**Elevating Rural Tourism Experiences in Finland**

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Bachelor of Hospitality, Tourism and Experience Management

Bachelor's Thesis

2024

# Abstract

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| **Degree** |
| Hospitality, Tourism and Experience Management |

| **Thesis Title** |
| Elevating Rural Tourism Experiences in Finland |

| **Number of pages and appendix pages** |
| 51 + 3 |

Finland welcomes travellers to experience the peaceful nature and landscapes, local food, Finnish lifestyles, and traditions. While a considerable number of travels focus on the most popular areas, rural Finland offers a wide range of destinations to see and experience. The potential of rural Finland has received a lot of attention and discussions recently and became the focus of this thesis.

The theoretical framework focuses on rural tourism, experiences, and sustainability, and each chapter begins with definitions of these key concepts. Rural tourism covers the current state of rural tourism in Finland and identifies some current projects related to the development of rural areas. The experience part presents the key theories and some essential elements creating a successful experience. The importance of sustainability actions in the tourism industry is investigated, and some sustainability development goals are discussed.

The empirical part of this thesis used qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews with travellers and thematic interviews with rural tourism specialists. The focus was to identify the elements necessary for attracting travellers to rural Finland and to get travellers' points of view on what is appreciated and expected on their travels. To support the findings of interviews with travellers, rural tourism specialists were interviewed to understand the rural operations.

After analysing the data, the findings are linked to the theoretical framework, offering a broader understanding of travellers' expectations and needs. It provides important information to rural tourism service providers. Additionally, it offers some practical proposals for companies to elevate rural experiences, meet potential guests' demands, and improve the overall attractiveness of rural tourism in Finland.

The discussion part answers the main research question: *how to get travellers to explore more rural Finland* from domestic travellers' point of views. The main findings show that travellers are looking for a calm environment to relax, gather with their family and friends, and engage and learn from the local communities and traditions. As a summary, rural Finland interests domestic travellers. The elements that travellers require are found in rural tourism experiences, which can be enhanced with visibility and providing accessible information.

| **Key words** |
| Rural tourism, experience, sustainability, development, sustainable tourism |

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# 1 Introduction

An estimated 2.5 million foreign travellers arrived in Finland in 2023. Over 70 per cent of the travellers stayed in the most popular areas, mainly in the Uusimaa capital and Lapland regions. The estimation for domestic travellers in Finland was 9,4 million, with around 16,5 million nights spent in Finland in 2023. (Statistics Finland 2024.) Also, domestic travellers are seen to travel to the most popular areas, even there are a lot of potential destinations and experiences offered in rural Finland.

This research-oriented thesis aims to elevate rural tourism experiences in Finland by gaining more information on travellers' current perspectives and preferences. The primary objective is to investigate their willingness to shift from traditional tourist destinations to more rural environments and to engage with rural experiences. Finally, based on the interview findings, the thesis expands the author's and the tourism service providers' understanding of travellers' opinions about rural Finland. The thesis intends to offer tourism service providers new perspectives and proposals for better addressing their potential guests' needs. It will provide insights and widen their knowledge of travellers' requirements and expectations for rural experiences. The results can be applied to service providers' daily operations and provide an understanding of possibilities for future development.

The research question is "*How to get travellers to explore more rural Finland?*" (RQ1). To answer the main question, the two sub-questions are:

SQ1: *What elements do individuals require to travel more to rural Finland?*

SQ2: *What is the benefit of travelling further from the most touristic areas?*

The author chose qualitative research as a research method to explore the phenomenon. The aim is to understand better domestic travellers' preferences and identify the elements required in rural experiences. Semi-structured interviews with domestic travellers and thematic interviews with rural tourism specialists will be used, and the interviews will be conducted in April. The author aims to respond to the sub-questions and the main research question with gathered data. Through findings, rural tourism companies can potentially enhance their experiences and increase their competitiveness by aligning the company activities with travellers' desires and expectations.

The author became interested in rural tourism experience development as the topic has recently had increasing attention and much discussion on different social media platforms. The author has recently also been seeing some webinars taking place, such as *"Creating light in the dark experiences"* and *"Suomen Maaseutumatkailuyrittäjät ry Seminaari",* the seminar of rural tourism entrepreneurs held by the Finnish Association of Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs. Therefore, the topic

seems to be very relevant for the industry at this moment. The subject interests the author and has been the primary motive for writing this thesis. The author is keen on learning more about experiences and development in rural areas, and she will gain more knowledge for future possibilities and the establishment of a personal business.

Academics and the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, have recognised rural tourism as a significant research area. It also plays a considerable part in Finland's national policy considerations. (Ivona 2021, 5; Long & Lane 2000, 304; Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2021.) Finland's tourism strategy points out the meaningfulness of tourism in rural areas where, for instance, the current and rapid development of technology decreases the number of employees needed in the companies (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2019, 66). Rural areas face other challenges, such as locals moving to bigger cities, and an ageing population. Therefore, tourism brings possibilities for employment and community growth in rural areas. (Kauppila, Saarinen & Leinonen 2009, 425.) Most of the tourism movement inside Finland and from abroad focuses on the most significant regions such as Uusimaa, Southwest Finland, Pirkanmaa, North Ostrobothnia and Lapland (Statistics Finland 2024) even though there are a lot of destinations and experiences located all over Finland. The table that shows the regions with the most travellers received and can be found in Appendix 1.

After the introduction chapter, the thesis continues with the theoretical part, including rural tourism, experience, and sustainability. These definitions chosen for this thesis context can be found at the beginning of each chapter. Definitions aim to introduce the bigger picture, and the text moves towards more detailed information. Chapter 2 is about rural tourism and its meaning in Finland, followed by experience and its elements in Chapter 3 and sustainability in Chapter 4 with sustainability development actions. As sustainability is a priority in all activities, all the content in this thesis emphasises and builds around that theme. When developing and creating new experiences, sustainability and its' three areas, environmental, social, and economic factors, must be considered for *"people, planet and prosperity"* (United Nations s.a.).

Chapter 5 discusses the chosen research methodology for this thesis work. The interviews were held individually for seven domestic travellers and three rural tourism specialists, and they took place in April 2024. All interviews were recorded and transcribed straight after the interview took place. Through transcriptions, all of the interviews were deeply analysed. The findings of the interviews are presented in Chapter 6. Conclusions related to the theories are made in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, and they can be found in Chapter 7, which has limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2   Rural Tourism

This chapter introduces key concepts that are relevant to rural tourism in the context of this research. In the beginning, the definition of rural tourism and how it has changed over the years is briefly described. Additionally, the chapter addresses rural areas in Finland and the current state of Finnish rural tourism. Rural is explained as "*in, of, or like the countryside*" (Cambridge Dictionary s.a. c) and tourism is described as "*the business of providing services such as transport, places to stay, or entertainment for people who are on holiday*" (Cambridge Dictionary s.a. e).

Lane's first definition in 1994 suggests that rural tourism needs to include the following characteristics. First, it is geographically remote, highlighting small companies and entrepreneurs, open space, and closeness to nature. It should have heritage attributes from traditional communities and practices. Additionally, it should be rural in scale, involving modest-sized buildings and rural local communities. The concept is predicted to grow slowly, and it is closely tied to family companies and possesses a long-term nature. Rural tourism varies, depending on the place's environment, economy, history, and location. Rural tourism offerings have improved from more basic activities focusing on sightseeing, walking, and an admiration of rural life. Nowadays, the offered experiences are diverse niche activities, responding to travellers' expectations. (Long & Lane 2000, 301-306.)

These days, rural tourism is described as a form of tourism where travellers experience activities that are centred around nature, rural communities' culture, agriculture, and sightseeing. These activities happen in non-urban areas with low populations, agriculture and forestry environments, and a local social structure and lifestyle. (United Nations World Tourism Organization s.a.) Back in the day, rural tourism was seen more as sightseeing in a beautiful landscape, but now, it includes some recreational activities and adventure experiences in the rural nature environment.

Rural tourism is seen as an opportunity for local community development, signifying an economic improvement in rural areas (Ivona 2021, 2). The development of rural tourism with a community helps to positively influence the area and address issues like urbanisation, population decline, deforestation and unemployment (Liu, Chiang & Ko, 2023, 8). More and more companies and entrepreneurs are interested in rural tourism to avoid unemployment and earn enough for a living. This means that local farmers offer places to stay, or they have heritage centres, themed restaurants, and more activities to offer for travellers. Entire regions are teaming up to market themselves better. However, with more people travelling long distances, global competition is growing. The countries are working hard to present their rural heritage and offer affordable experiences. Rural tourism policies are expected to rise, but their development and implementation differ globally. Tourism

is a highly competitive market, and the private sector plays a crucial role in providing the tourism economy with success. (Long & Lane 2000, 304-305.)

Most rural tourism companies are small, offering a personal touch and attracting travellers to escape from their daily lives. However, it may be tricky for a small company to organise, market, and develop new products for travellers. Creating partnerships between tourism companies is a valuable way to connect and get support from the government. Accessing markets, market information, and marketing skills has traditionally been challenging for many rural tourism companies. However, it is improving. Information on travel trends and product purchases is increasingly available due to expanded research, publication, and technological advancements that help rural niche market developers. Furthermore, technological improvements in accounting, reservation systems, and virtual reality help rural areas overcome geographical challenges to enhance the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations globally. (Long & Lane 2000, 305-306.) Technology development also helps rural companies in Finland, as the distances are very long.

In the tourism market, rural tourism is a growing sector that significantly contributes to economic growth, socio-cultural development, and the protection and enhancement of natural and significant historically built environments. It allows tourists to immerse themselves in nature and appreciate a destination's unique culture. Managing a rural tourism destination involves understanding customers' opinions and expectations. When promoting rural destinations, it's essential to recognise the tourism products and how they meet customers' needs as the travellers compare the offerings and experiences. Industry players must truly understand and fulfil guests' needs for success. Rural areas offer unique and authentic products enriched with nature and cultural elements. Retaining the core and developing these experiences is crucial, as they serve as attractions for promoting more extensive areas and whole rural destinations. (Lo,Mohamad, Songan & Yeo 2012, 59.)

As a comparison, in Finland, rural vacations are seen to include cottage accommodation in a remote area with no neighbours around. Usually, the nearest services are some kilometres away. The holiday usually includes local food, nature activities, and a sauna. (Pesonen, Komppula, Kronenberg & Peters 2011, 32.) Another domestic rural tourism study suggests that the baseline for travellers' expectations for their rural vacation in Finland is relaxation, being away from the ordinary, comfort, and getting refreshed in a beautiful, calm, and rush-free environment. The most significant traveller segment in the study was "*social travellers*", who mainly value interaction with other people on their rural vacation. This group consists of more males who usually travel with their friends on active vacations. (Pesonen 2012, 79.)

## 2.1 Rural Finland

This part discusses the current situation of rural tourism and the key points of development in Finland. Visit Finland enhances rural areas through Finnish forestry nature. Finland's unique nature, forests, and coasts are promoted as a place to escape, explore, and relax. Activities such as hiking, snowshoeing, climbing, and canoeing are highlighted factors, not to mention cottages, biking trails, campfires, and northern lights. (Visit Finland s.a. a.)

Most parts of Finland are considered rural tourism areas, which are the focus of this thesis project. Approximately 95 % of Finland's land area is rural, as shown in the figure below. It is home to over 1,5 million residents, and nearly 40 % of all companies in Finland are in rural areas. In addition, every second inhabitant spends over 100 days each year enjoying leisure time in rural Finland. (Rural Policy Council s.a.) Therefore, rural tourism can be promoted for everyone's marketing purposes. On the other hand, as a significant area of Finland is seen as rural, most domestic travellers can also be considered rural tourists. When travelling, they pass through these rural areas and make stopovers. Consequently, domestic travellers are usually rural tourism companies' most important income source (Pesonen 2012, 79). However, this poses challenges in defining and quantifying the number of domestic travellers.
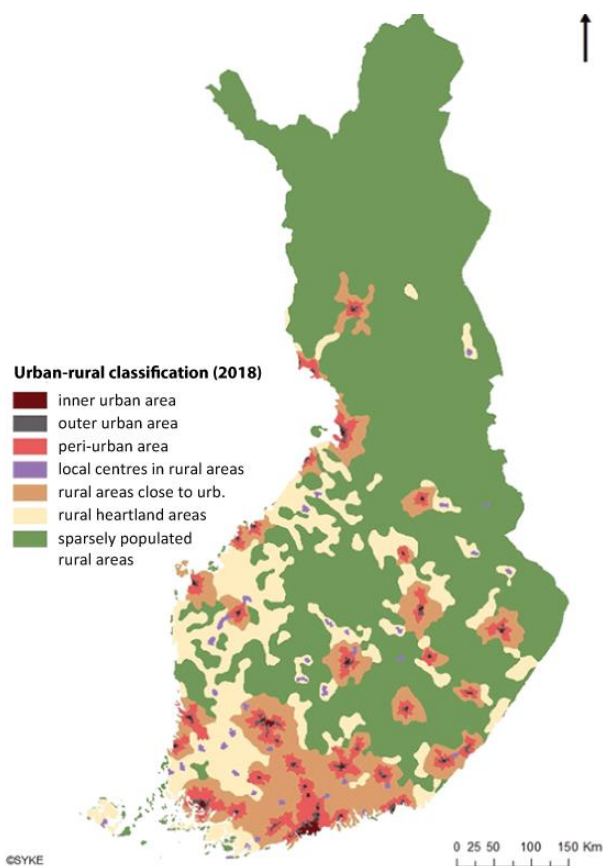


Figure 1. Urban-rural classification. (Finnish Environment Institute 2018)

## 2.2   Rural tourism in Finland

Finnish entrepreneurs in rural areas operate in various industry fields, with chores often varying by the season. Usually, these companies also offer some tourism-related activities. Rural area entrepreneurs are encouraged to align the visions and actions of Finland's food tourism strategies. In addition, they are encouraged to increase collaboration across different industries, integrate the principles of sustainable tourism, and aim for the Sustainable Travel Finland label, which proves the companies are committing towards more sustainable choices. (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland 2021, 33-35.) One of the projects, Hungry for Finland, is developing sustainable food tourism in Finland. The idea is to enhance food tourism experiences by involving Finnish nature, the local lifestyles, and the experiences of Finnish culture. The project enhances the development of food products and experiences and visualises travel routes to Finland. Hungry for Finland aims to add value for travellers and connect companies working together through experiences and development. Developing food products can impact tourism growth year-round and promote Finland as a sustainable destination. (Visit Finland s.a. b.) The project's purpose may bring many positive benefits for rural companies by improving and even creating totally new experiences for their offerings.

One of the recent projects, the parliamentary working group on sparsely populated areas, allocated three million euros for projects focused on enhancing nature, food, fishing, and hunting tourism. Applications were taken in 2022, and their goals included promoting sustainability and responsibility, knowledge management, digitalisation, cooperation networks, and product development. They sought to boost the livelihood and well-being of sparsely populated areas where unique opportunities and challenges can be seen. (Rural Policy Council 2022.) The survey findings gathered from the tourism projects were positive, and most, around 89% of the respondents, think that the goals were achieved, and the information and training were helpful and gave some inspiration and new ideas for the companies. (Finnish ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2024.) However, it has been highlighted that while some positive impacts of tourism sustainability have been achieved, they are usually seen at a small resort level. The results are not spread to a broader, for instance, to a regional level, which would also be more beneficial. (Kauppila et al. 2009, 431.)

The shortage of skilled workforce is a key challenge in rural areas, also including Finland. To meet workforce expectations, there is a need for comprehensive education offerings, tailored training programs, rural-based employment services, and smooth-functioning labour migration. Implementing training for new employees increases the vitality of regions. Anticipatory information about the need for a skilled workforce in rural areas must be communicated more actively to educational providers and universities. (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland 2021, 36-39.) Komppula

(2014, 369) points out that local governments are responsible for destination tourism policymaking in Finland. Therefore, rural tourism development is not accomplished because there are limited resources, which delays progress. A suggestion is to have a tourism administration system specialising in tourism visions and strategies for all destinations. Municipalities play a vital role in encouraging entrepreneurship, and without innovative, risk-taking, and dedicated entrepreneurs, no destination can develop and succeed.

Rural tourism's most important characteristics are the location, landscape, activities, and traditional local lifestyle (Long & Lane 2000, 301-306). In Finland, tourism is seen as an opportunity for local community development and economic improvement in rural areas. However, competition in the global market, employee shortages, limited resources, and slow development are factors slowing the growth. There are a lot of different efforts and promotions for rural sustainable tourism practices, as well as enhancements to company collaborations and employment opportunities to ensure the development and success of rural tourism in Finland.

# 3   Experience

This chapter focuses on key definitions of experience that are relevant to this work. It starts with a definition of an experience, following a deeper dive into tourism experiences and how they can be sustainably designed to experience at their best stage.

In this thesis context, an experience can be described as "*something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through*" (Merriam-Webster s.a.), which to add the definition "*the way that something happens and how it makes you feel*" (Cambridge Dictionary s.a. b). The word "*experience*" is used in everyday life to describe working life as well as vacation experiences (Hosany & Witham 2010, 352). In this thesis project, the word is used more related to tourism activities in a rural environment in Finland.

Depending on the type of hospitality or tourism environment, the person always faces different experiences (Oh, Fiore & Jeoung 2007, 120). Kim and So (2022, 32) also emphasize that in the tourism industry, experiences are significantly important and one of the core objects. Ray (22 May 2008) summarizes the experience of breaking routines from individuals' lives and going beyond their expectations with engaging, attention-needed elements that are also very involving and create emotions. This said, the experiences can be considered a big part of the tourism industry.

During times, society has emphasised consuming experiences instead of products or services. In this situation, the wholesome experience becomes more valuable and memorable than the service itself. Experience is engagement on a customer's emotional, physical, intellectual, or spiritual level and provides memorable events. This experience is different to every individual. For experience creating, a company uses services as a stage and products as support. Quality experiences that leave customers' memories usually influence a company's success. (Pine & Gilmore 2020,1-21.)

To enhance the overall experience, Pine and Gilmore have created the four realms, the following characteristics, to contribute to the overall quality of an experience, which is visualised in Figure 2. There are two dimensions which respond to customer participation and connection. Participation can vary from passive to active, and customer connections can be seen as absorption and immersion. In a theatre, the attendees may be passive participants, and the entertainment realm is emphasized. In comparison, participation in canoeing trips is more towards the educational realm, still not needing the complete immersion. Aesthetic experience is a more passive experience of admiring the environment with all senses, such as whale watching. The escapist realm occurs when the traveller escapes from reality and has a more considerable immersion in climbing or ski school. If all these four realms are presented in a designed experience, it creates a "*sweet spot*", meaning

that the guest receives the richest experience and engages guests with a staging experience. (Pine & Gilmore 2020, 39-48.)

The emphasis on customer experience has increased as customers now engage with service providers through numerous touch points on various media channels, leading to more difficult customer journeys. The customer experience covers the customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016, 70-71.) Therefore, the customer experience is also a response from a customer to service providers' correspondence.
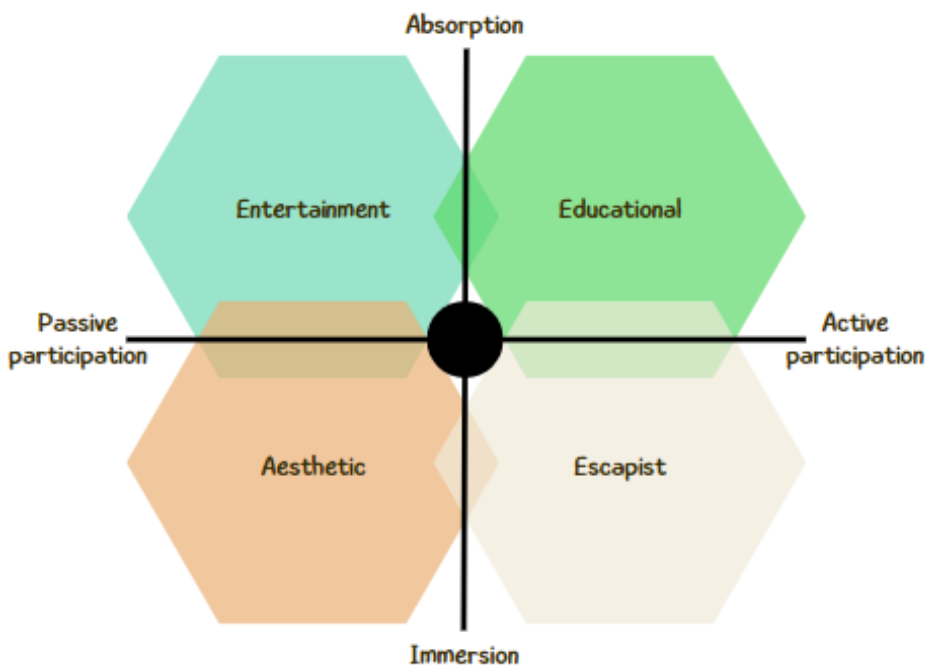


Figure 2. The Four Realms (adapted from Pine & Gilmore 2020, 39)

There are various types of tourism experiences located in rural Finland. According to Kozak and Bahçe's classification of special interest tourism types that are applied to niche tourism can also be applied to rural tourism. They suggest the four different types are based on nature, culture, education, and hobbies. Examples of nature-based tourism in rural Finland are farm tourism, nature tourism, winter/ski tourism, and wildlife tourism. The ones based on culture in Finland would be, for instance, culture and cultural heritage tourism and festival tourism. Tourism is based on hobbies such as hunting and golf tourism. (Sert 2017, 22.) The author would visualize and place the different tourism types mentioned earlier in the Four Realms, as Figure 3 shows. In Finnish rural tourism, the experiences would be emphasised more in absorption and passive participation, as rural tourism in Finland is seen more in relaxation and calmness than extreme sports activities.
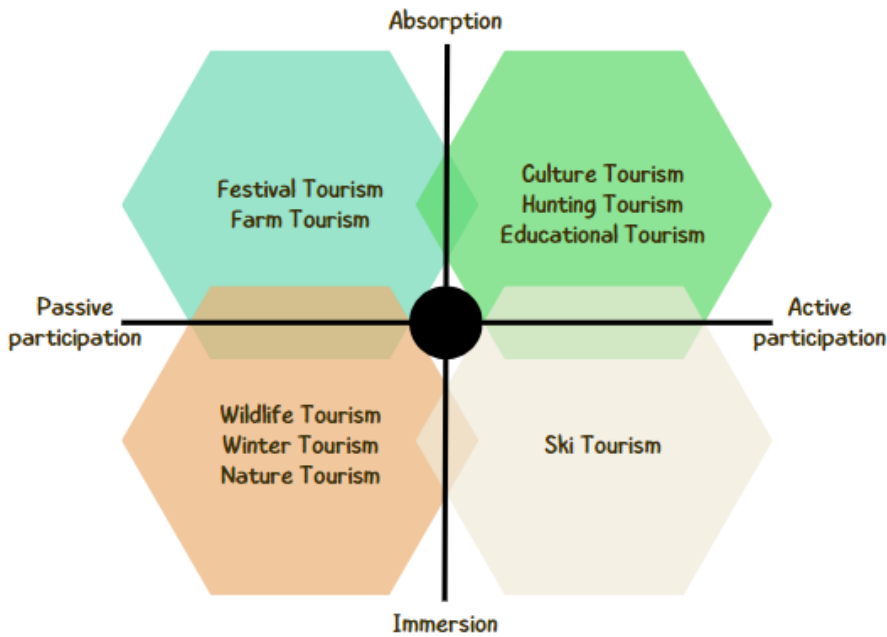
Figure 3. Rural tourism experiences (adapted from Sert 2017, 22)

The Experience Pyramid, visualised in Figure 4, is a model for analysing and understanding the levels of the created experience. The tool identifies critical aspects of the product for improvement and differentiation from other companies, which then benefits the competition. The model is to analyse an experience from two points of view: horizontal as the guest's experience and vertical as the guest's journey in different stages. Guest experience is the level at which service providers can make improvements and moderations. A horizontal level emphasises elements of individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory perception, contrast, and interaction. The model visualizes the ideal, a perfect product with all these elements fully represented at every vertical point, as in the guest's journey. The vertical level visualises the levels of experience from pre-experience to post-experience, from motivational curiosity level to mental transformation, where an individual changes their thoughts and behaviour. (Tarssanen 2009, 11–12.)
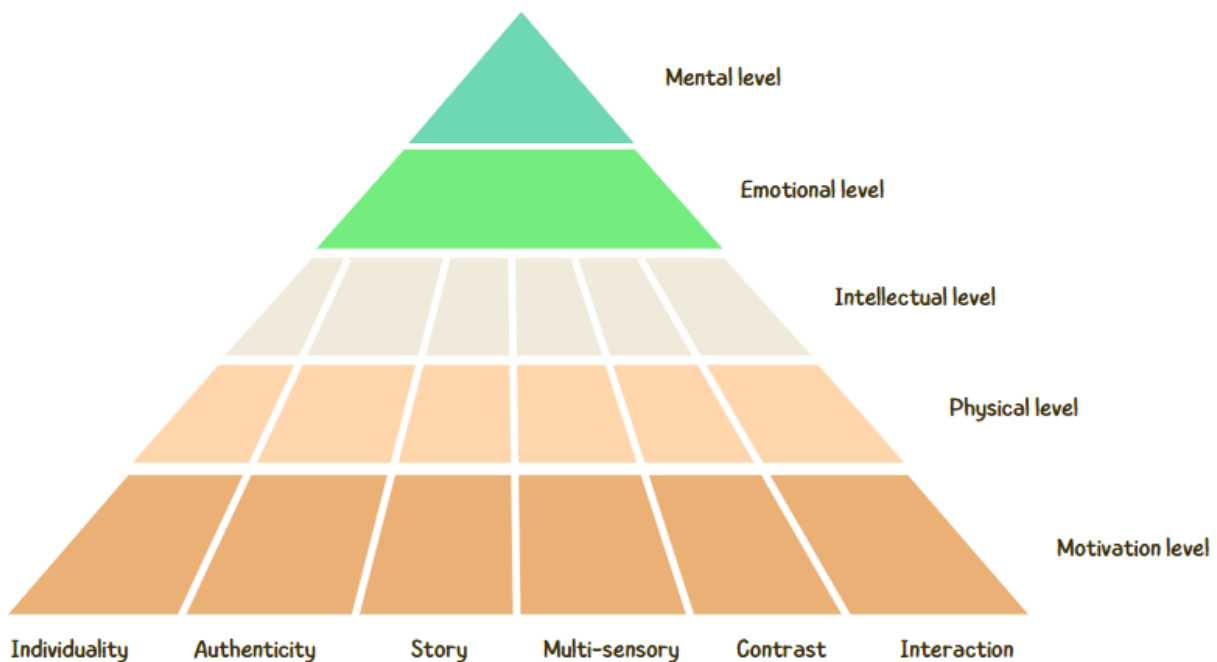
Figure 4. The Experience Pyramid model (adapted from Tarssanen 2009, 11)

The experience differs from the usual service as added factors include customization, theatricality, and thematic elements. Services are offered to customers, whereas experiences are provided for guests. In an experience, employees work as if playing roles on stage during the interaction. (Pine & Gilmore 2020, 39-48.) From these staged experiences and interactions, guests get unique and memorable experiences. As a result, they stay longer in a destination and are willing to pay more. It is possible to develop any service, from parking hall to computer installation, which then generates more value for guests and the destination and more money for the company. (Pine & Gilmore 2020, 3-7.) However, there is a different opinion as not all services need the experience kind of feelings. Consumer value can be divided into two different areas: the functionality of an individual needs as well as the experience or pleasure a product provides to an individual. The study's results also show that functional value, meaning what the consumer gets from that product or service consumption, is sometimes higher than the experience value. An example of this behaviour would be when shopping or eating in a fast-food restaurant. (Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2007, 399-404.)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, people have various experiences all the time, everywhere (Oh et al. 2007, 120). Tourism companies aim to ensure that their experiences are as positive as possible. The experiences bring the travellers more value and something to remember, for which they are willing to pay more. (Pine & Gilmore 2020,1-21.)  Everyone experiences things differently.

Therefore, the experience is something that cannot be created as "*the product*" to sell because it needs to be moderated for all travellers.

However, studies have considered that negative experiences are minor. The memorable experiences can also be negative, as we can read and learn from online reviews. According to Sthapit, Björk, and Jiménez Barreto's accommodation experience study, the negative memorable experience in accommodations is mainly related to a lack of cleanliness, an unpleasant host, or poor customer service from the company. (Sthapit, Björk & Jiménez Barreto 2021, 647.) These points could be considered in other rural tourism experiences.

## 3.1 Rural tourism experience

This part discusses the rural tourism experience in more detail. Essentially, the rural tourism experience must include a wide range of resources, attractions, services, people, and environments within a destination. These elements shape the overall experience and are potential points of interest for travellers. As mentioned in earlier chapter, specific characteristics like hospitality, traditions, and other features such as landscape are fundamental components of the rural tourism experience. Tourists, tourism companies, and locals create these experiences together. (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques & Lima 2012, 208.)

Usually, rural tourism experiences are filled with nostalgia, authenticity, and multi-sensory aspects, and some of these points were also mentioned in the Experience Pyramid in the previous part. Nostalgia seems more intriguing for domestic travellers when they travel to a destination for the first time. Nostalgia triggers more travellers' sensory experiences, both positive and negative memories, depending on travellers' past. It contributes more value to the rural tourism experience. (Christou, Farmaki & Evangelou 2018, 44-49.) Multi-sensory experiences create more positive emotions in rural environments, particularly delight and relaxation. Various sensory stimuli can activate different emotions in travellers. Sight, touch, and smell are linked to delight emotions and sight, hearing and smell are connected to relaxation. (Kastenholz, Marques & Carneiro 2020, 8.)

Vacation trips are willingly chosen to fulfil travellers' desires and are not out of obligation. Travellers actively engage in planning, experiencing, and reflecting on their vacations, investing their time, effort, and money because they value the process. This differs from traditional purchases made for practical reasons, such as food shopping. Tourists seek authentic experiences to participate in and learn from physically and mentally. (Prebensen, Chen & Uysal 2018, 2.) Prebensen and Foss suggest (2011, 61) that engagement, participation, and involvement generate more positive experiences and add value for travellers. Consequently, it is assumed that a higher level of involvement in the experience brings the guest a more memorable and meaningful experience.

Interaction, also mentioned as one element in the Experience Pyramid at the beginning of this chapter, can be the successful communication between the travellers or with the guide or host. Experiencing something together and being part of the group brings a sense of community and connects the individual tighter to a certain group. (Tarssanen 2009, 14-15.) This interaction between travellers and the guide needs to be genuine to create a positive image in individuals' minds, which can then increase their own personal status as well.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, extended stays in a destination create deeper engagement for travellers. The deeper connection with the place supports the sensorial experiences as travellers get more acquainted with local culture and products and purchase them. Additionally, it generates more value for travellers and enhances their positive image. (Pine & Gilmore 2020, 3-7.) One study related to sightseeing tours recognised that the tour guide plays a role as the key factor in designing the experience. The results also validate the importance of customisation, and on the other hand, it claims that factors like transportation quality, accuracy, security, or comfort are more closely linked to customer satisfaction rather than necessarily translate into an exceptional, memorable experience. (Zatori, Smith & Puczko 2018, 117-119.) The importance of nostalgia and sensory stimuli emphasises and supports the social-culture sustainability of the local and rural communities. (Kastenholz, Fernández-Ferrín & Rodrigues 2021, 615.) This important point has been mentioned as people then take the memories of their vacation home, share pictures and their stories, and return to the rural area on their future vacations.

## 3.2   Authentic experience

Defining an authentic and authentic experience cannot be limited to a single definition, as every traveller perceives authenticity differently. However, authenticity is described as *"the quality of being real or true"* (Cambridge Dictionary s.a a). Authenticity is one element of the Experience Pyramid explained at the beginning of this chapter and visualised in Figure 4, which is an important part leading to a mental, transformative experience.

The shift to the experience economy has transformed expectations and preferences as consumers want more memorable events to engage with on a deeper level. Authenticity comes forth when all are staged experiences as consumers try to find *"real, original, genuine, sincere"* offerings. (Gilmore & Pine 2007, 1.) Therefore, travellers are looking for more authentic experiences to learn from, such as experiences related to local community traditions rather than destination attractions built to attract guests. However, it needs to examine what authenticity means to the consumer in that exact product and its impact on their behaviour. (Castéran & Roederer 2013, 160.)

Regardless of the complex nature, authenticity is a relevant part of tourism and creating experiences as it represents the existent and real living habits and culture of a place. The experience is not ethnically sustainable if it, for instance, reveals incorrect information or impressions of the local community. This action gives travellers a wrong impression of the culture and insults the identity of the representatives of specific cultures. What is then genuinely authentic? Tarssanen (2009, 12-40.) points out the behaviours merged into one culture so well that it might be possible to know the original ones, even for locals.

Authentic experience impresses travellers the most and its' best, it may lead them to transformative experiences (Tarssanen 2006, 6). Adding meaningfulness and multisensory interactions to experiences brings potential advantages to a service provider and helps them stand out from the crowd. However, it is essential to understand different customer profiles, such as where they come from, and their social and cultural background. (Buzova, Cervera-Taulet & Sanz-Blas 2020, 137-138.)

The feeling of authenticity experience comes from the individual's previous experiences as well as their knowledge. (Gilmore & Pine 2007, 8.) For someone with little knowledge and who has not been skiing in the mountains, the ski slope indoors with snow and some penguins wandering around might seem like an authentic experience. Therefore, authenticity is created in every individual's mind. Wang (1999, 366) claims that if the environment around the experience is artificial, some tourists have the ability to seek authenticity elsewhere in their tourism experience. This means that the feeling of authenticity appears to different travellers in different ways, and travellers may seek authenticity in themselves and through engagement. However, Castéran and Roederer (2013,153) claim in their study that the lack of artificial elements in a Strasbourg Christmas market positively affects their feeling of authenticity and visiting regularity.

### 3.3   Memorable experience

The concept of a memorable tourism experience is described as a "*tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred*" (Kim, Ritchie & McCormick 2012, 13). This part focuses on positive, memorable experiences. Even as mentioned earlier at the beginning of this chapter, some memories can also be negative. Memorability in rural tourism comes from regular experiences with a touch of extraordinary and quality experience. Marschall (2012, 2217) also points out the contrast of travellers' lives affecting their vacations and bringing them memorable tourism experiences. Contrast is part of the element in the Experience Pyramid visualised in Figure 4. Positive, memorable experiences contribute loyalty to the destination and service provider (Chen & Rahman 2018, 160), and the experiences are shared with friends and family, bringing positive word of mouth (Marschall 2012, 2217).

Travellers are looking to understand the local culture of their destination. The more travellers engage with the original culture, the locals, and the local products, the more memories they make and receive more memorable experiences. Therefore, guided tours, guidebooks, and other literature increase travellers' memorable experiences. (Chen & Rahman 2018, 160.) Ponsignon, Lunardo, and Michrafy's study (2021, 5-6) indicates higher satisfaction levels of experiences among foreign than domestic travellers. Additionally, older travellers express less satisfaction than younger travellers. Foreign travellers are also more pleased with their experience than domestic travellers. The conclusion suggests that these findings may be the escapism experienced, the fact that foreign travellers are further away from their homes and daily lives.

## 3.4   Storytelling

The story is one of the horizontal elements on the Experience Pyramid, described and visualised at the beginning of this chapter. A story can be challenging to explain, but all stories have similar characteristics as they are a series of events connected together in chronological order. Through stories, people tell what things have happened in their lives. Stories can also create sights, smells, and sounds (Sax, 2006, 165-167) as people make the pictures in their minds. Stories exist within the world, yet they have the power to set up a fictional event in the minds of an audience. The purpose of a story is an *"engagement or emotional immersion".* Storytelling is a tool to evoke emotional and cognitive reactions and can be used to accomplish goals. (Lugmayr, Sutinen, Suhonen, Sedano, Hlavacs & Montero 2017, 15710-15713.)

Through stories, people share the cultural heritage of rural communities (Lugmayr et al. 2017, 15707). Stories are linked to the authenticity element, which, at its best, creates a genuine, engaging experience. A good story includes elements of local knowledge, such as the area's history and old beliefs, which together form a part of a successful, memorable experience. (Tarssanen 2009, 13.) Therefore, as an element of a rural experience, stories serve as a vital communication tool for sharing a cultural heritage for future generations and for cherishing social-cultural sustainability. However, the stories of local cultures need to be acceptable to the local community, which is the only way they are sustainable (Tarssanen 2009, 41).

Quality storytelling increases the value of an experience as it captures the traveller's attention by affecting their feelings, and it may even change how they think. Therefore, the stories need to be moderated constantly to match the audiences' values. It is suggested that expertise in staging as a method for execution and storytelling be invested as a valuable resource. Therefore, they are crucial for meaningful tourist experiences. (Mathisen 2018, 138-142.)

Adding all the elements of an Experience Pyramid increases the value of a rural tourism experience for travellers. In addition to these elements, companies differentiate themselves from the masses, and they are able to generate more money from their offerings. (Tarssanen 2009, 11–12.) Rural tourism experiences are a significant part of rural tourism since they engage the events, creating emotional engagements with travellers. These emotional engagements increase the individual's memories, which are remembered and recalled later after their vacation and influence travellers' loyalty. Other important factors for travellers are authenticity, and storytelling in creating meaningful and memorable experiences. (Tarssanen 2009, 13.)

# 4  Sustainability

This chapter explores sustainability and its main components related to this context. Sustainability is defined as *"the quality of being able to continue over a period of time"* (Cambridge Dictionary s.a. d). Sustainability involves responsibly using resources to ensure they are available for future generations. Sustainability includes environmental factors, which are the world's natural resources; economic factors, such as economic well-being; and social factors, such as the quality of life of each human on earth. Sustainable development is a strategy of improving these factors for people now and the ability to leave the earth for future generations to fulfil their needs. (Maryville University 2020.)

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, sustainability is framed with environmental, economic, and social areas, which shall be considered at all levels. These three areas create three sustainability pillars, which are visualised in Figure 5. The origin of the three sustainability pillars concept is unclear, however, it is commonly used. (Purvis, Mao & Robinson 2012, 681-682.) There are other frames of sustainability. For instance, Clune and Zehnder Alexander (2018, 212) suggest a new approach for three pillars by Professor Alexander J.B Zehnder that involves a sustainability framework for more implementation and action of technology and innovation that are laws and governance as well as economics and financial incentives. In this thesis, the three most common sustainability pillar frameworks are used.

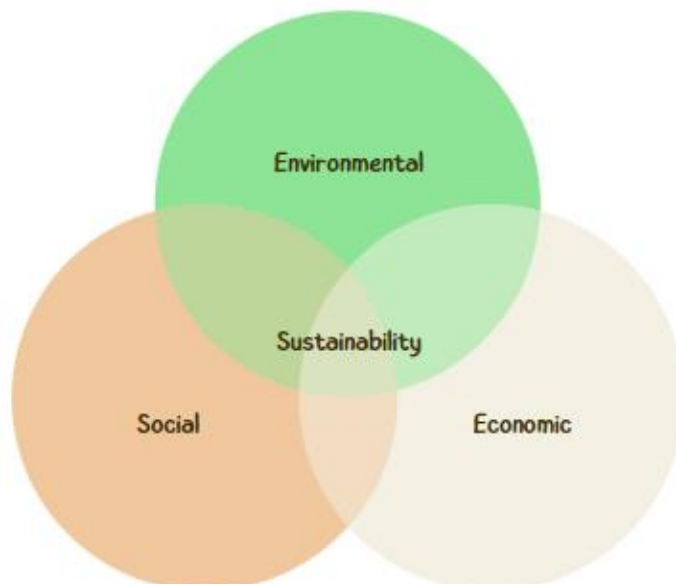Figure 5. Example of three pillars of sustainability

**Environmental sustainability** is about the good health of the nature around us, ensuring that it will continue to thrive and provide for human existence (Mensah 2019, 10). People and companies

depend on the planet, its resources, and the environment. The consequences may be tragic if we use these resources over limits and the planet's capacity. (Strange & Bayley 2008, 27.)  Mensah (2019, 8) concludes that what a person does affects all these three pillars of environment, economy, and society and, therefore, the continuity of humans on Earth. Nowadays, people are very well aware of global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and overconsumption. One result of these environmental challenges is turning towards a circular economy, where the economy operates on the limits of the planet's capacity by minimising the use of resources by keeping products in use as long as possible (Holmberg & Konttinen 2023, 131).

**Economic sustainability** refers to companies' and markets' ability to allocate resources, acknowledging that natural resources are not limitless. A company that implies an economic sustainability strategy also considers environmental sustainability. (Basiago 1999, 150.)

**Social sustainability** refers to people and their well-being. Healthy people contribute to successful companies. Therefore, poverty and diseases lead to unsuccessful companies. In the long run, economic and social sustainability are only possible if the environment is healthy. (Strange & Bayley 2008, 27.) Therefore, all the environmental, economic, and social areas are strongly connected and with the same importance to maintain and develop.

## 4.1   Sustainable tourism development

The concept of sustainable tourism consists of three pillars: environmental, economic, and social sustainability, described in more detail in the previous part. Sustainable tourism development can be described as *"tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs for visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities"* (United Nations Environment Programme & World Tourism Organization 2005,12). Sustainable development is a crucial and principal value for rural tourism, and it may generate the competitive advantage for company (Rosalina, Dupre & Wang 2021, 142).

Sustainable tourism includes being aware of the current impacts and taking care of the challenges to achieve sustainable development goals. One of the major challenges is that tourism involves the movement of individuals, commodities, finance, and ideas across regions and destinations with a complex network of numerous interactions in social processes. (Saarinen 2006, 1124-1126.) Therefore, encouraging more sustainable practices for tourism companies, travellers, and all other stakeholders is needed.

The concept of three sustainability pillars described in the previous part can be used when exploring the UN's (United Nations specialised agency in the tourism field) universal plan adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the

Sustainable Development Goals cover the sustainable issues to protect *"people, planet and prosperity"*. Their 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) answer environmental, economic, and social challenges (United Nations s.a.) and are presented below in Figure 6.



Figure 6. The Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations s.a.)

The hospitality and tourism sector has the potential to contribute to Sustainable Development Goals and play a central role in achieving these objectives. The key players, such as destination management organisations (DMOs), must address challenges in their current sustainability strategies, communicate those to all their stakeholders and adopt new approaches related to Sustainable Development Goals. The concerns about sustainability with current economic growth are likely to continue. (Hillier, Comfort & Jones, 2017, 14-15.) There is a need for better knowledge, also sharing this knowledge with other companies and guests, and finding ways to minimise environmental impact. Reusing and recycling are important across the tourism supply chain (Manniche, Broegaard & Larsen 2021, 14).

## 4.2 Other sustainable actions

In addition to sustainable development goals, other global frameworks and agreements are, for instance, UNESCO's World Heritage Sites that preserve more than 1000 attractions that are related to tourism. Other agreements are the General Agreement on Trades and Services covering industries including tourism, market access and Paris Agreement in 2015 stopping climate change. UNESCO actively develops plans and policies to increase awareness for all people. UNESCO

protects the sites and promotes sustainability benefits for communities and the economy. (Coghlan 2023, 139-140.) All the regulations are "*designed to safeguard human wellbeing, the integrity of natural systems, the protection of cultural, built and natural heritage*" (Coghlan 2023, 160), and they need to be communicated to stakeholders as well as supported by the governments and managers of different companies. There are also many national laws and regulations related to sustainability that affect tourism companies' operations. For instance, in Finland, the "*Act on Travel Service Combinations*" and the "*Land Use and Building Act*", ensure responsible, sustainable, and safe land use. (Coghlan 2023, 149-164; Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority s.a.; Finnish Lapland Tourist Board 23 May 2017.)

Sustainability in the tourism sector means, among other things, the ability to avoid overconsumption, prioritise sustainable quality over quantity and maintain travellers, employees and the community's well-being. Recognising that healthy individuals create more money for a company is needed. (Maryville University 2020.) Challenges in achieving sustainable tourism include the complex network of interactions across regions and destinations and requiring stakeholders to adopt more sustainable practices. (Saarinen 2006, 1124-1126.) The tourism sector can contribute to achieving sustainability and become a role model for other industries by addressing the challenges of environmental, social, and economic sustainability and adopting new approaches. This involves sharing knowledge, minimising environmental impacts through practices and fostering collaboration among all stakeholders.

The theoretical framework with key concepts of rural tourism, experience and sustainability has been investigated. Their main elements that are relevant to this thesis project has been fully discussed for the understanding the most crucial points. Next, the empirical part of this thesis project will present the main factors of the research.

# 5   Research Methodology

This chapter familiarises the empirical part of the thesis work and the research methodology. The main differences between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are described. The chosen scientific research methodology and how it is planned, used, and implemented in this thesis project is presented. Additionally, this chapter describes the research design and how the data will be collected and analysed.

The author's investigation of the main research question, "*How to get travellers to explore more rural Finland?*" is the addressed research problem of this thesis. The author aims to answer the question with gathered data from semi-structured and thematic interviews. With the gathered data and the findings, the author is able to conclude by relating the findings to the theoretical part for conclusions. Seven interviewees were people who live and frequently travel in Finland. The research focused on domestic tourists aged between 25 and 35 who visit rural Finland. The author wanted to get the perspectives of this group of people, as domestic travellers bring more revenue for rural tourism companies (Pesonen 2012, 79). On the other hand, foreign travellers seem happier with rural tourism services (Ponsignon et al. 2021, 5-6). In addition, three tourism company specialists were interviewed to get a clearer picture of their operations and to support the conclusions from their point of view. All the interviews took place during two weeks in April 2024.

With the findings of the interviews, the author will provide the answers to the sub-questions:

*SQ1: What elements do individuals require to travel more to rural Finland?*

*SQ2: What is the benefit of travelling further from the most touristic areas?*

Rural tourism, rural tourism in Finland, the experience and its different characteristics, and sustainability have been reviewed in the earlier chapters in the theoretical part of the thesis. The thesis aims to discover what travellers require to explore more rural Finland. With sub-questions, the thesis aims to present the elements that would motivate travellers to more rural areas and find their opinions of the benefits of travelling to rural Finland. Through the interviews with rural tourism specialists, the author wishes to understand their operations to support the overall conclusions. The research of this thesis also aims to identify the potential of Finnish rural tourism. After analysing the results, the author seeks solutions to motivate domestic tourists to travel more to rural Finland and offers suggestions for rural tourism companies.

## 5.1   Research designs

Quantitative research consists of numbers, and qualitative research consists of meanings. These two research approaches are the primary types, and they are used separately but also alongside, which helps the researcher to make more comprehensive findings. (Hirsjärvi, Remes, Sajavaara & Sinivuori 2010, 137.) Finding the most suitable strategy and methodology that align with the selected research topic and the research problem is crucial for achieving the best results for the research work (Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 132).

A quantitative research approach investigates the connection between different variables, the effects, mechanisms, phenomenon, and their causes. When using the quantitative research method for analysis, it is necessary to recognise the potential and limitations. It is important to think, for instance, about what kind of sampling to use and how to add specific questions, as this also affects the responses. In addition, the responses may come from only certain types of people, and some might have difficulties correctly expressing themselves when asking open questions. (Tähtinen, Laakkonen, Broberg & Tähtinen 2020, 11-26.)

Different research methods are utilised to gather information. Research methods consist of various practices, such as using observation, survey questionnaires, or different interview techniques. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 183.)  The interviews are usually qualitative research methods, which have more flexibility than surveys, as the interviewer can modify the order of questions as well as ask follow-up questions. In the interviews, the interviewee's voice is clearer than on surveys, as the interviewer is able to make sure that everything is understood. Also, the sampling error, meaning the difference between an interviewee and the represented population, might be smaller than in quantitative methods. The interviews are interaction situations, and therefore, they can also use observation methods. (Tähtinen et al. 2020, 25.)

Qualitative research aims to explore a phenomenon and its unexpected findings. The data can be examined in detail from various perspectives. The sample is chosen purposefully, every interview is observed, and the results are interpreted according to the interviewees' perceptions. The data may consist of one case or various individual interviews. The aim is not to gather the average regularities but rather to widen individuals' voices and opinions. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 164-181.)

In this thesis project, the author used the qualitative research methodology, which offers a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This research is trying to address how travellers would explore more rural tourism experiences in Finland, which is also the phenomenon of this project work. Through qualitative research, the study examines the "*how*" and "*what*" aspects of the

phenomenon, which are the most important to this thesis work. The qualitative research was implemented by conducting interviews with domestic travellers and tourism specialists in Finland.

## 5.2 Interviews

The author decided to collect the data by conducting interviews, as they are more flexible and allow more interaction with interviewees. In this way, the author seeks to find the relationship between travellers and rural tourism and to investigate individuals' opinions. Interviews are a very popular way of gathering qualitative research material. It is built with engagement between the interviewee and interviewer. The questions are divided into order or themes. Interviews mostly take place face-to-face or through online applications. Usually, before the interview, the interviewer prepares the questions beforehand. During and after the interview, the interviewer saves the data, analyses the results, and reports the findings. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016, 83-84.)

A semi-structured interview with a traveller was chosen for the interview type, as it can be used to investigate research questions starting with "*what*" and "*how*". In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has prepared questions beforehand but is able to change the used words and the order of questions in an interview situation if necessary. An interviewer needs to be prepared and listen very carefully so that all the questions are covered, and the answers are well noted. Analysing and comparing interviews may be challenging, as the interviews might be long without a very clear structure. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016, 94-95.) In this type of interview, the interviews are more variant, meaning they are not the same. The interviewer can skip questions and even create new ones as long as the base is the same for each interview. The interviewer's task is to make the interview situation comfortable and to encourage the interviewee to share needed information. (Brett & Wheeler 2023, 23.)

The thematic interview occurred with the rural tourism specialists, as the author aimed to widen her knowledge through their company operations. To support the conclusions, the responses were gathered to hear more details about their offered experiences and current developments. The interviewer chose a thematic interview type as the interview was directed at tourism entrepreneurs with experience in the field. The thematic interview is focused on selected themes that allow the interviewee to talk widely about their perspectives. The interview is closer to the unstructured interview, and it does not have chosen specific questions. In this type of interview, the themes are the same for everyone, but the interviewee can talk flexibly. Therefore, in the end, the data collected is quite different from different interviews. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 47-48.)

When creating interview questions, it is necessary to consider what information is needed for the required results. In qualitative interviews, the questions may be different, as some questions may

not fit each interviewee's previous responses, or they may have already covered another question. (Brett & Wheeler 2022, 39.) An interview is created with open and straightforward questions. With open-ended questions, the interviewee has the freedom to answer wider, and it may encourage them to tell more stories about the topic. Questions shall also be neutral so the interviewee can answer from their perspective. During the interview, the interviewer is able to ask more detailed questions, the secondary questions, such as "*When you said x, what do you mean with that?*" (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016, 96.) However, the interviewer's skills may affect the data quality if they have not done interviews before. Doing interviews also takes time, and too long interviews may affect the interviewee's interest and the results. Data gathered in the interviews may cause some difficulties as every response differs. Interviews in a cross-cultural environment may make communication more difficult. (Brett & Wheeler 2022, 7.)

The data gathered is managed confidentially, and all the interviews are completed anonymously. Also, the gathered data will be deleted a month later. The author only gathered reasonable data for the thesis to ensure the interviewees' safety. The data collected after the transcription modification was offered to be shared with an interviewee. All this information was mentioned in the form and verbally at the beginning of each interview. The interviewer knew the travellers as they were found through her network, and this also built trust in answering and sharing information with the interviewer.

## 5.3   Focused group

The interview data should be as rich as possible to identify the chosen population. Therefore, the interview was conducted with domestic travellers aged between 25 and 35 years who regularly travel to Finland. These travellers were willing to participate in the interview and give their opinions about their experiences. The convenience sampling method was used to choose the interviewees, as there was a limited time for recruitment. The author had easy access to certain people through her networks. The convenience sampling method is only recommended for try-out interviews, not for the interview sampling strategy (Brett & Wheeler 2022, 39). When investigating experiences, the results are different depending on the individuals.

There were seven selected individuals, domestic travellers, who were willing to share their own stories and take part in the interview. The author was using her network as an opportunity to find potential interviewees for this research, as she did not have time to find strangers for the interviews. Mostly, the author did not know much about the interviewees' travelling preferences before the interview, and the author tried conducting the interviews and analysing the data in a neutral way. Full objectivity is impossible to reach, as the author has their own thinking and some knowledge gathered from the theoretical part before the interviews. Participants usually travel to

rural Finland on their own or with a partner. The interviews were held online through Teams, which creates everyone's own secure and personal space and also builds trust. One interview was conducted on a phone call. The interviews were recorded for transcription and further analysis.

To support the thesis project, another interview was created for the tourism specialists, the entrepreneurs offering rural experiences for travellers. The author expected to gather some insight from rural service providers, as they have practical knowledge and are also in contact with their guests daily. Thematic interviews took place in April with three tourism specialists from rural Finland. They were also chosen through the author's network and were willing to participate in the interviews.

## 5.4  Planning

This qualitative research was conducted with interviews to gather data. Due to the time limitations, the focus group was chosen from domestic travellers through the author's network. The author did not have enough time to find strangers for the interview, but she knew nothing about the interviewees' travelling preferences before the interviews. The interviews for rural tourism specialists were also from the researcher's network, although their operations were unfamiliar to the author before the interviews took place.

The potential participants were contacted on WhatsApp and asked if they would participate in the research. The author learned that these individuals regularly travel to Finland through her network and, therefore, are suitable for the focus group. After agreeing and scheduling the interview, the semi-structured interview questions were sent through WhatsApp. Given that most interviewees' native language is Finnish, the interview questions were translated into Finnish before they were sent. The participants had a chance to think about the questions before the interview and ask whether something was unclear for them. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and online using the Teams platform. One interview was conducted through a phone call. The researcher aimed to conduct at least six interviews during one week in April.

Rural tourism specialists were contacted through WhatsApp. The thematic interviews were held in April with three rural tourism service providers. The aim was to gather information on what kind of rural experiences different companies offer and if they are developing their experiences according to their travellers' feedback and needs.

The questions were categorised into groups to relate to the theoretical part of this thesis to get an order for further analysis. Different interview topics with travellers are themed to the travelling preferences, other characteristics of an experience, and sustainability. The interview with rural tourism specialists consists of characteristics of their experiences, sustainability, and thoughts on rural tourism in the future. The Finnish versions of the interview documents were sent to the

interviewees before the interview. The document mentioned anonymity and other security issues. The author mentioned those points again at the beginning of each interview. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer asked permission for recording. The author tested the interview with one person for timing and recording purposes. Those results are not considered in this thesis work. During the first couple of interviews, the author noticed that the definitions needed deeper descriptions. Therefore, the meaning of rural tourism in the context of this thesis project was explained at the beginning of the interviews. The final interview questions for travellers are in Appendix 2 and for rural tourism specialists in Appendix 3.

## 5.5    Data analysis

Data analysis is a research method of understanding qualitative data by gathering, for instance, differences and similarities between the interviews. The aim is to examine and interpret the data findings through the theoretical framework and by using the author's own thinking. Even though the author had some knowledge about the topics before the interviews took place, the author tried to neutrally analyse the results. There are many techniques for analysing the data, such as coding, typing, content analysis, and thematic analysis. Therefore, choosing the right one for specific research is necessary. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, chapter 4.1 and chapter 4.4.2.)

The process of data analysis consists of several stages, beginning with listening to the interviews. Afterwards, transcribing is suggested, which means changing the voice recording into a text. Text gives the data a simpler form and provides a clearer and bigger picture of the gathered data. In this thesis process, the author looked for similarities and interesting points in the conversations and highlighted those in the transcriptions straight after the interviews took place. This thematic analysis is a technique to understand the data by highlighting the points of what people have said about different themes. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, chapter 4.1) Thematic analysis helps the author better understand the interviewees' thoughts and perspectives.

The data gathered usually is a lot of information, and all the information cannot be mentioned in the project. Therefore, the results consist of only a small piece of chosen data gathered, although the phenomenon is described as wide as possible. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, chapter 4.1.) This qualitative research project brought some new perspectives that the author did not think about beforehand, which are mentioned in the next chapter.

# 6 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the research. The findings focus on aspects related to the research questions, and the relation between the findings and the theoretical framework is discussed. In addition, this chapter is focused on the data gathered from the interviews. Similarities, differences, and other important findings are described. The interviews conducted individually in April contain seven interviews with travellers and three with rural tourism specialists whom the author found through her network.

## 6.1 Semi-structured interview findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with domestic travellers who regularly visit rural Finland. The interview document was sent to all participants in advance, allowing the author to clarify any necessary questions. No questions arose before the interviews, but some clarifications regarding specific questions were necessary during the interviews. Before each interview started, the definition of rural tourism in the context of this thesis and the information about anonymity and other security issues were discussed. The interviewer also asked permission to record the interviews. All interviews were performed in Finnish except for one in English. The interviews with travellers took place between the 15th and 23rd of April, each lasting around 40 minutes.

No notes were taken during the interviews to ensure the smooth flow of the conversation. Some clarifications related to questions about rural tourism definition, travelling preferences and the important factors of rural Finland were necessary. The interviewees were happy to answer all the questions after the author clarified the meaning related to her thesis project. The interviewer sometimes had to rephrase questions to enhance more detailed responses. Impressively, halfway through the interviews, the author started to notice similar responses and also faced some new perspectives. The author found it very interesting to learn from other travel perspectives. The interviewees were encouraged to answer the questions through their own rural travelling stories to help the interviewer fully understand the responses.

Following each interview, the author transcribed the sessions and wrote down the key points for further analysis. The transcriptions were also slightly simplified to ease the analysing process. The questions of the interview were pre-themed, but some rearrangements were made during the analysis to organise data better. The interviewer used a coding technique, using different colours to identify similar themes and patterns, and the results were introduced thematically.

**Introduction/common travelling preferences**

The first theme focused on the introductions. The author wanted to ask clear, opening questions to start the interviews smoothly and comfortably. Initially, the author aimed to understand the interviewees' perceptions of rural tourism and their general travel preferences, not those specifically related to travelling in rural areas. Five respondents travelled to rural Finland for social reasons, as they have friends or family living there. All participants mentioned nature as a reason to visit rural Finland. One respondent goes to rural Finland weekly for work reasons.

The primary motivation for all respondents to travel to rural Finland is to relax and take a break from their urban lives. Spending time in a cottage with loved ones was highlighted in three interviews, and visiting spa destinations was mentioned in one interview. Hiking trails and travelling to national parks were mentioned in two interviews as reasons for travelling to rural Finland. Figure 7 illustrates the key factors that lead travellers to rural Finland.

There was a broad perception of rural tourism in Finland among the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer briefly explained what rural tourism means in the context of this thesis project. All respondents mentioned diverse nature destinations, and two respondents added outdoor activities as an attraction. Additional insights included memories of childhood caravan life, visits to summer villages and summer theatres, and a few notable services. In two interviews, the need for services in the destination was mentioned. Interestingly, two interviews mentioned various rural areas' different cultures, histories, and traditions, such as local cuisine. One respondent also highlighted the other people and accents that can be met and experienced in rural areas. The main thoughts are visualised in Figure 7.
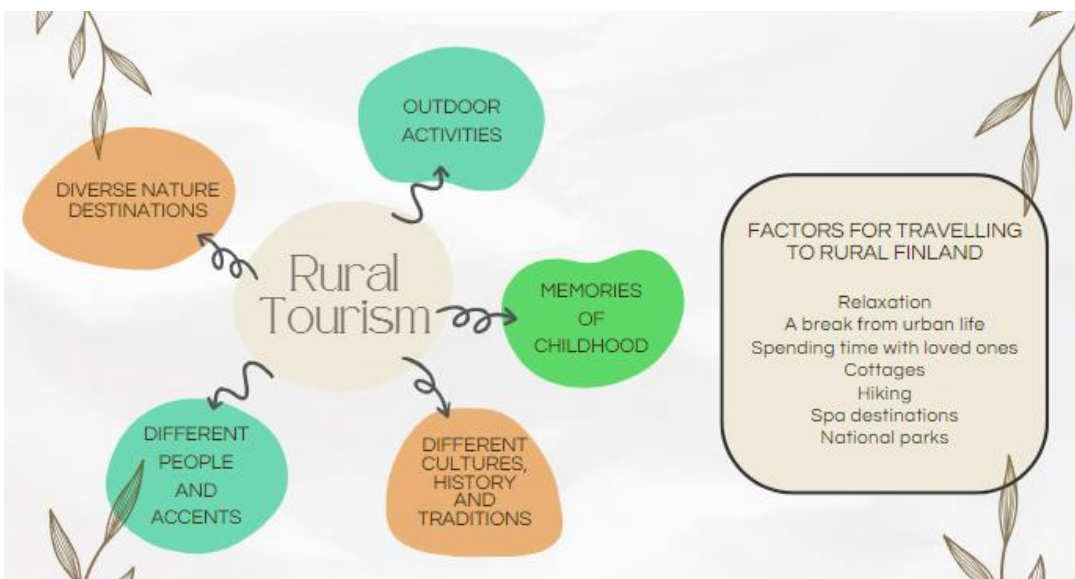


Figure 7. The summary of motivations and thoughts about rural tourism

**Characteristics in rural tourism experiences**

With the following questions, the author explored the characteristics of rural tourism experiences, aiming to understand what aspects bring more value to travellers. Their opinions about the differences between rural and urban experiences were also discussed. Rural Finland was seen as quieter, more peaceful, relaxed, idyllic, and rustic. Rural Finland was described as a place for enjoying "*just being*". Two respondents mentioned transportation as a challenge and said that most areas require a car for accessibility. In contrast, urban areas were characterised by the continual rush, better transportation options, and a wider range of services and products available. All respondents agreed that there is a huge difference between urban and rural, which is sometimes easy to forget. One respondent answered, *"…when you go out of the urban cities, out of the daily bubble, then you realise the difference"*. One respondent mentioned the conversations with local people and the feeling of a warm and kind community-oriented atmosphere in a rural village, *"which would not happen in cities like Espoo or Helsinki".*

The interviews also investigated memorability and authenticity, as well as their connection to the value created in travel experiences. Respondents shared various memorable moments differentiated from positive experiences, like spending time with friends, experiencing kind hospitality at a farmhouse, and seeing and learning new things, to negative experiences, such as inadequate customer service or interrupted hiking trips. Regarding learning, one respondent was mentioning when you realise many things are taken for granted at home, it might not be in nature.

The authenticity question was challenging to answer, and the interviewer explained it to be something different to every individual. In the end, the answers had a lot of similarities. The authenticity was described as *"some local experiences in a specific place that might not be elsewhere, some unique experience"*. One respondent described authenticity as a thing that has always been in its place, and nothing is built and told as authentic. One interviewee mentioned that people are the main reason for something to feel authentic. It includes real engagement with locals and is not always what is built. It is something that has a meaning, whether there are tourists or not. One answer for authenticity was *"honest real"*. One interviewee was saying the following, and the other respondent was pointing out similar things:

Woman, 31: *"The authentic experience is not made for the tourists; that is what brings the real feeling of an experience; it exists in the rural area anyway. It can be very simple and does not need to be luxurious. Something fake would be something even repulsive to me. I would not want to support some artificial experience that company tells it is an authentic experience. It would be too commercial their operations and something that they are not".*

The question *"What are the things you value in a rural tourism experience?"* got confused thoughts with its similarity with the question *"What factors of rural Finland are the most important to you?"*. Even though the responses had some repetition to the previous question, most interviewees mentioned some variation, such as cooking together with people (when in a cottage), trying local food specialities, and engaging with rural tourism providers that welcome guests to their lives and homes. One respondent mentioned the appreciation of guided experiences that offer the freedom to explore and not feel obligated to participate in activities.

Furthermore, four respondents described a good rural tourism service provider as someone who not only offers excellent customer service throughout the engagement but also possesses effective marketing skills to attract travellers, especially in rural areas. Important factors mentioned included that someone was there welcoming you upon arrival and that information about the company was easily accessible, as well as the place and local activities. Two respondents also mentioned the activities and food service so that travellers can rely on and enjoy the destination as much as possible. One interviewee described a good rural tourism provider as follows:

Woman, 29: *"A good entrepreneur who knows and listens to their customers is very innovative. They are interested in continuously developing their services and their destination based on the feedback they receive. They are constantly looking for things to develop, and their mission is also to connect people in this rural village".*

**Sustainability in Rural Tourism experiences**

As mentioned earlier, sustainability is the core of any company's operation and development; therefore, the author wanted to know travellers' opinions on the topic as well. The sustainability was described in the beginning of each interview. The author wanted to know whether the participants are considering sustainability when making travel decisions and if sustainability is very clearly seen in the companies' operations. All the respondents recognised the importance of sustainability when travelling. Nevertheless, three respondents admitted that sustainability is not a primary consideration when making their travel decisions. This was because of the convenience of using personal vehicles and the absence of suitable transportation alternatives.

Interviewees offered good, versatile opinions of storytelling and its impact on the socio-cultural sustainability of destinations. One interviewee noted that the story helps define a particular place, attracting travellers from the beginning to travel to the destination, and it strengthens the community's image. All seven respondents agreed that stories are essential as they awaken their interest and enhance the memorability of their experience. One mentioned how storytelling must reflect a place's and people's true nature. This is also an important point, as the other interviewee

mentioned an example of how one rural tourism destination was made very attractive through storytelling but did not meet the traveller's expectations when visiting it. One respondent connected storytelling to authenticity and said that storytelling is an important part of the continuity of different cultures. One interviewee described that protecting some sacred places is possible by helping travellers understand and respect their importance.

The interviewees observed that sustainability practices were mainly centred around accommodation providers. Four interviewees highlighted actions such as reducing water use, no daily linen changes, and promoting local products. One respondent questioned the feasibility of fully sustainable practices, especially for young and small entrepreneurs. Two respondents described nature conservation efforts in Finland, including the possibility of recycling. On the other hand, one respondent mentioned that poor transportation often limits the use of more sustainable public transport options. Most of the conversations were about environmental sustainability, but social sustainability was brought up, including employment opportunities for disabled or locally unemployed individuals.

**Suggestions ideas**

The last theme concluded and finished the interview. The interviewees mentioned the advantages of rural tourism experiences and some ideas for the tourism service providers to develop and attract more people. The advantages of rural tourism experiences for travellers were similar to the question, "*What is the difference between urban areas' and rural areas' experiences in your opinion?"* among the interviewees. The responses were similar to previous ones, such as nature, relaxation, peacefulness, escape from urban stress, and it calms your mind. One interviewee emphasised how rural tourism offers a lot to see and gain new experiences as it widens the travellers' perspectives through engagement with diverse people, and for instance, seeing where the food comes from. The other two responses were quite similar as they highlighted the learning from rural experiences, which is something that you might forget when living in a city. One of these responses continues:

Man, 25: *"It is a totally different life, with different scenery and people, and there are so many things and experiences that can appear as a surprise to a traveller who's living in a city. It is a learning and self-development, even transformative moments, and it gives new perspectives of a life".*

There was a wide range of ideas and responses for attracting more domestic travellers to rural areas. One respondent would encourage the rural companies to organise more events throughout the year and also mentioned consideration of partnership marketing as a cost-effective strategy.

Marketing was mentioned in all the interviews as crucial in bringing more travellers to rural Finland. Effective use of social media, commercial collaborations, partnerships, and influencers was recommended to help potential travellers discover rural destinations that might otherwise be impossible to find. One of these respondents continues.

Man, 30: *"I would be even more interested in travelling to rural Finland if I knew what else is there. When on holiday, I appreciate quietness, relaxation, good food, and a clean natural environment. The destination can easily be rural Finland, and I would gladly support these Finnish entrepreneurs".*

## 6.2 Thematic interview findings

The thematic interview was conducted with three rural tourism specialists who have been running their companies for several years in rural Finland. The author selected these entrepreneurs through her network because their offerings include both accommodation and activity, aligning well with the research focus on experiences. Two of these rural companies are based in Northern Finland, and one company is in Eastern Finland. All the conversations were conducted in Finnish, and the interview themes were told before the interview took place. The interviews for rural tourism entrepreneurs were conducted between the 24th and 26th of April, and the interviews lasted around one hour.

Before each interview, the interviewer presented the thesis topic, and the interviewees provided some information about their companies. The entrepreneurs willing to participate in the interview offered similar experiences, but their operational approaches differed a lot. Some notes were taken during the interview, primarily to remind the interviewer to ask for further details on the interviewees' responses. The interviewees were happy to answer according to the themes, and the interviewer was mainly listening, but was also asking some more details. The interviews with rural tourism specialists had interesting, and very different responses about their operations. There was a lot of gathered data from the three thematic interviews. After transcription, the author simplified and used coding for the texts to make the further reading easier.

**Introduction / The company experiences**

Although the interviewees presented their companies before the interview started, the interviewer got a lot deeper information when the conversations moved forward to the initial themes of each interview. The author wanted to understand travellers' profiles and motivations for choosing the company's experiences. Also, the author was interested in learning more about current developments or collaborations with other companies.

**Interview 1, a company offering activities in Lapland:**

Most of the company's guests are foreign, although domestic travellers are also their guests. The most popular experience that travellers are looking for is husky safaris. The company offers other experiences related to reindeer and horses, as well as some accommodation in nature. Domestic travellers are primarily looking for experiences related to horse riding, and some are also interested in huskies when visiting. The company has domestic visitors throughout the year who are interested in the history and stories about the animals. The interviewee has also noticed the need to learn new things when travelling, and the conversations between the guide and travellers are directly related to satisfaction. The company has good communication and partnerships with neighbouring companies in the destination. The entrepreneur sees partnerships as very important as they bring visibility, help and learn from each other, and get to know different people and ways of operations.

**Interview 2, a company offering activities and luxury accommodation in North Finland:**

The company offers private experiences based on the "*live like a local*" concept. Travellers are usually couples. The entrepreneur welcomes their guests to participate in their daily life by taking them to fells to see the reindeer herder's daily routines. After the reindeer herder experience, the guests usually continue with a sauna experience back in the reindeer ranch, where they also have accommodation. The range of offered experiences is niche, as they are all based on the owner's daily life. As the entrepreneur confirms, all the activities looking after the reindeer herd happen daily whether there are bookings or not. As the accommodation company is relatively small, the entrepreneur wishes to develop marketing services to offer the whole destination to one group travelling together. Their guests seek authentic and unique experiences, and all their offerings happen in the Finnish wilderness. The entrepreneur has some partnerships in the rural area but works together more with companies located in more populated destinations.

**Interview 3, a company offering accommodation in Eastern Finland:**

The company attracts an equal mix of domestic and foreign travellers, primarily young adventurers and couples. Many visitors are on their way to the national park in Eastern Finland. While most travellers are looking for a place to accommodate, some couples seek a peaceful escape to immerse themselves in nature over the weekend. The company's roots are connected to the environment and community, and they are creating connections with the natural world, as well as the local culture. The company offers comfortable accommodations and authentic nature experiences with easy access to breathtaking wilderness. The company partners with some of the other companies

in the area, and they hope to develop some experience packages with various companies in the future.

**Characteristics in rural tourism experiences**

The theme was to get more insights into how the companies have created their experiences and what they have considered in developing them. The author wanted to know about some elements related to the theoretical part, such as memorability, authenticity, and storytelling, and how they are seen in experiences.

In the first interview, the importance of a guide to ensure safety is highlighted as a creation of a tourism experience. The guide's tasks are to create the experience through storytelling and, therefore, also educate the travellers. The memorable experience in their operations is created through personal storytelling by guides, intimate group interactions, and the uniqueness of activities, such as glamping in a remote location. The inclusion of local cultural elements adds to the memorability of the experience. The entrepreneur discussed providing authentic experiences through their local guides and staff, who share insights about Finnish culture and local life. The use of local animals and the stories of the Sámi culture told by Sámi people enhance the authenticity of their tourist experiences and how their passion for dogs and horses turned into a company.

In the second interview, the elements of offering "*live like a local*" experiences are the factors that emphasise the unique and authentic experience. The entrepreneur aims to create an environment where guests can immerse themselves in local culture and integrate the travellers into their daily routines and activities, such as reindeer herding, enhancing authenticity. The storytelling is emphasised as a vital part of the guests' experience. Stories about local history, culture, and traditions make the experience more memorable and authentic. The accommodation in the luxurious glass igloos enhances memorability.

In the third interview, the entrepreneur emphasised the authenticity of experiencing life close to nature, simplicity, genuine rural lifestyles, and traditional Finnish rural activities. From their point of view, the physical setting around the accommodations, with forest, peace, and the forest animals and birds, serves as an authentic environment that strongly contrasts with urban life. Not-guided activities, such as heating the sauna, swimming in the river, cooking by the fire, and biking with "*old-style bicycles*", support the authenticity of a Finnish lifestyle. Memorable experience is created through personal interactions, such as cooking with guests or sharing wildlife and personal stories, and they usually become the highlights of a guest's stay. The interviewee enhanced the importance of storytelling as it connects guests with the local culture and history and adds depth to

the traveller's experience. It is also mentioned that storytelling is used as a marketing tool in the operations to share the company's rural life and experiences.

**Sustainability in Rural Tourism experiences**

As sustainability needs to be considered in every company operation and development, the author wanted to know about the entrepreneurs' sustainability actions in their daily operations. Additionally, the marketing strategies were asked briefly.

In the first company, sustainability is a significant focus. The company has, for instance, the Sustainable Travel Finland label and has agreed to the UN's sustainability development goals. In the company, people and animal welfare, recycling, and using local resources are essential, and they are constantly looking for improvements in those areas. The interviewee mentions the need for technology and social media marketing development that would lead them to attract new audiences.

The second participant also mentioned some sustainability certifications, such as the Sustainable Travel Finland label, and said they considered solar panels and wind energy for more sustainable operations. All of their operations are based on an authentic, sustainable reindeer herder life. The entrepreneur does the marketing, and the global audience is reached through social media platforms and travel agencies where most of their guests come from.

The third entrepreneur strongly focuses on ecological and social sustainability, including eco-friendly buildings with no running water, promoting recycling, minimising waste, and buying local services and products. The very interesting point of the company's commitment to respecting environmental principles was not allowing motor vehicles near forestry accommodation areas to preserve the natural soundscape. The entrepreneur markets the company on trade shows and engages actively on social media to promote and get visibility for the company. The company has also gained a lot of visibility through local newspapers.

**Future of rural tourism**

Before finishing the interviews, the author wanted to know the entrepreneurs' opinions about the future of rural tourism in Finland. As a summary of all the interviews, it can be said that all of them see rural tourism growing in Finland in the future. They all mention the importance of good marketing strategies, and at the same time, social media marketing is one of the factors to develop in their companies.

Trends highlighted in interview 1 are the rush of travellers and how they have noticed the demand for short experiences, still with good quality. In interview 2, the entrepreneur discussed how travellers seem to look for authenticity and "*live like a local*" experience. The third interview brought nostalgia as a growing trend as people seem to look for their childhood lifestyles. All the respondents emphasised sustainability as an essential factor that will grow in the future. The increasing demand for authentic, relaxed environments and unique, authentic experiences away from crowded centres is increasing the potential for rural tourism to rise.

# 7    Discussion

The discussion chapter presents the research results, which are related to theories and interview responses. The aim is to explore whether this research answers the main research question and sub-questions. Additionally, this chapter introduces the limitations, suggestions for future research, and evaluations of self-learning.

## 7.1    Conclusion

This thesis aims to answer the main research question, "*How to get travellers to explore more rural Finland?*" (RQ1). The thesis focused on the rural areas in Finland, where the number of travellers differs a lot depending on the area, as most travels only focus on certain parts of the country. This research work aimed to answer the main research question by exploring the domestic travellers' perspectives and motivations to visit more rural Finland and the factors they value in a rural environment.

With a large amount of gathered data from the interviews, the author was able to choose the perspectives that were most interesting and important to this thesis project. The primary aim was to interview ten individuals, but due to time limitations, the interview was conducted with seven domestic travellers. The number of interviews was enough, as there happened to be a lot of similar answers, and the author found some unique and unpredictable points of view. Additionally, three rural tourism entrepreneurs were interviewed. All of them have years of experience working in rural Finland. Transcribing and finding the themes and patterns related to this research project was also quite time-consuming, so more data would have delayed completion.

The research work aims to answer the main research questions through sub-questions "*What elements do individuals require to travel more rural Finland?*" (SQ1) and "*What is the benefit of travelling further from the most tourist areas?*" (SQ2). The author decided to look into the sub-questions first to make answering the main research question easier. The research results can be considered by rural tourism companies looking for more detailed information about travellers' perspectives on rural experience development.

The author gathered all the interview questions that were formed to answer the sub-question (SQ1), and they are visualised in Figure 8. The relevant responses were gathered from the interview questions about what factors in rural Finland are the most important and what travellers value in a rural tourism experience. All more detailed findings can be found in Chapter 6.1. The interviewees of travellers got confused with the similarity of these two questions, and some responses were comparable to each other. Interviewees of travellers described the elements of the natural

environment, relaxation, and a break from hectic cities, including spending time in cottages, hiking and visiting national parks. These elements were also discussed in the theoretical part of Chapter 2, where the study stated that rural vacation includes cottage accommodation in a remote area, local food, and nature activities (Pesonen et al. 2011, 32). These elements are also very well presented in all three entrepreneurs' offerings. All the entrepreneurs who participated in the interviews are located in a rural area offering different kinds of cottage accommodation services so that they can enjoy a quiet and peaceful time surrounded by nature. This is also well connected with Long and Lane's description in Chapter 2 of most rural tourism companies as being small, offering a personal touch, and attracting travellers to escape from their daily lives. The study about Finnish vacations does not mention hiking separately, but it is certainly part of outdoor activities. Neither national parks are mentioned, but they may be considered a part of "*nature*". Their study also mentions the sauna, which was not discussed in any interviews with travellers.

For travellers, the peaceful environment and social connections are important parts of their travel decisions, which was also found in Pesonen's study (2012, 79) as a baseline for travellers' expectations for their rural vacation. Also, the study found the "*social travellers*" group to be the biggest traveller segment and value interactions in rural tourism. Some respondents are also attracted to the cultural and recreational activities as they are intrigued by learning something new on their travels, such as cultural, historical, and traditional aspects of rural areas. Recreational activities include visiting spas and outdoor activities in nature and "*only enjoying*" the natural environment. In Chapter 2, rural tourism included activities created around the rural communities' culture (UNWTO 2023; Lo et al. 2012, 59), but this was not mentioned in the rural Finland vacation studies. This might be because culture is not seen as a main motivator for travelling to Finland, even though it is an important point of learning and self-growth. On the other hand, the cultural points, such as appreciation of the unique culture, storytelling and learning about cultures, meaning for memorable experience creation, were more highlighted in other rural tourism studies (Lo et al. 2012, 59; Tarssanen 2009, 12-13; Chen & Rahman 2018, 160). In the interviews with entrepreneurs, it arose that the travellers and their guests usually visit as couples interested in relaxation and to hear stories about their lifestyle and participate in the activities.

Additionally, the interview questions about typical travel preferences that travellers look for and a description of a good rural tourism service provider are considered for creating the most effective answer to a sub-question (SQ1). The interviewees noted the value of customer service and easily accessible information about the activities and destination throughout their visit. The importance of a guide's knowledge and customer service skills were mentioned in entrepreneur interview 2. Additionally, in interview 3, the entrepreneur has noticed the importance of written information in the accommodations, even though everything can be found digitally. Effective marketing was also

mentioned to gain more visibility and communicate the company's concept in order to attract travellers more to rural areas. The challenges of marketing skills were mentioned in Chapter 2, where Long & Lane (2000, 305-306) describe rural tourism companies as usually being small, which, for instance, may delay the companies' development of technological usage. Marketing was discussed during all the interviews with entrepreneurs, and they are well aware of the importance of marketing skills and their need for improvement. Accessing the market has become easier through online platforms, but at the same time, the competition has increased. Partnerships allow small rural entrepreneurs to create marketing strategies together to gain more visibility and attract travellers. (Long & Lane 2000, 304-306.)

Sustainability was an important part of four travellers' decisions when selecting a destination. Not choosing the cheapest vacation experiences and selecting sustainable choices as well as in everyday life were mentioned in the responses of travellers. Chapter 2.2 mentions the Sustainable Travel Finland label, which proves commitment to more sustainable choices (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland 2021, 33-35). Two of the entrepreneurs mentioned having the Sustainable Travel Finland label, and one does not consider that to be the most important purchase for them at this moment. However, the entrepreneur's operations include many sustainable actions, starting from the buildings of the place, but the company wants to invest that money for other development. All entrepreneurs consider the sustainable development goals described in Chapter 4.1 in their operations and do as much as possible to achieve them.

In conclusion and to answer sub-question (SQ1), the elements that travellers require to explore more rural Finland are natural beauty, cultural richness, personal interactions, and sustainable choices. It is essential to offer a peaceful environment and possibilities to engage with local culture, experience, learn, and share stories. Effective communication, sustainability and marketing visibility are also elements that domestic travellers require when making destination decisions. The answers are summarized in Figure 8.

Figure 8. The first sub-question summary

To answer the second sub-question (SQ2), the author investigated the interviewees' answers to the questions about how they see rural tourism, what advantages rural tourism experiences offer and what the difference between urban and rural experiences in travellers' opinions is visualised in Figure 9. Chapter 2 defined rural tourism, and according to Lane's 1994 definition, the most important aspects of rural tourism are the remote natural environment and activities, including the rural community's practices (Long & Lane 2000, 301-306.), added to UNWTO's (2023) definition of agriculture and sightseeing. According to travellers' responses, rural tourism in Finland offers them a variety of natural environments, outdoor activities, summer villages, cultures and traditions and different people and lifestyles. The definition of rural tourism in this thesis context and the research findings have many similar aspects. None of the interviewees mentioned the small entrepreneurs, except one traveller who gave an example of their visit to a family-owned accommodation company. In this research, the importance of social aspects, such as visiting friends and family or spending time together with friends in the rural cottages, was very much highlighted.

The benefits of travelling to rural areas were seen as very similar to the elements people require when travelling to rural Finland. The interviewees mentioned better or even direct access to nature destinations and an opportunity to relax and escape urban stress. The connection to nature is seen as a refresher to daily life. This quieter and idyllic nature contrast allows travellers to "*just be*", which is usually impossible in a hectic city life. In rural areas, participants also mentioned

experiencing the local food, engaging with locals, and experiencing other unique traditions, which are part of an intriguing learning process for many individuals. All the benefits of the rural setting mentioned can provide new perspectives and significant personal growth and, therefore, lead to a transformative experience. As mentioned in Chapter 3, experience connects with travellers' emotional, physical, intellectual, or spiritual levels (Pine & Gilmore 2020 1-21), and many of the elements that travellers mentioned can also be found on the Experience Pyramid, visualised in Figure 4. Even though the Experience Pyramid has been created to provide a tool for experience product development, the rural environment may offer many of these elements without any created tourism product. The benefits of self-learning and personal growth, all the emotions that travellers might go through in the peaceful rural environment and how the rural areas offer time to relax and think offer the setting of transformative experience. Therefore, many of the elements of the Experience Pyramid come from a rural setting, allowing the company to create memorable experiences for travellers and highlighting other elements in their rural tourism experiences. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 2, rural areas offer unique and authentic experiences enriched with natural and cultural elements (Lo et al. 2012, 59).

When linking these interview respondents to four realms explained in Chapter 3, domestic travellers' rural tourism experiences are mostly based on relaxation and some nature activities. These would mostly be seen as entertainment and aesthetic experiences, emphasising more absorption and passive participation, as experiences in Finland are mostly more related to peaceful nature than extreme sports. Two entrepreneurs offer some more active experiences but are also in calm nature, and admiring the natural environment and wildlife is part of their experiences.

As a result, and to answer the sub-question (SQ2), the characteristics of tranquillity, natural beauty, and enriching experiences are the advantages of rural tourism over tourist areas. All interviewees mentioned nature's closeness, which provides direct access to the natural environment, a peaceful environment and a break from hectic city life. Engagement with and learning from the local community were mentioned, which can even create transformative experiences for travellers. The conclusions are visualised in Figure 9.
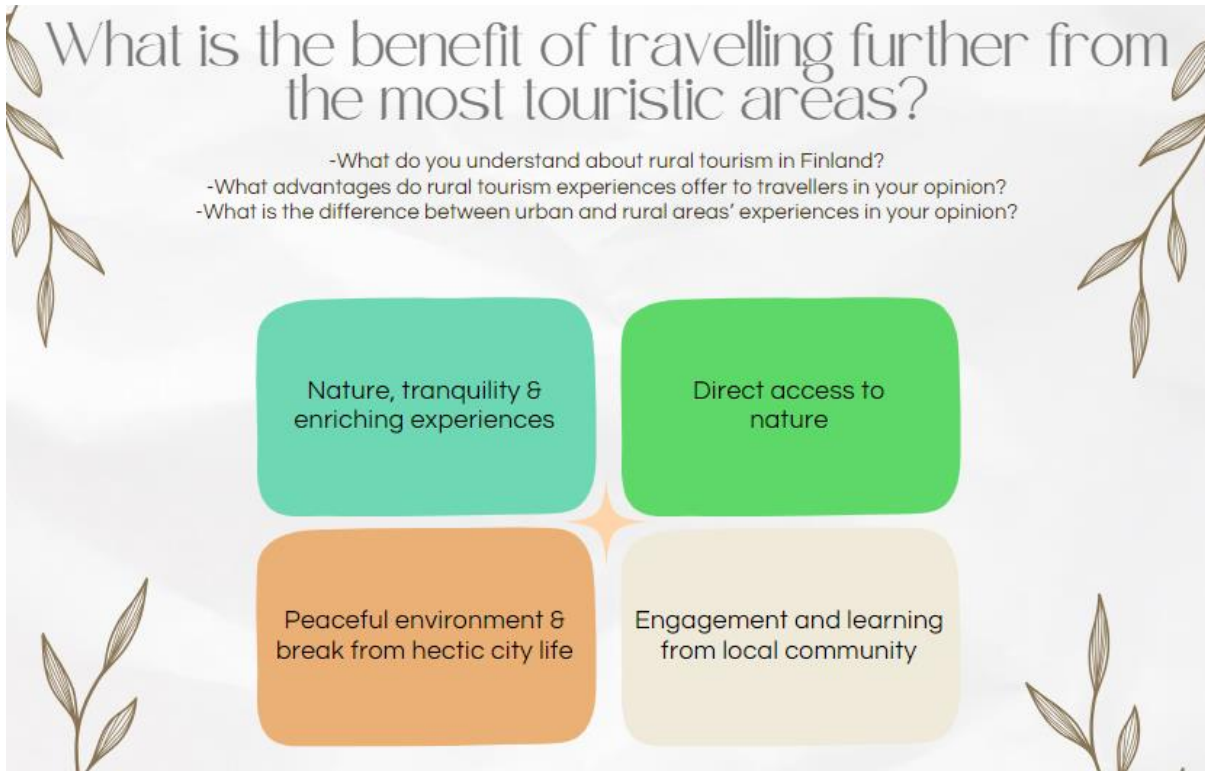
Figure 9. The second sub-question summary

Two sub-questions are strongly considered when answering the main research question (RQ1). The interviews with travellers also included suggestions for rural tourism development, as found in Chapter 6.1. These travellers have the best perspective on developing experiences to attract even more people to visit rural Finland. The development efforts are not only to promote sustainable tourism development but also to support local economies, which affect the well-being of the people and the local community.

According to the findings, domestic travellers are looking for destinations that are equipped with the necessary services. They trust the service providers so that, for instance, some activities or food are available at the destination. As described in Chapter 3.1, the rural tourism experience must include a wide range of resources, attractions, services, people, and environments within a destination, which are created together by tourists, tourism companies and the locals, that shape potential interests for travellers (Kastenholz et al. 2012, 208). Two of the companies offer accommodation experiences with dinner included, and in the third one, cooking facilities are available so that travellers can fully concentrate on relaxation during their vacation. Two of these companies also offer experiences related to reindeer, huskies, and horses, which are their main product. The third one offers a lot of different equipment that travellers can use to explore the surroundings. Even though all of them provide experiences for activities, they genuinely hope their guests would enjoy calm nature and recharge their batteries.

An interesting point highlighted in the interviews with travellers is that they value the opportunity to engage with local communities and experience rural cultures and traditions. As suggested by an interviewee, this could be done not only through storytelling but also by arranging cultural festivals and community-hosted events. The events can be organised throughout the year to enhance the travellers' visit year-round and make rural tourism more sustainable at the same time.  Chapter 2 emphasises the importance of local community development, which can be done through rural tourism (Ivona 2021,2). Rural tourism has been increasing the local's interest by, for instance, offering some farm accommodations (Long & Lane 2000, 304-305) and the experiences are expected to be authentic and related to local community traditions (Castéran & Roederer 2013, 160). In Chapter 3.1, engagement, participation, and involvement are the factors generating more positive experiences and adding value (Prebensen & Foss 2011, 61). The feeling of experiencing something together and being part of the group brings a sense of community and connects the individual tighter to a certain group (Tarssanen 2009, 14-15). In this case, engagement would be between travellers and local people. The entrepreneurs also highlight the need for authentic cultural experiences. They also discuss the engagement and how travellers expect a host to be around them and available to answer their questions and requests, which also seems to bring more positive, memorable experiences.

Seeing and learning new things was mentioned in three interviews with travellers. Travelling to new places was also emphasised in those interviews. All the new destinations always teach something new to a traveller. Physical and mental participation and learning seem to be important aspects of rural tourism experiences (Prebensen et al.  2018, 2), and one of the levels of the Experience Pyramid levels by Tarssanen is described and visualised in Chapter 3. Therefore, travellers are looking for more authentic experiences which they can learn from, such as experiences related to local community traditions (Castéran & Roederer 2013, 160). Entrepreneurs mentioned the increased travellers' curiosity and excitement to hear stories and learn about entrepreneurs and local lives. As mentioned in interview 2, it not only teaches travellers and widens their knowledge but also affects their satisfaction.

In Chapter 3, Pine and Gilmore (2020, 39-48) stated the development of theatricality and thematic elements of experiences and how employees work as if playing roles on stage during the whole interaction. On the contrary, from the travellers' perspectives, the findings show that they look for genuine and warm interactions with the hosts and local communities. As mentioned in a couple of interviews, they avoid artificial experiences as they do not meet their values either. The interviews also pointed out how travellers seek more authentic, natural experiences. Authentic experience impresses travellers the most, and at its best, it may lead them to transformative experiences (Tarssanen 2006, 6). Also, the interviews with entrepreneurs highlighted the importance of genuine and

warm engagement with guests and authenticity in their experiences. All entrepreneurs offer experiences that are authentic from their nature and according to their personal values as well.

Multi-sensory experiences create more positive emotions in rural environments, and the aspects add more value to the rural tourism experience. (Kastenholz et al. 2020, 8; Christou et al. 2018, 44-49). In the interview with travellers, the author asked about participants' previous memorable experiences, most of which were positive memories. However, despite the author's additional questions, no mentions related to the multi-sensory aspects were mentioned. When entrepreneurs described their experiences during the interviews, they were mostly focused on sensory aspects. The reason might be that their experiences are easier to describe through sensory functions, but also that they have been taken into account in their experience design.

In Chapter 3.1, nostalgia is described to seem more intriguing for domestic travellers when they travel to a destination for the first time, which contributes more value to the rural tourism experience (Christou et al. 2018, 44-49). Nostalgia came up in one interview, where a participant described rural tourism as related to their childhood caravan life. Moreover, in the third interview, the entrepreneur discussed the possible development of rural area events related to harvesting chores and other farm work as they have also seen interest towards their daily life from people. This could also enhance the social-cultural sustainability of rural communities. People have been moving to a bigger city and are seceded from the farm work, and, therefore, they would get a sense of nostalgia. Entrepreneurs would see this as an attraction for people to travel to rural areas.

Even though the interviewees frequently travel to rural Finland, they would increase their travels to domestic and rural destinations if they had better knowledge of rural offerings. Interviews highlighted their struggle sometimes to find enough needed information, which directly affects their travel decisions. Making information accessible and providing excellent customer service before, during and after travel is crucial to attracting more travellers. On the contrary, as described in Chapter 3, poor customer service creates negative memories for a traveller and affects the travel decision in the future. (Sthapit et al. 2021, 647). As mentioned in Chapter 6.2, all entrepreneurs highlighted travellers' curiosity to get information, and the third interview entrepreneur highlighted the need for printed information, even though everything nowadays can be found digitally.

As mentioned, travellers face challenges in finding information about unique rural tourism experiences. Therefore, all seven interviews with travellers highlighted better marketing strategies as a development suggestion, even though they were aware of the high marketing costs. The important points mentioned were the effective use of social media, as all different groups of audiences use it, and the creation of awareness by using influencers. Tourism is a highly competitive market, and the private sector plays a crucial role in providing the tourism economy success. Still, they benefit

more when enhancing partnerships and working together (Long & Lane 2000, 304-305). The Chapter 6.2. discusses the challenges of social media marketing to all entrepreneurs, and at the same time, they are all aware of the importance of good social media marketing skills. Provided that they are all discussing improvement or hiring someone to assist them with better marketing. It is important for rural tourism service providers to aim for more effective marketing operations. This can only be done with learning.

Chapter 3.4 discusses storytelling, which could also be added to marketing strategy as quality storytelling increases the value of an experience as it captures the traveller's attention by affecting their feelings. It may even change their opinions or even their behaviour (Mathisen 2018, 138-142). Storytelling is a big part of all three entrepreneurs' operations. Through stories, they describe their lifestyles, history, culture, and wildlife around them, which creates travellers' knowledge and more memorable experiences. Chapter 3.4 points out how stories are used for engagement and emotional immersion, which can, for instance, be linked to authenticity (Lugmayr et al. 2017, 15710-15711.) All three entrepreneurs also linked storytelling and authenticity elements together in the interviews. Among travellers' interviews, storytelling was seen as an important part that awakens interest and creates memorable experiences.

Sustainability is the core of every company operation. Sustainability in marketing can raise awareness among travellers and create market competition. Although, as a result of interviews, not all travellers consider sustainability in their choices, sustainability practices have an influence on some travel decisions. They are presented in the findings in Chapter 6.1. Chapter 4.1 describes sustainability and enhances the supply chains to reuse and recycle, as well as learning and sharing knowledge with other businesses and guests. (Manniche et al. 2021, 14.) The company's operations must consider the three sustainable pillars, environmental, economic, and social. (Purvis et al. 2012, 681-682.)  The entrepreneurs mostly discussed operations related to environmental sustainability. However, the well-being of staff and buying products and services from local people was also mentioned. It is highlighted that while some positive impacts of tourism sustainability have been achieved, they shall spread wider to a regional level (Kauppila, Saarinen and Leinonen 2009, 431). Chapter 3.4 mentions that stories can be a strong communication tool for social-cultural sustainability (Tarssanen 2009, 41). These stories could also be added to marketing to share awareness of cultural heritage, but properly, not to share any harmful or incorrect information.

The Chapter 6.1. was presenting findings from interviews on how most travellers explore rural Finland for social reasons. These travellers are looking for a relaxed time to share experiences with their loved ones. As also mentioned in Chapter 2, the most common segment was social travellers who value interaction with other people on their rural vacation (Pesonen 2012,79). Additionally, the

interviews with entrepreneurs support the findings in Chapter 6.2, as their travellers are usually couples or small families. Doing the marketing more through nature and peace of mind, emphasising the enjoyment of travelling with friends and family through group activities and accommodation for family and friends' gatherings. This would attract more domestic travellers and gain more audience for rural tourism service providers. Figure 10 summarises how to get travellers to explore more rural Finland as a summary.



Figure 10. The main research question summary

## 7.2    Reliability and future research

Rural areas in Finland attract people; however, the most popular destinations seem more compelling to travellers, bringing many challenges to rural areas. Stll, some people even look for more peaceful destinations when travelling. Increasing tourism in rural areas may also cause environmental and natural problems. Therefore, the capacities of travellers need to be carefully considered when developing tourism in certain vulnerable areas. The research findings show that the marketing of rural destinations should increase for domestic travellers to find rural tourism companies and learn about their experiences.

Reliability is essential in quantitative research. The question of objectivity is challenging but crucial, as the age, gender, nationality, and professionalism, among other characters of interviewer affects the reliability of the research findings. Additionally, it is stated that what is heard and the story is filtered through the researcher's own thoughts and knowledge. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, chapter 6.1.) When investigating reliability or research, it is necessary for a researcher to recognize the nature of quantitative research and the meaning of definitions. Even though the reliability of quantitative research is challenging, it can be increased by using more than one research method or doing the research twice, gathering similar findings. As errors occur when analysing data, the researchers need to be critical. (Puusa, Juuti & Aaltio 2020, chapter 11.)

Limitations of this thesis work include the fact that interviewees were chosen from the author's network. However, participants openly shared their stories, and it would have been different if the interviewer had been a complete stranger. The author decided to focus on domestic travellers, but research with travellers from outside of Finland would have given more perspectives for the findings. Also, the focused groups covered the opinions of travellers aged between 25 and 35, and the responses of older travellers would have brought different points of view. Therefore, different focused groups would be interesting to investigate, too.

This thesis work benefits the tourism sector and rural Finnish companies. The findings offer valuable insights into the perspectives of domestic travellers. Tourism companies are able to use the findings to create more personalised and compelling experiences to attract a greater number of domestic visitors to rural Finland. The findings enhance the tourism sector's ability to market rural Finland more effectively and attract more domestic customers. Additionally, companies can utilise this information to tailor their offerings to meet the needs of domestic travellers in a sustainable way.

## 7.3   Assessment of personal learning

This thesis project aimed to find travellers' perspectives and motivations and the elements needed to travel more to rural areas in Finland. Through the findings, the author could answer the chosen research question and its sub-questions, and therefore, the main goal was achieved. The author thinks the results can also help the rural tourism industry and entrepreneurs strengthen their experiences for domestic travellers. The conclusions can be easily taken fully or partly into consideration by all rural tourism companies when developing their experiences.

The thesis project was a long process as the author decided to change the topic three times. After the topic was selected, the work started moving smoothly and slowly forward. The current topic was chosen at the end of 2023, but the work began after the author decided to commit fully to the

thesis work at the end of January. From the beginning, the author wanted to complete the thesis work with a good grade even though there was no previous experience with this kind of big research project.

The beginning of the project was not easy, and it took a long time for the author to understand the writing process. Research work brought many challenges throughout the process but was simultaneously filled with learning. As the topic was very interesting for the author, she sometimes spent too much time reading the articles, writing only small paragraphs from sources. Also, as all the chosen theories have a lot of written articles and other information, it was sometimes challenging to decide what to include in this research work. Writing the theoretical part often made the author think that the research would never be complete.

The interviews were a bit challenging, as even though the author was not shy, asking some people to participate in the thesis project scared her. The time passed, and the author needed to get some participants as she wanted to complete everything in April. In her opinion, the interviews themselves went smoothly, and there was nothing scary about them. As mentioned earlier, every traveller experiences things differently, which also affects the results of this thesis.

Scheduling was not an easy task, and the work would not have been completed on time if the author hadn't focused fully on the research project. She felt many times that the project would not be finished on time, and her mentor positively encouraged there was a lot of time left.

This thesis project has been a huge process of personal growth and taught the author to have more patience, as the thesis did not sometimes develop as she had been scheduled. There were days when the research moved forward for only one little paragraph, and often, she needed to show mercy to herself. It has not only been a big final project for graduation but also a huge learning process of working independently and finding the needed information from sources. The author gained so much information about rural tourism that hopefully, through its development, it will be even more appreciated in the future.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Nights spent and arrivals

Yearly nights spent and arrivals by country of residence by Region, Country, Year and Information. A modified version of the Statistic Finland information highlights the regions getting the most arrivals and nights spent, dividing the domestic and the foreign travellers.

**Yearly nights spent and arrivals by country of residence by Region, Country, Year and Information**

| Preliminary data of 2023 | | Arrivals | Nights spent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Uusimaa | Domestic | 2501409 | 3887101 |
| | Foreign countries | 1281667 | 2473452 |
| | | | |
| Southwest Finland | Domestic | 785654 | 1234887 |
| | Foreign countries | 92507 | 193199 |
| | | | |
| Satakunta | Domestic | 216560 | 352924 |
| | Foreign countries | 15844 | 50308 |
| | | | |
| Kanta-Häme | Domestic | 207121 | 366403 |
| | Foreign countries | 10094 | 23443 |
| | | | |
| Pirkanmaa | Domestic | 1085408 | 1653127 |
| | Foreign countries | 85969 | 211494 |
| | | | |
| Central Ostrobothnia | Domestic | 73512 | 120681 |
| | Foreign countries | 5189 | 16860 |
| | | | |
| North Ostrobothnia | Domestic | 807866 | 1633197 |
| | Foreign countries | 100299 | 275212 |
| | | | |
| Kainuu | Domestic | 299221 | 878909 |
| | Foreign countries | 13310 | 42413 |
| | | | |
| Lapland | Domestic | 689680 | 1602535 |
| | Foreign countries | 653740 | 1746035 |
| | | | |
| Åland | Domestic | 111368 | 219839 |
| | Foreign countries | 88665 | 206742 |

**Appendix 2. The interview for traveller**

**Interview questions for travellers**

The subject of this thesis is explained before the interview and the questions. The definition of rural tourism in this thesis project is explained. The interviewee is told that the results will be anonymous and all documents will be destroyed within one month of the interview. A transcribed version of the interview will also be sent to the interviewee if requested.

Introduction / common travelling preferences
- How often do you travel to rural Finland?
- Can you describe the typical travel preferences and experiences that you look for when selecting a travel destination?
- What do you understand about rural tourism in Finland? (e.g. what is it, and what can you do there)
- What factors of rural Finland are the most important to you?

Characteristics in rural tourism experiences
- What is the difference between urban areas' and rural areas' experiences, in your opinion?
- What is the most memorable thing about your previous trip to rural Finland?
- What does authenticity mean to you in rural experiences?
- What are the things you value in a rural tourism experience?
- Can you describe a good rural tourism service provider in your opinion?

Sustainability in Rural Tourism experiences
Definition: responsibly using resources and living on earth to ensure they are available for future generations. It includes environmental factors, economic well-being and social sustainability, and the quality of life for every human.
- How important is sustainability in your travel decisions?
- How do you see storytelling impacting the destination or the local culture?
- How can you see the sustainability of rural service provider actions?

Suggestions for rural tourism experiences
- What advantages do rural tourism experiences offer to travellers, in your opinion?
- What could rural experience providers do better to attract more travellers to rural areas?
- Is there any aspect or topic that we have not covered yet?

**Appendix 3. The interview for the rural tourism specialist**

**Interview questions for rural tourism specialists**

The subject of this thesis is explained before the interview and the questions. The interviewee is told that the results will be anonymous, and all documents are destroyed within one month of the interview.

Introduction / The company experiences
　　　Some keywords: Your guests, motivations, collaboration and development

Characteristics in rural tourism experiences
　　　Some keywords: Offered experiences, factors considered in experiences, ensuring memo-rability and authenticity, domestic versus foreign travellers

Sustainability in Rural Tourism experiences
　　　Some keywords: Company sustainability, sustainability labels, their benefits



Future of rural tourism
　　　Some keywords: New trends, appreciation, future of rural tourism