

## **Measuring Service Quality at My Suomi Oy**

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<p>The objective of this thesis was to create an entire form of research for My Suomi Oy, a small and new travel agency targeting the Japanese market in Helsinki. As there was no previous research conducted to identify the successfulness of their service performance since its foundation in 2006, the research was designed to measure customer satisfaction level as well as service quality.</p> <p>The main literature review includes the characteristics of tourism products, service quality, and Japanese cultural studies in the tourism context. The unique features of service products are demonstrated in comparison with physical goods, and then the SERVQUAL dimensions and the Gap Model of Service Quality are followed. As culture has a strong influence on one's decision-making, expectations, perceptions and behavior, Hofstede's cultural studies are illustrated to get insights into Japanese tourist behavior.</p> <p>The empirical research was conducted mainly by a quantitative method and to some extent also by a qualitative method. The questionnaire was designed to include both quantitative and qualitative questions based on SERVQUAL dimensions (tangible, responsiveness, promptness, assurance and empathy). The idea was to obtain an overall customer satisfaction level in figures and confirm the results with detailed customer opinion on five different aspects. The questionnaire was distributed as a hyperlink and 54 responses were received. A similar questionnaire was sent to the personnel in order to find perception gaps.</p> <p>The findings indicate that the customer satisfaction level in general is remarkably high in all aspects of service quality, and the results of the customers and the employees relatively match. The lowest value was found in tangibles such as the homepage although it was not crucial. There was no significant difference in the rest of the variables; however, the best scored variable was assurance meaning that politeness, kindness, professional and knowledge levels were evaluated as excellent.</p> <p>In conclusion, the overall customer satisfaction is almost up to the highest even though being small and new in business is a big disadvantage due to limited experience and knowledge. At the same time it is an advantage which enables My Suomi Oy to offer intensive attention and warm care to individuals besides new types of tourism products to survive in today's competitive tourism industry.</p>	
<b>Key words</b> Japanese, Hofstede, SERVQUAL, service quality, customer satisfaction, expectations	

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# 1 Introduction

Today, not only tourists are getting more and more experienced and sophisticated than before, but also the tourism industry is becoming mature in the competitive market, and therefore the greater importance is attached to quality and value for money. Tourism industry is facing a serious challenge – increasing competition and rising consumer expectations of quality makes it more difficult to satisfy each traveler than ever before. Competitive advantage through high quality has become fundamental in business survival.

Japanese have been becoming world-wide travelers, and the number of Japanese traveling abroad is considerably increasing. Needless to say, Japanese are often very favored tourists, as they are well-known to be big money spenders, and in fact, they were ranked the fifth biggest spender in the world, according to the survey by World Tourism Organization (WTO) in 2006.

Generally speaking Japanese do not fantasize to visit Finland for the first place, as the popular destinations for Japanese are naturally their neighbor countries in Asia, and internationally popular countries like France, Spain, USA, Italy, UK and Germany. However, the number of Japanese who desire to travel to Finland has been growing gradually over the past decade, and Japanese have become one of the important target groups in today's Finnish tourism market. (Japan National Tourist Organization, 2009.)

Interestingly, Finland has recently established a considerable reputation in Japan. First of all, the Japanese wish to visit Finland has been recently enhanced by the Japanese media reporting the high standard of Finnish education system as well as the Finnish social security system due to the constant discussion over revising social systems in Japan. Secondly, the Japanese film entitled *Kamome Shokudo* (Ruokala Lokki in Finnish) from 2006 has a great contribution to draw Japanese attention to the Finnish way of life. The movie represents three Japanese ladies who meet each other in Helsinki, and one of them sets up a diner serving Japanese food by the name of Ruokala Lokki in Helsinki's district of Punavuori. Following the success of the film, Kahvila Suomi where the movie shooting mostly took place has become a popular sight among Japanese

tourists. Probably the relaxed atmosphere of the movie has appealed to the Japanese people to go on a holiday in Finland who wish to escape from such a busy life in Japan. (Römpötti, 2006.) Finally, according to embassy of Finland in Tokyo, the style of how the Japanese people travel has been changing. Compared to years ago when package tours by elderly couples were common, there are many young people, especially women, these days travelling alone or with a partner and seeking for unique life in Finland. The safe and sanitary image of Finland can be considered to be the reason why. (Haikarainen, 2008.) Moreover, such Finnish design brands as Artek, Marimekko, and Iittala have ardent fans in Japan who wish to visit Finland for shopping.

## 1.1 Research Problem & Questions

My Suomi Oy is rather a young agency which was established in 2005, and there has no studies conducted either internally or externally to measure their quality of service or situation of the company within the Finnish tourism industry. My Suomi Oy is a very unique travel agency, and there is no such a travel agency like My Suomi Oy in today's Finnish tourism market as a competitor at the moment. However, this kind of monopoly system requires constant awareness to monitor and keep up its quality and develop new operations, otherwise not being set optimally under the pressure of market forces may result in degradation in quality. Thus, it is important and challenging to assess whether or not expectations of customers have been met, and if not, then discovering where the problems lie is crucial on a regular basis.

In order to identify how customers perceive their service, the main research question is **“how successfully My Suomi Oy has been able to satisfy their customers with their service?”**

For the further information to solve the main question, the following sub-questions need to be addressed:

- How customers perceive My Suomi Oy and their service?
- Are there any gaps regarding the perceptions of service quality between customers and employees?
- How is My Suomi Oy able to enhance their service quality?

## **1.2 Research Aims**

The intent of this study is to design an entire form of research in order to monitor service quality of My Suomi Oy objectively and assess the successfulness of their service performance. As there is no official assessment system at this point, the questionnaire created for this specific inquiry could be a future assessment tool of service quality in order to keep track on the level of service quality through time. The study also aims to propose solutions to problems and gaps if there are found any.

Service quality has a central role in the success and survival in today's competitive market, and this study will be valuable for My Suomi Oy to reveal opinions and perceptions of their customers at this early phase of their start-up business. The earlier problems are found, the better it is to fix them. Thus, they are able to re-examine their operations and identify what their strengths and weaknesses are. Although this report is focused on service quality, the results could be applied for stronger marketing strategies for their future success as well.

## **1.3 My Suomi Oy**

Founded in 2005, My Suomi Oy is a small Finnish-owned travel agency in Helsinki which especially aims at targeting Japanese tourists with the aim of offering them something different from typical travel agencies. The director was previously a well-traveled journalist with an extensive interest in the Finnish design and architecture. At first, she started her own online shop "SCOPE" to sell Finnish products to Japanese, and then she developed an idea of bringing Japanese buyers to Finland. Her strategy was directly being connected to customers without intermediaries and providing the Finnish design focused tourism products to the Japanese people. (Jämsä, H, 26.8.2009.)

Employing two native Japanese and three Finnish personnel who can speak fluent Japanese, they convey friendly and personal care to their customers. Although My Suomi Oy operates 100% based on the internet, they have been successful with their customers. The main success is driven from deep and wide understandings of Japanese culture in order to provide the right products and services. Also, updating their blog about everyday life in Finland on a frequent basis is another



significance to draw and keep interests from their previous, current and potential customers. (Jämsä, H, 26.8.2009.)

Their key product is a variety of tours guided by the personnel of My Suomi Oy. The tours are highly focused on the Finnish specialty: Finnish landscape, Finnish food, Finnish music, Finnish way of life, Finnish design and arts, and Finnish architecture. Marimekko, Arabia, Iittala, Alvar Aalto are excellent examples of Japanese tourists' interests in relation to Finland. They focus on getting small group of tourists or individuals rather than large group tours because they aim to offer individual care and attention to their customers with the highest possible standards. They take minimum one person to maximum ten people for their tours. (Mysuomi, 2009.)

Additionally, they have a wide range of network and knowledge to respond to any requests. Their tailored tours, for instance, technical visit to a Finnish educational institution or a welfare facility, business meeting, wedding ceremony for individual customers can be also organized easily regardless of business or leisure purpose. My Suomi Oy makes the most use of being a local travel agency, as that is their advantage compared to travel agencies operating in Japan. (Mysuomi, 2009.)

#### **1.4 Structure of the Report**

In the first chapter, the research is introduced by presenting the background of the study, the research problem, objectives and limitations. The profile of My Suomi Oy is also described to give basic information about the company.

Then, it is followed by a core literature review which is divided into two separate chapters. The second chapter literally clarifies service quality in the tourism context by highlighting characteristics of service products in comparison with physical goods. In the further step, it is followed by SERVQUAL instrument and SERVQUAL gap analysis which are intensively used to measure service quality in a wide range of area. In the third chapter, Japanese travel culture is primarily demonstrated by using Hofstede's cross-cultural dimensions. As cultural differences also

affect people's perceptions, his cultural studies are extremely relevant to this study and explain behavior of Japanese tourists in general.

After the presentation of the theoretical framework, the methodology for the empirical study is discussed in chapter four. The chosen method, the process of data collection, validity and reliability are presented as well. The following chapter five provides findings of the study and critical analysis. Finally, the last chapter concludes the whole report and implicates the further research.

## 2 Tourism Products and Services

Tourism products and services are very unique and notably different from physical goods in a number of unique characteristics. In this session, the key words of the research “service quality” and “satisfaction” are firstly defined before getting into the further important aspects of service. The whole literature reviews especially underline the tourism service context rather than universal.

### 2.1 Defining Service Quality and Satisfaction

The two separate terms “satisfaction” and “quality” are difficult to define in general, and press writers tend to use those terms interchangeably. However, the more precise meanings and measurement of the two concepts were developed after a considerable debate. Although these two consensuses share something in common, the fundamental causes and outcomes differ from one another. While satisfaction is a wide and broad concept in general, service quality has specific attributes of the service itself. As shown below in Figure 1, service quality is a reflection of the customer’s perception of reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and tangibles. Whereas customer satisfaction is more inclusive and perceived according to service quality, product quality, price, situational factors and personal factors. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2009, 103.)

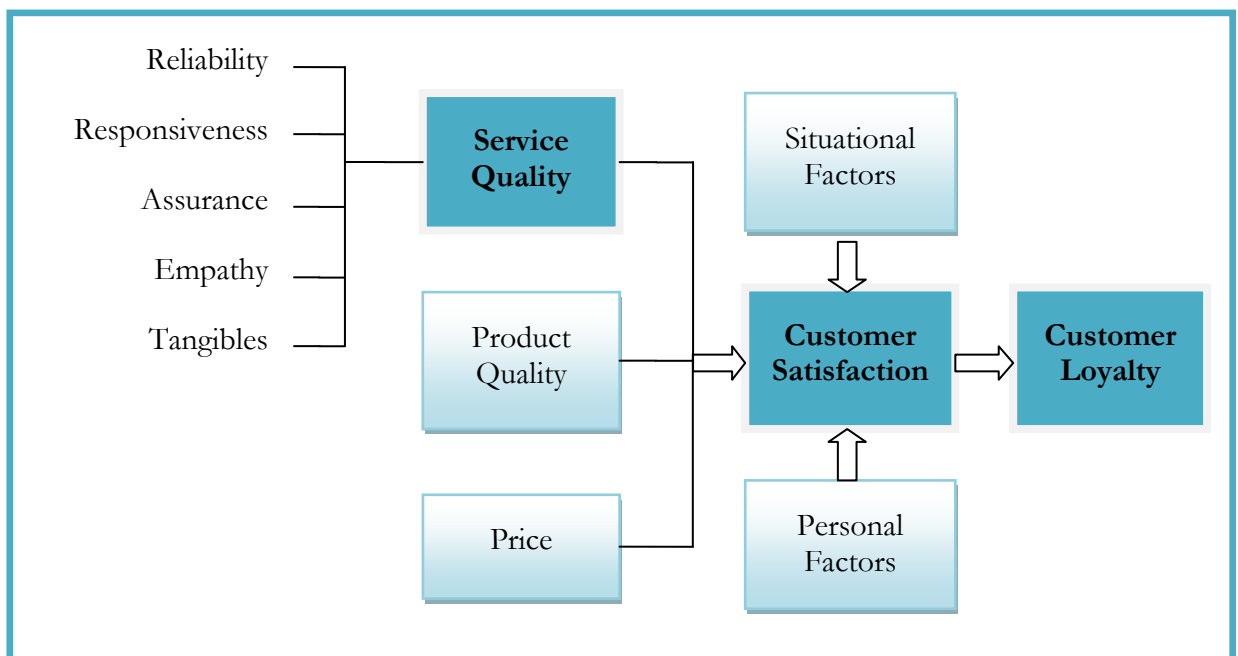


Figure 1. Customer perception of quality and customer satisfaction (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2009, 103.)

## 2.2 Understanding Tourism Products

*“A tourism product is an amalgam of all goods, activities, and services offered to tourists by different sectors of the tourism industry in order to satisfy tourist needs while they are away from home. It includes the journey to and from a destination, transfer from and to an airport, accommodation, transportation while at the destination and everything that a tourist does, sees, and uses on the way to and from the destination, including purchases of food and drinks, souvenirs, entertainment, amusement and a very wide range of other services such as financial, medical, insurance, etc”* (Kandampully, Mok & Sparks 2001, 8-9).

While a tourism product is often understood as a tourism destination, it is not a complete product but just a geographical unit. A tourism destination offers different kinds of tourism products for purchase and consumption such as:

- Accessibility
- Amenities (e.g., entertainment, internal transport and communications)
- Accommodation
- Attractions (e.g., scenic, historical, natural wonders) or events (e.g., exhibitions, congresses)
- Activities (outdoor and indoor recreation activities)

These are direct services which cater directly to tourist needs and supported by indirect services, such as financial, medical, insurance, retailing, wholesaling, or telecommunication. In other words,

a tourism product is a combination of different sub-products which are strongly linked to each other. Poor performance of one sub-product can influence the performance of the total product, and as a result tourist experience turns out negative. (Kandampully, Mok & Sparks 2001, 9-12.)

Interestingly, psychological experience like everything that tourists feel after they leave home until they return is a part of a tourism product. However, their perceptions are quite subjective, and everyone experiences and perceives the same product differently. Different age, social class, place of origin, cultural values and motivations create various perceptions. Furthermore, the tourism product also has a human component, which means that tourists come into many contacts while travelling. For example, hotel staff, flight attendants, cashiers in shops, wait staff, tour guides, and local residents can determine the total perception of tourism product. (Kandampully, Mok & Sparks 2001, 9-10.)

To sum up, customer satisfaction can be impinged upon by all aspect of the service delivery process as well as the outcomes of the experience. Accordingly, the nature of the tourism product is so complex and diverse that all the tourism sectors need to integrate and cooperate well.

### **2.3 Distinctive Characteristics of Service**

Service products are not as easy as physical goods to describe and communicate since services are often produced out of people's will, and every individual is simply different. This makes services rather complicated and challenging. Here are several unique features of services to be discussed.

## Intangibility

Tourism services cannot be perceived by any of the five senses in the same way as goods before purchase. Tourism services are abstract and difficult to deal with, as they are about offering intangible elements such as activities and experiences rather than physical objects. Physical goods like shoes can be displayed, tried on, and even evaluated before purchase, but tourism services can be only perceived in mind on a pre-purchase phase. However, most tourism services are a combination of intangible and tangible elements. For example, airlines offering the form of transportation is intangible, on the other hand, aircraft, food, seats, pillow, and blankets are tangible elements. Similarly, in hotels the atmosphere of a lobby is intangible, although the design and architecture are tangible. To reduce the complexities of intangibility marketers often try to increase tangible aspects to service products – showing appealing pictures of the destination, or using celebrities in promotional brochures is an effective way to gain customer confidence and trust. (Kandampully, Mok & Sparks 2001, 17-18.)

## Inseparability

Tourism services cannot be produced first and then sold in another place and consumed, but they are produced and consumed simultaneously at the same place and time. More precisely, both customers and service providers have to be present for their production and consumption process. This makes the mass production of tourism services a challenge, as the more customers there are, the more producers there have to be at one time and place, consequently controlling the operation scales to a manageable level is essential. Yet, self-service require no interaction with staff and this kind of option can be used to improve efficiency. (Kandampully, Mok & Sparks 2001, 18.)

## Heterogeneity

Services involve a high level of labor input in service delivery processes and, as a result, they differ in standard and quality. It is because the service performance depends on producers' moods, feelings, attitudes, skills and knowledge, and as a consequence, service experience can be seen differently. Likewise, depending on customers' needs and expectations, their experiences vary. Although maintaining the same service performance is impossible for the reasons above, standardizing the service performance can be done by introducing the use of technology such as a computerized voice system at the front desk instead of the human voice. (Kandampully, Mok & Sparks 2001, 18-19.)

## Perishability

Services are short-lived and cannot be stored like physical goods can be kept in stock for a period of time to avoid a loss of revenue. For example, it is impossible to resell the spare seat on a flight for a later date when later flights are overbooked. Since unsold service products mean a loss of revenue, service providers must try to sell their products as much as possible and to adopt such strategy as a cancellation policy. Additionally, tourism services cannot be returned or redone even if customers were not satisfied with the services. There are some hospitality services that can store part of their service process, for instance, ingredients in restaurants; still, they can be kept for only a limited period of time. (Kandampully, Mok & Sparks 2001, 20.)

Undoubtedly it is more difficult to control the quality of services than physical goods and service marketers face various challenges because of these unique characteristics of services. To be

successful and develop effective marketing strategies in the service sector, marketers and managers need to understand these features.

## 2.4 SERVQUAL dimensions

Customers evaluate quality based on various factors on their minds rather than on one simple manner. SERVQUAL (SERvice and QUALity) dimensions have been developed by Parsu Parasuraman, Valarie Zeithaml, and Leonard Berry (1988), and there are five specific dimensions of service quality. This model is used to apply across a wide range of service contexts. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 111.)

### Tangibles: Representing the Service Physically

*Tangibles* are defined as the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communications materials. Customers, particularly new customers, use these physical representations or images to assess quality. Service companies can make good use of tangible factors to improve their image, provide continuity, and indicate quality to customers, or even combine them with another element to create a service quality strategy. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 115.)

### Reliability: Delivering on Promises

*Reliability* is defined as the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. More specifically, it means that the company delivers service provision, problem resolution, and



pricing according to their promises. In this way, firms can keep their customers loyal to them. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 113.)

#### Responsiveness: Being Willing to Help

*Responsiveness* is the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service. The focus is weighted on how quickly and attentively companies are able to deal with customer requests, questions, complaints, and problems. Companies must have customer's point of view to deliver service and handle requests in order to excel on this dimension. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 114.)

#### Assurance: Inspiring Trust and Confidence

*Assurance* is the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. For high-risk service such as banking, insurance, medical, brokerage, and legal services, this aspect tends to be particularly significant. Companies need to gain trust and confidence in order to create trusting relationships with their customers. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 114.)

#### Empathy: Treating Customers as Individuals

Empathy is the provision of caring individualized attention to customers. The core idea is to prove customers that they are cared and understood through personalized or customized service, as they are special and important for firms. Small firms are often able to reflect their personal knowledge of customer requirements and preferences and build relationships with their customers

so that small firms tend to be more advantageous when competing with larger firms in this dimension. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 114-115.)

All of those elements are equally important in order to obtain one hundred percent of quality and have different influence on the final service quality. Customers use those five dimensions to organize information about service quality in their minds. Depending on a situation, sometimes all the dimensions are used, and at other times not. Although this model is found relevant for a variety of service business and therefore widely used, some researchers suggest that cross-cultural aspect is missing on those dimensions. Individuals from different backgrounds seek different experiences from the same set of service and also perceive actual experiences differently. This has to be taken into account when applying these dimensions. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 112.)

## **2.5 SERVQUAL Gap Analysis Model**

As an extension of SERVQUAL dimensions, the gap model of service quality shall be naturally illustrated. The figure 2.2 points out the key concepts, strategies, and decisions in services. This well-structured model gives a clear picture of complexity of services marketing and helps to explain why and where the problem occurs.

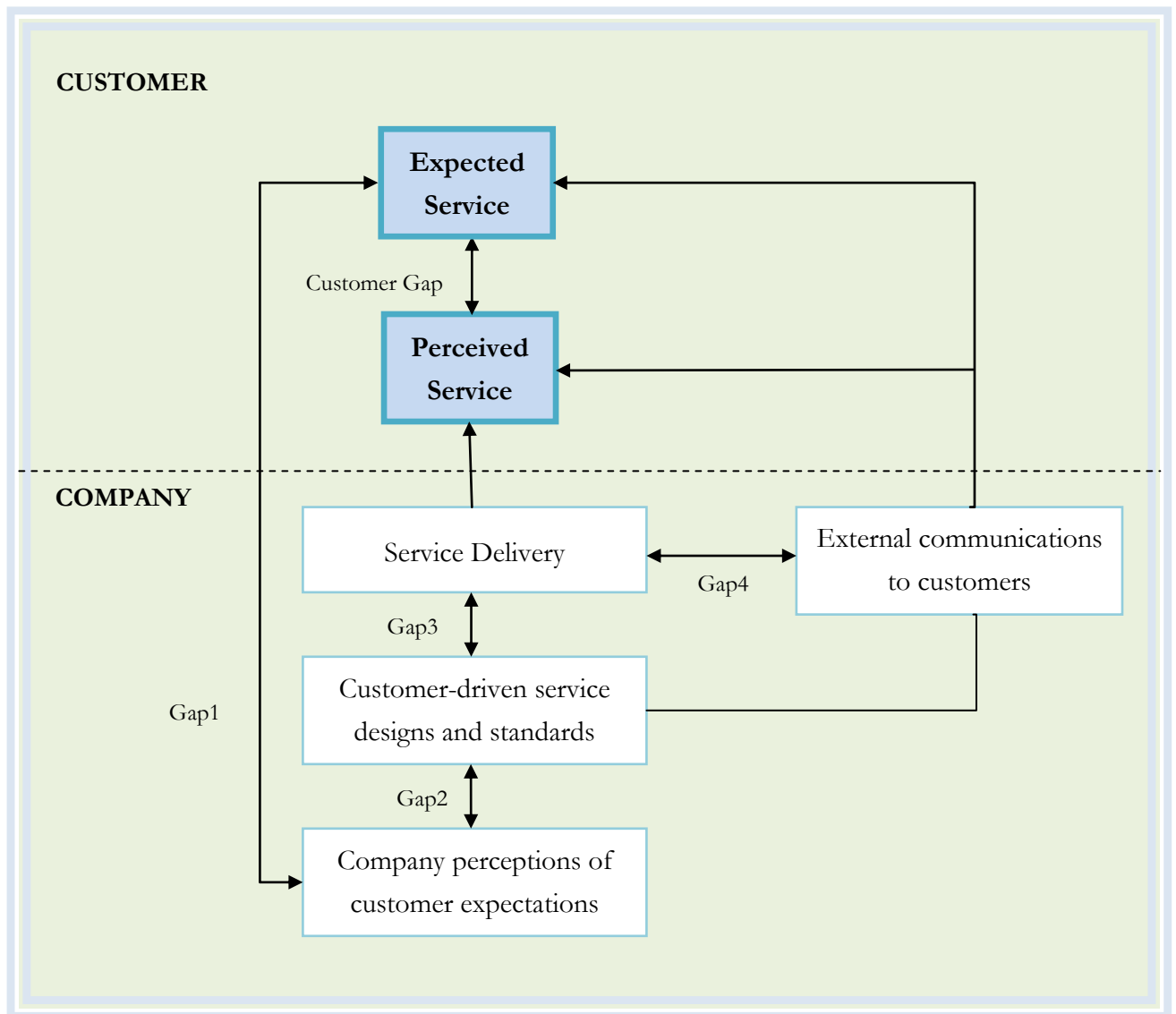


Figure 2. Gaps model of service quality (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 43)

Customer Gap can be described as the overall difference between expected service and perceived service by customers. Customer expectations are what customers believe to happen during the service experiences, whereas perceptions are subjective evaluations towards actual service experiences. Expectations can be formed from pricing, advertising, sales promise, innate personal needs, word-of-mouth communications and other factors. In practice, expectations and

perceptions are not identical and usually separated by some distance. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 32-33.)

Gap 1: The Listening Gap is the difference between what customers expect and those expectations that companies perceive. Primarily, this occurs when a company fails to understand their customers' expectations accurately. One of the critical causes of this is insufficient marketing research and inaccurate information; therefore, they get wrong understandings of what exactly their customers' expectations are. Moreover, a lack of upward communication such as an insufficient communication between managers and frontline employees is another key factor to widen this gap. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 34-36.)

Gap 2: The Service Design and Standards Gap is the difference between management perceptions of consumer expectations and development of service designs and standards. Those service designs and standards are customer-driven, which means they are set priority for customers expectations rather than for firm's conveniences such as productivity or efficiency. When services are not well-designed or customer requirements are poorly assessed, the gap becomes evidential. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 36-38.)

Gap 3: The Service Performance Gap is the difference between service specifications planned by the management and the actual service performance by operational personnel. The causes may be deficient human resource management system, a failure to synchronize demand and capacity, and issues with service intermediaries. Customers can be another critical variable when they perform

their roles in appropriately. In order to narrow this gap, all the resources like people, systems and technology must be backed in place. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 38-39.)

Gap 4: The Communication Gap is the difference between the service delivery and the information put out to the customers about what to expect. Customers' expectations are raised out of promises made by companies through its communication tools such as media advertising. In consequence, if customers are not correctly informed about service products, it might mislead them into having too high expectations. Broken promises can be as a result from an absence of integrated services marketing communications, overpromising, and inappropriate pricing. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 42-43.)

This full conceptual gap model gives a comprehensible picture of the nature and extent of the gaps. Utilizing this model is beneficial for managers to improve quality service and services marketing, because this enables managers to capture what the existing gaps are and where the problems are originated from. The key here is to spot the gaps and close them, and most importantly keep them closed. (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler 2009, 43.)

Even though numerous researchers have adopted the SERVQUAL model in the service sector worldwide since its inception in the middle 1980's, there is little mentioned about the application of the model in different countries or cultures. For that reason, there has been an extensive debate concerned with the design and reliability of the tool, and considering specific cultural factors into account should not be forgotten when applying the model. (Williams & Buswell 2003, 181.)

### **3 Japanese Travel Culture**

Cultural variations in value and social behavior lead to different expectations and satisfaction levels. Consequently, understanding cultural differences in tourism industry is vital just like any other business. Cultural research can explain tourism behavior such as decision making, varying tourists' expectations and satisfactions with service quality. Additionally, marketers can learn those characteristics and develop products that appeal to a particular target group. This chapter reveals distinctive traits of Japanese tourists in response to the Japanese culture in accordance with Hofstede's cross-cultural studies.

#### **3.1 Hofstede's cross-cultural dimensions**

Geert Hofstede is widely acknowledged in the field of cross-cultural psychology and business. He extracted data of employee value scores composed by IBM between 1967 and 1973 and further surveys in more than 70 countries. His cross-cultural approach has been used extensively in tourism applications. It is helpful to comprehend the behaviour of society or organization in various cultures, but also extremely relevant for the study of travel and tourism, as cultural values highly influence travel motivations, tourist behaviours, expectations and attitudes regarding service quality. (Itim International 2003.)

- Power Distance (PDI) – shows the degree of inequality among people which the inhabitants of a country considers as ordinary. It defines the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations accept that power is distributed unequally.

- Individualism (IDV) – is contrasted with collectivism. It refers to the degree to which people follow their own ideas and ideals or integrated as a member of a group or organization.
- Masculinity (MAS) – captures the value placed on traditional male or female roles which is a fundamental issue for many societies. Masculine society encourages assertiveness and competitiveness.
- Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) – deals with culture's tolerance for ambiguity and shows how comfortable people of a society feel in uncertain situations. It shows the degree to which people in a country prefer structured over unstructured situations.

A fifth Dimension was subsequently added after a survey-based study with Chinese employees and managers:

- Long-Term Orientation (LTO) – describes the importance a culture attaches to the future, the past and present. In Long Term orientated countries future based ideas such as thrift and perseverance are important, whereas in Short Term orientated cultures present/ past oriented values; for instance, respect for tradition, and protecting one's 'face' are the key elements. In other words, this deals with Virtue regardless of Truth.

Today scores for 74 countries and regions are available. (Geert Hofstede about himself, 2009.)

### 3.2 Characteristics of Japanese Tourists according to Hofstede's Model

As previously mentioned, Hofstede's work has been extensively applied to the study of tourist behaviors. The cultural values based on his dimensions are effective tools for understanding cultural differences in a variety of fields certainly including travel and tourism. (Itim International 2003.)

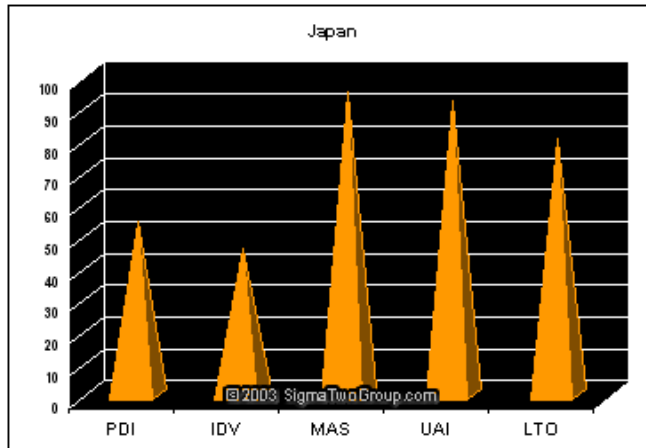


Figure 3. Geert Hofstede™ cultural dimensions of Japan (Itim International 2003)

The Power Distance Index (PDI) of the Japanese culture is high compared to most European cultures. This indicates that Japanese believe in authority supervision, and hierarchy, such as respect for age, and high social position. They accept unequally distributed power and a hierarchy system. (Geert Hofstede about himself, 2009.) In tourism, they are likely to consider themselves more powerful than their service providers; therefore, they tend to be strict in their performance evaluations. (Manrai et Manrai 2009, 25.)

The Individualism (IDV) in Japan is low to middle which illustrates that the Japanese culture is more collective-orientated than individual-oriented in nature. In collectivistic countries, people tend to focus on group needs and goals; as a result, they learn to behave on behalf of the group.



Being detained and fulfilling the expectations of the group are two main characteristics in these cultures. (Geert Hofstede about himself, 2009.) Collectivism culture explains why Japanese tend to travel in groups rather than alone. They also tend to follow trends and visit popular places.

Japan is a country with the highest Masculinity (MAS) worldwide, and in this culture clear gender roles are distinguished. In masculine society performance and growth are emphasized. Men are more dominant than women for working and bringing money home, and women are more modest, softer and more responsible for the intangible quality of life than men (Geert Hofstede about himself, 2009). Crotts and Erdmann (2000) found out that in masculine society the level of expectations are high and standards of evaluations are strict. It is because the masculine society tends to measure professionalism and performance as well as a sign of good manners and respect to others (Manrai et Manrai 2009, 26.)

It is noticeable that Japan scored very high Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). They avoid conflict, competition, and prefer to preserve harmony (Itim International 2003). According to Money and Crotts (2003) in terms of traveling, tourists from high Uncertainty Avoidance shows risk reducing behavior. Such behavior includes extensive trip planning, use of travel agents and tour operators, making prior travel arrangements, preference of safe activities, pre-payment for tourism components etc (Manrai et Manrai 2009, 16.) Moreover, short lengths of stay, a small number of destinations in the itinerary, a big travel party size are also a distinctive characteristic of high UAI.

The last point, Long Term Orientation (LTO) is only mentioned in the diagram of Japan, as this dimension was found in the study from Chinese scholars and was resulted from the teaching of

Confucius. Japan is greatly a long term orientated country and this is associated with endurance, sense of shame and frugality. (Itim International 2003.)

Yet, his studies demonstrate just typical behaviors in general. Therefore some researchers criticize that Hofstede's approach fails to account for individual differences and personal values, situational factors and their changes over time.

### **3.3 Behavior of Japanese Tourists**

There have been a number studies carefully focused on the cultural characteristics of the Japanese tourists due to its importance of the Japanese market in today's tourism industry. As an extension of the Hofstede's model, it is of importance reviewing the traits of Japanese further. Here are some reviews in order to get more insights into the differences between Japanese tourists from other nationalities.

It has been proved that Japanese belong to a high context culture where people communicate indirectly and implicitly, or one way or the other, non-verbally, depending on the situation and personal relationships. (Reisinger & Turner 1999, 1208.) Japanese do not exhibit their feelings or dissatisfaction on their faces despite of unfavorable encounter, because complaining not only makes the service provider lose its face, but also makes themselves lose their faces by being emotional in public. (Mattila 1999, 31.)

According to the studies by Turcq and Usunier (1985), Japanese are extremely keen on detail, aesthetics, quality and service compared to other international tourists. This fact is considered to

be driven by a Japanese service philosophy of how properly service should be performed which is one of the Japanese cultural beliefs. Hence, they tend to be demanding with high expectations. Furthermore, Ahmed and Krohn (1992) examined the unique cultural characteristics of the behavior of Japanese tourists visiting USA; these following traits in table 1 are the major ten elements in Japanese culture influencing their purchase behavior. (Reisinger & Turner 1999, 1206.)

Table 1. Ten distinctive characteristics of Japanese tourists (Reisinger & Turner 1999, 1208)

1. Belongingness (traveling in groups and seeking comfort in togetherness)
2. Family influence (purchasing gifts for close friends and family members and reciprocating)
3. Empathy (projecting the feelings of others and not expressing true feelings, including displeasure)
4. Dependency (being loyal and devoted in exchange for security and protection)
5. Hierarchical acknowledgement (behaving in accordance to social status)
6. Propensity to save (accumulating funds for an emergency and saving for a home to overcome feelings of insecurity)
7. The concept of <i>kinen</i> (collecting evidence of travel to prestigious tourist destinations)
8. Tourist photography (importance of photography)
9. Passivity (avoidance of participating in physical activities)
10. Risk avoidance (avoidance of adventurous leisure pursuits)

It was reported that Japanese regard complaining or expressing dissatisfaction as disruptive; therefore, they save all complaints until they go back home. The concept is derived from *enryo* as self-restraint in the Japanese society which has been exercised to preserve group harmony or to avoid causing displeasure for others. This indicates the necessity of keeping negative feelings inside, as saving face and not embarrassing the service providers is the key for the good harmony with surroundings. The Japanese holiday satisfaction level is normally weighted against the degree of the Japanese reluctance to express negative opinions. (Reisinger & Turner 1999, 1209.)

Cultural background also affects how Japanese tourists choose a holiday destination. The differences between Japanese and western nationalities on how to plan a holiday were clearly recognized. For instance, when selecting a destination all members of Japanese families participate to maintain group harmony. In order to maximize the benefits of their holidays, Japanese pre-plan their travel arrangements very carefully including all alternative destinations, their pros and cons, and various pricing policies to save additional funds. As a result, their decision making process tends to be longer than westerns. (Reisinger & Turner 1999, 1209.)

These kinds of studies of Japanese tourists rationally explain how Japanese tourists behavior and their cultural beliefs are associated in such a particular way. These understandings of Japanese tourists can be used for effective marketing strategies for Japanese such as product development and customer relations.

## 4 Research approach and methods

### 4.1 Research methods

There are three major methods for doing a research – quantitative, qualitative and a combination of both. For this particular type of inquiry, a mixed methods design was carefully chosen after considering the following clarifications.

Firstly, a quantitative approach is a research method which requires the researcher to have initially post-positivist claims for developing knowledge, for example, cause and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypothesizes and questions, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories. The common strategies of inquiry are experiments and surveys that bring statistical data in figures to back up individual explanations and findings. This method suits the best when the investigator intends to identify factors that influence an outcome or to test a theory or explanation. (Cresswell 2003, 18-22.)

Secondly, a qualitative approach is one in which researcher's knowledge claim is based on constructivist claims or advocacy/participatory perspectives or both. This employs strategies like narratives, phenomenologies, ethnographies, grounded theory studies, or case studies.

Traditionally, the data collection is based on open-ended observations, interviews, documents and a variety of materials. This approach merits if a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood due to the lack of previous studies or if a topic is new. (Cresswell 2003, 18-22.)

Thirdly, a mixed methods approach is one in which the researcher often get knowledge claims according to such pragmatic ground as consequence-oriented, problem-centered, and pluralistic. This method is relatively new, and there is little studies done yet so far. The concept of combining different approaches is believed to be derived from the study of psychological traits by Campbell and Fiske in 1959. Soon this new way of undertaking a research has been employed by others, and field methods such as observations and interviews (qualitative approach), and traditional surveys (quantitative approach) began to be gathered together in a single study. Researchers considered that applying two different types of data could neutralize or avoid the biases of other methods. This design is useful when a researcher wants to generalize the findings to a population and develop a detailed view of the meaning of a phenomenon or concept for individuals. (Cresswell 2003, 15-22.)

As mentioned earlier, service quality of My Suomi Oy has not been measured before. Thus, it is important to reach and interpret the complexity of customers' perception, experience or behavior as well as to measure service quality in pure numbers. Distributing questionnaire with open-ended questions, therefore, brings customers voice. In this way, findings of customers' perceptions can be confirmed along with numeric figures of customer satisfaction level to expand understandings of the results. The results will be more credible than applying just one method, as a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach can capture the best of both methods.

## **4.2 Data Gathering Process**

The first step was to create the questionnaire for customers principally in accordance with SERVQUAL model. The questionnaire was designed to have both qualitative and quantitative questions in order to receive various opinions and validate those with numeric data.

The questionnaire is divided into three parts: general questions about the customers, evaluations of perceived service, and opinions about the tour. To start with, the first part was organized to gather basic information and background about customers. The second part of the evaluation was created based on the five dimensions of SERVQUAL instrument: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, respectively, questions 2.1 to 2.4, questions 2.5 to 2.6, questions 2.7 to 2.9, questions 2.10 to 2.11, and questions 2.12 and 2.13. This section was intended to verify perceived service quality with the numerical rating scale, and each question was open-ended in case customers want to leave their opinions regarding their assessment. Finally, the last part consists of four open-ended questions requested by My Suomi Oy to find out customers' overall impressions and opinions in relation to the tour they participated for the future marketing and customer relations.

Table 2. The designed questions based on SERVQUAL dimensions

QUESTIONS BASED ON SERVQUAL DIMENSION	
<b>Tangible</b>	<p>2.1. The contents of My Suomi's homepage</p> <p>2.2. The contents and interesting level of blog</p> <p>2.3. The contents and design of brochure</p> <p>2.4. The appearance of personnel (dress code)</p>
<b>Reliability</b>	<p>2.5. Was the tour as promised? (e.g., contents and time schedule)</p> <p>2.6. Did you receive accurate information?</p>
<b>Responsiveness</b>	<p>2.7. Promptness of service such as email transactions</p> <p>2.8. Was the staff available when need for help?</p> <p>2.9. Response to complaints or emergency</p>
<b>Assurance</b>	<p>2.10. Knowledge &amp; professional level of the personnel</p> <p>2.11. Politeness and kindness of the personnel</p>
<b>Empathy</b>	<p>2.12. Individual care</p> <p>2.13. Understanding level towards customers</p>

The next step was to send the online questionnaire for customers to My Suomi Oy and had the contents checked carefully by the personnel. There were several minor errors to fix such as the



Japanese grammar. After the collection, the questionnaire was finally published onto the blog of My Suomi on 4th February 2010 with a clearly defined introduction and objective. The deadline was announced to be 11<sup>th</sup> February 2010. Besides the blog, the link for the questionnaire was put on the website of My Suomi.

There was a concern that there could be some customers who do not visit their website or blog anymore and cannot be reached via those tools, therefore, the email with the link was sent individually in order to invite them to participate in the questionnaire on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2010. As the customers' personal information cannot be retained in the in-house system for more than six months according to the Finnish law, previous customers before September 2010 could not have been reached. For that reason, the number of personal email was limited to 220. In total, questionnaire received through the website, the blog and the email was 54.

At the same time, the similar questionnaire was sent to all the employees of My Suomi (six personnel) also in the online form. The purpose is to get to reveal internal views, and then compare with those of customers, and then discover existing gaps between the organization and customers.

### **4.3 Reliability and Validity**

When evaluating a research, there are two important aspects to consider. Reliability is one aspect of the credibility of the research findings, and the other is validity.

Reliability refers to the extent to which research results would be stable or consistent if the same techniques were used repeatedly. If the research repeated by other researchers obtains the same results, the research is considered to be reliable. *Replication* is a method to test the reliability of the results by repeating the research. (Collis & Hussey 2003, 58.)

Alternatively, validity is the other aspect of the credibility of the findings. Validity is an extent to which the research accurately measures what is supposed to be measured. This means the data collected should be a true picture of what is being studied. If the researcher chooses wrong procedures or samples and mislead measurement, it can result in undermining validity. (Collis & Hussey 2003, 58-59.)

This research can be considered quite reliable with certain limitations as the questionnaire was carefully designed in accordance with the SERVQUAL theories. Speaking of the quantitative questionnaire part, especially, the answer options are fixed in figures, hence the results are unlikely to change. However, the open-ended questions to reach customers opinions can possibly differ if the same survey were repeated as it is in different time and place. In other words, because the research method was mixture of quantitative and qualitative approach, the different results could be drawn to some extent though not dramatically. In terms of validity, the findings were analyzed objectively as the researcher does not belong to either customers or personnel. The findings were studied successfully by demonstrating figures and supportive facts to backup. The results would be more credible if the sample size was bigger since the findings could be confirmed with more accurate data collection.

#### **4.4 Research Limitations**

In interpreting the results several limitations of the study should be noted. The first limitation is that the SERVQUAL dimensions are not universal. Although the application is notably used in a wide variety of fields, there are some criticisms of its use, namely the original usage of SERVQUAL dimensions is to analyze gaps between expectations and perceptions of the received service. There is little evidence which supports that customers evaluate service quality in those terms. It should be noticed that this study does not capture the dilemma of expectations and perceptions. However, the tool is meant to reveal a good overall picture of the service quality which covers the purpose of the research.

Similarly the second limitation is that Hofstede's cultural dimensions are somewhat classical stereotypes of national and regional cultural groupings. The cultures are persistent, yet cultural phenomena changes over time arguably. In fact, the Japanese who come from collectivist culture travelling abroad on their own is no longer unusual as an example. There is no universal definition or scale to measure culture due to its complexity. This may cause biased interpretation of findings.

A third limitation pertains to the small sample size due to the limited amount time for the - research. The questionnaire was published as a hyperlink only for a week at the beginning of February in 2010; thus, the number of respondents was limited to 54 answers. Also, it should be noted that the online survey for customers was carried out in Japanese and then translated into English; as a result, there might be some minor nuance differences to some extent.

## 5 Research Results

During 4<sup>th</sup>– 11<sup>th</sup> February, in total 54 questionnaires were received. Since the online questionnaire was mostly asked to take part voluntarily on the website and the blog, it is not possible to figure out how many people in fact got to know about this project, and then how many of which have contributed to the questionnaire and how many of which have rather decided not to participate. Thus, the response rate cannot be calculated in this study.

### 5.1 Classification of the Respondents

This section first presents the demographic facts of the respondents group which is important to recognize for the further analysis later on.

As for the gender of the respondents, the majority was female. Out of 54 respondents 47 were female and only 7 were male which weights 87% and 13% respectively.

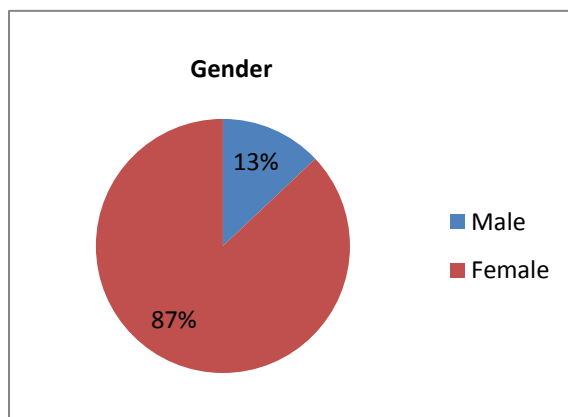


Figure 4. Gender of respondents

Among given option to choose age groups, approximately 52% respondents belonged to the age group of 30-39 years old. The age group of 20-29 years old 30-39 years old amounted about the same which was around 20% each. There was no respondent under 20 years old or over 60 years old.

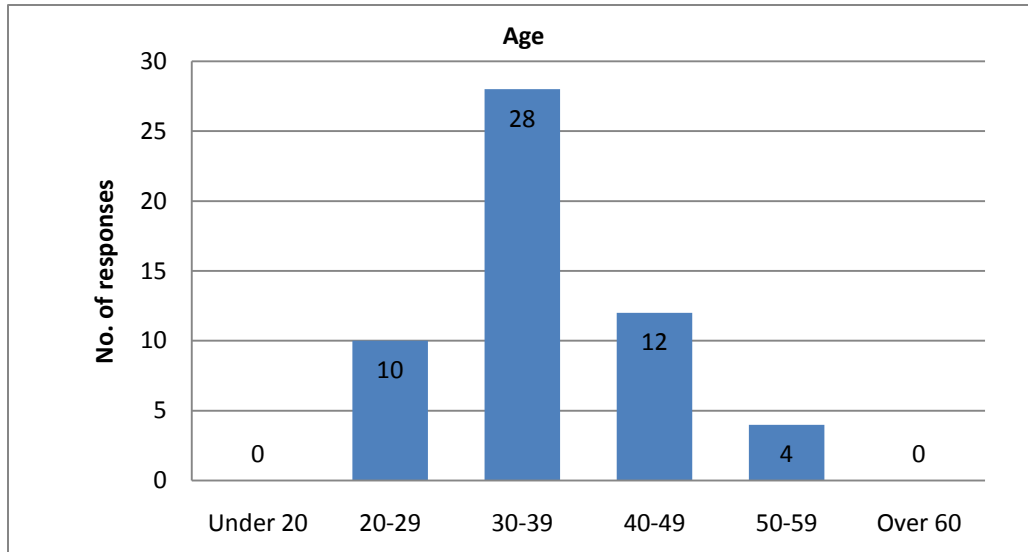


Figure 5. Age of respondents

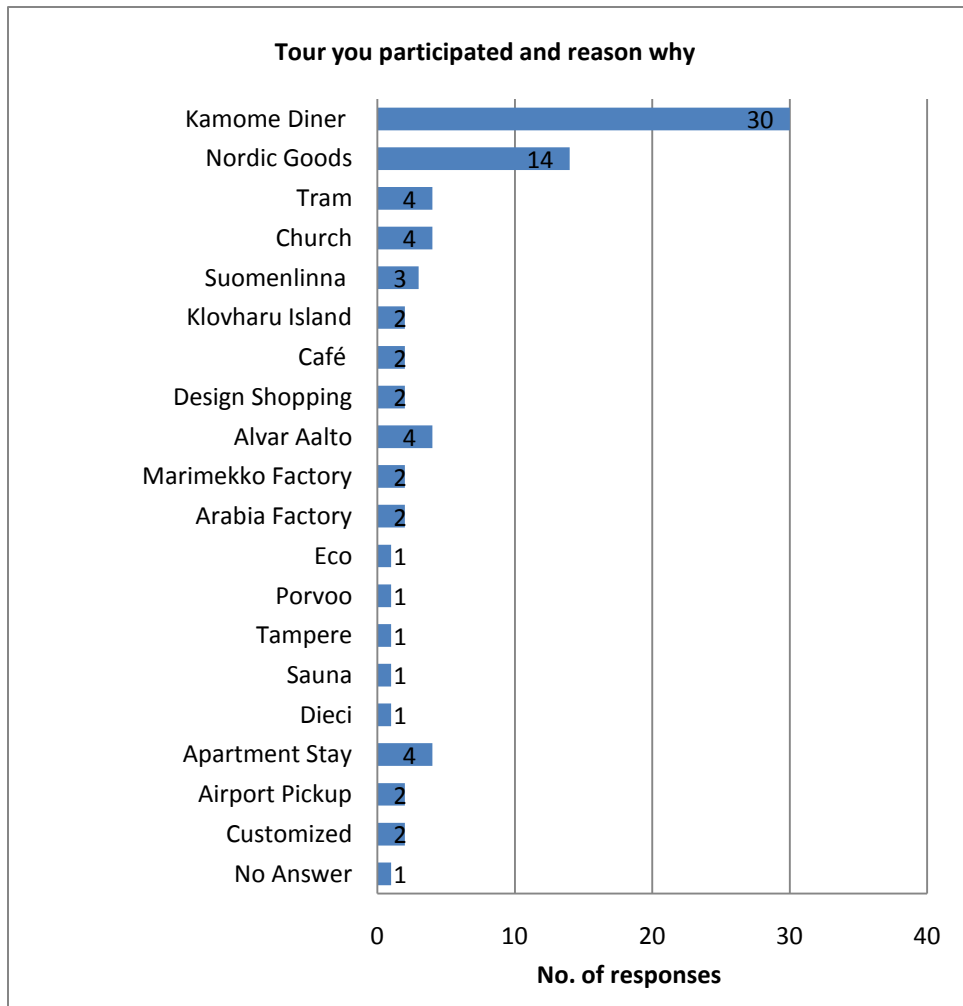


Figure 6. Tours which respondents participated

The figure 6 demonstrates which tours the respondents have taken a part. Apparently, the most popular tour was *Kamome Diner tour* which 30 out of 54 respondents (56%) have participated. The highlights of the tour are to take a walk around the forest and relax with a cup of coffee and korvapuusti (Finnish cinnamon roll) in the Finnish national park “Nuuksio”, to visit Arabia factory for shopping, and to have lunch at *Kamome Diner* at last (My Suomi, 2010). According to the open-ended comments, most of the respondents were strongly motivated to visit *Kamome Diner* because that was where the successful Japanese movie “*Kamome Shokudo* (2006)” was mainly

filmed. Many others were also interested in seeing the forest and lakes at Nuukio national park. Some people joined the tour since they were afraid that finding a way to Nuuksio national park and taking a walk in the forest alone would be too complicated.

The second most popular tour was *Nordic Goods tour* which received 14 respondents (26%). Many answered that shopping at the Finnish market hall, Marimekko outlet shop, vintage flea market, and supermarket was appealing, as they were interested particularly in Marimekko products as well as Finnish antique items. The other tours such as *Tram tour* (7%), *Church tour* (7%), *Alvar Aalto tour* (7%) got only four respondents each. Those who chose Tram tours wanted to learn how the tram system works in Finland. Two respondents stated that they joined Church tour because they liked the other tours offered by My Suomi and wanted to participate in another tour. Alvar Aalto tour was obviously popular among those who were particularly attracted to his architecture.

Tours outside Helsinki like Porvoo, Tampere, Klovharu Island were minor tours. Motivations were out of curiosity on discovering new places besides Helsinki. Two respondents wished to visit Klovharu Island because that is famous for the author of Moomin, Tove Jansson, having spent much of her life.

Apartment stay and airport pick-up is not a tour but one of the services that My Suomi offers. Four respondents who stayed in an apartment wrote that they wanted to experience “living” abroad or to have cozy and peaceful time and space.

It should be noticed that many respondents have joined more than one tour; as a result, the total percentage exceeds 100%.

The respondents were asked with whom they have traveled to Finland. Most commonly, 65% of respondents traveled with somebody, 41% of which with family members and 24% with friends. 19 respondents (35%) were traveling alone, and 17 of which were female. This means that 31% of the whole respondents were individual female tourists.

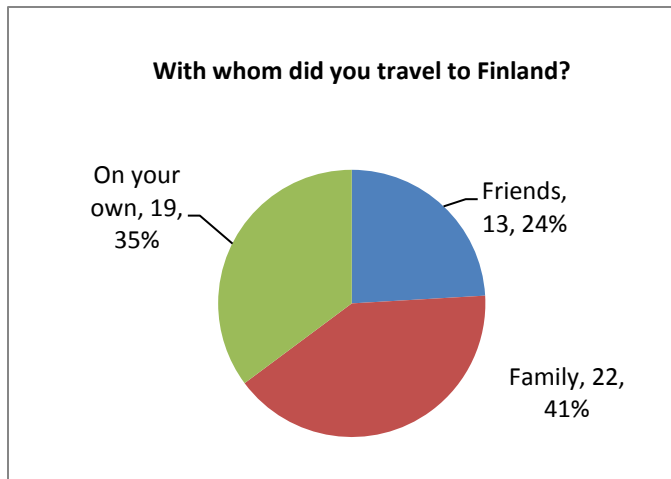


Figure 7. With whom respondents traveled

To figure out how experienced the respondents were in traveling, they were asked where they have travelled before visiting to Finland. Two respondents answered that Finland was their first time abroad and their purpose was honeymoon. 39% of the respondents had been abroad quite a lot around 4-9 countries. 28% of the respondents were experienced traveler who had visited more than 10 countries before. Roughly the same amount of percentage people had been to only a few countries, and they were not very matured travelers.



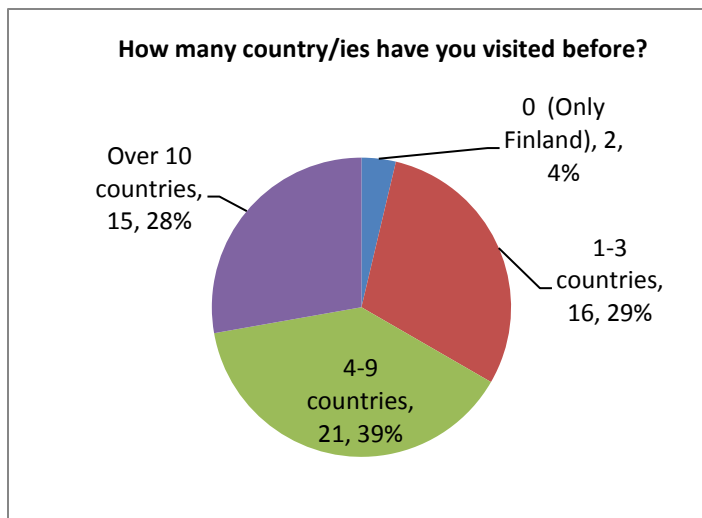


Figure 8. A number of countries visited before

Top 10 destinations among the respondents are shown in figure 9 below. The most popular country was USA; especially many had visited Hawaii or Guam. France followed after USA, and then UK. Many respondents had been to several countries in Europe as well as their neighbor countries in Asia such as China, Korea and Thailand.

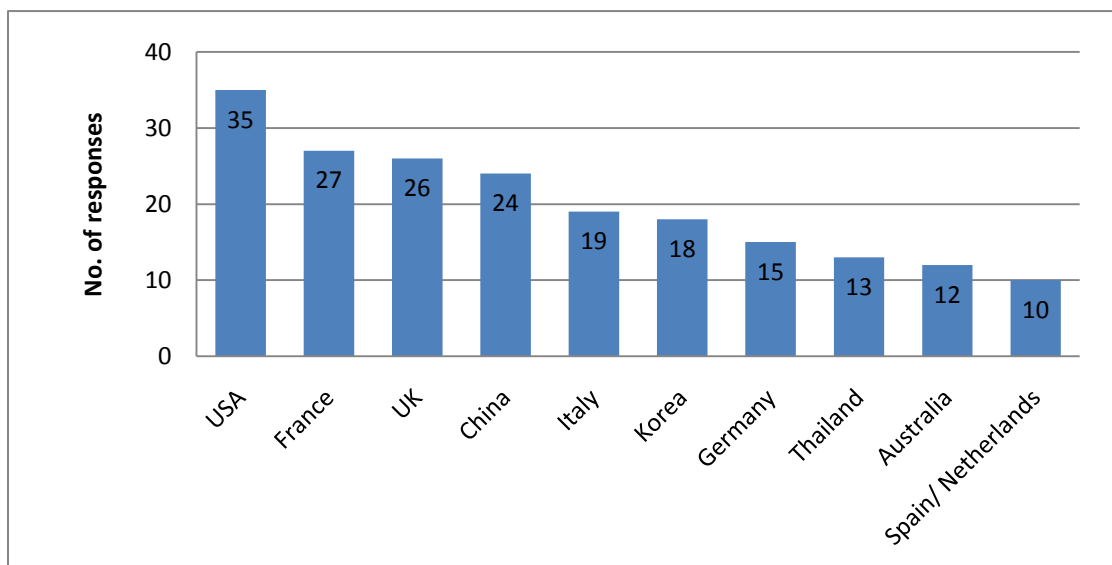


Figure 9. Top 10 destinations among the respondents

As demonstrated in figure 10 below, the Finnish architecture and design (44%) was the most common reason for visiting Finland. Many of the respondents were big fans of Marimekko, Arabia, Iittala, and Nordic design in general and wanted to make a shopping at the destination, as products from those brands are limited and pricey in Japan. 12 respondents (22%) answered that they were just curious to visit Nordic region including Finland because Nordic countries uniquely differ from the rest of Europe. Some of them mentioned that their curiosity about Finland was derived from the high standard of Finnish education system, Nokia, Moomi, and Finnish design. Following the general interests, 11 respondents (20%) came to Finland to see Kamome Diner, and then relaxation (11%) and nature (9%) were another good reason for traveling to Finland. Minor purposes were to visit Santa Claus Village and to meet up a friend living there. Interestingly, Two respondents decided to spend their honeymoon in Finland.

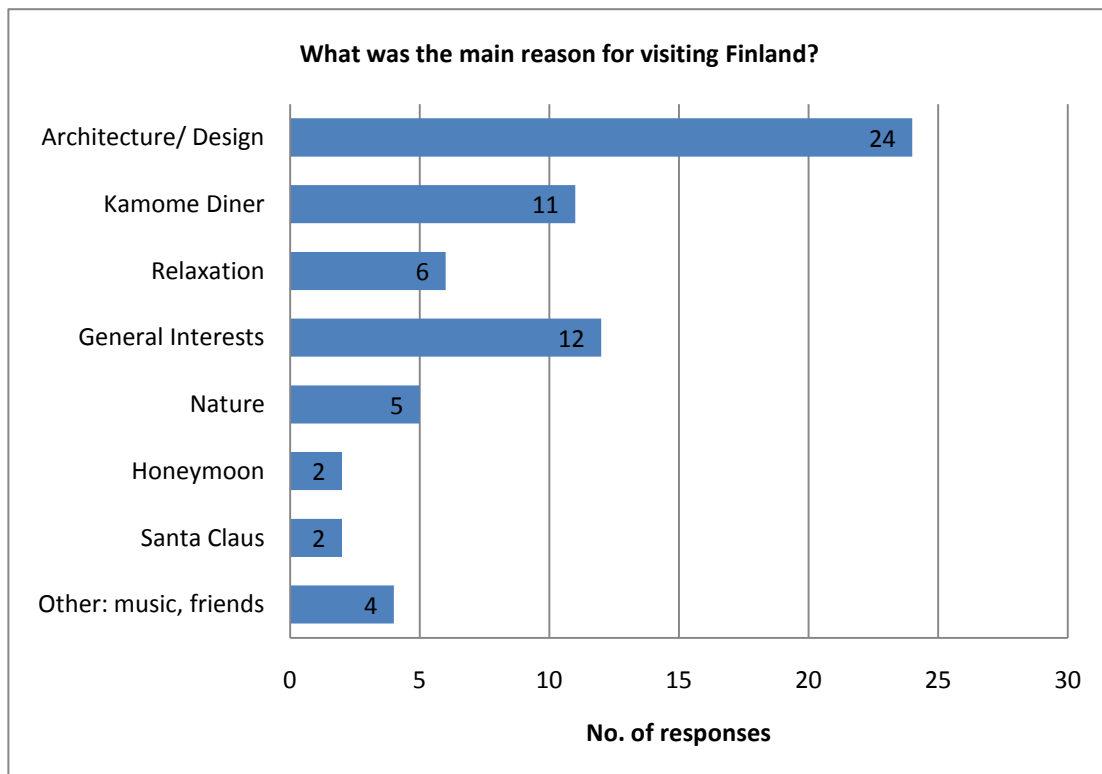


Figure 10. The main reason for visiting Finland

It is important for marketing strategy to find out where the customers hear about the company for the first place. 28 respondents (52%) answered that they had got to know about My Suomi via search engine like *google* or *yahoo*. 10 respondents (19%) found My Suomi on some advertisement on the internet. Several respondents heard about My Suomi via word of mouth and friends each. The answers of those who chose “other” were: “I don’t know because my partner found”, “through Japanese social networking service called *mixi*” and “online shop *SCOPE*”. Nobody had reached My Suomi via advertisements on any magazines.

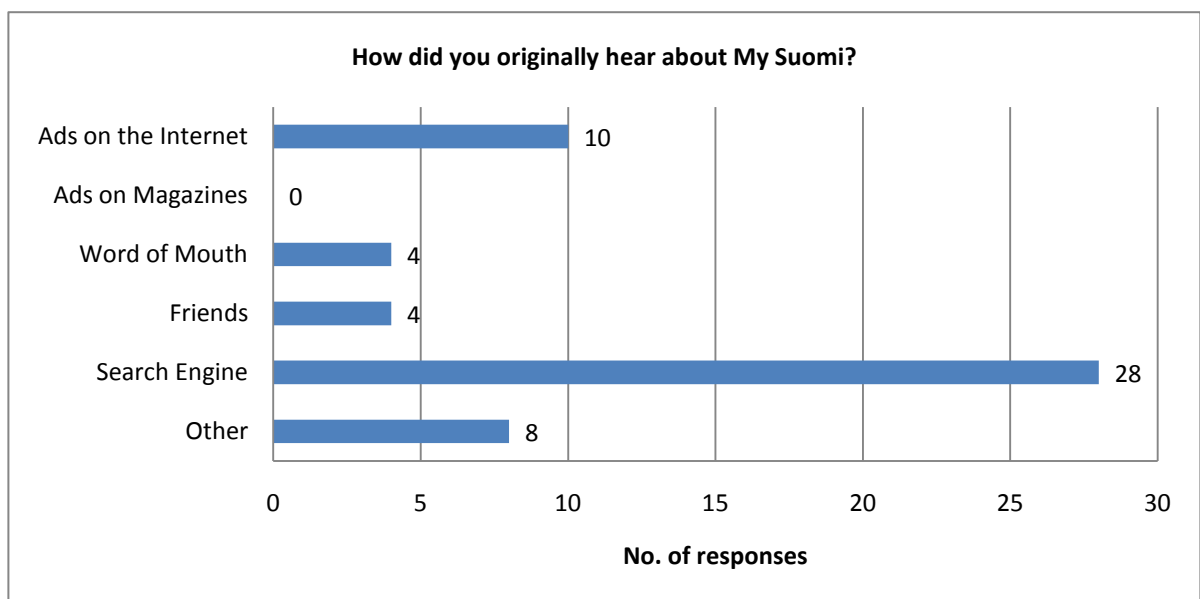


Figure 11. How respondents heard about My Suomi

Last but not least, the respondents were asked what factor(s) had an influence for them on choosing My Suomi. Approximately 50% of the people responded that the excellent content of the tours was the key factor, for its being small, customizable and exactly meeting customers’ needs and wants. Nearly the same percentage of the respondents stated that they got a positive impression of My Suomi through their friendly homepage or blog. They thought the website and the blog were truthful, warmly-welcoming, and fascinating. Especially, the brief profile of the each

staff member on the homepage describing who actually they are made the respondents feel it is a reliable company. The possibility to communicate in Japanese was also indicated to be a significant factor (20%), as majority of them is unable to speak English or Finnish. There were five respondents (9%) who said that the key was they gained trust through polite and friendly communication such as emails. Being a local travel agency was another factor which had attracted several respondents, as the locals' knowledge and support was ideal. Four respondents had heard or read positive feedbacks concerning the company. Only three respondents thought the offered prices were reasonable to afford. Two respondents pointed out that they really did not find any alternatives.

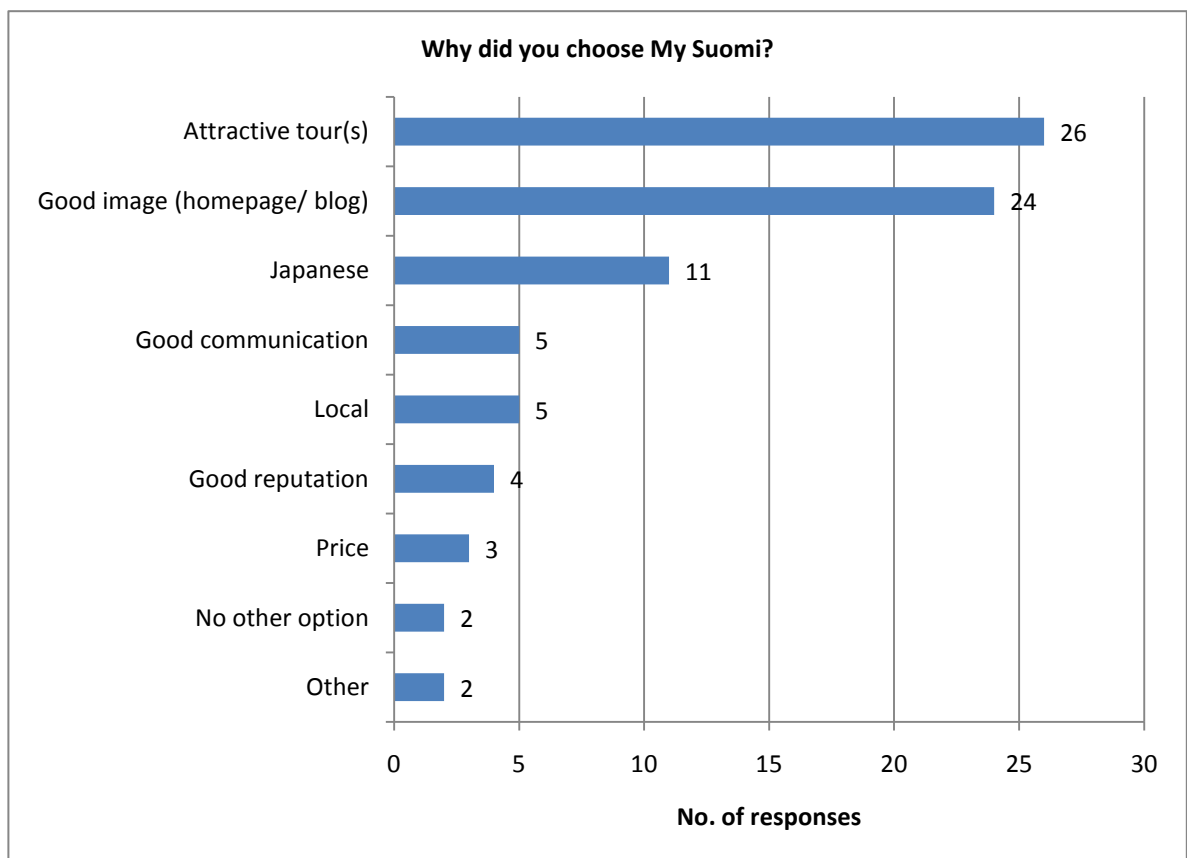


Figure 12. Reason for choosing My Suomi Oy

The following results are received based on SERVQUAL dimensions; tangible (homepage, blog, brochure and appearance), reliability (promised tour and accurate information), responsiveness (promptness, availability of the personnel and response to complaints and troubles), assurance (knowledge and professional level, and politeness and kindness), empathy (individual care and understanding level). The evaluation by both the customers and the employees of My Suomi Oy are demonstrated in figures in order to compare the gaps. The received comments are discussed after each figure in order to support the results.

## 5.2 Tangibles

This variable was approached by assessing physical factors such as, My Suomi's homepage, blog, brochure and appearance of the personnel.

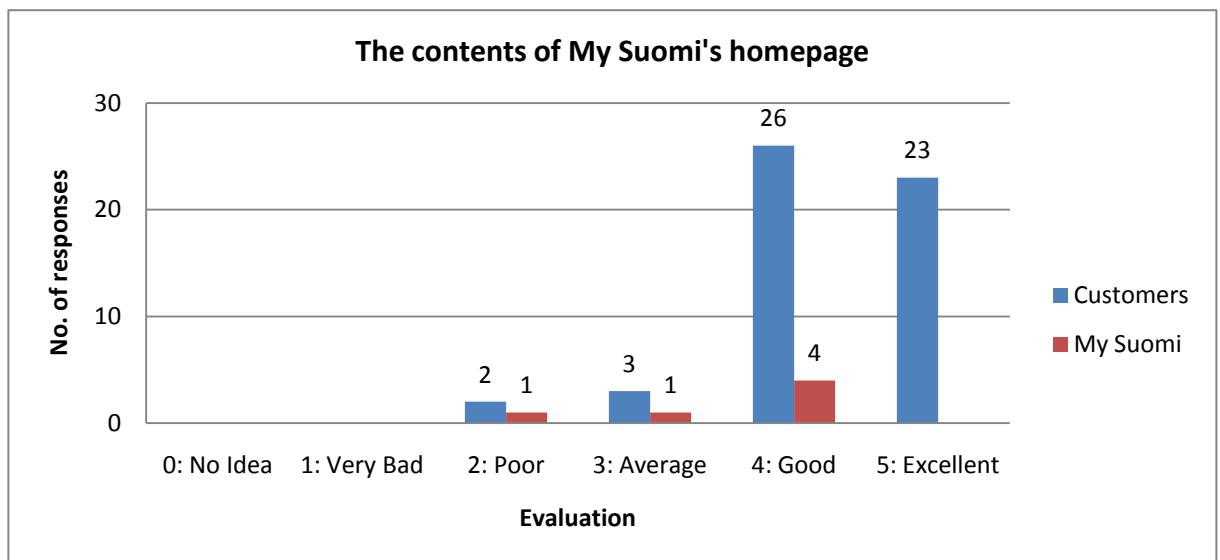


Figure 13. Evaluation on the contents of My Suomi's homepage

The most valued score by the customers was “4: good” concerning the contents of My Suomi's homepage as shown in figure 13. There are several negative comments and suggestions for

improvements with the evaluation by those who chose the score. Many customers also answered “5: excellent” as many of them felt the warmth and kindness of the company and liked the overall layout and design. The staff thought their website was rather good; however, they were aware of the possibility of upgrading it; for example, by renewing more often and making it look livelier.

Table 3. List of positive and negative comments about My Suomi’s homepage

POSITIVE COMMENTS	NEGATIVE COMMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nice and exciting pictures</li> <li>• Good layout/ design</li> <li>• Accurate and clear description of tours</li> <li>• Easy to find information</li> <li>• Polite</li> <li>• Describes Finland well</li> <li>• Warm atmosphere of My Suomi Oy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technological issue</li> <li>• Too simple</li> <li>• Too heavy (too slow to open pages)</li> <li>• Difficult to find information</li> <li>• Could be better</li> <li>• Bad font style</li> <li>• Unreliable payment process</li> </ul>

Table 3 shows various comments regarding the website. The main practical issue pointed out was the garbling pages. Minor technological problem was that some links are outdated. A few customers were worried that the payment on the website was if tightly secured or not.

Interestingly, some people felt that finding information was easy; on the other hand, some found it difficult. All those diverse opinions are considered to be influenced by different computer skills and different tastes on design.

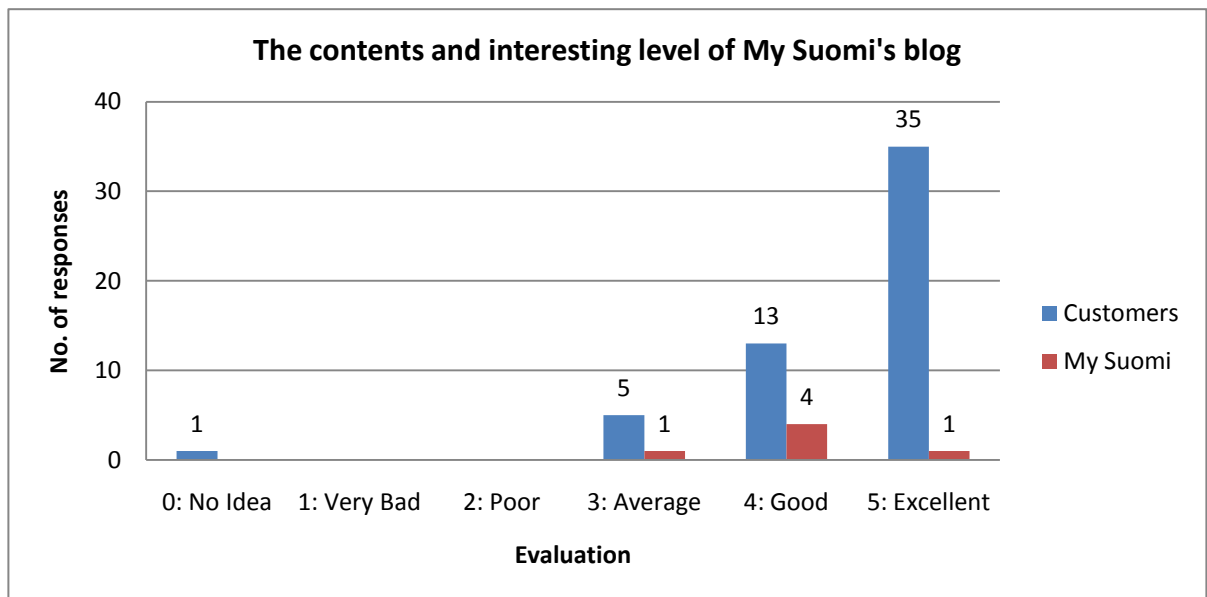


Figure 14. Evaluation on the contents and interesting level of My Suomi's blog

As shown in figure 14 above, the majority of the respondents perceived the contents of the blog were good or excellent. According to the open-ended comments, many respondents enjoy reading the blog very much. Several people even look forward to reading a new entry on a frequent base as a routine, on the other hand, some read rarely. The other received comments were: "it is interesting to know what is going on trivially in everyday life in Finland like weather, events, Finnish food, newly released products, and fashion in real-time", "I can enjoy a feeling of being imaginably in Finland again while reading", "it is a great preview of Finland", "the warm personality of the staff is reflected nicely in the blog, so I could trust My Suomi from the very beginning." There was no negative feedback though; several respondents suggested that it [could](#) be even better if a different employee writes more often from a different angle, since at the moment one employee is mostly in charge of updating it. The employees were quite positive about their blog, as it contains a variety of interesting subjects, and it shows that My Suomi is easy-going; therefore, easy to approach.

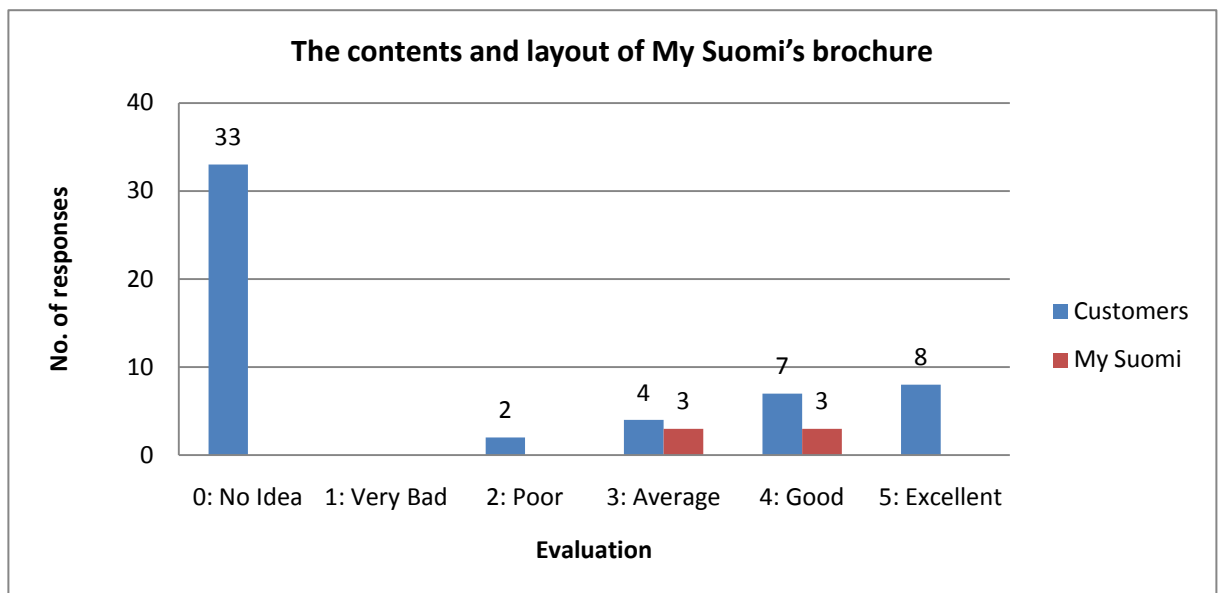


Figure 15. Evaluation on the contents and layout of My Suomi's brochure

Figure 15 indicates that 61% of the respondents have not seen the brochure of My Suomi before. The respondents with the score “4: good” or “5: excellent” thought that the brochure was well-designed and nice looking including the quality of paper. Some were neutral, and two respondents considered the brochure was rather poorly made. One respondent recommended that the brochure should be revised carefully; as an example, enlarge the size to fit more information. A few respondents wondered how they could receive the brochure and thought it would be a good idea if it becomes possible to download it in PDF file through the homepage. The valued score among the employees was fairly average, as it contains accurate information and authentic pictures. One employee answered neutrally that their brochures were not one of the outstanding ones s/he had ever seen.



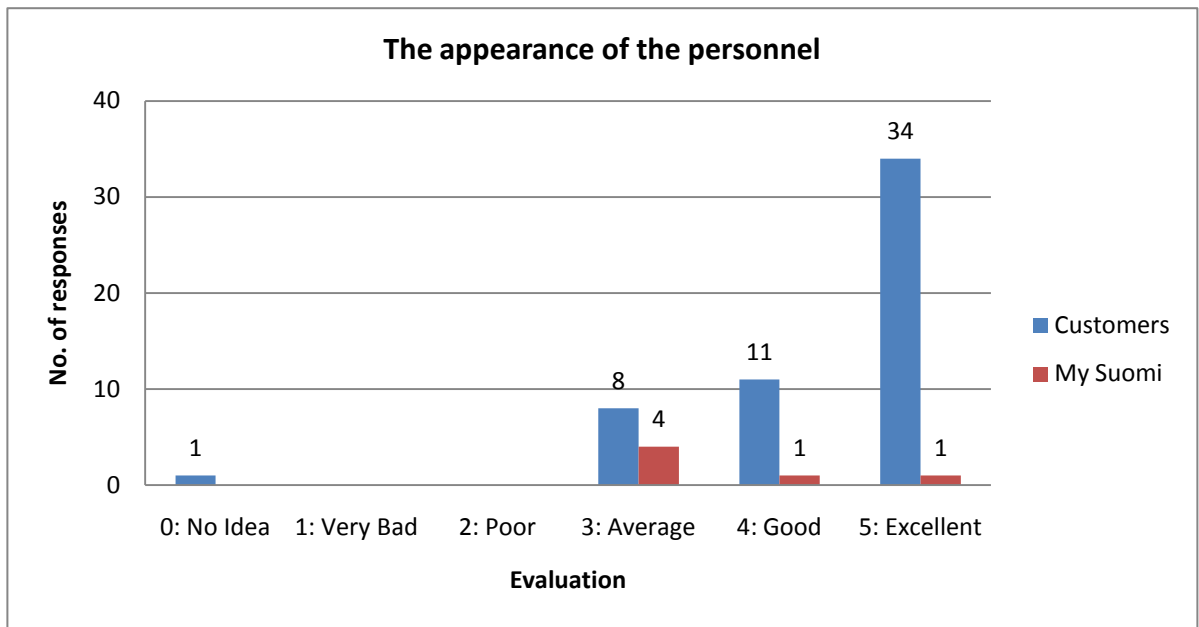


Figure 16. Evaluation on the appearance of the personnel

It is demonstrated in Figure 16 that 63% of the respondents valued the appearances of the personnel as excellent. The common reason was their casual and fashionable clothing style. According to many respondents' opinion, casual look of the employees made them feel comfortable for the entire tour, unlike formal clothes which would have given intensive atmosphere. They also agreed that the appearance of the personnel matched perfectly with the image of the company; therefore, the styles should be remained the same as it is now. As the personnel of My Suomi try to be “themselves” when meeting their customers, from an objective point of view they considered that dressing in a cozy style was rather good. They have very neutral score on this variable, since they dress just normally.

### 5.3 Reliability

Reliability factor can measure how much customers can trust the company. This was addressed by ensuring if the tour was carried out according to the itineraries and if accurate information was delivered or not.

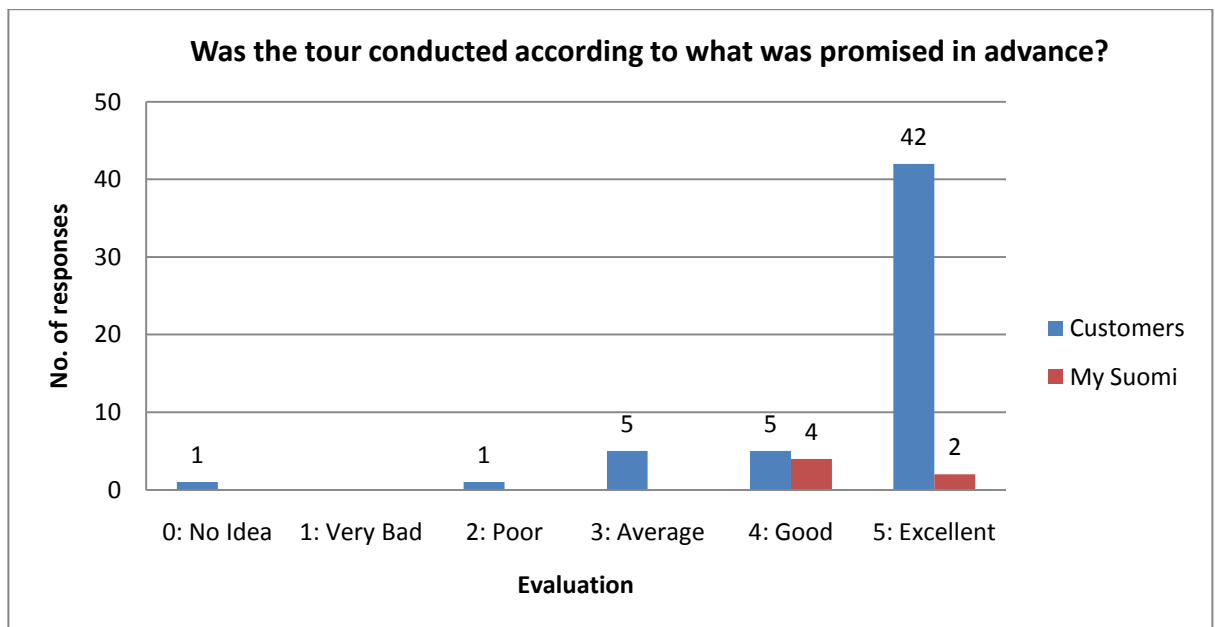


Figure 17. Evaluation on the tours

As shown in Figure 17, 42 respondents evaluate the tours excellent, as tours were carried out relaxingly according to the schedule with some flexibility. Some were grateful for the possibility to make a slight change as they wished to customize. Several respondents appreciated they did not have to hurry up completing their shopping and rather took their time, since tours were somewhat flexible in time. On the contrary, a few respondents felt a bit stressed when they realized that other people had to wait for them to finish shopping. As for the employees' perception, they were quite confident that they offer tours as promised in their itineraries. An

employee answered that s/he has gotten better at time management over time with more experience.

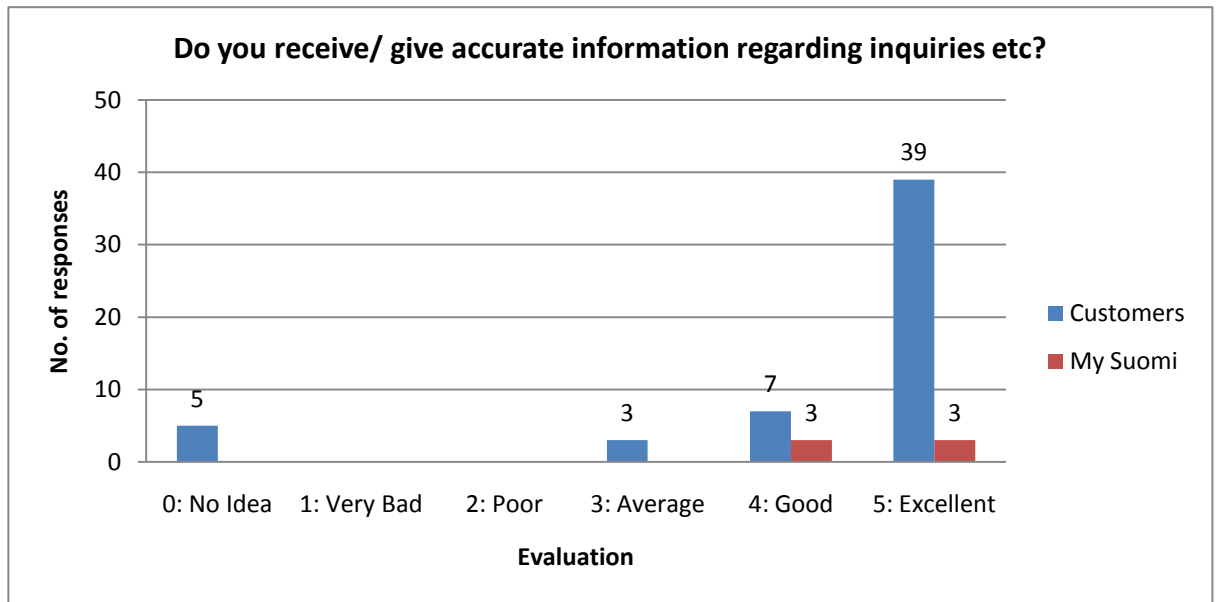


Figure 18. Evaluation on accurate information

Almost every respondent was satisfied with the precise and practical information they received. Many felt that the answers were such in details which were more than what they have expected. Several respondents even did not have to contact the agency because everything was in order, and those people scored "0: no idea". One respondent noted that she should have been informed about the ongoing renovation at the apartment where she had stayed. Another respondent commented that she should have gotten information in case the flight was delayed, as she got puzzled when she was behind the schedule. The personnel had a great attitude when it comes to delivering accurate information. One added that if something is unclear, s/he always calls the office or checks it up on the phone to make sure. There was a concern that sometimes broad questions are not clear enough to comprehend what exactly their worries are.

## 5.4 Responsiveness

Responsiveness is associated with how personnel respond to customers. According to how quickly the service was conveyed, the availability of the staff members as required, and how complaints were dealt with, the level of responsiveness was determined.

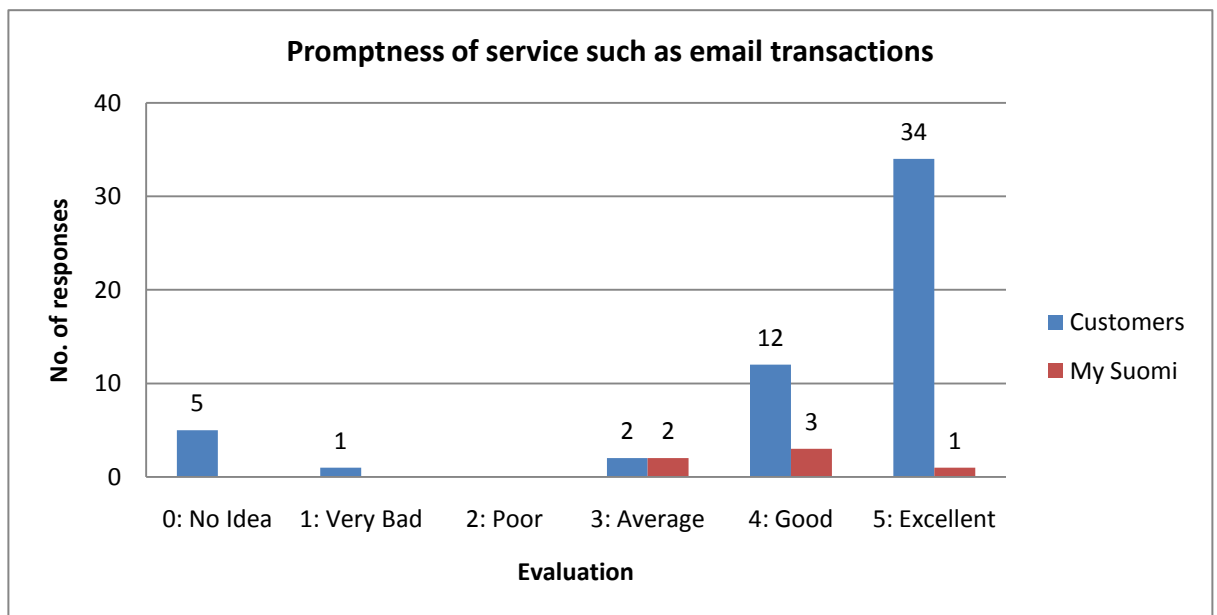


Figure 19. Evaluation on promptness of service

The majority of people felt the transactions were smooth and quick in spite of the time difference between Finland and Japan. Many respondents praised that the responses were always considerably polite and kind in addition to promptness. Some people thought responses were slow from time to time though overall it was fine. One respondent wrote down that their reply took too long time. There was one suggestion that when it is a Finnish national holiday and a response will be late; customers should be notified that matter in advance. The evaluation among the employees was rather good. The staff was highly aware that answering inquiries takes time due

to the difference in time. Accordingly, they try their best to respond to inquiries as soon as possible.

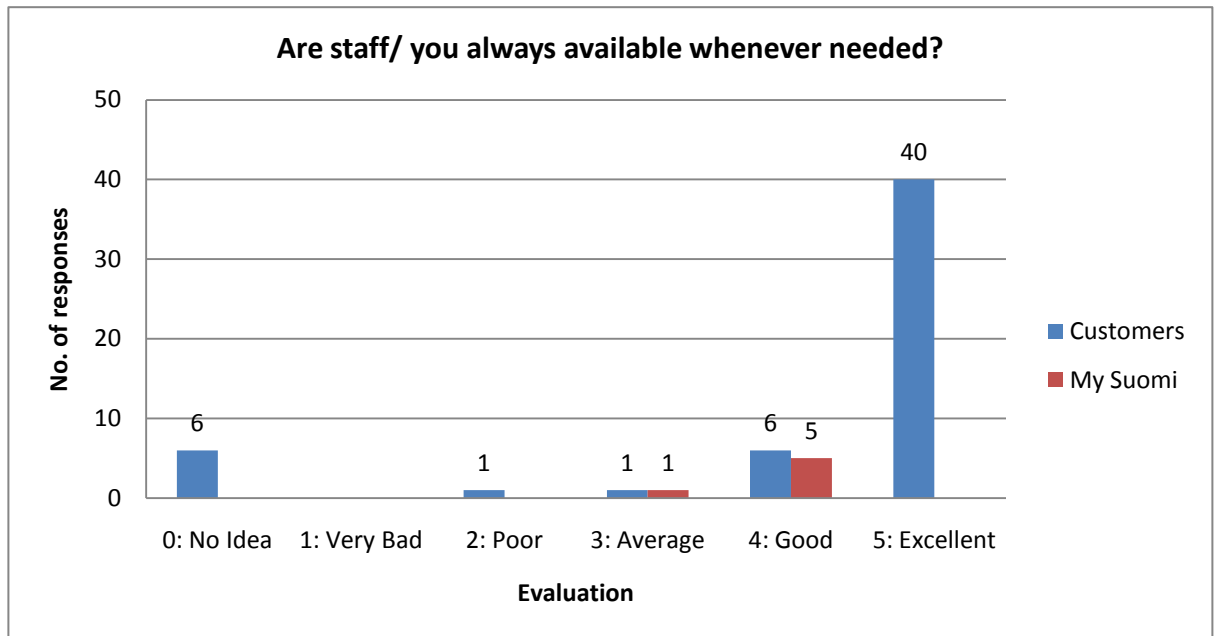


Figure 20. Evaluation on availability of the personnel

As shown in Figure 20, the most respondents were clearly of the opinion that the personnel were always available whenever they needed help. Especially, some respondents valued it when the tour guide assisted them during shopping; for example, giving advices and helping with a payment as a go-between. One respondent commented that even at the tax-free procedure, the staff was thoughtfully available. It was pointed out by one of the employees that they are not available on Saturdays, Sundays and Finnish national holidays. Except the fact, they are pretty much available as required. Thus, the given evaluation was relatively highly scored.

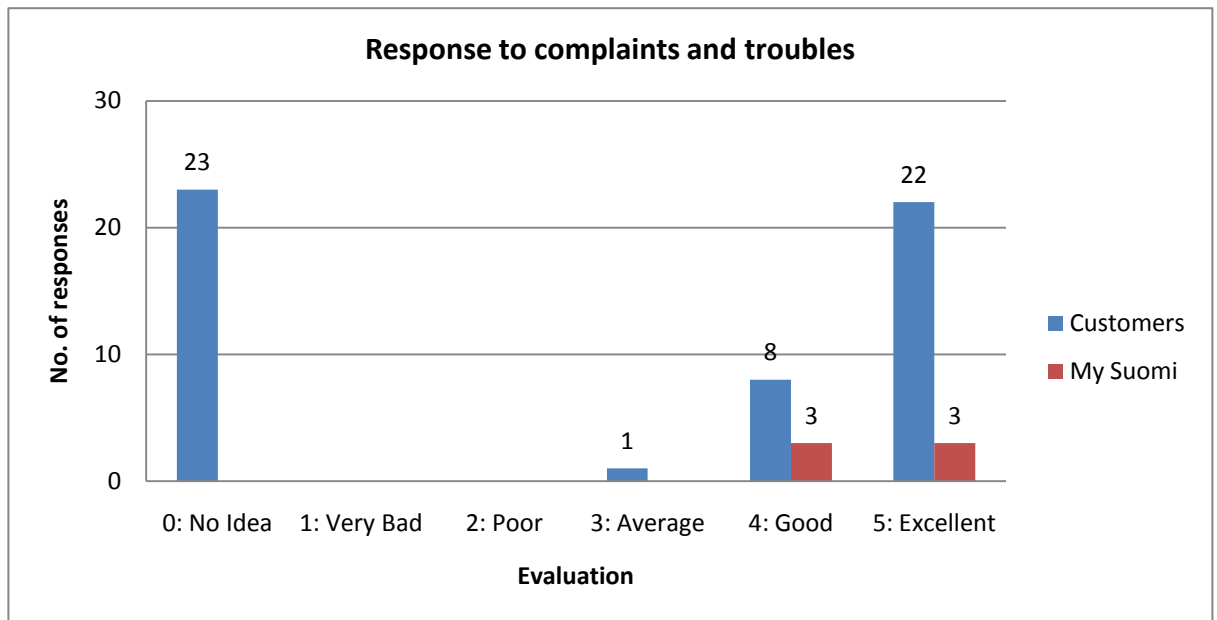


Figure 21. Evaluation on response to complaints and troubles

As it can be read from Figure 21 above, the approximately half of the respondents did not have any references to answer this question, because they did not encounter any problems at all during the tours. Many of those who chose “5: excellent” had nothing to complain about, since tours were extremely well-organized and nothing went wrong. “When it started to rain, a rain jacket was already prepared”, one respondent noted. Another respondent was thankful when his payment failed, he was guided to a solution immediately. Regarding complains and troubles there seemed rarely any of them. One comment of the personnel underlined that they try to solve issues as soon as possible. Another note was that they give adequate compensation for customers if any problems occur.

## 5.5 Assurance

To measure assurance variable, if the personnel were knowledgeable and professional in their job and if they were kind and friendly to their customers were surveyed.

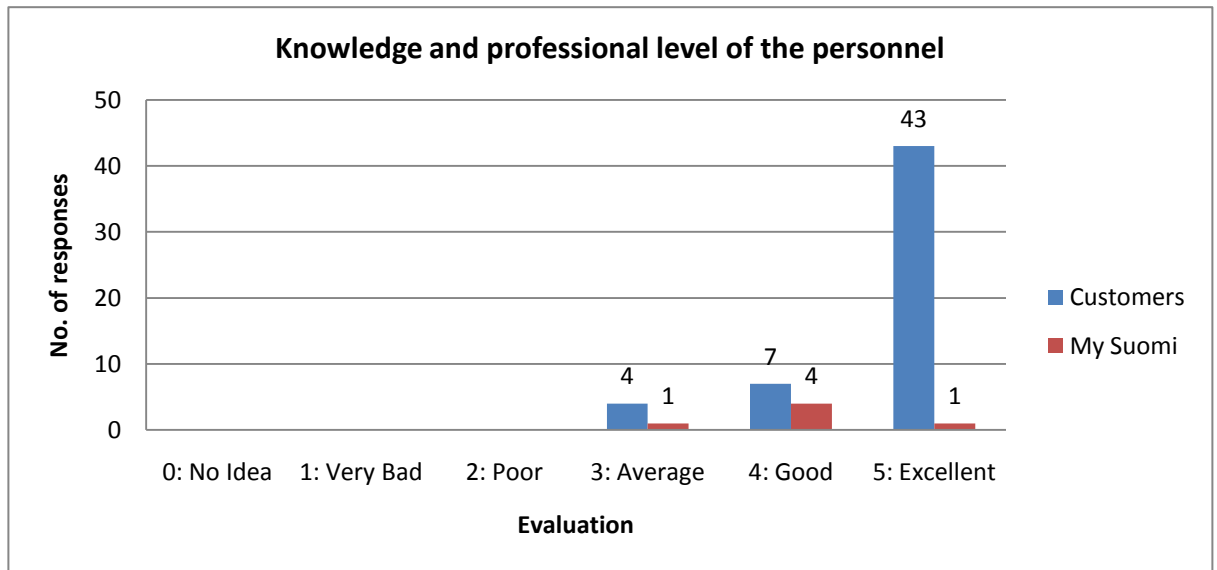


Figure 22. Evaluation on knowledge and professional level of the personnel

Almost 80% of the respondents thought the knowledge and professional level of the staff was brilliant. In terms of the knowledge level, many described that they were deeply impressed by the tour guide being able to answer any questions regardless of topic, particularly in relation to design and architecture. Some were also amazed at the Finnish tour guides who spoke fluent Japanese. Not only the great knowledge level, but also email/phone transactions and the tours were all handled on the viewpoint of customers, hence the professional level was viewed high. One of the employees noted that all the tour guides are sophisticated, yet detailed knowledge in some fields is still quite limited. Another thought that his/her knowledge has been developing over time. The received assessment of the staff was good in general.

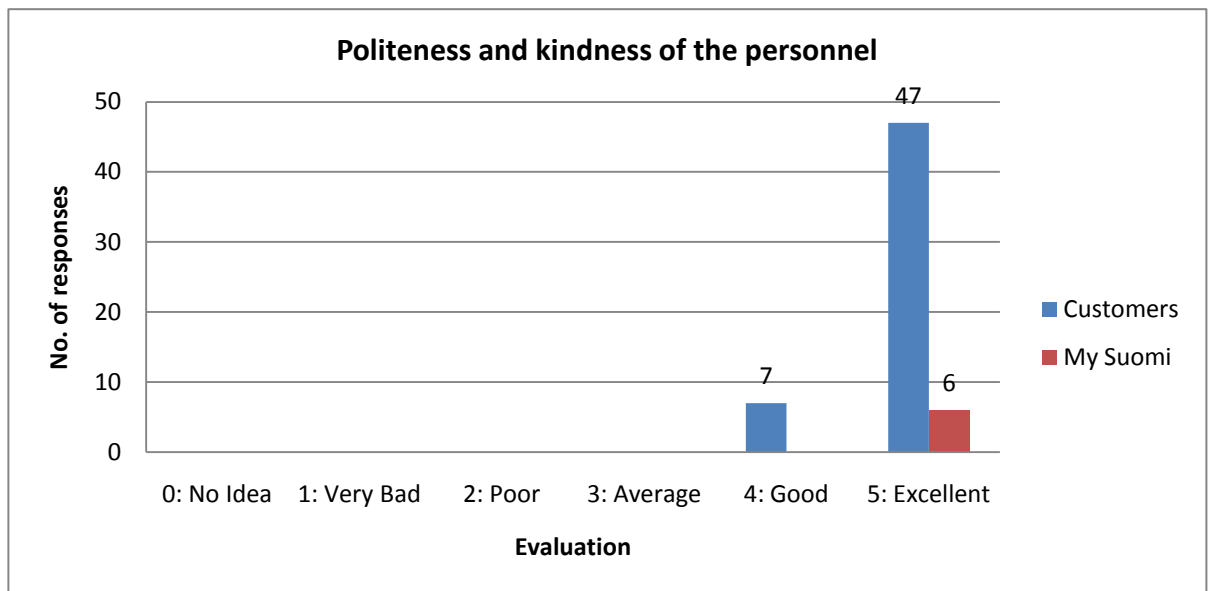


Figure 23. Evaluation on politeness and kindness of the personnel

Remarkably the total evaluation was high as to the politeness and kindness of the personnel as shown in Figure 23. It was highlighted by several respondents that the Finnish tour guides were even more polite than the Japanese people. A few respondents noted that the staff was so friendly that they felt like they were visiting their friends. Apparently their friendliness created easy-going atmosphere and politeness showed respect to customers, as a result, even around 90% of the respondents chose “5: excellent”. Besides the customers, the personnel also believed that they were greatly polite and friendly. All the personnel agreed that their politeness and friendliness level mark the highest. Even though the other factors were reviewed imperfect, this particular variable received the perfect score of all to be emphasized.



## 5.6 Empathy

The concept of empathy is that company care for their customers. This factor reveals if customers were individually cared and understood right.

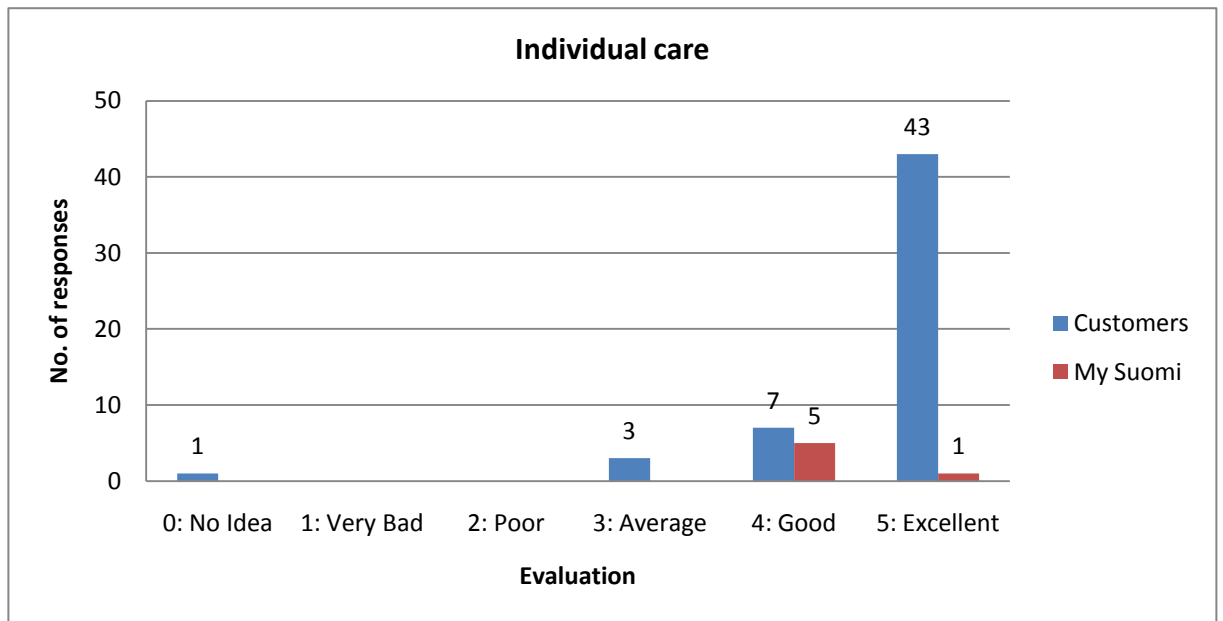


Figure 24. Evaluation on individual care

Approximately 80% of the responses indicated excellent regarding individual care. The most common answer was that the staff created comfortable atmosphere and involved each one of the participants in the tours. Some felt cared well when the tours were customized just for them, like the tour ended at the different place from the itinerary because it was closer to their hotel.

Another example is that the staff had checked out open facilities even on national holidays when their tours took place during the public holidays. Some respondents were grateful for a surprise gift as a part of the tour. There was also a comment that receiving a handmade Christmas was such a nice surprise. It seems it is the little things that count. Except one employee all gave

themselves a score “4: good”. One of them noted that s/he tries to customize the contents of tours according to the customers, including stories to tell depending on their interests, travel experiences and so forth.

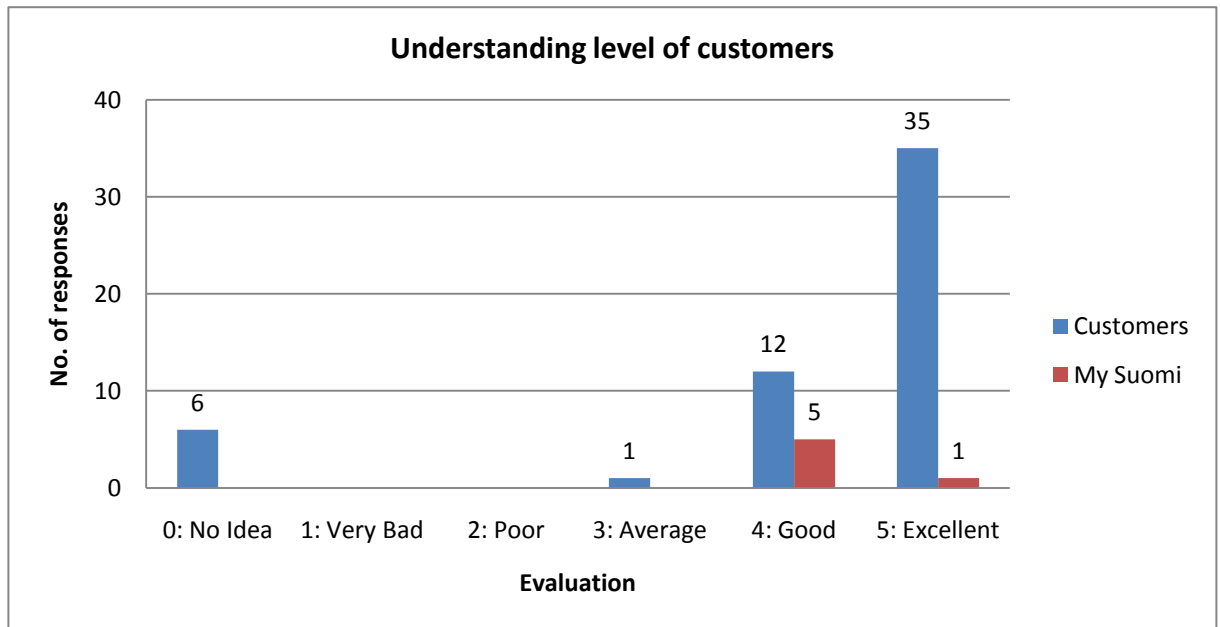


Figure 25. Evaluation on understanding level of customers

Figure 25 illustrates that almost all the respondents had the same opinion that their needs and wants were understood well. That is why many customers felt that the actual tours exceeded their expectations. Some flexibility of the tours was recognized as understandings of customers. The majority of the respondents were satisfied with all aspects of the services. For the employees it is sometimes difficult to understand their Japanese customers, as Japanese tourists are quite often unaware of the significant difference between Finland and Japan. It would be easier if they realize the way Finland functions is totally different from Japan. Even though their job is to bridge the gaps, one of the personnel was afraid that some disappointments cannot be avoided for that reason.

## 5.7 Overviews

The first question in the last section of the questionnaire was “what was the best part of the tour?”, and the common responses were: “it was easy to reach places where would have been difficult alone”, “the small group tour enabled to give somewhat freedom, privacy and flexibility”, “interacting with locals and getting local information”, “a lot of new knowledge was gained”, “it was efficient to travel one place to another with a local tour guide”, and “the tours were in the Japanese language”. Minor answers were having a cup of coffee and Finnish cinnamon roll by the lake, getting a little memorial gift at the end, enjoying handmade picnic lunch in Suomenlinna. The central point was that the tours were small, local, and Japanese.

The following question was if there were any unfilled expectations. The majority of the respondents were fully satisfied with everything. Although there was no major disappointment, there were several respondents who left their dissatisfying feeling in comments. A few wrote that they were promised that their pictures from the tours would be sent, but it took three months and one respondent is still waiting. Some of the people recommend that tours should become available on the weekends as well. Those who stayed at an apartment thought it would have been better if there was an elevator for carrying the heavy suitcases, if the renovation was not ongoing, and if the views through windows were livelier. One customer underlined that the pick-up service from the airport was different from her expectation, as she imagined that a private car would be waiting according to the picture on the homepage. All those dissatisfactions were so minor and uncomplicated that it is straightforward to fix.

Then, the respondents were asked about their wishes (places to visit or things to do) for their second visit to Finland. Their wishes notably varied from one another. Many respondents were interested in visiting some other city than Helsinki, doing more outdoor activities associated with the nature, and interacting with local Finns as well as experiencing Finnish way of life. These wishes can be cleverly used to implement new tours. More detail is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The list of respondents' wishes for the next visit

Wish List		
• Northern light	• Berry picking in the forest	• Moomin village
• The midnight sun	• Mushroom picking and cook them	• Iittala glass factory
• Sauna/ swimming pool	• Learn how to cook Finnish food	• Aarikka factory
• Live music	• Cook fresh food from market	• Rovaniemi
• Visit Finn's house	• Hiking/ trekking	• Fiskars
• Homestay/ farmstay	• Skiing	• Tallin (Silja line)
• Museum tour	• Cycling in summer	• Klookaru
• Sports event	• Camping	• Turku
• Meet Finns studying Japanese	• Autumn leaves in Lapland	• Rauma
• Talk to locals at bars		• Helsinki in different seasons
• Living experience (long stay)		

At the end of the entire questionnaire for the customers, the respondents were asked to describe briefly what they thought about My Suomi. The results of the key words were warm, caring, homey, trustworthy, and easy to approach. Some customers felt that My Suomi was rather like a family or friends than a company for them. Moreover, this kind of travel agency was new for

some people, and their image of travel agencies turned, in a good sense, completely different. Many respondents could feel that the staff love Finland from the bottom of their heart, enjoy doing their jobs with these members, and most significantly, have a thorough understanding of Japanese culture.

Besides the customers, the personnel of My Suomi were requested to tell their strength(s), weakness (es) and opinion about the company at the end of their questionnaire. In general, they see their strength as being a small organization which enables them to offer personal services, to focus on a specific segment, and to work flexibly. Conversely they also think that being small is their weakness, as it limits their potential customers, experience and knowledge, and confuses managerial roles within the company. Overall, they are aware of being a unique and new type of travel agency with a lot of potentialities and challenges ahead. Every person in the company is experienced from all other walks of life, and it is the key for successful business as well as a great workplace according to some responses.

## 6 Analysis of the Results and conclusions

### 6.1 Result analysis according to SERVQUAL

To further the previous findings retrieved from the conducted survey, the relevant results will be drawn methodically in this part.

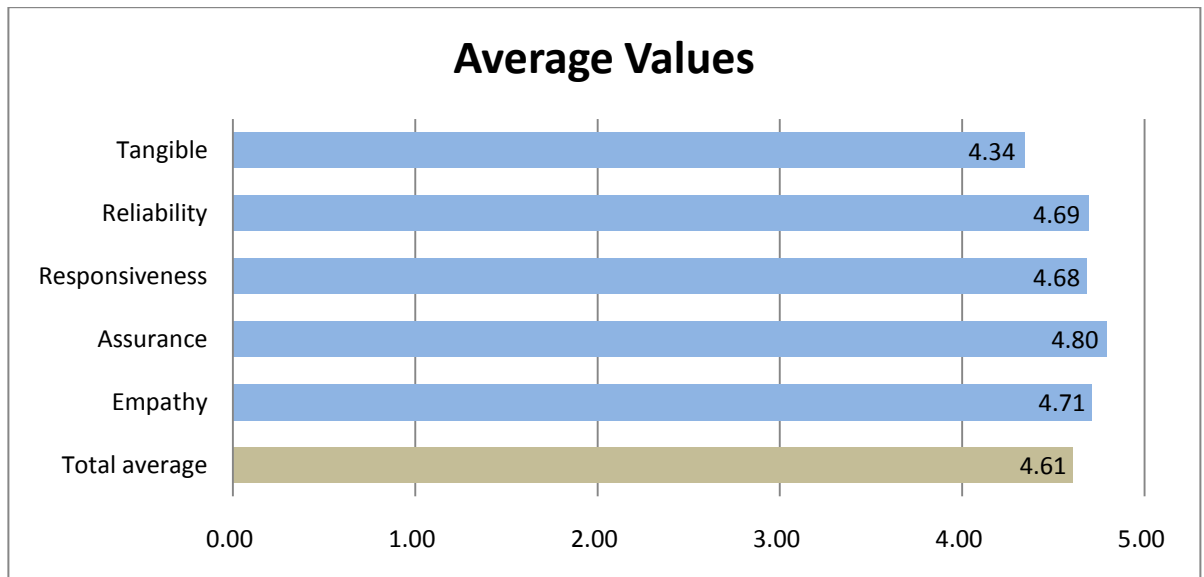


Figure 26. Average values of all variables scored by the customer respondents

It can be summarized that overall customer satisfaction level was quite close to excellent, as the final average value was 4.61 as shown in Figure 26. According to the customer survey, the lowest value received was 4.34 in the tangible elements. The rest of the evaluations were more or less the same; still, the highest value was found in assurance which scored remarkably 4.80. Each variable will be analyzed more in detail in followings.

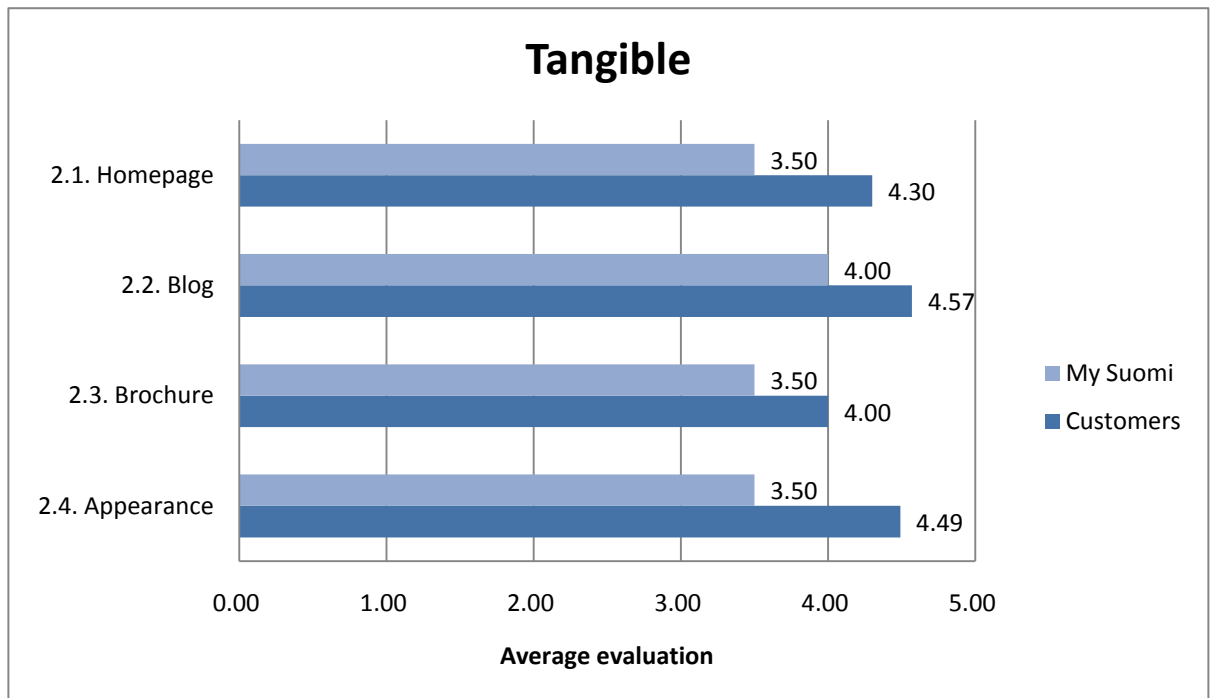


Figure 27. Average values of tangible

The total average point of four *tangible* factors among customers was 4.34, and among My Suomi was 3.63. The best marked tangible feature among both the customers (4.57) and the personnel of My Suomi (4.00) was the blog. The customers created positive images of the company based on the website and the blog on the pre-visit phase, and then they developed the real images when meeting the staff upon their arrival.

The appearance factor received the second best score by the customer respondent, and the gap between the customers and the personnel was relatively big. Many customers agreed that their perceived images on both pre and post visit matched quite well, while the personnel thought their dressing style was nothing special.

The weakest factor was the brochure; still, the average point was 4.00 which indicated “good”. Although nearly 60% of the customers could not evaluate as they had not seen it before, the received assessment varied from customer to customer. The website got the second lowest score, and negative evaluations derived from minor technical problems.

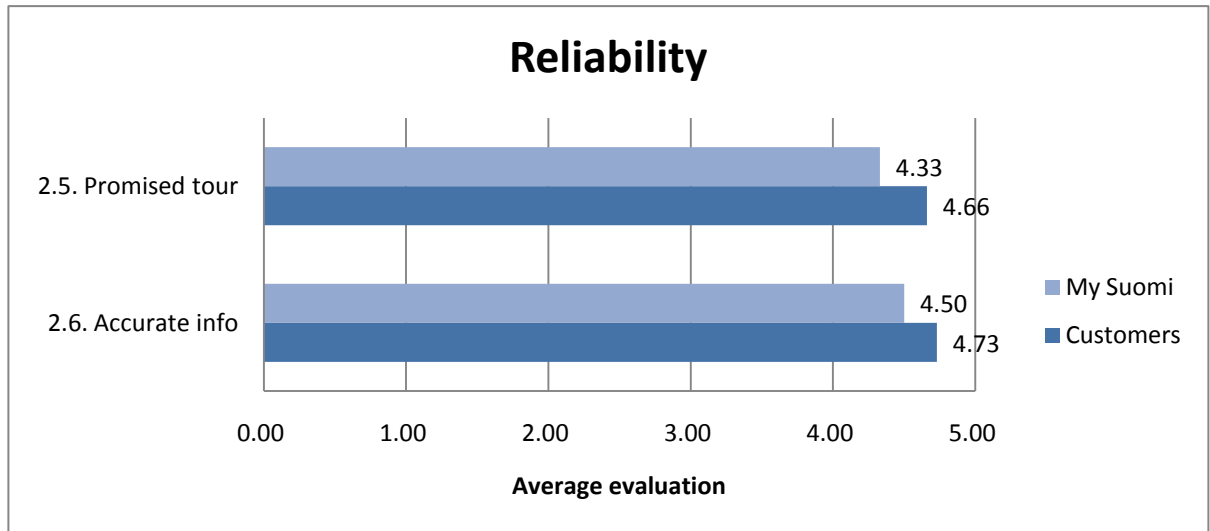


Figure 28. Average values of reliability

The received value on average was 4.70 from the customers and 4.42 from My Suomi. The reason behind the high level of customer satisfaction concerning *reliability* can be considered due to the actual performance which has exceeded their expectations. Many customers appreciated when the tours were favorably customized just for them on an ad hoc basis as well as those were conducted according to the itineraries without facing any problems. Likewise, the customers felt they received more detailed and polite answers to their questions compared to what they had expected.



The personnel, on the contrary, assessed their performance slightly lower than the customers. It is likely that because they are not fully sure at all times if they understand and respond the actual questions of their customers' broad inquiries.

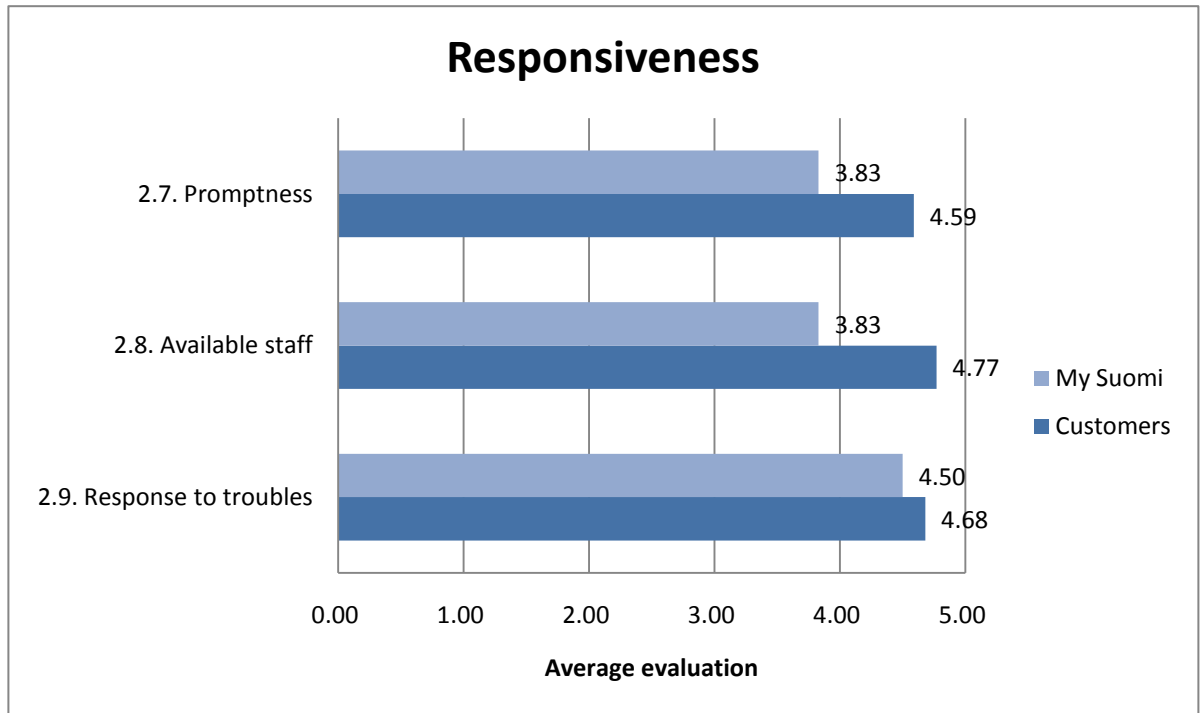


Figure 29. Average values of responsiveness

*Responsiveness* got marked 4.68 averagely by the customers and 4.05 by My Suomi. It is evident that all the variables were perceived nearly excellent. The employees were quite confident that they take an excellent care of their troubled customers if there happens to be any. There were rarely any customers who faced problems, since everything was organized with absolute controlling and planning. As a result, the customers evaluated high.

However, the staff members were concerned that their services such as responding emails tend to be slow because unfavorably Finland is 6-7 hours behind the Japanese time. Another concern was that they are unreachable on weekends and national holidays. In spite of those facts, the customers rather judged those elements to be excellent as taking the different business hours into account. Thus, the results turned out to be a great gap between the customers and the employees in relation to the promptness transaction and the staffs being available.

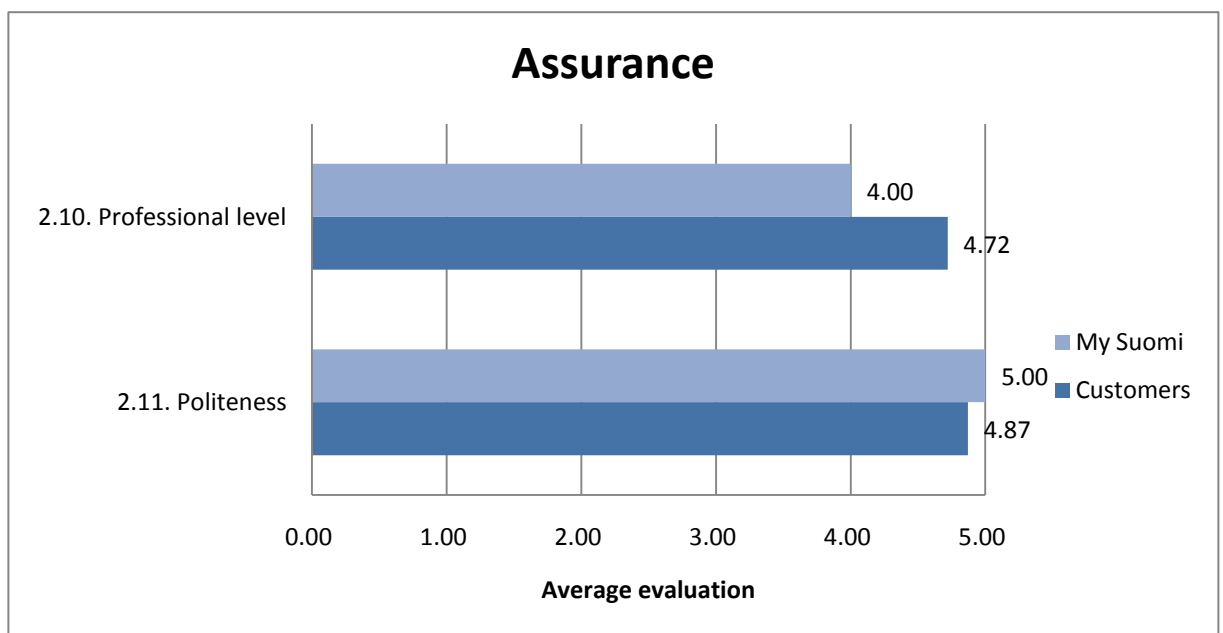


Figure 30. Average values of assurance

*Assurance* received the highest average point of all – 4.80 by the customers and 4.50 by the employees. This resulted to be the best evaluated variable of SERVQUAL dimensions. Especially, the politeness got a significant outcome. All the personnel considered themselves excellently polite with an absolute confidence, and it was reflected in the customer reviews as well. The reason could be considered because a number of customers were surprised that the Finnish tour

guides were incredibly sophisticated and knew how to show respect even better than the Japanese people, which they did not expect.

Additionally, the customers felt that the tour guides had an enormous amount of knowledge concerning their specialized field of architecture and design in particular. They were able to answer any questions from the customers and no negative feedback was received. Not only the employees were seen knowledgeable but also professionally experienced overall for their great attitudes and actual high performances to offer the best possible services. The personnel, on the other hand, thought their knowledge and experience in the tourism and service industry was quite limited.

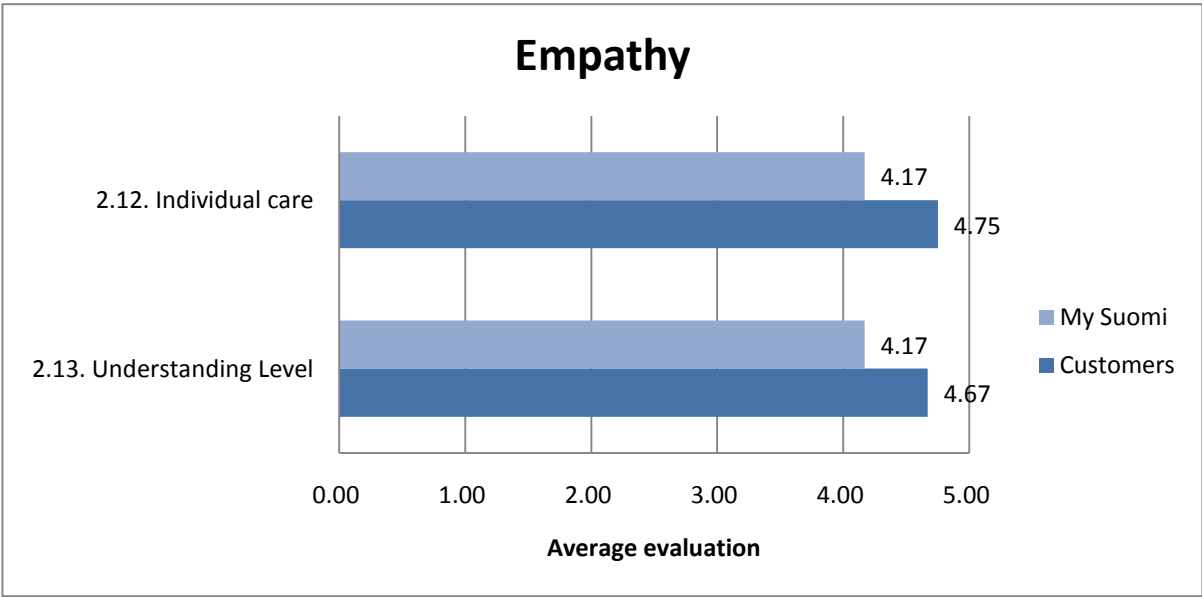


Figure 31. Average values of empathy

Regarding the last variable *empathy*, the customers evaluated quite high on average 4.71 and the personnel rather neutrally 4.17. The figure shows that the customers were quite fulfilled with empathy factors. The customers felt that each individual was paid a careful attention and involved actively in the tours; for instance, everyone was equally encouraged to ask questions or start discussions, and the friendly atmosphere was maintained for the entire time. Moreover, they felt they were being understood well when the tour guides were willing to tailor the content depending on a situation as the customers wished.

The reason for the personnel being slightly neutral about those factors was because they were not completely convinced that they understand their customers wish. The challenge is that Japanese customers often expect tacit understandings.

## **6.2 Conclusions and implications**

Customer satisfaction, quality and retention are core issues to study carefully for successful business no matter how small or large, global or local, and profitable or non-profitable. Especially in such a competitive tourism industry today, the focus should be on delivering high level of services and offering different forms of services. In that sense My Suomi Oy is greatly potential as having established with aims of offering excellent services and unique products on their own way. The results of the survey indicate that their goals have been nearly achieved. The customers are highly satisfied with the services and aware of the differences from the traditional types of travel agencies.

According to the survey results, the strongest variable of SERVQUAL dimensions has been identified as assurance which inspires trust and confidence. In details, the level of professional, knowledge, politeness and kindness were perceived considerably high by both the customers and the personnel. These are the key indicators to meet high expectations in such a masculine society like Japan where people put emphasizes on performance and professionalism when judging the quality of services. The weakest aspect of the dimensions, by contraries, was tangible which customers often generate the first images and then evaluate trustworthiness on the pre-visit phase. The potential element for improvement is the homepage which now has several technical problems occasionally. This requires technical skills in the employees. The brochures can be possibly reconsidered as well, although a limited number of respondents on this cannot show a significant direction whether or not it should be revised. Even though tangible resulted in the lowest scored variable, this is not so crucial, as the rating was still good after all.

Remarkably the total level of customer satisfaction was quite up to the highest in all five dimensions, and there was no alarming factor in need of an urgent fix. Overall, the customer respondents evaluated higher than the personnel in all aspects. This is a positive outcome that customers are more satisfied with the service performance than the personnel perceive themselves, because this indicates that the employees have been performing their jobs well and can gain more confidence. The challenges for the growth are keeping on doing what they have been doing right, working more on their weaknesses, and developing nearly excellent services to absolute excellent services.

My Suomi Oy is still a young, yet a successful type of travel agency developed in these new times. The success of My Suomi Oy seems to lie in the thorough understanding of the Japanese culture,

the narrow and unique segment of the market (design-focused tourism products for Japanese), and highly skilled personnel. As long as their customers keep being satisfied, stay loyal and spread positive word of mouth, the company is likely to attract more customers in the future. However, it is a small organization; therefore, the process may be slow, but significant in a long run.

### **6.3 Suggestions for further research**

Constant research is recommendable as customer needs and expectations constantly change. The research form can take the same method as this research or modified to fit their own criteria more specifically. The further research should be conducted by the sponsor themselves continuously, and then the data should be stored in their in-house system over time in order to monitor the changes. It is important to adjust strategies to fit the present demand.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Online Questionnaire

I am a student at HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences majoring Tourism in Finland. I am conducting a research for my bachelor's thesis and measuring service quality in corporation with My Suomi Oy. It would be highly appreciated if you could take 5-10 minutes to fill in the questionnaire below.

\*Please submit the questionnaire no later than 3rd of February, 2010.

\*required

### 1. About yourself

1.1. Gender \*

☐ Male

☐ Female

1.2. Age \*

1.3. Tour you participated and reason why \*

1.4. With whom did you travel to Finland? \*

- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Family
- ☐ On your own
- ☐ Other:

1.5. Which country/ies have you visited before? \*

1.6. What was the main reason for visiting Finland? \*

1.7. How did you originally hear about My Suomi? \*

- ☐ Ads on the internet
- ☐ Ads on magazines

- ☐ Word of mouth
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Search engine (e.g., Google, yahoo etc)
- ☐ Other:

1.8. Why did you choose My Suomi? \*

## 2. Evaluate questions below in scale 1-5.

<1: very bad, 2: poor, 3: average, 4: good, 5: excellent, \*if you do not know, please choose 0>

2.1. The content of My Suomi's homepage\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.2. The content and interesting level of My Suomi's blog\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.3. The content and layout of My Suomi's brochure\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.4. The appearance of personnel\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.5. Was the tour conducted according to what was promised in advance?\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.6. Did you receive accurate information regarding your inquiries etc?\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.7. Promptness of service such as email transaction\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.8. Was the staff always available when you needed?\*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.9. Response to complaints or troubles\* (If you do not know, please choose "0".)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.10. Knowledge and professional level of the personnel\* (If you do not know, please choose "0".)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.11. Politeness and kindness of the personnel\* (If you do not know, please choose "0".)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.12. Individual care\* (If you do not know, please choose "0".)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

2.13. Understanding level of customers\* (If you do not know, please choose "0".)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

### 3. Your impressions

3.1. What was the best part of the tour?\*

3.2. If you have a chance to visit Finland again, what would you like to do/ see?\*

3.3. Are there any unfilled expectations while your stay in Finland?

3.4. Please tell briefly what you think about My Suomi.\*

**Thank you very much!** Please complete by clicking "submit".



The purpose of the survey is to collect information about how you perceive your own performance regarding customer service. On the basis of information received, the gaps between customers and the staff of My Suomi will be analyzed. The result will be handled confidentially. Please submit the survey no later than 5th February 2010.

## 1. About Yourself

Nationality \*

☐ Japan

☐ Finland

## 2. Evaluate questions below in scale 1-5.

< 1 : very bad, 2 : poor, 3 : average, 4 : good, 5 : excellent >

### 2.1. The content of My Suomi's homepage \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

### 2.2. The content of blog \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

**2.3. The content and layout of brochure \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

**2.4. The appearance of personnel (dress code) \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

**2.5. Do you offer a tour according to what is promised? \*** (time schedule and content of the tour etc)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

**2.6. Do you give accurate information to your customers? \*** (in relation to inquiries etc)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

**2.7. Promptness of service such as email transactions \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

**2.8. Are you always available whenever needed? \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

**2.9. Response to complaints or troubles \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

**2.10. Knowledge and professional level of the personnel \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

---

**2.11. Politeness and kindness of the personnel \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent

Comment:

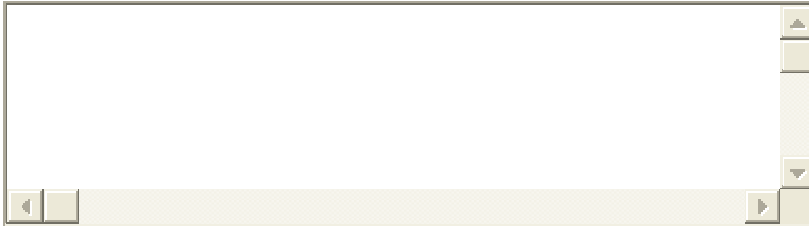
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**2.12. Individual care \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Excellent



3.3. Please tell what you think about My Suomi?



**Thank you for your time!**

Please complete the survey by clicking "submit".

Appendix 3. The pictures of the movie, Kamome Diner (Kamome Shokudo, 2009)

