



DEVELOPING THE EXPERIEN- TIALITY OF A BLIND TRAVEL PRODUCT

Case Sokkomatka by Saarikoski Travels

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis was commissioned by the travel agency called Saarikoski Travels. The company has operated in the travel industry for nearly 20 years and as one of their backbone products has been a blind travel product called Sokkomatka. The company has not used previously theory on creating experiences, so the objective became to research experientiality and find ways to improve the existing Sokkomatka trip to fulfil the customers' needs.

The author familiarized himself with theory around the subject and used scientific literature as a secondary data. Additionally, a quantitative research was conducted in the form of a survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) which was sent to all the participants of the upcoming Sokkomatka. Information was gathered to understand what aspects of the experience the customers appreciate the most are and secondly, what elements the participants would like to be added in the future Sokkomatka trips.

Based on the survey results, the author found out the importance of community and excitement to be the most valued aspects of the Sokkomatka. The company should maintain these elements in the future as well. For a more coherent experience, Saarikoski Travels should use the experience pyramid model introduced in this thesis to develop its product. In brief, the product should consist of all the elements of individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast and interaction. These elements should be involved in all the levels of the customer's experience starting from marketing to the actual trip and even post marketing.

Key words: experience, travel, experience pyramid

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1 INTRODUCTION

It is not enough for businesses to offer great service in the 21st century. How come, you might wonder? According to Pine and Gilmore (1999, 2), we have entered the experience economy which is as distinctive from the service economy as service economy is from the goods economy. Experiences offer substantially more value to its customers and therefore also more can be charged for them. (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 1-2.)

How is it then to create an experience product? Sanna Tarssanen and Mika Kylänen (2009) have come up with the experience pyramid model, which enables companies to analyze, improve and create their products from the standpoint of experientiality (Tarssanen 2009). But not any kind of experience product will do. A competitive experience product of today must be much more than just a nice experience, it must offer meaningful experiences (Tarssanen 2009, 18).

After reading the thesis, the reader will understand what meaningful experiences are and how to use the experience pyramid in order to create meaningful experiences and gain competitive advantage over competitors. The thesis will introduce also the case company, Saarikoski Travels and its popular blind trip product called Sokkomatka. By using theory on experientiality and survey results, the reason behind the popularity of the trip will be analyzed and improvement ideas given to make it an even better experience for its participants. This will allow the commissioning company, reader and author to better understand the creation of experiential products. This valuable information can be used not only to improve the Sokkomatka but also any other product available or being planned.

2 THESIS PLAN

The following thesis plan will introduce the topic, purpose and objectives of the work. It will also go through the main concepts that form the theoretical framework for the thesis. In addition, the thesis plan will guide the reader through the data collection methods and structure of the thesis.

2.1. Thesis topic

The topic of the thesis is to research experientiality and how to create meaningful experiences for customers. The thesis will focus on the commissioning company's, travel agency, Saarikoski Travel's popular blind trip product called "Sokkomatka" and analyse ways to improve it from the perspective of experientiality. The thesis is focusing on this product due to the interest of the author and suggestion from the commissioning company. Saarikoski Travels sees that it is smarter to focus on a product that is already a success as Sokkomatka is, rather than coming up with something totally new. This way, the author expects that the lifespan of the product can last longer, and it can become the backbone of the company.

There is also a shift occurring in our society and it is necessary to understand the needs and wishes of our customers now and in the future. According to Tuohino & Pitkänen (2002, 27), we are moving on to experience economy after service economy. The traditional values of physical health have been replaced with emotional, mental and knowledge-based needs. It is important for humans to have active participation and self-realization. Consumers are looking more for experiences and emotions. In addition, the experience society has become part of mental image society, in which mental images and stories work as inducements. (Tuohino & Pitkänen, 2002, 27.) Also, Tarssanen and Kylänen (2009, 20) agree that there is a significant shift happening in our society on a global level. They add that it has changed the factors for gaining competitive advantage regardless of industry. The development continues with an even higher pace in the 21st century. (Tarssanen 2009, 20.) This thesis will introduce the changes happening in

our customers' buying behavior for experiences which is an important factor in developing Sokkomatka.

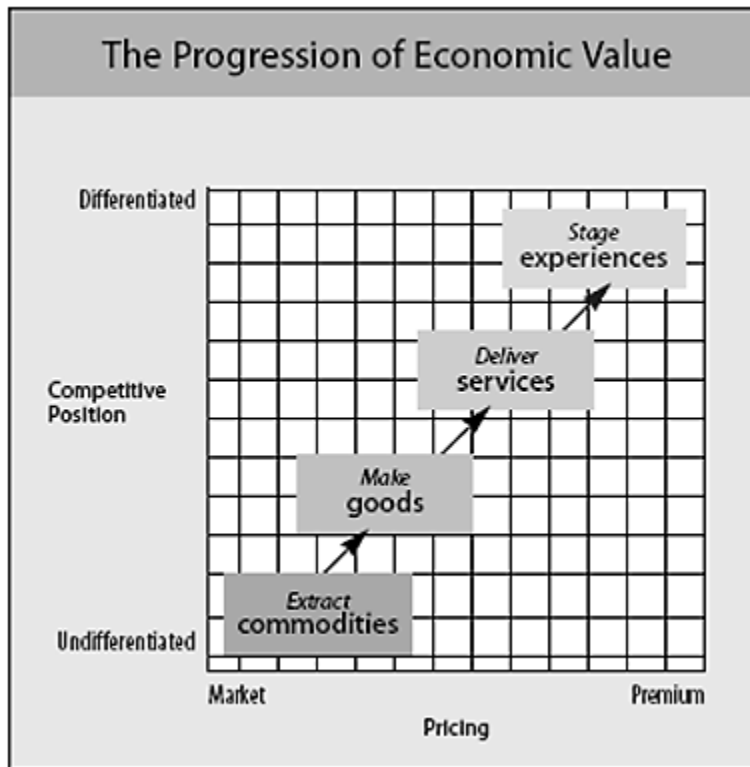


Figure 1: The Progression of Economic Value (Pine & Gilmore 1998)

To become more successful as a company, it is important to understand how to create more value to its customers. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999, 22), economic value can be greatly increased by transforming services into experiences. They give an illustrative example of economic progression by using cakes and birthday parties. Pine and Gilmore (1999, 20-22) explain that back in the day moms made birthday cakes from scratch using baking ingredients (commodities). As different food companies started providing ready-made cake mixes and frostings (goods), it saved time for moms. Then came bakeries and shops from which ordering cakes (services) became easier and with some extra money, moms could buy cakes to save more time and effort. Now we have reached the point that we do not need to even organize a birthday party as there are companies which organize birthday parties (experiences) for you. Experiences provide the highest form of economic value and therefore substantially more can be charged for them. (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 20-22.) Welcome to the experience economy. Understanding how to create more value is essential for any company and

Saarikoski Travels does not make an exception for that. The thesis will focus on ways to improve Sokkomatka, thus it is of essence to understand how to create more value to its customers. The thesis will provide answers to these questions.

2.2. Thesis objective, purpose and research questions

The objective of this thesis is to find ways to improve the Sokkomatka from an experientiality standpoint. This means that the loyal customers of the company who participate on the annual trip could be served and amazed on a higher level on the future trips. The objective can be transformed into a research question as follows: *“How to improve the experientiality of Sokkomatka?”*.

Sub-questions are used also to help reach the objective and narrow down and use necessary theory. The sub-questions are the following ones: *“How to create meaningful experiences”* and *“How to transform a service into an experience?”*. Finding answers to these questions will help the company to understand how meaningful experiences are created and what they could do better to serve their customers which essentially forms the basis of the purpose of the thesis. The knowledge acquired from the thesis can not only be used to enhance the experientiality of Sokkomatka, but also to develop other existing products and plan new ones in the company. The author believes this can be of great help for both the company and the author as they both work in the travel industry which should offer its customers meaningful experiences. The company has not used before theory on creating experiences which gives a great deal of potential to improve its products to the next level. By applying the gained knowledge from the thesis, customer satisfaction and loyalty are expected to reach higher levels which in turn forms a stronger and happier customer base. Thus, an even more stable base for future business would be formed.

2.3 Concepts and theory

So, what are the key concepts that Saarikoski Travels could use to enhance the experience of their blind travel business? What theory could be of essential use to understand and better the experience of Sokkomatka? What is experientiality

and what transforms a product into an experience? First, it is important to understand the term “experience” before going deeper into the wider concepts.

2.3.1 Experience

The English language does not have a separate word to differentiate meaningful experiences with experiences in general so it can be sometimes difficult to understand the difference between the two words. According to Collins dictionary, an experience is the following: “An experience is something that you do or happens to you, especially something important that affects you.” This does not yet necessarily define if an experience is positive or negative and gives a rather broad definition. To better understand meaningful experiences, we should look into Finnish language. In Finnish, there are two words: “kokemus” and “elämys” which both translate to “experience” according to Collins dictionary. In this thesis, we will use the term “meaningful experience” to describe “elämys” which is the focus of the work. The following explanations will clarify the differences between the two terms.

A meaningful experience is a positive, significant and unforgettable experience which can lead to a personal change (Tarssanen 2009, 11). According to Borg, Kivi and Partti (2002, 25), a meaningful experience is an emotional experience that has an uplifting and positive effect. A meaningful experience is usually something extremely personal. In nowadays’ western society, emotions have formed the base of decision making on the contrary to being seen hindering reasoning like in the past. People trust emotional clues as they plan their actions. Observing and perception, physical environment and senses are important factors that affect the creation of meaningful experiences. (Borg, Kivi & Partti 2002, 25-26.) Often the meaningful experience is related to the feeling of exceeding oneself. This can happen by doing and experiencing something out of the ordinary which can lead to self-development and even change in one’s persona and worldview. (Tarssanen 2009, 6.) Now that a better understanding of meaningful experiences is acquired, it is possible to dive deeper in the world of experientiality and comprehend the following chapters.

2.3.2 The Experience realms

According to Pine and Gilmore (1999, 30-31), an experience can be analysed in two different dimensions that engage the customer. The first dimension is the level of participation the guest has in the experience. The guest participation can be passive such as for a symphony goer who merely observes the performance. Active participation is when the participant is more involved. This can be for example a skier who actively affects and influences the course of the performance. The other dimension of an experience has to do with the level of environmental relationship or connection the person has with the performance or event. These two levels are called absorption and immersion. If the experience is absorptive, it “goes into” the mind of the participant such as watching television. On the other hand, an experience is immersive if the participant “goes into” the experience such as when playing a virtual reality game. The two dimensions form the four realms of an experience which are entertainment, educational, esthetic and escapist. (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 30-31). The four realms of an experience are shown on the following page’s figure 2.

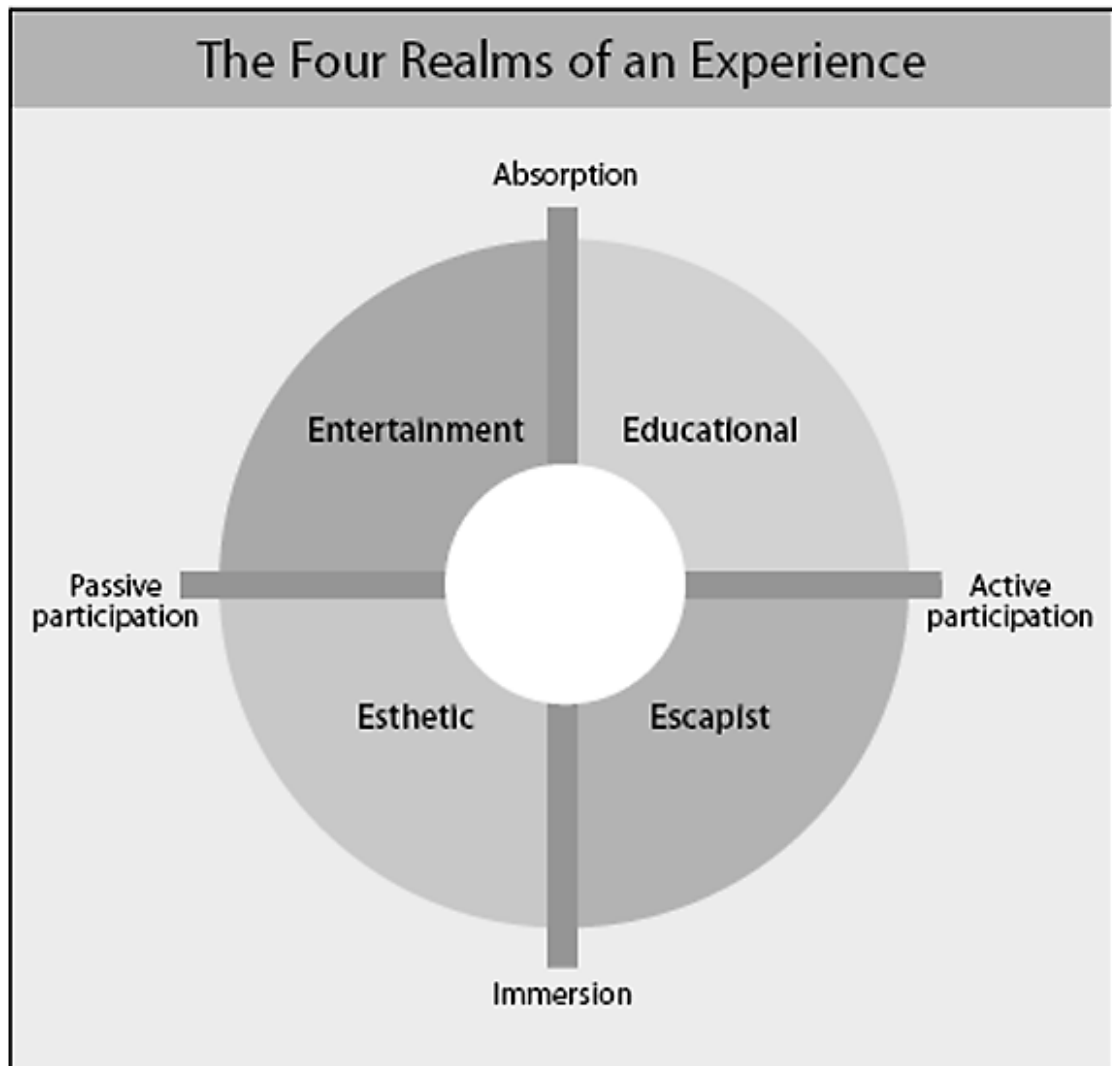


Figure 2: The Four Realms of an Experience (Pine & Gilmore 1998)

Being aware of these realms and understanding the dimensions that affect the experience, can be of great value when analysing the experientiality of Sokkomatka. By acknowledging the existence of the four realms of an experience can also facilitate finding different areas of the Sokkomatka to focus on when making the survey and make it easier to come up with new development ideas for the blind trip.

2.3.3 Experience pyramid

Sanna Tarssanen and Mika Kylänen (2009) have created the experience pyramid model to help companies in creating memorable experiences for their clients. The model allows different travel and culture businesses to analyse and understand

the experientiality of its products. By using the experience pyramid, a company can easily find the key points that it should focus on and notice its product's defects. This way, the company can find critical information to improve and develop its product. The experience pyramid shows companies what are all the necessary elements an experience consists of. It is a type of an example of an optimal experience product in which all the elements of an experience are represented. The model allows companies to improve its products and better products create a competitive advantage over the competitors. Even though it is impossible to promise meaningful experiences to any customer, the model can help to make it very likely to create meaningful and memorable experiences. Thus, services will be formed into the next level, experiences. (Tarssanen 2009, 11.)

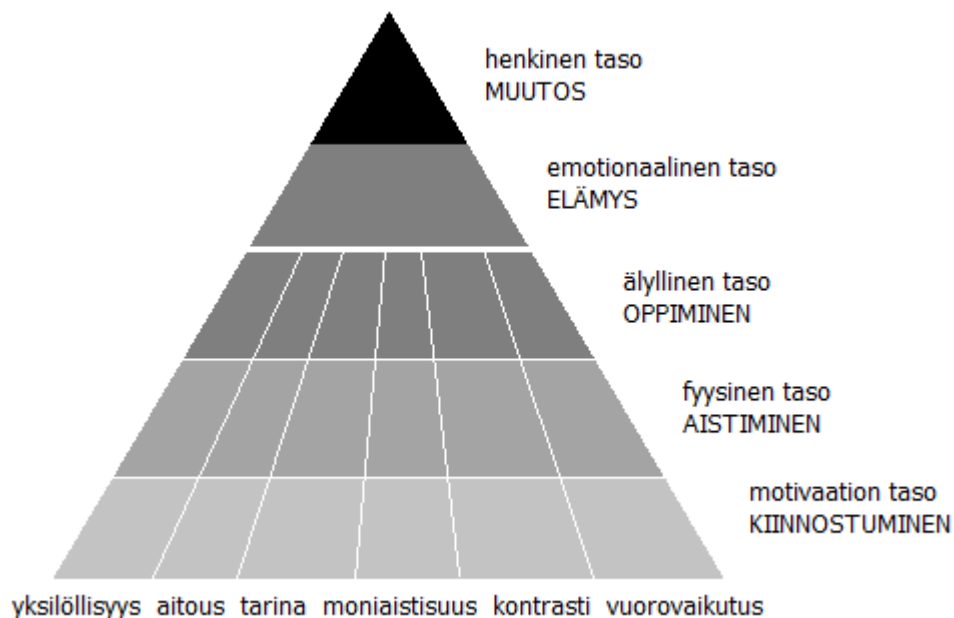


Figure 3: Experience Pyramid Model (Tarssanen 2009, 11)

The experience pyramid is divided into two: the horizontal level showcases the elements of the experience on the product level and the horizontal level divides the elements of the experience on the level of the customer's experience. Different elements which affect the product level include individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast and interaction. All these elements should be included when planning and implementing the product. The customer's experience level consists of the following elements: motivational level, physical

level, intellectual level, emotional level and mental level. A good experience product has as many product level elements included as possible in each of the elements of the customer's experience level. (Tarssanen 2009, 12-16.) Each of the experience pyramid model's elements and levels will be analyzed more deeply in the following chapters in order to better understand how Saarikoski Travels could enhance the experience of its Sokkomatka trip. The survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) was formed and development recommendations for the company given primarily based on the experience pyramid concept.

2.3 Working methods and data

The primary research method for this thesis is a quantitative research. According to Tarja Heikkilä (2008, 16), quantitative research helps resolve questions related to numbers and percentages and is used to measure correlations between different things (Heikkilä 2008, 16). The primary data for this thesis will be collected in the form of a survey. Hanna Vilkkä (2005, 73 – 76.) states that a survey is the most popular form of gathering data in a quantitative research. In a survey, the respondent answers the written questions by writing the answers down. A survey is suitable for a large group of examinees and a benefit of it is that the respondent stays anonymous. On the other hand, a typical deficit of a survey is seen to be the low response percentage. (Vilkkä 2005, 73 – 76.)

In the case of this thesis though, the author, who was supposed to participate on the trip, expected a rather high percentage of respondents as the survey was planned to be handed out in person and asked to be received back in the end of the Sokkomatka. A bond was expected to be already formed with the respondents and this in turn was thought to lead for a more interested approach to answering the survey. Anyhow, the plans were needed to be changed rapidly after the Sokkomatka trip was postponed from March 2020 to September 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A paper survey was changed to an electronic one (Appendix 1, p. 54) and questions asking about experiences of this year's Sokkomatka was changed to customers' expectations towards the trip and their experiences from previous years. Even though the survey was delivered via email, an extremely high percentage rate was achieved. Reasons behind this and further details will

be revealed in the later chapters. As mentioned before, a quantitative survey suits well a larger group and that is exactly the case with Sokkomatka in which more than 100 participants join the trip.

There are also other pros and cons about quantitative research. According to Vilkkä (2007, 13-14), the best way to gain generally applicable information is by using quantitative research. Consistencies are aimed to be found from the results. A downside can be if the researcher is not able to get deep enough into the worlds of the respondents and the research is superficial. (Vilkkä 2007, 13-14.) To avoid this risk, the author aims to gain enough necessary background information about the respondents and have suitable questions which speak to the target audience. In addition, it is important to have questions which support the secondary data theories in order to analyse the results and give recommendations based on literature as well.

To analyse the data gathered from the survey (Appendix 1, p. 54), the author plans to use cross tabulation on Excel. According to Amrutha Aprameya (Cross Tabulation: How it Works and Why You Should Use It, 2016), cross tabulation is especially useful for analysing survey results. She adds that cross tabulation can help find correlation between different variables, provide clear results and minimizes the risk for error or confusion. It can also help interpreting data especially for researchers with less knowledge of statistical analysis. (Aprameya 2016.) This is the case of the author who has not used statistical software systems before, thus cross tabulation seems to be the right choice for analysing the data. Excel is familiar for the author and is of its interest, so it gives ever more reason to use that platform for cross tabulation.

2.4 Thesis process

This chapter introduces the structure of the work and how the thesis process takes place. The first chapter is an introductory chapter which leads the reader to the topic briefly. The second chapter introduces the thesis plan which includes the topic, objectives and purpose of the thesis. In addition, by reading the thesis plan, the reader gains knowledge of the theoretical concepts necessary to the

thesis and learns about the data collection method used in the work. Chapter three provides a company analysis and describes experientiality as a phenomenon. In the fourth chapter the survey results are revealed and analysed. The fifth chapter of the thesis includes further recommendations for the company with the help of theory. The sixth and closing chapter concludes the thesis.

3 THE CASE COMPANY & EXPERIENTIALITY AS A PHENOMENON

The following chapter introduces the commissioning company more thoroughly, the industry where it operates and experientiality as a phenomenon. By doing so, the reader gets a better understanding of the company's product portfolio, main customer groups and field of business in general. After reading the chapter, the reader gains valuable background information which gives perspective in analysing the focus of the thesis: the Sokkomatka product and its development by experientiality.

3.1. Matkatoimisto Saarikoski Oy

Matkatoimisto Saarikoski Oy or more commonly known as Saarikoski Travels is a small and medium-sized company which operates in the field of travel. The travel agency was founded in 1992 by Juha Saarikoski, the majority owner and the Chairman of the Board of the company. The Finnish company has its roots deeply in Ostrobothnia region and more precisely the town of Lapua, where in addition to the majority owner, also the minor owner and CEO of the company, Jarkko Paloniemi, is originally from. Even though most of the eight employees of the company work from its office located in Tampere, the company holds strong to its roots in Ostrobothnia and has its other office in Lapua. (Matkatoimisto Saarikoski Oy n.d.) It is important to keep in mind the roots of the company as later in the thesis a possible link between the origin of the Sokkomatka customers and the company might be founded.

Saarikoski Travels is specialized in group travels and its largest product area is formed by sports travels. Especially youth sports teams' training camps and tournament trips are organized by the company. Soccer and Ice hockey groups form the two largest sports sectors but in addition, sports camps for example for Finnish baseball and swimming clubs are also regularly arranged. In addition to sports travel, the company provides trips for also leisure and work groups, starting from ten people or more. A leisure trip can be for example a group of friends' planning to go to watch Spain's highest-level soccer, La Liga, and combine a guided tour around Barcelona for instance. This kind of travel package could include flights,

airport transportation, accommodation, meals, match tickets, guided tour and possible other extra services. Similar trips can be organized for companies with a twist as their travels are often created around company visits or a certain seminar or another event the company is willing to participate in. These three categories: sports, leisure and company trips form most of the turnover of the company. (Matkatoimisto Saarikoski Oy n.d.) According to Kauppalehti, the turnover of the company was 4,7 million euros in 2018 from which profit 388 thousand euros. The turnover and profit amount have stayed rather steady since 2015 until 2018 (Kauppalehti).

3.1.1 Sokkomatka

In addition to gaining background information about the company, it is important to know more about the main product the thesis focuses on, Sokkomatka. Sokkomatka is an annual trip organized for individual customers, another customer segment in addition to the previously mentioned ones. According to Saarikoski Travels (Matkatoimisto Saariikoski Oy, n.d.), participants willing to join the trip need to be part of the company's free travel club called S-Club. S-Club members are the first ones to hear about new trips and they receive via email in addition to travel, also culture and sports information. Yearly, there are two to three customized trips made for the S-Club members of which Sokkomatka is one. On these S-Club trips, there is always at least one Saarikoski Travels employee on the trip, and on Sokkomatka, if not all the employees, at least many of them. (Matkatoimisto Saariikoski Oy, n.d.)

What makes Sokkomatka such a unique trip, is the concept of keeping the destination of the trip unknown for its participants until the trip begins or better yet, until they reach the destination itself. As the other S-Club trips tend to have 20-30 participants, Sokkomatka has typically over 100 travelers. Sokkomatka has become already a popular and famous trip for its S-Club members as the trip has been organized already 11 times. (Matkatoimisto Saarikoski Oy, n.d.) Past years, trips have varied from a flight trip to Stockholm to a train travel to Lapland. The trip typically lasts three days from Friday to Sunday or Saturday to Monday. According to the Chairman of the Board Saarikoski, this concept of a three-day

travel has proven to be a success (Seinäjoen Sanomat 2016). Now that an overview of Sokkomatka is acquired, it will be easier to understand the analysing of the survey results and recommendations for Sokkomatka, both of which will be introduced in the later chapters to come.

3.2. Experientiality as a phenomenon

In this chapter, a broader view of experientiality will be gained. Reasons behind traveling and travel needs will be introduced. Additionally, history, current situation and the future of experiential travel will be focused on.

3.2.1 Experientiality and motives for traveling

The goal of traveling is to experience meaningful experiences. Already at the stage of planning for the trip, we start to imagine, wish and dream about the feeling that traveling should give us. The ideal version of the experience is formed in our minds and the actual experience is how this ideal is realized during the travel. The experience is then reflected on after consuming it. Traveling is often defined by its location or time. Even though these aspects are connected with the experiences gained from traveling, experiences as a phenomenon is the center piece and objective of traveling. (Borg, Kivi & Partti 2002, 27.) Perttula (2007, 62-64) also agrees that people travel to gain meaningful experiences. He adds that in psychology, a meaningful experience stems from the term experience seeking. This experience seeking is a relatively stable quality of a persona which may explain an individual's travel behavior. (Perttula 2007, 62-64.) By knowing the motives behind traveling, it gives more reason and confidence to invest in understanding how to create meaningful experiences as those are what the participants of Sokkomatka are also seeking for as travelers.

Travel motives are needs which affect travel decisions (Komppula & Boxberg, 2002, 68). One of the most known theories on needs is called Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy of needs can help give an answer on what is valuable to a person and one of the key elements of businesses is to create value. (Borg, Kivi & Partti 2002, 24.) Hence, the elements of the below figure can be used also

to ensure that the travel needs of the participants of Sokkomatka are realized to enable the possibility and likelihood for gaining meaningful experiences from the trip.

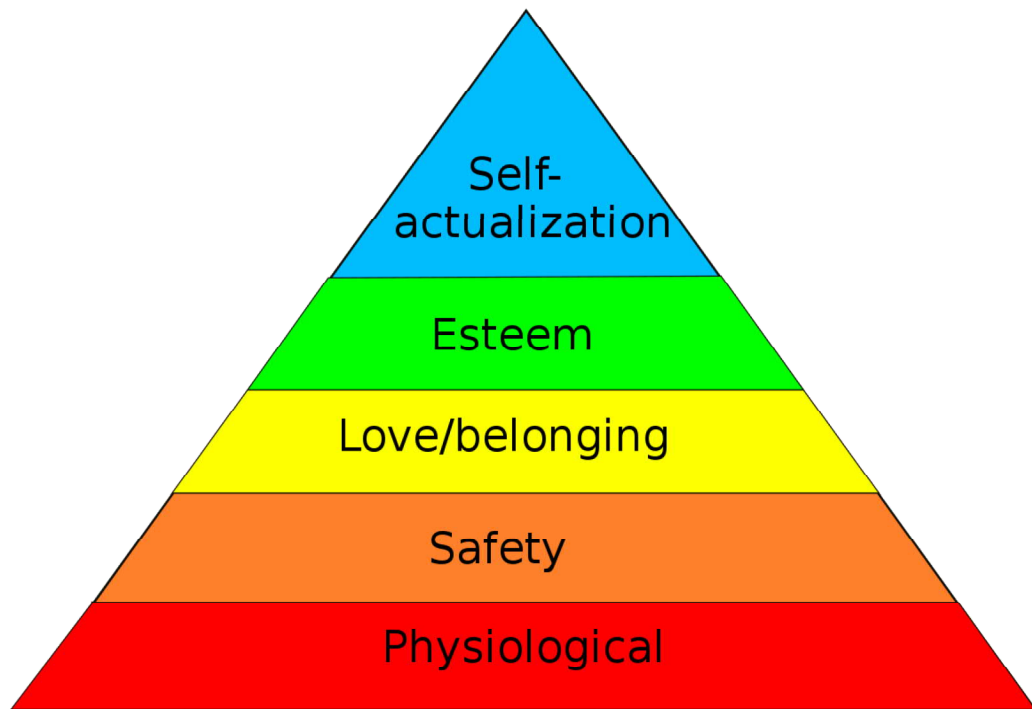


Figure 4. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Wikipedia.

The figure shows the different needs from Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the benefits traveling can offer in each of those five elements. The first element is the physiological needs which can be satisfied by food and rest. The second element of safety needs can be satisfied by shelter, guidance and security. The third element of love and belonging is achieved by the group and travel companions of the trip. The element of esteem is satisfied by gaining status, role, task or knowledge. The highest element of self-actualization is realized by a coherent experience. (Borg, Kivi & Partti 2002, 24-25.) These elements and its benefits will be used also to analyze ways to improve Sokkomatka's experience.

3.2.2 Experiential travel in the past, today and tomorrow

Experiences have always been around us, they have just been put in the same category of services by companies, economists and consumers. This service category has included businesses of the unexciting areas of telephone access, wholesale distribution, dry cleaning and auto repair. When a service is bought, intangible activities are bought to be delivered on behalf of the consumer. Experiences on the other hand should provide memorable events that the customer is willing to spend his or her money on. These memorable events are staged by a company in a theatrical way to engage the customer in a personal manner. (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 2.)

The term, meaningful experiences increased its popularity in the travel industry's marketing in the 1990's. At first, the marketing communication of experientiality and experience offerings were mainly about nature travel and nature adventures where mental images were created with the help of different activities and beautiful sceneries. In the 21st century the term, meaningful experiences can be seen in almost every kind of travel marketing. According to these commercials, meaningful experiences can be experienced at a spa, on a beach or city vacation but especially program services and nature travel areas have embraced meaningful experiences and experience products as the base of their image. (Saarinen & Järviluoma 2002, 45.) Nowadays that meaningful experiences are promised everywhere, the term has inflated. More effort for showcasing the authentic meaningful experience of the Sokkomatka is also needed. The best way to do so, is to have the actual successful travel product speak for itself. In the results and recommendations chapters, ways to improve the Sokkomatka will be introduced.

The following chapter will introduce how to create these meaningful experiences. Even though there are great concepts behind the creation of meaningful experiences, it is of essence to always know the up to date possible special needs and wants of the target audience. According to Verhelä & Lackman (2003, 24-30.), it is needed to be remembered that in the behavior of peoples' travel motives occur changes in both, the short and long term and therefore travel companies need to

stay up to date with these changes. This enables the company to provide its customers with products and services which are up to date and of the needs of its users. This allows the company to reach and maintain its competitive position in the market as well. Verhelä & Lackman add, that the products should always be based on the ultimate needs of the customers in order to have them experience the products intriguing. (Verhelä & Lackman 2003, 24-30.) For this reason, also the needs of the customers of Sokkomatka are researched by a survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) in order to understand their true needs for the travel product.

4 CREATING MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES

Meaningful experiences are about each of the traveler's own experiences which happen in their respective minds and therefore no company can promise its customers meaningful experiences. Anyhow, probable conditions for the formation of meaningful experiences can be created by productization. (Saarinen 2002, 55.) The following experience pyramid model will showcase how to create these products of meaningful experiences. It will help to better understand the experientiality of Sokkomatka and ways to improve it.

4.1. Experience pyramid

The experience pyramid model answers the question of what kind of elements should a travel product consist of in order to provide its customer meaningful experiences. The model analyses meaningful experiences from the two perspectives: the elements of the product level and the level of the customer's experience. (Tarssanen 2009, 11-12.) First, the product level will be introduced.

4.1.1 Elements of an Experience (product level)

On the horizontal level of the experience pyramid, have been represented six different elements which an experience should consist of. These elements can be consciously added to a product in order to create a successful experience. (Tarssanen 2009, 12.) The experience pyramid is shown on the following page's figure 5.

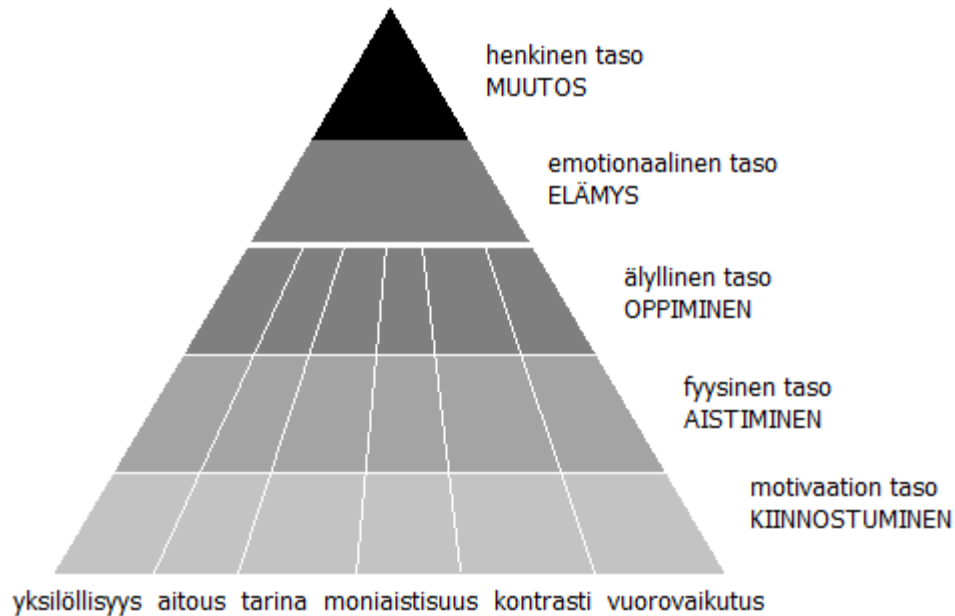


Figure 5. Experience Pyramid Model (Tarssanen 2009, 11)

Individuality

The first element of the experience pyramid is individuality. Individuality of the product means that it is unique, and no other product of its kind can be found that creates the similar experience. Customization is an important factor of individuality which means that the product should be able to be transformed according to each of the customer's needs and wishes. Customer orientation, flexibility and customization are of importance in individuality. As an example, a customer can be able to choose the level of challenge and contents of the program and activities according to his or her preferences. The challenge of customization and individuality is the increased expenses the more they are applied. In addition, it can be difficult to create an experience of high individuality which is easily personalized and duplicated. On a positive note, there is almost no limit on increasing customization and individuality. (Tarssanen 2009, 11-12) Therefore, there are plenty of possibilities also for Saarikoski Travels to update and personalize its product to enhance the overall experience.

Authenticity

Authenticity is another key element of the experience pyramid. An important factor in demanding if authenticity is applied, is whether the customer feels that the product is credible or not. Credibility is of essence and it can be achieved simply

by representing or living the real lifestyle of the area's culture. There is no one right way of identifying what makes something authentic or not. It always depends on a perspective for example what localness is. The local culture should be represented as authentically as possible and it should be based on the culture of the product producers. This way, the person representing the product should feel it as his or her own way of living. Therefore, the ethical and cultural sustainability is an important aspect of the product. An ethical product does not seek to gain from ethical or cultural groups at their expense, nor does it offend them. For example, making money out of Sami people by appearing or dressing like them is not correct, if a wrong impression and inauthentic picture of the Sami people is conveyed. (Tarssanen 2009, 12-13.) To apply authenticity in the Sokkomatka, Saarikoski Travels could think if it is possible to showcase the local cultural of the travel destination in an authentic way.

Story

The next element on the experience pyramid is story. According to Tarssanen and Kylänen, story is closely related to the authenticity of the product. A credible and authentic story gives the customer a reason to try the product and allows the experience to have content and social importance. To make the experience close and engaging, it is crucial to combine the different elements of the whole into each other with a coherent story. A good story has elements of both facts and fiction. It can have for example myths and legends combined with local knowledge. The place of the nearby pond can be mystical, or the catch can have some special value. The story lures the customer to be involved also in the experience on an emotional and intellectual level. The story justifies the customer what will be done and in which order. Ice fishing will not be done just for learning ice fishing but rather the customer is convinced why he or she should learn the important skill. The story of the product should be carefully scripted taken into consideration the target audience's needs. Thus, the effectiveness of plot twists will be taken into account as well as possible and impressiveness of the product will not be left down to chance. The story of the product should be credible and planned so well that the details of it are not in conflict with each other. (Tarssanen 2009, 13-14.) According to Tarssanen and Kylänen (2009, 14), Pine & Gilmore (1999, 46-55) name this as harmonization and theme design of the experience.

Consistent theme design is also an essential part of an experience product. The themes and story should be present in all the phases of experiencing the product, from marketing to experiencing the product and even to after sales marketing. (Tarssanen 2009, 13-14.)

Multisensory perception

Multisensory perception is another level of the experience pyramid. With multisensory perception is meant that all the sensory stimuli have been designed in a careful way so that the desired theme is strengthened and that the immersiveness of the product is supported. The overall impression might suffer though if there are too many sensory stimuli or they are disruptive. (Tarssanen 2009, 14.)

Contrast

Contrast is another level of the experience pyramid. According to Tarssanen and Kylänen (2009, 14), Turner & Turner (1978, 249-253); Jokinen (1991, 133-134) and Sepänmaa (1998, 19) state that a product should be different to the customer's everyday life. According to them, contrast is diversity from the perspective of the customer. They agree that the customer should be able to experience something exotic, new and out of the ordinary. According to them, it is possible to see oneself from a different perspective as another kind in an unfamiliar environment. They add, that this frees the person to see and experience things free from the restrictions and habits of the everyday life. Tarssanen and kylänen (2009, 14) remind that for one person different can be absolutely normal to someone else. For this reason, she adds that the culture and nationality of the customer should be taken into consideration when applying contrast.

Interaction

Another level of the experience pyramid is interaction. Interaction is not only successful communication between travelers and or the guide, but also with the product and its producers. A sense of community is an important factor of interaction and therefore it is essential to at least introduce the travelers to one another if they do not happen to know each other beforehand. A sense of community is about experiencing something together as a part of a group, community or family. It is possible to have an experience by one's own of course but the awareness of

the experience being generally valued and accepted, is linked with the sense of community. This way, the experience attaches the experienter closer to a certain group or lifts his or her social status. The element of interaction is of essence in creating individuality when speaking of experiences. The personal interaction between the traveler and service provider has a decisive meaning conveying the experience to the customer in a certain physical environment in the best way possible. (Tarssanen 2009, 14-15.)

4.1.2 Levels of an Experience (customer level)

On the vertical axis of the experience pyramid are represented the levels of an experience from the customer's perspective. These levels showcase the steps to an experience starting from arousing interest towards the experience, conscious processing of the experience, on to an emotional experience which can even lead to a personal change. All the previously mentioned basic experience elements of a product are involved in each of the levels of the customer's experience in order to have a good and working experience product. (Tarssanen 2009, 15.) Next all the elements of the experience are introduced.

Motivational level

The customer's interest is aroused and expectations towards the product created on the motivational level. These can be accomplished by the means of marketing for instance. Already at this phase, it is important to have as many of the elements of the experience represented on the motivational level. Thus, already the marketing of the product should be as individual, authentic and interactive as possible and consist of a story, have multisensory perception and contrast as well. (Tarssanen 2009, 15.)

Physical level

The technical quality of the product is tested on the physical level. Physical sensations allow us to be aware of where we are, what we are doing and what is happening. On the physical level, a good product guarantees a safe and pleasant experience. The experience should not consist of feeling too hot or cold, being hungry or thirsty, call of nature, not to mention physical danger. An exception to

this is the so-called extreme experiences in which playing with the thought of danger is a necessary part of the experience even though actual danger is often aimed to be avoided. (Tarssanen 2009, 15-16.)

Intellectual level

On the intellectual level we act according to the sensory stimuli from the environment which we process in our minds. This means that we think, learn, apply information and form opinions. On the intellectual level a good product offers its customer a possibility to improve, learn something new and gain new information either consciously or unconsciously. On this stage, the customer decides whether he or she is satisfied with the product. (Tarssanen 2009, 16.)

Emotional level

On the emotional level the actual meaningful experience will be experienced. It is challenging to predict and control the customers' emotional reactions. It is rather likely that the customer experiences positive emotions if the basic elements have been applied in each of the previous levels of the experience pyramid: motivational, physical and intellectual level. These kinds of positive emotions the customer might experience are delight, happiness, joy of learning and success – something that is felt significant. (Tarssanen 2009, 16.)

Mental level

The strong positive emotional sensation can even lead to a personal change. This can cause permanent changes in the physical condition, state of mind or way of life. The individual feels that he or she has changed, improved as a person or gained something new to his or her persona. This can lead the person to find a new hobby, figure out a new way of thinking or find resources within oneself. As an example, a couch potato might find a spark for exercising, a shy person can become brave after a parachute jump or a wilderness hike can force a materialist person to shape his or her values. (Tarssanen 2009, 16.)

5 THE DATA COLLECTION, RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The following chapter introduces the data collection method and objectives for the research. In addition, the results will be revealed and analysed. The experience pyramid model will be used as the primary theory to analyse the results.

5.1. Research objectives and conducting the survey

The main research objective was to find out what do the participants of the Sokkomatka value most in the experience of the trip and what are possibly some experience aspects they would like to be improved on the trip. The goal of this research objective was to answer the main research question: “how to improve the experientiality of Sokkomatka?”. As the experience pyramid model was selected as the main theory part for this thesis, it was logical to have the survey questions related to the different aspects of the experience pyramid. This way, it will be possible to analyse the experientiality of the Sokkomatka product and give development recommendations to improve it.

The survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) was sent by email to all the 96 participants who had signed up for the trip. All in all, there were 102 persons signed up for the trip but six of the participants were either bus drivers or employees of Saarikoski Travels. Thus, the survey was only sent to the actual customers of the trip. This way, the results should reflect only the customers’ opinions of the trip which is the focus of the survey. Thus, the answers also will be unbiased, and it will be easier to get factual and objective information.

As the research was of a quantitative manner, it was important to get enough responses to be as reliable as possible. A high response rate was needed which was not an easy task taking into account that the survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) was sent online and not in person. The risk for a low response rate and total amount of answers was seen to be increased considering that many of the participants of the trip are couples. Knowing the majority of the participants beforehand, the CEO of Saarikoski Travels, Jarkko Paloniemi expected that the couples would mainly answer together, only sending one response and a common answer for both of

them. To avoid this risk, the author had to attract the participants to answer individually. A raffle between all the respondents of the survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) was come up with. It was reminded via email to answer separately and to double the chance for the prize by doing so. In line with the blind travel theme, the prize was said to be a mystery prize which would be delivered to the winner of the raffle. As another action to increase the response rate, each of the emails were sent personally to each one of the participants with greetings with their first name. In addition, they were let known that answering the survey would take just a few minutes of their time and that the gained information would be highly valued within the company to improve the trip.

The survey link with the cover letter was sent via email on Thursday 19th of March afternoon and time was given to answer until Tuesday 24th of March 12pm. On Monday already around 50 people had answered but this number was increased to an impressive 77 total answers and an 80,2% answer rate by Tuesday midday as a reminder message was sent to participants on Monday. This message was sent to those whom had not answered the survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) or at least had not sent a reply email that they would like be part of the raffle.

To gain as honest and trustworthy answers as possible, the survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) was kept anonymous and email addresses were not collected. If the respondents wanted to participate in the raffle, they were instructed to send a message that they had answered the survey. To ensure they answered the survey and to have a higher response rate, this information was given in the end of the survey questions before submitting the results. As a small issue, there were still a clearly bigger amount of responses received but not nearly as many messages received to participate in the raffle. For this reason, it was important to send a reminder message not only to increase the number of respondents but to make sure that those all who wanted to participate in the raffle must send an email message about it. After the message was sent, also at least most of the people who had not noticed or read clearly the instructions, realized they need to send the email as emails started coming in a faster pace than new survey answers.

5.2. Survey results

The following chapter will introduce the results from the survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) which was sent to all the participants of Sokkomatka. In addition to introducing the results, also some analysis and recommendations will be given. Further recommendations will be introduced in chapter six.

5.2.1 Background information

Already before the survey (Appendix 1, p. 54), there were some background information available about the Sokkomatka participants. They had an option to choose whether they hop on the bus from Lapua or Seinäjoki. From the 96 persons signed up for the trip, 65 would have come from Lapua, 23 from Seinäjoki and eight were still unknown. As it can be seen, most of the travellers likely live in or at least near Lapua, the city from which the company is originally from as well. Seinäjoki is located also only 30 kilometers or so away from Lapua so most if not all the participants come from Ostrobothnia region. This information can help understand the strength of the bond between the participants and even their relationship with the trip leaders, employees of Saarikoski Travels.

Another aspect that might give valuable background information is whether the participants who join the trip come on the trip alone or with a friend or partner. With the same pre data obtained, it can be seen that only two persons have signed up individually and the rest, 94 persons have signed together with one other person. This information can be used also analysing the motives for joining the trip and importance of interaction and sense of community.

The survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) itself had also a couple background questions in the beginning to gain more valuable information about the participants. As none of the questions were compulsory, not all the respondents answered each and every one of the questions. This was done purposely to avoid the risk that people would not finish the survey. On the other hand, some of the respondents might have skipped questions and not the maximum amount of possible data could be

gathered. Anyhow, a rather good percentage answered the background questions as 73 persons out of 77 answered the open question about their age. As a result, we now know that the age of the participants ranges from 47 being the youngest and 78 the oldest customer.

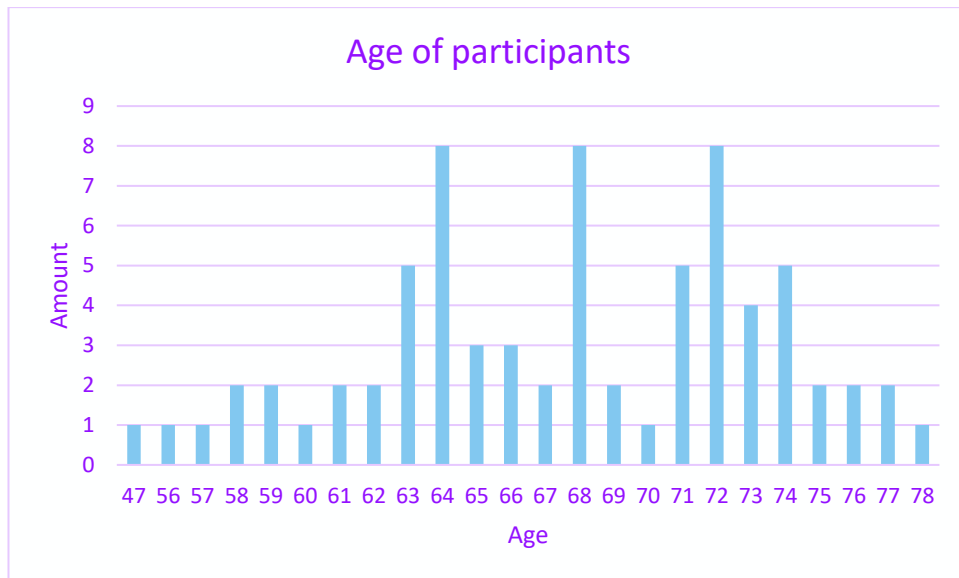


Figure 6. Age distribution between participants.

Examining the data, we can divide the customers into three main age groups to clarify the data: 47-62-year-olds, 63-74-year-olds and 75-78-year-olds. The following pie chart demonstrates the distribution of the age groups.

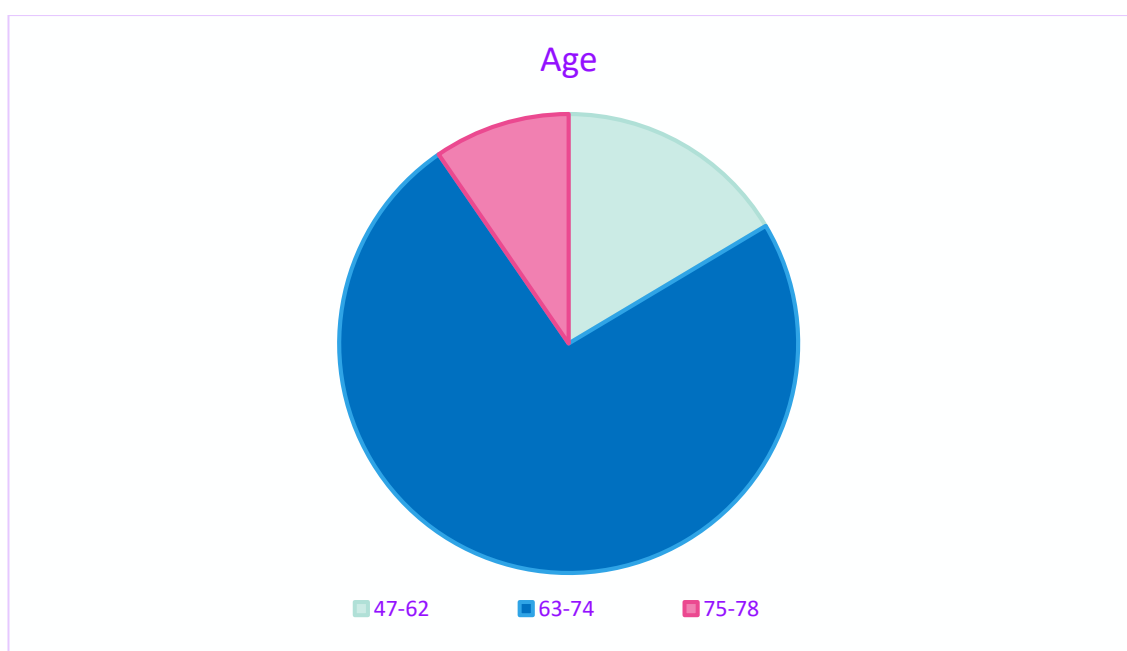


Figure 7. Age groups.

As we can see, the vast majority of the participants belong to the 63 to 74-year-olds age group. By percentage, the amount is 74 percent. 16 percent belong to the youngest group, 47 to 62-year-olds. The minority group representing 10 percent of the whole group, is the group of 75 to 78-year-olds. The information about age can be used to better understand what the specific needs are and wishes for people in these age groups.

Another important background information is the gender of the participants. 73 persons responded also this question and as it can be seen on the below pie chart, there are slightly more female participants on the trip compared to men. 56% of the respondents are female and the remaining 44% men. The possible correlation with gender and certain answers can be analysed in the survey questions to see if gender makes a difference in the participants' opinions.

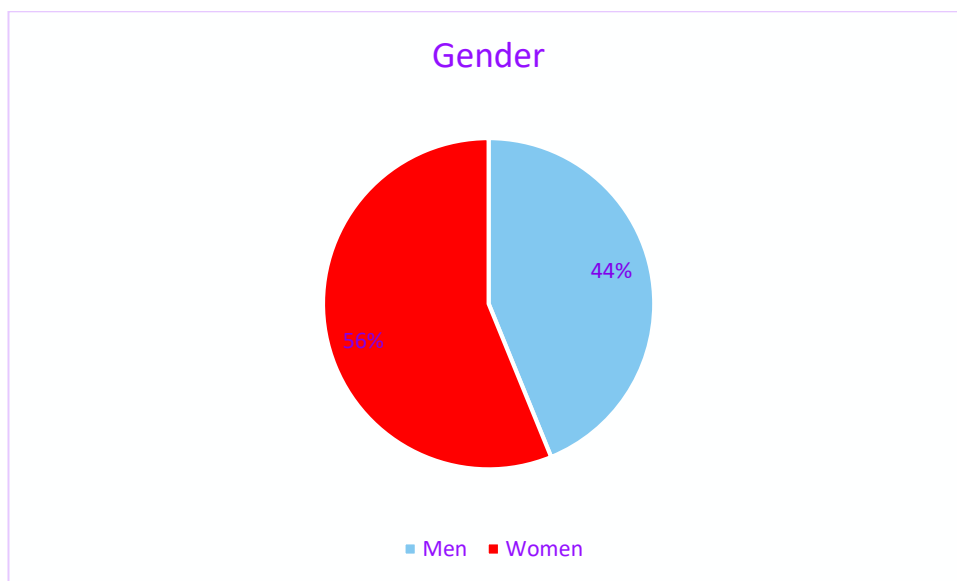


Figure 8. Gender.

Also 73 responses were gathered from the question on how many Sokkomatka trips has the respondent been already. The results show clearly that most of the Sokkomatka participants are regular and experienced Sokkomatka "users" as over 75% have been on two or more Sokkomatka trips before. Nearly 10% have participated on only one trip before and around 15% answered that they have not yet experienced a Sokkomatka trip. The following chart demonstrates the significant division between the level of experience the participants have on these trips.

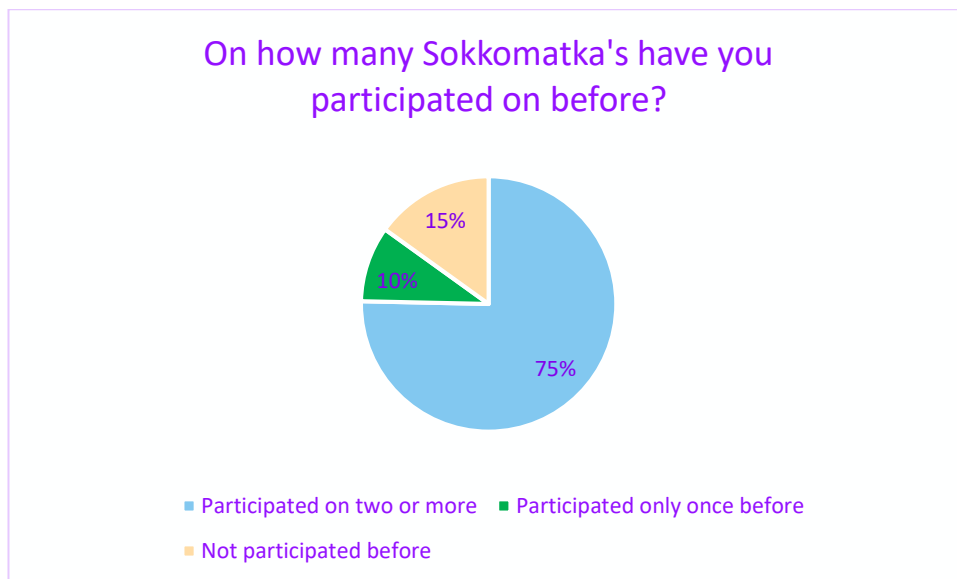


Figure 9. Amount of Sokkomatka trips experienced.

As it can be seen, most of the Sokkomatka participants are regular customers and have experienced the trip many times before. This needs to be kept in mind when analysing the trip and giving recommendations for the future. Still, all participants should be considered, and it will be analysed whether there are ways that this minority group can and is necessary to be served in a different manner.

5.2.2 Reasons for participating on Sokkomatka

Before looking into what are the aspects customers wish to improve in Sokkomatka, it is important to know what makes it such a popular trip in the first place. By identifying the key elements that makes the customers wish to participate on the trip, gives perspective on the areas of the experience which are already a success. On the other hand, it can help figure out also where could be potentially most room to improve. To understand as well as possible the reasons behind traveling on Sokkomatka, an open survey question was come up with asking each participant what the three most important reasons are why they participate on Sokkomatka.

As the participants could freely answer the question, many different answers and a lot of data came as a result. In total, 76 persons answered this question and 195 different reasons were come up so on average, 2,7 answers per respondent

were given. Some gave even four reasons and all these reasons were accepted for the analysis of the survey. Others gave the same answer twice but, in these cases, duplicates were not accepted and only one answer per theme counted. As different answers were come up with, it was important to divide the answers to different themes. Answers close to each other were put in to one unified theme to better understand the bigger picture and make a clearer division to analyse the data in a more understandable way. The themes are represented in the following chart and percentages on top of each of the bars show how many of the respondents gave this as one of their reasons to participate on Sokkomatka.

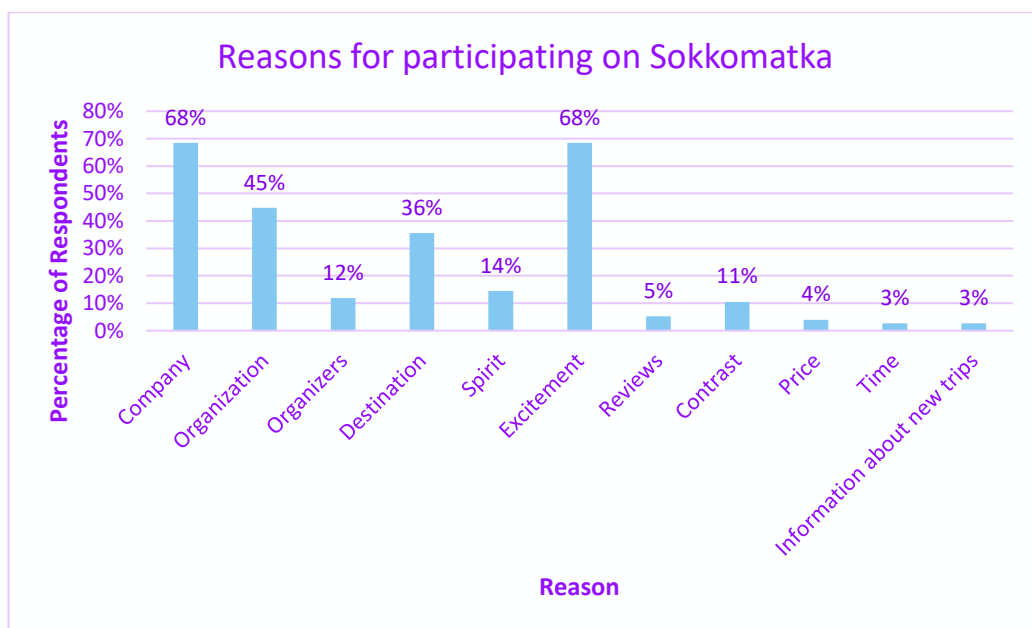


Figure 10. Reasons for participating on Sokkomatka.

The two most important reasons that showed up in over two thirds of the respondents' answers were "excitement" and "company". The theme "excitement" does include though answers ranging from the actual word of excitement to words and sentences referring to the element of surprise, curiosity and interest. As the word "interesting" can refer not only to excitement, it was considered to be close enough to belong to the same theme in order to make large enough theme groups. According to the results, the element of "company" can be seen as the other big factor for participating on the Sokkomatka trip. The theme "company" consists of all answers related to having an enjoyable company and group of friends or people on the trip. As an exception, answers which were specifically

about the employees of the trip, are separated to another theme group of “Organizers” which was represented in 12% of the answers. So, if these answers of company and organizers are added up, 80% percent of the respondents had mentioned other people as one of their reasons to participate on the trip. At this stage already, it is clear to state that the company and excitement aspects form the strengths of the present Sokkomatka.

The two other major reasons for participating on the trip appear to be “organization” and “destination” as 45% mentioned organization and 36% destination as one of their reasons. The theme “organization” consists of answers of for instance “well organized trip” or even “easiness, no need to take care of anything by ourselves”. Essentially, both aspects of good organization and easiness for the customers are within this same theme of “organization” as they are so similar to each other. A bit over a third of the respondents mentioned “destination” as one of their reasons to travel on Sokkomatka. Destination theme includes not only the answers of the unknown destination of a city the customers will visit on the trip but also the program and culture they experience on their trip.

Also, spirit was mentioned by 14% and contrast by 11% of the respondents. Spirit theme includes answers also about for example how much fun there is in the trip in addition to overall good spirit on the trip. Even though the percentage seems low, it is unlikely that the majority would feel as the spirit is bad on the trip. Many might think that the spirit is good but rather have probably answered for instance “company” or “organizers”. These answers can be seen also related to having an overall good spirit on the trip. Contrast theme includes words such as “holiday” or sentences such as “getting away from daily routines”.

The lowest amount of answers got the following themes of reviews, price, time and information about new trips. The review theme could be written also as reputation as essentially it means that the good reputation of the trip and Saarikoski Travels in general has been a factor in signing up for the trip. These respondents can be seen as the minority group who have yet to participate on a Sokkomatka trip and have heard good things or reviews from others about it. Some mentioned also the good price per quality factor which is demonstrated as “price”. There

were also a few who enjoy the fact that information about new trips is given during the Sokkomatka.

In addition to getting an overall view of the reasons for participating on Sokkomatka, different groups and their answers can be analysed to possibly find differences between them. The following charts will demonstrate the difference between respondents who have not yet and those who have already participated on Sokkomatka in the past. This can help us understand what the expectations of those who have not yet participated on the trip are and on the other hand gain more information about what makes the trip so special for those who have experienced it already.

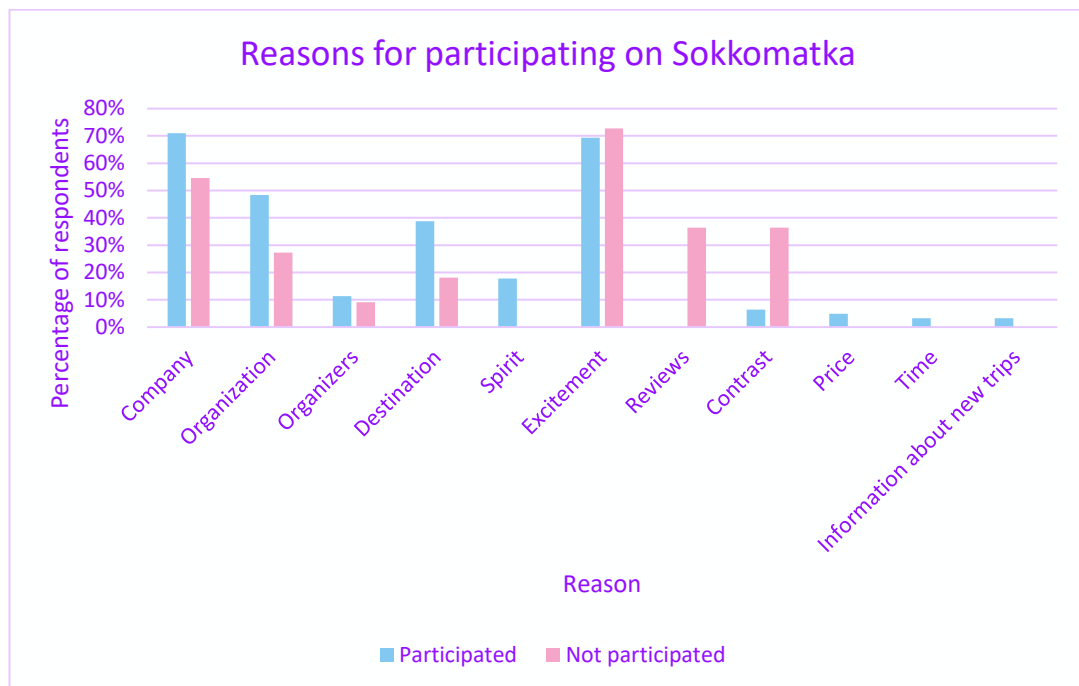


Figure 11. Reasons for participating on Sokkomatka by those who have not yet participated and those who have participated on the trip before.

As expected, the answer “reviews” was only given by the ones who have not yet participated on Sokkomatka. This and the contrast theme are clearly more important factors for those who have yet not participated on Sokkomatka. The chart also shows the noticeable difference that company, organization and destination are more valued within the people who have already participated on Sokkomatka before. The reason behind the difference between the answers among these two different groups is most likely due to the different perspective on the trip. The

ones who have yet not participated before, find it more important for their purchase decision the fact that they have heard good things in general about the trip and for this reason have decided to participate as well. They might also want to look for something new and get away from their daily lives and for this reason their answers have belonged to contrast theme more often. As a conclusion, their reasons for participating on Sokkomatka might have more to do with the deeper reasons for traveling and what made them decide to participate on the trip in the first place. On contrary, it seems that the ones who have already participated on the trip before, seem to have as their reasons more often topics that have directly to do with the characteristics of Sokkomatka as an experience. As mentioned before, they have mentioned with a higher percentage themes such as company, organization and destination, factors that might be understood only after experiencing Sokkomatka.

This information can be helpful when thinking of ways how to market the trip for new participants as now a better understanding has been gained what makes the new participants want to participate on the trip and on the other hand, what the elements of the experience are for those, who have already participated on the trip before. Both of these aspects can be used in marketing the trip as Saarikoski Travels can convey the importance of company, destination, organization and excitement that the trip delivers to its participants through marketing to attract new participants and maintain old ones. This is also part of the whole Sokkomatka experience as the experience begins from the customer receiving information about the trip and hopefully is excited and already entertained at that point.

5.2.3 Elements of the experience

After analysing the reasons for participating on Sokkomatka, different elements of the experience of Sokkomatka will be reviewed. This will help understand Sokkomatka better as an experience and which of its elements are doing well at the moment and which of them could be improved more. It will also give deeper knowledge about the participants' opinions about Sokkomatka's different aspects. In each of the questions regarding the elements of the experience, a scale

from one to five was given where one is not important at all and five being very important.

Interaction

As the first question, the participants were asked to rate how important aspect community on Sokkomatka is. In line with the results from the previous question, also in this specific question the importance of community is proved. As the chart below demonstrates, 93% of the respondents are of the opinion that community is very important as they have given it either a five or a four.

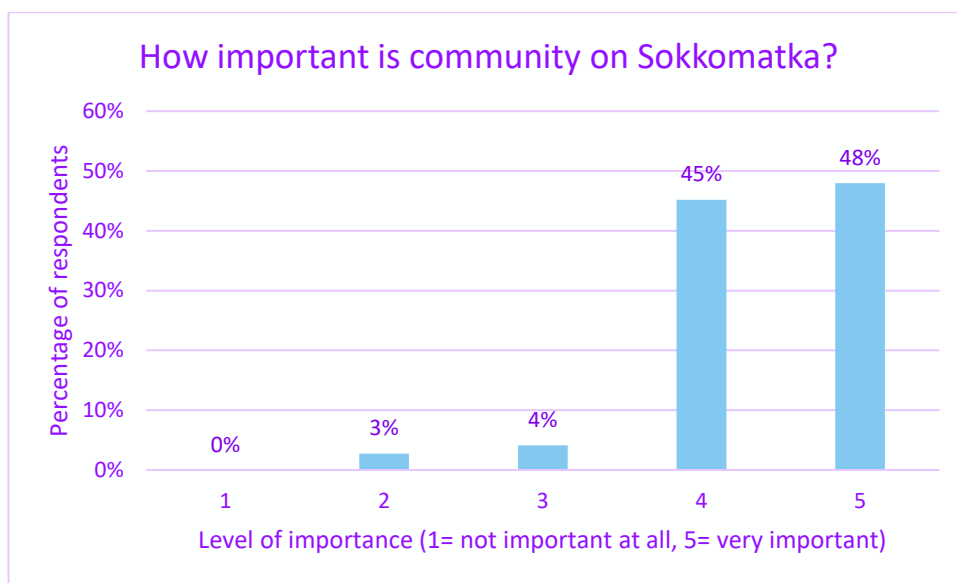


Figure 12. Importance of community on Sokkomatka.

After analysing separately again the answers between those who have and those who have not yet participated on Sokkomatka, no drastic differences were found as the below chart indicates. As a conclusion, community seems to be an important factor for all of the participants of Sokkomatka. Those who have already been on Sokkomatka have already experienced the high level of community on the trip and they appreciate this element on the trip. Those who have not yet participated on the trip seem to also value the aspect of community. They might have heard that this element is good on the trip or otherwise feel as it is an important element that they want to experience on Sokkomatka. As mentioned earlier in the theory part of experience pyramid, sense of community is connected with the interaction element of the experience. Based on the survey results, it can

be stated that this element is well taken care of in the experience product of Sokkomatka and should not be the focus of improvement and development but rather an element to be maintained.

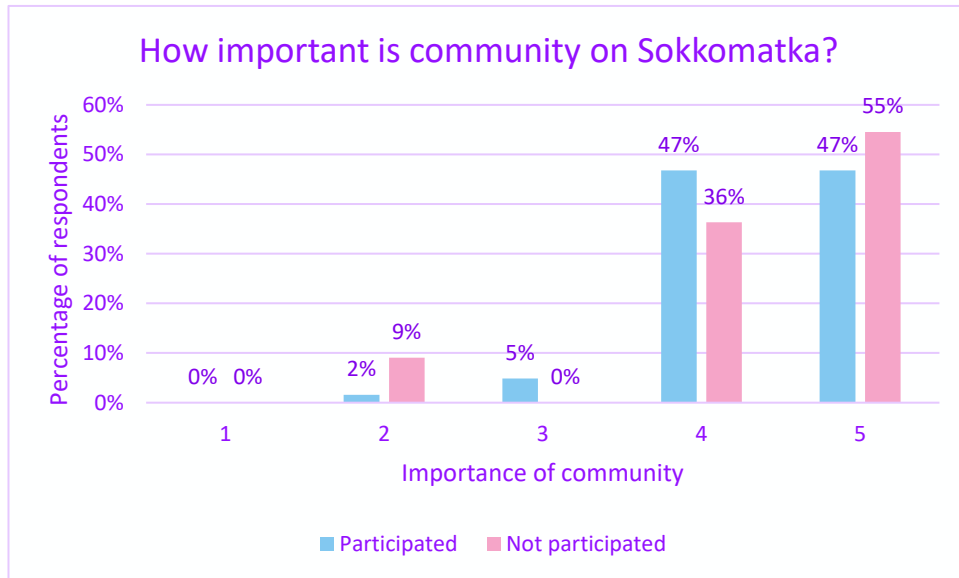


Figure 13. Importance of community on Sokkomatka by those who have not yet participated and those who have participated on the trip before.

Contrast

As the following element, the importance of experiencing new and out of the ordinary was researched. As the below chart on the following page clearly indicates, experiencing new and out of the ordinary is an even more important element than community on Sokkomatka. It is nearly as important for those who have not yet participated on Sokkomatka compared to those who have already participated on the trip.

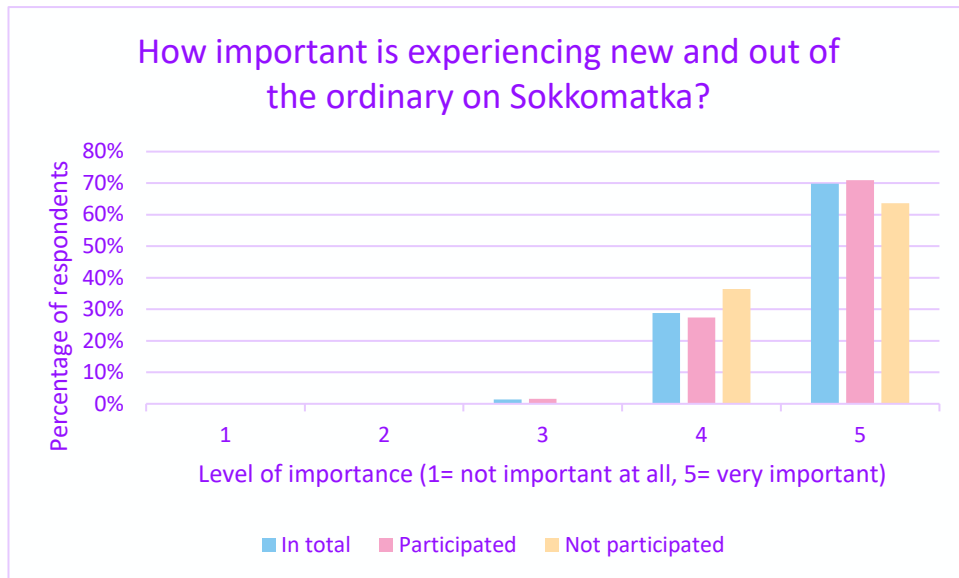


Figure 14. Importance of experiencing new and out of the ordinary on Sokkomatka.

The specific question asking how important is it that the destination is new to the participant was also asked and the results are shown on the chart below.

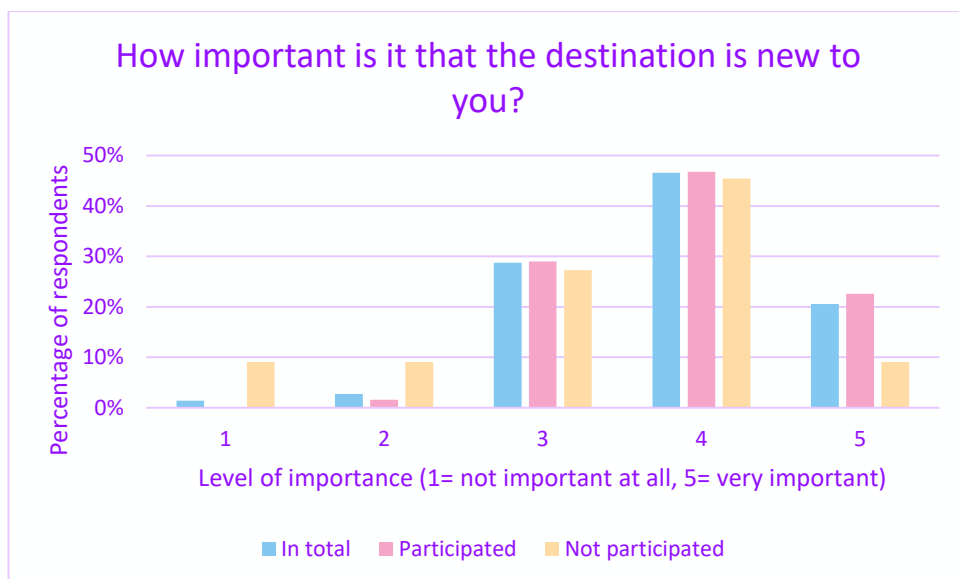


Figure 15. Importance of destination being new to the participant.

As we can see, it is still rather important for the majority of the participants that the destination would be new to them even though this aspect is not as important than experiencing something new and out of the ordinary in general during the trip. As it is a such an important element for the participants to experience some-

thing new and out of ordinary, it is important to keep the trip unique on the following trips as well. In order to do so, Saarikoski Travels ought to keep the program it offers fresh and deliver contrast to its participants who are willing to experience a getaway from their daily lives. It is recommended also to look for new and exotic destinations where to take the customers.

Authenticity

The next element of Sokkomatka that will be analysed is authenticity. The respondents were asked about the importance of the experiencing the destination's authentic local culture. As the below chart shows, it is also an important element for the participants as over 80% have ranked its importance as a five or four on a scale from one to five.

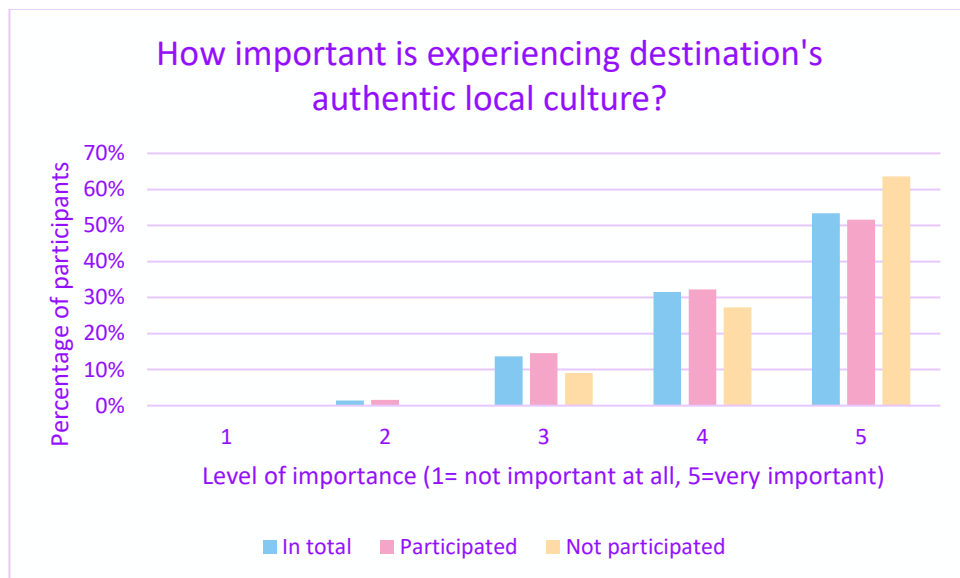


Figure 16. Importance of experiencing destination's authentic local culture.

The chart indicates that the ones who have not yet participated on the trip value the aspect of authenticity even more and seem to expect that on their upcoming trip. As the results show that it is important for nearly all participants, it would be important for Saarikoski Travels to come up with program that is authentic and represents the local culture in a true manner.

Individuality

The individuality element of the experience of Sokkomatka was also researched. A question in the form of “How important is it that the program is individual and flexible”, was asked from the respondents and the results can be seen on the chart below.

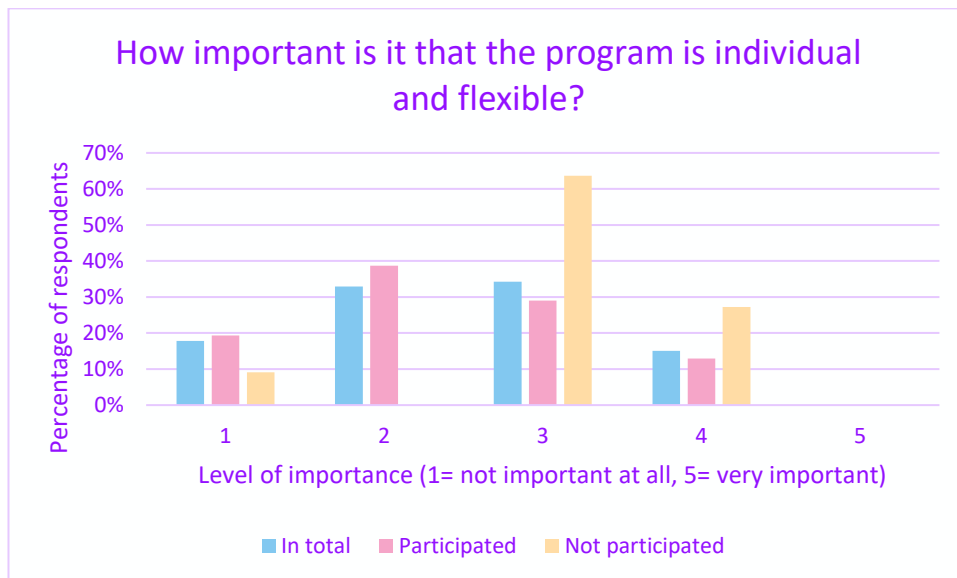


Figure 17. Importance of program being individual and flexible.

The question might be a bit difficult to understand and has an “and” word in the middle meaning that the respondent should agree that the program of the trip should be both: individual and flexible so this might decrease the likelihood of answering that both of these factors are important. This might be the case especially for the participants who have not participated on the trip as most of them have answered the middle option, thus might be uncertain and do not have a strong opinion about this question.

The responses indicate that the element of individuality is not the most important factor for these participants and therefore should not be the main focus of product development for Sokkomatka. The element of individuality can also be challenging to implement on a trip for around 100 participants and this gives ever more reason to not put all efforts trying to improve this element of the experience. As noticed before, a sense of community is a clear strength of the trip and therefore it might be that the participants rather want to do activities in a group than individually.

5.2.4 Memorabilia

Another interesting aspect that the author wished to research is whether or not the participants wish to receive some kind of memorabilia from the trip. As the chart below indicates, it seems that this is not an important factor for the participants. At least, it is not something they know they wish for, but it might be that they could still be positively surprised when receiving a gift or other memorabilia to remember their trip.

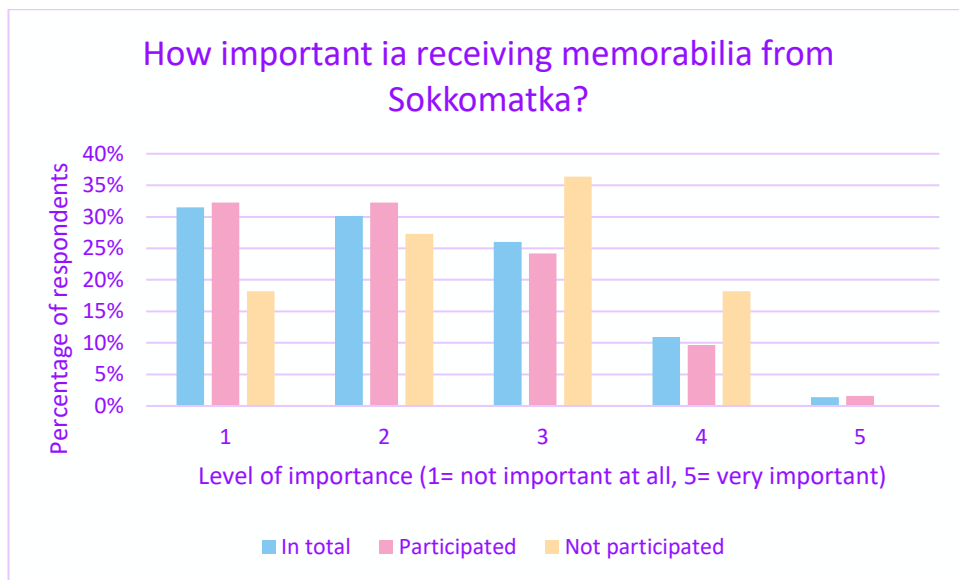


Figure 18. Importance of receiving memorabilia.

In addition, the respondents were asked what kind of memorabilia they would prefer receiving from the trip and the options and results can be seen on the chart below.

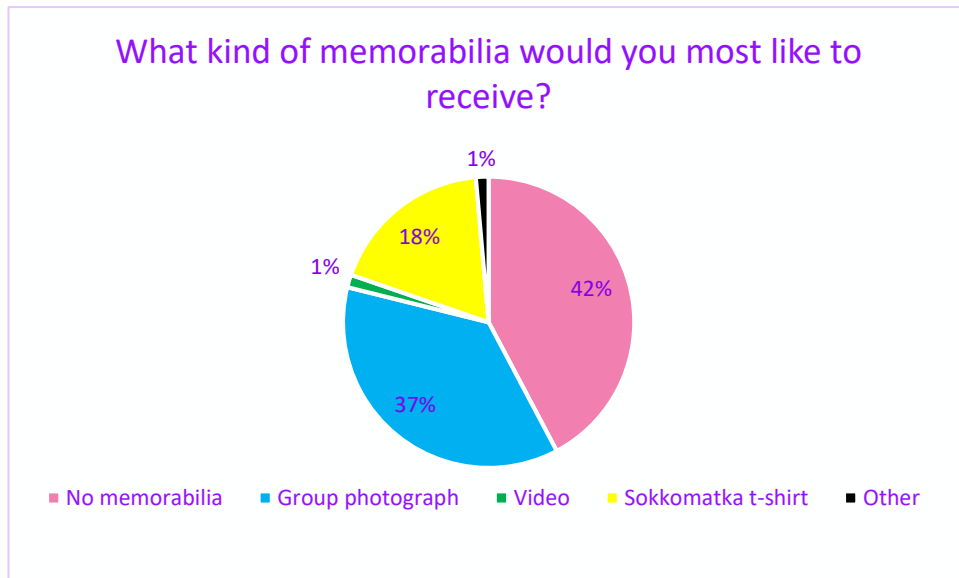


Figure 19. Type of memorabilia wanted.

Even though 61% replied earlier that it is not important for them to receive memorabilia from their Sökkomatka trip, the amount had dropped to 42% when given a list of different options to select from. It can still be said that memorabilia do not play an important role for the Sökkomatka participants, but some remarks ought not to be unnoticed. From the five different memorabilia options, 37% of the respondents selected group photograph as the memorabilia they would most like to receive from the trip. As the expense for taking such a picture and delivering it is low and the expected reaction of receiving it afterwards is positive, Saarikoski Travels should consider this option in a way to delight its customers and make the experience of the trip even better all the way until post marketing. Even though video is increasing its popularity in content consumed online, it seems that the Sökkomatka participants do not value video over photograph as only 1% wished to receive a video from the trip. This is probably due to the higher age of the participants meaning they belong to a generation which is not used to watch videos as much and do not have a need for them. Therefore, video should not be selected as memorabilia for this target group.

5.2.5 Form of travel

During the history of Sökkomatka, trips have mainly been made by either bus or a combination of bus and ship. The author and the commissioning company wanted to know whether its participants could be interested also in the option of

flying. As the results show on the chart below, in total one third answered that flight would be the most enjoyable form of travel when given the three options of airplane, ship and bus. From the participants who have already been on Sokkomatka, 31% and from the new participants, 45% would prefer a flight over a ship or bus trip on Sokkomatka. Ship is the least preferred means of travel as only 17% prefers it in total, 20% from experienced Sokkomatka travellers and none from the 11 new participants. The preferred form of travel is bus, as half of all the respondents gave this option as their favorite one, 49% from the experienced Sokkomatka travellers and 55% from the new ones.

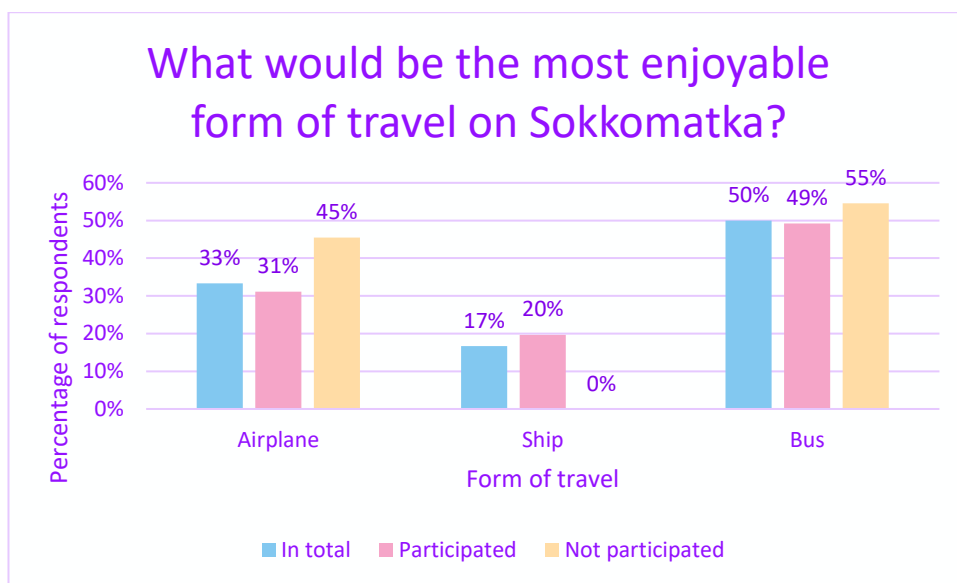


Figure 20. Form of travel.

Even though most of the previous Sokkomatka trips have involved travel with a bus, the results show that it is still a way of traveling that the participants enjoy. It might be that in the bus the important aspect of the trip, community can be fulfilled better as tens of other participants can enjoy each other's company in the same space in a relaxed manner. As airplane was also preferred by so many, a combination of a bus trip and a flight should be something that Saarikoski Travels should consider as 83% of the respondents preferred form of travel would be realized. In addition, flight would bring something new and contrast to what the trips have offered previously.

5.2.6 Suggestions from respondents

After receiving valuable data of different elements of the Sokkomatka, the overall satisfaction and recommendations from its participants was researched. The respondents were given an open question asking for wishes about future Sokkomatka trips. As the chart below demonstrates, most of the respondents did not give any recommendations and are satisfied with the current Sokkomatka trips and concept.

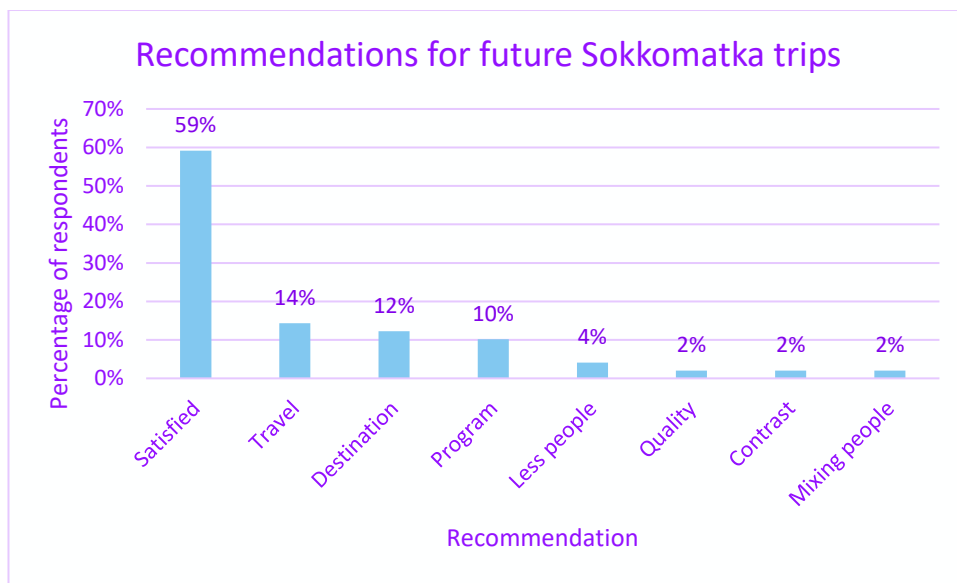


Figure 21. Recommendations for future Sokkomatka trips.

From those who gave recommendations about future trips, the most popular category or theme where the answers belonged was “travel”. Some wished for a train trip but mainly it was about decreasing the amount of being on the bus. The second most popular recommendation was about destination as some gave their wishes of making a flight trip for instance to Gdansk or Riga. The third most popular recommendation was related to the program as all respondents had different ideas for program. A minority wished also to have less people on the trip and themes such as quality, contrast and mixing people were answered by only one respondent each. Quality answer was about having a luxury trip with better hotels, contrast was about having diversity between the trips and mixing people had to do with the wish of getting to know more people on the trip and separate already formed strong groups. This data and ideas will be used in the following chapter

where further recommendations for the trip will be given. The previous recommendations from this chapter will be summed up and extended.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will introduce more detailed recommendations based on theory and chapter five's survey results. Recommendations will be given to the commissioning company in order to enhance the experience of its Sokkomatka blind trip. The main theory used in this thesis is the experience pyramid and the survey questions (Appendix 1, p. 54) were formed around the elements of the experience on product level. All the elements of the experience will be analysed in this chapter in order to improve the experientiality of Sokkomatka as comprehensively as possible.

Individuality

As mentioned in chapter 5, individual and flexible program was not seen as an important factor for the respondents. This element can also be difficult and even expensive to implement in a trip for around 100 participants uniquely and separately for all customers. As the results showed, the trip has kept its excitement level and customers are all in all satisfied with the trip. Individuality of the product is also the uniqueness of the trip and it is important for Saarikoski Travels to maintain this aspect. It is important to keep this unique concept of participants not knowing where they are headed and keep the destinations, program and forms of travel diversified in order to keep the excitement level and uniqueness of the trip in the future as well. This will enable to lengthen the lifespan of the product.

Authenticity

As the survey results indicated, it is important for the participants to experience the authentic local culture of the destination of Sokkomatka. In order to improve this aspect on the future trips, Saarikoski Travels could have some program of its destination which is traditional and as authentic as possible. To do so, local experience providers should be contacted to organize the program. In order to find a suitable company, a local DMC company can be reached if needed to outsource this work.

Story

The element of story can be added to the authentic program the participants will experience during their trip. In addition to the program, already in the marketing of the product, a story could be told about the upcoming trip without revealing too much of course to keep the destination a surprise. Having a unified theme and coherent story starting from marketing the product, makes the whole experience more meaningful and gets the customer excited from the get-go. As many of the respondents mentioned the excitement of guessing where the trip will take them is something they enjoy, sending some broad clues in the marketing material could get them even more excited and they could start guessing and engaging with the other participants where they might be going.

Multisensory perception

Once Saarikoski Travels has come up with a theme for their following Sokkomatka trip, it would be important to plan that all sensory stimuli are according to the theme. Even though it is good to think about ways to use each of the senses, it is important that the senses are not disturbing one another and strengthen the wished theme and therefore improve the experience.

Contrast

As the survey results demonstrated, the participants of Sokkomatka are willing to experience something new and out of the ordinary on their Sokkomatka trips. It is important that Saarikoski Travels keeps the program diversified and offers something that the participants do not experience in their daily lives. Also, the destinations should be new to them and at least differ from the previous Sokkomatka locations.

Interaction

Interaction, which is highly related to sense of community, is of essence on the Sokkomatka trip as the results showed. This element is well taken care of already but there is still room to improve. In addition to introducing the tour guides to the participants of the trip, it would be of great worth to have the participants introduce themselves to each other. This could be done in a form of an interactive game for

example to keep the spirit relaxed and not make it too formal. By doing so, already tight groups of friends could welcome other travel companions more easily to socialize with them and the group could bond as a whole more. This would lower the risk also for individual persons or couples to stay by themselves as they could more easily interact with others, building connections and community. The travel guides have also an important role in observing the chemistry of the participants and notice if there is someone who seems to be left alone. In these cases, the tour guide can be of company until the individual has bonded with others.

Other recommendations

Based on the survey results, most of the participants enjoy traveling by bus and the sense of community increases during the time spent on the bus ride. Many mentioned though that the bus rides can be often too long, at least at once. It would be important to have breaks often enough if a long bus ride is necessary. A combination of a bus trip and a flight would bring something new for the participants and the time spent on bus would decrease. This would also fulfil the wish of many to have a flight trip without forgetting totally the important aspect of the bus journey.

As mentioned in chapter 5, memorabilia are not something that the participants crave for. When given different options though, a group photograph was a clear winner from different memorabilia options. As a suggestion, Saarikoski Travels could take a group photograph during the trip and send it with a personal thank you note for participating on the trip to each of the participants home address. This way, the loyal customers of Sokkomatka and Saarikoski Travels would feel even more valued and could cherish the memories of the trip for a long time.

7 CONCLUSION

The objective of the thesis was to examine the experientiality of the commissioning company's, Saarikoski Travel's popular blind trip travel product called Sokkomatka and find ways to improve it. A survey (Appendix 1, p. 54) was formed and sent to all the participants of the upcoming trip. In addition, academic books and publications were researched around the theme of experientiality to gain valuable background information in order to give recommendations based on credible resources.

The research question of the thesis was "*How to improve the experientiality of Sokkomatka?*" and its answers are given more specifically in the fifth and sixth chapter. As the survey results indicated, the participants of Sokkomatka are rather pleased with the current concept and experience. The main elements which they appreciate are the sense of community and excitement of the trip. It is important that Saarikoski Travels maintains these aspects of the trip strong in the future as well. In addition, they should look ways to improve the trip using the suggested elements.

The sub-questions: "*How to create meaningful experiences*" and "*What transforms a service into an experience*" are mainly answered in the fourth chapter using the primary theory of the thesis, the experience pyramid model. The survey results are analysed, and recommendations given based largely on these concepts. In brief, the product should consist of all the following elements: individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast and interaction. These elements Saarikoski Travels should also include in Sokkomatka in all the customer's levels of the experience pyramid which are: motivational level, physical level, intellectual level, emotional level and mental level.

The benefit of this thesis serves as a guide for the commissioning company not only to improve Sokkomatka but also any other existing or new travel product from the standpoint of experientiality. The valuable survey results allow the company to satisfy the customers' needs even better in the future as recommendations from this thesis are applied.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the author needed to change plans rapidly concerning the way of gathering survey results as a paper version which was supposed to be given to the participants face to face on the trip was turned into an email version instead. Effort was needed to phrase the cover letter attractive and authentic in order to gain enough results for a quantitative research. Also, follow-up messages were sent, and a raffle came up with in the hope of increasing the response rate. As a result, a high majority of the participants replied. As a conclusion, Saarikoski Travels has a very loyal customer base which ought to be listened to in the future as well in order to satisfy their needs and offer travel products of community, excitement and interest. As a high response rate is likely to be received in the future as well, the author recommends making a survey in the future as well to stay up to date of the needs and wants of its customers.

In addition to the benefits the company can reap from the thesis, the author gained valuable knowledge throughout the thesis process. Important skills from project planning, searching reliable theory and analysing results on Excel are just a few examples from the list of many how this process developed the author professionally. Additionally, the deeper understanding gained from the subject of experientiality will be of help for the author as well planning and analysing travel products more comprehensively during the author's work career.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Survey questions for the participants of Sokkomatka

Sokkomatka survey

Great that you want to participate in an anonymous survey and help us improve Sokkomatka even more. Answering the survey will take just a few minutes. Thank you for your time!

1. Age:
2. Gender: A) Male B) Female
3. On how many Sokkomatka trips have you been on before? A) I have not yet participated B) I have participated only once C) I have participated twice or more
4. What are your three most important reasons to participate on Sokkomatka?
5. On the scale from 1-5 (1= not important at all, 5= very important), how important is community on Sokkomatka?
6. On the scale from 1-5 (1= not important at all, 5= very important), how important is experiencing new and out of the ordinary on Sokkomatka?
7. On the scale from 1-5 (1= not important at all, 5= very important), how important is it to experience the authentic local culture on Sokkomatka?
8. On the scale from 1-5 (1= not important at all, 5= very important), how important is experiencing a new destination on Sokkomatka where you have not been before?

9. On the scale from 1-5 (1= not important at all, 5= very important), how important is it that you could influence the program, so it is individual and flexible?
10. On the scale from 1-5 (1= not important at all, 5= very important), how important is it to receive memorabilia (e.g. photo/video/Sokkomatka t-shirt etc.) from Sokkomatka?
11. What kind of memorabilia would you most like to receive from Sokkomatka? A) I do not want memorabilia B) I would like a photo of the group C) I would like a video of the trip D) I would like to get a Sokkomatka t-shirt E) I would like some other kind of memorabilia
12. If you would like to have some other kind of memorabilia, what would it be?
13. What would be the most enjoyable form of travel on Sokkomatka? A) Bus B) Ship C) Airplane
14. What kind of changes/wishes do you have for Sokkomatka in order to make its experience even better?

Are you ready? Send your answers by pressing the "Submit" button below. Thank you, a lot! :) A surprise prize will be drawn among the respondents. In order to keep the survey anonymous, we do not receive the email addresses of the respondents. Whether you like to participate in the raffle, please reply to the email sent to you that you have answered the survey and you would like to participate in the raffle. Good luck in the raffle! :) Please remember to press the "Submit" button below, thank you.