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Marketing Reform:

The Role of Marketing Communication in (Re)shaping Tourist Perceptions of Rovaniemi

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### **Abstract**

Marketing communications play a key role in tourism development and in how tourists perceive the destination. Rovaniemi belongs to the Arctic tourism that is well-known for its unique nature, remote distance, cultural and authentic experiences. The marketing communications across all touchpoints require greater attention to ensure the destination identity is transparently delivered to prospective tourists so that the destination identity developed by marketers is aligned with the destination image formed by tourists and their expectations.

Using a qualitative research approach, this research explores the contemporary issues of marketing communication in Rovaniemi by evaluating its relevance in this changing global tourism market and examines the role of communications in turning current challenges into further growth through a potential marketing reform. The main research questions are how Rovaniemi tourism marketers present the destination identity through current marketing communications across media platforms, and the role of marketing communication in (re)shaping tourists' perceptions of the destination. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten tourism marketing professionals working in Rovaniemi and analysed using thematic analysis. The research contributes to the practical insights for destination marketers and the development of the destination through suggested marketing reform plans.

**KEYWORDS:** marketing communication, integrated marketing communication (IMC), destination identity, destination image, authenticity, transparency, consistency

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview of the current marketing communications in tourism in Rovaniemi**

Tourism in the Arctic has increased its popularity among international tourists for several reasons. Arctic regions (Alaska, Greenland, Iceland, the northern part of Canada, Russia, Norway, Sweden, and Finland) share similarities in extreme weather, unique nature, Indigenous cultures and remote lands that are hard to reach (Keskitalo, 2017). Tourism consists of activities that involve the interactions between the supply side which is the destination and the demand side which is represented by the travellers (Pike, 2008). Tourism services are intangible, inseparable, variable and perishable that can only be experienced once a purchase is made to determine the quality (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 57).

Tourists are motivated to travel to the Arctic regions by nature-based and snow-based activities (Falk & Vieru, 2019, p. 1312), cultural experiences (Chen et al., 2021, p. 499), or the last-chance tourism (Lemelin et al., 2010, p. 478). Last-chance tourism is commonly used in marketing communications, especially in the Arctic regions, because of the potential loss of their unique landscapes due to climate change, which motivates tourists to visit the destinations before they vanish (Lemelin et al., 2010, pp. 478—479). Arctic tourism can be vulnerable to tourism development due to its well-known tourism activities (e.g., skiing, snowmobiling, ice fishing, dogsledding) strongly relying on snow conditions that are unstable because of climate change (Tervo-Kankare et al., 2013).

Due to the nature of the Arctic regions, developing Arctic tourism requires special attention to ensure sustainability as these are the lands of Indigenous communities and vulnerable nature. To promote a destination that is vulnerable, the marketing communications should be taken into consideration to ensure the destination identity is correctly presented to the tourists so that their expectations about Rovaniemi are realistic and the services provided are authentic. Tourists' perception of a destination identity can be shaped by marketing communications (Chen et al., 2025). Marketing a destination is more challenging than a product since it needs to take several aspects into account such as geographical characteristics, activities and attractions (Kotler et al., 2017).

Marketing in tourism is to promote the destination and its tourism activities to domestic or international tourists (Holloway, 2004). Marketing communication between a destination and (potential) tourists is important in portraying the destination identity in the way that marketers want tourists to perceive (Pike, 2008). A slogan could shape the identity of a destination (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 517).

When thinking of Rovaniemi as a destination, the common perceived images of Rovaniemi are the Christmas capital of the world with the popular slogan of the city “Santa Claus’ Official Hometown”, “Santa Claus Land” (Pretes, 1995; Tervo-Kankare et al., 2013, p. 292), and “Arctic” branding in many tourism businesses (Marjavaara et al., 2022). In recent years, there is a new marketing term that has been widely used to motivate tourists to travel to Rovaniemi: “Guaranteed Northern Lights”. Northern light is a special natural phenomenon of the Arctic (Lee et al., 2017) that often occurs from September to March. The chance to observe it depends strongly on weather conditions and solar activities that cannot be forecasted precisely. All of these marketing messages are closely linked to seasonal tourism, which makes Rovaniemi a winter destination and creates a tourism development gap between snowy season and snowless season. The reason for saying “snowy season” is due to the fact that many popular tourism activities in Rovaniemi are based on snow coverage (Falk & Vieru, 2019; Rantala et al., 2019; Tervo-Kankare et al., 2013).

On top of that, other current marketing messages on digital media can be misleading or unauthentic because of the misuse of some common keywords such as traditional dog sledding while it is not traditionally from Rovaniemi; local tour guides while many of the tourism workers in Rovaniemi are seasonal; and Northern Lights wilderness tour while it is basically a driving tour to find Northern Lights with no real wilderness exploration. Tour operators should take responsibility to ensure their activities match with the tours’ description in their marketing materials across all media platforms to avoid misleading or inaccurate information that could lead to customer complaints (Holloway, 2004). Therefore, this study will examine the current tourism marketing communication issues in Rovaniemi and evaluate its relevance to this changing industry.

In Rovaniemi - a part of Arctic regions, tourism could be seen as a golden egg for all tour operators in the snowy season yet an amateur in tourism industry of the other seasons. Most of the key tourism activities provided in Rovaniemi considerably rely on the weather conditions

which are unpredictable factors (Tervo-Kankare et al., 2013, pp. 294–295; Varnajot & Saarinen, 2022) that might affect tourist experiences if the weather is unfavourable when they arrive for their tours. Despite the winter season being around December to April in Rovaniemi, the snow conditions vary from month to month. This winter season 2025-2026, the snow came early but did not stay for long in early December, whereas some snow dependent tours had already been booked for that time as it was the Christmas time of the year. This caused the tour operators to cancel or rebook the tours which might negatively affect their sales revenue and tourist experiences for those who booked their trips to Rovaniemi for Christmas holiday.

Considering these, Rovaniemi's image is significantly linked to winter holiday destinations, making it a seasonal destination for not only tourists but also for tourism service providers and tourism workers. This leads to the high seasonality and seasonal employment, which raises concerns about sustainability issues of the industry and the local communities (Saarinen, 2003, pp. 103–105). While Finnish Lapland often advertises itself as a sustainable tourism destination which can be a competitive marketing ingredient to increase the popularity of the destination (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009), the accuracy of its claims is in doubt according to European standards (Europa, 2024). For example, some current marketing approaches in Lapland have been accused of exaggerating the destination sustainability commitment according to the new EU directive for having vague sustainable claims with no solid evidence (Yle, 2025).

There are four stages in destination brand building: evaluate the destination brand's current situation, develop the brand identity and brand promise, communicate the brand promise, and measure the success of the brand building (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009, pp. 218–219). Since Rovaniemi is aiming for an all-year-round tourism destination, measuring the effectiveness of the present Rovaniemi destination branding will help tourism marketing professionals assess the brand's current situation so that they can develop a desired brand identity and promises that are sustainable and communicate them to potential tourists.

Overall, there are some current marketing messages that might be considered misleading, inauthentic, or not fully presented in cross-cultural environments that need to be addressed in Rovaniemi tourism. These issues will be analysed in greater depth in later sections of this study. Moreover, because of overusing Christmas and winter-related keywords in the marketing materials, Rovaniemi marketing communication might have downgraded other marketing opportunities as nature-based Arctic tourism can be operated all-year round with different tour

structures depending on the seasons. Therefore, this study will examine the current marketing communications between Rovaniemi and tourists to justify the relevance and authenticity of the marketing materials on the media channels. From that, the study will suggest whether a marketing reform plan in communications is necessary to aim for a more sustainable development in the tourism industry in Rovaniemi.

## **1.2 Previous research**

There are many definitions of marketing and tourism marketing. Marketing can be described as a set of activities within a fixed structure, executed exclusively by marketing professionals to generate demand and make promises for customers and other related stakeholders (Grönroos, 2024, p. 33). Tourism marketing is a set of multifaceted efforts carried out by tourism service providers to offer suitable products and services, fulfil tourist experiences, promote sustainable development, and improve the tourism operations (Geng et al., 2024, p. 2). Tourism marketing has primarily contributed to the development of tourism destinations and sustainability promotions (Geng et al., 2024).

In the era of globalization and digitalization, traditional marketing in tourism has undergone struggles as modern travellers and tourists prefer real experiences and recommendations from trusted sources of information such as verified travel influencer accounts on social media channels (e.g., Lee & Min, 2013; Balter, 2008; as cited in Ahmad et al., 2023, p. 551). The fundamental goal of media is to reach the target audiences of the destination (Juska, 2022). Recent strategies in tourism marketing from several stakeholders' perspectives that involve short, frequent or deep engagement through modern media (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels and Youtube Shorts) between tourism organisations and travellers have been practiced (Chen et al., 2023b; Büyükoçkan & Ergün, 2011; as cited in Geng et al., 2024, p. 1).

Nowadays, marketing is shaped by its changing context, which includes population trends, the growing information technology that empowers consumers, and an increased awareness of ethical issues (Sheth & Sisodia, 2006). With the fast development of marketing on digital platforms, the customers have gained more power than the businesses and the marketing communications have shifted from business to consumer (B2C) to consumer to business (C2B) and consumer to consumer (C2C) (Hanlon, 2019, pp. 31–32). C2B and C2C in tourism happen when the tourists leave personal reviews on businesses' platforms (e.g., google reviews,

Facebook forum, online feedback and recommendations) that can add value to the businesses by influencing their own followers or online communities. This plays an important role in marketing communications of tour operators and helps the customers to assess which company fits their travel preferences, since people are interested in learning others' opinions about tourism products or destinations on digital media (Dabija et al., 2018).

However, the international characteristic has been taken for granted in marketing communications in Rovaniemi. International and culture backgrounds should be considered when promoting Arctic tourism due to unfamiliar geographical term resulting in different expectations (see Pelsmacker et al., 2010, pp. 9—10). For example, “Arctic” is commonly used in business branding and tourism marketing to increase geographical attractiveness (Marjavaara et al., 2022), yet the people's perceptions of Rovaniemi as a destination are related to merely a few aspects of the whole idea of Arctic, which are the Arctic circle borderline and coldness (Varnajot, 2020). Hence, it is understandable that tourists from different backgrounds are not fully aware of the whole pictures of Arctic that has different weather and landscape in different seasons, which makes marketing communications more challenging promoting snowless tourism season.

Tourism development in Arctic regions is generally more vulnerable to the risk of mass tourism, while producing both beneficial (e.g., economic profits) and adverse effects (e.g., environmental destruction and social disturbance) (Chen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the last-chance tourism marketing tactic in the Arctic (Lee et al., 2017, p. 5) has contributed to the growth of tourism in Rovaniemi and emphasis should be placed on more sustainable and ethical approaches (Varnajot & Saarinen, 2022). Sustainability is a typical operation and marketing strategy for tourism businesses in the modern world. Sustainability, which consists of environmental, economic and social dimensions, has various definitions in many industries. Basically, to be sustainable means to be able to live in a way that is environmentally, economically and socially sustainable now and in the future (Dillard et al., 2009, p. 2).

Destination marketing is more difficult than product marketing since it needs to cover a variety of tourism activities, attractions, accommodation and geographic aspects (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 511). The role of marketing communication is crucial in tourism sustainability development especially in the Arctic regions where authenticity in the exotic is one of the key attractions

(Dawson et al., 2011, p. 251). Marketing communication should be authentic, consistent and follow the service promises made to tourists (Dolnicar & Ring, 2014).

Most of the marketing messages from Rovaniemi are based on either hometown of Santa Claus that is self-proclaimed (Tervo-Kankare et al., 2013, p. 292), uncontrolled use of winter- and sustainability-related keywords, or uncertain natural phenomena. The idea of building a winter theme park (e.g., Arctic Fantasy Park, Snow Glow Winter Park and Santa Park), or winter wonderland with Santa Claus as the main character in the Arctic region for commercial purposes often neglects the authenticity of the destination, the vulnerability of nature and the challenges of sustainability commitment due to the risk of overtourism, fast changing Arctic climate, and false tourists expectations (Lundén, 2024). Consumers focus on authenticity in every aspect, yet marketing is overwhelmed by inaccurate and insincere practices (Sheth & Sisodia, 2006). Thus, tourism development in the Arctic regions needs scrutiny as those have a unique environment and are home to several cultures where authenticity is an important element (Enzebacher, 2011, p. 23).

Marketing reform has different meanings in specific contexts. Kotler et al (2017, p. 516) indicate that marketing in tourism for sustainable development means to be willing to give up some potential profits. Grönroos (2024) suggested that marketing should shift its focus from promotion and selling to providing help to customers as well as ensuring the delivered tourism services match the marketing promises to create meaningful experiences for tourists in the value co-creation process. Tourism marketing should be recognized as a value co-creation process by the involved stakeholders to achieve mutual benefits, not just creating sales and profits for the providers (Grönroos, 2024). Likewise, Sheth & Sisoda (2006) believed that marketing should represent the customers' interests first to enhance their life quality.

For this study, marketing reform means to restructure how Rovaniemi as a destination is communicated to tourists to achieve an all-year-round tourism destination instead of the current seasonal destination by (re)evaluating the relevance and influences of current marketing messages delivered to tourists in this competitive global tourism market. Additionally, it will adopt the marketing reform concepts of Grönroos (2024), Sheth and Sisoda (2006) to prioritize customers' needs over profits, even if it means cutting off a part of future profits to support sustainable tourism growth (Kotler et al., 2017). Although marketing professionals might be reluctant to adapt to change that requires investment and a real transformation regarding

marketing communications approach (Eagle et al., 2007, p. 958), there is a need to reconsider and restructure marketing communication approaches to the outside world to aim for consistent, authentic marketing campaigns and sustainable growth in the future.

### **1.3 Research gap and aim of the study**

Much of prior research on tourism marketing concentrates on strategic relationship marketing, network approach, and the service-dominant logic (Li & Petrick, 2008, p. 240), or how services are created and delivered (Dolnicar & Ring, 2014). Scholars have recognized that integrated marketing communication (IMC) is a necessary approach for destination marketing (Holloway, 2004; Kotler, 2017; Pelsmacker, 2010). Some researchers proposed different focuses on either corporate communication (Syed et al., 2022) or customer-driven IMC (e.g., Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017; Finne & Grönroos, 2017), on online media or social media platforms (e.g., Valos et al., 2016). Recent research indicates that tourism marketing-related topics are continuously developing, covering multiple areas such as environmental issues, transportation and social policy, which shows that tourism marketing research is multidisciplinary (Geng et al., 2024, p. 13).

Rovaniemi is the selected study area where there is a clear imbalance between winter and other tourism seasons. Understanding how Rovaniemi identity is portrayed through marketing communications, together with evaluating its influences on tourist perceptions of the destination, is necessary to generate tourist demands for all-year-round travel as well as to promote sustainable development in Rovaniemi. Seasonality in tourism is shaped by socio-cultural factors such as the promotion of specific images of the destination, ethnic or cultural factors (Lundén et al., 2023, p. 317), and it is one of the significant challenges of the tourism industry in northern European areas (Rantala et al., 2019) that affects the overall sustainable development of the destination. The perceptions of tourists towards Rovaniemi as a Christmas destination (Tervo-Kankare et al., 2013) or last chance Arctic tourism (Varnajot & Saarinen, 2022; Lundén et al., 2023) need to be shifted to a new reality where the destination's full potential is not restricted by solely winter attractions.

In tourism, marketing is not only about selling more products or activities, but also about regulating demand where the supply of products or activities is limited (Holloway, 2004, p. 13). From marketing's perspective, to achieve sustainable tourism can be to give up a part of

potential revenues from short-term tourism by limiting capacity, especially in peak season, to preserve demand for tourism in the future (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 516). This could result in limiting the number of tourists in the winter season to deal with the mass tourism challenges while figuring out how to attract more tourists in summer season.

In Arctic regions, there are many studies about tourism development (see e.g., Müller et al., 2013; Rantala & Müller, 2024), yet only a few marketing tourism research in the Arctic, which focuses on either relationship marketing (e.g., Wu & Chang, 2020), tourists' perceptions of service values (e.g., Wang et al., 2018), or sustainability communication in destination marketing (e.g., Vespestad et al., 2025). Vespestad et al. (2025) claimed that their study was the first to address communication issues between destination marketing organisations and the stakeholders in Arctic tourism regarding moral muteness in sustainability communications.

Despite the multidisciplinary tourism marketing research, there is a lack of research on tourism marketing communication and how it is communicated to tourists in the media between Rovaniemi and its audiences. Although marketing communication conceptual backgrounds remain relevant for current market, new approaches should be applied as its platforms change rapidly (Keller, 2016, p. 287). In Rovaniemi, many marketing studies have been conducted such as research on winter tourism, tourist experiences, destination branding and sustainable development in Rovaniemi with existing concerns about climate change affecting the tourism industry in general (e.g., Pretes, 1995; Popescu & Corboş, 2010; Tervo-Kankare et al., 2018; Varnajot, 2020; Vuoksenmaa, 2025). Summer tourism or all-year-round tourism development research has gained increased attention because of the climate change challenges affecting the winter tourism operation in Rovaniemi, yet it is more about attraction development, new experience design and marketing rather than focusing on marketing communications that shape tourist perceptions. Besides, the majority of tourism studies in Rovaniemi were conducted from tourists' viewpoints (see Okuno, 2025; Hylton, 2022; Varnajot, 2020), yet were limited from perspectives of tourism marketing professionals working in Rovaniemi.

Research often indicates that it is crucial to sustainably develop tourism in the Arctic because of its vulnerability to fast and mass tourism (Vespestad et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2017; Garcia-Rosell & Maekinen, 2013). Marketing communications in the Arctic tourism can mean how it is presented to the international audiences that might or might not have a complete understanding of what the Arctic is and the situations in that faraway land (see Pelsmacker et

al., 2010). Authenticity is often mentioned in Arctic tourism research (e.g., Dawson, 2011), yet authentic marketing messages communicated across media platforms have not been justified, as marketing has been traditionally seen as selling tourism services and products. This study focuses on marketing communication in Rovaniemi which is part of the Arctic tourism, attempts to reassess its relevance in the current tourism stage of Rovaniemi, and explores the possibility of shifting current tourists' perceptions into the marketers' desired destination identity to achieve sustainable development all year round.

As a result, the main purpose of this master's thesis is to analyse the perspectives of marketing professionals in Rovaniemi in presenting the destination identity through marketing communications in the media including online and offline channels to evaluate the relevance, transparency, and authenticity of the current messages delivered to tourists. The main research questions of the study are:

RQ1: How do tourism marketing professionals present the Rovaniemi destination identity through current marketing communications across media platforms?

RQ2: How can marketing communication (re)shape tourists' perceptions of the destination identity?

#### **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

The structure of this thesis will proceed as follows: The second chapter will discuss the theoretical background and framework that guide this study. The integrated marketing communication framework acts as a main theory to evaluate the relevance of current marketing communications in Rovaniemi with the support of applicable concepts. The next chapter will present the qualitative research methodology with semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis and my justification. The fourth chapter will explore the findings from the data analysis gathered from semi-structured interviews with tourism marketing professionals. The fifth chapter discusses the summary of the main findings and discussions. The final one will conclude the thesis with the key results, the suggested reform plans, the limitations of the study, and further research recommendations.

## **2. Theoretical background and framework of the study**

### **2.1 Marketing communication**

The basic definition of marketing is to anticipate customer demand, recognize it, stimulate and satisfy it (Holloway, 2004, p. 7). Marketing needs the support and collaboration of all departments in a business to function effectively in both short-term and long-term planning (Holloway, 2004, pp. 7–25). Marketing communication can be an advantage for businesses to distinguish themselves from competitors (Martin et al., 2020, p. 28). Furthermore, marketing communication is the voice representation of a destination to notify, persuade, interact and build relationships with the audiences (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 72). Marketing communication supports the destination image formation of tourists on both digital and traditional media platforms (Keller, 2009, pp. 140—141).

However, the relationship between customers and the diversity of marketing communications is complex and not fully comprehended (Eagle et al., 2007, p. 959). The use of marketing communication varies from corporate communication (Syed et al., 2022) to consumer-centric (Finne & Grönroos, 2017). The voice representation of the destination might be interpreted differently by stakeholders who are exposed to various communication platforms (Finne & Grönroos, 2017). In today's digital era, AI applications have been increasingly used to generate content for marketing communications (Kirk & Givi, 2025, p. 1). It is challenging for tourists to determine whether the information they are searching for is real or fake (Zhang & Patrick, 2021). Customers could view AI-generated content as inauthentic marketing messages (Kirk & Givi, 2025). This affects the destination reputation and authenticity, which will be further explored in later sections. Hence, the authenticity of content via marketing communication channels needs greater attention in this digital era (Arango et al., 2023, p. 499).

Marketing communication is important in presenting a destination and making it stand out among rivals in the global tourism market. With the rise of AI-generated content, marketers need to be careful when promoting a destination since its identity can be perceived differently by prospective tourists. Marketing communication for international markets has a different approach than for domestic markets due to differences such as different cultures, backgrounds, expectations, and media preferences (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, pp. 9–10). For an Arctic destination like Rovaniemi that has many international tourists and seasonal workers from all

over the world, it is vital not to take marketing communication for granted, as the international tourists can react differently to the marketing communication and the marketers might expect the foreigners to share the same ways of thinking and doing (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 11).

More importantly, marketing a destination is difficult because of various stakeholders involved in the tourism development of the destination (Buhalis, 2000), and even more so in marketing a destination that belongs to Arctic tourism, which requires extra knowledge about its stakeholders (Chen et al., 2021; Enzenbacher, 2011). Rovaniemi has several stakeholders involved in the tourism development such as tourists, local communities, tourism businesses (e.g., owners, employees, restaurants and accommodation), tourism marketers, media, governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, policy makers, investors, researchers and others (Enzenbacher, 2011, p. 38).

Overall, marketing communication is how tourism businesses communicate their services and the destination to the audiences. Table 1 presents the tools of the marketing mix overall, and the last column of the table presents the marketing communications mix. This study will focus primarily on the market communication mix which is the promotion in the marketing mix.

Table 1. The tools of the marketing mix. Source: Pelsmacker et al., 2010.

<b>Product</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Promotion</b>
Benefits	List price	Channels	Advertising
Features	Discounts	Logistics	Public relations
Options	Credit terms	Inventory	Sponsorship
Quality	Payment periods	Transport	Sales promotions
Design	Incentives	Assortments	Direct marketing
Branding		Locations	Point-of-purchase
Packaging			Exhibitions and trade fairs
Services			Personal selling
Warranties			Electronic communication

## 2.2 Destination identity and destination image

Places turn into destinations according to the narratives and images presented through marketing communications to others (Morgan et al., 2011). A brand of a destination represents not only the promises of what the destination can offer to tourists but also an identity for the destination and tourism service providers, and a destination image for tourists (Pike, 2015). Branding a destination is to leverage the place's uniqueness to differentiate it and make it stand out in the tourism market (Ooi, 2011). Destination brand needs to be transparent to the customers with no inconsistency (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011).

Figure 1 illustrates how a destination can define itself from its desired image of destination identity with brand positioning to the actual destination image held by consumers (Pike, 2015). In other words, destination identity is defined by the local stakeholders (e.g., destination management organisations (DMOs) and tour operators) and it reflects the destination's goals, values, and desired destination image. Destination image, which refers to tourist expectations and perceptions of a destination (Buhalis, 2000), is an important competitive advantage of a destination (Richards & Munsters, 2010, p. 156).

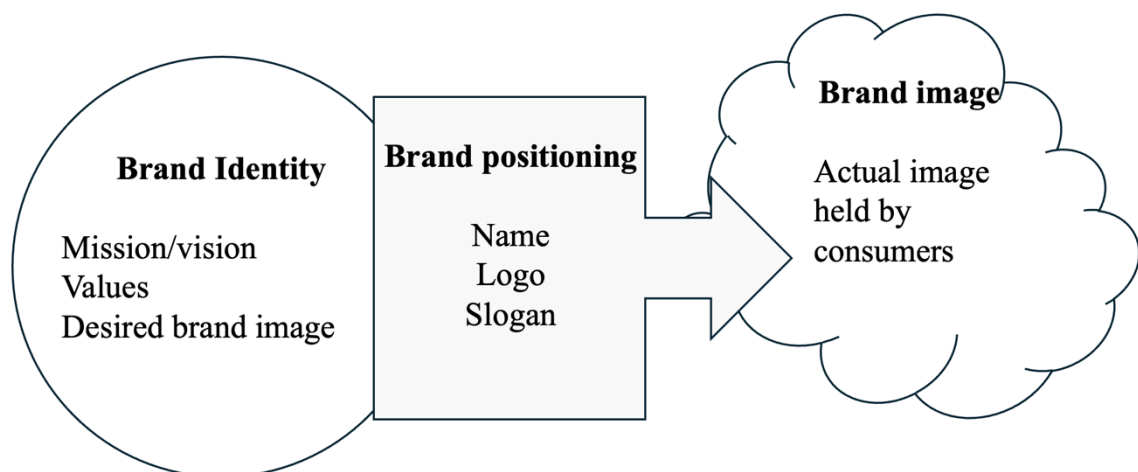


Figure 1. Brand identity, positioning and image. Source: Pike, 2015, p. 187.

While tourists' perceptions of a destination are crucial in travel decisions, destination image and its formation have not been defined clearly (Pike, 2015, p. 202). Previous studies highlight

that the main elements that influence the destination image formation in one's mind are cognitive image forming from individual knowledge and beliefs about the destination, affective image generated by overall image, and the perception (Richards & Munsters, 2010, p. 158).

One of the image formation concepts suggests that the image of a destination is formed by organic and induced images (Gunn 1988; as cited in Pike, 2008, p. 205). This concept explains that the organic image has little influence from marketers and develops naturally through an individual's daily information exposure, such as books, mass media, and actual visitation. On the other hand, an induced image is developed through tourism marketing, promotions, and communications. Tourists' behaviour is shaped by the images they perceive of the destination (Hunt, 1975; Pearce, 1982; as cited in Richards & Munsters, 2010, p. 158). The study of Pike & Page (2014) suggests that the destination brand identity is less critical than what the tourists believe to be true. Tourists' knowledge of a destination brand is not just about facts but also about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences that connect to it (Keller, 2009, p. 143).

Marketing communications have a significant impact on creating destination awareness and shaping image (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005). In order to (re)shape tourists' image of the destination, tourism marketers should focus on influencing induced images (Gunn 1988; as cited in Pike, 2008, p. 205) by offering suitable marketing campaigns and communications. Although it is often hard for tourists to identify whether their destination decisions were shaped by any marketing communication, it still can be tied to the formation of tourists' perceptions of a destination image or stereotype (Pike & Page, 2014).

International tourists' knowledge of Rovaniemi's location in the Arctic regions may affect the formation of the destination image, including its likely climate and geographical features (Pike, 2008, p. 204). Varnajot (2020) indicated that tourists often view Rovaniemi as a cold destination. Perception is the process of an individual's selecting, organizing and interpreting incoming information to form an image (Beerli & Martin, 2004, p. 626). Destination image formation in tourism marketing plays a primary role in influencing tourist perception and choice of travel destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004, p. 623). Tourists' perception of a destination identity can be influenced by marketing communication, recommendations from other travellers and personal experiences (Chen et al., 2025, p. 3). As a result, marketing communication can be a powerful tool for service providers to reach their customers and to

shift the tourist perceived images of a destination to a new image by generating demand (Holloway, 2004, p. 13).

The common tourists' perceptions of the Arctic destinations are extreme cold weather, unique wilderness and remote land. This can be considered an organic image formed by tourists about Rovaniemi. Together with the widespread winter marketing images (induced image), such an image might lead international tourists to perceive Rovaniemi as a cold destination with snow-covered for most of the year. The image perceived by tourists might be incorrect or correct, but it is what the tourists believe to be true (Pike, 2015, p. 200).

Prospective tourists form images about the destination, yet its past development can create various limits for marketing in the fast-paced market (Buhalis, 2000). It is difficult to develop a strong image of a destination, and even harder to change the image that has been formed (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005). The past and current image of Rovaniemi is a cold, snowy and Christmas destination. However, destination image can be (re)shaped by marketing communications through consistent messages and on-site travel experiences (Balgolu & McCleary, 1999; Buhalis, 2000). Changing tourist perceptions of a destination requires a long-term and determined effort in destination marketing and management to influence induced images and create a different desired destination image that is more relevant for the contemporary market.

### **2.3 The importance of destination reputation**

Tourism's rapid development makes it highly competitive (Baber & Baber, 2023, p. 2299), and easier accessibility among countries increases the need to pay more attention to destination reputation management, especially on digital media. Although destination branding is connected to people's aspirations and emotions, which can be maintained by staying authentic and simple, it often has challenges in brand management regarding ethics and authenticity issues (Morgan et al., 2011). There is a growing demand for trusted destination brands that offer an uncomplicated choice-making process and authentic experiences (Morgan et al., 2011, p. 174). In other words, when there are many sources on different platforms promoting a destination and its services, the easier the information gathering, the higher the chance for tourists to decide to visit. Tourism businesses need to pay close attention to what marketing

materials they deliver across media channels to make the process of searching for information simpler and more transparent.

Destination reputation becomes an advantage to distinguish itself from rivals (Şanlıöz-Özgen & Kozak, 2020). Brand knowledge consists of two key factors which are brand awareness and image (Keller, 2009, p. 143). Destination competitiveness is considerably influenced by the destination awareness and image, which is how tourists perceive all characteristics of the destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005). Destination awareness is a vital factor that influences tourist decisions to visit, and it is developed with the support of marketing communications (Saeed & Shafique, 2020). Low awareness or a negative destination image will affect how tourists consider the destination among other competitors, although the image might not be correct (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005).

Nowadays, travelling can be an expensive experience and people often rely on marketing on digital media to decide where to visit as they tend to have more trust in social media channels than traditional ones (Castellano & Dutot, 2017, p. 46). Online reputation has direct impact on tourists' intention to (re)visit a destination (Baber & Baber, 2023, p. 2309). Destination reputation on digital media is influenced by trust that is built based on long-term interactions, message quality that is clear and understandable, and the accuracy of the information exchanged (Castellano & Dutot, 2017, pp. 52—54). Word-of-mouth (WOM) information from close relationships is the most essential source in forming destination images (Balgolu & McCleary, 1999). When the actual experiences do not match the marketing promises, the destination's reputation could be ruined by the fast-spreading WOM in the age of digital media.

Tourists are attracted to travelling to Rovaniemi for the unique nature, local cultures and authentic experiences of Arctic tourism (Dawson et al., 2011, p. 251). Authenticity is a vital element of Arctic destinations as it promotes sustainable development in these vulnerable regions (Vespestad et al., 2025). Wang (1999) points out three authenticity approaches in tourists' experiences: objective authenticity which focuses on the realness of the objects; existential authenticity which emphasizes on personal feelings and interactions with others during their travels; and constructive authenticity arises from beliefs and perceptions projected onto objects by tourists and service providers. On the other hand, de Andrade-Matos et al. (2022) propose that authenticity is not simply about objects, individuals, or structures but is based on a combination of different viewpoints.

In general, authenticity refers to determining different aspects of truth and the verification of facts (Newman & Smith, 2016, p. 610). However, skeptical tourists tend to find it difficult to verify the destination promises communicated on media channels (Mohart et al., 2015, p. 212). Brand credibility on online marketing channels contributes to tourists' perception of the destination brand's authenticity which refers to whether tourists perceive the destination brand to be true to its customers (Mohart et al., 2015, p. 201). There is a link between authenticity and realistic expectations of what tourists can achieve from the tourism experiences (Beverland et al., 2010, p. 842). The role of marketing communications is not only to promote the destination but also to manage tourist expectations. Managing tourist expectations of the destination is essential to promote authentic experiences, meet tourist demands and to emphasize the destination competitiveness among other competitors in the global tourism market.

Building on these, it is expected that destination marketing messages should not be deceptive or misleading (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 623), so the destination identity can stay authentic to its true self in the complex formation of the destination image. Some advertisements may be misleading (un)intentionally that they could lead to unrealistic expectations (Attas, 1999: as cited in Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 623). For instance, some tourism marketing keywords mentioned in subchapter 1.1, such as guaranteed northern lights hunting, local guide claims, and traditional husky sled, could fall into the puffery category of advertising which is not entirely true but not illegal either (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 623). Puffery is an exaggerated, subjective or vague claim in advertising with limited supporting evidence (Preston, 1997, p. 341). People aim to determine their futures (Hall, 2004, p. 221). When tourists purchase the tourism services of a destination and later realize that the services promised do not exactly correspond with the actual experiences, this could have a specific impact on the destination's reputation.

A place's reputation is shaped by both how it is perceived by people and how it perceives itself, and managing reputation shapes it into a desired image (Morgan et al., 2011). Tourists tend to seek experiences that can help them to achieve valuable outcomes such as satisfaction and quality experiences (Volo, 2022). Unethical business practices such as false representations and dishonest information lead to disappointing experiences for tourists (Kim et al., 2022). Marketing professionals need to be careful in controlling tourists' expectations about the destination since false expectations will negatively affect tourists' experiences (Kotler et al.,

2017, p. 33), which contributes to the damage of the reputation of the destination and tourism services (Schweiggart et al., 2025).

Therefore, it is crucial to apply suitable marketing communication strategies to not only regulate tourists' demand but also to ensure the sustainable development of the fragile Arctic destination like Rovaniemi. Tourism service providers should take responsibility to ensure their services live up to the description in their marketing materials (Holloway, 2004, p. 372). For ethical reasons and to avoid misleading or inaccurate marketing content that could lead to customer complaints and dissatisfaction, it is important to pay close attention to the marketing materials (Holloway, 2004, p. 292). As a result, IMC is believed to be a powerful tool in shifting tourist perceptions of Rovaniemi from a Christmas holiday to an all-year-round destination. To achieve this, understanding how tourism marketing professionals manage the current marketing communications between Rovaniemi and the tourists plays a key role to gain deeper insights on the desired destination identity and image formation.

#### **2.4 Integrated marketing communication in destination marketing**

The theoretical framework for this research is integrated marketing communication (see Batra & Keller, 2016; Pelsmacker et al., 2010; Pike, 2008), which indicates the marketing communications for the destination should be strategically coordinated among all stakeholders to deliver honest messages across all different media channels (Juska, 2022). IMC from older concepts indicates that the integration activities are managed by organisations to create internal foundations within them (e.g., planning, structure, personnel) for an external integrated communication to present their businesses to other stakeholders (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017, p. 471). The newer IMC concepts focus on specific aspects such as customer-driven IMC (e.g., Finne & Grönroos, 2017), or types of platforms like social media (e.g., Valos et al., 2016).

This shows IMC is changing its priorities to customer-centric and to adopt new technologies depending on the market trends and customer demands. To justify the choice of this framework, practicing marketing in Arctic tourism destinations is complex due to the unfamiliarity of the geography, culture and nature to the outside world. IMC is an interactive integration of all related stakeholders in communication across all touchpoints so as to build long-term, profitable and value-creating relationships (Porcu et al., 2019, p. 14). IMC requires collaborations among all people within organisations, partners, customers and other external stakeholders to ensure

all brand's communication channels are integrated so that the interaction between customers and the destination is simple and transparent (Laurie & Mortimer, 2019). In tourism context, IMC is a competitive approach (Porcu et al., 2019, p. 22) that reflects the destination's missions, identities and values between the destination and its audiences (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 33).

Nevertheless, the role of IMC under the new media evolution remains unclear (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017). IMC challenges marketers to manage interactions with the stakeholders via multiple touchpoints, including both online and offline media (Laurie & Mortimer, 2019), since customers have gained more power in exchanging information on the communication channels (Hanlon, 2019). Kirk & Givi (2025) are concerned about the transparency and authenticity of AI-generated content through modern marketing communications.

Current IMC approaches face challenges in controlling the overwhelming flood of content on various types of media (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017, p. 474), and how customers react to the use of advanced technology of AI in marketing communications (Arango et al., 2023). Chen et al. (2025) stated that adopting AI in marketing communication activities reshapes how customers think and can enhance their attitudes towards the content while Arango et al. (2023) believed that AI-generated content is only effective than human creator content when the use of AI is disclosed.

With the accelerated growth of digital media with AI, marketing is not merely about selling or promoting, but it concerns managing tourists' expectations of the destination so that authentic experiences can be promised. The IMC framework proposed by Batra and Keller (2016) targets a holistic approach that coordinates all major communication channels for different goals, outcomes and stages of customers' decision journey. While IMC has different concepts over time, the framework proposed by Batra and Keller (2016) introduces a combination of two communication models.

This framework addresses all fundamental communication options together with choosing the suitable messages on the right media at different stages of the consumer decision journey to maximize the effectiveness of the marketing communications (Batra & Keller, 2016). This framework proposed that every platform matters in shaping tourist perceptions of the destination. Destination marketing organisations and stakeholders can utilize all marketing communication tools to deliver a clear and consistent message to the audiences including

(potential) tourists, partnered companies and other relevant stakeholders. IMC concentrates on building long-term relationships with target customers and stakeholders by consistency and interactivity in communications instead of attracting new customers and convincing them to pay for products or services (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 33).

In today’s tourism marketing, this framework can be adapted to fit the destination’s goals, stakeholders, media resources and tourists’ demands. Tourists interact with the destination or tour operators through marketing communications via different platforms. The tourist makes decisions to visit the destination through a journey starting from having demands, getting familiar, willingness to pay (WTP), to engaging, and supporting the brand. Further details can be seen in Figure 2.

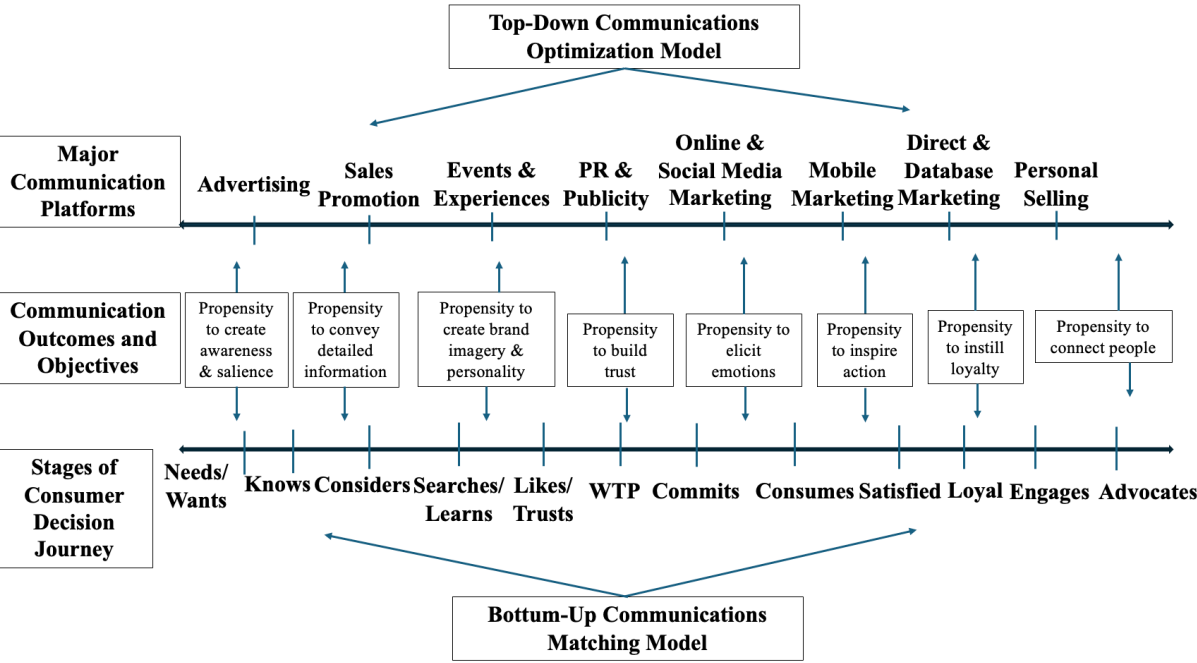


Figure 2. IMC Conceptual Framework. Source: Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 137.

To be able to create effective marketing communications for sustainable tourism in the Arctic, it is necessary to understand the stakeholders involved in the destination marketing and management. The stakeholders can be either foreign seasonal workers or local workers, foreign companies or local companies, foreign tourists and domestic tourists. All of them can be overlapped regarding roles, are exposed to different media (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 33), and they perceive messages differently from the marketing messages depending on their cultural

backgrounds and perspectives. An integrated approach to communications helps the stakeholders connect and coordinate with each other more effectively and equally on the digital media channels that have different impact on multiple stakeholders (Mulhern, 2011). To avoid conflict messages among these audiences in how the marketing messages are delivered and perceived by each other, IMC plays an important role in providing an effective mechanism that represents consistent messages to all target audiences (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, pp. 33–39).

The consistency of marketing communications across different touchpoints positively affects tourists' perceptions of destination image, quality of tourism services and experiences (Šerić & Mikulić, 2023). The current communications between Rovaniemi and its audience need to be examined so that customers' journey is smooth and effective for tourists. Therefore, IMC is considered a valuable approach for this fast-paced tourism market to ensure the messages reaching the potential tourists are authentic, consistent and reliable. For the purpose of this study, IMC framework is used to evaluate the current issues of tourism marketing in Rovaniemi according to the theory as well as to understand the significant role of integrated marketing communications in promoting an Arctic destination that aligns with sustainable growth of the city.

### **3. Research methodology**

This chapter introduces the choice of research methodology to adopt the qualitative approach and justifies the decision. The main goal of the study is to analyse the perspectives of tourism marketing professionals in Rovaniemi in understanding marketing communications to (re)evaluate the relevance, transparency and consistency of the current messages delivered to tourists across all media channels. The chapter further describes research ethics, the data collection method, and analysis process, which align with the research purpose.

#### **3.1 Qualitative methodology**

Based on the purpose of this thesis, the interpretive social sciences paradigm is applied as it views the world as composed of multiple realities (Jennings, 2010, pp. 40–43), and the researcher adopts qualitative research methodology to explore how tourism marketing professionals working in Rovaniemi deliver the destination identity through marketing communication. In the chosen paradigm, the researcher approaches the phenomenon from an insider viewpoint in the field to acquire a full-depth knowledge of the phenomenon despite its limited generalizability (Jennings, 2010, p. 42).

In tourism research, using qualitative methods offers significant potential to enhance our understanding, studying and interpreting of social implications from an insider's viewpoint (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Choosing either qualitative or quantitative research methodology depends on the researcher's purpose (Silverman, 2006, p. 34). While quantitative research is a fixed and objective method that reports reality through statistical data, qualitative research captures the richness of the social phenomenon with flexibility and subjectivity that go beyond the numerical representation (Silverman, 2006, pp. 33–48).

Qualitative research takes into consideration perspectives based on the differences of research participants regarding their backgrounds, knowledge and subjectivity about the research topic (Flick, 2006, p. 16), which is hard to be measured through statistical data of a larger sample size in quantitative research (Allen et al., 2009). Unlike the quantitative method which is to build hypotheses from previous literature and then test them, the qualitative method allows me to use insights gained from existing literature as background knowledge to better understand

and interpret my findings (Flick, 2006, pp. 58–59). The subjectivity and reflexivity offer me flexible approaches to how I interpret the data collected. Thus, qualitative research allows me to observe the study phenomenon, open to new possible insights with richer explanations, and focus on the deeper meanings of the studied phenomenon (Allen et al., 2009, p. 4).

In addition, qualitative researchers find the sequences of a social phenomenon through understanding how people express their opinions (Silverman, 2006, p. 44), since it considers social life as a result of interaction and interpretations, as well as provides significant potential for understanding the social aspects of tourism from the participants' perspective (Phillimore et al., 2004, pp. 23–24). Overall, qualitative approach enables me to study the target respondents' viewpoints on how they portray Rovaniemi on media platforms and how they think about the current marketing communications from not only their companies but also others. Therefore, qualitative research methodology is believed to be the most suitable for the purposes of this thesis.

### **3.2 Research ethics**

Ethical issues often happen during three stages of the research process: designing, conducting and translating the research (Drolet & Ruest, 2023; as cited in Drolet et al., 2023, p. 270). Therefore, all activities in this research will be conducted following established ethical research standards and guidance (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017). All participants were carefully informed about the purpose of the research, data handling procedures, and their rights in the interview process following Finnish research ethics (TENK, 2024). All the interviews were audio recorded for data analysis with full consent of the participants. The data collection was solely used for academic purposes.

Since tourism is one golden industry of Rovaniemi city, studying its marketing communication might pose an (in)visible threat to the stakeholders if the findings could point out the strategies that are contradictory to normal beliefs, or irrelevant ways of marketing planning and management of some tour operators. Hence, being a foreign researcher is assumed to be less threatening than the local researchers when conducting interviews, making it more accessible for the researcher to ask challenging questions or have contradictory opinions with the interviewees (Hall & Hall, 2011, pp. 107–108).

Riley and Love (2000, p. 182) state that qualitative methodology is often approached with caution or suspicion regarding its reliability, validity and its capability to apply the findings into practices in tourism industry. Therefore, it is vital that the researcher working with an interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology provides a transparent justification of the choice of approach, data collection and analysis procedures (Phillimore et al., 2004, pp. 56–57). Such transparency allows the audiences to evaluate the quality, credibility and rigor of the research (Phillimore et al., 2004, pp. 56–57). Moreover, following research ethics would increase the credibility of the study (Drolet et al., 2023).

In this thesis, artificial intelligence (AI) in applications was used to support information search and the data collection process. The applications were Apple Voice Memo, Word Document and Microsoft Teams. They were used to record data and generate transcripts automatically. Furthermore, as AI has strongly developed everywhere including Google website and other Microsoft applications, it is unavoidable to obtain information using Google search engine which has been mechanically linked to AI Overview in its system. This meant anything I searched on Google website, AI Overview on the top of the website would generate answers before scrolling down for more specific responses. However, Google search was used solely to seek for information that support my research such as materials and sources related to my study topic.

Besides this, I used Microsoft PowerPoint to manually draw the figures myself based on the academic sources and my own findings, and the AI-powered writing assistant Microsoft Editor in Microsoft Word for basic spelling and grammar checks. Most importantly, having ethics in research means to act in a trustworthy and honest manner, and consideration for others (Ryan, 2004, p. 13). The confidentiality of research participants was seriously considered by ensuring the findings were reported with thoughtful choice of words, anonymised codes and generalization of the details.

### **3.3 Data collection**

Since the thesis is conducted as qualitative research, the data collection method will be semi-structured interviews with marketing professionals or tourism professionals who have experiences in the tourism marketing in Rovaniemi. Interviews are the most remarkable ways of exploring one's experiences and seek for emerging ideas (Richards, 2009, pp. 42—43). The researcher conducting semi-structured interviews can be subjective in the data collection process and reflect the findings based on her perspectives and international background, making reflexivity essential in qualitative research (Jennings, 2004, p. 101).

Interviewing in qualitative research requires skills to enable social relationships with the interviewees to build trust before exchanging information (Jennings, 2004, pp. 108). A semi-structured interview method with designed questions and room for argument and discussion is important in the interpretive paradigm to gain knowledge that is produced from different perspectives (Phillimore et al., 2004, pp. 54–56). The semi-structured interview includes both fixed theoretically driven questions and open-ended questions according to the interview process to explore the sophistication of the research topic (Galletta, 2012).

In the interviewing process, the researcher and the research participants are viewed as partners in knowledge production (Schwandt, 1998; as cited in Phillimore et al., 2004, pp. 54–56) to study the interviewees' genuine perspectives on the phenomenon, and to interpret their opinions in accordance with the research questions. This is necessary for this study as it could provide unexpected insights into the research topic by developing follow-up questions during the interviews based on the interviewees' responses (Richards, 2009, p. 43).

In this research, the interview questions were formed to explore the current issues of tourism marketing messages in Rovaniemi including the use of marketing communication across media channels, its impact on destination development, the transparency, accuracy and authenticity of promoting materials in the destination from the marketers' perspectives. The interviewees were selected based on their professions according to purposive samplings (Guest et al., 2006), so they had solid experiences relating to the topic of the study. The target participants were sales managers, marketing managers working in the tourism industry and tourism business owners who have engaged in the marketing process themselves.

The data consists of ten interviews conducted between January and March 2026. Since this period was the peak tourism season in Rovaniemi and the target respondents were professionals working in tourism companies, it was challenging to connect with them. The participants were contacted via emails, Instagram accounts of the businesses and through personal connections to invite them to join in the research interviews. Fortunately, enough numbers of participants were willing to join in the research interviews and data saturation was able to be achieved as there was no new information obtained in the last interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

The interviews were conducted primarily in person, with two of the interviews were done via Microsoft Teams, and all were undertaken with full consent from the participants. The interview questions were not informed to the participants before the interview to collect honest opinions. The average length of the interviews varied from 30 minutes to 50 minutes except for the first interview that lasted 15 minutes with no follow-up questions due to inexperience in interviewing and the interviewee's limited time in January, which was the busiest time of the tourism industry in Rovaniemi. Depending on how the interviewees responded to the designed questions, follow-up questions were developed and opportunities for discussions were encouraged based on the interviewees' responses.

The interviews' flow was relaxing and enjoyable, so it felt like having discussions between friends rather than interviewing despite not knowing most of the respondents prior to the interviews. Building a social connection with the participants by allowing time to introduce each other was necessary to build trust and respect to support the data collection process (Jennings, 2004, p. 107). After the interviews, the raw data content was initially transcribed automatically by Apple Voice Memo, Microsoft Word and Microsoft Teams applications, and was edited on Word Document to enhance accuracy with the help from AI-empowered assistant Editor in the application.

Table 2 summarises the research participants' backgrounds, working experiences in tourism in general and in marketing in Rovaniemi, using anonymised codes for privacy protection. As the roles of the tourism workers can be overlapped (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 33), the research respondent working experiences were divided into overall tourism and tourism marketing to understand how deep they have engaged in both marketing and tourism in Rovaniemi. The years of experiences given were estimated by the respondents and were reported in generalized ranges to ensure confidentiality. To enhance privacy, when mentioning a specific participant in later

chapters, interview participants were referred to using the gender-neutral pronoun set they/theirs. The origins of the respondents could provide different perspectives of the study as well (Flick, 2006). Four of the participants were originally from Finland, adding a local touch to this study. The diversity of the others shared interesting insights from multicultural viewpoints.

Table 2. Research Participants' Backgrounds and Working Experiences.

	Origin	Work Experiences in Tourism in Rovaniemi	Work Experiences in Tourism Marketing in Rovaniemi
P1	Hongkong	More than 5 years	More than 5 years
P2	Slovakia	Less than 5 years	Less than 5 years
P3	United Kingdom	More than 5 years	More than 5 years
P4	Finland	Less than 2 years	Less than 2 years
P5	Italy	More than 5 years	More than 5 years
P6	Finland	More than 5 years	More than 5 years
P7	Kosovo	Less than 5 years	Less than 5 years
P8	Finland	More than 5 years	Less than 2 years
P9	Poland	More than 5 years	Less than 2 years
P10	Finland	More than 5 years	More than 5 years

### 3.4 Thematic analysis and analysis process

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analysed by using thematic analysis which is widely used for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis is a useful and flexible research method that can be used in different theoretical frameworks and provide a comprehensive, yet complex interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 78—81). This method helps in both reflecting the reality and unravelling the reality's surface (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

After the data collection process was completed with 10 interviews in total, the data analysis process followed the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87). The data analysis began with getting familiar with the transcripts by reading and re-reading;

generating and reviewing the codes formed initially; grouping the codes into potential themes by finding the patterns and similarities; reviewing the themes and generating themes map; defining and naming the chosen themes; and reporting the results with quotes to demonstrate the themes in accordance with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

During the data collection process, the transcripts were carefully reviewed after each interview together with the audio records and self-notes during the interviews to enhance the accuracy of the transcripts, to get familiar with the content, and to initially code the data. An inductive approach in coding involves the identified themes that are closely connected to the data from which the research questions can evolve and generate theory, whereas deductive approach is theory-driven focusing more on theory testing (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 56—57). In this study, inductive coding was applied to better understand the interviewees' perspectives about the research topic.

Table 3. List of Initial Codes.

Over-promise	False marketing	Service quality concerns	Cultural appropriation	Established vs new businesses	Trends over traditions
Over pricing	Inconsistent content	Lack of Finnishness	Scams	Mass seasonal destination	Short-term investment
Imbalanced growth	Plastic and loud Lapland	Arctic awareness	Long-term investment	Mix of media	Guidelines and certificates
Rovaniemi city brand	Low value destination	Managing tourist expectations	Lack of unique selling point among service providers	Accessibility issues	Content selection
Perceived value imbalance	High value customers	Budget destination	Authenticity concerns	Authorities' roles	Arctic seasons communication
Weirdness of Lapland	Shared goals and missions	Uncertain attractions	Marketing promises	Actual delivered services	Dream holiday over winter holiday

Reporting data is similar to telling a story with multiple drafts and revisions before the final version (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 149). The process of coding helps the researcher to capture and break down the essence of the data (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 5). Table 3 represents codes that were initially formed after the data familiarisation process. The initial codes were recognized

and reduced from the first coding draft collected after each interview. Once the interview process completed, all the codes were compared, organised and grouped into themes that represent patterns capturing the specific topics.

In Figure 3, the final codes were selected systematically, making the whole picture clearer so they were used to form the themes that reflect similarities and recurring patterns across the interviewees’ opinions and experiences. Themes are developed through an iterative process of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and indicate important information about the data in accordance with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). After reviewing the themes, codes and the whole multiple times, four final themes were identified for this study: marketing communication issues, market trend adaptation, mass seasonal destination, and possible different reality.

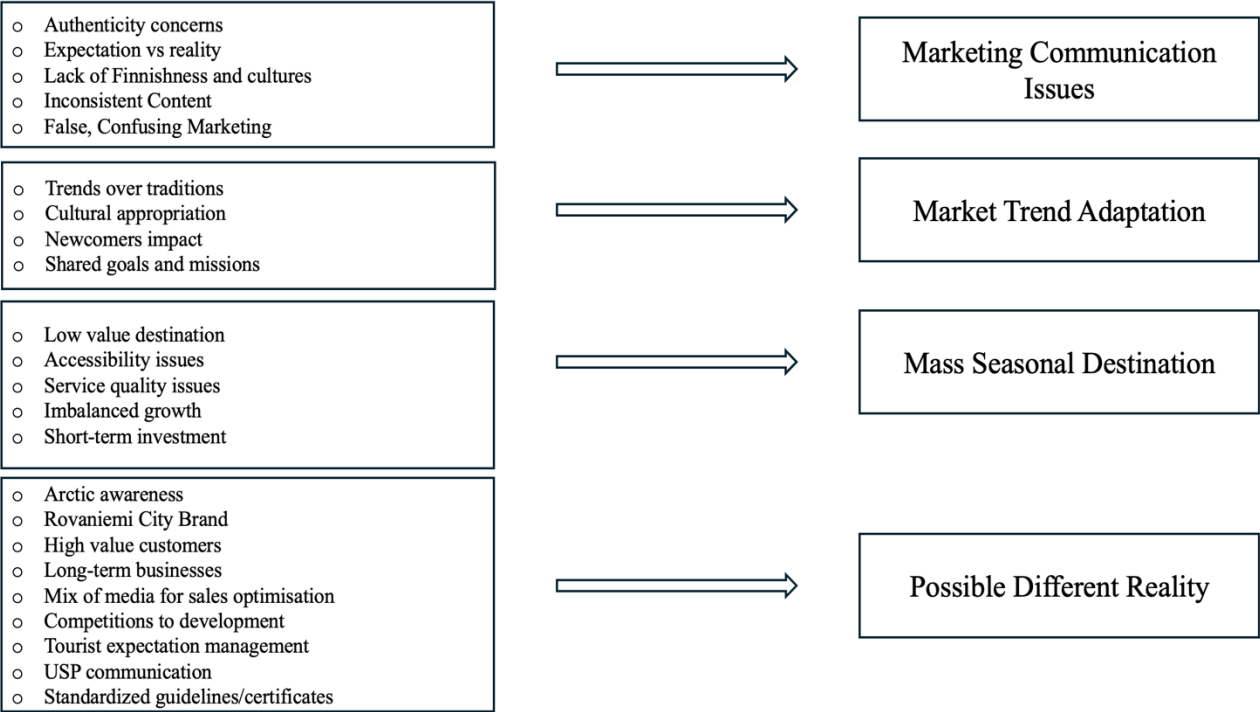


Figure 3. From Codes to Final Themes.

## **4. Findings**

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the data collected from tourism marketing professionals working in Rovaniemi. The purposes of the study are to (re)evaluate the present marketing communications between Rovaniemi and its tourists, and to understand the role of marketing in shaping the desired destination identity that is aligned with destination image formed by the prospective tourists (Holloway, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2005). Through the thematic analysis, four themes were developed based on the patterns and aims of the study. This chapter provides deep insights on marketing communication situations of Rovaniemi as well as how they contribute to the formation of Rovaniemi identity towards a desired reality with supported quotations from the interviews. The subchapters are named after the final themes, and the subsections represent the subthemes derived from related codes that support the main themes.

### **4.1 Marketing communication issues**

The first theme identified is marketing communication issues. This theme focuses on the representation and delivery of Rovaniemi identity to tourists through the media platforms. The theme is explored through two subthemes that elaborate on distinct key aspects. The two subthemes are “Marketing communication channels” and “Marketing promises and actual delivered experiences”, which are analysed in the following subsections.

#### **4.1.1 Marketing communication channels**

All of the participants except for participant 7 and 8 promoted their services in Rovaniemi on various media channels including online and offline platforms. Online platforms are social media, online travel agencies (OTAs), website, online travel communities, sustainability platforms like Sustainable Travel Finland and Biosphere, influencers’ channels and others (P2). Offline platforms include traditional media like TV channels, travel fairs, brochures at partnered stakeholders, news, signs, personal selling and others (P2 & P5). All participants agreed that social media channels were the most effective when advertising their services. Participant 7, 8 and 9 mainly used social media channels to promote their services through which participant 8 expressed that they had more success in promoting their services when using their own personal accounts that already had a certain number of followers than using the business accounts.

Meanwhile, participant 1 stated that in the mix of media used, OTAs seem to be more effective for bigger companies who have established reputation than for new and smaller ones: *“Honestly, it doesn't succeed for us, because there are like maybe 200 tours in those channels and then as a new company then we are really in a low ranking so nobody can notice us.”* Additionally, participant 5 claimed both online and offline marketing channels bring benefits depending on the timeframe: *“the online ones are the ones who are generating the revenue, I would say, kind of instantly. But the travel fairs are the ones where you can see a return within a bit longer period, so I would say between one and five years. So it's more kind of a longer-term investment.”*

To sum up, tour operators who use diverse media channels have better success in the long-term development while those who prioritize only social media marketing without clear long-term development orientation tend to focus on quick returns driven by seasonal demand. This can be influenced by tourists' reliance on and trust in social media as a source of information (Castellano & Dutot, 2017, p. 46). However, the opinions shared by participant 2 and participant 5 confirm that it is more effective to integrate all media channels with different goals but consistent content in each stage of the marketing process. This suggests that integrating all communication touchpoints can lead to long-term success and sustainable growth of the destination. The size of the tourism service businesses, their goals and their investment in marketing communications have a certain impact on how they can reach their target customers on different media platforms, which will be further analysed in the later chapter.

The consistency in all media channels is important in the IMC framework to increase effectiveness and efficiency of the marketing communications between tourists and the destination (Batra & Keller, 2016). Participant 3, 7, 8 and 9 said that the marketing messages promoting Rovaniemi were not consistent and transparent across all media channels in recent years: *“Multiple companies are on these marketing channels, and each company has their own way of marketing and it's not all true.” (P3)*

In contrast, participant 2, 5, and 6 believed the marketing messages were consistent and transparent from established companies and the DMOs: *“Bigger companies, they are actually sending out messages that are consistent and transparent. They are not promising anything which is not correct” (P5).* Meanwhile, the newcomers including new travel agencies or

independent guides doing their own tours may promote their services in a somewhat opposite way:

*They (newcomers) are changing the market in a way that is not, in my opinion, sustainable and fair... If someone is doing things, let's say, on purpose, not responsibly and trying to use the shady areas to benefit and to get, let's say, some unfair advantage... they are taking all the benefits, but they are not on the same page with the responsibility.*  
(P2)

Tourists seek for uncomplicated choice-making process and consider simple communication platforms are vital for a trustworthy destination (Morgan et al., 2011, p. 174). However, marketers face challenges in content management across all touchpoints (Laurie & Mortimer, 2019). Problem can occur when services are promoted through several channels or OTAs where the original content can be mixed up by different stakeholders represented the platforms. The tour information is reposted on different platforms without latest updates. For instance, the meeting time and location are sometimes communicated differently between the main website of the travel company and the OTAs' channels, which makes tourists' experiences more complicated.

*They're part of the mix. But as marketing channels, we're present there. We have some collaborations with them. We do campaigns on those platforms. And they are a big part of our business. But that's the thing that we don't have that much control over there. So, it's a different thing then. It's a matter of having the control and not having the control... I understand that the kind of content and information is not aligned throughout the kind of customer journey that you should give and that the information should be everywhere. I think that's also a result of that, there are so many different platforms that people are humans, and they forget to update it. Or they have old information from last season and think that, okay, it's okay, nothing has changed.* (P10)

Using mixed media channels with consistent and transparent content following the IMC framework for destination marketing with careful use of reposting across all media channels is important. Reposting without fact checking could lead to false expectations of tourists about the destination which could result in negative tourism experiences and the destination losing its authentic identity over information overload (Kim et al., 2022). DMOs such as Visit Rovaniemi

often repost content from their stakeholders such as tour operators, travel influencers, private/public accounts or travellers on digital platforms as a way to promote tourism products in Rovaniemi (Varnajot, 2020): “*They are quite active with reposting of our things*” (P2). However, they need to be careful with reposting content from other users since AI-generated content has been increasingly used in marketing communications (Kirk & Givi, 2025), which creates unrealistic expectations for tourists.

*It should be more aware of what pictures it reposts on its channels in regard to marketing and upselling of Rovaniemi, because there's a lot of AI and very clearly, a lot of AI-generated, or enhanced pictures out there, which is giving a false representation of what you can experience in Rovaniemi. (P3)*

*The customers, they make a decision of choosing a destination based on certain elements what are brought to them. And pictures are, of course, one of that [...] You would go to a place, and you make the decision of going there and spending a huge amount of money because this is the destination that costs. Based on pictures and when you land, you don't see these. Of course, in this sense, in the mind of the travellers, it's actually a negative point. And in this sense, it can actually affect, basically, the future. (P5)*

On top of that, the use of AI generated content for marketing communications led to negative reactions from the customer responses: “*It happened actually last season. Some companies tried to paint Santa with AI and coming to your place. So that received like a lot of bad comments. So, I think local people hate AI*” (P7). Adopting advanced technology can help the service providers to differentiate themselves in the competitive tourism market (Kirk & Givi, 2025). However, in the example provided by participant 7, the audience’s reaction was not positive. Therefore, managing content with authentic and consistent content is necessary through all communication channels so that tourists can determine what to expect.

#### **4.1.2 Marketing promises and actual delivered experiences**

This section explores the situation of how tourism marketing professionals communicate Rovaniemi as a destination to the people. All respondents agreed that there were current issues of marketing communication and how it portrayed the destination identity across media

channels in Rovaniemi. Marketing communications are often accused of unethical practices that can be found in misleading marketing materials (Pelsmacker et al., 2010, p. 608). Pricing is a key factor that influences tourist perceptions of the destination brand in this competitive market (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011). Participant 1 and 7 stated that the costs of services were often not mentioned in the marketing materials and there were even extra service charge at a later stage or on service point that was not clearly communicated before booking the services online:

*The latest scam was that they sold a tour on a platform for cheap price and then on the day of the tour they would send people e-mail that because of the weather we're going to have to travel far away and you have to pay extra fee in euros. And then people are pressured to pay extra even if the tour happens just how far from here. So this is the scam that has been going on now and other scam is that they are promising people five-star reviews in exchange for entering a game to win. (P7)*

In addition, the participants addressed their concerns about the rise of “Guaranteed Northern Lights” tours that can be operated by anyone who owns a car and a good camera. This term has been explained in chapter 1 and it has changed the market: *“We don't, we never guarantee in our company. And I'm kind of a bit terrified that there are nowadays so many operators who guarantee, who promise to find because it's a natural phenomenon. You can never promise... that's not honest” (P6).*

A natural phenomenon like northern lights should be seen as a cherry on top in the whole experience that exceed customer expectations rather than make it a main subject of the tourism services then fail to deliver because smart marketing professionals should only promise what they can deliver (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 33): *“It should be the tour to the wilderness, to teach people about Arctic, about animals, about locations, about trees, about northern lights, and if the northern lights will appear, that's perfect bonus” (P2).*

In terms of tourist expectation management, the use of AI in marketing materials, especially in editing northern lights pictures, can lead to tourists' unrealistic expectations about the guaranteed northern lights they are promised to. Many of the advertisements about northern lights tours often exaggerated the phenomenon with vibrant colours and shapes, yet it may be unsure whether tourists would be able to observe it as promised. If tourists feel that the

destination's promotions are exaggerated or confusing compared to what they experience, this lack of trust can have negative impact on the destination's ability to welcome returning tourists (Jiménez-Barreto et al., p. 12). Participant 8 was concerned that tourists interpret "guaranteed" in different ways based on what they have seen in the advertisements. Some expected to see full exposure with strong green or different colours of the northern lights. Some expected to observe the northern lights with their human eyes like in the marketing pictures. When they can only see very weak northern lights on camera, they can be disappointed due to miscommunications and misinterpretation. When they expect a refund, it is usually not a full refund but this information is often disclosed in small prints after long paragraphs of tour descriptions.

*If we think about the Northern Lights tours and they're using guaranteed word, but the guaranteed is like as a term, it could be understood very different way. And of course, people, when they read that guaranteed, they think that, okay, there will be Northern Lights or they take get their money back. But the guaranteed, it's very often just you can show some green from screen from your iPhone or there are some little prints that there is only 25% of the amount that is actually given back. (P8)*

The discussions then shifted to the popular tourism product which was reindeer experience. Despite the strong focus on Christmas destination for families, reindeers which are known to be Santa's helpers (Herva et al., 2020) are largely exploited in many marketing communications of Rovaniemi, yet its traditional meat production is considerably muted (Rusko et al., 2013). No one eats Mickey Mouse in the magic universe of Disneyland, yet many have tasted reindeer Rudolph in Santa Claus village. While many of the interviewees shared that it was not unusual to eat reindeers and still advertise them as magical creatures, participant 10 stated that this can be a confusing marketing message to deliver to tourists who travel with their families:

*You know, they are being magical or Santa's helpers and so on, that story is for the kids. And then the other way, that's a way of living for the people in the region that has been forever. And when those two collide, I think it's always quite confusing. It's super confusing. I've thought about it myself, but I mean, as a Finnish native, I don't really think about it like that. It's just a story, and here I'm hungry. It's good food... You can't forbid things, but it could be forbidden in the Santa Claus Village to offer reindeer*

*meat... I wouldn't do it there maybe yeah so maybe then when you're back and somebody tells you the story but I don't think the kids understand that. (P10)*

To some extent, participant 9 expressed that although the use of reindeers in tourism and in other aspects of life was common, this tourism and animal business practices had a darker side. It is necessary to have clearer marketing communications in this case. Participant 3 believed that educating tourists about the cultures could help tourists understand the destination culture and its tourism services in a proper way. This proves that marketing communications for foreign tourists should consider the international aspects so that tourist expectations and perceptions of the destination tourism services are accurate (Pelsmacker et al., 2010).

*In this case, I think that as this place is visited by many children and many families and this kind of business with reindeers from the darker side may be considered a little bit less happy and cherry cherish. So I think that I understand why they are avoiding this kind of marketing, but I think that in this case here in the Rovaniemi, it's not anyhow hidden. So people are aware and they are informed about it. Each time you go and see the reindeer farm and you you're with the guide, the guide will explain you how it works here. And it's treated completely normal because also here the reindeers are raised in a very good, I would consider them in very good conditions. So of course it's sad and that it's darker side of Rovaniemi and darker side of Lapland. (P9)*

*I think you, like, you sum it up perfectly there. It's just, it's just about education and learning. We can't expect a tourist from Vietnam, for example, to know this because you're so far from like the Arctic Circle, so far from Rovaniemi, and it's not, it's only when you live here that you then understand or start to learn and understand, you know, the history behind reindeer herding and then tourism and reindeers or huskies and huskies and tourism. So It's always going to be the case, not only in Rovaniemi, anywhere across the world where there are animals involved in tourism, it's always going to be a sensitive subject because there's always going to be companies which abuse the animals, reindeers in this respect, or the huskies, whatever we're talking about. (P3)*

Moving on, the lack of representation of Finnishness, cultures and weirdness of Lapland through marketing communications was discussed with the participants. Reindeer husbandry is

an integral part of the Sámi people, yet is often neglected because of its lower value compared with tourism contribution to the economy (Mäkitie & Ylisimiö, p. 170). The existence of reindeers is widely leveraged in the Santa Claus fairy tale and tourism development as a magical sleigh ride while the meaning of their existence to the Indigenous people is not as frequently discussed on the tourism marketing platforms by the stakeholders. For this reason, the use of Sámi culture including reindeer husbandry in marketing materials needs greater focus to reach a more balanced portrayal of the culture and heritage (de Bernadi, 2022, p. 131), in order to preserve the culture and to prevent real culture, magical experiences and tourism products from clashing in process of tourism commodification.

*We should in the marketing narratives bring up more about the, for example, like the traditionality of the reindeer, like what does it mean in the land especially... I'm sure that like Sámi people who are in tourism for example try to talk more about the traditional and cultural things, but maybe they are not like, they cannot compete against the major, massive narrative. (P4)*

Finally, the term “local tour guides” that was commonly advertised for tourism services was discussed to understand tourism marketers’ attitudes toward this situation. There are many types of tourists such as those who wish to interact with local people, those who do not care about the country backgrounds but knowledge and expertise in the field, and those who wish to have their own language speaking guides to guide them in a foreign destination. Although participant 8 welcomed foreign workers to work here, they shared their views on the use of local in marketing communications that the definition of “local” was somehow different in nowadays tourism practices in Rovaniemi:

*I'm very happy about that we got a lot of people also working here and everything. But those terms like local I think they are now a little different than what they have been because it's also for the customers. If they have little kids, for example, and they book local guide, they might think also the safety side of the thing and then the local is only a few weeks local. So it's a problem... But of course, it's also one of the things that are very on the edge, what is fair or not fair marketing... And that's a big problem for me because I'm that idealistic. I would like to take people to Lapland to work and visit and everything. I want to keep this international, but I want to keep the Lapland authentic values that are like honesty and transparency. (P8)*

Likewise, safety concerns were confirmed with participant 7 opinions on local tour guides. With the high reputation of Finland being an honest country among the rest of the world, not only tourists but also the seasonal workers would have higher trust and expectations regarding safety and security when coming to Rovaniemi. However, the reality is that many seasonal tour guides are not acquainted with driving and working under extreme weather which could cause unexpected accidents: *“I would say Rovaniemi, it's a really nice place to develop. But it will be also very tough to compete, because now companies are hiring people from countries who have never seen snow. Then they're driving in snowstorms and then crashing. This is an issue”* (P7).

Overall, marketing communications between Rovaniemi and its tourists have certain problems that need to be addressed to reconsider how the destination is being presented so that its identity is authentic and match the destination promises with the potential destination image formed by tourists. The destination promises communicated through media platforms should be consistent and should be built on original destination personality together with the destination strengths to expand its presence in the international tourism market (Hudson & Ritchie, p. 221). Moreover, it is important to emphasize the destination competitive advantages that belong to Arctic tourism (e.g., cultures, authenticity and wilderness) and maintain the reputation by minimizing the gap between promised experiences and actual delivered services. Last but not least, it is recommended for authorities to provide some guidelines or control to fact check the advertising content of the tourism services in order to assess the businesses' promises that match the destination's values and the actual delivered services to tourists. Tourists are more likely to revisit and recommend the destination if they find its marketing platforms trustworthy (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020, p. 12).

## **4.2 Market Trend Adaptation**

The second theme of the findings is market trend adaptation. It captures how tourism market trends influence the marketing communications, the destination current identity, and the tourism businesses' motivation to follow the trends to meet the demands of prospective tourists. The theme is supported by two subthemes which are “short-term trends over traditions” and “the established and the new companies”.

#### 4.2.1 Short-term trends over traditions

This subsection discusses market adaptation to new trends in tourism in Rovaniemi and whether the trends are sustainable for tour operators to follow. Market trends are developed by marketing outcomes and the demands of tourists. Some trends can provide immediate profits in short-term but the post impact on the destination needs to be considered in the long run.

The participants discussed some of the current marketing trends in Rovaniemi and how they have influenced the tourism market. As mentioned in the first theme analysis, newcomers and established tour operators have different ways of communicating their services but the eventual outcomes have certain impacts on the destination identity and image. Therefore, the second theme is formed to address how the market is changing, whether it is worth it to follow the market trends or adapt to the change based on short-term and long-term goals of the destination in general and of the businesses in particular.

The data demonstrate a sharp increase in the use of the uncertain factor “Guaranteed Northern Lights” in tour titles and marketing messages across digital media channels of many tour operators in Rovaniemi to promote a service that is a natural phenomenon and cannot be guaranteed. Many tours that have the main focus on a different service still use the “Northern Lights” in names of different tours to attract tourists. The reasons behind the use of this specific keyword are explained as follows:

*Because of the crazy market here and the expectations of people that are coming here, you perfectly ask the question, that they are coming here for the northern lights only. Then we had to adapt to the market conditions because these tours were somehow put aside. People were not that much interested. They want to have the guarantee; they want to see the northern light. So that's the reason why we had to build another product that is reflecting this kind of, not just trend, but also the demand on the market. (P2)*

If the “Guaranteed Northern Lights” tours become the primary motivation of travellers in the future, it can create a significant impact on the destination in the long run when the weather conditions are not favorable: *“If we market ourselves only as a Northern Lights destination, that's not good.” (P6)*

*It's a misused term. People are falling for it. But now in the latest weeks, people have been aware of that. It's like selling something you cannot do and then I'm sure about this, that in the next years of this guarantee it's going to be the worst marketing term ever because now we are entering in the solar minimum and in solar minimum if you keep going this guarantee you're going to have two to three weeks of tours and see nothing and then if the company can still manage with that, sure. (P7)*

This is when the tour operators need to consider whether they should adapt to the new market trends for short-term success or believe in what they are doing to achieve a more sustainable growth in the long-term. This goes the same to culture appropriation that should be considered when building stories based on real Indigenous cultures and the use of marketing common keywords to attract customers without checking if it is authentic or relevant to the destination identity. Cultural values and its meaning of a culture could be faded away in tourism commodification process (Ranasinghe & Cheng, 2018).

New trends in markets are developed based on tourists' demands and interests. Many tourists are attracted to experience reindeer sleigh and husky sled in Rovaniemi. In many published posts from DMOs and tour operators, huskies are generally described as traditional transportation in the North but not clearly mentioned which Indigenous community the traditional husky sled was originally from. Participant 6 and 8 expressed their concerns about how husky sled was portrayed in current marketing materials:

*I understand the problem with huskies not being the traditional transportation mode or traditional part of the local culture... And huskies are part of the modern Lapland travel industry. And that's ok if it's ethical, if it's doing well, but we shouldn't say that it's part of the traditions or part of the local life. That's a lie. So we need to tell that that this is a travel product in the area. It's a great experience, but we can't say that it's a traditional husky tour or something like that. It's not true... But yeah... There are controversies in this. (P6)*

*And lies should be avoided. It's okay. Huskies have come here. It's been maybe 30 years, 40 years. They've been hobbies for some people and people have done competitions with dogs. And that's the original background. But the reindeer is official transportation. And rivers, little river boats and horse. But I remember when I was working on the husky*

*farm, I was telling everyone, all the groups, that this is not traditional transportation. This is for fun. (P8)*

Culture is one of the main attractions of Arctic tourism. In the process of tourism development, commodification can happen and lead to the disappearance of cultural values and its meaning (Ranasinghe & Cheng, 2018): “Companies are feeding the demand. Even if it's not authentic, they're still feeding the demand because it's what people want to do” (P7). Although tourism commodification could help preserve traditions and cultures that are on the edge of extinction while still bringing economic benefits Bai & Weng (2023), commodification might be seen as a negative practice as it reduces the multifaceted richness of a destination's culture to a mere tourism product or a new invention of tradition from marketing perspectives (Dinnie, 2011).

#### **4.2.2 The established and the new companies**

The interviews then explored the impact of the established tour operators and newcomers on tourism practices in Rovaniemi through marketing communications. Participant 2 and 5 agreed that the established companies contribute to the sustainable tourism development by sharing the same goals and missions to not only promote their services but also the destination as well in the long run:

*We are promoting Rovaniemi a lot. And sometimes like, let's be honest, if you see the nice picture on our social media channel, you will save it, it doesn't mean that you will book tour with us, but it means that maybe you will come here in two years and you will book tour with [company names] with someone else and the same is from their side. Like if they post something, they are promoting the destination as well. And the people that will be attracted by their marketing strategy can be ultimately our customers. So we should think about this whole area as like, let's say something we have in common. It's our common playground let's called it this way. And I think that, let's say these established companies, like, we have really good relationships, [company names] but you know that we are respecting each other even with our differences that everyone has different marketing strategy. (P2)*

However, some newer tourism companies or the independent tour guides who come from abroad and do their own tours do not share common long-term goals but instead tend to take

the advantages of the previous success for their own benefits and leave when the peak season ends. Hence, the newcomers tend to concentrate on making money rather than embracing the value and authenticity of the destination to tourists. Participant 7 discussed how it is challenging for tourists to find a true local companies and many of the tour operators and tour guides in Rovaniemi come from different countries:

*There is a lot of fake, unauthentic tours which sell themselves as authentic. And there is a lot of unauthentic players within the tourism industry who sell themselves as authentic.*  
(P3)

*So I think you have more foreigners who really want to do a short time, let's say six months hard work, and then go away. But then if you keep doing this for one, two years, then you will get tired, and then you will be burnt out. So I think it's really hard to find locals who will be providing good service. And then this time, in this case, you cannot find, I would say, very, very authentic. So it's an issue of hard field. It's not an easy field. I would say it's a really tough field to work in.* (P7)

In general, the second theme points out the current situations in communicating Rovaniemi in the media. The differences in marketing communications, goals, values and promises between newcomers and established companies are considerable. The growing trend in uncertain tourism factor like guaranteed northern lights is not a sustainable act and can be misleading depending on tourists' expectations regarding northern lights' colors, movement and size. AI generated content or enhanced pictures promoting Rovaniemi, northern lights and other attractions can be viewed as inauthentic and affect the destination reputation (Kirk & Givi, 2025). Moreover, cultures and traditions should be carefully presented in marketing materials to ensure its authenticity to the destination as tourists can (re)post whatever information they receive during the experiences to either promote or justify the truth. If the information shared online is inaccurate but it is too widespread, other prospective tourists would start to believe it as well. Therefore, communications in destination marketing need greater attention so that its identity and values are protected for long-term development.

### 4.3 Mass Seasonal Destination

Based on the data collected, Rovaniemi is often labeled as a mass tourism destination characterized by seasonality. Hence, the third theme evolved from the thematic analysis is “mass seasonal destination” which illustrates a significant pattern in the data. The subthemes “the impact of mass seasonal destination” and “is your service quality good or because tourists have no other choice?” offer a more detailed understanding of the various facets within this theme.

#### 4.3.1 The impact of mass seasonal destination

All participants believed that Rovaniemi has become a mass destination in winter “*Definitely I would say that Rovaniemi has become a mass tourism place*” (P5), specifically in December and January, making it a mass seasonal destination. Mass seasonal destination is certainly affecting the environment and the silence of Arctic destination (Chen et al., 2021).

*I see the market is changing and it's getting faster somehow and more aggressively competitive. And I feel, again, maybe as a Finnish person, a bit bad about it in that sense that when the marketing messaging starts to go into this kind of like I don't know how to describe it, very fast and very attention seeking. No one wins anymore. Not the customer and not the people in here. Because then you actually don't deliver the value of things. (P4)*

Furthermore, while Rovaniemi is turning into a mass seasonal destination with fast in and out from both tourists and investors with no real value exchanges (P4), participant 1 and 10 expressed their concerns about the service costs that do not align with the service quality tourists received regarding accommodation, yet the costs of tourism activities do reflect the quality provided. Similarly, participant 7 believed that many tourists were aware of the overpriced tourism services that are not aligned with the service quality. Service providers must determine fair prices that are reasonable in the market and match consumer knowledge (Monroe & Xia, 2006). When tourist perception of the service price is unfair, the destination or tour operators’ reputation and trust will be negatively affected (Monroe & Xia, 2006). Accommodation is a crucial part of a travel experience, so the overall service quality perceived by tourists will be affected:

*If the trend is like now, which means the pricing is like, not under control. For example, hotels are very expensive. Then somehow, I will say in 5 to 10 years, the people coming to Rovaniemi will be declined because it cannot be unlimited increase in the price. People have choice, they will go to other places. And the other thing is like honestly this year, we can see so many issues which are caused from over tourism. (P1)*

Since the demand for easier accessibility increases due to mass winter tourism in Rovaniemi, flights and even direct flights are operated more frequently. The hard-to-reach and pristine nature image of Arctic destinations (Keskitalo, 2017) are fading and risk turning into a polluted destination (P9). In addition, mass tourism destination that is highly seasonal attracts short term investors rather than long-term ones.

*I think that bringing more charters and more charters and more flights, of course, it's already kind of destroying the real Lapland experience because even right now we are maybe 20 kilometres from the airport and we can hear the planes almost all the time. It's quite disturbing because of that. There is a lot of pollution and that's not something you would like to experience when you are in a place that should be remote and so close to nature. (P9)*

*And if you see this like very high price scams and they're doing this because they are here for short time... they are doing this because they don't care about the next two or three years. They are not here for long term. (P7)*

To conclude, the current mass seasonal situation of Rovaniemi has disrupted fair pricing and competition, the environment and the silence of Rovaniemi. It has brought in short-term businesses who do not respect the long-term development of the destination by prioritizing benefits over tourists' experiences. This leads to questions regarding service quality during peak months.

#### **4.3.2 Is your service quality good or because tourists have no other choice?**

As a mass seasonal destination, it is usual to see that tourism companies are fully booked especially in December: “Many companies were overbooked... I think if you're not fully booked in December, then something is wrong with you” (P7). This raises concerns about service

quality that is offered to tourists in winter season when they do not have much choice since many service providers are fully booked. Feeling in charge of purchase decisions for tourism services helps customers determine whether the experiences are authentic (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010, p. 841). In a mass tourism destination, service quality can be hard to maintained because of excessive number of tourists while infrastructures such as restaurants and hospitalities are not able to catch up with the demand: *“I think it's very problematic and I think Rovaniemi right now is not ready to accommodate more people”* (P9).

In addition, competitions are unavoidable among not only destinations but also service providers, yet there was a lack of stand-out unique selling point (USP) for tourists to choose or differentiate as the naming of services is similar with common keywords such as Arctic, Lapland and northern lights. Destination and tourism service providers can charge premium or higher prices only if they provide unique experiences (Buhalis, 2000). Being competitive as a destination or as a service provider means having advantages that are hard to copy (Hanlon, 2019). Competitions encourage development and tourists will have options to choose instead of having to tolerate with whatever is there at the moment because everywhere is fully booked. Based on this, participant 10 described how current tourism businesses operate in Rovaniemi that were not outstanding:

*The naming is similar. And because they sell the same experience, every company sells basically the same, just with maybe a slightly different pricing, slightly different organization, like how they do things.* (P10)

Furthermore, according to participant 4, Rovaniemi is trying to promote itself as a destination for luxury experiences but have not been successful. Rovaniemi might not be ready for a luxury destination for several reasons. Firstly, participant 10 described the unclear competitive advantages of this mass seasonal destination together with uncontrolled pricing mentioned by participant 1 and 7. Secondly, pricing significantly determines tourist perceptions of the destination (Buhalis, 2000). With very high service prices in Rovaniemi, tourists can expect the destination to be luxurious or a premium destination and expect to experience the promises delivered to them. In addition to the similar naming and activities, these create an assumption that tour operators in Rovaniemi provide no unique experiences with quality services that do not justify the uncontrolled high prices:

*It's all because some new companies have just opened the services and decided to make it double the price. And then other companies who have been doing the same thing for many, many years have to follow because they felt not because they provide something extra, but just because someone else is doing it, I'm going to do it too... I think it's like if you do like really good service, like many provide many things, then it's okay to have good price, like high price. But if you're doing the same thing, you did many years ago, but the price is higher, like double, then it's like nonsense. (P7)*

In the interview with participant 10, we discussed how tourists could experience the area like those who came in winter when service providers closed their businesses in summer. Even though Rovaniemi is in better position which still has service businesses operating than other Finnish Lapland destinations, the number of services and activities remains considerably lower than those offered in the peak season, making it unattractive to prospective tourists.

*That's a kind of chicken and egg dilemma what you have. Because if you as a region say that you should keep your businesses open so that people have something to experience then the counter question always is okay can you guarantee that people come and whichever should move first and that's the thing. I've been visiting obviously now not here but if we have been traveling in the region and with the family that we drive to, let's say, Levi for a couple of nights. And then just to realize that there are no restaurants open, there's nothing. So Rovaniemi is in a good position in the area because it's still a city for its inhabitants. (P10)*

To sum up, the third theme suggests that it is controversial whether the tourism businesses can survive to operate all seasons when tourists continue to opt for travelling to Rovaniemi around Christmas time. The peak months for tourism in Rovaniemi are December and January. Meanwhile, the remaining months of the tourism season (November, February and March) see fewer tourists and booking activities. This shows Rovaniemi is still primarily dependent on Christmas and New Year's Eve rather than winter tourism in general. In addition, the standard of service quality is debatable due to significantly high cost compared to the actual experiences delivered to tourists. The names of the service organisations and activities are similar with common use of keywords such as Arctic, Lapland and northern lights, making it difficult for tourists to differentiate the services and make a purchase decision.

#### 4.4 Possible different reality

Shifting a destination identity from seasonal to all-year round is challenging and can depend on many internal and external factors (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005). The last theme discusses possible development through marketing communication aspect to (re)shape Rovaniemi destination image from Christmas and winter destination to an all-season holiday destination. In this section, the theme represents a single overarching pattern identified within the data, rather than being divided into subthemes. By treating the theme as a whole, this section explores the potential different realities of how Rovaniemi destination identity can be shifted towards distinct situations by marketing communications.

All participants but participant 8 and 9 have engaged in certain kinds of summer tourism marketing campaigns in Rovaniemi. Rovaniemi and the DMOs have done many marketing campaigns for summer tourism. The summer tourism in Rovaniemi has slowly grown according to participant 2. Generally, many tourism businesses in Rovaniemi open from autumn to end of spring, which places summer tourism development responsibility on those who are committed to all-year-round development as participant 2 and 7 mentioned. In addition, the seasonal tourism operators solely focus on winter-related hashtags when naming or promoting their services since they exclusively operate in winter. This could be confusing for international tourists as the online advertisements about Rovaniemi were winter dependence and lack of summer information about the destination. Therefore, the marketing communications promoting Rovaniemi to international tourists were somewhat limited in portraying the whole destination geographical aspects, which leads to insufficient destination knowledge and awareness (Keller, 2009).

*Yes, we get questions about if we have snow in July or things like that. Can I do snowmobiling in July? That's a normal question. But then we honestly tell that no, it's our summer and we have maybe plus 15 to 25 degree and then we have midnight sun. So yes, we understand that people from other side of the world, they don't know our specialities. So we need to tell them. (P6)*

In terms of international marketing communications targeting foreign tourists, the interviews discussed how many tourists who travel to Rovaniemi from very far away regions were unaware of the natural weather characteristics due to geographical unfamiliarity (see Pelsmacker et al.,

2010). This led to tourists' disappointments when they did not see the northern lights that were guaranteed to them or when they arrived for the snow-based activities and attractions, but there was insufficient snow from before the end of December. When asked about the application of some winter related keywords such as Christmas, frozen, snow and Arctic in describing tourism activities, some participants were concerned that these practices could lead to confusions for tourists who came specifically for what were described to them, only to find that the snow in early tourism season was not enough to experience either the frozen forest, waterfall or ice fishing.

*I don't find it very like fair play to do because of course, if the frozen waterfall is not frozen, then it's not frozen. So yeah, that's actually, yeah, if that is there, it's very good example. What is the colorful marketing right now here? (P8)*

“Arctic” was believed to be a good marketing hashtag to use in marketing communication as it refers to a geographical region: *“There are a lot of things happening in the Arctic, like people live here, there is politics, there is culture, there are cities, there is the nature and also the Arctic summer in that sense, that it's not only winter. So in my opinion, it should be used even more, maybe in the more context of a summer, like what happens in the Arctic summer” (P4).* Nonetheless, international tourists might not be fully aware that Arctic regions have different seasons as participant 10 believed that the word “Arctic” and cold have the same meaning: *“Arctic has become a synonym for, in my opinion, I know it's not, but it's a synonym for cold... there is an Arctic summer... it's not cold... but I think it's that it's a so strong synonym for a region that is known for cold and harsh living environments.”*

Indeed, international tourists tend to view Rovaniemi as a cold destination for Christmas holiday and winter tourism activities (Falk & Vieru, 2019). The tourism professionals want tourists to perceive Rovaniemi as an all-year-round Christmas, but it is not effective as tourist image of Christmas and all-year-round has not collided. Tourist common perception of Rovaniemi is its summer image does not align with a well-established image of a cold and frozen Arctic (Varnajot, 2020, pp. 11–16). Participant 5 expressed that the marketing has not been as successful as expected due to the strong image of Christmas that links to seasonal travel, and participant 10 stated that the tourism marketing professionals of Rovaniemi might have underestimated the tourists in forcing a Christmas image in summer.

*Speaking about Christmas, you're already somehow a little bit cutting yourself because Christmas is a certain period within the year... Of course, here we have Christmas as a program or as experienced all year around because we have the Santa Claus Village that opens 365 days per year and it's possible to see Santa Claus in the summer, in the winter, in all the seasons. So of course, it's not the wrong marketing, but once again, does it give the correct effect in a way that when people think about Christmas, then they don't think about the summer, but they think about December. While instead using the word I think nature you mentioned and Arctic. (P5)*

*The majority of people coming to Lapland during the summer are Finnish people. The Finns don't really come here for the Santa it's a Christmas thing that's why I don't think of it as an advantage to have it in the name because it doesn't really convey the level of service that you're bringing... And I think that's just underestimating your audience because people are wise enough to go online and search and look for stuff with how they operate, what they operate and not just the name. (P10)*

The participants who have participated in summer marketing projects said that they have joint campaigns like midnight sun activities with Visit Rovaniemi, Discovery Finland and other stakeholders to boost summer/autumn tourism (P2, P5 & P6). Summer activities that have been received better attention are lake-based activities and hiking tours (P3), yet the hiking tours are harder to sell in summer as independent travellers tend to do it themselves. Perhaps those who visit Rovaniemi in winter are travellers with family for holidays (P6), so they feel it easier to join tours while summer season has not had success in attracting families rather than solo travellers. Participant 6 then shared that although Rovaniemi has a lot to offer, the destination's marketers have not found the suitable voice representation for different types of audiences yet (Pelsmacker et al., 2010)

*We have reindeer meet-and-feed reindeer tour, we have Santa Claus tour, we have walking with huskies, we have kayaking, canoes, boats, saunas, trekking, all kind of chores... Maybe meeting Santa Claus still also in the summertime or visiting Santa Claus Village. Yeah, but I think we have a lot of things to offer and do also summertime. That's not the problem in summer tourism or making summer as an attractive season. But we need to find the ways to tell about our summer. (P6)*

Having competitive advantages means the destination is effectively capable of using its resources in the long-term development (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005, p. 23) while the use of winter related keywords in tour naming limits the scope of what the destination can offer to tourists. Even though many of the participants expressed that leveraging Christmas factors for marketing materials was a normal approach, participant 2, 3 and 10 suggested that using Christmas in the materials should be limited since many tourists came to Rovaniemi also for other tourism activities that needed greater attention in marketing communications. Nonetheless, changing a strong image of a destination requires extra efforts (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005)

Marketing communication helps marketers portray the destination to a desired reality (Keller, 2009) and distinguish it among other tourism destinations (Martin et al., 2020). Based on the discussions with the research participants, there were key competitive advantages of Rovaniemi as a destination that can be operated all-year-round: Arctic focus, nature and outdoor focus, animal focus. The Arctic Awareness is an essential code that involves all the communications about seasons of Arctic (snow and snowless), the local, nature and cultures. Participant 2 discussed that the beauty of Arctic in different seasons should be communicated more on all the media channels:

*I think that from our marketing communication, we are trying to communicate like the differences of the seasons.... The different seasons that each has like all kind of perfection, and every season tells a different Arctic story. (P2)*

Tourists visit Rovaniemi for the local cultures of an Arctic destination as well. Local cultures and traditions are experiences that can be preserved for long-term tourism development. When asked about what were missing in the current marketing communications, Participant 4 and 8 stated that the current marketing communications have not integrated Finnish cultures and values enough compared to the selling aspect of the tourism industry in Rovaniemi. Participant 8 believed that although Lapland was popular for its Christmas destination in Rovaniemi, the region had turned into a “plastic Lapland” that did not offer traditional Christmas holiday as promised.

*As a Finnish person, I see that a lot of Finnishness is taken out of the marketing messages... And then what are the cultural differences also? Because as a Finnish person marketing Finnish Lapland, I try to, in my messaging, to somehow incorporate*

*Finnish culture in there. But in the vastness of things, it's just like this big narrative for Northern Lights and snow and that's it in that sense. (P4)*

*Oh yeah, honesty. Because it's our, if we think about one location in the world, even if I think it's, Finland, Lapland has been always like, it's one sort of like example of the most honest area in the whole world. And now it's turning to something a little bit different, and it doesn't fit to our traditional culture. And that's, I find it quite sad. What is missing about the Lapland, like Santa Claus Village, for example, for me, of course, it's very good that we have jobs and we have economy running, but when I go there, I don't find anything that looks like the traditional Lapland. It's more of a plastic Lapland. (P8)*

Finally, most of the participants believed that authorities should take more controls in promotion materials of Rovaniemi as they could affect tourists' expectations about the destination in an inaccurate way (e.g., expectation of full explosion of Northern Lights every night). On the other hand, participant 6, 9 and 10 believed authorities could provide more guidelines to encourage ethical marketing from all tourism businesses as they are presenting a destination that is known for straightforwardness and honesty: *“I think the difference between good and bad companies are successful and not so successful companies are made by marketing”* (P6).

Besides, participant 7 shared one interesting viewpoint that AI would be used more in their marketing plan to support posting schedules and targeting different audiences: *“If you are not using AI, then it will be very behind in the next years. I would say that. I mean, not using AI to make content, but if you're not using AI to automate things. For example, AI can post on your behalf.”*

This final theme suggests that marketing plays an important role in presenting Rovaniemi destination identity to the stakeholders. Activities that are famous in summer are lake-based activities, canoes and hiking. The types of travellers who would visit Rovaniemi in summer are often independent travellers (P3) or Finnish people from different cities whose main motivation to visit Rovaniemi is not about meeting Santa Claus (P10). Highlighting Christmas image via marketing communications limits the destination's ability to grow in all seasons as it does not give the correct effect marketers want prospective tourists to perceive Christmas as an all-year-

round holiday (P5). Besides the well-known Christmas and northern lights, tourism activities should be developed according to the factors gathered from the data: Arctic focus including traditions and cultures, nature and outdoor focus, animal focus. Other unique selling points of Rovaniemi are silence, quietness and wilderness: *“We believe that you should get away from the crowds, also with the tours, but also in the accommodation. So that's the reason why we are promoting the peacefulness, quiet, silence, let's call it, this way, and like the connection with the nature, because these are the key elements of our marketing, but not just of our marketing, but of what we love”* (P2).

## **5. Summary of the main findings and discussions**

As marketing communication can shape a destination identity and image (Keller, 2009), it is crucial to understand the present situations of how marketers promoting Rovaniemi across media channels. This chapter provides a key summary of the findings and addresses the research questions of this study:

RQ1: How do tourism marketing professionals present the Rovaniemi destination identity through current marketing communications across media platforms?

RQ2: How can marketing communication (re)shape tourists' perceptions of the destination identity?

The results of the study reveal that marketing communications between Rovaniemi and its tourists from the perspectives of tourism marketing professionals have some contradict, confusing and dishonest messages presented across media channels. The findings confirm the importance of marketing communications in shaping tourists' perception of a destination and the need for integrating IMC approach for transparency and consistency content across all media channels. The current issues of marketing communications are formed by aggressive competitions in a short-term industry, differences in goals and values of tour operators in the destination, and by integrating various media platforms for sales and marketing activities with no proper control over the content shared and reposted.

From an IMC perspective, there is inconsistent content that is delivered to tourists from different media channels. Understanding and integrating the stakeholders and audiences of destination marketing in this Arctic region is essential (Enzenbacher, 2011) to enhance consistency when marketing materials are presented and delivered through many media channels that are owned by different stakeholders. In the tourism industry, one small detail in promises that is not entirely true can lead to tourists' dissatisfaction, complaints (Holloway, 2004) and negative tourist experience (Kim et al., 2022). Greater emphasis should be placed on details in messages on all interactive touchpoints so the destination can build a long-term relationship with tourists to encourage revisiting intentions and long-term investments for sustainable growth (Bejou, 1998).

Marketing communications in the media needs to provide simple, transparent and reliable information for tourists to make easier decisions (Keller, 2009; Morgan et al., 2011). Authentic content and honest promises need to be practiced from service providers to ensure marketing promises are aligned with the actual experiences. Managing tourists' expectations by providing aligned service quality based on what is promised through the marketing messages is crucial to protect the identity of Rovaniemi with unique nature and cultures, not just a fairy tale or northern lights destination. Integrating cultures and values of both Rovaniemi and Finland in marketing materials and tourism services needs greater attention to attract cultural and value exchanges for both tourists and the locals. Furthermore, the findings suggest that there is a need for more guidelines or controls from authorities for all tour operators to respect the common grounds and practice responsible marketing so they can contribute to the sustainable development of Rovaniemi and not simply take the benefits that were built from established businesses in the industry.

Even though smaller and newer tourism companies tend to have more success on digital media, the established companies achieve the long-term profits gain from traditional media channels. Since the (newer) seasonal tourism businesses are prone to short-term profits and close the businesses when the winter season ends, it is understandable that they prioritize digital media marketing to earn instant benefits while not actively investing in the destination development. When participant 7 stated that failure to achieve full bookings in December could suggest the tour operators had underlying issues. This raises my concern whether the tour operators here in Rovaniemi doing a good job or they just happen to be there as a good time to have customers. In winter times, there were so many tourists with little supplies from the destination so most of the places and restaurants were full of customers whether the services were good or not.

Nevertheless, the lack of tourists in summer forces service businesses to lower the prices and increase their service quality in hopes of getting more customers who are locals and the independent travellers wandering around choosing a good service place among other competitors. This could be the reason why many tour operators are closed in summer because of the bare minimum they do to attract tourists. They rather wait for tourists to come and choose what is available at that moment because there are no other options. This does not create the feeling of being able to decide a service for tourists and will affect how tourists perceive the authenticity of the services (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

In addition to the interviewees' opinions, because of the "colourful" communications with aggressive competitions among the tour operators who might or might not share the same values with the destination, Rovaniemi has the risk to turn into a low value destination according to several images such as "plastic Lapland" (P8), "cheap direct flights", "budget travellers" (P3) despite the "uncontrolled high prices" (P1, P7 & P10), "quick in-and-out visit" (P3), and "no value or culture exchanges" (P4). A destination that is overcrowded, overpriced and lack of authentic cultures exchanges are not aligned with what the Arctic tourism is popular for.

Interestingly, most participants who brought up Finnish traditions, cultures and values were Finnish, and other participants came from different backgrounds had their focuses on selling, pricing, competitions and such. Altogether, the participants shared their love for the silence, quietness and uniqueness of Rovaniemi, and hoped to preserve the destination identity for now and in the future. The combination of different backgrounds not only in this research but also in tourism market in Rovaniemi provides an effective multicultural environment that needs careful development and management plans to maximize the outcomes while protecting the destination values. This is to guarantee the destination identity they are building for Rovaniemi, and their services can match the destination image formed by tourists to promote a consistent and informative image to the outside world.

Since the Arctic is vulnerable to mass tourism (Chen et al., 2021), there is a need for a special marketing path to shift the tourists' perceptions of Rovaniemi to an all-year-round destination. The new path is suggested to follow IMC for destination marketing to maximize the effectiveness of marketing communications to all audiences and to achieve the outcomes that are expected. If the marketing messages shift from the strong focus of Christmas or uncertain factors to the key competitive advantages mentioned in subchapter 4.4, the tourists' perception of Rovaniemi can be shifted from Christmas holiday to dream holiday destination. This transformation needs greater investment, requires time and determination, as it is hard to change a strong destination image to a new desired reality (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005).

## 6. Conclusion

The purposes of this thesis were to understand how tourism marketing professionals presented Rovaniemi through communications in the media and to evaluate its effectiveness. With the qualitative approach, the study was able to capture the perceptions of tourism marketing professionals working in Rovaniemi as research participants of the current marketing communication situations between the destination and tourists. The findings once again confirm that previous tourism marketing communications in Rovaniemi has successfully contributed to the strong destination image of Christmas and winter destination, which would soon be irrelevant due to climate changes affecting the past perception of the destination (snowy Christmas) and the mass tourism challenges that the city cannot fully accommodate the excessive number of tourists especially these recent winter seasons.

The findings further suggest that there is an urgent need to address how tourism service providers promote their services and the destination to (potential) tourists so that their values and promises are aligned with the actual delivered services that tourists experience to maintain the destination competitiveness among rivals (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009), destination authenticity (Mohart et al., 2015) and its reputation (Morgan et al., 2011). The marketing communications between Rovaniemi and its tourists have faced difficulties regarding authenticity, transparency and consistency issues across media channels especially with the expanding trend of AI and its applications. Additionally, the rapid growth of tourism in Rovaniemi has created tensions related to seasonality, environment, local communities, cultures and authenticity. Thus, it is crucial to find an alternate way to shift Rovaniemi's present mass seasonal image toward a more year-round and sustainable destination.

Both digital and traditional media platforms undoubtedly play a significant role in shaping destination image with tourists themselves actively contributing to the destination value through interactions with destination tourism service providers on their channels or in person contacts (Hanlon, 2019). Consequently, destination identity is now considerably shaped by both the local stakeholders and external audiences, which makes destination brand management more complicated as not every stakeholder share similar goals and missions as the destination. Hence, destination marketing success depends on effective cooperation between stakeholders to ensure the marketing messages are authentic with no contradictions across media channels (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017, p. 475).

More importantly, when tourism heavily depends on winter season from November to March, many external factors can seriously affect service providers such as Hannes snowstorm delaying commercial flights for approximately 1000 tourists in winter season 2025-2026 (Yle, 2025) or the prolonged conflicts in the Middle East causing flight disruption in March 2026 (Leggett, 2026), resulting in many tour cancellations in tourism and hospitality businesses. To be more specific, when the snowstorm caused flight delays, yet the city could not accommodate all tourists and left many of them struggling at the airport waiting for next flights. Therefore, the winter business might not be a business anymore if it is still defined closely with winter. The world is warming up and changing its appearance gradually, not in just the Arctic but in other parts as well.

This thesis offers a deep understanding of current marketing communication situations and how marketers present Rovaniemi in the media to prospective tourists. This research has several practical implications that tourism marketing professionals in Rovaniemi and similar Arctic destinations can utilize to restructure the communications between the destination and prospective tourists. One potential reform strategy is the marketing can be shifted from typical promotion to sell products or to prioritize customer needs like in previous research (Grönroos, 2024; Sheth & Sisoda, 2006) to treating marketing communication as a tool of education so that tourists who are unfamiliar with the remote Arctic lands will have better understandings on the destination's key attractions such as the cultures, natural phenomena and weathers. In addition, the use of AI in marketing communications should be thoroughly selected depending on the marketers' purposes. Media content should avoid AI to ensure authentic information and marketing promises, while applying AI in supporting with posting schedule or audiences target can be considered to enhance interactions with customers on communication platforms.

Another possible reform strategy for communication content is focusing on different destination competitive advantages that are certain for tourists to experience such as Arctic animals, animal-based activities, and Arctic wilderness across seasons. These reform plans might not generate immediate results like the "Guaranteed Northern Lights" tours which attract quick-in and-out tourists whose contributions to the destination are vague. Nonetheless, I believe the suggestions to be beneficial for the destination sustainable development.

It is noteworthy that there are some limitations to this study. The communication mix has many approaches in this modern digital era so this study cannot fully cover all contemporary aspects but rather addressing the present issues and the need to restructure. Since this is a qualitative research, subjectivity is one of the advantages but can also be a disadvantage in reporting the findings. The themes were defined based on my own choice of the final codes among many codes that other researchers could have different decisions on this (Saldaña, 2013). Additionally, the study focuses on marketing professional perspectives in a specific Arctic destination, and on the overall communications across all touchpoints. Thus, future research could concentrate on each type of media for further detailed analysis and could be conducted in different regions to compare results between Arctic tourism and others to seek for suitable marketing approaches for each area.

In addition to future research recommendations, AI and its applications can be supportive together with IMC framework for more ethical, reliable and effective approaches in destination marketing communications. Understanding how customers respond to AI generated content in marketing communications in Rovaniemi would significantly contribute to current theories and practices. Additionally, further research on reevaluation of current marketing communications and its impact can be conducted from tourist perspectives to gain a more holistic knowledge as well as to have reactive plans for suitable strategies during different market trends. Instead of focusing on the uncertain factors like snow and natural phenomena to build a sustainable tourism, perhaps it is more feasible to shift the focus to grow a tourism market based on certain aspects that can be utilised, preserved and developed to pursue an achievement that can be seen and predicted.

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## APPENDIX 1. Letter of consent

Dear recipient,

My name is Linh Lu. I am a master's student at University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland under the supervision of Senior Lecturer Linda Tallberg (Linda.Tallberg@ulapland.fi). You are invited to participate in my master thesis study entitled Marketing Reform? The Role of Marketing Communication in (Re)shaping Tourist Perceptions of Rovaniemi. The purpose of the study is to understand current marketing communication between Rovaniemi as a travel destination and tourists, and from that to explore a potential marketing path for the destination to achieve all-year-round destination for sustainability growth. The result of the study will be published as part of my master thesis. The thesis is conducted as part of the Master's Degree Programme in Tourism, Culture and International Management (TourCIM).

By signing this letter, you give consent to use the interview material confidentially and exclusively for research purposes. The research follows the principles for responsible conduct of research dictated by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research. The data will be handled anonymously. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw your permission even after signing this document, by informing the below mentioned contact person.

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, if you would need further information regarding the study and the use of the research data.

Sincerely,

Linh Lu

TourCIM Master's student

tlu@ulapland.fi

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I give consent to use the interview as data for the purpose mentioned above.

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Signature

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Date

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Print Name

## **APPENDIX 2. Interview questions**

Opening questions:

1. Where are you from?
2. How long have you worked as a marketing professional?

For Marketers:

1. What are the most popular keywords/ user-generated content you have used or seen in marketing projects?
2. What marketing channels have you or your company been using? What is most effective?
3. What do you think about the current marketing messages of Rovaniemi across media channels?
4. Have you participated in any marketing projects to promote summer tourism in Rovaniemi? Can you elaborate?
5. What do you think about some winter keywords (Christmas, arctic, frozen, ...) appearing in the tour titles but the tours are operated all year round or almost all year round?
6. Do you think the marketing messages are consistent and transparent across all marketing channels?
7. Do you think the current marketing communication between the destination and tourists needs to be changed or even transformed if the goal is to reach true sustainability development?
8. In your opinion, what could be the future of the tourism industry in Rovaniemi in 5-10 years?

Some follow-up questions occurred during the interviews:

1. Since you mentioned visit reindeer farm, what do you think about reindeer being promoted as a magical creature, Santa's helpers, but they are silent the marketing communication in Rovaniemi?
2. So relate to this question, because I'm from Vietnam, if I think of Arctic, it's the North I would think that maybe it's frozen all year round. What do you think about that? Because I know you are trying to attract Asian customers.
3. So, regarding to this, you know that northern light is a natural phenomenon and it's uncertain in some ways. Why would you make it a main topic of the tour? Because if you travel to Asia, most of the tours are titled like Explore Shanghai, Explore Korea, South Korea, most of the tours in Asia, they just put destination, like Exploring the north of Vietnam, Exploring the south of Vietnam, something like that. So it's certain that the customer will see what they expected. But you put something uncertain in the main titles, what do you think about it?
4. Some marketing materials say reindeer and husky are Santa's helpers, Santa's pet friends, and traditional transportation, but huskies are not traditional transportation. What is your opinion about this?