INVESTIGATING THE IMAGE OF A TOURIST DESTINATION: THE CASE OF SAARISELKÄ

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ABSTRACT. This paper emphasizes the importance of defining a precise image for a tourist destination. We review first the main contributions in the literature on tourist destinations and their marketing. Then, we outline the methodology of a marketing research conducted in Saariselkä, a resort located in northern Finland. The results of the research provide interesting insights on how the image of this particular destination is perceived by tourists. The findings of the research also enable us to draw several conclusions which may prove useful for an enhanced efficiency of the promotional efforts.

Key words: tourist destination, marketing research, online promotion

JEL Classification: L83

1. Introduction

The process of creating the image of a certain tourist destination implies the research, implementation and assessment of tourists' opinions on that respective destination.

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The main aim of this paper is to analyze, by means of a marketing research, the opinions of tourists on Saariselkä, a destination in northern Finland, with a view to identify the elements of differentiation for Saariselkä as a tourist destination.

The research undertaken within this paper is an empirical study and, as such, contributes to the literature on the way tourist destinations are perceived, and subsequently marketed. The paper enriches the insights of other recent regional studies that deal with the promotion of tourist destinations. The results of the research offer interesting and useful findings for the administrators of the tourist destination in order to promote it more efficiently on the tourism market.

The paper is structured as follows: we start by surveying some of the important contributions in the literature on the definition and marketing of tourist destinations. In the next section, the method of the marketing research is detailed together with the investigated population and the resulting sample. The third section comprises the main results of the research oriented towards the opinions of tourists on the Saariselkä destination. In the last section we draw some conclusions considering the way Saariselkä is currently perceived and promoted and we suggest some recommendations.

2. Review of Literature

One of the first researchers to approach the concept of tourist destination was Gunn, who defined it as a collection of experiences gained by the traveller (Gunn, 1972). More elaborate, Leiper considered the tourist destination to be a packaging of products and services partly created by public and private operators. The core is not the single attraction in itself, but a combination of factors made through the tourist's consumption experience (Leiper, 1990). Further, a destination is also a place where tourist activities have been developed and then tourist products are produced and consumed (Buhalis and Costa, 2006).

According to the UNWTO (2007), a tourist destination is characterized by three perspectives: geographical (a distinctly recognizable area that tourists visit and stay in during their trip), economic (the place where they stay and spend a relevant amount of money and where tourism revenue is significant), and psychological (the main rational or emotional reasons for the journey).

Destination marketing is then an amalgamation of individual or collective efforts and activities created to form a total experience of a visited place (Murphy *et al.*, 2000).

Tourist destination marketing is the on-going research and evaluation process conducted upon the target public's needs, by means of which the organizations in charge with tourist destination management build the image of the location (Morrison, 2013).

The purpose of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) is to create a well-designed marketing mix targeted at a clearly defined target market to move a destination into the consideration set of that specific market (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989).

A major aim of the positioning strategy of a tourist destination should be to reinforce positive images already held by the target audience, correct negative images, or create a new image (Pike and Ryan, 2004). In fact, this understanding of the destination image is critical and provides the basis for more effective and efficient future strategic planning for the destination (Ispas and Saragea, 2011). Della Corte and Micera (2007) define destination image as the whole of beliefs, ideas and impressions a destination can generate in potential and actual tourists' minds. According to other authors, a destination image is composed of 3 elements: the product (for instance the attraction itself), the behavior plus attitude of hosts and the environment, consisting of weather, scenery and facilities (Milman and Pizam, 1995). As Lai and Li (2016) observe in their recent comprehensive research of 45 representative definitions of tourist destination image, even though this concept has been extensively studied, its nature and scope still remain vague.

The core of the concept remains the same, though. The need to build a strong image for a tourism destination stems from the desire of understanding the psychological forces that motivate individual travelers, as noted by Chon (1990). Thus, one can say that the process of creating the image of the tourist destination involves researching, implementing and evaluating the tourists' opinions in this regard. It entails the promotion of a tourist destination on various media channels. Promotion is one of the important activities conducted by the organization in charge of the tourist destination management. Likewise, this activity has an essential

role in creating the image of the tourist destination, and its competitive edge over other tourist destinations. The promotion, development, and finally, the knowledge of tourist destinations by visitors are possible after identifying genuine elements, capable to differentiate a place from others (Baltescu, 2016).

The use of the internet to promote a tourist destination represents a big opportunity nowadays. Thus, destinations can benefit from the increasing popularity of social media and web services, using these tools to develop a coherent image in the global marketplace, and interacting with potential tourists, to subsequently ensure delivery of high levels of customer satisfaction (Morgan *et al.*, 2004). Given the strong competition between destinations and the increasing trend of worldwide tourism, new empirical studies are continuously published on how to best promote selected tourist destinations.

3. Material and method

The purpose of our research was to find the elements of differentiation for Saariselkä as a destination on the tourism market, and more generally to analyze the tourists' perceptions on the image of Saariselkä as a tourist destination.

The research objectives were the following:

➢ to identify the profile of the tourists who visit Saariselkä;
➢ to establish the main reasons for choosing Saariselkä by tourists;
➢ to identify the information sources used by the people who choose Saariselkä as their tourist destination;
➢ to assess the quality of the information retrieved within these sources;
➢ to measure the notoriety of several tourist attractions;
➢ to identify the main tourist attractions.

The following research hypotheses were set:

A. General hypotheses

1) Most tourists checked the official website of the destination (www.saariselka.fi) before choosing Saariselkä as their destination.

2) The tourists analyzed the variety of leisure activities, when choosing Saariselkä as their tourist destination.

3) Tourists believe that Saariselkä is an ideal holiday destination for a family.

4) The tourists took into account the activities for children, when choosing Saariselkä as destination.

B. Statistical hypotheses

1) Over 70% of tourists checked the official website of the destination (www.saariselka.fi) before choosing Saariselkä as their destination.

Below 70% of tourists checked the official website of the destination (www.saariselka.fi) before choosing Saariselkä as their destination.

2) The tourists considered the variety of leisure activities to be important, when choosing Saariselkä as their destination.

The tourists did not consider the variety of leisure activities to be important, when choosing Saariselkä as their destination.

3) Tourists agree that Saariselkä is an ideal holiday destination for a family.

Tourists do not agree that Saariselkä is an ideal holiday destination for a family.

4) Tourists considered the activities for children to be important, when choosing Saariselkä as destination.

Tourists did not consider the activities for children to be important, when choosing Saariselkä as destination.

The research was a descriptive one. In order to gather the data, the survey-based inquiry was used. The tool for data collection was a questionnaire, filled in face-to-face with the target public.

A non-random sampling method, namely conventional sampling was applied. It supposes choosing the sample components through interviews conducted on street or in an enclosure, by stopping the persons that the operator considers to be part of the population studied (Constantin, 2009). This research was conducted on the main street of Saariselkä, at the ski slopes and inside Tunturi hotel. The studied population consisted of tourists. Throughout the duration of the research (March 2015), the number of tourists in Saariselkä reached around 6,000 persons according to the regional marketing agency, of which about 60% women and 40% men, aged between 35 and 64 years old. The majority of tourists present at the time were of Finnish origin (approx. 60%), the others from abroad (40%).

In order to determine the sample size, using a non-random sampling, a confidence level of 95% and a permissible error of ± 5%, for which "z" takes the value 1.96, were considered. Thus, the size "n" of the sample in the case of the percentages was determined, applying the formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2 \cdot p \cdot q}{E^2}$$

where,

E = permissible error, expressed in percentages;
z = the value in the normal-distribution table, corresponding to the confidence level considered;
p = the assessment in case of success, or of those who answer "Yes";
$q = (100 - p)$ the assessment in case of failure, or of those who answer "No".

In this situation, we do not have previous information about "p". Therefore, the maximum achievable level is adopted: p = 50% => q = 50%.

$$n = \frac{1.96^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot 0.5}{0.05^2} = 384$$

n = 384 persons who represent the tourists of Saariselkä.

For objective reasons, a sample consisting of 384 persons could not be taken into account; hence, a fixed sample size of 153 persons was chosen.

In this case, the error is:

$$E = \sqrt{\frac{z^2 \cdot p \cdot q}{n}} = \sqrt{\frac{1.96^2 \cdot 50 \cdot 50}{153}} = 7.92$$

The resulting confidence level is:

$$p \pm z \sqrt{\frac{p \cdot q}{n}} = 0.5 \pm 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{50 \cdot 50}{153}} = 0.5 \pm 0.0792$$

As a result, the sample size of 153 persons entailed a reduction of the precision level, namely the acceptance of a greater error, while maintaining the confidence level (95%). Establishing that sample size, the representativeness was guaranteed with an error of ± 7.92% and with a confidence level of 95%. The sample validation was performed by means of a comparison test of the percentage differences.

$H_0: \pi = \pi_0$; $H_1: \pi \neq \pi_0$

Where: H_0 – null hypothesis;

H_1 – alternative hypothesis;

π – percentage at the level of the studied population;

π_0 – real percentage at the level of the researched population;

p – percentage at sample level.

$$z_{obs} = \frac{|p - \pi|}{\sqrt{\frac{p \cdot (100 - p)}{n}}}$$

4. Results and discussions

The results of the research revealed some interesting insights.

Most interviewed tourists (37.9%) indicated cross country ski as their main reason for choosing this tourist destination (see fig.1). A large part of them mentioned that the ski slopes were similar to those

of other resorts in northern Lapland. Yet, what differentiate Saariselkä from other resorts were the purity of nature and the lack of massive buildings.

As for the way tourists used to book their stay in Saariselkä, a percentage of 30.7% of the respondents booked their tourist services by means of online booking websites. A similar percentage opted for packages offered by travel agencies. Other ways of booking marked small percentages.
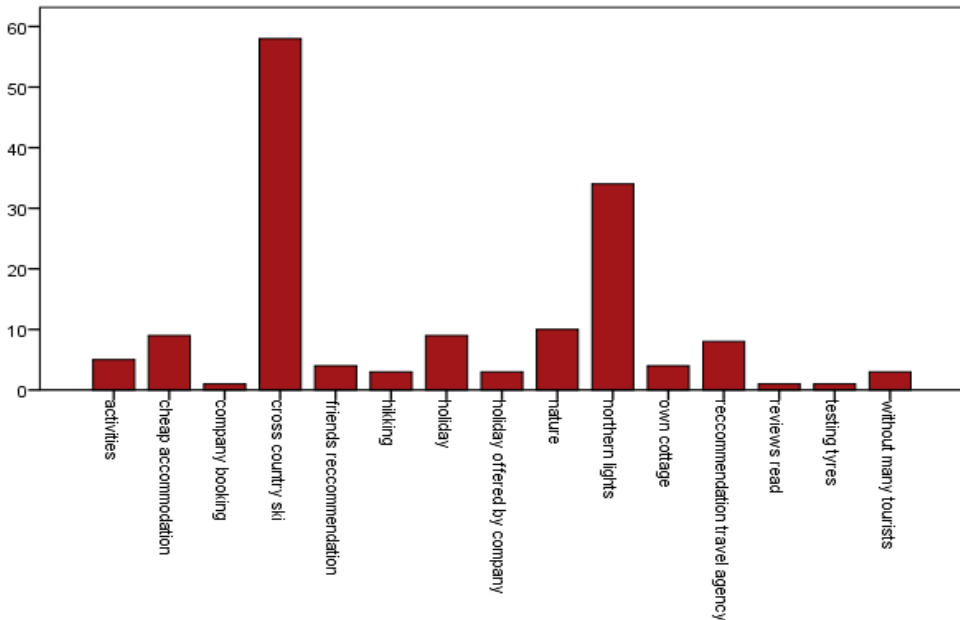

Fig.1. Reasons for choosing Saariselkä

The most commonly used information sources by tourists for choosing Saariselkä were: the official website of the destination, advice from friends/family, and reviews posted on Tripadvisor.com (see table 1). Thus, a percentage of 63.8% of all respondents resorted to the official website of the destination as their information source, this answer representing 24.4% of the total. The smallest percentage in the total number of answers was marked by videos on Vimeo or YouTube (5.9%), used only by 2.3% of respondents.

Table 1. Response frequencies on information sources

		Responses		Percent
		N	Percent	of Cases
Information sources	Comments on Facebook/Twitter	15	3.8%	9.9%
	Friends/Family	47	11.8%	30.9%
	Holiday and Travel Blogs	22	5.5%	14.5%
	Information from travel agency	43	10.8%	28.3%
	Photos on Pinterest/Tumblr	10	2.5%	6.6%
	Reviews on Booking.com	28	7.1%	18.4%
	Reviews on TripAdvisor.com	48	12.1%	31.6%
	Saariselkä's Facebook profile	38	9.6%	25.0%
	Saariselka's mobile application	13	3.3%	8.6%
	Website saariselka.fi	97	24.4%	63.8%
	Videos on Vimeo/YouTube	9	2.3%	5.9%
	Other	27	9.8%	25.7%
Total		397	100.0%	261.2%

Among those who checked the website www.saariselka.fi, 43% stated it included useful information; yet they suggested it might be updated with aspects related to leisure activities. However, as regards the information on Tripadvisor.com, most respondents considered it to be neither irrelevant, nor relevant, which means it should be reviewed and completed. A consistent portion of respondents considered the information on the Facebook page to be useful. The tourists said, nevertheless, they wanted to find more information on weather and on the activities that can be performed in Saariselkä. The research also brought forward the activities that tourists would like to perform when staying in Saariselkä (see table 2).

The clear majority of respondents (19.4%) said they would make cross country ski throughout the time period spent in Saariselkä. Likewise, a large proportion of tourists (17.5%) emphasized they would make a trip to see Aurora Borealis (most of them were of foreign origin). An activity quite popular among tourists is the husky dogsled ride (10.5%).

Table 2. Response frequencies on preferred activities

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Activities	Cross Country Skiing	98	19.4%	64.1%
	Dinner at Reindeer Farm	23	4.6%	15.0%
	Down-hill skiing/Snowboarding	36	7.1%	23.5%
	Husky safari	53	10.5%	34.6%
	Angry Birds Activity Park	5	1.0%	3.3%
	Reindeer safari	26	5.2%	17.0%
	See the Aurora Borealis (trips)	88	17.5%	57.5%
	Snowmobiling	44	8.7%	28.8%
	Snow shoe hiking	50	9.9%	32.7%
	Visit Santa Claus's Resort	9	1.8%	5.9%
	Other	72	14.3%	47.0%
Total		504	100.0%	329.4%

As for the most important factors for choosing Saariselkä, results showed that nature and a relaxing environment played a major role (see fig. 2). This factor had an average of 4.71 in terms of importance (where: 1-very unimportant, 5-very important). 76.5% of respondents considered that nature and a relaxing environment were very important in the decisional process of choosing Saariselkä as their holiday destination. Most respondents totally agreed that Saariselkä is an ideal location for spending the holidays with a group of friends, yet they did not agree that, in this destination, the price of services is low.

Fig. 2. The importance of various factors when choosing Saariselkä

One can see that tourists perceived Saariselkä as a destination offering a wide variety of activities, which can be performed along with a group of friends (see fig. 3). A large portion of the respondents considered the locals to be hospitable and friendly, and Saariselkä to be a unique/original destination. The average score for the first statement had the value of 3.63 (where: 1-don't agree, 5-agree), meaning that tourists agreed that the destination is worth being visited also in the summer season/throughout the year.

Fig. 3. Opinions on Saariselkä

Tourists were also asked to assess the activities that can be performed in Saariselkä, according to the notoriety acquired by means of various promotional channels (see fig. 4), along a scale from 1 to 5 (where: 1-low notoriety; 5-high notoriety).
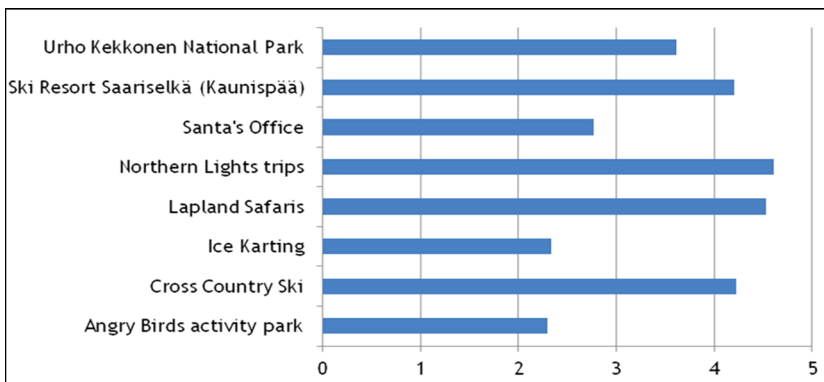

Fig.4. Notoriety of activities in Saariselkä

15

Note that the highest average (4.61) was obtained by trips made to see Aurora Borealis. The average for Angry Birds Activity Park was of only 2.3, which means the respondents considered the park to have low notoriety. This location has been recently opened and it has not been sufficiently promoted on different media channels, hence it is less known among tourists.

To enrich the findings of the research, the general hypotheses were tested.

1) Most tourists checked the official website of the destination (www.saariselka.fi) before choosing Saariselkä as their tourist destination.

$$H_0: \mu = 0.7; H_1: \mu < 0.7$$

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: official website

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
saariselka.fi	153	.56	.499	.040

At the level of the 153 persons having answered this question, the average of the binary characteristic is 0.56 (see table 3), which signifies that 56% of respondents checked the official website. Note that the percentage at the level of the sample is lower than the theoretical value established in the statistical hypothesis, $\mu_0 = 70\%$ of the respondents.

The significance level Sig. 2-tailed (0,000) is lower than 0.05; therefore, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, according to which, the percentage of the persons who used the official website to inform themselves, is significantly different from 70%. The analysis of the confidence interval leads to the same decision, as it does not include the value "0", the percentage being lower than 70%.

2) Tourists analyzed the variety of leisure activities, when choosing Saariselkä as their tourist destination.

$$H_0: \mu = 4; H_1: \mu \neq 4$$

Table 4. Descriptive statistics: variety of activities

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
The variety of leisure activities	153	3.85	1.099	.089

For the 153 respondents, an average of 3.85 was obtained (see table 4), in terms of the importance given by tourists to the variety of leisure activities, with a standard deviation of 1.099. Note that the average at the level of the sample is lower than the theoretical value set in the statistical hypotheses, $\mu_0 = 4$.

The significance level Sig. 2-tailed (0.093) is higher than the significance level 0.05; hence the null hypothesis is accepted, according to which the average score is not significantly different from the value 4. The analysis of the confidence interval leads to the same decision, as it does not include the value "0". In conclusion, tourists considered the variety of leisure activities to be important, representing one of the contributing factors when deciding for Saariselkä as one's tourist destination.

3) According to tourists, Saariselkä is an ideal holiday destination for a family.

$$H_0: \mu = 4; H_1: \mu \neq 4$$

Table 5. Descriptive statistics: family holiday

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Saariselkä is an ideal destination for families.	153	4.01	1.088	.088

An average of 4.01 was obtained for the 153 respondents (see table 5), stating their opinion on Saariselkä as an ideal destination for a family. The average obtained at the level of the sample is higher than the theoretical value set in the statistical hypotheses, $\mu_0 = 4$.

The significance level Sig. 2-tailed (0.882) is higher than the significance level 0.05; hence the null hypothesis is accepted, according to which the average score is not significantly different from the value 4. The analysis of the confidence interval leads to the same decision, as it includes the value "0". Thus, one can state that tourists agreed that Saariselkä is a perfect destination for families.

4) Tourists took into account the activities for children, when choosing Saariselkä.

$$H_0: \mu = 4; \quad H_1: \mu \neq 4$$

Table 6. Descriptive statistics: children activities

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Activities for children	153	1.86	1.269	.103

The average obtained for this hypothesis is of 1.86 (see table 6). The significance level Sig. 2-tailed (0.000) is lower than the significance level 0.05; hence the alternative hypothesis is accepted. The analysis of the confidence interval leads to the same decision, as it does not include the value "0". In conclusion, tourists did not consider the activities for children to be important, when choosing Saariselkä destination. On the contrary, they considered them hardly important. Most of them said that the destination was ideal for the elderly couples, usually coming to relax.

Differences were also tested, in the case of the average.
H_0: The notoriety average for the Saariselkä ski resort is the same for both Finnish and foreign tourists; H_1: The notoriety average for the Saariselkä ski resort differs between Finnish and foreign tourists.

$$H_0: \mu_0 = \mu_1; \quad H_1: \mu_0 \neq \mu_1$$

Table 7. Group statistics: ski resort

	Country of origin	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Ski resort Saariselkä	Finland	82	4.39	1.173	.130
	Foreign country	71	3.99	1.439	.171

For Finnish tourists, the notoriety-assessment average is of 4.39 points (see table 7), ranging between the 4 and 5 levels of the scale. However, at the level of the foreign tourists, the average is lower, 3.99. This aspect shows that the notoriety of the ski resort in Saariselkä is lower among the tourists coming from abroad.

Finally, differences were tested, in the case of percentages.

H_0: There is no difference between Finnish and foreign tourists, in terms of making the trips to see Aurora Borealis; H_1: There is a difference between Finnish and foreign tourists, in terms of making the trips to see Aurora Borealis.

$$H_0: \mu_0 = \mu_1; H_1: \mu_0 \neq \mu_1$$

Table 8. Group statistics: Aurora Borealis trips

	Country of origin	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
See the Aurora Borealis (trips)	Finland	82	.33	.473	.052
	Foreign country	71	.86	.350	.042

A percent of 86% of foreign tourists made trips to see Aurora Borealis (see table 8). Only a percentage of 33 of the Finnish tourists performed this activity. One can see that the percentage of the tourists of Finnish origin (24.8%) is higher around the variable "Totally agree", in terms of the affirmation "Saariselkä is worth being visited also in the summer season/throughout the year." Foreign tourists are neuter as regards this statement. A large portion of them said they were more willing to visit the destination in winter, than in other seasons. Thus, one can state there is a difference between the two groups in the perception on the image of the destination in different seasons of the year.

5. Conclusions

This research reveals that the main reasons for which tourists are choosing Saariselkä are the natural landscapes, the quality of the ski slopes, and the lack of agglomeration. However, one can notice that most tourists in this resort are of Finnish origin. Foreign tourists choose Saariselkä as it is a location situated in northern Finland (further North than its main competitors), and thus the likelihood of seeing the Aurora Borealis is greater.

Likewise, note that the tourists' wish to perform other activities than cross country ski and the trips to see the Aurora Borealis, is very low. This aspect is mainly due to the low notoriety of the other activities, and also to their lack of promotion, even within the tourist destination itself.

This research offers an overview of the tourists' perception on the quality and usefulness of the information found on different communication channels, and also on the notoriety of the various tourist attractions in Saariselkä. It reveals a series of marketing problems of the Saariselkä destination. Firstly, this location does not have a comparative advantage differentiating it from other destinations. Likewise, its main tourist attractions are not sufficiently promoted on the online channels. Furthermore, the official website and the mobile application should be improved in terms of navigability and attractiveness, so as to be easier and more enjoyable for tourists to access.

Saariselkä is a destination with great tourist potential. Tourists are always impressed with the beauty of the place, and the stories behind each sight. It is essential for the administrators of this destination to raise the visibility of Saariselkä destination and to choose an adequate online promotional mix. Likewise, for an improved image of the Saariselkä destination, the image should be unitary on all promotional channels.

The research has its limitations as it is confined to a local level and there is a bias towards regional characteristics. The extent to which such insights may be generalized to other regions is not addressed in the present research as it would require knowledge of various features of the promotional activities in other destinations and contexts.

Nevertheless, we believe that the findings of our research contribute positively to the existing literature. The results can be used by administrators in Saariselkä to enhance the efficiency of their efforts to promote the tourist destination. Future research could comprise more empirical studies on an international level to enable comparisons of results. As long as tourism is on ascending worldwide trend, it is expected that more empirical studies will enrich the literature.

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