Minna Utriainen

VIRTUAL REALITY IN DESTINATION BRANDING

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Unit	
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Author	**Supervisor**
Utriainen Minna	Professor Saraniemi Saila
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Abstract

Businesses might gain a competitive advantage by offering virtual tourism as it is still a novel phenomenon. Experiencing virtual reality, the user engages with the virtual content more in comparison with 2D media such as texts and pictures. The immersive aspect of virtual reality increases user engagement in the virtual environment. Therefore, the virtual experience raises higher interest towards the content. As virtual content engages the users more, it could be utilized for destination branding purposes. Destination marketers could offer virtual content in the form of virtual tourism in order to productize the intangible aspect of traveling. Virtual tourism could be also considered as a sample tool for marketing to experience a destination before potential travel.

The existing research covers mainly studies about virtual reality, virtual tourism and destination branding without combining these aspects. Therefore, this study focuses on researching the combination of these aspects. The purpose of the study is to define the uses of virtual reality in destination branding and the means of it. Also, the meaning of virtual tourism for destination brands is considered. To understand the researched phenomena even further, a theoretical framework will be provided to clarify the most essential theoretical (secondary data) aspects of the study. The theoretical framework will be later completed with empirical findings (primary data) to provide a whole diagram to support the examined phenomenon.

The chosen research method for the study is a qualitative approach to collect empirical data in support of related literature. Semi-structured interviews were selected for the qualitative research method. The criteria for selecting suitable interviewees were to select organizations that operate in the tourism field and implement destination branding. The interviews were performed with both public and private organizations. Also, the abductive aspect was applied as collected empirical data had a dialogue throughout the research with selected literature. The collected data was transcribed by the researcher and thematic analysis was applied to notice frequencies within the data. However, also infrequencies are presented.

The study results indicated that the operations regarding virtual reality varied in both public and private organizations. While public organizations provided virtual content among their other marketing operations, private organizations offered virtual content as their main purpose for their businesses. However, the joint consensus among the interviewees was to bring tourists on the spot to destinations. As by offering virtual content their ultimate purpose was marketing the destination. However, the study indicates that virtual tourism can be used for three purposes; (1) as a sample tool, (2) as a product, and (3) as an on-site added-value experience. The mentioned purposes jointly attract tourists to destinations in their various ways yet constantly aiming for destination branding.

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1   INTRODUCTION

The present research examines the uses of virtual reality in destination branding and the ways of implementing that. Also, the meaning of virtual tourism is considered for the destination brands. This chapter will introduce the research's subject and justify the research topic. The research background and the motivation for the study are first presented, after which the research topic and research questions are provided. Also, research methods and data, key concepts and the structure of the thesis are explained.

1.1   Research background and context

The current existing literature contains research from various aspects regarding virtual reality (VR) and virtual tourism (VT) as a phenomenon. However, the phenomena have not been researched from the destination branding aspect. The current studies do not offer perspectives on the topic and therefore leave a gap for this research. Hence, the present study aims to research the uses of VR in destination branding and the ways of implementing that by reviewing existing literature (secondary data) and gathering empirical data (primary data). The research makes theoretical and managerial suggestions based on secondary and primary data. The existing research regarding the topic is presented in the following chapters.

Nowadays, intangible experiences are focused more than owning a tangible object (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). According to Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) study, people who were to purchase intangible experiences were happier compared to people having a memory of owning tangible objects. Therefore, people might be more eager to purchase experiences or devices for experiencing than before. For example, people might purchase VT experiences, which makes the service a more concrete product.

VR can be applied to marketing as well and the uses of VR in marketing have been studied from different aspects. For example, Grewal et al. (2017) state in their paper 'The Future of Retailing' that both virtual and augmented realities are promising inventions, which are only increasingly starting to be realized and offered. VR has the power to change the course of marketing (Williams & Hobson, 1995). Tussyadiah et al. (2018) present that VR can be an effective marketing tool and good for marketing and branding strategy.

In addition, information technology has been, and ongoingly is affecting the field of tourism (Pesonen & Neidhardt, 2020). Also nowadays, people also share ordinary experiences via social media, which enables co-travelling in the tourism field (Sheller & Urry, 2004, p. 170). VR can be connected with VT as well, with various applications. "Virtual reality seems to promote tourism, rather than discourage it.", stated Dewailly already in 1999. Furthermore, as regards business innovation, VR seems to be one of the most auspicious imminent technology adaptations. VR offers unforeseen possibilities for branding as it can create an experience of a certain brand or a destination (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017.) Hence, tourism destinations could create an overall VR experience that would be enjoyable and lead to a higher interest in the destination. (Tussyadiah et al., 2018).

As briefly presented, VT has been researched mostly in recent years as it has become a more popular research topic in late years. However, the use of VR in destination branding has not been researched ergo creating a research gap. Therefore, the present study focuses on answering the research gap from the mentioned aspect. Currently, the available literature does not give an answer to the considerations of using VR as well as VT as part of destination branding and the ways of implementing that. The research attempts to discover whether offering such services might benefit destination organizations' branding efforts. Hence, the current study with empirical findings with the help of secondary data from existing theories aims to answer this research gap.

Therefore, it is meaningful and timely to study the uses and ways of VR in destination branding as it might resolve current issues and affect the way of branding and traveling in the future with destinations. Consumers are constantly surrounded by technology and already traveling on the Internet (Sheller & Urry, 2004, p. 170), which might affect the branding of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) as well as other destination marketers.

The present research contributes theoretically by implicating new aspects of the uses of VR in destination branding. In addition, the study makes suggestions on the ways of implementing VR in destination branding. Also, the phenomena are considered from the destination brands' point of view to suggest the meanings VT might possess.

The theoretical contributions are adapted into managerial implications and presented to offer practical suggestions regarding the researched phenomena.

1.2   Purpose of the research and research question

The purpose of the present research is to examine how VR can be utilized in destination branding. Also, the ways of VR in brand communication are inspected. The phenomena are also viewed from a destination brand perspective to elaborate on the meaning VT might hold. A broad understanding of the researched topic is presented with existing theoretical concepts of previous research. In addition, qualitative semi-structured interviews are implemented to support the empirical outlook of the phenomena.

Therefore, the research questions concern issues such as what is still unknown or was not covered in the existing theories. To gain a broader understanding of the phenomena, primary and supporting research questions are created to answer the research gap. Therefore, the primary research question aims to answer the following question:

- *How can virtual reality be utilized in destination branding?*

The primary question will be answered with the support of the following questions:

- *What are the means of virtual reality that can be utilized in destination branding?*
- *What is the meaning of virtual tourism for destination brands?*

1.3   Research methods and data

The primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews meaning that the study is qualitative research. Firstly, interviews were held with participants who work within the tourism field. Secondly, interviews were aimed at those that have possibly worked with VR, VT, or are destination marketing organizations (DMOs).

Overall, nine interviews were performed via communication platforms Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The research was not completed as a case study, but rather as an interview with multiple participants in order to gain a broader perspective of the currently available VT services in Finland and their branding efforts. The interview questions are presented in appendices 1 and 2 and covered in part 5.2. Additionally, the secondary data for the thesis will be collected mainly from academic journals related to the specific research topic. Relevant books regarding the topic will be also utilized in order to gather theoretical aspects for the secondary data.

As deductive reasoning tests an assumed theory or hypothesis, and inductive reasoning starts from data upon which the theory will be built, abductive reasoning was chosen. Abductive reasoning is both a difference and a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning as it focuses on observation regarding the phenomenon and aims to reach a likely conclusion. The preliminary philosophical assumption for the research is positivist as it: "...attempt to test theory, in an attempt to increase the predictive understanding of phenomena." (Myers, 2013, p. 38). Myers (2013, p. 38) also states that positivist research is suitable for studies regarding organizational phenomena, which would suit the case of interviewing travel agencies. As the gathered data will be studied and interpreted a thematic data analysis will be partly applied for the purpose in order to identify possible patterns within the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

1.4   Key concepts

In order to collect a comprehensive view of the main themes regarding the research, it is essential to study and determine the most suitable themes from previous studies and literature. Therefore, the most relevant and frequently used terms in the thesis context are as follows.

Branding

> Branding establishes key components of a statement of ownership, distinguishing a product or service from competitors, and a symbol that can be connected to the brand. It could be summarized that brand is a differentiative advantage. (Middleton et al., 2009, p. 198.)

Brand communication

Brand communication can be explained as: "all investments made by an organisation in all forms of media and in all types of promotional activities in support of the brand." As the brand communication efforts are planned and aimed to communicate messages and stimulate consumers to affect their behaviour towards the brand in the future. (Schultz, 1998; Elliot et al., 2018, p. 127.) The brand message implementations are executed by creating brand awareness (Elliot et al., 2018, p. 143-153).

Marketing communication

"Marketing communications represent the voice of a brand and the means by which companies can establish a dialogue with consumers concerning their product offerings." (Keller, 2001).

Destination branding

Destination branding is: "the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphics that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serves to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice." (Blain et al., 2005).

Virtual reality (VR)

VR can be explained as being a certain environment, which is formed by a computer or other similar media where the user feels present, which can be interpreted as presence (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017). VR offers a mixture of "organic, intuitive technology with personalized information" that serves as a virtual replica of the physical presence. (Adachi et al., 2022.)

Virtual tourism (VT)

Travelling with VR does not require actual travelling but instead offers a way to travel and experience a destination from afar by removing the distance limits (Lee & Kim, 2021), which creates virtual tourism.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The research proceeds as follows. After the introduction to the research and description of the topic, the research provides existing theoretical aspects about the topic as secondary data. The first part of the literature focuses on aspects of brand communication. A diverse presentation of the following topics is provided; branding, marketing communication, sample tourism as a marketing tool, destination branding, destination image and presence, brand love, and DMOs in destination branding. Whereafter, the second part of the literature reviews theories of virtual tourism in destination branding. The latter subject is viewed from the virtual reality aspect, as well as VR in marketing and tourism, VT advantages and disadvantages, and finally outcomes of VT.

After presenting the secondary data, a theoretical framework is built to elaborate the theoretical efforts in the form of a figure. The framework will be provided and discuss the most relevant aspects of the existing theories. The framework will be followed with research methodologies to explain the methodological choices for the research. It will cover research design, strategy, data collection, and implementation of the interviews. Also, the data collection and data analysis are explained to give the reader a sense of the qualitative methods used in the research.

Next, the empirical findings are presented in themes according to the presented research questions. Connections that emerged from the gained data are provided with themes. In addition, an empirical framework is provided to present the most essential aspects of the empirical data. The empirical framework is built upon the theoretical framework to showcase important aspects emerging from the empirical data.

Finally, the conclusions cover the answers to the research questions. Also, theoretical contributions elaborate the theoretical input current research offers. Additionally,

managerial implications will be provided about the research. Lastly, the limitations and the validity of the research are briefly presented, with future research suggestions.

2   BRAND COMMUNICATION

This chapter indicates the research's most essential literature aspects regarding brand communication in the following order of topics: DMOs in destination branding, brand communication in destination branding, destination branding, destination differentiation, virtual reality presence in destination communication, destination marketing communication, and lastly, sample tourism as a marketing tool.

2.1   Destination marketing organizations in destination branding

To create destination images regarding the destination brand, certain practitioners are needed for the implementation. These practitioners are known as destination management, or marketing, organizations (DMOs). DMOs are essential when creating destination marketing and branding for certain areas. The main task of DMOs is to be responsible for marketing their destinations (Elbe et al., 2009). The areas vary, as those can be countries, towns, regions, etc. The members of DMOs can include various practitioners, such as hotels, restaurants, tour operators, individuals, companies, airlines, and universities. The expertise and coordination of DMOs' efforts usually make the organization an important resource for the members as well. To support the marketing and branding efforts even further, some DMOs may create a logo for their areas that reflect the main elements of the destination. (Blain et al., 2005.) Hankinson (2009) suggests that DMOs face problems regarding the nature of the destination, in comparison to being from the public or private sector. The problems in branding may reflect the institutional differences in branding between public and private sectors, such as lack of resources or direct management control over service delivery in the public sector. (Hankinson, 2009.)

According to Bregoli (2013), DMOs should pay attention to two main things. Firstly, not only is it important to measure the destination brand's external success but also to measure the internal strength of the brand. The internal strength will point out stakeholder commitment and the extensivity of their commitment reinforces the brand. Secondly, it is necessary for DMOs to offer such activities to the destinations' stakeholders that would motivate them to be knowledgeable about the brand and behave according to its values. (Bregoli, 2013). Morgan et al. (2004, p. 132) suggest

that DMOs could take destination branding even further, and potentially apply brokerage to the branding.

In order to be a successful destination brand, Hankinson (2009) suggests that destination brands need to go further the brand communication and implement the brand promise. Therefore, it is necessary to develop strong partnerships with the destination's investors. A DMO can achieve notable marketing and branding actions regarding the destination by combining and mobilizing resources from the stakeholders, even with a small budget. However, to make the collaboration fluid and practical, the DMO must create and achieve cooperation between the destination stakeholders. (Elbe et al., 2009). Hankinson (2009) agrees with this statement, as DMOs should seek compatible and committed stakeholders. The most important resource when implementing the task of a DMO is pragmatic legitimacy. It is necessary that the DMO has suitable competence and an existing network among expertise in marketing. Elbe et al. (2009) present, that additionally, the DMO's duties require moral legitimacy, and to be seen as an "appropriate partner for co-operative relationships." Therefore, maintaining relationships is essential regarding the work of a DMO. (Elbe et al., 2009).

The manageability of place brands can be complex, as the ownership divides between multiple parties such as cities, residents, and tourists. These stakeholders might also hold different standpoints that could result in conflicts. Therefore, place branding results could be measured from e.g. the tourist and society perspective in order to gain a better understanding of the intangible outcomes such as society's well-being and life satisfaction. (Swaminathan et al., 2020.)

2.2 Brand communication in destination branding

"Brands differentiate products and represent a promise of value" (Morgan et al., 2004, p. 41), which also applies to destination brands. The meaning of certain brands varies among people, yet brands generate emotions, beliefs, and behaviours (Morgan et al., 2004, p. 41; Kotler et al., 2013, p. 245). In addition, brands can develop deeper meanings with consumers regarding the socialization process of growing up. Therefore, destinations experienced at a younger age affect the later in life and can

evoke feelings and even nostalgia. (Elliott et al., 2018, p. 62.) Morgan and Pritchard (2001, p. 228) support this theory by suggesting appealing to the youth as brands tend to remain with consumers even through adulthood. Also, building consumer relationships into the brand personality happens by being timeless, trustworthy, and contemporary with branding actions (Morgan & Pritchard, 2001, p. 228).

Destination brands can be applied to the following streams of thought as the nature of brands, identified by Hankinson (2004): (1) brand as a communicator, (2) brand as a perceptual entity or image, (3) brand as a value enhancer, and (4) brand as a relationship. The first stream of thought; destination brands as communicators, can be seen as strategy building as the brand identity is based on its attributes that are communicated externally. Destination branding can be seen as the result of consistent and focused communication collected from the destination values that are already existing in tourists' minds. Since a brand as a communicator can be categorized as an "input orientation to branding". The second stream of thought; destination brand as a perceptual entity or image, means how brands are perceived by people. For example how brands appeal to tourists' emotions and how image presents certain attributes to which tourists attach personal values. A desire to visit a certain destination reflects the destination's; level of tourist awareness, the tendency to be part of a set of options, and perceived emotional affection. Destination brands as value enhancers can be described as being a target of trust and eliminating a certain risk that can be associated with more unfamiliar brands or destinations even. Therefore, brands can be perceived as enhancing value. Last stream of thought; the destination brand as a relationship is suitable especially for service brands because brands are thought to have a personality to create a relationship with the consumers. Ideally, destination brands build a relationship with the visitors and form a bond, and consequently causing a revisitation.

2.2.1 Destination branding

Swaminathan et al. (2020) propose that brands have a deeper meaning than just being icons or symbols linked to certain products by individual companies, as brands can also be places. Regarding destinations, place brands could be considered further. Place brands can be defined as "a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through

the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design". Place branding can be much more than e.g., measuring the perceptions of individuals of the place, places can also be sociological structures, continuous and administered image-building, and management strategy. (Swaminathan et al., 2020.) In addition, places can carry certain meanings to people either through personally gained experiences, cultural heritage, or both. The place attachments and certain emotional connections motivate people to return or want to return to a place. (Plunkett, 2011.)

The effect of promotional advertisements seems to gain greater value regarding emotional response. More emphasis is put on emotional experience, which marketing targets to provoke. Specifically, positive emotions that also increase the intention of buying. "In the travel planning stage, positive emotions have also been shown to play a pivotal role in tourists' destination selection". For instance, in a study, a certain film was shown for the audience that was filmed in a particular city, in order to figure out whether it would cause more positive emotions towards the city. The study's destination marketing material generated positive emotions towards the city after watching the film. (Yung et al., 2020.)

Other motivational factors regarding traveling could be identified with five factors; (1) relaxation/escape, (2) excitement/adventure, (3) knowledge, (4) social, and (5) prestige, which DMOs could consider while making destination branding strategies. From these factors knowledge, social and prestige motivations had the greatest impact on the destination image. Knowledge factors included things such as "Learning new things", "Experiencing different cultures and ways of life", and "Enriching myself intellectually". Whereas social factors referred to "Meeting people with similar interests" and "Developing close friendships". Motivational factors regarding prestige were "Going places my friends have not been" and "Telling my friends about the trip". In order to attract certain motivations, these themes can be utilized to create efficiently and sustain certain destination images. (Baloglu & MacCleary, 1999.)

From the brand and marketing strategizers' point of view, word-of-mouth (WOM) means direct personal recommendations of a good from one's family, friends, and acquaintances (Kotler et al., 2013, p. 428). According to Baloglu and MacCleary

(1999), when people form their personal tourist images of different destinations, it seems that WOM recommendations from friends and family are an important source. Therefore, it is essential that destinations should aim to provide the most pleasant experiences and satisfy their tourists' enjoyment when visiting as these tourists have a large effect on their business in the future when forming a positive reputation (Baloglu & MacCleary, 1999).

However, the tourism industry is a service industry, yet it differentiates itself from other service industries because of the complexity of destination products and essential elements of tourism. These elements impact the development and maintenance of successful destination brands. Two notable attributes regarding destination branding are identified. The first attribute defines how tourism destinations are not developed by one organization, but rather by a network of multiple companies and other parties. This network of partners offers services that are required to develop a tourism destination product. The second attribute is that when creating a tourism destination product, it is gathered from a selection of products and services. However, this assembly is conducted rather by the tourist than the producer. (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008, p. 112-113.)

For making a brand successful, Tasci and Gartner (2009) offer a list and tools for tackling potential problems: "collaboration among stakeholders to assure congruence between brand and the physical and social values of the destination; defining a clear target market for the brand; supporting a vision of destination development; projecting a simple, appealing, believable, and distinctive image; defining the attributes forming a basis for strong branding; developing an umbrella concept to cover the country's separate branding activities; and a catchy slogan, visual images or symbols, and special events to achieve higher levels of awareness." However, it is important to understand that most empirical studies conceptualize branding for smaller areas or even resorts instead of e.g. countries. The larger area brings another level of complexity when making the destination detailed and elaborative about the brand. (Tasci & Gartner, 2009.)

Therefore, Blain et al. (2005) created a revised version of the definition of destination branding: "Destination branding is the set of marketing activities that (1) support the

creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphics that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serves to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination, and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk." Together these elements assist to develop a destination image which aims to affect the customer's destination image as well as the destination choice.

Nowadays electronic environments are complex, and therefore reaching the end-users can be challenging. Therefore, Morgan et al. (2004, p. 131-132) identify three main players in tourist destination's routes to market: (1) principals, (2) intermediaries, and (3) customers. The distribution channel starts with principals, which include parties like hotels and other tourist attraction suppliers, and government agencies, which then provide information to intermediaries. Intermediaries consist of e.g. tour operators and travel agencies, that pass the received information to potential customers. Lastly, the customers, ergo tourists, are attempted to be targeted with certain information about the destination. Morgan et al. (2004, p. 52) suggest that not only the destination brand is important but also the country's image as countries elicit associations and have an impact on purchase decisions. Countries can be products as well as rivals against each other to have in addition to tourists, businesses and talented employees as well.

It is essential to notify that a well-known destination or receiving large quantities of tourists does not equalize with the destination brand, as these places do not always include "trust, relationship, quality, consumer loyalty, or an emotional attachment", which would be the case for a strong brand (Tasci & Gartner, 2009).

2.2.2   Destination differentiation

According to Moilanen and Rainisto (2008, p. 111), place brands are common within destination marketing as tourism destinations are competing against each other in order to attract tourists, firms, and investments. The biggest problem thfirms,,Os face is the substitutability of their services, as usually there are similar destinations with similar offerings. Therefore, destinations aim to include certain branding practices to differentiate and enhance their unique selling points (USPs). However, tourism

destinations usually do not have as many stakeholders in comparison to larger entities such as nations, which limits their scale of offering. (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008, p. 111.)

In agreement with Yongho Hyun and Cai (2009), as well as Hankinson (2004), differentiating from competitors by identifying unique characteristics is essential and even necessary. Both researchers and practitioners value image creation and destination differentiation and think these elements to be essential parts when creating a powerful destination brand (Blain et al., 2005). A brand name embodies information that stands for differentiating the added value, apart from the competitors (Elliott et al., 2018, p. 125). In addition, Blain et al. (2005) performed a study with 409 DMOs regarding destination branding. From the analysed content, the participating DMOs stated that they "believe that a recognized, well-differentiated, and consistent destination image is central to the success of destination branding." Furthermore, destination logos aim to obtain a unique presentation of the destination image and its attributes. (Blain et al. 2005.)

"Brands are one of the most valuable intangible assets that firms have" since branding has become a priority for management because of the comprehension of its importance (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Also, Melewar et al. (2020) agree with the brand's value for the organization. Moreover, competitors can copy various issues like prices or product characteristics, yet the value a certain brand has created in customers' minds is not possible to multiply (Melewar et al., 2020). For customers, brands can signify a promise of a certain quality, develop trust and simplify choices (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). However, nowadays people form *net communities* that are growing fast as an online era phenomenon to offer, share, and exchange information about a destination among tourists. When tourists seek information about their desired destination, they tend to rely on consumer-driven net communities, which can affect their decision-making process as well. The image of a brand serves as a function of position and differentiation from rivals. By being strong, distinct, recognizable, and positive, the image guides to a stronger possibility of being chosen by tourists. (Yongho Hyun & Cai, 2009.)

Regarding the logo development and design process, as mentioned earlier, logos should reflect the main features of the destination image. Logos should be able to deform for different media and simultaneously be memorable. The memorability of a logo could stimulate support for the destination since the brand communication should be consistent to maintain and seem active. (Blain et al., 2005). According to Tasci and Gartner (2009), destination branding entails both development as well as maintenance of brand identity, and positive image by using multiple elements like logos, slogans, and colours. Image is a crucial element impacting branding strategies, as through image an emotional connection can be gained between the brand and the user. The emotional connection is the goal. (Tasci & Gartner, 2009.)

However, brands are more than a name or a logo although these visual elements support building the identity design for destination brands. Kouris (2009) proposes that brands work on two levels. The first level comprehends how the destination is perceived by the visitors currently. The second level is about how the destination wishes to position itself in order to attract tourists and other publics. In other words, brands exist in the tourists' perceptions and predispositions about the destination. (Kouris, 2009.)

"A destination`s strong brand image holds tourists' attention, interest, and visit intention which helps to differentiate a destination brand from others", therefore *destination image* is an important part of destination branding (Majeed et al., 2022). A destination image is a collection of impressions, beliefs, and visualization of a certain destination that creates an initial image. The formation of the initial image before a vacation is essential regarding choosing a suitable destination from various options. Therefore, travellers should be able to receive a clear image of the desired destination. According to Adachi et al. (2022) the 'destination image' impacts the traveller's preference for the vacation destination.

Baloglu and McCleary (1999) present a theory regarding forming a destination image that comprises two forces: (1) stimulus factors, and (2) personal factors. *Stimulus* factors can be considered as external stimulus like tourism advertisements through different channels, WOM, experiences, and other stimuli gained from a certain destination. Whereas *personal* factors are internal stimulus such as psychological and

social features of the possible tourist, like their values, motivations, and education. Stimulus and personal factors affect cognitive and affective evaluation. Cognitive evaluation indicates an individual's knowledge and perception of the features of a certain destination. Whereas affective evaluation refers to the personal perception an individual has gained of certain destination's traits, feelings like pleasure, and enjoyment. Cognitive evaluation has an impact on affective evaluation yet affective evaluation does not have an influence on cognitive evaluation. (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999.)

Regarding the cognitive and affective evaluation in a tourism context and experiencing a destination through HMD in comparison to computer screens, it was noted that the cognitive and affective evaluations were higher, which means that the evaluation was more comprehensive. If the destination image is comprehensively assessed as positive, the intention to travel increases. Therefore, HMD allows the consumer to be more profoundly absorbed into the destination which cultivates the travel intentions. (Adachi et al., 2022.)

2.2.3 Virtual reality presence in destination communication

In addition, also offering VR services with the feeling of a presence, creates another differentiating advantage for such destination brands. The VR experience's depth affects the VR presence which is an important aspect when experiencing VR. Therefore, it also affects the provided VR content from the destination brand's point of view. This will affect the formulation of the *virtualized image*, hence affecting the destination image and destination branding.

Virtual experience can be used interchangeably with the term telepresence, as these terms mean a mediated environment, yet the former is not as broad a concept as the latter. Telepresence is applicable to both online and offline media, whereas virtual experience is limited to two-dimensional (2D), and three-dimensional (3D) environments. Telepresence enables customers to transport both online and offline mediated environments which leads to image formation and attitudes about the product. Therefore, it can be stated that telepresence impacts the virtual perception of the destination meaning that the destination image can be virtualized with telepresence.

Virtualized image can be defined as a comprehensive perception of the destination, experienced through interactions among virtual information sources, such as cognitive, affective, and global perceptions as well as offline sources by an online individual. The cognitive component means the perception of the destinations' features; the affective component refers to the emotions stemming from the perception; and the global component is a result of the two evaluations combined. The virtual information can be more authentic and feel even like having actual experience for the consumers, as 3D-based virtual information results in higher telepresence over 2D-based virtual information. (Yongho Hyun & Cai, 2009).

Plunkett (2011) states that the presence of VR aims to contribute to the experience of the virtual environment. "The more involved the user is with the VE, the more stimulated the senses will be, and the greater they will experience a sense of presence." Therefore the presence of an individual is essential when experiencing VT, as it advances one's feelings to actually experience a certain location. The user engages with the psychological display of themselves visiting a destination and is a considerable aspect in destination branding. "An increased sense of spatial presence was found to influence positively and significantly the enjoyment of VR as well as attitude changes about the tourism destination, measured as the intensity of preference, liking, and interest in a tourism destination." Both users' cognitive and affective evaluations of destinations can be impacted when a user experiences VR through HMD, leading to the form of a destination image (Adachi et al., 2022.) In addition, VR enables users to make more informed decisions regarding future traveling in real life. By experiencing a destination through VR, they could more easily recommend the experience to other people; "even indirectly, destination marketing through VR could benefit word-of-mouth advertising for destinations." (Yung et al., 2020.)

Yung et al. (2020) suggest that presence is an essential part of also the DMOs' website performance. Therefore, DMOs should aim to engage their website's users to strengthen their presence. If online users feel a higher presence on the destination website they remember more vividly their experiences on that website which is "leading to familiarity, knowledge, interest, and positively influencing intention to visit the destination". (Yung et al., 2020.)

The integrated behavioural response such as loyalty and purchase intention results in conation as a consequence of virtualized image. Virtual loyalty is essential for several reasons, firstly it can reduce the maintenance costs for the traffic of the website. Secondly, it can strengthen the market by decreasing consumers' search and decision-making costs. Thirdly, virtual loyalty can decrease new consumer acquisition costs and increase the preservation of current ones. And lastly, obtaining new online consumers costs more in comparison to conserving existing loyal consumers. (Yongho Hyun & Cai, 2009.)

2.3 Destination marketing communication

As mentioned in the key concepts, marketing communications represent the voice of a brand so that destinations can communicate with consumers about their goods, therefore having an essential role in improving brand awareness (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2012). Marketers can inform, remind, encourage, and persuade consumers with marketing communications by offering detailed information about their product offerings. By doing this, marketing communications can connect a certain brand with certain destinations as well. Brand-related information can offer aspects of tangible or intangible aspects of the product offerings, in addition to the brand itself. Tangible aspects are physical product attributes, whereas intangible aspects can, for example, relate to brand personality, the company behind the brand, and usage imagery. (Keller, 2001.) These all are important aspects of destination brand communication.

Williams (2006) suggests that marketing can be viewed with two orientations: (1) experiential marketing, and (2) traditional marketing, which are applicable for destination marketing as well. Experiential marketing views consumers as emotional beings and who are looking for pleasure. Whereas, traditional marketing orientation sees consumers as rational and seeking functionality and benefits from products. There are differences between these orientations. Firstly, customer experience and lifestyle are concentrated as these offer values to the consumers. Secondly, synergies are developed between meaning, perception, consumption and brand loyalty. Thirdly, consumers are driven by emotions over rationality. The last difference is that experiential marketing requires more versatile and new ways of research methods in order to understand the consumers. Williams (2006) argues that experiential marketing

offers firms an understanding of the market and consumers, in a highly competitive hospitality and tourism field. Experiential marketing offers insight into the way consumers see the abundant range of offers in tourism and hospitality. Additionally, it offers marketers a new way to approach marketing, where the uniqueness of tourism and hospitality products is capitalized. Innovative experience design will increase its popularity in tourism and hospitality firms, as this field is not immune to such changes in the orientation of marketing. (Williams, 2006.)

It is advisable for destination brands to be consistent within their communication regarding online communities as they can benefit from it. "The potential positive effects can be achieved due to the repeated interaction of the brand and the members of an online consumption community". By listening and adapting to the wants of certain brand's requirements the brand can achieve a more positive attitude towards the brand, and even affect the perception of the brand. Therefore DMOs should acknowledge these relationships when they plan the brand interaction with the members of the communities that consume the certain brand. (Steinmann et al., 2015.) In addition, consumers might use brands as an instrumental way to gain some social goals (Sorescu et al., 2020).

According to Kannan and Li (2017), non-customers have a bigger impact on electronic WOM campaigns than actual customers when looking at the collected data in their research. It is recognized that brands can act as arbiters of social trends, catalysts for social communication, and even as symbols in case a brand represents certain iconic status. Brands could be viewed even as cultural symbols when examined from a societal perspective. It is suggested to have consumers more rooted in the society perspective as consumers can formulate different social groups, even loud entities that are capable of forming social trends. (Swaminathan et al. 2020.)

Moreover, earlier tourists had to trust essentially others' recommendations regarding destinations, but nowadays they can search for the information independently. When tourists are looking for travel destinations, destination websites are essential advertising channels. Destination websites are not the only source of information for tourists, yet the only official ones. Therefore, destination websites should be attractive and useful for tourists as it is likely to affect their decision-making regarding the

holiday. (Bastida & Huan, 2014.) In addition, it is essential to identify and understand consumer expectations in order to exceed them. "Expectations play an important role in satisfaction and repurchase behaviour among low familiarity customers." (Tam, 2008.)

In case destination brands have been able to gain favourable brand associations, the brand ought to build a "desirable structure of brand knowledge in consumers' minds." Those consumers that are familiar with brands from previous encounters use less effort considering the information they are gaining via communication, and such brands usually are preferred over others. Therefore, familiar brands should perform moderately consistent brand messages. That is the most efficient habit to create brand knowledge as brand image and brand recall are higher compared to highly consistent brand communication with familiar brands. Whereas, when consumers are unfamiliar with the brand, it is essential to expose such consumers to the brand's message consistently. By practising consistent exposure to the brand's meaning the repetition nurtures and stimulates positive brand attitudes, and customers gain more knowledge which leads to brand awareness. To create brand awareness, it is essential to be recalled by consumers for generating a favourable brand knowledge structure. Therefore, consistent brand communication through messages would support higher brand recall as well. (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2012.)

2.4 Sample tourism as a marketing tool

As mentioned, services are intangible goods also including traveling and tourism. However, through offering sample tourism, VT productizes the intangible aspect of traveling. With the VR experience, one can purchase the service for their use and possibly even experience it multiple times. Yet, it is not certain whether, with the help of VR, VT will become a product meaning that VT might create a new niché for goods between services and products.

"Virtual reality can serve as a marketing instrument for travel agencies.". VR systems could be utilized for customers as an opportunity to experience a "preview" of their chosen destination. This sample of a destination preview would enable customers to sense the atmosphere within the place before making a purchasing decision. Overall,

the sample tourism with the help of VR can remove the possible uncertainties from visitors as their expectations would be matched since they are able to preview the place before the visit. (Cheong, 1995.) This can be compared e.g. to a sample of a tasting in a store, meaning that customers want to dream in advance of their upcoming locations (Davies, 2021.)

The sample possibility of experiences might also influence the environment positively as customers would be able to make more informed decisions about certain destinations, which might prevent people from flying and trying the destination on their own. Especially places that are negatively impacted by emissions and other harmful behaviour, would benefit from this arrangement. (Cheong, 1995.)

Sample possibilities can also work as a marketing tool as mentioned since the imagery seen in the preview would stay in the customers' minds and induce them to visit those places in their futures (Cheong, 1995.) Tussyadiah et al., (2018) agree with the mentioned suggestion as they claim that VR is a powerful marketing tool "as it is able to offer more compelling imagery of tourism destinations to potential tourists by giving them a sense of what it is like to be there, a "try before you buy"-experience." According to Williams and Hobson (1995), VR has an impact on the field of tourism with the use of VR as a sales and promotions tool. "From a marketing perspective, VR has the potential to revolutionize the promotion and selling of tourism." as the travel agencies and tour operators may offer possible customers an interactive experience through VR. In addition, the tour operators might purchase VT travels in order to market and offer more suitable destinations for their customers. However, it must be noticed that offering such technological advancements, might be expensive. (Williams & Hobson, 1995.)

Additionally, offering a sample of the destination as VT tasting might create a competitive advantage as it "might then compete with what travel agents are offering." (Williams & Hobson, 1995). Also Huang et al. (2013) agree with using virtual world environments for tourism marketing as the individuals would engage with the content more. The virtual 3D representation addresses the hedonic experience, which can affect: "a tourist's behavioural intentions, including requesting more information about destinations, willingness to recommend, the likelihood of visiting the virtual site

in the future, and taking an actual trip." However, also Buhalis (2003, p. 92) argues that VR might decrease experiencing the actual destination but also claims that VR might inspire the majority to travel in order to experience the "real deal".

Furthermore, tourism brochures have limited space to communicate messages along with appealing pictures of the various destinations. Multiple destinations are possibly presented in the same brochure, meaning that the space for a single destination is highly limited. Therefore, the VR experience allows customers to explore the destination more in-depth than brochures are able to provide. (Cheong, 1995.) Moreover, brochures are passive tools to entice tourists (Williams & Hobson, 1995). While customers can view the destination virtually, popup windows could be utilized to offer more in-depth knowledge about the history of the place. The abundant information gained from the preview assists the user to form a realistic picture of the place within their minds. (Cheong, 1995.)

3 VIRTUAL TOURISM IN DESTINATION BRANDING

This chapter indicates the research's most essential aspects regarding virtual reality and its usage in the context of virtual tourism. According to Han and Hyun (2018), travelling is a high-involvement product, which could be the character of travelling. Therefore, the virtual tourism literature focuses on immersion of virtual reality in the following chapters. The following topics are covered in said order: virtual tourism advantages and virtual tourism disadvantages, the use of virtual reality, the of virtual reality in marketing, and lastly, the current use of virtual reality in tourism.

3.1 Virtual tourism advantages

As the advantages and disadvantages of VT have been mainly researched from the consumers' perspective, the subjects are presented in line with the customer aspect. However, business perspectives are presented in the following chapters as well.

"Currently, the tourism industry is demanding an ever-increasing level of value-added services in technologically complete environments, which are integrated and highly dynamic." (García-Crespo et al., 2009). As mentioned earlier, the current immediacy of mobile devices allows people to be updated through e.g. social media at all times. When people travel and are sharing their content regarding tourism they form virtual travel companions for themselves. Even when people are not sharing their traveling experiences, they are monitored by the background presence of their social relations. Which can be experienced as emotionally consuming or even as a discomfort. Hence, people who use their mobiles are also able to escape to separate themselves from uncomfortable situations. "The close virtual proximity, constant connectivity, and intimacy can all distract individual's attention from their physical experiences." Meaning that by being bodily present somewhere, technological applications like VR may distract people to be emotionally and mentally elsewhere. (Hannam et al., 2014.)

Tussyadiah et al. (2018) suggest that "VR experience leads to positive attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, such as consumer learning of products, brand recognition, product recall, and memory of experiences." However, benefits gained from VR in the tourism context can be divided into two categories; (1) benefits for customers, and (2)

benefits for businesses and destinations. Benefits for customers are enhanced experience, full immersion, engagement, entertainment, social interactions and connectivity, personalization, accessibility, image formation, place attachment, and staged experiences. Whereas the benefits for the businesses and destinations are; marketing and promotion, sales and distribution, revenue generation, planning and management, heritage preservation, training, competitive advantage, and gamification. (Tussyadiah et al., 2018.)

In addition, a higher presence in the VR experience commits positive attitudes towards the destination, leading to stronger interest and liking of the destination. Hence, provides theoretical background of the VR effectiveness with users to marketing stimuli. Which also supports the justification of investing in such services. (Tussyadiah et al., 2018.)

According to Yung et al. (2020), studies have shown that when online consumers feel present in a destination through VR, they find it more memorable, which leads to "familiarity, knowledge, interest, and positively influencing intention to visit the destination". However, Guttentag (2010) presents technological substitutes that VR may offer "lower costs, no lines, no transportation hassles, greater safety, no language issues, no bureaucracy or visas, no weather concerns, and an overall guaranteed experience." VR could also provide tourists to visit destinations that are vulnerable to visit on the spot. However, it is not the idea of VR to mimic the destination to the core to be approved as a tourism substitute, instead, the experience gained from VR tourism is composed of the recipient's perception of the experience. Additionally, VR could substitute some aspects on-site, as certain locations are restricted for reasons like being vulnerable. (Guttentag, 2010.)

3.2 Virtual tourism disadvantages

Kounavis et al. (2012) present that VR's main disadvantage is that the user is prevented from creating relationships with the real world and the surroundings since VR requires one's presence hence complete immersion. Whereas e.g., AR allows the user to still be in communication with the real world. According to Guttentag (2010), a survey was

performed in 2001 where 31 university students from Australia nearly unanimously rejected the idea of utilizing virtual reality for traveling instead of actually traveling. For their reasons, they listed "logical limitations such as the lack of spontaneity, the absence of opportunities to relax, and the inability to purchase souvenirs". Moreover, another survey was carried out for 50 British people regarding a similar issue and the outcome was: "there is a current consensus among UK tourists that virtual holidays cannot replace the real holiday experience, regardless of apparent inconveniences and environmental dangers to destinations''. (Guttentag, 2010.)

Furthermore, Guttentag (2010) claims that by providing such a substitute for travelling as VT, the contrary might happen as it might increase the travellers' urge to visit the real destination. However, Dewailly raises a relevant thought by stating "But would an individual believe that he or she has seen enough of a tourist site by 'visiting' it virtually, or does a virtual visit provide further incentive to go to the site in question so as to enjoy fully its richness?" (Dewailly, 1999). As VT might in fact offer only an incentive for tourists to visit the real site as VT offers knowledge regarding the destination for future purposes (Refsland et al., 2000). Moreover, regarding leisure tourism and museum visit the VR as a traveling substitute might decrease the purchase intentions for such services for its inauthenticity and inability to authentically recreate the consumer experience (Boyd & Koles, 2019). When considering the satisfaction of the VT experience, Guttentag presents that "the existence and popularity of such attractions in no way indicate that tourists view the attractions as acceptable substitutes, as few tourists probably would accept visiting the Venetian as an acceptable substitute for visiting Venice, for example." (Guttentag, 2010). VR has its limitations as it is not yet a complete multisensory experience. In addition, the price of both experiencing VR with high-quality HDMs, as well as producing the content are restricting features (Davies, 2021.)

3.3 The use of virtual reality

Even though utilizing VR in the scope of tourism Loureiro et al. (2020) claim that it is starting to gain momentum. Evidently, such papers started to appear after 2014 within the field of tourism and hospitality journals. (Loureiro et al., 2020). Sheller and Urry (2004) suggest that when people have access to the Internet and the specific websites

that offer traveling content, the story they can form within their minds is enough for them to daydream about these destinations. In a sense, the Internet permits the world to become people's virtual playfields. Barely a decade ago, virtual, and imaginative shapes of traveling were considered a novelty; currently, those ways are more common for an increasing number of individuals (Hannam et al., 2014). Generations like Gen Z and millennials might be keeping up with such developments, as "they will not feel alienated by the technology" (Davies, 2021).

As mentioned, VT through VR can be used for *sample tourism*, meaning that people can test the setting before they purchase the tickets. Some facets have started to offer online events in the form of a tour and make those more appealing, even free of charge. (Grewal et al., 2017; Hannam et al., 2014.) "Experts say pandemic could provide watershed moment for technology, potentially leading to more sustainable tourism.". According to Davies' (2021) article in the Guardian newspaper, social distancing might offer people new ways to be entertained and connected, as VR might activate them to travel virtually. Although, it is mentioned that VR can be viewed as a gimmick and will remain seen as such if people do not continue to use VT services after actual travel resumes. (Davies, 2021.)

Within the VR experience, the person is able to put one's soul into the virtual environment and have a feeling of being part of it. The VR experience will feel like a real situation with the device senses to feel a realistic mental state of the virtual environment. This allows the user to have an illusion of interacting with "reality". (Tussyadiah, Wang, Jung & tom Dieck, 2018). According to Buhalis (2003, p. 92): "Virtual reality will be the next stage, where users will be able to experience a destination or tourism product through all their senses".

For using VR, one can utilize a head-mounted display (HMD), which is worn like a helmet including displays for eyes. In order to experience the 360-degree virtual environment, the user can look and move around. (Adachi et al., 2022.) There are two commonly used headsets; (1) untethered, and (2) tethered. The first type refers to VR presented through mobile devices, which has its limitations e.g. providing complete 3D content. Yet, untethered devices' advantage is their low costs and comprehension as many people possess such devices. However, untethered VR can be used through

headsets like Samsung Gear VR or Google Cardboard. (Tussyadiah et al., 2018.) VR can also be viewed through smartphones and computers, offering recorded 360-degree videos. These videos can be controlled either by turning the smartphone or dragging the mouse around (Adachi et al., 2022.)

The second, tethered VR, demands a headset that can display and simultaneously follow the user's motions (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). The HMD senses the user's movement and demonstrates a 360-degree virtual world, offering a first-person view (Adachi et al., 2020.) The virtual environment alters real-time while the HMD device gathers the user's data. This produces a detailed presentation of the virtual environment and builds an illusion of interacting within the virtual world. However, tethered headsets usually require a computer in order to process such demanding data that VR produces. (Tussyadiah et al., 2018.)

For example, Oculus is suitable for tethered VR and they launched the Quest 2 headset in October 2020. A 64-gigabyte headset costs €349 and 256-gigabytes is priced at €449. Considering prices within traveling and depending on where one is located, these prices might be equivalent around for one trip in the actual setting. (Davies, 2017.) Also, other providers are offering such sets, like Samsung Gear VR, which on Amazon costs around €150. Also, Google offers a Google Cardboard app that can be used with one's smartphone with the purchasable cardboard for around €10-30. (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017.) The low price makes the mentioned solutions available to a wider audience, which also increases the adoption by consumers (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017; Adachi et al., 2022). Currently, YouTube is offering a VR channel. Likewise, Facebook offers an online community possibility for sharing 360-degree online experiences (Adachi et al., 2022).

3.4 The use of virtual reality in marketing

Boyd and Koles (2019) state that interaction within the virtual environment increases the sense of immersion in the environment. In order to make VR experience meaningful for the users, proper immersion in the environment, interaction with the environment, and social interaction were found to increase VR experience satisfaction. Moreover, the VR experience might encourage consumers' intention of purchasing.

For example, customers make more informed decisions and receive personalized offers. Yet VR can affect post-purchase outcomes as well by boosting loyalty whether they have received satisfaction from the VR experience. (Boyd & Koles, 2019.)

Kerrebroeck et al. (2017) claim that the possible opportunities for marketing are still undefined, however, e.g. Marriott offered VT experiences to campaign certain destinations. Moreover, e.g. Expedia offers their customers the possibility to view VR tours of their hotels as a way to offer a service sample. According to Adachi et al. (2022), "travel and adventure were voted the top VR experiences of interest". Moreover, 360-degree videos lead to a bigger engagement by the users and they are to view these videos completely and after click-through in order to acquire more information about the perceived content. (Adachi et al., 2020.) Marketing practitioners increasingly are commencing to experiment with VR in experience marketing. Experience marketing includes marketing communications that aim to specify the experience of using certain goods or brands over product features. Meaning that the idea is to showcase to consumers how certain goods or brands would make them feel. (Kerrebroeck et al., 2017.) Hannam et al. (2014), state that in order for people to slough more networked life, technological innovations have been included increasingly in the tourism industry.

As VR technology is increasingly more available for larger audiences due to e.g., smartphones, these solutions make reaching VR more affordable. Thus, VR has been adapted to marketing as well "as it provides a new, creative and innovative way to reach consumers in order to advertise products and brands". VR enables unforeseen possibilities for brands since it can present certain destinations, and events, or even showcase an experience of using a specific brand. Presenting products through technologies like 3D or 360 rotation allows higher interactivity and vividness. (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017.)

According to Van Kerrebroeck et al. (2017), vividness plays an important role in marketing communications since it offers a realistic presentation of the good. The vividness can be influenced by audio, video, and animations. Van Kerrebroeck et al. (2017) suggest that a more vivid presentation of the good produces more positive perceptions of e.g. attitudes in consumers. With the help of VR presentation, marketing

could be able to reach similar experiences for consumers regarding the product presentation.

VR leads to better vividness than often-used 2D presentations, like picture presentations. Vividness also increases the positive attitude toward an ad, and when the attitude is already more positive towards a brand it also impacts the purchase intentions. Van Kerrebroeck et al. (2017) were able to identify that "attitude toward the brand and purchase intentions are higher in the case of VR versus 2D" as the vivid representation can be lively staged for consumers to experience the brand. VR is able to also create a higher level of perceived presence. Therefore, considering marketing communications VR repays itself back after investing in it, compared to 2D presentation. (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017.) Also, Martínez-Navarro et al. (2019) agree that engaging virtual environments strengthens the brand recall that leads to purchase intentions. As Martínez-Navarro et al. (2019) suggest that in order to develop emotional experiences like positive impact, emotional responses need to be caused. Therefore, they suggest that interactive features together with VR or AR technologies and social media and other webpage links have the possibility to strengthen the user experience. (Martínez-Navarro et al., 2019.)

Van Kerrebroeck et al. (2017) present possibilities for VR regarding presentation in two environments; (1) home, and (2) in-store. The at-home presentation allows for marketing to appear in one's home as experiencing the brand as part of their life. VR apps used via mobile technologies enable the presentation of online store environments. The second environment also created possibilities for stores to represent their selection of goods in-store location and innovatively brand themself. (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017.) According to Martínez-Navarro et al. (2019) such in-home and in-store applications serve more natural interactions as consumers are more familiar with the context, which therefore can strengthen the shopping experience as well as purchase intentions.

Huang et al. (2013) studied technological acceptance factors regarding ease of use and perceived usefulness in behavioural intentions to visit a destination after experiencing a VT website. The results disclosed that perceived usefulness was linked positively to behavioral intentions, meaning that the provided 3D destination virtual world

positively impacts the decision-making process, and eventually the intention to visit the destination in future. (Huang et al., 2013.) This means that 3D tourism sites offer information that strengthens the experience of pleasure with e.g. visual similarity of the actual destination, naturalistic components, and imagery of authentic cultural aspects. In addition, such a 3D tourism site was perceived as useful in order to plan a visit, since elements like local music and storytelling videos express the feeling of the destination. (Huang et al., 2016.) Overall, the study results suggest that an easy 3D virtual world experience leads to positive emotions, and possible emotional involvement and has a considerable effect on destination awareness and possibly the decision-making process. (Huang et al., 2013).

Huang et al. (2016) suggest that the parties that develop VT ought to offer efficient and trustworthy platforms for tourists to acquire travel information in order to create more pleasurable experiences and intentions to travel. They also propose that there should be an emphasis on the VT customers' psychological needs to strengthen satisfaction in the experience of pleasure. Since tourism marketers pay attention to the strategy of satisfying the psychological need for autonomy and relatedness within the VT setting the physical and geographical limitations are absent. In a VT setting, one cannot decide e.g. their activities, which reduces the sense of autonomy. Regarding relatedness, destination marketing strategy needs to consider the impact of experiences of pleasure as well as the intention to travel. Hence, relatedness is essential in order to create purposeful relationships that would potentially expand into the real world. Therefore, destination marketers should design their 3D tourism sites to answer the target markets' needs to identify what possible tourists consider to be efficient in order to plan a trip. For instance, the virtual destinations could present images of artwork in order to increase knowledge of local communities and tribes. (Huang et al., 2016.)

3.5   The current use of virtual reality in tourism

Already some tourism sites include artificially created environments, e.g., in Las Vegas hotel-casinos like the Venetian and the Luxor offer people the ability to watch VEs from ancient Egypt (Guttentag, 2010). "VR is then no more than another logical step dowEgypt (hereby tourism experiences are manufactured for consumption to the

wishes of the consumer." The upside of VR is that users can design and tailor their own experiences. (Williams & Hobson, 1995.)

VT could be helpful especially "In a post-COVID landscape, building interest and evoking positive emotions toward tourism products are vital for destination recovery." (Yung et al., 2020). In addition, Kim et al. (2020) state that "VR tourism content should be created to offer amusement and happiness." Cohen et al. (2014) suggest that Generation Y, the ones born from 1982 until 2002, will become the most valuable tourism cohort economically. Generation Y shares certain social traits regarding coming-of-age, and therefore also present similarities in values, attitudes and behaviors. Ergo, finding unifying characteristics within this generation might be the answer to serving them with specific marketing actions.

According to Hannam et al. (2014), technological developments allow people to live unattached to certain locations geographically. Therefore, Hannam et al. (2014) claim that tourism is not viewed as a momentary part of one's social life and external to everyday life, instead it is perceived as an integral part of ordinary life. One of the reasons is that tourists adopt mobile technologies into their daily life which will expand into digital spaces. As nowadays people are sharing very ordinary experiences through social media, which enables tourism to be co-traveled and enjoyed even through screens. "The emergence of cyberspace has reconfigured and mobilized the concept of space itself, where virtual spaces are configured based on human interest rather than physical proximity." (Hannam et al., 2014.) The connection between tourism and technology enables the blurring of traditional allocation e.g. home or away. Technological adaptations allow these blurrings to occur and multiple tourists have already adapted these reshaped practices. Omnipresent access to mobile and the Internet enables incessant connectivity which reshapes the geographical freedom in order to interact with people. "Travellers are not only travelling on the internet, but also with the internet". (Sheller & Urry, 2004, p. 170).

Yet, the combination of technology and tourism, as well as the coalescence of virtual and physical spaces have also excluded people, which eventually will affect the equality of people. The digital division of people is caused mainly by access to technology ergo the Internet. (Hannam et al., 2014.) From a marketing point of view,

it could be beneficial when tourists are increasingly using mobile technology systems while traveling. Information could be gathered by e.g. collecting data with mobile ethnography. This data could provide more light on what, for example, tourists do while traveling. This could provide a notable market as the consumers are understood even further. (Cohen et al., 2014.)

By contrast, the VR experience is inauthentic per se but "A user's perception of the authenticity of a VR experience will be one factor influencing his or her acceptance of it as a VR substitute." However, the acceptance of VR tourism is influenced also by the nature of VR presented. For example, if a destination is closed for instance restoration, the VR system may be more easily accepted. However, when the destination is a museum, the tourists may reject the VR substitute's authenticity. Also, the user's motivation regarding the VR experience influences one's perception of the substitute. Tourists mostly travel for their enjoyment, however, there are also other motivations for travelling; "personal push factors, such as the desire to escape one's daily routine, find excitement or novelty, or engage in social interaction." (Guttentag, 2010.)

Moreover, Guttentag (2010) argues that VR's tourism travelling substitute can satisfy the personal push factors to a certain degree. VR's novelty and excitement may offer a certain escapism in one's life. However, such a feeling that e.g. a race car driving offer in real life might not translate that well in the virtual environment. VR allows an easy and a rather cheap tool for meeting with acquaintances yet is limited to the available technology. Furthermore, tourists can be motivated by the destination's pull factors, such as interesting attractions, visiting acquaintances and taking part in activities. VR meets the pull factors to a certain extent but functions better as re-creating destinations than offering e.g. a social interaction. (Guttentag, 2010.)

Guttentag (2010) presents that VR can be applied variously within the tourism sector. Regarding the marketing aspect; "VR's tourism marketing potential lies primarily in its ability to provide extensive sensory information to prospective tourists." Usually, tourism goods are unable to be tested prior to the purchase. Therefore, Internet marketing is essential in the tourism field, and VR being interactive could provide more information regarding the destination to the tourists. Tourists are able to make

more informed decisions and gain a realistic view of their traveling destination, which might result in more satisfying holidays. VR is already in use for luring tourists e.g. staying in certain hotels, where destinations are showcased with virtual tours. This kind of representation may provide certain relief for someone suffering from travel anxiety. However, these virtual tours might not be authentic VR but rather represent panorama photos. Yet interactive features in tourism websites seem to attract people. According to a study, virtual experiences offer more efficient advertising compared to brochures regarding theme and natural parks. Viewing e.g. a museum through VR increased the intention of traveling later to the real museum. (Guttentag, 2010.)

Similar to applying VR to marketing within the tourism section, also entertainment can be utilized as a marketable tool for attracting tourists. Entertainment and video game industries also play a role in VR as VR technologies have been subsequently developed. For example, theme parks have already incorporated VR entertainment. (Guttentag, 2010.)

Additionally, certain sites and destinations recreated with VR create access for tourists. Virtual worlds might in certain cases be the only possible way to view destinations as the real visit might be impossible for many reasons, such as the destination might be too remote, expensive, dangerous, fragile, inhospitable or the site does not exist anymore. Such sites could be created in the virtual world and offered to the public through the Internet or as an on-site added service. In addition to destination visitation, VR could offer the best option to handle some historical and fragile objects. (Guttentag, 2010.)

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
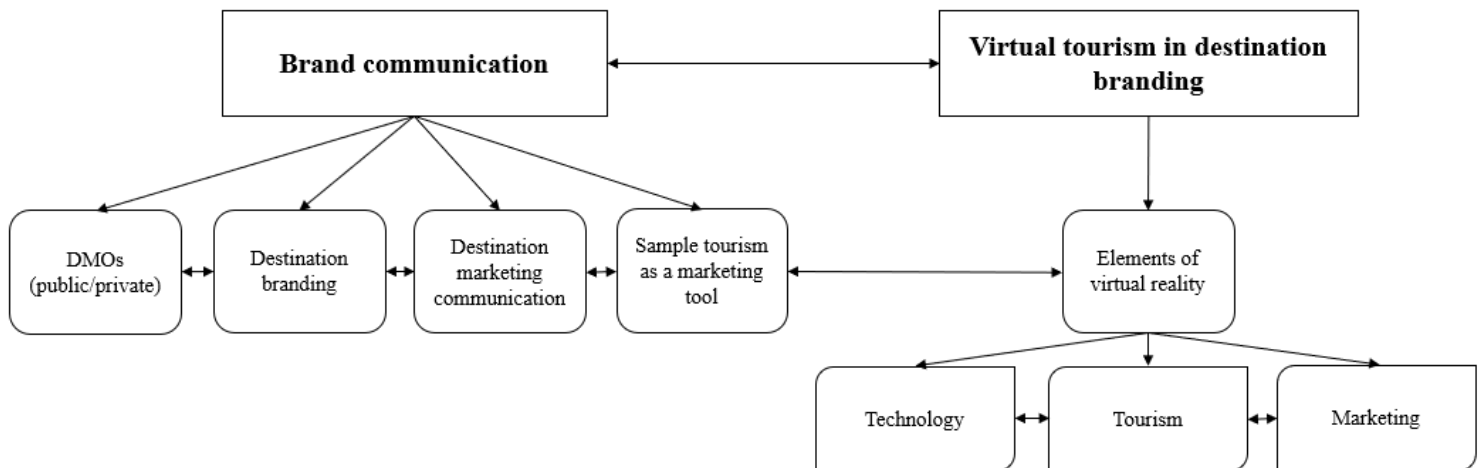
Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework presented in Figure 1 displays the most important aspects regarding the researched topic in the current study. As the study focuses on researching the uses of VR in destination branding, and the ways of implementing that, the theoretical framework shown in Figure 1 describes these literature aspects. The phenomenon is described from the customers' and businesses' point of view.

Consequently, as seen in the figure the presented theory is twofold: brand communication, and virtual tourism in destination branding. According to the literature, brand communication includes the following aspects; DMOs, destination branding, destination marketing communication, and sample tourism as a marketing tool. Even though destination branding might be a larger element in the framework, the previously presented literature indicates that destination branding is part of brand communication. As presented earlier, also VT in destination branding is an essential part of the research in order to understand the elements of VR in destination branding. Therefore, the elements of VR were divided into technology, tourism and marketing aspects.

As explained previously, the DMOs are responsible for the marketing of their destinations (Elbe et al., 2009), which can be private or public organizations. Depending on the nature of the DMO, being either public or private may reflect the destination branding (Hankinson, 2009.) Brands can also be destinations

(Swaminathan et al., 2020), that are not created by a single party, but rather a network of stakeholders, who jointly offer tourism products (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008, p. 112-113). Destination brands require a certain identifying visual identity with the help of logos, slogans, and colors (Tasci & Gartner, 2009), which strengthens to the identification of the destination brand. As brands signify certain qualities and thus create trust (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), developing brands are created patiently by providing constant high-quality (Morgan & Pritchard, 2001, p. 228).

However, differentiating with identifying characteristics from the rivals in destination branding is essential (Yongho Hyun & Cai, 2009; Hankinson, 2004) in order to attract tourists and businesses. Some destination brands use USPs to differentiate from competitors (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008, p. 111). As presented in theory; a "recognized, well-differentiated, and consistent destination image is central to the success of destination branding." (Blain et al. 2005). Moreover, the perceived destination image impacts choosing the destination from multiple options, and the traveler's preference for the destination (Adachi et al., 2022). Through the destination image, an emotional connection can be created between the destination and the visitor (Tasci & Gartner, 2009). The emotional connection with a destination can be created with brand messages in different ways and channels (Elliot et al., 2018, p. 143-153). Therefore, it could be implied that destination marketing communication implements the practical side of destination branding. Additionally, consistent brand communication with various brand messages supports higher brand recall which leads to brand knowledge and eventually brand awareness. Brand awareness is a desirable outcome when destination marketing communication is implemented. (Blain et al., 2005; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2012.)

As disclosed in theory, the presence of VR can affect destination branding. By offering VR, the user will experience a higher presence which positively influences the attitudes towards destination and in interest of destination (Adachi et al., 2022). Presence even on a destination's website leads to familiarity, knowledge, interest, and even intention to visit (Yung et al., 2020). Therefore, a virtualized image is a perceived collection of offline and online sources by an individual, which should be considered in destination branding (Yongho Hyun & Cai, 2009).

The last part of brand communication is sample tourism, used as a marketing tool as services are intangible goods, therefore the sample or a preview of the destinations productized the traveling concept. The sample of a destination creates a competitive advantage for the ones offering such service as the experience offers more in-depth information about the destination compared to e.g. a brochure (Cheong, 1995). Sample tourism also acts as an effective marketing tool (Williams & Hobson, 1995) as it enables experiencing engaging imagery of the destination, even as a try before you buy-solution (Tussyadiah et al., 2018).

Therefore, the sample tourism links to the elements of virtual reality as indicated in Figure 1, as VR has an effect on VT in destination branding. The VR content can be roughly sectioned into elements, which are technology, tourism and marketing. Technology is an essential aspect when experiencing VR as while the user is immersed in the virtual environment they have a feeling of being part of it which enables the feeling of interacting with that reality (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). VR can be used with either tethered or untethered headsets, which allows the user to experience a 360-degree virtual environment with which the user can interact (Adachi et al., 2022.)

Furthermore, VR content can be utilized in the tourism context as well, creating virtual tourism (VT). VR in the tourism context serves the best when marketing destinations, as trips cannot be tested prior to purchase. Therefore, yet again sample tourism can be connected with VR content as seen in Figure 1. In addition, VR in the tourism context can be utilized to showcase fragile sites within the destination, as well as add value to the entertainment aspect (Guttentag, 2010.)

As already mentioned, VR can be applied to marketing and used as a tool for efficient marketing purposes with a vivid presentation of the product that engages the users, hence it might encourage consumers' intention to purchase a trip (Adachi et al., 2020; Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2017). In addition, when users engage in the virtual environment their brand recall is higher leading to higher purchase intentions (Martínez-Navarro et al., 2019). When users gain more information through VR, they can make more informed decisions regarding trip booking (Boyd & Koles, 2019). It is also noteworthy to mention that interacting with a virtual environment leads to emotional involvement, which in turn has a noticeable effect on destination awareness

(Huang et al., 2013). Therefore, VT can be used for *sample tourism*, to preview the destination before purchase to increase sales and create brand awareness (Hannam et al., 2014).

The theoretical framework will be later completed with empirical aspects after presenting the empirical findings. Figure 2 visualizes the main theoretical aspects with the empirical findings related to the current research.

5   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology will be presented with the following topics; research design and strategy, data collection and fieldwork, implementation of the interviews, and data analysis.

5.1   Research design and strategy

Qualitative research methods assist the researcher to understand people in their social and cultural context. Therefore, an essential benefit that qualitative research offers is that it helps to see the decision and action context. Usually, the context explains the behavior behind decisions and actions, hence talking is the key to understanding in such cases. (Myers, 2013, p. 5.) Qualitative research enables us to examine in detail the subject through an interview or observation, resulting in rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Wilson, 2010, p. 14). Performing interviews allows the researcher to view the participant's beliefs and attitudes towards the subject and gain insight into the topic (Wilson, 2010, p. 138). The qualitative research method was chosen as it is most suitable for cases where a particular subject is being studied (Myers, 2013 p. 8).

For the theoretical framework abductive was chosen since neither inductive nor deductive were suitable aspects of inquiry for the research. The abductive aspect combines inductive and deductive aspects into one, (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 23) which means that the theory and empirical data develop together using traits from both sources. Also, the abductive research strategy supports the nature of the thesis since it begins with the pre-understanding of the theory and gives a starting point for the research, which will be completed with empirical data to provide conclusions for the research. Moreover, theory and empirical data continue on having a dialogue throughout the study. Since the topic and the aspect of the thesis is fairly new and timely, empirical data allows the introduction of new topics alongside the theory. Therefore, the abductive aspect of inquiry seems the most suitable aspect. As mentioned in the introduction, the preliminary philosophical assumption for the research is positivist as it aims to test a theory. The suitability of the philosophical assumption will be reviewed in the conclusions after empirical results have been presented. (Myers, 2013, p. 38.)

An essential part of qualitative research is having an empirical study that relies on empirical data (Myers, 2013, p. 11). Qualitative data sources include participant observation, observation, interviews, questionnaires, interpreting reactions and impressions, and so on (Myers, 2013, p. 11; Wilson, 2008, p. 136). In addition, qualitative findings are usually long, hence detailed in content (Yilmaz, 2013). Therefore, interviews are the most suitable practice for the nature of this study. The collected qualitative research data from the interviews will be used for the purpose of the research. The collected empirical data was used as primary data, whereas already existing studies in theory part were used as secondary data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 77.) Secondary data is data that is collected by other researchers (Wilson, 2008, p. 170).

A semi-structured interview is a method used in qualitative research to collect primary data for the study. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the qualitative research method in the thesis. A guided or semi-structured interview refers to a type of interview where topics and themes are prepared, yet there is a possibility to change the wording and order of the questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 77; Wilson, 2010, p. 147; Myers, 2013, p.122). In comparison to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews offer more leeway in the interview process as the questions can also bring up follow-up questions or even change the angle of the questions which are allowed in semi-structured interviews. Also, semi-structured interviews have room for the interviewer to be more present in the dialogue. (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 21.) Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to focus on more important topics of the interview depending on what is thought to be a more relevant topic (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 21; Walle, 2015, p. 70). The semi-structured interviews offer the interviewees to answer in a distinctive manner, yet the direction of the interview is controlled by the researcher to focus on certain aspects (Walle, 2015, p. 72). The key benefit of semi-structured interviews is that the materials are organized and comprehensive while the interview tone is informal and more conversational (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 77; Walle, 2015, p. 72). However, the challenge is that if the wording or the order of the questions will be changed, it is important to keep track in order to cover all the planned topics and themes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 77).

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 84) suggest that asking several simple questions works better than asking only one, more complex question. The idea of qualitative inquiries is to clarify answers to questions like 'what' the respondents feel, and 'why' they feel like that. Therefore, yes or no questions should be avoided, as these questions do not produce qualitative data. (Basit, 2003.)

5.2 Data collection and fieldwork

The semi-structured interviews are the qualitative methods for the study. Since the research aims to clarify the use of VR in context of VT in brand communication and is therefore niché research topic, it is essential to choose suitable interviewees for the study. Therefore, the interviewees were narrowed down by interviewing tourism organizations, who might have heard of the use of virtual reality as part of tourism. Whether offering VT themselves was not a determining factor, instead, all kinds of tourism organizations were considered for the interviews. In order to gain richer results and to collect data from all kinds of participants, the nature of the organization was not a limiting factor. Consequently, both private and public organizations were pursued for the interviews. As mentioned in the theory by Elbe et al. (2009), the DMOs' function is to be responsible for the marketing of their destination, ergo DMOs were preferred target interviewees as those present cities or even regions at times. However, other kinds of tourism organizations were suitable for the interviews as well.

Therefore, purposeful sampling was used for the thesis as the main aim of purposeful sampling in qualitative research is to locate, select and study a small number of interviewees who possess detailed information and an in-depth understanding of the studied case (Fossey et al., 2002; Yilmaz, 2013). Fossey et al. (2002) suggest that also two considerations should be taken into account when selecting the interviewees: (1) appropriateness, and (2) adequacy. Appropriate participants are those who can best inform the study, whereas adequate ones are chosen through initial information data e.g., position, organization, and so on. (Fossey et al., 2002). As the interviewees were destination representatives, they were searched through the Internet. The reach for certain destinations was not limited, instead, the interviewees were studied throughout Finland.

Interview questions were formulated based on theory and are mainly focusing on VR, VT, and branding. The covered topics with the interview questions also follow the thesis' theory and aim to be in logical order. The interview questions were divided into main categories to section the questions. The main categories were in order from the first to last as follows, organization and brand, marketing communication, destination branding, virtual reality, virtual tourism, and lastly virtual tourism in marketing. The aim is to gather a broad understanding of the interviewee's organization and its branding and marketing efforts for their destination. After which firstly virtual reality questions were covered to warm up the interviewee for the upcoming virtual tourism questions, and to inquire about their preliminary experiences regarding virtual reality. As virtual tourism was introduced, the aim is to let the interviewee describe their view on virtual tourism, as the topic is broad. Lastly, thought-evoking questions are asked about utilizing virtual tourism in marketing. To view the formulated body for the interview questions, see Appendix 1 and 2. The interviews are presented both in Finnish and English, as the interviews were performed in Finnish, but the study is written in English, hence both versions of the questions are provided.

The questions are designed to be open-ended, as they encourage the interviewee to speak more (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 83). Open-ended questions give the participant more control over the answer's direction and they produce more detailed answers. In-depth interviews usually cover and focus on a few subjects, making the interview more detailed and tailored. As these interviews are performed one-on-one, the interviewees have great freedom in their answers. (Walle, 2015, p. 18.)

The manner of the interview questions should be neutral in tone, in order to avoid pre-assumptions or given thoughts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 84). To gain rich and impartial answers from the interviewee, the interviewer should avoid interrupting the interviewee to not break their thought process (Walle, 2015, p. 19). The tone of the interviewer should remain calm and neutral in order to not prompt nor probe the interviewee with their answer. The interviewer should aim to remain quiet and give space for the interviewee to form their answers (Fielding & Thomas, 2016, p. 285; Myers, 2013, p.131.) According to Walle (2015, p. 70), the interview questions should be constructed in a manner of logical flow to assist the interview to proceed fluently.

Individual interviews including only the interviewer and the interviewee can be less lively at times in comparison to group interviews. However, individual interviews have advantages, firstly it is easier in one-on-one interviews to be in charge of the conversation's direction and to focus on useful research aspects. Secondly, individual interviews allow the interviewee to trust the interviewer more as there are no others present, so the atmosphere should be calm and discreet. (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 27).

5.3 Implementation of the interviews

The process of contacting the interviewees was to research suitable destination representatives and to call them directly instead of pursuing them via email. All who were reached by phone call agreed to the interview. All interview participants were briefed on the purpose and the use of the data when they were first contacted before they agreed to the interview. As presented in Table 1, overall, nine representatives were interviewed. Both public and private organizations and destinations were selected for the interviews yet only two of them were private. The seven public destinations were mainly DMOs for different cities as destinations. Table 1 presents that S2 is a private organization acting in a destination similar to a DMO, however S6 was different in nature as the destination was a project, although the materials are available to this day. As explained in part 2.1, there are DMOs for different sizes of areas, which is also the case with the interview participants. Some of them operate in a larger area whereas others for a certain city. However, some of these DMOs are called by a city despite having a larger area part of their brand.

The interviews included different positions of interviewees from the destinations as shown in Table 1. The interviews were performed within a three-week time frame. The duration of the interviews varied considerably, as 29 minutes were the shortest ones whereas the longest was 79 minutes long. The medium length of the interviews was 48 minutes.

Interviewee	Code	Company type	Position	Date	Duration (min)
1	S1	Public	CEO	10.1.-23	39
2	S2	Private	Owner and CEO	11.1.-23	54
3	S3	Public	Project manager	11.1.-23	41
4	S4	Public	Communications manager	12.1.-23	79
5	S5	Public	CEO	12.1.-23	29
6	S6	Private	Project manager	13.1.-23	29
7	S7	Public	Travel coordinator	13.1.-23	58
8	S8	Public	Marketing specialist	16.1.-23	46
9	S9	Public	CEO	26.1.-23	57

Table 1. Conducted interviews.

The interviews were performed via Zoom or Microsoft Teams call, depending on the convenience of the interviewee. Both devices have the function of recording during a call. It is suggested by Myers (2013, p. 8) that the interviews would be recorded in order to remember what was said. Whenever a recording is used to take notes of the interview, it is important to test the quality beforehand (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 85). Taking a double recording is recommended, hence one version will be recorded with the researcher's personal mobile phone and the other with either Zoom or Microsoft Teams' own recording program (Myers, 2013, p. 8.) After each interview, both recordings will be inspected to view the quality and length of the interview recordings and to ensure the intactness of the recordings. Interviews were transcribed into text by listening to the audio recordings and videos recorded from the online meeting session and writing. The recordings were transcribed by writing down only the interviewees' words, ignoring the impressions, facial or other physical expressions, the rhythm of the speech or other factors regarding speaking.

During the interviews, the interviewer took notes from the data before transcribing or thematizing the data as suggested by Myers (2013, p.132). Notes were taken of the mentioned main themes, frequent themes, and infrequent themes during the interview. The initial themes were noticed already in the process of the interviews, however, these only gave an initial indication of upcoming themes. Therefore, the data was processed after all the interviews using a program designed for the purpose; NVivo.

As recommended earlier by Myers (2013, p. 8) the interviews were recorded in a double; one with a mobile phone and the other with the help of the interview platform, whether it was either through Zoom or Microsoft Teams' own recording program. All of the interviews were performed in Finnish as all the interviewees were Finnish. However, as the thesis is written in English, both Finnish and English interview questionnaires are provided in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

5.4   Data analysis

In order to handle and cover all qualitative data from the written transcripts it is essential to code or categorize the data (Basit, 2003). To code the data and create categories the software NVivo is utilized. The NVivo program allows researchers to organize their written data from codes to categories, and finally into themes. The data will be analyzed while compared with the theory during the research. Theory can be modified to be in line with the collected data as the abductive aspect was chosen for the research aspect. Data analysis will create an understanding of the ways VR could be implied in brand communication in the context of VT.

The approach to coding the data is emergent coding, as the categories emerge and develop from the examined data instead of pre-deciding the categories (Wilson, 2010, p. 258). Coding and categorizing have an important role in analysis and it includes subdividing the data into different categories (Basit, 2003). Categories can be created using word categorizing, which presents both similarities and differences in the data (Elliott & Timulak, 2008; Myers, 2013, p. 167). "Codes usually are attached to chunks of varying-sized words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting." The role of coding in certain categories can be viewed as documenting relevant phenomena, collecting examples of certain phenomena, and analyzing the phenomena to recognize similarities, differences and patterns. (Basit, 2003; Elliot & Timulak, 2008.) Myers (2013, p. 167) suggests that coding already is part of making the analysis of the data.

To analyze the collected qualitative data, thematic data analysis is partly used for the purpose. The thematic analysis method was selected as it is suitable for analyzing qualitative data. In order to search data throughout to identify, analyze and report

possible frequencies or patterns, thematic analysis can be applied. (Fossey et al., 2002; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Lochmiller, 2021.) However, the thematic analysis will be applied only partly, since both frequent and infrequent findings will be presented. The codes are identified through the data as first categories, and then into themes. It is also essential to see through the frequencies to identify the salient meanings. Lochmiller (2021) presents an analytic process for thematic analysis which includes three phases (1) setup, (2) analysis, and (3) interpretation, which will be followed with the current research. In the setup phase, the data will be prepared and ready for use with e.g. transcribing and moving the data into the suitable program which in the present study is NVivo. The next step is the analysis, which begins with familiarizing oneself with the dataset to identify initial central ideas, concepts or experiences described by the interviewees. The final step in the analytic process is an interpretation which includes identifying (dis)connections within categories to develop themes. (Lochmiller, 2021.) However, Elliott and Timulak (2008) suggest that the nature of qualitative research is to examine phenomena from all aspects, even from the infrequent ones. Therefore, all data should be considered and not discarded some aspects because those are not frequent.

All the gained data are processed with a manner of respect and used in the research discreetly. Additionally, the identities of the interviewees are kept confidential in order to remain anonymous. Also, privacy and confidentiality are respected in the research. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 73-74; Wilson, 2010, p. 88.) Myers (2013, p. 52) presents three ethical issues that should be taken into consideration while doing research: (1) maintaining privacy, (2) representation of data, and (3) taking responsibility for your findings. For the research privacy will be maintained and therefore as seen in Table 1 in part 5.3, the interviewees are named with codenames to protect their anonymity. Secondly, the data will be treated, reported and presented honestly. The third ethical issue 'taking responsibility for your findings' means standing behind the results despite the outcome.

6   EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the empirical findings and analysis of the research. The empirical data was collected from nine semi-structured interviews implemented with organizations working in the tourism field. Because the aim of the research is to study the use of VR in the context of destination branding and the means of VR, the empirical findings are presented in line with the research questions. Also, the meaning of VT for destination brands is elaborated. The empirical findings contribute to the understanding of approaches regarding destination branding and present various insights on current VR and VT scenes in the tourism field of business. Therefore, the gathered empirical results are explained with main aspects in the following order; destination branding, virtual reality in destination branding, means of virtual reality in destination branding, and lastly, the meaning of virtual tourism for destination brands. Thematic data analysis is applied in the empirical findings, to an extent, to identify certain frequencies. However, infrequencies are also reported.

6.1   Destination brand communication

As seen in Table 1., seven out of nine interviews were performed with public destination marketing organizations (DMO). This means that these organizations are funded by public resources like cities or municipalities and are therefore public organizations. Whereas two of these interviews were with private actors. S2 is a private company that operates in a destination that is larger than a city, rather an area. S6 however was a pilot project done a few years ago about a certain regional destination and its culture. However, not all DMOs cover only a city but a larger entity of an area.

As mentioned in 5.3, the size of the area of the interview participants varied, which may have an effect on the possible efforts regarding marketing and branding in some aspects. It can be gathered from the interviews that there are three kinds of interviewees: (1) DMOs who do not offer VT, (2) DMOs who offer VT, and (3) private actors who offer VT as their product. Therefore, this factor has different kinds of aspects on the results, for example, the DMOs who do not offer VT might not possess as broad of an aspect as those who offer VT. Consequently, DMOs' resources are more limited compared to private actors who offer VT as a product. This aspect will be

reviewed during the empirical findings. In comparison, as S2 and S6 are private, their content rotated around VT as it is or a part of their product. Whereas, public DMOs cannot fully put their emphasis only on VT as they are required to produce other kinds of services and content.

In order to protect the anonymity of the interview participants, identifying factors are kept to a minimum. Vague elements are mentioned in the manner of respect to anonymity. However, slogans or other clearly identifying components will not be presented in the empirical results and therefore some parts of certain questions cannot be presented in the following chapters.

Destination branding

For their brand's values, the interviewees stated very different answers as some practiced clear and strategically constructed branding while others were more lenient with their efforts. Some did not state certain values but have them, whereas others were able to identify and present their jointly designed and stated values. Some simply did not have that kind of brand values designed for their destination from the organization:

"I don't think we have for our company stated in the previous or current valid strategy brand values." (S5)

"Our value proposition can be summarized into three things which are sustainability, customer-oriented approach and authenticity, that is our value proposition and also the basis for our DMO." (S7)

Like presented, S7 stated their three values, which was repetitive to present values in groups of threes. Also, S7's answer mentioned sustainability as their value, which was mentioned by a few others, meaning that this pattern was somewhat frequent and could therefore be named as one of the themes in the study for destination branding. As presented below, durability for both cultural and commercial purposes was brought up. They also continued to wonder about the meaning of commercializing the culture, the ethical and sustainability aspects that are not always taken into account when designing their services about culture. However, for S6 their pilot project concentrated heavily on the sustainability aspect:

"During the project and already the idea for the brand, to begin with, was to make culturally as well as commercially sustainable business and memorable experiential services." (S6)

As mentioned earlier, few other interviewees did not directly state values, but had some directions with their branding efforts as e.g., S4 mentioned that their destination is strongly charged with values, and explained further that they do not have specific slogan as they have multiple target groups. They wish to speak to all their target groups as different things work for different groups. This was also mentioned by S8, however, S8's destination has created separate slogans for different target groups to address them in a suitable manner. Addressing different target groups with suitable slogans, content, styles, and so on was also mentioned by multiple other interviewees, meaning that this pattern could be stated as a theme.

According to S9, their brand is "as diverse as our customers are too", meaning that their customers define the brand instead of them as a DMO stating already existing brand values. They continued to elaborate on their city and the possibilities it has to offer for their customers, which can be divided into different groups. With a similar mindset, S1 explained that they wish to strengthen previously formed mental images about their destination:

"Obviously we wish to bring up the mental images that already are connected with […] depending on whether we are marketing […] for example as a traveling destination or for instance as a business area for operation, so it is a little bit different obviously the messages we want to create for the target markets." (S1)

Moreover, similarities were found in things related to nature. Nature was stated frequently by different interviewees, whether it related to cleanness or the possibilities that nature offers. Interviewee S2 stated that their services help people to connect with nature for the source of their well-being and even health, overall getting inspiration from nature to grow as a human too. S2 also mentioned that humanity is one of their values, which however was not stated by other interviewees. However, society emerged from a few interviewees from the functional point of view. Working society and nature were mentioned frequently and therefore could be considered possible patterns:

"Clean nature and then working society." (S1)

"[...] is a city where one can live their own kind of life so everyone can define themselves that what good life is and [...] offers possibilities for that." (S4)

According to S3, in practice, their DMO is a traveling brand that manages and supervises the destination brand, which includes the travel content and aspect but also what the destination visitors can experience, see, and feel while on their stay. They also offer a collective guide for their customers of restaurants, services and so on. S5 however stated as their DMO's purpose as follows:

"We want to grow the (destination's) visibility, that is our brand's purpose." (S5)

S6 presented that in practice with their pilot project they created a traveling service that was experiential in nature which means that they were building a travel route that would support the area's travel companies or entrepreneurs who are on-site whereas in the digital channels, offsite, they aimed to create a solid path for their customers. This means that they were operating both on- and offsite, which was also stated by other interviewees. S6 also was the only interviewee that mentioned designing their services:

"[...] With the means of service design with this kind of joint development mentality we wanted to do this so what it meant in practice was that we wanted to involve relevant parties so from the culture, our travel from Visit Finland and then these traveling actors and artists and culture makers who somehow were connected to [...] so that we will get realistic and, in a way, accurate concept." (S6)

S6 also mentioned that they are collaborating with Visit Finland, which represents Finland's traveling possibilities. Their website acts as a portal for all services Finnish traveling has to offer. Doing a collaboration with the Visit Finland organization was mentioned also by a few others, being a frequently mentioned aspect.

Frequency was also detected in renewing brand and/or marketing strategies. It was mentioned by multiple of the interviewees that they were in recent years either done new marketing and/or branding strategy or are currently going through it. Some made new looks for their brands visually and others renewed their strategies. Some of them

also talked about having bigger marketing campaigns regarding the new visuality of their brand after announcing the renewals in order to inform people about their new visuals. S8 told that they did their brand reform largely involving different stakeholders making their destination's brand. Therefore, S8 feels that the brand has been taken as their own, especially by the inhabitants and they seem to like the brand. S4 stated similarly that when the country and the city function humans can focus on being creative and focus on things that matter to them despite the target. S4 also mentioned that a working society gives people the space to live the life they want to live:

"We got your back, as we always say so it is possible to trust that the society works." *(S4)*

When asked about the aim of causing certain emotions, S2 described that feeling the connection with nature and other people and our surroundings are the emotions they wish to awaken with their customers through their services. Other interviewees did not mention creating a connection with nature. S8 states that despite the feelings, they wish that their brand would cause some emotions:

"Depending on the target group but generally that people have either positive or negative opinion so that people can either identify with it or don't want to identify with that so in a sense it is the kind that forms an opinion." *(S8)*

Destination branding in practice

Many of the interview participants stated having done updating of their brand in recent years, which has also partly led them to refocus their efforts in practice. Most of the interview participants mentioned having branded their destination with their values and/or unique selling points (USPs). A frequently mentioned practical way of implementation was utilizing various digital channels. In order to communicate the services a destination offers, some mentioned using storytelling in branding. In practice, some interviewees outsource their marketing implementation to advertising and/or marketing agencies.

Regarding branding the destination in practice, S1 told that their destination brand was collected from different stakeholders' ideas and suggestions of mental images that were connected with their destination around a decade ago. As a DMO they involved regional partakers in order to communicate the collected messages and set certain objectives they wished to achieve with their outbound communication. Which resulted in a bold concept for their communication. However, they also have currently an ongoing "freshen up" of the brand and they also simultaneously develop their operational model. S1 mentioned that they as an organization see that these mentioned actions were and are very needed. Other interview participants did not directly state the essentiality of actions regarding branding. However, S3 elaborated that they also needed to make necessary actions with their brand and divide it into two as it was confusing for their target groups. Therefore, they are able to communicate their messages better to different kinds of receivers and speak with more targeted messages.

Interestingly, S4 reflected on their destination further and described that their destination generates a bit of emotionless mental images. However, they continued that their destination sells themself the best way meaning that usually, the visitors are positively surprised after visiting the city despite having emotionless preconceptions. By contrast, other interview participants did not elaborate further on how they perceive their visitors' emotions towards the place pre-traveling. However, this yields a niche to be fulfilled and is therefore a possibility. This is the aim of the S4's destination as they have concentrated on the emotional side in recent years to communicate better about the destination. They stated that:

"We are very practical, which naturally also means that it easily leaves a bit of a cold picture of [...] and therefore generating emotions is very important." (S4)

Therefore creating emotions is essential and requires considerably much work with the way they can voice their destination as a good living city. Specifically, communicating other values too than merely stating rankings or facts. This also applies to the business field, communicating the trust, fluency, low hierarchy, equality, and so on of the working culture. S4 elaborates further that Finnish people themself often address themself as quiet whereas most often Finnish people turn out to be fun, humorous, and approachable in the end. Which might unnecessarily affect the way Finnish people are

seen by foreigners. With the rest of the interviewees, the working culture of Finland was not covered.

It is found that repetitive patterns could be detected also with storytelling in branding. Especially with S2 as their product is based on an authentic storyline from Finnish everyday life. S2's branding is based on a real-life story that follows the storytelling style in branding. In contrast, S5 also told utilizing storytelling as part of their marketing when communicating their lead attractions. Main attractions are strongly tied with the brand identity also in S5's destination for travelers. However, the messages are different for target groups, meaning that for example the business partners, they focus more on their scope of services. Some execute destination branding through their USPs:

"Domestically we strongly do both image marketing as well as tactic campaigning and image marketing is built obviously into our USPs, and we make marketing in multiple channels." (S7)

S7 continued to elaborate the channels that they are present in, including both digital and printed marketing, yet always leading with image marketing. Moreover, they also sell marketing packages for the regional companies with whom they are able to make even more tactical marketing. Partaking companies provide the services and resources for the destination and therefore collaborate in joint marketing:

"[...] mission is to broaden marketing and the brand and also create those for the brand implementation ergo brand is a service promise." (S9)

"The further you go in the world the more it is beneficial to have a wider service scope." (S3)

With the practical matters, S9 specified that their brand originates from meeting people despite the channel; face-to-face, chats, digital channels, social media channels, website, phone call or meeting the guides. They always wish to bring added value to the customer encounter as in they received more than they ordered.

In addition, S9 explained that their destination would be nothing without different companies that provide goods in the area, likewise, S7 mentioned a similar statement.

S9 defines that they work in collaboration with an advertising agency which provides campaign content for them. Advertising and/or marketing agencies were mentioned by multiple interview participants. In others' cases, agencies provided them with content, ideas, cooperation and other things related to marketing and branding.

Brand communication ways and brand message

The data points out that brands were communicated differently by different organizations, however overall, all the interviewees mentioned in one form or the other that they wish to do marketing for their target groups in order to stay in their minds and thus improve the recognizability. Most of them mentioned that recognizability is in their opinion part of branding. Generally, it also was rather clear that all participants followed targeted marketing for certain target groups, depending on the group hence the message. Clear groups were identified in some of the interviews whereas others committed to more value-based communication.

Clear frequency was detected with travelers as the target market. Multiple interviewees answered travelers as their main target group undoubtedly, including both domestic and international travelers. S3 explains that with families and individual travelers they aim to appeal to the scope of services available starting from the accommodation, hospitality services such as restaurants and cafes, activities, cultural services and so on. S9 narrates to have left families out of their target marketing only because the destination's other main attraction covers it already extensively meaning that they can focus on other target groups more. Some interviewees identified target groups also by age categories as some mentioned targeting younger adults whereas others mentioned middle-aged couples. S8 mentions targeting urban adults meaning individual, pair or group travelers who usually are interested in culture. Few mentioned applying gender-specific marketing as well.

With international travelers the main tourist attractions are communicated for the visitors, as well as a broad amount of services. Based on the interviews, mostly recurred European markets, Asia, and North America in order from the most frequently mentioned to the least mentioned. One destination offers educational traveling for international visitors, especially in Asian markets. The Finnish school and education

system has gained lots of positive attention internationally in the media and therefore is the target for such traveling. S3 explains that they already have received visitor groups regarding education. Other interviewees did not mention this as their target group. However, S3 explained that education traveling is not their main target market currently as COVID-19 interrupted this kind of traveling and marketing.

In addition, business marketing was mentioned frequently as one of the main target groups for marketing, forming a clear theme. Usually, things like good premises for meetings and conferences were mentioned as well as investors. One of the main target groups mentioned frequently was the labor force tempting more skilled workers into the area. Also, international skilled workers were mentioned by S4. This also has a coalescence with residence marketing, which mainly acquires new people to move to their destinations.

Also, event marketing shapes to be a repetitive target group as multiple destinations also provide different kinds of events. In addition, nature travelers were named as one of the main target markets by S9. On top of that, also one interviewee mentioned having movie makers as one of their target groups, both domestic and international productions. S1 elaborates that movies increase visibility considerably, which is also in line with the presented theory.

In contrast, few of the interviewees described making target marketing based on values, more specifically USPs. S7 explained that domestically speaking their target audience is not built on top of sociodemographic factors but instead based on values. All who identify with those values are their target audience. Internationally, they target geographic segments. Whereas, S4's organization aimed for having a main message that cuts through all of their communication:

"We aim that we basically have that kind of, well we say overarching messages meaning kind of main message [...] per target group with different emphasis. " (S4)

In order to reach their target markets, the interview participants mentioned various ways of communication, marketing and branding. Many practiced digital marketing campaigns that are targeted for their target markets. Mainly target markets are tried to

reach through digital campaigns, after which the results are estimated whether the campaign succeeded to be functional and timely for their target groups, explained S1. They also follow the traffic whether they were able to direct it somewhere, for example, their website. S8 also told of making campaigns that aim to increase recognizability. In addition, they wish to cause emotions and remind people of their destination even as a place to live in their future, in hopes that the mental images improve through the campaigns. However, direct communication was also practiced instead of indirect campaigns. S2 explains contacting their followers with direct messages on social media. S2 also estimates that:

"[...] direct messages and emails are what is the most functional and effective." (S2)

They also have included their main slogan and values into everything that they do with their marketing, and even with the additional sideline products that are connected with the destination. Social media is also the channel of feedback for S2 as usually their customers connect with them and express their thoughts directly. Which was not stated by other interviewees.

S4 mentions having a broad spectrum of different social media channels through which they execute marketing and branding. Multiple other interviewees also mentioned using social media as part of their marketing. On top of that, S4 utilizes influencers in social media as well, which was also mentioned by a few others. Usually, younger adults are reached through influencers, explained S5.

Some practiced customer marketing through the tour operators they work in collaboration with internationally and domestically. S3 states that international marketing is expensive and they do not possess enough resources and therefore lean on the tour operators. The destination S3 works at aims to be presented to as many countries as possible through the tour operators. However, domestically S3 explains that they practice search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) with keywords. S6 explained their customers' decision journey as follows:

"The customer's consumer decision journey started from Facebook marketing so this our [...] consult who arranged these tours did adverts and webinars in advance

through their own site, come and get acquainted with the X-journey and collected people there and through that live session, they got different kind of questions and the interested ones to direct into the right website and through that to purchase those tours [...]". (S6)

Destinations' webpages were also mentioned as one of the main ways to communicate with target audiences. S9 explains that:

"Our homepages are in a very important role in this that in a sense from there comes the customer, they are looking for accommodations or archipelago destinations that it is easy to find, easy to navigate and then we support the message with texts, pictures but also with a face-to-face service [...]". (S9)

They continue to explain that it is important that customer service extends through the whole customer journey they experience. Other interviewees did not emphasize, however, taking part in different events both on the spot and as well as collaborators emerged often. Especially yearly travel fairs are an important event for many destinations. Also, S4 explained that their destination is usually partnered with various local events which improves their recognizability further.

Public relations (PR) plays a big role in S4's destination, as different journalists visit their destination from abroad and publish unbiased content such as articles about them. S4 estimates that this impartial opinion and view of a certain destination supports their marketing and therefore also recognizability. International attention, as also mentioned in educational traveling can therefore be an important factor for some destinations.

Only a few of the interviewees mentioned printed media as part of the way to communicate with their target markets. S4 mentions that if they implement print media, it mainly is a handout brochure or a map. S5 also mentions print media, however, they execute newspaper advertising. Digital newsletters, usually received by email, were also addressed as an important way to make one-way information.

Destination differentiation

Various distinctive elements were stated for the destination's differentiation actors. Uniqueness was pursued usually by the most identifying factors connected with a

certain destination. Identifying factors were utilized to attract target market audiences and therefore interested in the destination as a whole. Simply, every destination has its USPs which guide their marketing. Destinations named multiple different factors which are presented in the next chapters. However, USPs were mentioned a few times as distinctive factors:

"Obviously everyone who sells their destination also appreciates and thinks of those USPs and since differentiation is nowadays very important but first you need to get the customer interested in it (destination) by pictures and words and then the service needs to work so that these support each other." (S9)

However, uniqueness was pursued by S5 through their main attraction, describing it as a unique sight. Using one main attraction as a differentiative factor was part of several interviewees' strategies. Original identity and brand image with the recent brand reformation is S8 destination's differentiative factor. After their brand reformation, they received an award for it as they widely included residents as part of the reformation. As cited below, S4 described their uniqueness with roughness and imperfection:

"[...] Certain kind of roughness in its own way that we are not very polished but in a sense our values are also highlighted [...] certain kind of can one say even imperfection." (S4)

Additionally, they explain that design in all its forms whether intangible or tangible cross-sections their city in everything. Their services have been designed thoroughly and they have an advantage with the design element.

By contrast, few connected their destinations with different kinds of connections with nature. For example, the differentiative shape of the city is the S9 destination's unique factor that is one of a kind in all of Finland. S2 also named a certain Finnish triangle combination as their differentiative elements, which are nature, well-being and link to Finland. They also mention authenticity as part of the main combination. S1 elaborates that they have identified their rivals:

"With traveling we have very clear competitors [...]". (S1)

They have differentiated themself with a high level of service and a service concept that also includes high-quality accommodation. They also mention functionality being their differentiative element. In addition to professionality, hosting groups and accommodation concepts. Functionality as a differentiating element was not mentioned by other interviewees, therefore it could be expressed as infrequent theme.

S6 describes that with their project, others have not previously connected the local service providers and other actors in order to produce an experiential service. The service path is unique and therefore the concept was created. The service needed to be polished and created in collaboration to create an unforeseen service concept. However, S3 viewed differentiation from competitors from a new point of view, compared to the rest of the interviewees. Firstly, they think that they do not have a lot of competitors domestically:

"[...] Inside Finland I don't think we have competitors on the contrary rather collaborators." (S3)

Moreover, internationally they proceed with more of a united Finnish front meaning that they wish to lure visitors anywhere in Finland instead of choosing some other country for their destination. S3 states that Nordic countries are especially relevant rivals for Finland overall. In addition, the mentioned rivalry between Nordic countries was frequently stated by other interviewees.

Regarding the logos with the destination brands, multiple of the interviewees had slogans, which cannot be presented to remain anonymous. The visual identities of the interviewees are also differentiative factors from rivals. Moreover, the logos will be introduced in a vague manner in order to not give away specific elements like colors or shapes.

S4 elaborated that their destination does not have a certain logo but rather an identifying frame that is repeated and present in everything that they do, meaning that they aim to increase overall recognizability. They have clarified their visual identity recently, which was also the case for multiple other interviewees. The work regarding clarifying the visual identity of a brand was frequently also connected with a modern

look. On the other hand, two interviewees stated that their logos communicate their strong and identifying histories that are still part of the cities to this day. Especially S8 explained that their logo is strong and stands for:

"[...] history and strong features, it is wanted to be distinguished from other cities' logos." (S8)

Also, S1's organization aimed to represent history in their visual identity, as their logo expresses their family's genealogy. Then again S6 explains that their logo aimed for mythical and symbolic meanings. Even though Finland's nature with its lakes and forests is important for the S7's DMO, they also wished to create an up-to-date visual identity that would express certain graphic elements. Whereas, S2 wished to bring forward the naturality and handcrafts:

"The logo is designed so that it brings out the values and the core, whether it was with shapes and colours or words." (S2)

Having a logo and visual identity in line with the destination city or cities was practiced by multiple interview participants. Many stated reasons for the decision by explaining that different aspects of marketing support each other and therefore repeating certain visual identities might lead to accurate and broad recognizability.

Destination organizations and collaborations in marketing

As mentioned briefly earlier, a major part of the interviewees are DMOs, however, other kinds of collaborations emerged through the interviews. Not a single interviewee stated not having any form of collaboration. Certainly, it can be stated that cooperation is essential in destination marketing.

Cooperation with the Visit Finland organization was mentioned by a few of the interviewees. For example, Visit Finland has developed a programme called 'Sustainable travel in Finland' into which at least S8's destination participates. S6 explains that Visit Finland does not support individual projects and therefore was not

able to cooperate with their project. However, they were able to work together in other ways.

S3 describes their DMO as being an organization that includes the other regional municipalities in their actions regarding destination marketing. Especially international marketing through their DMO as other municipalities in the region are fairly small or doing their own marketing internationally. Therefore, S3's DMO unites everyone and does international marketing in collaboration in order to join their efforts also financially. Similarly, also S1 unites multiple regional organizations and by doing so they have been able to make persistently long-term travel strategizing for the region. The functional structure of their DMO serves all partakers, and they have together with the regional actors designed the development of their region's traveling. In line with their areas, they have been able to design their scope of services and increase their quality.

Also, S4's DMO wished to increase the quality of their destination marketing, there used to be two operating city marketing organizations. In order to strengthen and unify their branding and communication, they united the destination organizations into one. After this, they were able to reach more separate target markets with joint efforts. Therefore the role of their DMO deepened and in a sense, the unified brand got more consistent according to S4. In practice S5 mentions participating in exhibitions and fairs as part of their branding actions:

"On top of making our own business also this destination marketing and we see it as an important part of the recognizability [...]". (S5)

One of the interviewees views themself as a destination management company (DMC) as they have the rights to sell the travelling services, as well marketing their destination. However, S9 explains further the importance of collaboration with destination marketing by saying:

"So, marketing this destination does not simply succeed without the companies, Visit-organizations do not have anything of their own [...] if these companies disappear around us we've got nothing to sell." (S9)

Therefore, as a DMO they collaborate with destination's companies and for example, have joint campaigns. S9 wishes that the companies would inform them about their services, events, and so on so that they can do marketing for them as a DMO. In addition, S9 told to liaison with other Visit-organizations in order to make even broader marketing and to reach target markets more extensively. Apparently, nowadays people rarely visit only one destination but rather visit multiple in the same trip and are independently making package tours. It is also beneficial for the Visit-organizations to work in liaison knowing this.

Customers' purchase- and decision-making process

Regarding marketing customers' purchase- and decision-making processes were asked, some of the interview participants answered with a broad variation. For example, some of them inquired from the customers directly, whereas others followed more of a questionnaire-type approach. However, the answers show variation which also obviously depends on the size of the DMO or other organization. Also, some of the answers did not directly cover the question asked but elaborative answers were given regardless.

S1 explains that it is important to know consumer behavior and the ways clients are lured to the channels where the considerations turn into action. Therefore, S1 thinks that their role is to make the recognizability and consideration for the destination preference which directs the customers to their channels where the behavioral change happens. S1 identifies that their aim is to lead to results: "With traveling to the travel business and then in citizen marketing to the growth of the number of movers."

S2 admits immediately having too little information regarding the purchase- and decision-making processes of their customers. In practice, thus far they have asked directly their clients' opinions and inquired about the ways of finding their services and the purchase decision-making. The private organization that S2 is the CEO of works through networks meaning that they have one main target market area where they have several cooperative partners who then sell and market their services there. After this, they mutually discuss the findings and therefore receive more information through them. Yet they wish to focus on these matters in the future to become more

aware of possible issues or improvements. Similarly, the organization of S3 also appeals to the travel agencies and tour operators who reach regional customers, however, S3 did not state inquiring information regarding the decision-making of their collaborators. In the organization of S9, they make systematic inquiries of all of their services, in addition to economy research which they compare biennially. S8 considered that by repetition their brand would be more recognizable and thus affect customers' purchase- and decision-making progress:

"We see the purchase process so that in a sense we need to increase the consciousness overall of [...] so that people have seen it somewhere and when it is repeated to them, they get a feeling that this is trustworthy, somehow familiar so then it is easier to buy as they get intrigued of the entirety and then start to seek content." (S8)

Through agencies, S6 got instant information as for some customers, booking through an agency is important; they seem trustworthy and are familiar with good and suitable concepts explained S6. In addition, they combined user study methods and made interviews and feedback questionnaires which both gave data and information.

S4's DMO has made profile work in the sense that there exists an example person from all of their main target markets. And therefore always have this certain profile in their minds when doing marketing. They worked the profiles so that they first mapped the suitable person who would most likely be interested to visit their destination, after which they interviewed people on the spot in certain countries who would match their preliminary profile. S4 explained that they have been close to the estimate of the profile persons in the target countries:

"We see it as important because we have to be authentically ourselves, because we cannot in a way market and sell something that is not per se consistent with our values and then it is smart to address the travel community that shares our values." (S4)

S4 continues to elaborate on the practice of their profiles as it varies depending on the target markets, for example, in China, it is typical to book trips through agencies whereas British people book their journeys themself and look for information independently of the whole travel process.

S7 mentions that they follow web statistics, in addition to the service called Rudolf which is a database offered by Visit Finland. Everyone has access to the database and can search for the differences in customer behavior which might expose certain conclusions and consequently highlight in their marketing. Overall, identifying customers by certain metrics was a frequent pattern and elaborated. S5 was able to identify that most of the purchase process happens from mobile devices instead of computers. Also, the largest part of the reservations comes 24 hours before the trip despite the travel product they choose. Most of the purchases happen at nighttime or very close to the actual trip taking place. However, some people also book their trip early on and they usually plan their trip beforehand yet this is only a tiny part of bookings. Seemingly, there is variation since event travelers usually plan ahead of the trip as they need to book their accommodations and tickets and therefore need to plan beforehand. S4 estimates their destination is different from other Finnish destinations as 50% of their travelers are from abroad from which half are on a business trip whereas the other half is on leisure travel which also forms a certain profile. S9 identified that online bookings are important for their destination:

"Two thirds if not more of our customers who make the bookings are women [...] from activities, program services and accommodations 70% comes through online." (S9)

In addition, S9 estimates that the customer journey starts with searching their website through search engines, from where they settle into their website's front page that has a menu full of services for their stay in the destination. After that, they make a reservation and S9's organization sends them documents and bills afterwards. S9 comments that sometimes customers call them if there are some uncertainties with online booking. To conclude, S9's destination has a different DMO profile compared with others as they have the rights to sell the services too whereas the other six DMO interview participants did not perform direct selling.

Social media

Nearly every interview participant mentioned utilizing some tool to analyze, monitor or track their social media channels. Interviewed organizations mentioned revising their social media analytical tools frequently; some daily, some weekly. Also, most

organizations have at least one person working on social media and therefore are able to promptly react in case something needs attention in their channels.

S4's organization tracks and monitors singular posts and Instagram stories. They monitor the conversion by comparing separate posts' or stories' content and therefore track the most popular content versus the least popular. The people whose job is the content creation and tracking conversions are analyzing on a daily basis their social media channels. However, they do not track their website conversion daily. S4 mentioned that Google Analytics is their tool for tracking their social media channels. This tool gives them information regarding their digital channels:

"We follow all the time how much those (social media channels) are used, how much is the conversion and same applies with our website, so the visitor counts, from where, what are the most popular contents, how much time are used for those. It is a kind of continuous tracking because it also defines what kind of content, we should put there [...]." (S4)

Similarly, also S9 mentions tracking their social media content as they identify whether it is working for the audience or not and are therefore able to make some changes in case needed. They collaborate with an advertising agency, which in the event can change texts, pictures, and so on to make the content more appealing. Also, others utilize certain tools for tracking their digital channels. S5 explained that they track their visitors by age, by time, through which channels they visit their sites and so on. However, their employees working regarding social media follow what is commented on and therefore also reply to those comments.

S1 states that they report their social media channels' results quarterly. They also report the productivity of their marketing campaigns. On top of that, they report additional observations if those emerge. S3 mentions having weekly tracking in their social media channels and monitoring occurrences. It can be interpreted that the strict data from different social media channels are important and are therefore reported. Therefore they view it as leading with knowledge. Similarly, S8 states that they follow their analytics:

"[...] if not daily, then at least weekly follow, and then monthly even more closely." (S8)

Larger part of the interviewees, specifically DMOs, did not mention having content regarding VR nor VT in their social media channels. Which is understandable as they do not offer VR or VT services. However, even those who offer VT content, a part of them have content of it in their channels. For example, S7 explained that when they had their VT project, they also provided content regarding the VT possibilities in their channels as it was a novelty. The novelties are according to S7 "hyped" in their channels and therefore gain visibility. In comparison, as S2 and S6 are private, their content rotated around VT as it is or a part of their product.

6.2 Virtual reality in destination branding

The main research question for the present study is "How can virtual reality be utilized in destination branding?" which will be aimed to answer in the following chapters where the familiarity of VR is described. In addition, the role of VR in consumers' decision-making in the marketing context is presented.

The familiarity with virtual reality

The familiarity with virtual reality varied among the interviewees. Everyone had heard of the concept and therefore was familiar in some sense. However, some of the participants had not tried VR at all whereas others had been working with and producing content to be experienced through virtual reality. One of the interviewees had no personal experiences regarding trying VR. Others had tried VR on some level. However, one of the interviewees explained to have tried VR yet getting nauseous of the VR glasses. For types of experiences they stated:

"Yes, I have experienced it and experienced some impressive moments with virtual reality". (S7)

"Well one experience, for example, was that other municipalities made [...] it was quite like a startling experience, and it gave me a feeling that oh man this is great we should do something like this too!" (S8)

As pointed out above, some thought that VR was impressive or even startling at times, meaning that it had affected them. S8 even started to consider the possibilities VR

could possibly offer for them regarding marketing their destination. However, two interviewees who had tried virtual reality in some form or the other were doubtful as shown below:

"Personally, I think that it is precisely 'just nice' but maybe its role is to kind of give a little like tasting that what the real experience could be [...]" (S1)

"Yes, it is familiar, I have done a few of these kinds of virtual reality tours [...] as an experience those were pretty interesting but then again, I am not convinced completely." (S3)

S6 had tried a VR workshop where they were able to try a promoted version of a certain platform made for an event. The session lasted for 45 minutes and was a very intensive session, it exhausted some of the participants. Which might give direction on the length of sessions through VR. However, some had produced content with VR and therefore possesses a different kind of view and understanding of the issue compared to some other interviewees. For example, S4 explained that they see VR to reach prospective new travelers for their destination in the future. They elaborated further that considering the current users of VR and metaverse and what they consume in those worlds will be changing and in a few years those users are undisputedly their target markets:

"At the moment if we look at someone who is 15 or 17 years old, to them there aren't any restrictions which is the reason that what is virtual, instead two realities live side by side and both of those are equally real to that specific target group." (S4)

Therefore, S4's DMO believes that bold experimenting and pioneering regarding VR and more broadly with metaverse gives them an advantage in a few years' time. They explained that with time customer behavior will change even more and therefore the role of virtual consumption will be increasing. S4's organization was able to respond quickly as they have already experimented with different ways of using VR. This also gives an indication of the possibilities S4's organization have been able to do in comparison to other DMOs sizewise. Furthermore, S2 hoped that content-wise in the future VR could offer tranquil experiences in addition to current games and other forms of entertainment.

Role of virtual reality in consumers' decision-making in marketing

The role of VR in the interview participants' customers varied, as some of them are DMOs who also produce other kinds of content than VT and two privates who sell and market their VT services full-time. It can be therefore interpreted that offering VT does not influence the consumers' decision-making with the DMOs who do not offer VT services. However, these DMOs were able to identify positive elements of offering VT:

"If there were moving pictures and still pictures and videos and all that, yes it could bring more sales." (S3)

However, non-providing DMOs also quite jointly agreed that the lack of offering VT services would affect their sales at this moment. For example, S5 described that considering their target markets, they believe that expanding their product range with VT would play a role in their consumers' decision-making. Moreover, both S8 and S9 considered that with international customers, it might be an affecting element as VT might be a larger phenomenon abroad compared to domestic markets:

"[...] the more the awareness (VT) increases, the more it is required." (S9)

"I don't know that does it (VT) affects, for example, how much internationally their decisions, there isn't any comparison, but it would be interesting to research this." (S8)

Although, S1 recognized that VT as a sample tool could be functional, as it could work as attracting visitors into their VT based on a web browser:

"Its kind of is an awakener of the interest, that tasting [...]." (S1)

From there the customers could be redirected into web pages to make sales, or to other sites that they find interesting. However, S2 described that regarding selling and marketing the virtual tours, VR has played a large role since it is their full-time purpose as an organization to sell their VT products. Therefore, showcasing already at the reaching stages some of their content impresses the customers. Despite having offered VT content as a project, S6 does not think possessing a broad outlook on the results to

state the amount of influence VT has on the customers' decision-making. However, largely offering VR content, S4 as a DMO ponders that offering VR would significantly influence the singular traveler's decision-making, however, they state that it certainly will change in the future. Yet they still identify benefits of offering VR:

"Maybe the largest advantage we have gained from VR is that we have started making and providing it at that point when others as a destination did not, at least at that extent [...]." (S4)

6.3 Means of virtual reality in destination branding

As described in the 1.2, the first supporting research question for the study is "What are the means of virtual reality that can be utilized in destination branding?". Therefore, the following chapter will elaborate on the understanding of the means of VR in destination branding with the following themes: possibilities in using VR with marketing, and use of virtual reality in destination branding.

Possibilities in using virtual reality with marketing

As the question was only asked in case the researcher considered it to be suitable, only a few of the interviewees inquired about the answer. The question was mainly targeted at the ones who would have not previously discussed or elaborated on the topic of the possibilities of utilizing VR in brand and marketing communication. These mostly were the kind of interviewees who did not actively or largely practice VR or VT. Therefore, the data gained for the question were limited and gave only subtle ideas about the topic.

S7 identified that VR gives the possibility to communicate their organization's values further. As one of their values is sustainability, VR could be the "vehicle" to communicate that. VR might have a way to make informative messages interesting and inspiring, which would not seem like lecturing about the topic. Instead, functions as a tool to add gamification to information to keep the received information lightweight. However, S5 did not yet recognize the possibility of using VR as part of their brand and marketing communication by stating:

"I can turn the question around, immediately when I see a possibility in that we will put it to use." (S5)

It could be interpreted that in case the receiving audience largely would see value in VR content and use that actively, then S5's public DMO organization might invest in such development.

Use of virtual reality in destination branding

The question regarding the use of VR in destination branding aimed to cause different kinds of thoughts and possible ideas regarding the topic. All in all, all the interviewees saw the potential of utilizing VR in destination branding, and different kinds of marketing-related ideas emerged through the discussions. As mentioned earlier, a few of them had more experience from the production side as well, which was also clear with the answers. The two VR content producers were able to elaborate their ideas further with concrete examples, having more experience with the possibilities as well as restrictions regarding VR. However, others were able to view the issue from the marketing point of view and identify how VR could benefit their destinations. Aspects like planning and management and education did not emerge from the interviews.

According to S8, they would wish to inspire people to move or visit destinations through VR. This was also mentioned by S5 since they would use VR to increase the recognizability. They continued to elaborate that some kind of gamification could be a suitable purpose for VR as the marketing would not be as obvious and therefore excite people to visit the destination at some point in their future. S9's destination, which is largely focused on history, would use VR to enliven the long and specific history of the destination. They assume that people would most definitely be interested in how the city looked hundreds of years ago.

The frequent theme among the majority of answers was to utilize VR in destination branding so that it would give a taste of the destination which would ultimately lure the travelers to visit the destination in real life. The tasting application of VR could also limit the abundance of destinations to visit in real life. Therefore, tasting could function as a test in a sense which has an influence on the purchase decision in the end.

If the tasting sample would be developed with a high-quality and real view of the destination, maybe the tasters would be impressed by the shorter content and think that the real deal is much more impressive, so suggested S3 and S8. Also, S1 agrees with the idea of tasting:

"[...] this kind of awakener and trigger of mental images and also of the recognizability [...] it gives like a tasting of what it could be and then it awakens the interest and that way maybe also the consideration and that way seeking information so then maybe the traveller will purchase a trip [...]." (S1)

"With virtual reality, we can offer some kind of added value [...] offer a possibility for people who cannot come here or are wondering whether to visit [...] to also teaser that how the destination looks and feels." (S4)

Also, others stated that they wish that people who do not have the possibility for financial reasons or others, or physical access to visit certain destinations could experience them through VR. S4 would use VR to create for example already demolished buildings that carry historically important meaning. Most relevantly S4 sees VR can be used to reach prospective target markets, whose consumer behavior is already or will be different. Therefore, they see younger and more active people as possible target markets to pursue. However, the teaser experience should be something where things can be done and experimented with instead of only watching. For instance, people from around the world who do not know a lot about the destination would possibly be interested in seeing the content in concrete. S6 states that the demo or session could be short to awaken the interest and even raise trust. Therefore interest combined with trust could lead to the purchase decision.

S2 has used VR content already in destination branding and noticed it is functioning well. COVID-19 yielded a certain niché for traveling and therefore S2 started to produce VR content more broadly. However, they would use VR in destination branding to purchase traditional Finnish experiences like a sauna or cross-country skiing. They also see potential with shopping online through VR:

"It's already done out there in the world but not so much in Finland, is that for example also web shops are adapting to VR meaning that technologically it is possible to through VR-glasses to go for example into my home which would be completely shot on film and people can wander around and through VR-glasses to click and buy

something if they see some nice cup, that would be linked with the web shop and that can be bought there." (S2)

S7 thinks virtual traveling is an overall interesting phenomenon and views VR from a critical aspect. They ponder whether VR is after all a "double-edged sword" since as a DMO their fundamental purpose is to bring customers to the destination. Therefore, VR could wilt the actual destination visiting as it would largely affect the locals' living possibilities. Especially some smaller cities and municipalities in fact require visitors, consequently, they have concerns regarding VR. Therefore, the VR content should be attracting customers on the spot to experience the authentic environment in the destination. They explained their reasoning as follows:

"Traveling is not done only so that travellers would have fun, primarily it is done so that locals feel well when we are thinking about responsible traveling [...] so it in a way passivates people if a person gets everything too easily into their sofas it can passivate people to go and obviously it is a good thing for climate but what does it mean for the smaller cities." (S7)

6.4 Meaning of virtual tourism for destination brands

The last main theme for the empirical findings is presented in line with the second supporting research question, offering aspects on the meaning of VT for the destination brands. Therefore, VT as a phenomenon will be familiarized, after which the different kinds of VT services will be elaborated. Next, in line with the presented theory, the advantages and disadvantages of VT in the marketing context will be reviewed. Also, VT as a sample tool will be discussed. Lastly, the considerations of adding value with VT to traveling are presented.

Summary of virtual tourism

VT was described by the interview participants rather similarly to a certain extent. The ones that were not familiar with VR, did express more on the advantages and disadvantages of VT, whereas the ones who have already produced VR content focused more on the types of VT and the possibilities these possess. Nevertheless, VT was viewed in both positive and negative aspects, however, the majority perceived it to be a possibility. The interview participants' descriptions of VT are presented below.

S5 describes VT being a visit for example to the Louvre museum through virtual channels without physically being in Paris or even France. Ergo that one could visit any destination through digital channels. However, S3 estimates that VT is also the future as COVID-19 gave space for such services, for example, they were under pressure to start to offer virtual services as well since the demand increased. The pandemic also addressed that people need the actual traveling, however, sustainability plays a large role in S3's DMO. Therefore, it raises questions about the durability of travelling, to which the answer might be found in VT. Interesting insights regarding VT were discovered:

"VT enables a lot but also surely creates challenges as well and it will never fully replace real traveling but possibly somehow will be linked to it." (S3)

"It generates a thought that it (VT) enables access to many more target groups for example to culture or World Heritage Sites that to which everyone possibly isn't physical or financial access." (S5)

"It probably is an easy, effortless and affordable way to get new experiences." (S1)

As read above, virtual travel journeys are a way to get new experiences, however, nowadays people tend to spend a lot of their time on computers and increasing the screen-time can have negative effects, S1 expressed. However, if one had no knowledge of a certain destination whatsoever, for that VT is a suitable instrument. Further, S6 who have produced VR and VT content pondered that VT seems still to be only at the beginning. Moreover, S7 does not think that from their point of view, there is yet such a thing as VT. However, possibly the lack of knowledge and experience gained through VR or VT content production might affect their view on the matter. VT can be viewed also from the revenue generation model point of view:

"It raises questions like what is the revenue generation logic, who will earn the money, and does it (VT) compete with regular traveling or does it bring added value to it." (S7)

They continue to reflect that VT should alter as revenue received to the area after e.g., five years time. As the DMOs cannot produce entertainment without receiving income as usual, DMOs get their funding from the taxation system in Finland. Therefore S7 sees VT problematic as the revenue logic is in their opinion still unclear.

There are different kinds of VT journeys which can be either tethered or untethered experiences, as explained in part 3.3. Therefore, VT can be described as being a rather diverse field of types and it is essential to identify the type of VT that is being discussed, explained S2. They continue to elaborate that they perceived that VT is (pre-COVID) a traveling done with tethered devices, however, after COVID-19, the field expanded regarding VT. S2 explain three main types of VT: (1) with tethered devices, (2) live- or video connection, and (3) recordings. Also, S4 agrees that VT currently has a broad spectrum of experiences in various ways:

"At its best VT is that it gives access to certain locations which normally aren't available, or it does genuinely produce some added value, meaning that you can buy or change maybe something for free which improves your experience for example of some attraction." (S4)

The familiarity of virtual tourism

After getting descriptions, explanations, and opinions on VT, the familiarity of VT was inquired. As a concept VT was familiar to all the interview participants, however, not all of them had tried VT themselves. The rest who had tried it personally had either participated in a virtual journey or produced VT content themselves. Participants' familiarity overall with VT is presented in the next chapters.

Every participant was asked whether they had tried VT themself, the reasons for not trying it varied. S1 explained that they work regarding traveling every day and wished in their free time to "experience the real thing". Then again, S5 thought themself of being old-fashioned in wanting to travel to the destination:

"For me traveling and tourism is that you can use all of your senses, so I want to smell and taste the destination where I am, so I don't think that what I'm looking for personally from traveling would be achieved through digital channels." (S5)

Lastly, S9 had once tried VR a few years ago, however, they think of VT "not being their thing". Also one of the reasons for not trying VT was that the VR glasses make them nauseous, and therefore are not able to use the HMD VR glasses.

By contrast, during COVID-19 S3 participated in a virtual tour to Iceland. They described the experience as intriguing yet it also cultivated the feeling of actual traveling to the same destination. Therefore, they see VT as a marketing tool that can present teasers of destinations. Hence, why they believe that VT will not replace real traveling as VT is not a multisensory experience. In addition, S8 tried VT purely out of interest as they wished to gain ideas and vision about the content of VT. They recall taking part in a filmed session where a guide was by a fireplace surrounded by nature, and they were presenting the area. The experience only inspired S8 to experience a similar journey in real life on the spot.

As mentioned, COVID-19 gave space for VT to emerge more broadly, which was also the reason for S7's visit to a museum in Saint Petersburg. With that tour, there was a guide who in a live session explained and presented the places in the said museum. Also, S4 experienced a similar tour to a church in Florence, that was based on a web browser. S4 thought VT has an advantage with certain aspects of travelling:

"[...] instead of queuing there for an hour and going there to push through the people, I watched it from my own computer [...]." (S4)

"At the beginning of COVID-19 those two VT experiences were enough, then I kind of got tired with it [...] it passivated me, it made me tired, it didn't necessarily inspire me, it raised questions [...] people become passive online." (S7)

As described above, VT experiences might consume and passivate the users as well. Therefore, it could be analyzed that VT is not suitable for everyone. However, S6 states participating in VT sessions as well as producing content for their project. Yet, they estimate their ambitions and objectives to be higher than the current VT scene is able to provide. Despite producing VT content, themself in the past using VR, S2 admits to not benchmarking enough of others' produced VT content. Nonetheless, they advocate the use of VR glasses because of the "confusingly immersive" experience they are able to provide. This is also agreed by S4, who states that it can feel as if one would be on-site with the VR glasses. S2 elaborated research background for the use of HMD:

"[...] it is also researched that how VR-glasses work when a person experiences some place through them, the brains start to understand that they really are in there, in that way, for example, the natures' effects on well-being can be achieved virtually even though they would experience it in the middle of Tokyo." (S2)

Being a VR and VT content producer themself and having a broad experience of the issue, S2 criticizes certain ways of implementing VT, as some have simply combined one video after the other to make marketing or promotional videos which S2 regards as not being VT. Hence, in simplicity, one can purchase a guided tour of a destination.

Virtual tourism services

Despite VT being familiar to all interview participants, and some even trying the services, only part of them offer such services. Extensive descriptions of the content, distribution channels, challenges and problems, and problem-solving are described in the following parts. Firstly, the reasons for not producing or offering VT services are explained thoroughly. Also, the values and benefits of VT gained from the data are explained.

Non-providing virtual tourism

As most of the interview participants are DMOs, they are funded by the region's cities and municipalities, meaning that they have limited resources for their use. Which was the most frequently named reason for not offering VT. As producing VT content might usually be permitted by the marketing departments of the DMOs' budgets it is therefore challenging to invest largely in that since the rest of the marketing might suffer from the consequences. Oftentimes producing VT content would be outsourced meaning that DMOs cannot proceed with the VT projects in-house hence the funding is problematic. Few interviewees explain the lack of resources as a DMO as follows:

"[...] to a large extent our marketing budgets go into campaigns and other similar collaborations and to the tactical side and that kind of content." (S8)

"Clear answer for this is resources, we currently have very limited resources [...] we don't have resources to delve into this now and produce quality material and content." (S3)

Some of the DMOs are also non-profit organizations (NPO), meaning that they do not profit directly from the visiting tourists. Also, S5 explained that their main job as a DMO is to bring tourists into the destination in order to increase the traveling income. Therefore, they have not yet identified a way to enhance income through virtual channels.

Yet the non-providing VT interviewees were also inquired about the possible values or advantages they see in VT. Some of them were able to identify by using VT as a marketing channel to develop the brand and increase its recognizability. It was also stated that VT could be utilized as a teaser or a tasting tool for the destination and would work for that purpose greatly. S8 also identifies that internationally VT could function as generating the destination interest. Whereas domestically VT could function rather as introducing certain elements of the destination. They explain that similar experiences can be also available in Finland that people might desire from abroad. Also positive outcomes of VT were identified as:

"Yes, it can stimulate the increase of recognizability and also obviously money if the destination is very good, so a good virtual product or previously well-known destination from which the virtual traveller would be ready to pay." (S5)

Also, both S3 and S9 saw certain assets in VT, however, they were also doubtful of the genuine benefits. They agreed on VT being part of the future as a marketing tool yet S9 explained having trouble picturing the continuity of VT as it does not provide a multisensory experience. However, it was jointly reflected by multiple interviewees that multisensory VT experience might be achievable in the future. S3 did not identify the advantages of VT by explaining that:

"At this moment not that much, sure the marketing advantage but somehow I feel that it is already gained through TikTok and Instagram the same benefit with the reels." (S3)

Providing virtual tourism

Some of the interviewees provide VT in one form or the other, yet everyone offers VT based on a web browser and only one of them with the tethered devices such as HMD.

Content

Different interviewees stated having offered VT services starting mainly from 2018 until 2022. Once again COVID-19 was repeated as giving more space for such services, as the demand also increased. Although, part of the VT-providing interviewees stated their VT was primarily one or multiple projects, instead of continuous travels. However, S2's organization sold virtual journeys thus offering VT was not a project by character. With S4 and S7 the VT project materials based on the web browser are still available and accessible for everyone through an electronic device, yet S6's project was a pilot and therefore is not accessible.

The VT of the offering participants varies by content, which will be explained further in the following chapters. In practice, S2's VT content was produced by them shooting and producing the content with a 360° camera in Finland, which was later edited and distributed to their Asian partners who by knowing the target markets better also implemented the selling and marketing of the virtual tours. Their progress with the VT was quick as they already had started importing people from Asia to their destination in Finland pre-COVID-19. Therefore, they were also able to apply their previous marketing materials to new purposes. The materials and glimpses of the virtual tour were shown with VR glasses in the target country to attract visitors. S2 describes offering VT as follows:

"[...] that was one form and effective one." (S2)

However, the execution happened through a live session with the help of a platform called Zoom. Their concept was to include as many senses as possible with their virtual tours for the Asian groups. This was also part of the success of the VT:

"Our virtual journeys became popular during COVID-19 because we invested a lot into the multisensory side of the content. And then we ourselves aimed to empathize as much as possible in every way, with sounds and all of us had props, so we aimed for a certain virtual journey bubble for both us and for the travellers." (S2)

S2 has been able to create different kinds of entities of VR content for the target markets. For example, they provided a glimpse of Finnish Christmas. S2 themself

acted as the destination guide communicating with English and Asian guide was along who also interpreted the spoken content for the virtual travelers. With the guidance of S2, as activities they went on tour skating on an icy lake, Christmas sauna, into nature, into their home that was decorated with a Christmas tree and so on. From this content, they received positive feedback and even new entities were required for the future.

S4's organization has produced widely different kinds of VT projects with tethered devices, such as visits to popular attractions as well as presenting delicate places unequipped for larger masses. They have also offered events virtually, based on a web browser. For example, they organized a meet and greet possibility during another event they were partners with. S4 explained the reasoning for offering virtual content:

"Why at the beginning we started to produce was that we felt that VR was the kind of thing that somehow could increase and improve the travellers' experience in [...], so we don't see it as 'either or' rather as 'as well as' ". (S4)

Additionally, as one of the first organizations offering virtual content already before the pandemic, they had a massive advantage to reshape the content into new purposes at the beginning of COVID-19. They continued to elaborate further, that by offering virtual content they give a more real picture of their destination without visiting the actual place. In addition, the sustainability aspect is a strong part of offering VT for S4.

During the pilot project of S6, they had a little less than a hundred visitors in their virtual journey, and it was offered through their Asian partner in the target country. According to S6, the two-hour virtual experience journey followed a replication of a real-life trip. Firstly, the journey started from the airport and continued to Finland, Helsinki from which the journey continued to the destination. Within the destination, certain activities, stories, Finnish delicacies, and culture were presented. This kind of scripted journey was not stated by the other interviewees.

S7's organization offered a virtual experience of a certain nature attraction at their destination. This experience was aimed at people who are interested in nature traveling, and the content was provided in Finnish and English, aiming to reach a larger

audience. In essence, the virtual content strongly included the aspect of responsible traveling and therefore communicating about sustainability. Furthermore, while the users were free to explore the environment of the virtual destination, there were attached clickable informative notifications, such as "please always take forest fire warnings into account". The purpose of the project was to present the attraction in two seasons: winter and summer. The virtual content included activities available in the destinations, such as; riding a bike, stand-up paddleboarding (SUP) and so on.

Channels

As mentioned previously some of the VT content was accessible to everyone as they are web browser based. S4 and S7's content is due to being NPO DMOs available for everyone. Whereas S2 and S6 being private organizations were aiming to generate profit and therefore are not available for everyone. This means that the distribution channels vary between public and private organizations. S4 states that marketing and distributing the VT content needs to be carefully considered as there are certain restrictions regarding different channels. Therefore, it is the organization's decision to decide whether they want to offer virtual content to a larger audience based on a web browser, or a more limited audience with tethered devices. They consider tethered device content as more challenging to distribute and use.

S7's organization made VT content distribution marketing through multiple channels, such as inserting QR-code-equipped plaques around town in suitable places. Plaques were placed for example near the tourism info spot and inside the bus- and train station. The QR code took the person to the project's VR world.

As stated earlier, the distribution of "private content" of VT is different by nature than the public ones. Even though the content would be based on a web browser it is not accessible for a larger audience. Instead, the links and contents are shared only with the ones who participated in or purchased the virtual tour. In practice, as both S2 and S6 were in collaboration with other parties, the partners did the VT content marketing in their target markets which both are placed in Asia. In S2's case, they were the service producer and shot the content in Finland, whereas the partners in Asia marketed and sold the content to those markets. They also stated that local knowledge was

important as knowing the target market regarding marketing efforts. When S2 communicated in English, the Asian partners translated their speech into the target country's language.

Challenges and problem-solving

The main challenges regarding providing VT were the Internet connection and its uncertainty, and other technical issues. When VT content is done through a live connection or even on pre-shot video content, the Internet might be a challenge. However, S2 states that usually, people are understanding this issue. Therefore, the receiver's Internet connection plays a big role in the functionality of the virtual journey. Issues like slow or fitful video display are the main issues with the prepared video content in VT. This is the reason that S2's organization sent the recorded session for the participants after the live session:

"[...] then to our participants we sent the recording afterwards so it works kind of like a souvenir but also if one cannot participate in something then through that recording one can experience it." (S2)

Other technical issues mentioned were with the tethered devices as those can restrict the usage easily, for example already issues like hygiene. Also, the reliability of the VR devices is puzzling, therefore the provider must have certain technical experience and knowledge of the devices to fix possible problems, explained S4. Also, S2 agreed with the issues regarding VR devices, for example, one problem with those is the development of the camera technology.

In addition, S2 explained that a certain kind of issue is also the profitability of VT. At the beginning of their content production, almost no profit was made. Therefore, they mention having to do largely product development. However, rarely the first version of a product will be the last one. They have learned, thought and developed their VT product with time and experience which has resulted in a reasonable and profitable model regarding the content. Thereby, the content has developed into a high-quality product for the customers of S2's organization. S7 were not the project manager regarding their destination's VT and therefore does not recall anything notably problematic.

S2 explained that when facing problems, those were faced with logical thinking of considering reasonable solutions for them. They also described that as the entrepreneur, ultimately they were in charge of the proceedings. For example, S2 states that they were part only of those virtual tours whose values are in line with the S2 organization's values. Meaning that they only partnered with selected associates. They elaborate that there have been changes with the partners. However, with the eligible ones VT worked fluently as one major part of providing VT is the atmosphere, the emotional connection and the energy among the colleagues. These things will, in the end, affect the quality of the product as usually, the VT partakers sense the mentioned elements:

"With partners, there have been changes [...] the more there are the suitable partners who share the similar values and want to do the same, but then again also by their know-how complete each other, so that is important." (S2)

Advantages and disadvantages of virtual tourism in marketing

Previously the advantages and disadvantages of VT were presented in the literature, hence these aspects were inquired from the research participants during the interviews. The empirical findings of advantages and disadvantages of VT are in line with the literature and are presented in the following chapters.

Advantages

The most mentioned advantage regarding VT is utilizing it as a marketing tool that can be efficient in representing the destination as well as cost-effective to some extent. According to S2, VT brings a distinctive added value and new and efficient aspect to present destinations through VR. Usually, their virtual visitors have been impressed by the authentic footage of the destination on a virtual tour and therefore are inspired to visit the destination in real life:

"[...] when we have presented [...] several times after that the feedback is that it would be lovely to actually visit the place and people are impressed by that [...]." (S2)

Also, others agree that the advantage relates to marketing one way or another. When the content is manufactured with high quality, it can be a very efficient tool for marketing the destination. VT can also increase the recognizability of the destination according to S5. With VT the atmosphere can be reached further and therefore create the feeling of a real experience. This might trigger people to travel to the destination. In addition, VT also enables reaching larger audiences, dispensing the platform obviously, with more real content than for example pictures, texts, and videos. Therefore, it could be deduced that VT offered through a web browser would reach larger audiences better than the tethered device VT experiences:

"The advantage is that it enables you to reach larger audiences and precisely with more interesting content, so it gives you some more real experience in comparison to video content." (S4)

According to S3, VT might also correct certain incorrect mental images and expectations of destinations. For example, if people who have not visited Finland think that the whole country is like Lapland. As Lapland is somewhat known for its nature, snowy winters, and so on, it is justified to correct the idea that the whole country is similar. Therefore, a comprehensive picture of a whole country might develop the country's holistic branding.

In addition, as VT offers only a part of a destination, it might strengthen or reduce the desire to visit the place. Therefore the sustainability aspect as well as heritage preservation emerged from the data. According to S9, attractions that are nearly impossible reach would benefit from offering virtual tours. They could use the content as a tool for documenting the environment as well as creating a vendible product using VT.

Disadvantages

Regarding the disadvantages VT might create, frequently mentioned themes included the fear of losing actual visitors, as well as creating expectations with the materials that do not match reality. In addition, also the costliness of creating VT content for VR

was frequently stated by the interview participants. The aspects of disadvantages regarding VT are presented in the following chapters.

The private VT content producer S2 does not endorse the possibility that VT might replace real traveling based on their experiences of VT. In addition, producing VR content is still expensive nowadays so S5 raised a concern of the expensive price tag that comes along with VT. As mentioned earlier, DMOs act with low budgets and therefore producing expensive VR content is challenging. VT also requires knowledge and know-how, which too requires certain funding.

S4 states that also finding relevant and suitable distribution channels is challenging. However, the channels depend on the produced content, whether it is based on a web browser or tethered devices such as VR glasses. In which case also the technical issues are challenging since not all content works similarly. According to S4, only a certain kind of content might work with certain tethered devices and even the devices' brand affects the suitability. Therefore, web browser-based VT content is easier to distribute. Additionally, just producing VT content is not enough:

"[...] finding the right distribution channel is not enough, you have to invest a lot in the marketing and PR and other things so that people find their way there and also that the content is relevant and suitable for that place's and platform's users." (S4)

Therefore, offering only one kind of VR content might not speak to everyone, as the receiving audience is wide and diverse. In addition, the web browser-based VT requires a device with a screen to experience the content. According to S1, VT might passivate people even further. They explain that nowadays people already spend a lot of their time in general on their computers and other devices screens. Therefore, they consider spending even more time by the screen when consuming entertainment is a slight disadvantage. S7 also agreed with the statement by explaining that people nowadays are easily taking the easy way out, which would support consuming VT content.

VT might decrease the number of visitors, however, rarely one virtual tour is enough for people who are interested in a destination. Despite this, few of the interviewees mentioned that if VT could offer a broad spectrum of the destination, people might

consider the place as seen or visited and therefore will not actually visit the destination in the future:

"It is the disadvantage that if it (VT) is used too much in marketing, it turns so that I don't need to go there as I already saw it right there, some thing or an experience." (S7)

Yet, if VT was the product, for example of a museum, it might decrease those kinds of visitors as museums are smaller and easier to replicate into a virtual environment. Also, S5 considers that smaller attractions might suffer from a decrease in visitors if VT would be cheaper and easier to experience. However, utilizing VT as a product is a separate issue from marketing through VR. Therefore, S7 considered that if VT is part of the on-site experience it would create added value and attract visitors.

In addition, multiple interviewees considered creating expectations with VT that do not match reality as a disadvantage. According to S8, VT might create wrong mental images if the content is made virtually, which was frequently mentioned disadvantage:

"If someone comes here and the taster is addressed and there already the expectations are skyrocketed and then the reality does not match those." (S3)

Therefore, S3 considers that the content should match the truth accurately. They also mentioned that VT might create a problem with the abundance if there were multiple destinations available virtually. People might experience several destinations virtually which might create the effect that destinations become blended or intermingled.

Virtual tourism as a sample tool

Nearly every interviewee considered that VT serves better as a sample for a destination, instead of being enough for the customers as a complete travelling experience. Everyone agreed that VT would function as a sample tool for a destination. Yet nearly everyone doubted that it would fully replace real traveling at this point since VT is not a multisensory experience and users might desire that after all. However, by being multisensory, VT could replace traveling partly in the future. S1 speculated that

possibly in case technology will develop and VT experiences can be experienced with all senses it could form into a physical experience as well:

"[...] I don't think that virtual travelling could even get that versatile spectrum there to the person as the real travel can, like all that stress and so on [...] like considering all senses then it could be a little bit more enough." (S1)

However, on the other hand, VT could have the possibility of removing some unpleasant aspects of travelling, such as stress. VT as an experience is narrowed down from external distractions and therefore could, in certain situations, enhance the traveling experiences. According to S3, they consider VT to be more of a tasting tool for the actual visit as the tasting experience might determine whether they would like to visit the destination in real life in future:

"Especially when international travellers do not yet truly know our area [...] with that it could be very practical that they could access a small virtual journey first and then buy the whole real journey through the tour operators, so this could work for both individuals as well as B2B side." (S3)

Also, S9 agrees that further abroad VT serves the purpose of being an informative tasting tool since people might not know anything about the destination, for example, that walking on a frozen lake is possible in Finland. According to S4, despite providing virtual content they estimated that VT still serves better as a sneak peek instead of being enough for visitors. However, they ponder that the extent of the provided VT defines the quality of the visit as it is nearly impossible to replicate a whole city in a virtual environment. Therefore, it is not possible to replace actual traveling with VT since the multisensory aspect of it is still in progress. However, S4 explained that certain attractions could serve better in the virtual world:

"[...] then again, for example, if attractions are considered like museums and so on, for those kinds of attractions it (VT) could even be an option." (S4)

Museums or other attractions are smaller in size and therefore could be easier implemented into the virtual world. This was also agreed by S5, who also considered that for example art exhibitions could be fully experienced with VT without certain physical aspects. S2 explained that VT serves well in the purpose of marketing the destination as well as a product. However, they emphasize that VT functions

"excellently" as a marketing tool. Even though their VT product was to offer experiences from their destination to Asian customers, they also think that this product overall might lure the virtual visitors to their destination in the future as well. And therefore acts as an excellent incentive for future visits:

"So, we aim to that people participate in our virtual travels and simultaneously we sell the real journeys for the future so at the end of the virtual journey we disclose it and kind of aim to sell the real journeys. So, it (VT) is used simultaneously; when they have come to virtual journey it is a product as such and service as such and a journey as such but it is also linked with the real journey and it serves as marketing for the real journeys as well [...]." (S2)

However, multiple interviewees saw VT's possibilities only with the functions of a sample tool. According to S6, VT's purpose is precisely to create interest and therefore VT generates trust for the destination. VT could also provide aspects of the atmosphere within the destination to showcase the destination even further. According to S8, destinations should not be fully offered through VT as people would put an end to travelling. However, S9 elaborated that at this moment VT functions best as a tasting or a sample tool, yet, if an individual has certain barriers regarding moving or financial aspects, then VT could be the whole experience. The size of the destination also might matter in the usefulness of VT:

"I see it with this kind of more unknown travel destinations it (VT) might have a bigger meaning than with very well-known destinations because with the help of VR the uniqueness of a destination can be better introduced like the common thread, then the person maybe understands better that why they should visit there [...]." (S7)

Sustainability aspects also were considered, as flying in the future might have effects on global warming and climate change. On the other hand, the various local travel service providers might suffer in the future in case VT would replace actual traveling, which is not sustainable either explained S3. Also, the topic of heritage preservation was mentioned during the interviews. Some places like Unesco attractions or other places might be fragile and therefore heritage preservation is an important issue for those destinations. Other destinations also suffer from over-tourism; therefore VT might give a little slack for these destinations' capacities. S7 considered that VT might provide a functional substitute for certain places. In addition, some destinations are not

accessible for everyone or to anyone, because they are difficultly placed or reached. S7 also emphasized that VT should be implemented only for the specific need, instead of just producing the VT content because of extra funds. Therefore the starting points for VT should start from its genuine needs and purpose for it.

Adding value to traveling with virtual tourism

The interview participants were identifying various ways that VT could strengthen traveling and even add value. For example, restrictions that COVID-19 created were mentioned by several interviewees which would keep the travelling business alive to a certain extent. On top of that also sustainability issues emerged from the data. VT also has the possibility to strengthen brand development and cultivate brand recognizability, which increases the attractiveness of a destination.

As mentioned earlier, VR could add value to traveling from the sustainability aspect, for example, if traveling will be at some point more restricted in order to manage climate change. Therefore the ways of traveling might broaden and VT could be even branded as a way to travel sustainably. VT could also release the travelling pressure from people. In addition, travelling can be restricted in other ways such as COVID-19 proved. Multiple interviewees considered that VT did strengthen travelling during the pandemic and also maybe even pressured it since VT might have maintained a certain level of awareness of destinations. Therefore, the pandemic somehow did yield a possibility for VT to increase and respond to the demand for travelling. Also, the unreachable attractions or sites in real life could add value to the travel experiences, according to S9. S5 describes that in situations when physical travelling is not possible, the answer might be found from VT:

"Also concerning the people who for one reason or the other do not have the possibility to travel, whatever the reason was money, movability, there can be various reasons why one cannot always travel, so in that kinds of situations I see it (VT) as a quite good alternative, short- or long-term." (S5)

Additionally, VR functions as an effective marketing and branding tool to increase brand development and recognizability, but also as a tasting tool of a destination. VR can also be an excellent tool for example presenting a destination at fairs or

exhibitions. In an exhibition environment, people may try the VR glasses and receive more information on the spot from the destination represents. Content consumed through VR is more elaborate compared to a simple picture slide show, according to S5. S4 states that VR is a new way to build recognition for a brand, as it can add value to brand development. According to S2, they have received and identified concrete results about marketing through VR:

"It serves as a tasting and also might give more ideas or something else, for example, people who already have visited here multiple times kind of seek something else [...] At its best, it comes to the point that people engage and get fond of something and then start to consume it and then want even more." (S2)

The question regarding off- and on-site experiences of VT gained versatile answers since different contents were interesting for different interviewees. In addition to VR, AR came forth as some of the interviewees considered it to be a way to gain visitors to the actual destination since it is an on-site service. Also enlivening and representing history was frequently mentioned by the interviewees as an on-site experience for VR.

To begin with, an idea emerged from the interviews for the on-site experience to check activities with a certain VT application, activities that some people might find scary in a sense. Therefore, VT could reduce the suspense or even stress of certain activities, such as downhill skiing or tree climbing that could be considered threatening. Even though one could not fall in the actual tree climbing because of the safety cautions, people might be too afraid of trying it in the real world. It could act as decreasing the threshold of some fears and even help to overcome them.

In addition, not all attractions in the destinations are accessible for everyone, for example for wheelchair customers. Therefore, on-site VT could offer some aspects or attractions. Also, some attractions are open for a limited time and for a limited number of people. In addition, off- or on-site VT might be more informative than walking around the destination if one wishes to gain a niché information on something, VT could enable certain bulletins. With expert services, those can require greater amounts of money, therefore VT is more accessible being cheaper for a larger audience:

"If you're interested for example of [...], you will need for that quite a specific knowledge to that theme, so then you will get a person for that who has specialized in that and then they can in that city certain places and hear certain stories that are relevant to you, because it might not be possible when you arrive to a certain destination and you're there in a certain day, to find someone who knows about the scene [...]" (S4)

In such cases, VR is cheaper. VR could also function on-site in situations when the resources like time and money are limited; VT could offer more insight about the area while visiting the destination. Usually, when people visit a destination, the larger area might be left unvisited because of the limited resources, states S3. However, the data showed that one of the most frequently mentioned on-site VT ideas could be offering content of historical experiences through VR. Destinations in their various ways could offer historical reliving experiences on-site that are emblematic of their destination, for example, Inari could offer to "live" a day with Sami people back in the day. However, destinations could also offer other kinds of on-site content. Also, certain guided tours to offer even more information about the area through storytelling could speak to all kinds of people according to S8. In order to also address children, on-site gamification might be the answer as it could enhance their experience and make it more memorable.

However, S7 doubted the practical aspects of VR and also AR, as they doubt that people are willing to on-the-spot download certain applications into their phone as it might be too slow and troublesome. Therefore, clear and informative communication and marketing regarding a destination's on-site possibilities should be taken into consideration when strategizing these kinds of services. However, tethered devices such as VR glasses gained some criticism from S7, as they do not believe that those are a permanent solution. According to S7, experiencing VR should be easier in the future, preferably without any devices. They even suggest that possibly an automatized hologram could be futuristic. They claim that:

"I don't believe that those VR glasses will last forever, it needs to be easier, it needs to be experienced without devices, I don't know how [...] when you walk somewhere suddenly something pops up from that person directly and then it for example as a hologram can be seen or something so that it would be automatized so you wouldn't need even your mobile phone [...]." (S7)

However, not all considered needing to offer on-site content by stating:

"Well does it need something virtual on-site then." (S9)

6.5 Empirically grounded framework

According to Elliott and Timulak (2008), the key aspect of categorizing is the connections between the categories. Therefore, an empirical framework was created to complete the theoretical framework presented in chapter 4. The empirically grounded framework provides associations and connections between the main categories identified from the empirical data in Figure 2 below. As the aspects of the theoretical framework were covered earlier, only the relevant empirical findings will be presented in the following chapters which are highlighted in green to distinguish the conceptions in the diagram.
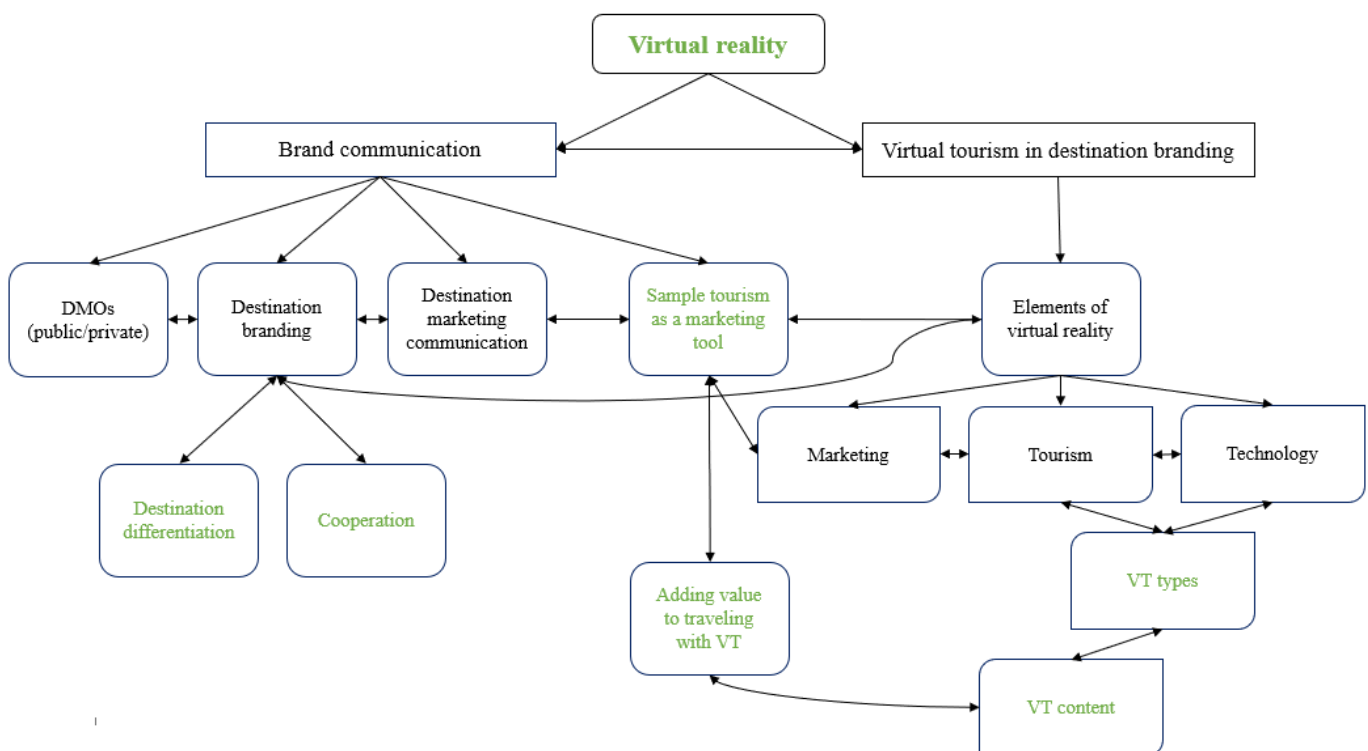
Figure 2. The empirical framework of observed connections as a diagram.

As the aim of the study was to examine how VR could be utilized in destinations, VR is the utmost component of the framework. VR is a prerequisite for VT, therefore, VR

affects the two headings below: (1) brand communication, and (2) virtual tourism in destination branding.

Despite destination branding being mentioned in the theoretical framework, it seemed to be one of the most important aspects according to empirical findings. Destination branding was implemented with different kinds of efforts. For example, sustainability as a destination's value emerged as a repetitive pattern from the interviews. This could be connected with the nature aspect that multiple interviewees also mentioned. On top of that, the working society was also named frequently. However, the interviewees also mentioned quite collectively that they speak to different target groups with different kinds of messages, by for example variable content. It was also clear that renewing brand and/or marketing strategies was recently implemented with multiple interviewees. Also, visual identities were renewed in the same progress.

The destination branding seems to include destination differentiation and cooperation as presented in the diagram. The destination representatives seemed to think that destination differentiation is an important aspect and each interviewee mentioned their respective identifying factors that also guide their brand communication. The uniqueness was implemented in various ways, however, most of the interviewees mentioned having recognized the USPs of their destination. The USPs such as main attractions and so on differentiate the destination from rivals. In addition, a distinguishable visual identity was frequently mentioned when aiming for differentiation. A clear and precise visual identity also leads to brand recognition.

Cooperation with other relevant organizations regarding the destination was a frequent theme in the interviews. As most of the interviewees were DMOs, especially in their operations they require companies around them. However, also the interviewed private organizations had essential collaborators to produce and showcase their products. Additionally, cooperation with the organization Visit Finland, other regional organizations, and other destinations on top of the local entrepreneurs was emphasized during the interviews. Collaboration with other Visit-organizations seemed to be essential for some interviewees as they have combined their marketing and even operational efforts to make their visitors' trips more fluent. Some interviewees also

mentioned making for example joint marketing and strategizing for their destination or larger region.

As seen in Figure 2, destination branding connects with elements of virtual reality, as it can be utilized in destination branding. The interviewees identified that offering VR content could inspire people to visit the destination in the future. Using VR to represent the destination as a virtual tasting could also increase the brand's recognizability. However, the use of VR in destination branding might also decrease the desire to visit a destination. Yet the interviewees trusted that when given a sample of a destination, it would trigger mental images and add brand recognizability as it might create even trust towards the destination. Therefore, the tasting could be linked to a webshop where the trip could be booked.

As established, VR can be utilized in the tourism context by offering virtual tourism, however, the content types were discussed with those interviewees who offer VT services. The content highly ties with both tourism and technology as there are three main types of VT: (1) with tethered devices, (2) live- or video connection, and (3) recordings. The way to consume the VT content also determines largely the experience, e.g. without devices versus with devices. In addition, technical challenges might arise while using VT, such as problems with the Internet connection or unsuitable content display. Therefore, the types are emphasized in the figure, which is linked with the VT content.

Even though VT content was already presented, it is essential to present the aspects of all interviewees, those who provide and those who do not provide VT. As most of the DMOs do not provide VT mainly because of the limited resources they were able to identify VT perks. For example, domestically VT could introduce unknown elements of destinations, whereas internationally VT could generate a destination interest. Yet, using VT as a marketing tool in order to improve brand recognizability was the most mentioned way to utilize VT.

However, the interviewees who have or are offering VT content had different kinds of projects that aimed to attract users. The underlying reason for everyone who provides VT was to create an interest to visit the destination in the future. The VT providing

interviewees stated having various different contents, as some practiced projects based on Zoom connections whereas others offered web-browser-based continuous content e.g. attractions.

Offering VT content might create added value to traveling for example from the sustainability aspect. The sustainability aspect was also mentioned frequently by the interviewees as their main value, which could be easily connected with offering VT. In addition, VT could be an excellent loophole for travellers who wish to travel but are restricted in one way or the other. Also, by offering VT content, the destinations could add certain value to traveling for example by offering also on-site VT. On-site VT could be offered because of restricted access, testing a certain scene, or by adding value e.g. providing historical aspects of the destinations.

Lastly, as mentioned, by offering VT the destination creates added value that is distinctive and supports brand communication. The interviewees identified that utilizing VT creates added value that could be used as a sample tool for the destination. The sample tool could function in both B2B and B2C scenes showcasing the most integral aspects of the destinations for them. As the interviews indicated, some attractions that are smaller in size could be more easily implemented in VT to create a virtual product, such as museums or exhibitions. Despite VT functioning for multiple purposes, the main finding from the empirical data is that VT suits most in marketing as a sample. Hence there is a connection between marketing and sample tourism as a marketing tool in the diagram. VT could serve as a full product itself, yet its main service might be in attracting tourists to visit the destination in future as a sample tool. Therefore it could be interpreted that the main purpose of offering VT content is sample tourism as a marketing tool.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions of the study provide relevant deductions of the research and its results. Firstly, the answers to the primary and supporting research questions will be provided. Additionally, the purpose of the thesis will be stated briefly to remind the study setting. Afterwards, the theoretical contributions of the research will be reflected from the introduced literature aspects. Also, managerial implications will be offered for the readers. Next, the limitations and validity of the research are explained and lastly, future research suggestions are provided.

7.1 Answers to the research questions

Purpose of the thesis was to examine how VR could be utilized in destination branding. As well as the ways of VR in brand communication, and the meaning of VT to destinations brands. The secondary data was gathered from existing literature and research, whereas the primary data was gained from nine semi-structured interviews. The interviews were completed with public and private organizations operating in the tourism field. To answer the research question, the thesis utilized qualitative research methods and an abductive research strategy to complete the qualitative method. The primary research question is "*How can virtual reality be utilized in destination branding?*", which will be answered in the following chapters.

In order to experience virtual tourism, virtual reality is needed for the purpose. As established, VR can be utilized to provide VT content with and without devices. According to the present study, it could be summarized that VT can be used at least for three purposes: (1) as a sample tool, (2) as a product, and (3) as an on-site added value experience. These three purposes complement each other as they jointly attract tourists to destinations, which primarily is the aim of the destinations. However, the nature of the organization also affects the possibilities that can be done with VR, as public organizations tend to have stricter limits with their e.g. budgets. However, the study indicates that differentiation from competitors is essential for destinations, which could be better reached with the help of offering virtual content. Virtual content could support the differentiation of the destination by creating accurate and influential content for the aimed target markets.

As experiencing virtual content both provides and requires a higher presence, it could be summarized that immersion in the virtual environment creates stronger emotions in the experienced content. Which usually enhances the level of interest as the content attracts the user. The interest leads to the recognizability of the brand which serves as an enticer in destination branding. Hence, receiving a pre-travel tasting from the destination would function as a more concrete sample of otherwise intangible tourism. Therefore, VT as a sample tool could function for marketing purposes.

As presented, VT as a product serves the purpose to an extent, as it rather attracts the users to the destination in their future for travelling. Therefore, currently, VT does not decrease the number of tourists, probably because it is not a multisensory experience yet. Rather, it increases them as the destination interest grows. VT might operate desirably when presenting only parts of a destination, such as attractions. However, showcasing the whole destination might be challenging for example to recreate. In summary, VT might operate better as a product of an e.g. museum than of a whole destination, except if VT is only a part of experiencing the whole destination. Provided that VT would be used as a product or part of a product the direct link to the webpage selling the trips to a destination would be recommended.

VT as an on-site experience to add value to the traveling experience is also a prospective idea for utilizing VT. Destinations could in their various ways offer VT content on-site to create an interest in the destination even further. Destinations could for example offer historical recreation scenes or gamify some aspects of their destination. The on-site VT experience could work in offering added value to the travelling experience, as well as creating an interest in travelling because of the on-site experience.

7.2   Theoretical contributions

Regarding branding, Hankinson (2009) presented that the institutional differences may affect branding between public and private organizations, because of e.g., the lack of resources. This is also in line with the interview results, as from the data it could be detected that there were three kinds of interviewees: (1) DMOs who do not offer VT, (2) DMOs who offer VT, and (3) private actors who offer VT as a full-time product.

Therefore, had a clear effect on the results as it was implicated repeatedly that DMOs lack the financial resources to produce VR content.

Steinmann et al. (2015) suggest that brands should remain consistent with their communication online as they are able to benefit from the consistency. Also Blain et al. (2005) support the statement. Consistency was also supported by certain interview participants in order to increase the recognizability as well. Therefore, multiple interviewees also mentioned that repeating logos as part of their visual identity on different occasions strengthens the recognizability and consistency even further. Many stated reasons for the decision by explaining that different aspects of marketing support each other and therefore repeating certain visual identities might lead to accurate and broad recognizability.

As presented in the chapter on marketing communication, Elliot et al. (2018, p. 134-142) mention that the brand's message execution is done by creating brand awareness. Which was also stated by the interview participants as multiple of them also mentioned that awareness and recognizability support each other regarding the brand messages. Therefore, brand and marketing communication has an essential role in regarding brand recognizability (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2012).

As Tam (2008) stated, expectations play an important role in the satisfaction and repurchase behaviours regarding the low-familiarity customers. Therefore, it is essential that the virtual content that destinations could offer mirrors authentically the destination in order to not create false expectations, which was also supported by several interviewees.

Regarding the destination image, Yung et al. (2020) presented that tourists aim to visit destinations that are showcased in movies and therefore generate more positive emotions towards the city in question. Also, S1 elaborated that destinations that are utilized as a movie setting increase the visibility of the destination considerably. Additionally, it was discovered from the data, offering VT during the COVID-19 pandemic might have released the traveling pressure from tourists. In addition, during the pandemic, VT strengthened travelling by maintaining the awareness of

destinations. This is supported by Yung et al. (2020), who consider that VT was vital for destination recovery.

As discovered, the biggest challenge DMOs face is the substitutability of their services (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008, p. 111), therefore, differentiating from the competitors by identifying unique characteristics even essential, or even necessary (Yongho et al., 2009; Hankinson, 2004). As suggested by Swaminathan et al. (2020), place brand manageability can be complex as the ownership can be divided, therefore, differentiating from the competitors is essential. Differentiation was considered essential also by the interviewees and multiple of them utilized their various USPs as their strategy. In addition, Kouris (2009) proposes that destinations can affect how brands are perceived in order to attract tourists. Therefore, branding through USPs might become important for destinations as multiple interviewees mentioned as their strategy.

Every interview participant stated different kinds of values regarding their destination and therefore, their brand. Therefore, their brands represent a certain promise of value as they differentiate themselves (Morgan et al., 2004, p. 41). As suggested by Morgan and Pritchard (2001, p. 228), a brand reflects on certain expected quality, therefore, the quality should remain on a similar level as it might impact on brand loyalty as well. Similar suggestions were presented during the interviews as well by stating that the brand should be in line with their high-quality goods.

As presented by García-Crespo et al. (2009) in the VT advantages, the tourism industry is currently in demand of technologically completed environments in order to add value for their services. However, the interviewees did not state of having demanded virtual applications, yet high satisfaction was noted from the users when VR or VT was consumed. Therefore, it could be suggested that offering such services primarily increases the value of certain services. Furthermore, as suggested by the interviewees who offer virtual solutions, also Yung et al. (2020) and Tussyadiah et al. (2018) recognized that consumers' recall of the brand strengthened when they experienced a presence in a destination with VR. Consumers' knowledge increased which led to a positive influence on visiting the destination in real life in the future. Similarly, the private actor offering VR S2 also recognized similar effects with VR.

From the consumer perspective, Boyd and Koles (2019) suggest that VR substitutes for example of a museum visit will not decrease the actual visit sales as the substitutes are considered as inauthentic. However, some of the interviewees disagreed as they considered VR a suitable substitute, especially with attractions regarding culture, which could be considered as a disadvantage of VT. According to Refsland et al. (2000) and Guttentag (2010), from the business perspective, VT might only create an incentive for future visit of to destination as tourists are not satisfied with the destination substitutes which also was in line with the primary data from the interviews.

As mentioned by Tussyadiah et al. (2018), there are untethered and tethered devices that can be used to experience VT. This was also found from the empirical data, as some of the interviewees' organizations offered none, the other, or both kinds of content. Like in the data, VR and VT content can be viewed based on a web browser displayed through smartphones and computers, usually offering a 360-degree video (Adachi et al., 2022). However, for a niché audience, tethered headsets can be also utilized to display virtual tourism. Which gives the receiver a detailed display of the virtual environment (Tussyadiah et al., 2018).

Moreover, Van Kerrebroeck et al. (2017) elaborated that presenting goods through VR enables a novel and creative way to reach the target market groups. Therefore, it possesses unforeseen possibilities with destination branding as well as leads to higher interactivity. In addition, Cheong (1995) presents that "Virtual reality can serve as a marketing instrument for travel agencies.". This part of the theory is in line with the findings from the present study, as a more vivid presentation of the destinations produces positive perceptions and attitudes in VR users.

Furthermore, as mentioned in part 3.3 younger generations might adapt faster to novel technological developments and are not so easily alienated by technology (Davies, 2021). This was also in line with the empirical results as it was shortly discussed that younger generations might be quicker to adapt to VR and VT applications. Therefore, the adaptation of VR and VT might indicate some generational differences.

Additionally, Tussyadiah et al. (2018) and Adachi et al. (2022) presented that VR has the possibility to be an efficient marketing tool, and therefore suitable for branding as well. Destinations could engage their target markets by creating a VR experience to lead to higher interest in the destination. These findings from Tussyadiah et al. (2018) are in line with the findings of the research as the VR visitors got excited about visiting the destination in real life after experiencing VT. Therefore, the use of VR as a marketing tool seems to be functional and effective in order to gain interest and travel income. In addition, VR is an efficient marketing tool, it also suits the purpose of sampling the destination pre-travel which might affect the purchase decision one way or the other. Sampling a destination partakes of the timely sustainability issues, as tourists are able to make more informed decisions (Cheong, 1995). Therefore, it can be proposed that VR actually is suitable for sampling the destinations pre-purchase while simultaneously being a pertinent marketing tool. Additionally, Huang et al. (2016) stated that destinations could increase the knowledge of local communities and tribes' by showcasing their artwork. Accordingly, multiple interviewees mentioned seeing possibilities in representing and enlivening an emblematic historical life or events utilizing VR.

According to Guttentag (2010), marketing could be applied with the help of VR in the tourism field. The marketing application is in line with the results, as all interviewees unanimously agreed that VR is a suitable application for tourism to test the destination prior to purchase. Consequently, tourists can make more informed decisions when booking their visitations. The marketing application was also supported by Tussyadiah et al. (2018). Yet, Guttentag (2010) suggested applications for entertainment and education did not emerge from the empirical data. However, part of the interviewees agreed with Guttentag's (2010) claims regarding utilizing VR with inaccessible attractions, as well as with the heritage preservation application. Additionally, Guttentag (2010) stated that for example, museums could examine the popularity of certain exhibitions by applying VR. Yet, the interview participants did not consider this aspect as multiple directly suggested making museums or other cultural attractions directly into a product as such.

7.3   Managerial implications

The current research presents managerial implications that may be convenient for organizations working within the tourism field, especially in a destination with a DMO. The destination members or DMOs may compare their respective situations with others through the data and even gain ideas for their operations. Although all destination organizations implement destination branding to some extent, the present study might provide insight on the brand communication perspectives of destination organizations. Secondly, perspectives related to utilizing VR, and possibly VT in destination branding will be provided. The current research contributes to providing additional views and perspectives regarding the researched phenomena. The study offers indications of the different ways of utilizing VR in destination branding, from which the relevant stakeholders can learn and understand the phenomena even further.

It became relatively clear during the interviews that the various destinations had some values for their organization that guides them. Despite only some having defined USPs for their organization, it seemed that those were still followed in their destination branding. Therefore it would be advisable to have values as well as USPs to differentiate the destination from competitors. Differentiation in general is an essential aspect of destination branding, which can be supported with distinguishable visual identity. The visual identity should reflect the destination accurately and be kept up to date.

Moreover, it might be relevant for some destinations to apply target marketing to their destination branding. The target groups could be addressed with different kinds of content and slogans to reach the suitable groups. Possibly creating emotions through storytelling in marketing communication is advisable for some destinations.

Despite cooperation with various stakeholders was mentioned during the interviews, it should be emphasized that collaborations are essential for destinations. Therefore, destinations could consider whether they should expand their cooperation partners to e.g. local companies, other Visit-organization as well as Visit Finland, other destinations, and so on. Sometimes even marketing agencies might be the right solution. The destinations might benefit from including fresh insight from various

parties, especially when DMOs' websites are the portals to the destinations and sometimes even the main way of communication. Additionally, people who felt present with destination marketing, for example in the DMOs' websites strengthen their recall of the certain website. This leads to recognizability and interest and eventually positively influences the intention to visit the destination.

As the role of virtual consumption is continuously increasing, therefore customer behavior regarding virtual consumption is changing. Regarding virtual content, currently, the active users are younger generations. Hence this could be considered while thinking about the future of the destination, as admittedly younger generations will be the upcoming target groups.

In addition, the virtual content could be modified to suit the destination's needs and therefore the content varies by destination. VT content could be used for the destination's advantage in differentiation. Some virtual content ideas discussed during interviews, for instance, were presenting something emblematic of the destination, to enliven the destination's history, offering safe pre-trials of eventful sports, or soothing sceneries for a calming effect. However, VT might even be the only solution for some on-site experiences as some places are not accessible to tourists. Also, gamification of certain content could be provided, for example, to invigorate greater amounts of information.

However, it became apparent that multiple of the interviewees considered that not offering VT might affect their sales negatively. However, multiple interviewees also thought that it might after all increase the sales in case VT would be offered by them, especially internationally VT might be a more familiar concept for people.

Moreover, VT functions as a full product on some occasions like with attractions like exhibitions or showcasing some aspects of a destination. However, it seems that VT does not apply to the whole destination as some destinations are too large to be fully copied and created in the virtual world. In addition, VT functions well as a sample tool for the destination and therefore for marketing purposes for destination branding as it might inspire people to move or visit the destination because of the higher presence through VR. With VR the user has a higher presence compared to traditional media

like e.g. videos, pictures, and text. In addition, VR enables users to make more informed decisions regarding future traveling in real life. Higher presence leads to interest and intention of traveling, resulting in higher enjoyment of the virtual experience.

Additionally, virtual content might build recognizability and generate trust towards the destination. Therefore, VR might serve as an attraction for luring tourists to destinations as it stays in the users' minds better as it activates and engages them more than merely watching a video. Regarding the content of VT, whether it being a product or a sample for marketing purposes, VT could include the webshop possibility so the sales would become easier and would serve the user.

It is also advisable to consider the distribution channels of the virtual content. As mentioned, there are different kinds of virtual content; (1) with tethered devices, (2) live- or video connection, and (3) recordings. The type of virtual content influences for example the content distribution channels. Web-browser-based VT reaches a larger audience yet the profits are not instant. Whereas with tethered devices the income is quicker when VT is sold. However, it is notable to consider that only one type of virtual content will not address every target group.

Additionally, in case of destination organizations create virtual content, they should replicate the reality as much as possible in order to avoid inaccurate mental images of the destination and its possibilities. As currently VT is not a multisensory experience it is unlikely to replace actual traveling, therefore destination organizations can put their minds at an ease of the fear of losing actual tourists.

7.4 Limitations and validity of the research

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 294) present research by Lincoln and Guba from the year 1985 where they established a concept of 'trustworthiness' of qualitative research, that includes four aspects: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) conformability. The credibility of the research can be measured by clarifying whether there are adequate and logical links between observations and categories. Also, in case other researchers made a similar study would they reach

similar interpretations of results in a similar study setting. Secondly, transferability means the state of responsibility to display the similarity of the current research with other research. Meaning to determine possible connections with previous studies to find out whether similarities have been found in other kinds of research settings. Dependability, on the other hand, refers to the responsibility of the researcher to represent information on logicality, traceability, and the level of documentation of the research process to the reader. Lastly, conformability introduces the idea that data and the interpretations of the research are not imagination. Rather combining findings and interpretations with the gathered data, and to make it easily understandable. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294.)

As the sample size of the current research was relatively small, interviewing nine participants, the results cannot be generalized. Therefore the results give only an indication of the researched phenomena. However, the generalizability of the study's results was improved by including all kinds of interview participants. The perspectives of both public and private organizations operating in the tourism field were considered for the interviews. Although, educational or work-related experiences were not taken into account when contacting the interviewees. However, it can be questioned if all possible options were considered for the interviews.

Regarding the current study's interviews, some aspects of the formulated questions can be questioned. It became clear during the interview process that the questions were more suitable for the participants that have more broad knowledge regarding VR and VT, as the questions aimed to clarify aspects of the mentioned subjects accurately. Otherwise, some of the questions might have seemed to be repetitive or overlapping in nature. In addition, there were some technical challenges during the interviews as those were implemented via a platform that required an Internet connection which decreased the quality occasionally. Although the interview questions were designed to be professional and accurate regarding the researched phenomena, it is possible that some interview participants were uncomfortable with answering some questions. Which might affect the extent the answers were elaborated. In addition, despite the questionnaire layout being the same for each interviewee with the same questions, some small changes were made during the interviews in order to adjust to the context of the conversation. Additionally, to avoid biases during the interviews, all interviews

were aimed to execute in a similar manner. Therefore, the interview layout guided the conversation in order to remain on the previously planned topics.

Additionally, to give the freedom to speak their minds the interviewees were given time to elaborate their answers. The semi-structured interviews were suitable for the purpose of the study. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the interview participants' opinions and the researcher's interpretation are subjective perceptions. Additionally, the quality of the research should be assessed whether all of the intended perspectives of the interview participants were presented correctly, and the interpretations made from the gathered data. Therefore, a similar study would not reach exactly similar results in another kind of setting.

The trustworthiness of the research was strengthened by also putting an effort into the transcripts of the interviews. The transcriptions were taken into the software NVivo, which assisted in identifying the similarities and differences within the empirical data. All the interviews were implemented, transcribed and analyzed by the same person which supports the overall process and the decrease of errors. As Walle (2015, p. 140-141) suggests, the trustworthiness of the research is completed with neutrality and objectivity, which means that the findings and the conclusions of the study are presented impartially. Neutrality also refers to whether the researcher's biases nor opinions impacted the reportage of the study. Therefore, the research has been reflected in an unbiased manner and the results have been reported objectively.

All kinds of results from the interviews are presented in the empirical data in order to provide equal and rich results of the research. Different views on the interview questions were reported to support the authenticity of the representation. However, the aim of qualitative research is not to generalize the findings for a larger group of people, but to study the applicability of the findings in suitable settings. (Fossey et al., 2002.)

7.5   Future research suggestions

VT should not be restricted only to the actual tourism destinations as there is a niché for the entertainment industry as well. Other settings could be learned from VT as it could be used for relaxation, for example, by providing a calm setting in a wintery log

house with beautiful scenery and a fireplace cracking in the background. Similar settings could be created for the sake of relaxation or evoking other desired feelings.

As different parties are interested in and already providing VT online events for free, other shareholders could as well implement such VT events, not only destinations and actual tourist places but also other entertainment parties. For example, the Harry Potter world has become popular, other similar fantasy worlds could start to provide similar experiences online, such as Lord of the Rings, Marvel, Avatar, and so on. Through showcasing fans' favourite fantasy worlds, these movie entertainment settings could also benefit from continuous popularity and heightened interest resulting in a commitment to a brand. VT could be easily part of brand communication for certain fantasy worlds, as well as an entrance to certain game environments.

Additionally, VT could relate to gamification as well, as VT might have the power to engage users more broadly and deeply thus using it for certain marketing purposes. This might create a novel way to implement marketing called 'virtual branding', or even 'virtual marketing' focusing only on virtual world content. Virtual marketing or branding might be the future of marketing, therefore, a futuristic topic for research. Also, the generational differences regarding the VR adaptation emerged from the study's interviews. Which could be studied further, whether there is an indication that younger generations do adapt and use VR and VT more than older generations. Also, the acceptance aspect of the virtual content would be an interesting topic linked to the existing usage of VR.

The acceptance factors regarding VT could be an interesting research topic from the multisensory VT point of view as well, extended into the sensory branding phenomena. The standpoint of sensory branding is a novel topic and could therefore be an essential issue. This could be researched from bodily and experiential aspects, which could be tied into a consciousness aspect to determine new aspects of sensory branding.

Additionally, it is worthwhile to mention that not all socio-demographic groups expect a similar VT experience. The expectations regarding VT experiences are tied to one's culture, as different individuals from various cultures expect different stimuli and

entertainment. Hence, this topic could be studied further, as there is not a lot of knowledge regarding the cultural expectations for a VT experience.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview questions in English

Interview Questions

1. Would you firstly describe who you are and where do you currently work, and in which position?

Organization and brand

2. Could you tell me about your brand? What are the values? What kind of emotions does it aim to generate? What does the brand represent?

3. How is your destination branded and what kind of practical effort were made to achieve it?

Marketing communication

4. What do you know about your clients' purchase- and decision-making processes?

5. What different ways does your brand communicate with your target audience and what is your brand's message at that point?

6. How does your destination differentiate from others? What makes it unique?

7. How does your logo represent your brand and support it?

Destination branding

8. Do you have a DMO (destination marketing organization) for your destination?
   - o Yes - could you describe their marketing and branding actions?
   - o No - what kind of benefits do you see having one?

- Have you thought these aspects in your destination communication; image, recognition, differentiation, consistency, brand messages, emotional response, creating expectations? How?

Virtual reality

9. Is virtual reality familiar to you? What kind of experience do you have about virtual reality? Could you describe them?

10. For what would you use virtual reality regarding your destination branding?

- Have you thought to implement these six applications with your VR? How?
  o 6 applications VR enables: (1) planning and management, (2) marketing, (3) entertainment, (4) education, (5) accessibility, and (6) heritage preservation.

Virtual tourism

11. How would you describe virtual tourism?

12. Is virtual tourism familiar to you? Have you tried virtual tourism yourself and how did it feel?
  o If you have not tried, is there some particular reason why not?

13. Do you offer virtual tourism in your services?
  o Yes → How long have you offered VT services? How do you implement it? What channels? What kind of customers?

  o Would you tell me about your VR content more closely? What kind of challenges or problems have you faced? And how you solved them? (In practise with the technologies and partners, etc.)

  · No → Why do you not offer such services?
    o What kind of value would VT bring to you, and what kind of benefits?

Virtual tourism in marketing

14. How do you analyse, monitor, or track your social media? Can VR be seen in there?

15. How and what kind of a role VR has in your customers' decision-making from the marketing perspective?

16. What kind possibilities do you see by utilizing VR as part of your brand and marketing communication? (In case question is needed)

17. How could VT function as a preview or sample tool of a destination?
  - How can a destination be experienced through VR "enough"? Or does a virtual visit provide only a further incentive to go to the destination?

18. What kind of advantages and disadvantages do you identify with virtual tourism regarding marketing?

19. In what way or what kind of situations would VR strengthen traveling and add its' value?
  o Off- and on-site experience of VT, how could it be implemented?

Appendix 2: Interview questions in Finnish

<u>Haastattelukysymykset</u>

1. Kertoisitko ensin että kuka olet ja missä tällä hetkellä työskentelet, sekä mikä on toimenkuvasi?

<u>Organisaatio ja brändi</u>

2. Kertoisitteko teidän brändistä? Mitkä on brändinne arvot? Millaisia tunteita teidän brändinne haluaa herättää? Mitä brändinne edustaa?

3. Kuinka kohteenne on brändätty ja millaisia toimia sen eteen on tehty?

<u>Markkinointi</u>

4. Mitä tiedätte asiakkaidenne osto- ja päätöksenteko prosesseista?

5. Miten eri tavoin brändinne kommunikoi teidän kohdeyleisönne kanssa ja mikä on teidän brändinne sanoma?

6. Kuinka teidän brändinne erottuu muista kilpailijoista? Mikä tekee siitä uniikin?

7. Kuinka teidän logonne edustaa brändiänne ja tukee sitä?

<u>Destinaatio brändääminen</u>

8. Onko teillä DMO:ta (destination marketing organization) kohtee(i)lle? Jos on, kertoisitteko markkinointi- ja brändäystoimenpiteistä? Jos ei ole DMO:ta, näettekö hyötyä sellaisessa?

   - Oletteko ajatelleet seuraavia aspekteja; julkisuuskuva, tunnistettavuus, erottuvuus, jatkuvuus, brändiviestintä, emotionaalinen reaktio, odotuksien luominen? Miten?

Virtuaalitodellisuus

9. Onko virtuaalitodellisuus tuttua sinulle? Millaisia kokemuksia sinulla on virtuaalitodellisuudesta? Voisitteko kuvailla niitä?

10. Mihin käyttäisitte virtuaalitodellisuutta brändäämisessä?

Virtuaaliturismi

11. Kuinka kuvailisitte virtuaaliturismia?

12. Onko virtuaaliturismia tuttua teille? Oletteko kokeilleet sitä ja miltä se tuntui?

    a. Jos ette ole, onko siihen syytä miksi et?

13. Tarjoatteko virtuaaliturismipalveluja?

    a. Kyllä à kuinka kauan olette tarjonneet VT palveluja? Kuinka toteutatte sitä? Mitä kanavia käytätte? Millaisille asiakkaille?

        i. Kertoisitteko enemmän teidän VT sisällöstä? Millaisia haasteita ja ongelmia olette kohdanneet? Kuinka olette ratkaiseet nämä? (Käytännössä teknologian kanssa, partnerit, jne.)

    b. Ei à Miksi ette tarjoa näitä palveluja?

        i. Millaista arvoa ajattelette virtuaaliturismin tuovan teille, millaisia hyötyjä?

Virtuaaliturismi markkinoinnissa

14. Kuinka analysoitte, valvotte tai seuraatte teidän sosiaalista mediaa? Onko virtuaalitodellisuus nähtävillä siellä?

15. Kuinka ja millaisessa roolissa virtuaalitodellisuus toimii teidän asiakkaidenne päätöksenteossa markkinoinnin näkökulmasta?

16. Millaisia mahdollisuuksia näette hyödyntämällä virtuaalitodellisuutta teidän brändäämisessä ja markkinoinnissa? (Jos kysymykselle tarvetta)

17. Kuinka virtuaaliturismi voisi toimia näytteenä tai maistiaisena destinaatiosta?

    a. Kuinka kohde voidaan kokea virtuaalitodellisuuden kautta "tarpeeksi"? Vai toimiiko maistiainen ennemminkin kannustimena tulevaisuuden vierailua ajatellen?

18. Millaisia hyötyjä ja haittoja näette virtuaaliturismilla markkinoinnin näkökulmasta?

19. Miten tai millaisissa tilanteissa virtuaalitodellisuus voisi vahvistaa matkailua ja lisätä enemmän sen arvoa?

    a. Off- ja on-site virtuaaliturismi kokemus, kuinka se voitaisiin toteuttaa?