractors follow sustainable values	1
		Our company has made contributions to social and ecological sustainability, even though it comes with more expenses	1
		Declining to complete the STF-certificate is considered as dismissive	1

