

Strengthening Finland's Country Brand: 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland Campaign

Linda Parina

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Author Linda Parina	
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<p>The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the perceived possibilities of strengthening Finland's country brand through being part of a nation-wide domestic tourism campaign, that aims to create a phenomenon out of domestic travel. The research was done as a commission for a campaign called 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland, Suoma being the official commissioner and Drama Queen Communications in charge of executing the campaign and therefore closely as an advisor in working on this thesis. The main objective of the thesis is to examine if the companies/organizations, that participated in the 2020 campaign, perceive they had an important role in strengthening Finland's country brand.</p> <p>Finland's country brand has been under conscious strategic development only for a decade. The aim of country brand work is to form a certain kind of image and identity for a country. It is often perceived from an international aspect, even though country brand does also exist for the country's own residents. This thesis was conducted to further contribute to the understanding of how country brand could be strengthened internally by its own citizens.</p> <p>The thesis process was conducted between October 2020 – May 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its imposed restrictions on international travel, the topic of the thesis has current relevancy. Theoretical framework of the thesis introduces central concepts and aspects that country branding entails both in general and specifically in Finland. It also extensively introduces the 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign and the commissioner. The research was qualitative and it was conducted by video call interviews between March – April 2021. Sampling consisted of ten participants of the 2020 campaign.</p> <p>The results showed that the participants could extensively describe operations that are a part of country branding. However, they could not bring up if they consciously execute these procedures because they know it strengthens Finland's country brand. The findings revealed that while co-operation was seen highly important in terms of the campaign, but also work environment in general, many respondents also believed that a single actor has power to influence how Finland is perceived.</p> <p>The findings of the research indicate that the participants' perception of their influence is linked to the extent and level of knowledge they have on what country branding entails. However, even if they were unfamiliar with the concept, they could still bring up a strong perception of the influence over country image. As a conclusion, it is possible that the participants already impact country brand on a much higher level, but these operations are subconscious. In order to the actors of tourism field to know how to support its strengthening, the level of awareness about country branding should be increased.</p>	
Keywords country brand, Finland brand, country image, domestic travel	

Table of contents

1	Introduction	1
2	100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign.....	4
2.1	Basic principles and goals.....	5
2.2	Pathway towards becoming a phenomenon.....	6
2.3	The 2020 campaign	7
3	Defining a country brand	10
3.1	Conceptual foundation of country brand.....	10
3.2	Complexity of forming a country image	13
3.3	Examining aspects of country branding.....	13
3.4	Benefits of strengthening the country brand	17
4	Country brand of Finland.....	19
4.1	Finland's country image	20
4.2	The roles of different actors.....	22
4.3	The effect of COVID-19 on Finland's tourism in summer season 2020	24
5	Methodology	27
5.1	Research type.....	27
5.2	Data collection methods & sample scope.....	28
5.3	Data analysis	30
5.4	Implementation throughout the process	31
6	Results.....	33
6.1	Description of data analysis in practice	33
6.2	Country brand work.....	34
6.3	Perceived roles	37
6.4	Effects of COVID-19.....	39
6.5	Co-operation	41
6.6	Value of the campaign	42
7	Discussion.....	46
7.1	Conclusions	46
7.1.1	Perceived role to strengthening the country brand	46
7.1.2	Added value from participating to the campaign.....	49
7.1.3	Perceptions on benefits of co-operation	51
7.1.4	Importance of pursuing country brand building.....	52
7.1.5	Summary & applicability for the commissioner	54
7.2	Suggestions for future research	56
7.3	Validity and reliability.....	57
7.4	Ethical considerations	58
7.5	Personal learning and development.....	59

References	61
Appendices	67
Appendix 1. Interview Guide.....	67
Appendix 2. Thesis process timetable	68

1 Introduction

Finland's country brand has been under conscious strategic development only for a decade (Country Brand Delegation 2010). Due to the long-term nature of country branding process, the development work requires persistence and a clear vision that maintains its focus even when people behind it change over time (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 32, 61-62). While most top-of-mind associations that are linked to Finland often strongly reflect similar descriptions about nature relation and northern location (FutureBrand 2019; Future Brand 2020), the further away we travel, the more neutral the country image becomes (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 87). Therefore, country brand work can easily be associated to concern only international travelers and enhancing global appeal. However, country brand does also exist for the country's own residents. (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 25.) While it would be easy to assume that Finnish people thoroughly know their home country and everything it withholds, there are many undiscovered opportunities and destinations that Finnish people are oblivious to in their own country (Suoma 2017a).

This thesis investigates the perceived possibilities of strengthening Finland's country brand through being part of a nation-wide domestic tourism campaign and aims to contribute to the understanding of how country brand could be strengthened internally by its own citizens. The research is done as a commission for a campaign called 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland, Suoma being the official commissioner and Drama Queen Communications in charge of executing the campaign and therefore closely as an advisor in working on this thesis. The Association of Tourism Organizations in Finland (Suoma in Finnish) is an umbrella organization that looks after the interest of its member organizations in relation to other organizations in the industry, without motives for direct financial gain or other benefits for its members (AALEP 2015).

The main objective of this thesis is if the companies or organizations, that participated in the 2020 campaign, perceive they had an important role in strengthening the Finland brand. Further, the sub-questions behind the main objective are:

1. did participating in the campaign give these companies or organizations added value or spark new ways to do business or marketing?
2. did they experience the co-operation with actors, that might normally be seen as competitors, beneficial for their operations?
3. do they see the importance of pursuing country brand building process even during a time, when tourism industry is suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic?

The topic was examined with a qualitative research by conducting video call interviews with a sampling of the participants of the 2020 campaign. This thesis will bring added value to the commissioner in terms of a deeper understanding of the reasons behind why companies want to be involved in the campaign and what they gain from it. Their perception of the campaign experience can help to detect new aspects and gain more in-depth understanding about the campaign's purpose and role from the participants' point of view. The commissioner can also benefit from examining the campaign through a bigger entity of country brand. Reflecting factors that are important for the Finland brand can also reinforce the operations of the campaign and therefore set stronger grounds for the future.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of introduction which gives the first insight to the thesis topic, describes the objectives, method and scope, and introduces key concepts that are relevant regarding the field of research. The introduction is followed by a more extensive description of the commissioner and the introduction of the 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign and its history.

Theoretical framework of the thesis introduces key concepts and aspects that country brand entails both in general and specifically in Finland. It explains the conceptual foundation for country branding, explains the hierarchy and roles of different actors and suggests motives to why strengthening country brand is important. Furthermore, country brand in Finland introduces what kind of work has already been done in terms of strategic country brand building in Finland, investigates existing country image and introduces some statistics related to the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on domestic travel in the summer season 2020.

After introducing the research topic for the reader, the empirical part describes the methodology used in this thesis and justifies the reasoning behind each choice. It is followed by a description of the implementation throughout the thesis process. The thesis then addresses the results by presenting them by main themes that were created in the data analysis stage. Finally, the conclusions of the research are presented separately by each objective or sub-question. The thesis is finished with analysis on validity, reliability and ethical considerations as well as suggestions for future research and a subjective reflection of personal learning and development.

Key concepts

Country brand is a multilayered, multidimensional and ever-changing entity which is constructed by both the creator of the brand and those who perceive it, with the aim to form a certain kind of image and identity for a country. Country brand is a result of well-thought, intentional operations in which the creators of the brand try to affect the process of linking chosen values, factors and ideology to a country in a way that facilitates individuals' tendency to relate and identify with these values. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 15-16; Teodorović & Popesku 2016.)

Country image refers to how the country brand is perceived. Consumer perception of a brand by the brand associations held in individuals' memory includes perception of values, quality and feelings. It is individually created mental image that is based partially on knowledge and experiences and partially on beliefs and feelings. It is altered by direct and indirect factors and with intentional strategies can be developed towards a constructed country brand. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 15-17.)

Brand identity refers to how the owners of the country brand want it to be perceived. It is a unique set of brand associations that are created or maintained to differentiate the brand. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 16-17; Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017.)

Brand personality is a multilayered entity that links personality traits to a place (for example honest, sophisticated or exciting) and forms a base for a relationship between the individual and the brand (Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017).

Country brand equity refers to the worth that a country holds that is formed by the combination of how recognizable a place is and what mental images individuals associates with it. In other words, it shows how well known the brand is and further, the level of value it withholds. (Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017.)

2 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign

The starting point that initiated the campaign's creation was the thought that Finnish people could travel more in their own home country but they do not have enough information about the variety of possibilities. The need to improve the position of domestic travel resulted in the creation of 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign in 2017. (Suoma 2017a.) The purpose of the campaign was to offer a solution for scattered and disorderly practice by multiple actors that formed the offering in domestic tourism field (Drama Queen Communications 2020). Since then, it has been a successful leader on how to promote local travel and create a whole new appeal and inspiration for Finland as a tourism destination (Suoma 2020).

The campaign is coordinated by The Association of Tourism Organizations in Finland Suoma and executed by Drama Queen Communications. Suoma looks after the interest of its member organizations in relation to other organizations in the industry without striving for direct financial gain or benefits for its members (AALEP 2015). Furthermore, Suoma acts as an unbiased trustee and supports the network by working in co-operation with its member organizations and the tourism companies that work with them. By working in co-operation, Suoma aims to improve the performance and operations of both organizations and companies in the tourism field. In addition, Suoma acts as an advocate for tourism business by influencing national decision-making and raising awareness about tourism industry. (Suoma 2021.)

The campaign is a pioneer in its field, as there has never been measures of this scale conducted for domestic travel and tourism in Finland (Suoma 2017a). It has succeeded to bring together different operators within tourism industry to join forces while creating an exceptional setting where competitors become allies (Suoma 2018a). Furthermore, the campaign has also brought along marketing and communication forces to successfully demonstrate co-operative and dynamic work (Drama Queen Communications 2019a).

The following subchapters introduce the basic principles that further explain the ideology and vision for why the campaign was created and what it aims to achieve. The background and history of the campaign from previous years are also briefly explained. The final subchapter dives more deeply into the special features and circumstances regarding the 2020 campaign year.

2.1 Basic principles and goals

The aim of the campaign is to develop and reshape the image of Finland and to offer new ideas and destinations (Suoma 2017b). In the heart of the target group is especially the younger generation. The brand message is attempting to steer perception and attitudes towards them seeing domestic travel as something that could hold equally as much value as traveling abroad. (Suoma 2017a.) The campaign goals also mention the aim to prolong the season for domestic travel from just focusing on the summer months (100 syytä matkaillla Suomessa 2020a).

Campaign's basic principles (Figure 1) are to create a new generation 'Finnish feeling' to reach the right people at the right time, to build a phenomenon out of domestic travel and to support the actors in the tourism field (Drama Queen Communications 2019b). Reasoning behind the motivation for creating the campaign in the first place stems from the imbalance of seeing other countries as the first choice and disregarding our home country as an equally attractive alternative. Tourism also generates a great input to national economy, therefore also increasing the number of jobs. (Suoma 2017b.) So far, destination marketing for domestic places of interest have been scattered across actors in the field. Finland is also seen as a more expensive option compared to other countries. On top of that, the knowledge that Finnish people have about their own home country's tourism offering is limited, which initiates a need for inventing a channel to decrease the gap between insufficient knowledge and domestic travel offering. (Suoma 2017a.)

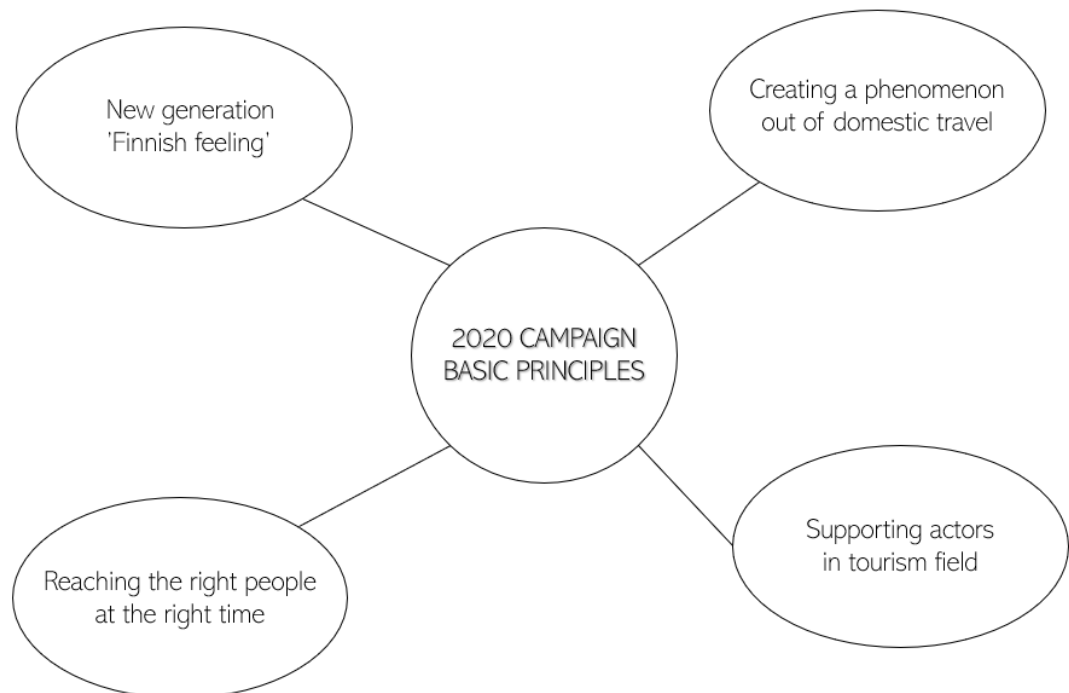


Figure 1. 2020 campaign's basic principles (Drama Queen Communications 2019b)

The campaign aims to reach a level of visibility that is wide and versatile enough to raise interest for domestic travel destinations when searching for inspiration. 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign's goal is to become and remain the primary source of information for Finnish people. The vision is supported by ensuring that the brand contacts reach the consumer in multiple channels. (Drama Queen Communications 2019c.)

100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign promotes responsible tourism which in the context of the campaign and its target group means mainly appreciating nature and locality. Responsible travel can however be understood from a different aspect as well; while it is increasingly important to support the recovery of Finland's tourism and businesses who are struggling, all domestic travel should still be conducted under the general guidelines and instructions of the time to prevent the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. (100 syytä matkaillla Suomessa 2020a.)

2.2 Pathway towards becoming a phenomenon

100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign was launched for the first time in 2017 which happened to be the same year Finland celebrated its 100 years of independence (Suoma 2017a). Since then, it has been executed every year during the summer months, making last year fourth in a row (Suoma 2020).

After the first campaign, points of development could be analyzed to better support the progress towards defined goals. Functions on the website, such as theming, filters and recommendations based on what the user has viewed, were developed to increase user-friendliness and guarantee that the website would remain as an easily approachable source of information, as defined in the goals. These corrections also help to increase the time spent on the website and related recommendations encourage the users to familiarize themselves with the content that is based on their targeted interests. Since social media has been a strong and irreplaceable channel since the beginning, the 2018 campaign introduced a social media manager to take responsibility for those channels. Social media manager's role is to plan posts and other activity to increase both organic and paid reach and visibility, engage followers and follow analytics to track performance. (Suoma 2017a.)

The channels for promoting the campaign have been extremely versatile while creating customer touchpoints to various different places. It is done to make sure that the potential consumers would receive brand messages, even if they are not exposed to some of the marketing channels at all. Besides social media, the ways of raising awareness over the years have included SEM, ads, frontpages, banners and video wallpaper in digital newspapers, articles in various magazines, banners in digital screens in public transportation,

radio, TV, marketing material for organizations and companies, content marketing, blogs and use of influencers or a campaign spokesperson. (Suoma 2017a; Suoma 2018b.)

The campaign has had steady progress and reached higher goals continuously every year. Visits to the website as well as interest towards introduction cards have shown a rising level of fascination that circulates around finding undiscovered gems in Finland and the trend can be reflected from campaign statistics. (Suoma 2021.) As mentioned in the basic principles, the aim is to raise the interest of the younger generation, and partially that has been affected the decision to include the use of influencers and selection of campaign spokespeople (Drama Queen Communications 2019b). Facebook and Instagram have been a big part of the campaign in terms of both creating traffic to the campaign site and therefore making the Finland brand more familiar and popular, but also from the aspect of creating hype and inspiration with visual content and engaging people who share similar values with the campaign. Creating a bond between the consumers and the campaign makes them feel included in reshaping the image we send out about Finland. (Suoma 2018b.)

100 Reasons to Travel in Finland has also won the award for the improver of tourism image in the Finnish Travel Gala in 2019 (Suomen matkatoimistoalan liitto SMAL ry 2019) and the phenomenon of the year in 2020 (PING Helsinki 2020). Reasoning behind nominations mention for example creating a positive image for Finland, even wider domestic travel visibility (SMAL 2019), flexibility and adaptability from a small actor in the face of new circumstances (PING 2020) and offering a focused, new source for information (Drama Queen Communications 2019a) while also creating a channel for smaller or less known actors to get more visibility as part of a nationwide campaign (SMAL 2019; PING Helsinki 2020).

2.3 The 2020 campaign

The leverage to domestic destination marketing became indispensable when tourism sector turned out to be one of the biggest industries to suffer from the effects of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (UNWTO 2020). The pandemic reached Finland in the early spring, forcing the government to declare the implementation of Emergency Powers Act (Finnish Government 2020). The following measures meant elimination of most planned business operations for the upcoming season in tourism and hospitality industry, also extensively changing what the campaign would be built on. In other words, when many actors in the field were forced to close down for an indefinite time and the future seemed unclear, the destinations and points of interest that the campaign would highlight, had to be carefully

re-evaluated. This of course affected the content and selection of the offering. (Drama Queen Communications 2020.)

In 2020 Suoma conducted two research, first in March (100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020a) and the second one in June (100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020b). The aim was to investigate the attitudes towards domestic travel for the upcoming year after the pandemic reached Finland. Both questionnaires indicated that over half (57-67%) of the Finnish people answering the questionnaire had travel plans in Finland during the year. (100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020a; 100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020b.) Willingness to explore domestically was expressed especially among the young adults between 18-34 years old, which corresponds to the campaign's defined target group. Some of the respondents also admitted that they most likely would have not considered traveling in Finland under normal circumstances. (100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020b.) Since restrictions set extensive limitations for traveling, special interest towards destinations nearby, outdoor activities and also respect towards nature and supporting local habitants and businesses were highlighted in the results (100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020a). Most of the respondents claimed the pandemic having no effect on their budget. The research scope was 1000 Finns per questionnaire. They were aged between 18-75 and gender, age and location were taken into account in the sampling. (100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020b.)

Despite the challenging setting and the near future forecast for tourism, the interest towards domestic travel showed encouraging signs which was supported by a decrease in the curve of reported cases during the summer (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020). While traveling internationally was suddenly eliminated as an option, it allowed destinations in Finland to rise in popularity (Business Finland 2020). Over the course of the campaign, the Government admitted an additional 500 000€ funding to support the campaign that aimed to help recover from COVID-19 crisis. The funding was indicated to bring more visibility for the different sized organizations and businesses in the campaign and help them raise awareness of their services in hopes of supporting their recovery post crisis. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2020a.) As a result, a new section called 'Information Bank' was created to the website which enabled more companies to join in for the rest of the campaign duration and get more visibility with a small investment. The hope was to stretch the domestic travel season beyond the summer months. (100 syytä matkailla Suomessa 2020c.)

The results reflected the increasing popularity in domestic travel; the number of visits on the campaign website as well as media hits and social media followers continued increasing in 2020, despite the pandemic (Suoma 2020; Suoma 2021). The surprisingly positive countereffect could also be detected from the increasing interest and excitement among domestic travelers to explore their own home country. The summer season opened new opportunities to reach an extended target group of travelers that would normally travel abroad but are under forced to stay in their home country under the circumstances. According to a brand research conducted in 2020, the 100 Reasons brand has also increased its recognition. (Suoma 2020.)

3 Defining a country brand

The concept of country brand is a very complex entity, that is constructed on multiple levels (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 14; Saraniemi 2020; Teodorović & Popesku 2016). It most commonly includes a combination of both inner identity and external image (Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017). Branding has originally been used to promote products. Its procedures have since been extended for services and further for promoting countries, which means that understanding brand related operations requires a wider multidimensional comprehension. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 12.) In academic research, terms like country brand and place brand can be used for similar topics, and there is a consensus among researchers, that they are essentially the same and therefore practices of both concepts can be utilized across each other (Teodorović & Popesku 2016). Similar take can be applied for the use of tourism brand as a concept (Saraniemi 2020). Nation brand concept has a small nuance that separates it from the above mentioned terms since nation refers to people and country refers to a geographically defined area that a nation inhabits. However, these concepts are closely intertwined. It is good to acknowledge from the start, that whether or not conscious branding activities have been performed, every nation and therefore also its country, has a brand image to begin with. (Hakala et al 2013.)

For this thesis, it is essential to understand what forms a country brand as a concept, and which factors affect its formation and strengthening since it is setting a base for the research. This chapter explains the key concepts that are relevant for the reader to understand the results and conclusions on the empirical part. In addition to the conceptual foundation, this chapter further examines what influences the brand building and image forming process from different aspects and clarifies why investing in developing and strengthening the country brand is beneficial for the country.

3.1 Conceptual foundation of country brand

Country brand and country image are two different things. Country brand could be seen as sort of a hypernym, under which brand image and brand identity form a dichotomy. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 16.) In an ideal situation, these two factors resemble each other and their visions correspond (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 27). Country brand is defined as a multilayered and multidimensional concept, with an ongoing change, that poses a continuous need for improvement and adjustment to maximize ideal positioning. It is inevitable that countries reflect the image of its inhabitants and vice versa, citizens partially identify themselves through their country's reputation. Therefore, it can be seen as a source for national identity which comprises who the nation is and what their global role is.

(Teodorović & Popesku 2016.) However, in order to achieve a positive association and relationship with both its visitors and citizens, a brand must be based on trust and genuine factors (Moilanen 2017; Teodorović & Popesku 2016).

Country image is a unique mix and a perception of a country that the person constructs from tangible and intangible as well as direct and indirect factors (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 15-16; Teodorović & Popesku 2016). Direct factors that influence its formation consist of individual's own experiences, memories, perceptions and the aspect that stems from own personality, sensory experiences, cultural context, country of origin, family, values etc. and constitutes which features raise interest over others. Indirect factors are small pieces of information that the individual gathers about a country from different sources but without having a direct connection or touchpoint with the country itself. Indirect touchpoints can be pictures, videos, articles, stories of friends or strangers, documentaries etc. which all have different values depending on how much meaning the individual gives to the source (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 15, 26.) Country image should be monitored and evaluated since it plays a major role in determining either positive or negative associations to a certain country. Therefore, it affects for example the perceived values, or attitudes that an individual associates to the destination and motivation to visit or explore. (Teodorović & Popesku 2016.)

Brand identity, on the other hand, is consciously built with an aim to form a specific kind of image with which the creator of the brand is trying to influence individual's country image. It is determined, carefully constructed, constantly on-going operation that aims to create and lead to a certain kind of brand image that highlights the chosen features. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 16-17.) Hakala et al (2013) agree on the fact that the image of the perceived brand is capable of changing and the direction of that change can be influenced. However, they suggest that before being able to do so, the target or respondents must be aware of the subject of branding, in this context, a country. Therefore, the initial step of the branding process should be to raise awareness.

Country brand positioning means how the country is seen or positioned compared to other countries (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 16). Brand positioning indicates country's competitiveness and is encouraged to be used to determine or assist its potential in global market context. In recent years, the factors related to sustainability have become increasingly important to the extent that its positive association to a country or its businesses can bring a competitive advantage in the global market. (Teodorović & Popesku 2016.)

Country brand equity is the worth that a country holds. It is formed by the combination of how recognizable a place is and what mental images individuals associates with it. In other words, it indicates how well known the brand is and further, the level of value it withholds. (Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017.) On the other hand, Teodorović & Popesku (2016) define that brand equity can be referred to as the value that a country withholds which is a result of consumption of its tangible and intangible, internal and external, functional, emotional and symbolic values and the benefits that visitors are promised during the consumption process. According to Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi (2017) brand equity is generated when a brand has an interesting personality and can be linked to perceptions that consumers form of it. Brand equity indirectly affects marketing strategies and travel motivation, and its potential should therefore be further explored and utilized.

While brand image is presented to be an important factor in building brand equity, a sub concept of brand attitude also plays an important role in forming the background since it determines which factors individuals favor over others. Therefore, it affects the choosing of building blocks that form country image and eventually contributes to strengthening brand equity. (Woo 2019.) Teodorović & Popesku (2016) suggest that the value of brand equity can be maximized by effectively utilizing sustainability elements and posits that it would even be the ultimate goal for achieving full brand potential and should therefore be involved in the brand equity model. Sustainability in this context also means the readiness and level of resilience that a country possesses in face of threats that impact its nations wellbeing, environment or quality of life.

As a response to both, the abundance of academic research on country brand equity and a comprehensive model that could be applied for further research internationally, a country brand equity model (CABE) was created by Teodorović & Popesku (2016). In hopes of contributing to the gap that was found present in literature regarding country brand equity, the model describes the correlation between country brand and its visitors and depict using dimensions and constructs what affects this relationship. It presents the internal dimension including national identity and sustainability and loyalty, and external dimension with perceived image and awareness. (Teodorović & Popesku 2016.) As mentioned earlier, awareness could be seen as the initial step for brand building (Hakala et al 2013). The results using the CABE model further encourages the significance of the connection between brand awareness and brand image and also confirms that the latter one is a major factor for brand equity (Teodorović & Popesku 2016).

3.2 Complexity of forming a country image

It is very important in terms of the thesis research to acknowledge from which point of view the country brand is examined, because reviewing the phenomenon from the domestic point of view sets a different base to the formation of country brand. The fact that the brand is evaluated from the country's own residents' point of view creates a completely different starting base than if the emphasis were to be on the foreigners' aspect. (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 25.) It is also suggested that cross-national differences may affect in which way the country in question is perceived or whether it initiates a motivation to visit (Hakala et al 2013). Promoting a country to someone who was born and raised there brings up a broader background of individual associations, experiences and emotions that are based on cultural context, family background, geographical location, social network to mention a few. It would be appropriate to assume that in this case most of the messages that construct the country image for each individual, stem from direct factors, some of which can be subconscious to a significant extent. Growing up surrounded with the same cultural context that is being branded and understanding small nuances and tiny details that can only be reached if the culture is recognized almost as a part of your own identity. The perceived image of a country that is formed by its nation can be so strong that it is thought to be the truth or parts of it are considered to be recognized around the world as self-evident. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008.) At the same time, sometimes we can be oblivious to those strengths and potential that a country holds (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 25).

The weight of each touchpoint that in form a mental image varies according to what kind of source does the information comes from and how much value the respondent gives to it. This means that some of the direct and indirect pieces that affect country image are perceived more important than others. Most likely a person gives more importance to friend's travel stories and the places mentioned in those than a faceless ad on social media feed. The mental image that a person forms in their head does not equal the truth about the place but might be very true to the person itself. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 26.)

3.3 Examining aspects of country branding

There are two ways to examine the place brand building process: normative and socio-constructive. Normative aspect gives emphasis on the vision that is created by administration or organizations that control the process of what is associated with it. Socio-constructive view on the other hand brings interaction between individuals' image and the destinations' identity to the center of focus. Branding destinations, as well as countries, is however a long-term dynamic process that keeps evolving throughout time, which brings the

need for a third point of view. It combines factors from both views and brings them together to describe that while everything cannot be controlled, the process still needs certain building blocks to remain stable. (Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017.)

One of the most important things is to lay the foundation of the brand image on real, genuine factors, strengths and things that differentiate from others (Moilanen 2017; Country Brand Delegation 2010, 29). Hakala et al (2013) agree that the brand image should be based on reality and the country should be well aware of what it is marketing and to whom. While a strong brand can help improve the country's positioning, it will not act as problem solver of political or economic issues that already exist beneath. Equally important is to get the approval of the citizens of the country. The marketers can create appealing, amazing sounding mental images of the destination. However, it most likely will not be successful if the people of the country do not resonate with that image or stand behind it. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 56.) This can present some challenges since there are as many approaches to this matter as there are people in the country. Therefore, finding a common ground is a project on its own to say the least. What makes the work even more sensitive, is that while certain strategies or tactics might have been proven effective in the corporate world, countries are always someone's home. (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 253, 255, 259.) On top of that, the demographic of the population is changing constantly (Statistics Finland 2020a).

The majority of the citizens are aging and retiring from work life in the near future and at the same time the millennials are on their way of becoming the biggest living generation (Statistics Finland 2020a). The shift furthermore affects the change in values that generations consider important. The older generations can see more importance in traditional ways of planning and executing traveling, ensuring the support for elderly from tourism point of view with accessible destinations or destinations that are located near rather than far. In contrast, younger generations put more emphasis on digitalization in their way of using social media or appreciating multi-sensory experiences or digital features in trip planning. That being said, multigeneration trips are increasing which requires skills from the service providers to accommodate everyone's needs. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2019, 19.) The inevitable future population structure also imposes a strain to the society's infrastructure and raises the importance to pay even closer attention to optimizing good governance, healthcare and economy with solutions that are made in the present day (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 323).

To ensure a seamless co-operation in the process of building a country brand, all the stakeholders and actors involved should share the same ideology and have a similar understanding of the key values and concepts that form the core of the brand (Moilanen 2017). Brand hierarchy can further explain the multi-layered nature of the actors behind brand forming and relationships between these groups. To demonstrate it more clearly, the author created a figure based on Saraniemi's text, which visually describes how different levels in the hierarchy align (Figure 2). Country brand and tourism brand can often be seen to influence one another as features of both intertwine and research practices to understand this phenomenon do not differ from each other substantially. Broken into smaller parts, country brand consists of areas that have their own brands. Those areas then have different brands for different destinations. It is not self-explanatory that destinations under the same bigger area would follow similar brand identities. Those brands are also always timely and constantly evolving. Lastly, under each destination's brand there are company or service brands that also affect the formation of each level. (Saraniemi 2020.)

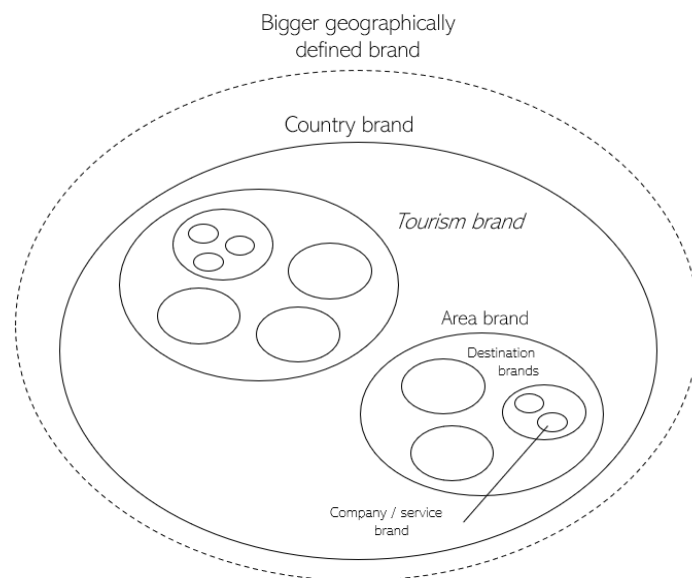


Figure 2. Brand hierarchy (adapting Saraniemi 2020)

Sometimes brands for smaller entities in the hierarchy can expand to affect more widely, making themselves more relevant in forming brand equity for the country (Saraniemi 2020). Examples of such highly recognized company brands are Nokia, Finnair or Moomin (FutureBrand 2019). Brand associations that people link to these brands can also form part of their association of the country of origin (Saraniemi 2020; Woo 2019). Some areas or destinations can also grow exponentially so that their brand equity becomes stronger than the area or even the country brand it belongs to. This is called the spill-over effect, in which the expansion in brand value is perceived beneficial for surrounding area and there-

fore pursued to transfer to give leverage to other brands. (Saraniemi 2020.) In order to understand how much power and in which scope could the participants of the campaign even access in terms of strengthening the country brand, it is good to have a more comprehensive understanding of where they align in their operative environment.

In other words, investigating country branding from a wider point of view than just individuals is relevant in order to understand the roles of every actor in the process (Saraniemi 2020). Unique or strong brands, that are created for each company or place within that nation, combined together form a brand for tourism in that country (Lemmettyinen & Saraniemi 2017). Strong brands help to contribute to the bigger entity and can affect the way the country is perceived. Transparency and open communication between these tiers contribute to a stronger probability that the defined goals steer country brand building and encourage to follow the same vision on smaller levels of the hierarchy. (Saraniemi 2020.)

The role of a single tourism company or organization is not insignificant. While they may have committed themselves to working towards a common vision, each actor brings their own aspects, strategies and diversity to the mix. In addition to the complexity of how individuals form their perceptions, it explains how the brand building process is never completely volitional or controlled by its creators. (Saraniemi 2020.) Single companies or organizations can also have a significant role in creating appeal in their area. Strong local businesses can improve competitive positioning locally or nationally or initiate a motive for traveling, therefore increasing tourism in the area (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008; Saraniemi 2020).

However, the brand hierarchy does not mention the role of single person who can influence the perception of a country with their own actions. Digitalization has allowed bigger emphasis on the image that is portrayed online and altered how social media is used to influence respondent's perceptions (Teodorović & Popesku 2016). While the threshold is getting lower and lower, the phenomenon encourages different people from regular individuals to social media influencers to post content that influences the brand image. This effect can be as powerful as the business or marketing solutions companies or organizations make respectively. The shift from individuals being consumers is moving towards becoming prosumers; partially consumers and partially producers. Prosumers are described as individuals that both consume and produce value for either their own use or for example their niche audience. They could also potentially get incentives from the content they produce, but that is not necessarily the motive in majority of the data that is shared online. (Lang et al 2020.)

It is good to keep in mind that procedures which are used for products, cannot be transferred as is to the use for services, and service procedures cannot be used for building a brand image. Products once they are made, do not change for the most parts regardless of who uses it. However, services are never completely identical even if the same person experiences it twice. Furthermore, in bigger entities such as country branding, the way each individual chooses experiences, activities and what they feel, see or hear is never in the hands of the provider or marketer. In the end, every person tailor-makes their own entities. While some of the choices can be influenced with marketing activities, the behavior can never be completely predicted. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 27-30, 32.)

3.4 Benefits of strengthening the country brand

To further explain why strengthening the country brand is the key interest of this thesis research, the evaluation of its benefits is justified. Creating a country brand is important because it strengthens and affects the brand positioning and can be seen as a vital advantage in global negotiations and debates (Teodorović & Popesku 2016). Successful branding can help its nation to create a stronger, improved image, which in the increasingly competitive environment can become an essential factor (Hakala et al 2013). The process should however be carefully planned, initiated and then supervised and evaluated continuously. By handling every step of the process ensures the long-term effects more reliably than starting strong but losing the grip or focus along the way. (Moilanen 2017.) When reflecting on the time frame it takes to build a country brand, the importance of having a clear aim, procedures and tactics are inevitable since during that time the representatives of the actors and stakeholders involved have most likely changed. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 32; Moilanen 2017.) The process is slow and includes multiple steps that require their own time frame. By estimate it takes 10-20 years to construct a country brand. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 61-62.)

Stronger country brand also means better positioning in relation to other countries and a direct effect on the demand of export products. It can also bring international businesses and create new workplaces if companies see it as a profitable opportunity to expand their market to the country. Reputation and recognition are based on the combination of countless variables; images, assumptions, attitudes linked with experiences, knowledge and stories. If the combination however forms a positive brand image, it can help to increase the country's own national identity and self-esteem also internationally (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 18-19, 87; Country Brand Delegation 2010, 253.) This ideology is strengthened with a model by Jaworski & Fosher (2003, 106-108) of Internal Nation Brand Effect (INBE) that describes the branding process as a circular ongoing effect that supports the growth of brand identity, strengthens the external brand image and therefore increases internal

national reinforcement. When the nation is behind the brand, it resonates with its core values and through that participates in ensuring the continuous circle that vouches brand building.

It is suggested that the goal would be to increase brand loyalty in order to achieve improvements in country brand equity. Country brand gets empowered by individuals' positive associations and how they link themselves or their values to the country's corresponding factors. Furthermore, country brand influences willingness to visit or influences readiness to pay. In other words, the cost-to-value ratio is affected by whether the country is seen attractive and/or competitive in relation to others. (Teodorović & Popesku 2016.)

To conclude, the country brand requires co-operation of multiple actors and the process needs careful initiation and critical monitoring that does not end after a specific milestone or time frame has been achieved (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 61-62). Successful implementation depends on the concrete actions that are executed in line with the brand values, and the success depends on how well different actors participate to the process (Moilanen 2017; Saraniemi 2020; Country Brand Delegation 2010). The dimensions of which the country brand is built on are broad and its constantly changing nature poses its own challenges. This further highlights the importance of having a shared, clear vision as to what the aim of the brand is. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 32, 70.) Although country brand is a huge entity that depends on various factors, a company, organization or even a single person can have a significant impact on how a country is seen. This potential should not be underestimated. (Saraniemi 2020.)

4 Country brand of Finland

Country brand work can often be perceived from an international aspect, in other words, how Finland is perceived abroad. However, country brand does also exist for the country's own residents. (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 25.) The country image of Finland has only been studied since the 1980s. The country brand has been under conscious, purposeful development only during the last decade. This development work resulted to publishing Finland's country brand report, which at the time set goals for the next 20 years. (Country Brand Delegation 2010.) A publication that comprehensive has not been published since so it is still seen relevant at the time of creation of this thesis. Country image work is currently executed by Finland Promotion Board and their work is led by a country brand strategy that was published in 2017. It defines the following key strengths for Finland's country brand: functionality and wellbeing, nature and sustainable development and education and know-how (Finland Promotion Board 2017a). These central strengths are reflected annually in the Theme Calendar (Finland Promotion Board 2021).

The 2010 country brand report more broadly defined six goals for developing the brand towards a more solution-oriented country with better positioning in fields of economy, tourism and international role. These goals include appreciating Finnish work and supporting its export, encouraging international investments, promoting tourism, striving for better international positioning as well as increasing appeal among international professionals and lastly, raising national self-esteem. (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 23, 27.) Then again, Ministry for Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2019, 23) states in the tourism strategy for 2019 – 2028 that the vision is to make Finland a unique country that awakes curiosity as a tourism destination while making the most sustainable growth in Nordic countries. The mission is to be a responsible and growing service industry that will create wellbeing and year-round employment in Finland.

The following subchapters will examine the state of Finnish country image and explore what kind of mental associations are linked to Finland externally as well as coming from the professionals in the domestic tourism field. The roles of different actors in building the country brand are also examined to explain how the network is built in Finland. Finally, the last subchapter briefly explains the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on Finnish tourism during the summer season of 2020. Understanding the network of operators and how the effects of the pandemic reflect to their operations contributes to forming a coherent picture of the research topic and recognizing associations in the findings.

4.1 Finland's country image

As stated in the country image study in 2015–2016 (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 6), the country brand is a result of everything that country and its people have done through time. Finnish people are aware of the fact that Finland is a good and safe place to live, but the perks of our country are often less unknown abroad. Therefore, there is a need to raise awareness about Finland's strengths in order for the image to grow stronger. (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 3.) Finland is known for some specific individual things such as Nokia, Moomins and saunas (FutureBrand 2019), but the overall mental image often falls short and can leave the receiver with a somewhat vague image of our country (Moilanen 2017; Country Brand Delegation 2010.) Furthermore, one of the biggest challenges for Finland is to find a way to stand out from its nearest neighbors in the Nordics (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 12). That being said, the potential is there as Finland for example ranks high on different comparisons about for quality of life (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 3). As stated in the country brand report (Country Brand Delegation 2010), only by focusing on actual strengths rather than trying to create appealing features that are not based on truth, we can achieve a stronger, more coherent brand image that Finnish people proudly stand behind.

The motive behind developing Finland's country image is to enhance the power of country brand because it ultimately affects many fields, such as politics and economic growth, which are considered highly important (Finland Promotion Board 2017, 3, 5). In the 2010 country brand report, four C's were defined as Finland's pull factors: credible, contrasting, creative and cool. Three tourism themes were created based on these four C's: 'silence, please' which highlights tranquility, purity and space, 'wild & free' focusing on unique activity offering and 'cultural beat' which takes Finnish culture and its perks into the mix. These features and themes form the brand identity, in other words how Finland is wanted to be perceived. (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 263-265.)

These topics can still be detected ten years later in the Theme Calendar by Finland Promotion Board (Figure 3). The purpose of it is to help find a common tone and goals to work towards, which as mentioned earlier, are inevitable for successful country brand work (Finland Promotion Board 2021; Moilanen & Rainisto 2008). The Theme Calendar identifies key strengths that are annually reflected to the strategy. It also determines main themes for the year. In 2021 they strongly reflect the importance of wellbeing and nature combined with health and good governance. All of the above have an important role after

the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, there is also a need to focus on reassuring future strengths by bringing sustainability and importance of know-how into a central role. (Finland Promotion Board 2021.)

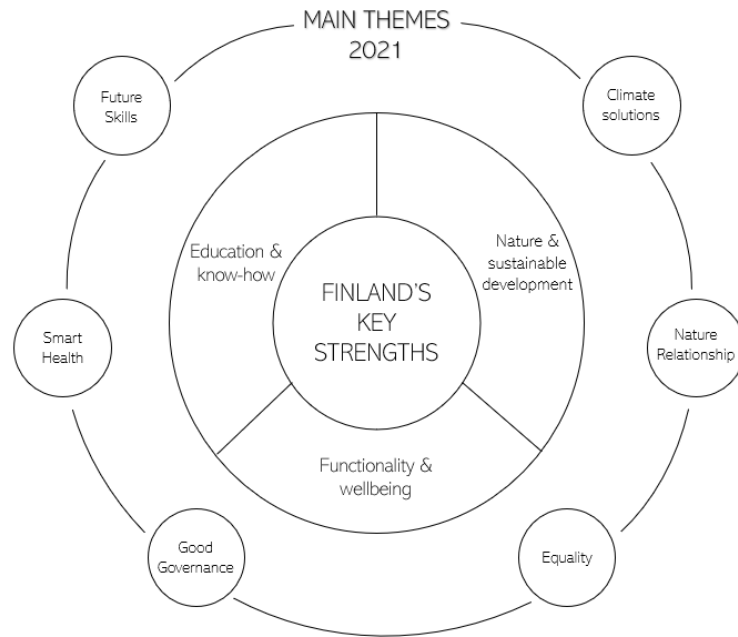


Figure 3. Theme Calendar 2021 (adapting Finland Promotion Board 2021)

In general, Finland is seen as a good country, associated with mostly positive emotions and mental images, evolving into more neutral associations the further from the country geographically. Mostly Finland is associated with nature, cold and sparsely populated northern country (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 261). Finland has also been named as the happiest country in the world for four consecutive years (Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2021, 18, 21).

The strength of the brand can be measured by different research or rankings such as the FutureBrand's Country Index that positioned Finland on the 5th place of the overall listing and 4th in Europe in 2019 (FutureBrand 2019) and 7th on overall listing, 5th in Europe in 2020 (FutureBrand 2020). The Country Index also identifies areas of expertise, special features associated with Finland and the mental image that is constructed of our country. Highly developed sustainability proficiency and environmental consciousness as well as innovative solutions and knowledge in technology field arise from perceptions (FutureBrand 2019). Top-of-mind associations, such as 'cold', 'nature', 'safety' and 'clean' to mention a few (FutureBrand 2019; FutureBrand 2020), portray similar mental images than what was already mentioned in the beginning of country branding work for Finland in 2008

(Moilanen & Rainisto 2008). Social media conversations clearly highlight first and foremost natural beauty as well as safety and security. In addition, native speakers also seem to raise health and education and resort/lodging options to value. English speakers see environmental friendliness and historical points of interest as something to appreciate. (FutureBrand 2019.) Confidence in reliability and stability was also investigated for the first time in the 2020 research which referred to how reliable the country's government and society has been perceived. Finland's results were 61 percent having very high confidence in aforementioned. (FutureBrand 2020.)

The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI) is a tool to measure perception and country brand strength of a country. Finland showed promising increase in all the dimensions of the index in 2019. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2019.) Governance, equality, sustainability and education, all of which are also mentioned in the Theme Calendar (Finland Promotion Board 2021), are associated strongly with Finland, making it rank high on these dimensions. However, in the dimensions for tourism and urban culture, Finland falls shorter compared to other countries, even in comparison to other Nordic neighbors. The perception of Finland was vague, especially if our country was not really familiar to the respondent. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2019.) Similar results about the need to improve and strengthen the position on Finnish culture have been reported already a few decades back in one of the largest projects conducted about the country image of Finland called Kantine in 1988-1990. The suggestions encourage the creators to have bravery for making bolder decisions in order to reinforce pathway towards building a stronger position for art and culture; a point which could be later seen as one of the core parts of the four C's in the brand report (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 263, 297-299.)

4.2 The roles of different actors

The creation of a stronger place brand requires long-term development, co-operation and common understanding of significance of networking and shared perception of cohesiveness among the service producers of tourism field in the area (Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi 2017). To explain the roles of different actors are in terms of country branding, the structure of the following description loosely follows the order of the brand hierarchy (Saraniemi 2020).

As mentioned, Finland Promotion Board is in charge of conducting country image work in Finland (Finland Promotion Board 2017b) and adapts the goals of brand strategy to the Theme Calendar which steers the work and clarifies the vision (Finland Promotion Board 2021). In contrast, the role of Visit Finland is to promote Finland internationally and support internalization, marketing and development of Finnish travel companies and products.

It is a part of Business Finland and works in co-operation with the regional organizations and companies. (Business Finland 2021.)

Destination management organization (DMO) is an entity that involves a combination of processes, circumstances and stakeholders, authorities and professionals that work together towards a collective vision to attract visitors to a tourism destination (Camilleri 2018; UNWTO 2019, 12). The complexity of the concept can be further established by how internal and external factors affect its operations and eventual success. DMOs can see a direct correlation to their work if there were to be changes in for example the governance or political environment, whereas internal factors can include for example the aspects of stakeholder theory. It shortly states that each stakeholder or actor has their own goals and objectives regardless of the fact that they are under the same organization. (Fairley 2018.)

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines the role of DMOs as the leading entity that regulates and brings together different stakeholders in a specific region to form a partnership that works towards a shared vision of the destination (UNWTO 2019, 12). Furthermore, the managers of the DMOs should acknowledge that sole leadership does not contribute to the success of a destination. However, the structure should include co-operation with others in the community that have stake in the development of tourism in the area and benefit from the destination's success. (Fairley 2018.) The traditional role of DMOs could also benefit from being expanded from traditional marketing and sales related procedures towards a more comprehensive and strategic development that takes into account aspects of economy, know-how, digitalization and sustainability. (Business Finland 2019, 8-9). Fairley (2018) shares the ideology of rethinking traditional methods but also reminds that a level of deeper understanding should be achieved with the existing ways how DMOs work if a greater level of success in operations are to be strived for.

The aim is also to strengthen the brand of the region as well as increasing attractiveness. The network of co-operation enables opportunities that otherwise would not be reachable for some of the stakeholders. They create opportunities for local businesses to learn from each other which further supports the goal to work towards a common goal together. The benefits of the network are also highlighted in smaller businesses that would not have enough resources on their own. In other words, the purpose of the co-operation is to create value. (Business Finland 2019, 8-16.)

According to Finnish Tourism strategy for 2019-2028, the role of DMOs and regional actors is strong and relevant, despite of what size the region or its organization might be.

The way this role is seen is also going through a change to search for better working operating models as the tasks are expanding to cover parts of digitalization, service quality and initiating development strategies. It suggests that the role for DMOs is to for example coordinate the co-operation of entrepreneurs in the region to form a bigger, profitable product entities for sales. They should also act as a link between the entrepreneurs and Visit Finland while organizing marketing activities in a way that it supports seamless service chains and coordinate or even lead the development of the region. In contrast, the regional entrepreneurs' and companies' role is to take responsibility of internal development work, sales and marketing as well as take part in the operations done locally. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2019, 34-35.)

Even single companies or actors can influence its country's image if their brand is recognized and home country is known. A model called halo effect, that originates from psychology, but has later been applied in the country branding, explains this connection between country image and brand image. This model originally presents country image as an independent variable that can influence its singular, specific brands or products, particularly in this order. However, recent research findings suggest an extension to the existing model adding that the process could potentially also move in reverse; initiating from specific brands towards a bigger country image concept. In a nutshell, the halo theory brings an aspect of possibility for single companies to alter the way the country of its origin is perceived. (Woo 2019.)

Furthermore, this aspect of single companies' influence can be extended to concern even the role of a single person. Whether it is a celebrity or otherwise recognizable person, for example an influencer who uses their visibility to promote something, the possibility to affect both the brand and their own personal equity increases. The best case scenario is that these people are able to affect the enhancement of the perceived image in consumers' minds and also alter the way the country of their origin is seen. (Hakala et al 2013.)

4.3 The effect of COVID-19 on Finland's tourism in summer season 2020

Finnish tourism had been on steady increase for the past 4 consecutive years until 2020 turned the promising progression into a rapid downfall. By April the passenger traffic by air had dropped close to 99 percent compared to numbers from last year and overnight stays decreased by 88 percent. Constantly changing variables of different kind of border controls and COVID-19 imposed restrictions were introduced to monitor and limit traveling between countries. At the same time, a quick and heavy increase was seen in layoffs and unemployment in the tourism field as companies and actors were trying to accustom their operations to adapt to the new, unknown threat. The state of the pandemic also forced for

example restaurants to temporarily close their doors and countless festivals, fairs and events were completely canceled. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2020b.)

While the overall national pandemic situation improved over the summer months and reported cases seemed to show signs of slowing down (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020), the tourism and travel statistics nevertheless strongly reflect the effects of the new post-pandemic procedures and behavior, that further project to travel behavior. Air traffic did not pick up during the summer. The trips abroad were still reported to be down 95 percent between May and August. A trend could also be detected that the fear or uncertainty of the near future made many people cancel or at least postpone their travel plans. Finnish tourism therefore concentrated heavily on domestic travel. 9,7 million overnight stays were reported during the mentioned summer season domestically, and the busiest month was July. Trips to summer houses and cottages were also rising in popularity even more so than normally. (Statistics Finland 2020b.)

From June to August 2020, the total overnights decreased by approximately one third and the biggest percentual drop of 85% understandably came from foreign overnights. Out of the four greater regions, Lapland suffered the least loss of total overnights whereas Helsinki experienced a drop of 70 percent compared to previous year. Lapland was even able to grow its domestic visitors from the previous year by 7 percent. Biggest growth in overnight stays was reported in Salla, Kolari and Kuusamo (Business Finland 2020.) which also supports the statement that North Finland was high in popularity in the year 2020 (Statistics Finland 2020b).

Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2020b) states together with Visit Finland and The Finnish Hospitality Association MaRa that while it is difficult to estimate how long it will take for the tourism and hospitality industry to recover from COVID-19, it is increasingly important to continue on developing ways of creating interest and attractiveness to Finland with new innovations and visibility. This secures that when the world opens again, our country is seen as a considerable and fascinating destination. In many ways Finland withholds an appeal in the near future with its aspects of health, safety, purity and wellbeing as a result of the pandemic.

The creation of country brand strategy alone is not sufficient enough to guarantee that the country brand will actualize accordingly, actions and monitoring is needed throughout time (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 32, 61-62). The responsibility is not only in the hands of the government and other official actors, organizations or leaders of the country (Country

Brand Delegation 2010). Instead, the way the rest of the world pictures Finland is in the hands of every Finn (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 3). The process is also supported when actors in the field share an understanding for what the vision for the place is and acknowledges their importance in the network (Lemmettyinen & Saraniemi 2017). Country brand building is a long term process (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 61-62) and although the COVID-19 pandemic has affected tourism industry in a major way in 2020, phenomenon like these should not stand in the way of persistent aspirations to improve the attractiveness of Finland (The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2020b).

5 Methodology

This chapter describes the choices and reasoning behind the chosen methodology for this research as well as how it is implemented in different stages of the process. The main objective of this thesis is if the companies or organizations, that participated in the 2020 campaign, perceive they had an important role in strengthening the Finland brand. Further, the sub-questions behind the main objective are:

1. did participating in the campaign give these companies or organizations added value or spark new ways to do business or marketing?
2. did they experience the co-operation with actors, that might normally be seen as competitors, beneficial for their operations?
3. do they see the importance in pursuing country brand building process even during a time, when tourism industry is suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic?

5.1 Research type

In order to determine the research type as well as methods, a research approach has to be determined, which affects and steers the selection based on its purpose. The decision of which strategical choices should be used is based on what best contributes to the objectives and purpose of the research as well as what kind of questions or phenomena are in key interest. (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 93; Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 137-138.)

According to Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang (2016, 88) positivism and phenomenology are two main research philosophies, from which this research will conduct the latter one. It was chosen in order to understand country brand as a phenomenon and its relation to the country's reputation as well as how it is perceived in operations on organizational level. Phenomenology is described as a philosophy that tries to understand phenomena, focuses on meaning and behavior and tries to understand why and how things happen. Instead of leaning on hard data and large samples, it investigates small samples for natural, in-depth data and while it is more time consuming, can offer greater knowledge of processes, emerging issues and people's meanings. (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 88-89.)

Qualitative research aims to understand the subject of what it is studying, which often requires that the starting point of the research is to understand the field and context of what the subject relates to (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 181). Out of different research types, explanatory research was selected (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 138),

since the aim was to find out if there are connections between reinforcing and strengthening the country brand and perceived roles of single organizations as well as to what extent they feel they are capable of affecting it. Explanatory or causal research aims to search for connections behind a phenomenon and investigate which factors interact together in order to find an explanation of the causal relationship (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 138).

5.2 Data collection methods & sample scope

The selection of the method for this research is linked to the multileveled, complex nature of the objective itself but also the chosen research type (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 184). The goal for this research is not to produce a large amount of data as a result of the research but to understand the links and occurrences that rise from the results. Therefore, it is justified that the choice of methods support producing in-depth, subjective data rather than wider scope, numeric data.

The data collection methods involves triangulation or mixed methods; the terminology refers to slightly different use in practice depending on the aspect or research culture that varies between countries (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 78, 168). Triangulation is said to refer to utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods in a research (Puusa & Juuti 2020, 176-177). Triangulation can on the other hand also refer to cross-checking research results by using both methods for affirmation or wider understanding or explanation of the subject (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 94). Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, 78, 168) mention both of these approaches. They also explain further about the complex meaning of this concept. It depends on the researcher whether it is associated to the methods, methodology or the whole research process and how much quantitative and qualitative methods are seen as the opposite ends of a spectrum. In this thesis, triangulation is utilized for ways of data collection. Since it supports the research purpose and nature and was therefore chosen to give more depth to understanding the background of the phenomenon, the use of triangulation for this part of the research is justified.

For the thesis research, different qualitative data collection techniques including for example interviews, observation or document analysis (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 135), were evaluated but interviews were chosen, because its characteristics contribute most to finding answers to the objective and sub-questions. Interviews can be performed as individual, couple or group interviews (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 210). In this research, a representative was chosen to answer for the whole organization and the author did not affect the selection. Out of different interview types, such as unstructured, semi-structured and structured (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang, 141-145), semi-structured was

chosen as a data collection method, because it includes the advantages of unstructured interview method but still provides some structure in form of an interview plan. The questions are open-ended in order to enable deeper insight to the topic. They are also created beforehand based on theory. However, the order in which the questions are presented during the interview can vary. Semi-structured interviews are used when the goal is to find correlations or links between variables in hopes of accomplishing a deeper insight of the phenomenon. (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 143.)

Due to various COVID-19 related restrictions during the time of conducting the research, it is impossible to execute interviews in any other way than by phone or video calls. The advantage of this type of interviews is the efficiency with costs, flexibility and access (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 148). Even though the scope geographically expands to the whole country, the interviews could quite easily be booked or rescheduled. While the use of video calls enables some level of non-verbal communication, the virtual context might also affect the ability to build trust between participants during the interview (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 148).

Preparations for semi-structured interviews can include creating an interview guide to act as a supporting guideline as the interview goes along. In addition to just listing the open ended questions that are based on theoretical framework, the guideline includes potential probes which are sub-questions to help the interviewer get a deeper, more thorough answer from the interviewee. It can also include phrases or practical things that should be explained in different stages of the interview. (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 136, 143-144.) The questions should be formed in way that they are not biased or leading, require the interviewee to answer more than yes or no and do not include too much complicated concepts that the interviewee without any background knowledge would not understand (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 136, 139, 140).

Interviews are justified as a choice of method because the purpose is to understand what the respondents feel, perceive and believe (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 185). The uniqueness that it is able to provide entails the opportunity to be in direct communication with the interviewee and in case of misunderstanding or need for specification, this method allows flexibility in the moment. In other words, the researcher is able to regulate and support the interviewee during the interview. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 204-205; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 85.) However, the acknowledged downside of using interviews as the data collection method is its time consuming nature. From contacting potential interviewees, fitting schedules together, preparations, conducting the interviews to

finally transcribing before analysis takes a lot of time, effort and organizational skills (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 136.)

This research uses non-probability sampling (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 120), because the group of potential participants is relatively small and narrowed down to begin with. The criteria for narrowing the research participants came naturally as the research concerns the 100 Reasons to Travel in Finland campaign in the year 2020. The selected sample for the interview was chosen in mutual agreement between the author and commissioner, partially based on their performance in the campaign and on the other hand due to their expertise or understanding of the research subject. Because qualitative research aims to interpretating and understanding phenomenon, it is rational to have participants that understand or have experience about the subject (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 98). These specifics justify the choice of purposive sampling for this research. It is a non-probability sampling method where the participants are picked based on how appropriate they are for the research. It also contributes to the nature of the research in comparison to having random sampling because the purpose is in-depth understanding of a certain phenomenon and not generalized results (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 120-122, 128.)

5.3 Data analysis

Data analysis, as well as all other parts, is linked to the intention and nature of what the research is trying to understand (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 221). The purpose of qualitative content analysis is to increase information value which means going through data with chosen analysis methods with an aim to reduce and clarify the results (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 122). It is typical for qualitative research to draw conclusions out of the data collected instead of taking the results of the research as they are without critical evaluation or interpretation (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 183). That being said, qualitative content analysis has been criticized for being incomplete in a way that research using this method presents organized data as the final results but often fail to draw conclusions from it (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 117).

Transcribing is a common way to break down collected data to prepare it for the analysis stage. It means transforming the data into a written form with word by word accuracy (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 222.) This helps to prepare for detecting certain themes, patterns and similarities for data analysis (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 208). Saturation is referred to when certain patterns can be identified, the respondents give similar results and the research is perceived not to generate new knowledge anymore (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 99). It is also seen useful to save emerging thoughts and

comprehension that increases already during the interviews and the transcribing process to contribute to the analysis later (Puusa & Juuti 2020, 147).

The method for content analysis will be deductive, which is an approach that leans on theory to create the frame for what is considered relevant in the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 127). Coding, which in all simplicity can mean the act of marking down words and phrases that refer to the same concept, acts as a good base for beginning of the content analysis stage (Puusa & Juuti 2020, 147). The process then proceeds to theming, where similarities are identified from the coded data and are formed together under a predefined theme that is based on theory. In theming, the emphasis is on what has been said about each theme. Quotations that have been separated from the data are then organized under main themes which reduces the data and eliminates irrelevant information. Based on the content under each main theme, subthemes can then be formed (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 105-107, 123, 129-131.)

5.4 Implementation throughout the process

The thesis process started in October 2020, which was right after the official campaign time had ended for the year. After achieving mutual clarity on the focus of the research with the commissioner and marketing communications office, an idea was generated that a questionnaire that is going to be sent out to the 2020 campaign participants anyway could bring up useful background information and should therefore also be utilized for the research purposes. The questionnaire by the commissioner was sent out in the beginning of November. The original deadline had to be postponed, leaving the participants a month in total to reply. By mutual agreement, the analysis of the raw data and results were comprised in December by the author. For this stage, triangulation was seen useful to enhance the value of the research but also to detect what should be examined closer to achieve improved results and campaign experience. The questionnaire therefore acted as one source of background information for supporting the later execution of the qualitative research. After receiving the raw data of the questionnaire and presenting the analysis to the commissioner, useful aspects of how participants perceive the campaign and what are the issues in need of deeper understanding, could be taken into account in planning the qualitative research.

The interview questions and focus were partially based on the theoretical framework and the objective and sub-questions of the research, but also these aspects arising from the results of the questionnaire. Because the interviews were designed to a video call context, it affected the length of the interview and therefore the number of questions. The func-

tions, for example video recording in the Zoom platform where these meetings were arranged, were tested beforehand and the piloting interview questions was essential before the start of the interviews.

In the beginning of March, the potential participants were first contacted by the commissioner to ensure a higher response rate and follow up emails were sent by the author a week later. Out of 14 potential interviewees, 10 responded and were willing to participate and schedule a time for the interview. The rest stopped responding or did not respond in the first place. These potential interviewees were chosen partially based on their performance in the campaign and partially due to their expertise or understanding of the subject. Out of the chosen 10 interviewees, seven represented DMOs and three represented a single company or person brand. All of the interviews were carried out as video calls, using the Zoom platform and the sessions were recorded. Time frame for conducting these interviews was between March 11th and April 6th, 2021. Length of the discussions varied between 25 minutes and 49 minutes, average length being 36 minutes. An interview guide was used to form some structure to the course of the discussion, and to help the interviewer to inform or explain relevant things if needed. It included three background questions, 10 research questions and a chance for open feedback in the end, probes for some of the questions and some practicalities (Appendix 1). The interviewees did receive the questions beforehand because it was seen to be helpful by both parties to have time to think and get more depth to the answers during the limited time that was reserved for the interview.

To conclude, this chapter introduced the methodology used for this thesis research and drew it together by explaining its implementation in each stage of the process. The next chapter will further look into the results of the research.

6 Results

This chapter describes how the data analysis was executed and introduces the results of the research by each main theme. The results have been translated in English since the language used in the interviews was Finnish. While the translations were done according to best knowledge and familiarity with field related vocabulary, the author can be held accountable for any possible mistranslations and or slight differences in meaning of the expressions.

6.1 Description of data analysis in practice

The interviews generated 107 pages of data that were transcribed soon after each discussion using the video recording converted from the Zoom platform. For backup, the author also used another recording device to make sure the discussions are saved after the interview. This turned out to be just a precautionary act since all the transcriptions were written from videos. Because these recordings also included visual signs and non-verbal communications, they were watched several times for the analysis and some of the crucial non-verbal reactions were described in the transcriptions.

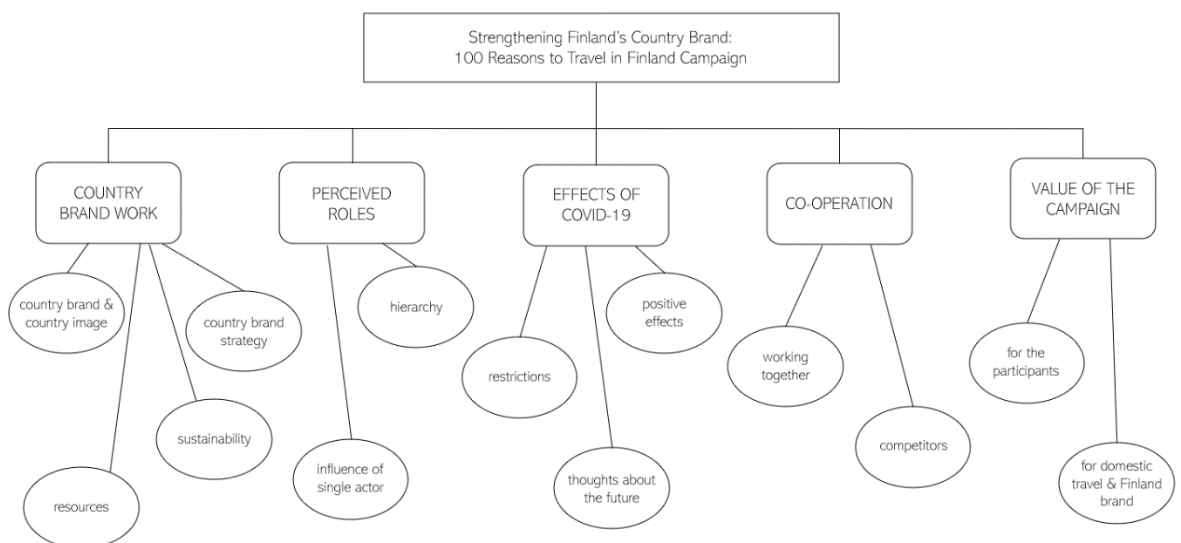


Figure 4. Theming hierarchy for data analysis

The large amount of data needed to be reduced for analysis. This was carried out in two stages using coding and theming. First, the data was gone through using different colored markers to indicate which parts refer to the same theme. These main themes were formed based on the objective and sub-questions as well as the theoretical framework.

The themes were then listed in an Excel chart and under each main theme the author listed the direct quotations from the coded data. After that, the quotations could be further organized to create a hierarchy of subthemes based on their content. This hierarchy is described in the figure above (Figure 4). By creating a chart and theming the relevant content, the amount of data was reduced from 107 pages to 6 pages. This part of the process was also perceived crucial for detecting saturation from the data. The following subchapters introduce research results by each main theme.

6.2 Country brand work

The concept of what country brand means and represents in this thesis research was explained to the respondents in the beginning of the interview. It was necessary in order to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation, because it was seen as the most crucial concept for the whole research. While respondents were mostly familiar with it, there were a few that felt the explanation was beneficial. One respondent also mentioned that they automatically link country brand related discussions to international travel but came to the realization that country brand also exists for the country's own residents.

Importance of developing country brand even during a time when COVID-19 pandemic causes extensive effects on tourism field was seen necessary by all respondents. Two of them pointed out that country brand work is long-term strategic development, which should not stop even under circumstances like the pandemic, on the contrary. Five of the respondents saw this as a favorable time for clarifying the brand so it would be authentic and all the different actors in field would strengthen the same themes. These messages need to however be adjusted to the situation according to best and most current knowledge. If the development work were to be neglected completely, two respondents felt like by the time it would be relevant, it is too late to start thinking about clarifying anything anymore. Four respondents also mentioned that country brand update is inevitable in order to succeed in international market once the world opens again. One respondent added that the pandemic has changed the elements that are now held a bigger priority. Research, statistics and megatrends were also mentioned by two respondents as something that gives value and should not be ignored. These discussions highlighted that there is still work to be done in general to get Finland on the map.

The question about goals for developing country brand raised a lot of discussion about national self-esteem. Up to seven discussions mentioned different aspects on Finnish self-esteem that in general was still perceived as way too modest. Many of the respondents described it as being a cultural phenomenon that is absorbed from the surrounding context, but also wish that it would start to improve. They also agreed that they cannot find

any real reasons not to have higher self-esteem and acknowledged that it would help the country brand if this belief would start changing. Two of them said that the faith in what they or their member companies are doing might occasionally fluctuate but the aim is to increase their belief and support the progress in their area. Three others continued that instead of having low self-esteem, we should proudly stand behind the things we do. However, these discussions also reflected a more positive aspect that with success in rankings like the happiest country in the world and Finnish people starting to see their own home country with new eyes, the national self-esteem will increase.

Other goals that were seen important were related to appreciation of Finnish work and enhancing the appeal of our country internationally. Many respondents mentioned themes of sustainability and locality. The appreciation of tourism industry was brought up strongly, as three respondents perceived there is room for improvement and acknowledgement of how much tourism affects GDP and creates workplaces. Four respondents also said that Finland is still not recognized as much as it should, therefore organizations should evaluate ways to incorporate international marketing to their operations. One respondent also reminded that while it is good to promote Finnish work abroad, it is also equally important to turn that around and find ways to get international business and know-how to come to Finland.

Resources for continuing development and supporting tourism operations raised opinions in the interviews. Three respondents said that resources they currently have and the resources that come from the government are relatively small which sets limitations and challenges on how to optimize it. One of the respondents also highlighted that appreciation for tourism field in general is in desperate need of improvement and continues that its significance to economy is underestimated and depreciated:

“The appreciation of tourism industry should be improved. It is bigger than forestry or finance and insurance field, and yet it is perceived as something similar to having a hobby. During a normal year 2,7% of GDP comes from tourism and it employs 140 000 people. The appreciation for what tourism industry does should be increased among the leading actors in government.”

Mental images about Finland were also brought up throughout the discussions. Five respondents mentioned nature related words, such as lakes, forest, pure nature and air, national parks, snow, reindeers, pure ingredients from nature, space and tranquility, northern lights, coast and ocean and also cottage and sauna culture. Another expression that stood out was the perception of safety. Five respondents brought up that Finland is seen as a

safe country that takes high care of health security. However, one of these respondents pointed out that while this is a common perception, safety should not be the main argument for attracting visitors because you can never guarantee absolute safety. Other viewpoints mentioned Finland's success on being the happiest country in the world fourth time in a row and that societal things, such as education system or maternity packages affecting country image.

During discussions about marketing, one respondent said that promoting domestic travel has been a conscious aim for a while now since there are many undiscovered destinations left and making domestic travel more popular. Another respondent said that they have found it effective to combine strong independent Finnish brands together to work in co-operation, and through that promote Finland brand internationally. However, in one interview the need to repeat marketing messages was brought up. Especially in tourism marketing, it can take a lot of repetition from different channels before the message provokes any action in the receiver.

Sustainability was one of the strongest topics to arise from discussions regarding tourism strategies. Up to eight respondents raised sustainable development in the discussion and described what it means for them. All of them also mentioned Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland certificate. Sustainability was described to be in the center of operations and determines the way things are done. It is reflected in their strategies and development of these strategies. However, one respondent wanted to point out that this is eventually a very difficult topic to define:

“There is a certain challenge related to communication when we talk about sustainability – eventually it is a very difficult subject. What is sustainable? When can you say that your operations are sustainable? Never. If you really dive into the details of everything that you should take into consideration in order to be sustainable and by which means it is defined, it is a complex issue.”

Three of the respondents mentioned about a separate sustainability section that is found on their website. As one respondent said that it is no longer a competitive advantage but self-evident that these issues are taken care of. Another respondent also continued that for example among tour operators there is a big hype about these issues and it has become the most asked question in co-operations with them. It was also brought up that many of the companies in the area already know how to be sustainable but they have not or do not know how to express it.

There was a consensus on the fact that without taking responsibility and understanding the importance of sustainability, there will be nothing left to promote in the future. Climate change and resource scarcity is taken seriously and should also be transparent in their actions. In practice, the respondents mentioned for example recycling, reducing prints and other materials, local food, theme weeks, sustainability guides and other online material, walking and bike tours, use of biogas and wind energy and operations to support the preservation of nature. However, they evaluated that sustainable development is and will be one of the most significant themes in the future.

6.3 Perceived roles

As one of the background questions, the respondents were asked about the size of their organization or company. The responses varied between a few to around 30. When the respondents were asked to evaluate the network in which they work in, all of them started describing the hierarchy of different actors and their roles. One respondent described the dimensions of the network from smallest actor towards bigger ones as follows:

“Our most important partners are our member companies because without them we would not have anything left to market. Then in this so called hierarchy we have different Visits on a local level, and a collective brand under which they operate. We also work in co-operation with other areas and their subareas that are all located around this part of Finland. Therefore, we also have a strong role in branding of this area. Lastly, there is of course Visit Finland.”

Eight respondents mentioned Visit Finland and many of them describe it in a way as being the top of the hierarchy. It is said to be in charge of executing international marketing as well as country brand, being the leader for sustainable travel for organizations, implementing tourism strategy that is built by Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, providing tools, training and materials and working in co-operation with the organizations in terms of various different projects. However, Visit Finland’s purpose is to promote our country abroad but a similar representative was perceived to be needed to drive Finland’s tourism image forward domestically.

According to seven respondents, the next level of the hierarchy is perceived to be DMOs. In one discussion, the way how different actors align to do co-operation was seen to be an effectively working system. Some respondents described that co-operation on DMO level can be done even on a bigger scale if the nearby area consists of a network of multiple representatives or it is beneficial for both parties to work together. Larger collaborations were also mentioned in terms of different projects, development, marketing related or

other operations. After these two levels of network, six of the respondents mentioned that companies and entrepreneurs are important, if not even the most important partners for them. These companies could be member companies of the DMO but also various other actors in the tourism or event field.

On top of being an active member of this network, the respondents also described other operations that they perceive are part of DMOs role. One respondent said that lot can be achieved when the DMO invests in the co-operation with its member companies. In their role, they can provide tools and help to develop their operations to the right direction. The co-operative spirit does not have to stop there. Smaller campaigns or other community activities can also include local residents. Another respondent continued that the role of DMO is to build the brand of the area and develop its appeal with marketing actions while simultaneously supporting the companies. It is important that the member companies are satisfied with the actions that they execute with them.

One of the questions concerned the respondents' perception of whether a single organization or actor has power to influence the whole country's brand image. Two respondents said that they feel no-one can do it alone and brand image is the result of many different factors. Two other respondents felt that it could be possible to a certain limit but it also depends on own activity in different networks. On the other hand, one of these two respondents also said that when the own brand is strong, there is potential for single actor to also influence country brand. Five respondents perceived it is possible to influence country brand and the discussions included various examples. Strong independent Finnish brands as well as big Finnish companies are seen to promote Finland effectively. Then again, one of the respondents pointed out that single Finnish celebrity or other recognizable person, for example from politics, has as much power as companies can have. Another respondent also brought up a strong viewpoint of single person's influence on social media and gives an example of how much nature photographers have been able to promote and enhance Finland's country image. The power of visual content is surprisingly effective in influencing the formation of country image or getting the attention of the receiver. This is backed up by another respondent who said that if you do something bold, preferably in a positive way, it can increase the extent to which you are able to influence the attitudes about the country.

Four of the respondents also reminded that country image is partially built by the perceptions of the travelers. How the messages that they receive link to their own life is a central viewpoint and should be better understood by those who provide services or built the country brand. One respondent highlighted that the further we go from Finland, the

smaller and less known we are. As two other respondents said, every encounter that you have with for a traveler builds country brand. Even if you travel yourself and meet a person from another country who you tell stories about Finland, it affects how the picture of our country is formed in their mind and possibly told forward. Therefore, every Finnish person is the spokesperson of their own country.

6.4 Effects of COVID-19

The outbreak of the pandemic in spring 2020 did reflect to the respondents' operations in multiple ways. Up to eight interviews mentioned different kinds of statistics or restrictions that either eliminated operations completely or minimized them radically. Two of the respondents said that especially the beginning of the pandemic was difficult in a way that they did not really know what is allowed and what is not. It also forced the organizations and companies rethink and rapidly adjust their procedures because it needed to be carefully evaluated what is appropriate so the message does not come out aggressive or inappropriate. Seven respondents described the fluctuation from one month to another in detail. Out of these discussions, March was the sudden stop for all and June–July arise as very successful time. Seasons from there on seem to vary from very busy to relatively slow. This trajectory can be detected in the answers about positive effects on domestic travel. Only one respondent said that the pandemic did not really have an effect.

The lack on international travel made the respondents rethink their strategies and adjust their operations accordingly. Five respondents described that when there were suddenly no international travelers, the service models as well as marketing communications had to be designed again and all the energy went towards investing to domestic tourism. One respondent pointed out that the messages for domestic travelers are different than for international market and another respondent added that those who have been unable to rethink their services were not coping as well in the situation. The importance of locality and supporting nearby areas were also mentioned in two interviews and supporting businesses in the area as a DMO was brought up in three discussions.

However, the pandemic has also had positive effects for both organizations and domestic travel. As one respondent said, it has been a productive time during which they have found new ways of doing things and become a better team internally in the organization. Another respondent also gave a similar response about being able to complete projects or tasks that they normally would not have time for. In one interview, the aspect of second city travel was brought up as the respondent pointed out that people started to avoid big metropolis already before the pandemic. Travelers switched to favoring smaller places and less known destinations, which is verified by another respondent, who said their area

was able to offer the right sized activities for travelers despite the COVID-19 imposed restrictions.

The pandemic has also sparked new innovations for operations and projects. One respondent mentioned that a lot has been done with different kinds of funding that have been received due to the pandemic. Another respondent continued that in addition to getting resources, this time has made them join forces with multiple actors and a common project has enabled them to achieve so much more than being on their own. One respondent also described how innovative thinking turned the sudden stop in their business operations around and ensured the continuation of procedures in a different form.

The similarities in the answers about positive effects for domestic travel were astonishing. Up to eight of the respondents said that they have had an outstanding summer or even the whole year. The expression of breaking records was mentioned in four interviews. Striking resemblance between these responses from different interviews further demonstrate the high level of saturation in the answers about this phenomenon:

- "records were made in the area and it shows in the companies' record breaking figures and sales"
- "we were breaking records all the way to October"
- "entrepreneurs were said that it has been a more successful year than normally"
- "we had a superb summer in our area"
- "the summer was exceptionally good"
- "we broke records for overnight stays in the area, the summer was extremely good, better than in a normal year"
- "the summer was record breaking in many ways, whether we are speaking about sales or overnight stays"

An emphasis on having a very good season for domestic tourism compared to a so called normal year did arise from these discussions very strongly. These answers were stated despite the fact that these respondents have a very different percentages of international visitors on a normal year.

When asked about how the respondents see the near future, six of them mentioned that while no-one knows when, the world will one day open again for travel. When it does, it is too late to start thinking about country brand issues anymore as the competition for travelers is predicted to be fierce. One respondent said that those who have invested towards improving their country image or tourism strategies are more likely to win them over. Another respondent added that Finland has all the potential to also be successful in international competition. Meanwhile according to two other respondents, the focus and efforts should be aimed on domestic travel which is why the campaign is perceived to have good timing, not despite but because of the pandemic.

Predictions and hopes that domestic travel would keep thriving was brought up in three of the interviews. The respondents hoped that the upcoming summer would be better or at least as successful as last year. They wished that restrictions that affect operations would be loosened so they could start normalizing their activities. Two of the respondents had similar thoughts about the economical perspective of domestic travelers. Finnish people have discovered their home country in a new way and they hoped this trend continues and domestic travelers embrace the idea of using Finnish services. It was seen important, that money that has earlier been spent abroad would stay in Finland. This way it would continue to create wellbeing for the whole area and whole country in the future.

6.5 Co-operation

There was a common consensus among all the respondents about the importance of co-operation between organizations, companies or in the campaign. Its significance is also highlighted during the pandemic and one respondent mentioned that as a result the understanding of its importance seems to be increasing too. Many of the interviews directly or indirectly mentioned that it is seen better to join forces with other actors in the field than to be on your own. Sharing a common vision was also mentioned in many interviews. In one interview, the effect of deviants among the network were brought up. While the majority works towards a common goal, one actor can still damage the promised country image to a far extent if the operations are not consistent with the vision.

Emphasis on locality appeared from the answers as seven respondents spoke about regional co-operation being something that they see beneficial and important also for future operations and success. Some of the respondents explained further that by working together with nearby areas, they perceive a higher level of power and better opportunities can be achieved to develop tourism in the area while simultaneously giving leverage to each other and the member companies. One respondent mentioned an innovative way of bringing local entrepreneurs together to strengthen a feel of team spirit and to form genuine company collaborations even across different fields of business.

International aspects were also brought up in three of the interviews. One respondent stated that organizations all together enhance Finland's international positioning and export of Finnish work. The collaboration between strong independent Finnish brands was also perceived to be powerful in strengthening country image internationally. Another respondent also expressed why the need to keep improving tourism and country image is essential. When reflected on a bigger scale, the role of the actors in the field is to get the traveler to first choose Nordic countries and from these countries to come to Finland. The

co-operative network was perceived to have power to affect the development work on a higher level of the hierarchy as working together with Visit Finland for better international appeal in various different ways arise from the answers.

When respondents were asked about seeing other participants as competition, four interviews mentioned not perceiving the campaign context competitive. However, some of the respondents highlighted the fact that although the setting is not competitive, you will increase others' visibility and possibly decrease your own by not participating at all. The importance of being able to stand out was also mentioned. Only one respondent stated that they perceive others as competitors. On the contrary, four of the respondents stated that it signals strong co-operative spirit to work together towards a common mission and makes it more powerful to strengthen the same declaration for domestic travel.

6.6 Value of the campaign

During the background information part of the interview, the respondents were asked which campaign package they had in 2020 and how many years they have they been participating. The campaign has four differently priced options based on the coverage and visibility as well as how many introduction cards the website will feature (Suoma 2020). Out of the respondents 40% had the smallest campaign package, 30% the second smallest, 20% the biggest and remaining 10% did not participate through a package. When asked about the years involved in the campaign, up to 50% responded that they have been participating from the beginning.

Table 1. Added value of the campaign

ADDED VALUE	
To the participants	To domestic tourism & Finland brand
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visibility from the campaign supported by good level of publicity and overall media coverage • multichannel approach & use of influencers seen beneficial • perceived not as effective as own marketing campaigns but effective for image marketing • value partially comes from member companies' experiences (DMOs) • development of the campaign and its creators seen as an asset • reports about campaign's success and performance valuable • link to actual sales, number of visitors or overnight sales hard to prove 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased understanding of opportunities and undiscovered destinations in Finland • taking the leading role in promoting domestic tourism and gathering the actors together • making Finland and its possibilities more familiar to Finnish people • breaking the outdated image of domestic travel and re-creating a new nationwide appeal for Finnish tourism • contributing to the aim that tourism season would last around the year • authenticity

The value of the campaign was seen primarily on two different levels: the effects to the participants and the leverage for domestic tourism and Finland brand (Table 1). All the respondents agreed that the understanding of destinations and possibilities in domestic travel has started to increase. This type of campaigning is more than appropriate to keep strengthening that trend. Finland has been noticed to be somewhat unfamiliar even to Finnish people themselves. It is time for the outdated image of domestic travel to be polished and transferred into something trendier. There is still a lot to be achieved among domestic travelers, especially those who have not thought of our home country as an option before. They were also in consensus about the fact that because there are so much undiscovered places and opportunities in Finland, they perceive it is a joy to be involved in promoting domestic tourism and they sincerely believe in its mission.

Three interviews brought up the potential role that this campaign has which is considered to be highly needed and important. One respondent mentioned that there is a lack for a site that would gather destinations or travel companies together because they are hard to find. While Visit Finland is in charge of successfully promoting Finland internationally, there has been an absence for similar representative domestically. One respondent said that this role has been suggested to be taken care of by Visit Finland but it does not fit to their operations. Therefore, many of the respondents felt this campaign and Suoma would be an appropriate fit to take on this role. As another respondent mentioned, it is rare to do domestic marketing that covers the whole nation. During the years that this campaign has been executed, it has established a steady place in domestic tourism field.

One of the strongest added values that seven respondents confirmed in the interview is that they have gotten good visibility from the campaign which has been beneficial in increasing their appeal. On the other hand, three respondents also claimed that the visibility from the campaign was not as comprehensive as their own marketing campaigns but they add that they see participating more as image marketing measure. Many of the respondents said that the campaign has achieved a great amount of overall publicity and media coverage over the years. Using various different channels as well as adding influencer marketing to the mix was seen as a value increasing factor. Three of the respondents also mentioned they have seen the development of how the campaign as well as its creators have improved from one year to another. The campaign brand was also perceived to have gotten stronger and more recognizable by customers.

The evaluation of overall performance in the campaign was often reflected to the package size. Especially the respondents who had a smaller package in the campaign, acknowledged that the reach and overall visibility is associated to how much was invested and

were still happy about the level of results that were expected with it. One respondent however pointed out that they felt the gap between the smallest and biggest package seems too big and the smaller can easily get buried under the bigger packages. The reports that are sent after the campaign have been recognized to give good value about the performance. The information is presented clearly which one respondent says saves them time of having to do the analysis all by themselves. Reporting during the campaign was brought up in two interviews where getting information about performance would help to improve operations. However, it is acknowledged to be very laborious.

What stood out from the answers was the respondents' willingness to develop in their own role and to find ways to increase the value they gain. Four interviews mentioned that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness to business operations, whether it is reaching visibility, bringing travelers to the area or generating actual sales. Cross linking for better SEO was also mentioned in two interviews. One respondent added that if the number of visitors from the campaign website to your own is relatively small, the content of the introduction cards should be critically evaluated before searching for the problems in other operations. Another respondent brought up the fact that when a large amount of money is invested to a marketing campaign like this, but the organizations do not always know how to take full advantage of it, it easily turns into an experience where they perceive they did not get value from it. When in reality, it might be dependent on their own skills and knowledge of how to utilize it to the full potential.

These perceptions generated the idea in three interviews that a collective webinar after the official campaign time would be highly beneficial for the participants. While one respondent mentioned that they have boosted the campaign effectiveness by increasing the visibility in their own channels, another one felt that the entrepreneurs should be trained more on how to utilize the material and tools in operations to get more results. It was also brought up that the use of for example social media does not come as naturally for everyone. When all the participants would gather together, the respondents evaluate it could potentially increase team spirit and seamless co-operation but also allow a platform and channel where they can learn from each other and get new ideas:

“...a collective webinar where all the participants would gather together. The platform would offer a channel for open feedback and suggestions. So that when one person starts to speak, another one continues and it would generate more value. Many of us know each other, which makes me think that people would have the courage to share and give feedback.”

The idea of a collective webinar was also perceived to give more value compared to just receiving a report of the results after campaign, which has been the practice so far.

Other issues in need of improvement included difficulty to decide and draw a line to what the introduction cards include. Two of the respondents said that they experienced difficulties in trying to form the featured content in a way that it is fair for all member companies of the organization. In another interview, this issue was not seen relevant because the organization's role had mainly been intermediary and the member companies have stepped up to handle the decision process. Two respondents also highlighted that this campaign idea works well to finding hidden gems in Finland, which is what the campaign itself has determined as their aim. However, in some cases these hidden gems could be for example nature related and not specific companies, which one respondent perceived to decrease the chances of getting noticed with a more familiar destination. Two of the respondents felt they needed more resources for activating the member companies to do marketing and promote the campaign.

However, one of the respondents reminded that there are different sized participants for a reason. When bigger organizations take care of image marketing, it clears the way for smaller companies to get leverage to their visibility. Another respondent also confirmed that they feel it is important to be involved in the campaign for the member companies and the value they perceive from it. In one discussion, the respondent stated that the campaign has done important work to try to increase the aim that domestic tourism would be a year-round phenomenon. Many of the respondents also used the words authenticity, excitement and belief in the work when they evaluated the factors behind the campaign's success.

7 Discussion

This chapter introduces the conclusions of the research by reflecting the results to the main objective and each sub-question. The focus is to evaluate if the research was able to investigate what it was aimed to clarify. Furthermore, this chapter includes critical evaluation of reliability and validity of the research. It also considers ethical aspects and suggests future research or improvement ideas. Lastly, the overall thesis and learning process is evaluated from a subjective point of view.

7.1 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the perceived possibilities of strengthening the Finland's country brand through being part of a nation-wide domestic tourism campaign. The aspect in this research was to study country branding from the internal point of view actualized by its own citizens.

The concept that was being studied is complex and extensive which could be strongly detected from the amount of data it resulted. That being said, the discussions still barely even covered half of the dimensions country brand is connected to. The range of what it entails is extensive and it would therefore even be unrealistic to expect that the participants feel like they can influence all parts of it. However, there were certain themes that arose from the discussions more than others. Those influences were especially evaluated through the lenses of tourism, and strongly associated with mental images, significance of tourism economically, the division of domestic and international travel and sustainability to name a few. The conclusions below are presented separately by the objective and each sub-question and summarized in the end.

7.1.1 Perceived role to strengthening the country brand

The main objective of the research was to investigate if the companies/organizations, that participated in the 2020 campaign, perceived they had an important role in strengthening the Finland brand. Out of the ten respondents, seven represented DMOs and three represented a single company or person brand. Their network and co-operators could therefore differ substantially from each other. However, despite differences in work environment, they had a connecting factor which was participating in the campaign in the same year.

Some of the respondents knew less about country branding or had never heard about it, some knew more or could even describe operations or actors behind it. In the discussions

about goals for Finland's country brand, as well as whether the work should continue despite setbacks such as the pandemic, all of the respondents covered various areas that are a part of country brand. However, they failed to clearly express that they would be aware that by doing those things in their own operations, they consciously contribute to strengthening Finland's brand.

To give an example, sustainability was a strong theme to arise from the discussions. All of them thought it is an important factor and should without a doubt be taken into account in operations. At another point of the discussion, they described in different ways how they perceived being part of the campaign is important for them. They believe it raises the appeal of domestic travel. On the other hand, they also see value in the visibility the campaign gives from an image marketing point of view. However, the respondents did not bring up if they know to draw a clear connection between these two occurrences. Sustainable thinking is a part of country branding but not just from an environmental aspect. By raising appeal for domestic travel, the phenomenon has potential in effecting economic wellbeing of the country. By travelers staying in Finland instead of going abroad helps to keep capital in the country and create jobs. Co-operation and supporting one another strengthens the actors, areas and eventually the whole country. Preservation of Finnish culture is enhanced with people experiencing their home country with new eyes. All of these are linked to each other as strongly as they are linked to the country brand. All of these viewpoints were also taken out of the interviews.

Therefore, the results of the research could indicate that the participants' perception of their influence is linked to their extent and level of knowledge about what country brand entails. On the other hand, even if they were not familiar with the concept, they could still bring up a strong perception of the influence over country image in the discussions. Furthermore, some of the respondents could even describe how they would like Finland to be seen and what they are doing in their own operations to steer the image towards that ideal vision.

This brings us to the respondents' perception about the single actor's influence. In contrast to country brand related theories and literature often putting emphasis on co-operation (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008; Country Brand Delegation 2010; Saraniemi 2020), some of the respondents also acknowledge a high possibility to affect country image as a single actor. Whether the discussion was about famous people of our country, regular citizens, Visit Finland or work as an influencer, the content and messages that they communicate about Finland were seen to hold strong potential. As the country image study implicates, Finnish people are aware of their own country's strengths, but similar awareness is not

recognized internationally, which is why every Finn should be an ambassador of their country (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 3). Similar statements were made in the discussions. Also, as mentioned in both literature (Lang et al 2020; Saraniemi 2020) and interviews, the power of visual content is surprisingly effective and social media context can further raise the emphasis the receiver gives to it. This is supported in the Country Brand Index results (FutureBrand 2019) which featured 'natural beauty' as the most popular subject to stand out from social media discussions about Finland.

Furthermore, what about the possibility that the messenger for the country brand is not a person at all, but our high-quality education system or happiest country in the world ranking as some respondents pointed out. The country brand report by Country Brand Delegation (2010) and well as the strategy by Finland Promotion Board (2017a) define education as one of the key strengths but their role as actually being the ambassador that promotes country image instead of a person or organization is less investigated.

National self-esteem and similarities between country image and identity are seen as important factors for country brand (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 23, 27; Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 16, 18-19). The importance of their correlation is highlighted in the Internal Nation Brand Effect (INBE) model (Jaworski & Fosher 2003, 106-108) which suggests that reinforcing national self-esteem and growing brand identity form a circular effect that vouches brand building. As stated by Teodorović & Popesku (2016), countries reflect the image of its inhabitants and citizens partially identify themselves through their country's reputation. However, it is also pointed out in the country brand report (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 25) that it sets a different basis on country brand building if the viewpoint is shifted to the country's own residents. This is due to the fact that the majority of touchpoints that link the country to its residents are direct which means they are subjective. The messages that are absorbed from growing up in the same cultural context that is being branded often poses the receiver to subconscious acceptance of what the culture is. (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 15.)

The question that raises from this initial setting is if it can then set challenges or limitations on detecting the opportunities to strengthen country brand in a domestic field. Can being part of the same culture than the country, which is being branded, restrain its creators to think outside the box or recognize its strengths and potential without being oblivious to them? Furthermore, is it an advantage or a restriction that the center of the campaign is Finland for Finnish people?

As the interviews often highlighted that potential of domestic tourism has for a long time been underestimated and the possibilities of our country are still undiscovered to a far extent. The image of domestic travel was described as outdated and not trendy. Self-esteem was described as being too low or modest, although for no real reason. The respondents acknowledged the fact that Finnish people should proudly stand behind what they are doing. For some reason, the belief is often drawn back by inbuilt modesty to avoid making a fuss about yourself.

On the other hand, it is the very aim of the campaign to raise aware awareness about undiscovered places (Suoma 2017b) and to create a phenomenon out of domestic travel (Drama Queen Communications 2019b). The campaign has also become annual, which contributes to the continuation and persistency that is needed for the country brand to stand through time. The campaign's state of success could also be beneficial for improving the appreciation for tourism industry. After all, tourism is considered to be one Finland's fastest growing sectors (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 11). Being thoroughly familiar with the culture of the country that is in question can also offer huge advantages on contributing to the level of authenticity. A good example of this is reflecting the themes that were brought up in descriptions about mental images of Finland. Nature related words, safety and tranquility, features related to society and sustainability were all mentioned both in the discussions and for example in the FutureBrand Country Index (FutureBrand 2019). This demonstrates that there is awareness among the respondents about the main associations with our country.

7.1.2 Added value from participating to the campaign

The first sub-question examined whether participating in the campaign gave these companies/organizations added value or sparked new ways to do business or marketing. Perceptions about added value can help to raise up a wider scope of opinions on the factors that might affect country brand strengthening in the campaign context. The respondents mentioned that authenticity and belief in the campaign among other factors have probably played a big part of its success. Indirectly, the respondents also express co-operation as something they value in the campaign context. While none of them really described any new ways to do marketing or business, the development idea of the webinar could be a potential factor that might affect this in the future. Co-operation and shared ideas in a common platform could generate new innovations.

In addition, visibility was perceived as one of the biggest added values that the respondents gained from the campaign. Good overall publicity and increased recognition of the 100 Reasons brand as well as the use of multiple channels to ensure good coverage for

the campaign visibility were seen valuable and effective measures. Reflected to what this means for country branding point of view, the initial step for country branding process was perceived to be raising awareness because in order for the brand to gain power to influence country images or eventually build brand equity, it needs to be recognized by its audience (Hakala et al 2013; Teodorović & Popesku 2016). In this case, the subject of branding, a country, is already familiar to the target group of the campaign which is Finnish people. The factor that needs raising awareness among the target group is the possibilities and potential our country withholds.

One of the central features of the country brand was for Finland to become first and foremost a solution-oriented country that others would turn to more often (Moilanen 2017; Country Brand Delegation 2010, 27, 35; Finland Promotion Board 2017a). While the emphasis for this statement might refer more to international context, the very same ideology of has been in the core of the campaign, just on a national level. After all, it has been detected that Visit Finland promotes Finland internationally (Business Finland 2021). A similar, coherent actor is needed to inform, promote and offer inspiration about domestic travel. The campaign was perceived to have achieved this. Chairman of the Country Brand Delegation Jorma Ollila also stated that increasing Finland's appeal and familiarity requires developing our strengths in a creative way (Moilanen 2017). The 100 Reasons campaign has also been able to successfully answer to this task.

As sustainable development was highlighted in the results, it is justified to also examine it from the campaign point of view. It is important to communicate about sustainability and safety issues because they eventually links to the trust level of the brand. The more transparent ja trust provoking the brand appears to be, the safer people perceiving it feel. While the campaign still encouraged people to travel in Finland and explore new places, they also still reminded to do it safely and under most current instructions (100 syytä matkaila Suomessa 2020a; Suoma 2021). It was acknowledged that travel safety is something that requires high priority under the circumstances of the pandemic. At the same time, it was important to get target groups moving around Finland in order to improve other important aspects of sustainability. Reassuring continuation of employment around Finland, supporting local businesses and aiming to even out the inequality that the pandemic had caused between different fields of business is perceived essential. Reviving tourism field is now one of the most essential elements of the campaign's mission (Suoma 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has set extensive challenges for tourism field. The hopes of domestic tourism to rise in popularity are in a key role for the campaign and its participants. Positive signs of this phenomenon can be detected from statistics as well as respondents'

answers. Domestic travel did not decrease as much as international travel, but some of the areas in Finland were even able to increase their domestic visitors (Business Finland 2020). When up to eight respondents describe the summer season as outstanding and very successful, some even using the word record-breaking, it gives very promising signs that the vision of creating a new generation Finnish feeling about domestic travel (Drama Queen Communication 2019b) seems to start becoming true. The astonishing resemblance in the responses could indicate that participating in the campaign has had a role in supporting their success. Detecting the uniqueness that our country withholds and building around those strengths by creating a stronger, more coherent understanding of cultural heritage, advantages that separate Finland from the rest and changing attitudes to increase that national self-esteem eventually comes back to the founding factors that are discovered to affect strengthening country brand equity.

7.1.3 Perceptions on benefits of co-operation

The second sub-question was if the participants experienced the co-operation with actors, that might normally be seen as competitors, beneficial for their operations. This was investigated to further find out how respondents experienced their role in the campaign. One of the biggest messages that arise from the 100 Reasons campaign is the feeling of co-operative spirit and actors joining forces to promote the shared vision of domestic travel. This ideology is supported by Finland's country brand strategy's aim to be a reliable country that takes care of one another (Finland Promotion Board 2017a). The majority of the respondents saw other participants as allies and not competitors. For many of them, promoting this vision is important and a conscious aim in both their own operations but also in the campaign. When the respondents do it together, the message is coherent and grows stronger. As one respondent said, it is better to join forces than to try to achieve everything alone.

The campaign basic principles mentioned supporting actors in the tourism field (Drama Queen Communications 2019b), which seemed to become even more essential in 2020 due to the pandemic. Many respondents perceived that their power over this and what they are able to do in their environment is to put effort on supporting their own area and local actors as well as member companies. Seven respondents thought that regional co-operation is important for future success as they expressed their concerns for the future of domestic travel. According to these answers, the respondents understand the significance on local networking and shared perception in order to strengthen their place brand (Lemetyinen & Saraniemi 2017). The hope was that even if the restrictions loosen internationally, domestic travel will still continue to be seen as an equally good option. It supports sustainability and the money that stays in Finland helps to generate wellbeing for the

country. However, it is a common mission to get the traveler to choose Finland from all the available options.

Respondents' explanation about the network of actors that they belong to had high resemblance to the brand hierarchy that Saraniemi (2020) describes. The question was formed in a way that automatically assumes the respondent is a part of some network, and therefore generated a response which is from a co-operative aspect. However, it was seen beneficial for the research to investigate how the respondents see their position in their usual work environment in order to understand how they could perceive their role as a participant of the campaign.

As one respondent pointed out, the campaign has partially been created for the smaller actors to get leverage from the bigger ones that have their emphasis on image marketing. This way the campaign offers a new channel for those who otherwise might not have access to it. This might often be due to lack of resources which is why co-operative network are very valuable for smaller companies (Business Finland 2019). As another respondent continued, the main reason for participating year after year was the added value that the member companies gain from it. Reflecting back to the brand hierarchy, it cannot be seen self-explanatory that the destinations operating under the same area would follow similar visions (Saraniemi 2020). However, participating under the same campaign that communicates the same clear and shared vision for everyone who could be seen as a potential factor for narrowing down the gap and transforming these operations to become more consistent. After all, in order to transform raising interest into cash flow and visitor overnights requires coherent co-operation from the entire tourism industry (Finland Promotion Board 2017b, 12).

7.1.4 Importance of pursuing country brand building

The last sub-question investigated perceptions on the importance of pursuing country brand building process even during a time, when tourism industry is suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. This was included to further investigate if respondents think that country brand work is necessary in the first place. If they do agree with the statement, what is their description of its dimensions. Continuation of country brand building was perceived important by every respondent. Furthermore, two respondents described it as a long-term process that should not stop even under the state of emergency that COVID-19 has imposed. This indicates to the respondents' comprehension that country brand takes 10-20 years to construct and can be seen as a slow process that requires the vision and goals to stay clear even though people executing it change over time (Moilanen & Rainisto

2008, 32, 61-62). Half of the respondents mentioned that clarifying country brand during this time would reinforce its authenticity and unanimous vision of country identity.

The significance of continuation was also reflected by how many of them shifted focus to checking their own operations, updating strategies and developing co-operative spirit both internally and externally. The motivation behind putting effort on constructing own operations is to improve procedures and take projects further. Eventually, it also means readiness to serve both domestic and international travelers better once the volumes increase again. It inevitably affects strengthening country brand on multiple different areas. The development work can be seen as an operation that increases the efficiency of the area and might for example create employment. As a result, the goal for different DMOs is to increase the appeal of their area and local businesses. Sustainability was also incorporated to operations and taking care of health security has been given a new importance. This aspect will require systematic protocols and evaluation of their effects in a completely new way to maintain sustainability (UNWTO 2020). However, all of these can be seen to impact at least the economy, international position and the appeal of Finland as a destination, which were all mentioned in the goals of the country brand report (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 23).

In fact, sustainability was one of the strongest themes to arise from all discussions. Looking back, the subject could have been covered more thoroughly in the framework. Although its value and importance was acknowledged by the author, it still came as a surprise how strongly these issues were brought up by the respondents. As one respondent pointed out, sustainability is hard to define and prove in action. According to the interviews, the main emphasis on what sustainability means seems to still be on environmental issues. However, sustainable development in tourism field is a more comprehensive concept that covers evaluating sustainability from environmental, sociocultural and economical aspect (UNEP & UNWTO 2005, 11-12). These entail various factors, preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring wellbeing of employees and locals, co-operation and supporting local businesses, equality and supporting economic growth and competitiveness to mention a few (Nylund 2018, 12-19). What was interesting is that all of these factors that link to sociocultural and economical sustainability were generally mentioned in the discussions, not just specifically when asked about how sustainability is seen in their operations. It is acknowledged by the respondents that sustainable development is and will be in the center of operations. However, in reality the scope is wider than what the respondents were able to recognize or communicate. That being said, the respondents may have known that sustainable development in fact includes all these issues but did not know how to express or communicate about it more clearly during the interview.

The majority of the respondents agreed that no-one knows when the restrictions will loosen and the world will open again but acknowledge that preparatory work needs to be done for when what happens. It was also stated that this is the time, now more than ever, to execute all that constructive work as the tourism field has been on a stand still state. Improving internal network, operations, strategies and eventually country image will most likely give a better starting point in international field where the competition for travelers will be fierce. This supports Teodorović & Popesku's (2016) idea of how country should evaluate its potential and the strengths that help to increase their brand positioning. Lemmetyinen & Saraniemi (2017) also agree that brand equity is linked to marketing strategies and travel motivation, which is why it is justified that there should be emphasis on the work that the respondents have done.

7.1.5 Summary & applicability for the commissioner

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the perceived possibilities of strengthening Finland's country brand through being a part of a nation-wide domestic tourism campaign. In other words, it was questioned if the participants perceived that they as a single actor have power over influencing the formation of Finland's country brand. In addition, the research examined participants opinions on value of the campaign, benefits of co-operation and the importance of continuation of country brand work even during the pandemic.

In general, the participants felt they could increase and promote domestic travel by being a part of the campaign and through that influence how Finland is perceived. However, the results raise a question to which extent is this perception conscious? Some of the respondents were familiar with the concept of country brand, some less familiar. Therefore, their starting base to answer to the interview questions was not on the same level.

That being said, all of them were still able to describe more than a few things that impact country brand throughout the discussions. Furthermore, they could bring up a strong perception of their influence over country image. Some even came up with detailed examples even if they were not familiar with the concept. To remind and clarify the difference, country image refers to how the brand is perceived and is always an individually constructed mental image (Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 15-17). To evaluate the strength of a country brand, it is suggested to reflect the resemblance of country image to the brand identity, which refers to how the brand is wanted to be perceived by its creators (Country Brand Delegation 2010, 27; Moilanen & Rainisto 2008, 16).

Table 2. Summary of the conclusions

Main objective & sub-questions	Key findings
<p>Main objective: Did the companies or organizations, that participated in the 2020 campaign, perceive they had an important role in strengthening the Finland brand?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respondents were able to describe various areas that are a part of country brand work but did not clearly express if they execute them in their own operations to consciously strengthen Finland's country brand • discussions did still bring up a perception that a single actor can have power to influence country image • results could indicate that the participants' perception of their influence is linked to their extent and level of knowledge about what country brand entails
<p>Sub-question 1: Did participating in the campaign give these companies or organizations added value or spark new ways to do business or marketing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visibility and raising awareness about domestic travel perceived as one of the biggest added values • the respondents evaluate authenticity, creativity and reinforcement of Finland's strengths as the success factors behind the campaign • answers to the existing need to have one, leading actor in charge of promoting and vouching domestic tourism • the campaign can be perceived to support sustainable development in many ways • no-one clearly expressed new ways to do business or marketing but a development idea of a collective webinar might be good channel brainstorming
<p>Sub-question 2: Did they experience the co-operation with actors, that might normally be seen as competitors, beneficial for their operations?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • majority of the respondents saw other participants as allies, not competitors • co-operative spirit and joining forces seen important and valuable both in the campaign and own operations • shared vision perceived important for ensuring future success and contributes to making operations coherent
<p>Sub-question 3: Do they see the importance of pursuing country brand building process even during a time, when tourism industry is suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mutual perception among all respondents that country branding is important even during the COVID-19 pandemic • clarifying country brand during this time was seen to reinforce authenticity and unanimous vision of country identity • revealed that respondents have started to also update their own operations during this time to prepare for the future • sustainability, national self-esteem and country positioning were strongest singular themes to arise from the discussions

These factors the respondents mentioned are all linked to one another and have an effect on more than just one dimension of brand building. It would be relevant to examine to which extent they are aware of their power to influence the country brand. If the respondent does not detect all the factors that link to the formation of country brand, it is justified to then evaluate that the perception of their power is in fact partial. In reality, they could already influence it on a much higher level but the effects of their operations are subconscious.

The findings of this research first and foremost offer Suoma a deeper insight of the campaign's significance and role from the participants' point of view. In the hopes of creating this thesis was to discover a more extensive understanding of why actors want to participate to the campaign and what they gain from it. As a result, the role of 100 Reasons campaign as the leading actor of domestic tourism was strongly verified by the respondents. The responses indicated that Finland already has all the valuable building blocks but

the systematic actor to solely be in charge seems to be missing. Furthermore, the campaign's role in creating a phenomenon contributes to strengthening the appeal of the country internally. By achieving an increased appreciation by its own nation, the country can eventually have better initial setting to strive for success internationally.

The campaign is seen to positively effect Finland's country image and build appreciation and appeal internally. Since one of the most important factors for successful country brand is authenticity (Moilanen 2017; Country Brand Delegation 2010, 29), the prestige of the campaign's message suddenly grows to a new level. Respondents' opinions of the significance was also strongly expressed by referring to many elements that sustainable development includes, and how the campaign supports their preservation. The goals of sustainability also directly link to the goals of what Finland's country brand aims to be. What comes to the motivation as to why the respondents want to participate to the campaign year after year was simply the sincere faith in what it represents and the strong belief in the power of co-operation to achieve stronger and established position in domestic tourism industry.

7.2 Suggestions for future research

Based on the findings and strong, even surprising themes that arose from the discussions, there could be several dimensions to further expand and deepen the knowledge of internal country branding. Most crucially, the research indicated that the participants' perception of their influence is linked to their extent and level of knowledge about what country branding entails. Even if they were not familiar with the concept, they could still bring up a strong perception of the influence over country image.

Therefore, the research findings indicate that the level of awareness about country branding should be increased in order to the actors of tourism field to know how to support its strengthening. The most beneficial result would be to bring up the campaign's significance more clearly, not only for domestic tourism but for creating the country image of Finland.

Limitations of this thesis research in terms of its scope and chosen aspect also set certain restrictions. Since the focus and viewpoint of this thesis is to examine how country brand is perceived internally by its own nation, it would be interesting to investigate how the campaign and its role in creation of mental images about Finland is perceived from the domestic travelers' point of view. This way the understanding of the campaign's role would be even more comprehensive from different point of views.

7.3 Validity and reliability

Although the methodology was chosen to best support the objective of the research, limitations do exist. The chosen data collection method can be somewhat problematic in terms of giving genuine information. Interviews can expose the interviewees to a context where they might feel they need to give socially acceptable answers as opposed to responding in a way that would provide the real perception. It should also be noted that the answers the interviewees give are always time and context bound. This means the given answers could potentially be different if they were asked now or six months later.

(Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 206-207.) The author acknowledges that it affects the depth of the results whether the researcher asks elaborating questions. On the other hand, even if the researcher asks for more explanation, the respondent could have decided intentionally not to share certain aspects.

Because of the situation at the time of conducting the research, it was not an option to perform face-to-face interviews. Therefore, all the qualitative data was gathered by phone or video call interviews. While the upside is that they were not as time consuming as regular interviews, they also eliminated the possibility for the researcher to fully observe the body language and other non-verbal communication the interviewee expressed while the interview is on-going (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 148).

The interview questions however mainly generated valuable data and saturation, which could indicate that they were formed in a favorable way for the research. To give an example, when respondents were asked about their role in the network and how they cooperate with different actors, nearly all started describing the hierarchy in their own work environment. This could later be used in evaluation to reflect if the brand hierarchy model (Saraniemi 2020) is applicable to describe the Finnish system and construction behind country brand building.

Typical features for qualitative research include for example favoring human as the instrument for gathering information. While it has its perks of giving more freedom and flexibility to construct the data in natural context and by adapting to variables, it also means relying on the researcher's subjective observation and interpretation of the phenomenon.

(Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 164.) Therefore, the researcher's individual skills, knowledge and experience always lead and affect the ways of interpretation (Puusa & Juuti 2020, 172). It also affects the capability of recognizing patterns from the collected data and skills to detect aspects that rise from the results as well as understand how for example cultural context and background can influence interpretation (Hirsjärvi, Remes &

Sajavaara 2009, 182, 207). The reliability on how saturation occurs or is perceived to be achieved also depends on the aspect of examination (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 100). The data analysis stage was aimed to be described as precisely as possible to increase reliability of the research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 26).

These factors were acknowledged in the data analysis stage as well as writing and interpreting the results since it needed to be evaluated to which extent the author was capable of handling the data in a way that the research would be reliable and answer the question. The decisions on what is included from the data and seen relevant to analyze was based on researcher's own perception and subjective experience of importance according to best knowledge on the subject. It was also acknowledged by the author that separating direct quotations from the context can alter their meaning. To minimize this effect, original transcriptions were checked during the interpretation of the results.

Non-probability sampling does not give all members an equal chance to participate or to be selected, which also means that the results cannot be generalized. On the other hand, qualitative research does not aim for that (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 121, 128). The size of the potential sampling group was relatively small to begin with as there were around 40 participants in the 2020 campaign. This research included ten participants (25% of the overall participants) which gives some idea of the actual sampling size in proportion. However, due to the context, sample size and representatives, as well as the subjective nature of the data, the results and conclusions of this research cannot be generalized (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang 2016, 93).

7.4 Ethical considerations

Part of responsible conduct of research is also to evaluate its ethicalness (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 150-156). It is referred to when the researcher agrees to conduct ethical principles throughout conducting the research. The research should also aim to create and generate good things and it cannot at any point endanger or cause harm to the subject of the research or those involved in it. (Puusa & Juuti 2020, 168.)

Part of executing ethical principles in practice was the voluntary participation to the research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 156). In this case it meant that the potential participants were contacted regarding this research but they had a right to decline from participating. The ones that did were then asked permissions to record the interviews and informed that this material is confidential and will only be used for this thesis research. This was also mentioned separately in the interview guide (Appendix 1). The participants also have a right to know what the research is for and what it investigates (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018,

156). This was made as transparent as possible both in the correspondence and during the interviews. One of the biggest ethical considerations in conducting the research is anonymity (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 156). The thesis had to be written in a way that no singular participant can be separated or recognized from the results and the thesis does not give away any confidential information about the campaign or its commissioner. It is considered the researcher's responsibility to respect and follow these principles (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 156).

7.5 Personal learning and development

When the thesis process was first initiated, the author had no former experience in conducting this type of a research or familiarity with the structure, approach or requirements in different stages of the process. Therefore, writing a thesis has required overcoming many new obstacles along the way but it has also developed new skills and understanding as the process went further. The expertise and understanding of the subject has increased exponentially. Conducting the research and writing a thesis also developed critical evaluation skills in terms of academic literature and sources of knowledge but also in terms of all the factors that executing a research entails and what affects for example the reliability of it.

The idea for the thesis subject was formed by the author's interest in the topic. The fascination towards marketing also had an influence in the decision process as country branding can be perceived as marketing, just from a different point of view. The aspect of the objectives were evaluated in a way that the commissioner would be in the center of it and get the best value. The objectives were discussed and mutually agreed upon with the commissioner. In addition, the timing of the process due to the pandemic also made it a very current topic.

The process took 7,5 months to complete during which the thesis was the main priority and occupancy of the author. The original schedule was prolonged a little, which was partially related to the commissioner's timetable as well as scheduling the interviews and partially to the time-consuming nature of qualitative research methods and especially data analysis stage. However, the author has throughout the process been on top of project management by updating every stage and meeting in a chart (Appendix 2). The chart was also shared to keep those involved up to date. Creating own deadlines for different parts of the thesis was also seen helpful to stay in schedule. Having a clearly presented chart has also made it easier for the author to re-schedule and adjust the process when there were changes in the timetable.

Throughout the process, the author has also aimed to demonstrate a high level of preciseness by evaluating and planning every stage well before conducting, paying attention to references and the correct way of writing them and making sure that the finished thesis does not violate confidentiality in any way. Different innovative methods including mind maps, charts, lists and recordings have been utilized to both generate new realizations and plan for example the structure of the chapters.

Overall, the biggest learning outcome in terms of the thesis process itself has been to detect which parts of the academic literature as well as the research data are important and relevant for this research, and what can be ruled out. The formation of objectives in a way that the scope is strict enough but would also provide value was also perceived challenging. From the subjective point of view, the thesis process has first and foremost increased the author's problem solving skills, independence in tackling things that are new and resilience to work towards the aim of successfully completing the process.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

THESIS SPRING 2021

Start by thanking the interviewee for participating in the study. Mention that the interview will be recorded, which was informed beforehand in the email as well as asking for the permission. All information handled regarding this interview and the research will be confidential. The interview is divided into a few background questions and the research questions. In the end there is also a chance for open feedback.

Background questions:

1. Campaign package size in 2020
2. Interviewee's own link to the campaign in his/her organization? (*Size of the organization?*)
3. How many times has the organization participated in the 100 reasons campaign?

Research questions:

In the beginning explain the concept of country brand and what it refers to in the context of this research

1. Building a country brand requires seamless co-operation between different actors for a shared vision. How is this co-operation executed in your organization? (*where does the organization position itself – the role of the organization – meaning of co-operation*)
2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic effect your operations in 2020? (*tourism statistics – operations – restrictions*)
3. What kind of advantages do you see in developing country brand even during times, when the travel industry is going through a more difficult time?
4. Do you perceive that you as a single organization could be able to affect the whole Finland brand or the country image building process? (*in your own area, nationally or even globally*)
5. How did you perceive your own role as part of the 100 reasons campaign in relation to other participating organizations or companies? (*size of the organization in comparison – added value – competitors*)
6. Did you perceive that the visibility gained from the campaign contributed to the increase of your area's or destination's attractiveness?
7. How would you develop the campaign to gain more added value to your organization?
8. Finland's brand report defined its key goals to be increasing Finland's economy, tourism and international position. How important do you see these in your own operations? (*more specifically: appreciating Finnish labor and increasing export – promoting tourism and the appeal of our country – increasing national self-esteem*)
9. Finland's tourism strategy defines the following vision for the years 2019-2028: "making Finland a unique country that awakes curiosity as a tourism destination, while making the most sustainable growth in Nordic countries". Do you feel that this resonates or supports the goals of your organization?
10. How would you describe your brand? / How would you describe the brands of the companies under your organization?
11. Open feedback or comments on participating in the campaign

End by summing up some of the things discussed in the interview. Thank the interviewee for his/her time and willingness to participate to the research.

Appendix 2. Thesis process timetable

Date	Thesis process steps	Research steps	Meetings	Notes
1.10.2020	Thesis process starts			
5.10.2020	SECTS		1st thesis meeting	Subject plan Komto + pre test + thesis outline
8.10.2020	Getting a commissioner		Phone call commissioner	Critical evaluation and narrowing down subject idea possibilities to get a commissioner?
14.10.2020			2nd thesis meeting	Confirming willingness to act as a commissioner
16.10.2020			1st meeting communications office	Updated subject idea, tips for the first meeting with commissioner
21.10.2020			2nd meeting communications office	Receiving campaign material; define research questions for next meeting
3.11.2020				Specifying research focus; planning project structure; drafting questionnaire
5.11.2020		Questionnaire sent out by commissioner	3rd thesis meeting	Update on thesis subject; scheduling
10.11.2020	Writing the intro & framework	Original last day of questionnaire	100 reasons kick-off webinar	2021 campaign kick-off webinar
19.11.2020			Phone call commissioner	Update on thesis; interview for framework; planning the next steps
1.12.2020		New deadline of the questionnaire		
6.12.2020		Going through raw data of the questionnaire		
7.12.2020				
16.12.2020			3rd meeting commissioner + communications office	Presentation of the questionnaire results; clarifying the focus of qualitative research; choosing companies to contact
17.12.2020			4th thesis meeting	Update on thesis process
15.1.2021			5th thesis meeting	Feedback on theoretical framework
17.2.2021			6th thesis meeting	Theoretical framework ready
18.2.2021	Writing the empirical part			
2.3.2021				
4.3.2021				
11.3.2021		Drafting questions for the interviews	7th thesis meeting	Sending the emails about the interviews to the potential interviewees
12.3.2021		Interviewing the chosen companies/ organizations		Feedback on methodology chapter
17.3.2021				Follow up emails sent by me to the potential interviewees who have not responded yet
23.3.2021				
25.3.2021				
26.3.2021		Transcribing the interviews simultaneously		
30.3.2021				
31.3.2021				
6.4.2021	Writing the results & conclusion			
12.4.2021			8th thesis meeting	Questions about the rest of the project (timeline, schedule, last phases etc.)
4.5.2021			9th thesis meeting	Feedback on results & conclusions chapters
7.5.2021	Deadline thesis abstract			
14.5.2021	Thesis presentation & maturity test			
17.5.2021	Deadline for last corrections			Presenting thesis to commissioner and thesis supervisor
	Process complete			
	SECTS			

Thesis process timetable