

**IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE – COMMUNICATING  
IDENTITY ON A MUNICIPALITY WEBSITE**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Turismi on ollut kasvussa jo vuosikymmenten ajan, ja turismisektori on merkittävä työllistäjä erityisesti kehittyvissä maissa. Turismi auttaa työllistämässä sekä paikallisten yritysten ja perintökohteiden suojelemisessa. Varsinkin syrjä- ja haja-asutusalueet, jotka kärsivät väkiluvun vähenemisestä, ovat usein riippuvaisia turismista selviytyäkseen. Sallan kunta on esimerkki tällaisesta väkiluvun vähenemisestä kärsivästä kunnasta, jolle turismi on elintärkeää. Kun jokin alue kärsii väkiluvun vähenemisen kaltaisista ongelmista, markkinointi ja erityisesti brändäys voivat auttaa houkuttelemaan vierailijoita. Brändäyksessä keskeistä on arvolupausten tekeminen ja niiden erilaistaminen, ja tässä digitalisoituvassa maailmassa Internet on erinomainen keino viestiä näitä lupauksia.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on tutkia, minkälainen brändi-identiteetti Sallan kunnan nettisivujen etusivulta välittyy ja millä tavoin. Tutkimuksessa käytettiin multimodaalista, kriittistä diskurssianalyysiä, joka pohjautui pääosin Fairclough'n (Blommaert, 2005: 30) kriittisen diskurssintutkimuksen periaatteisiin. Analyysissä tutkittiin niin verkkosivun tekstuaalisia, kuin visuaalisia elementtejä. Analyysissä selvisi, että Sallan kunta toivoo verkkosivun lukijan liitettävän se hyvin tiukasti osaksi Pohjoismaita ja Pohjoismaiden kulttuuria. Lisäksi verkkosivulla olevien kuvien ja tekstin kautta selvisi, että välittyvä identiteetti on monikerroksinen. Kunta haluaa lukijan näkevän sen kohteena, jossa hänellä on mahdollisuus paeta kaupunkien hälinää ja olla täysin yksin, turmelemattoman luonnon keskellä. Sen lisäksi kunta kuitenkin haluaa lukijan tiedostavan, että heillä on tarjota kaikille kaikkea.</p> <p>Tämä tutkimus voi olla hyödyllinen erityisesti kuntabrändäyksestä kiinnostuneille markkinoinnin ammattilaisille ja tutkijoille, sillä se tuo lisää tutkimusmateriaalia vähän tutkitulle kuntabrändäyksen alueelle. Lisäksi tutkimus voi olla hyödyllinen Sallan kunnan ohella myös muille kunnille. Sallan kunta voi katsoa, vastaako heidän verkkosivultaan välittyvä identiteetti sitä identiteettiä, mitä he oikeasti haluavat viestiä. Muut kunnat taas voivat halutessaan verrata oman identiteettinsä viestintää Sallan kunnan tekemiin valintoihin, ja pohtia niiden toimivuutta. Jatkotutkimusta voitaisiin tehdä esimerkiksi tutkimalla useampien kuntien verkkosivuilta välittyvää identiteettiä, jotta nähtäisiin, esiintyykö niissä joitakin yhteisiä piirteitä. Mahdollisesti suomalaisten kuntien brändäykseen voitaisiin myös kehittää suosituksia.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, n.d.), tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification over the decades, and has become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Tilastokeskus (n.d.) defines tourism as comprising of “the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than 12 consecutive months for leisure, business and other purposes”. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) notes that tourism serves as a lifeline for many rural areas. Tourism helps provide jobs, supports rural businesses and protects cultural and natural heritage. This is also the case with many rural municipalities, such as Salla, that are suffering from depopulation (Adamiak et al., 2015: 13). The population of Salla has been decreasing for decades, only experiencing slight growth during the previous year (Suomen Virallinen Tilasto, 2021). In a situation like this, the role of marketing and especially branding becomes significant in attracting visitors. Differentiation and promises of value are the key (Kotler and Gertner, 2002), and in this digitalizing world, what better place to communicate these selling points other than the Internet.

In the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland’s 2020 tourism sector report, it is stated that digitalisation opens new possibilities for tourism, because with the help of the Internet, potential international customers can be reached easily. The report mentions that companies need to increase their investment in international visibility, and I think that this applies to municipalities, too. By communicating their brand identity effectively on the Internet, especially rural municipalities can gain some much-needed traction.

The field of municipality branding is scarcely studied, and research in especially Finnish municipality branding is lacking. The purpose of this study is to analyse

the municipality of Salla's official website to see what kind of a brand identity it communicates and how. First, the concepts of branding, place branding, and brand image and identity will be explained. Then the method of the analysis, which follows Fairclough's guidelines for critical discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005: 30), will be introduced and briefly explained. Finally, an analysis focusing on the textual and visual discourse on the main page of the website will be conducted. This study can offer some much needed insights to the field of municipality branding, and possibly aid further research on the topic.

## **2 PLACE BRANDING ON THE INTERNET**

As mentioned in the introduction, the role of place marketing or destination marketing becomes more significant as competition between countries and destinations over tourists becomes more intense (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Kotler, Brady, Goodman, Hansen and Keller (2010: 6) explain, that marketing is about identifying and meeting human and social needs. Uysal, Harrill and Woo (2011: 103-106) provide a similar definition of destination marketing, and explain steps that destinations need to take into consideration when planning their marketing strategy. These steps are essentially the same as in the marketing mix that Kotler et al. (2010: 17) introduce. The basic idea of these steps is to identify what assets the destination has and then identify the target group of customers. Then the destination must identify the most appropriate and appealing brand image/identity for itself, and communicate this image/identity to the target customer group effectively. This action of branding described in the last step is the focus of this study. More specifically the study focuses on understanding the identity that the municipality of Salla communicates on its website, and the ways in which this identity is projected. The following background chapters will explain the concepts of brand, municipality branding, image, and identity more clearly.

## 2.1 Brand and municipality branding

The American Marketing association (AMA, 2021) defines a *brand* as “a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers”. According to Kotler and Gertner (2002), the purpose of brands is to differentiate products and make promises of value. Pereira, Correia and Schutz (2012: 83) explain that ‘brand’ can be either an entity or a process, because it can be used as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it refers to entities such as people, places, things and ideas; whereas as a verb it refers to processes companies use to make products and services meaningful (e.g. naming the product, targeting and positioning it and communicating its benefits) (Pereira et al., 2012: 83). According to De Chernatony (2006: 26-27, cited in Winter 2009: 29), one way to conceptualise ‘brand’ is to divide its different interpretations into three categories; *input perspective* where the company directs resources to influence the customer, *output perspective* which includes the consumers interpretations, and *time perspective* where brand is seen as evolving over time.

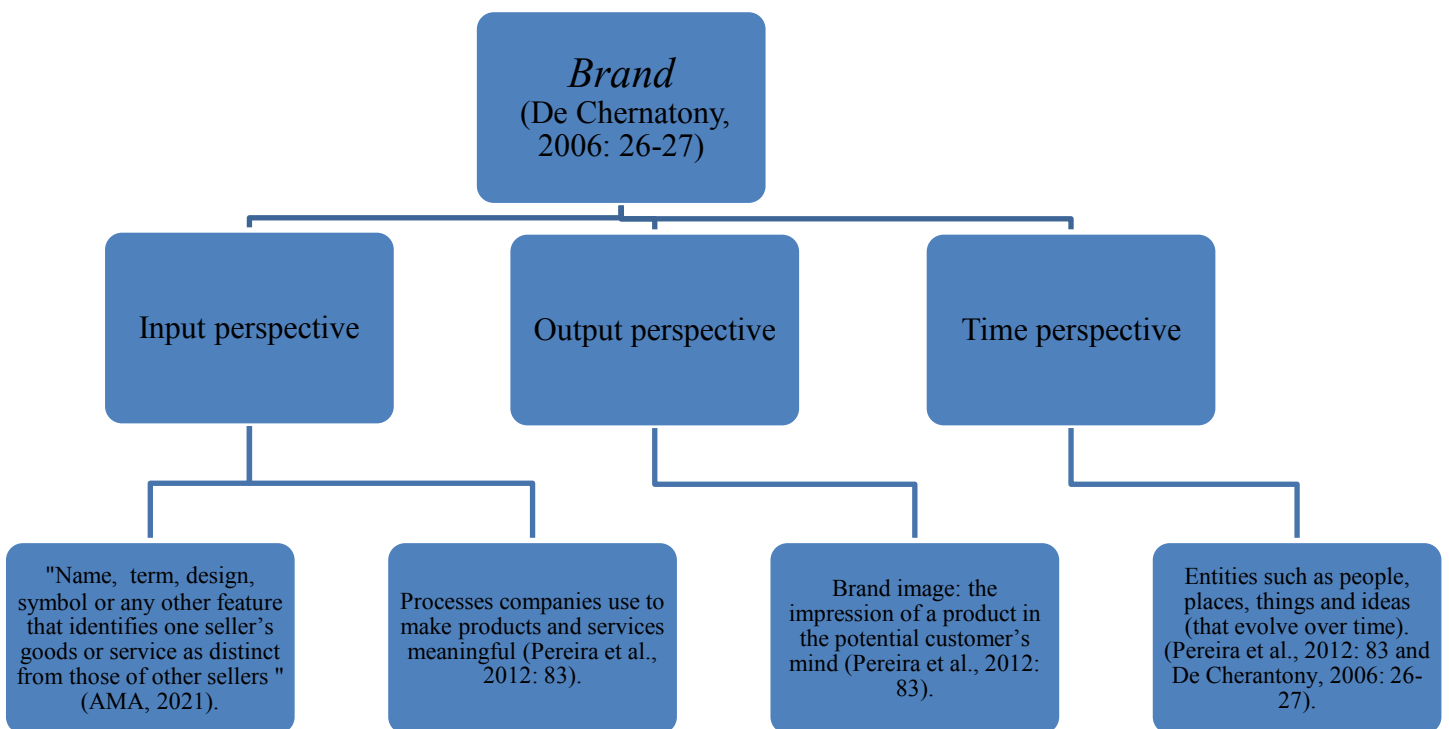


Figure 1. Definitions of brand, adapted from De Chernatony (2006: 26-27)



As seen in Figure 1, AMA's (2021) definition of a brand falls under the input perspective. Pereira et al.'s (2012) definition falls under both input and time perspective. 'Brand' as a verb belongs to the input perspective. 'A brand' as a noun belongs to the time perspective, because as De Chernatony (2006) explains, this perspective sees a brand as an evolving entity. Pereira et al. (2012: 83) also introduce the concept of 'brand image' which is defined as the impression of a product in the potential customer's mind. This definition can be placed under the output perspective. Winter (2009: 30) explains that the action of branding can be seen as improving this 'brand image'.

Both Kotler and Gertner (2002) and Winter (2009: 33) bring up the debate about whether a country can be a brand or not. Kotler and Gertner (2002) argue that countries can indeed be brands, however, some researchers do not fully agree. The problem with seeing countries as brands, is that they differ from classic brands in many ways. The main issues, introduced by Papp-Váry (2007: 6), seem to be that classic brands have less possible marketing communications channels and fewer elements that make up the brand image than country brands. These facts make classic brands easier to form. These issues are apparent when talking about countries as brands, however, this study does not focus on countries but municipalities. Municipality brands have not been researched extensively as González, Barquín, Domínguez and Ortega (2018: 19) confirm. However, from a logical point of view, the main issues with countries as brands do not apply to municipalities. The way I see it, municipalities are smaller than countries and their image usually does not include as many elements as countries' (e.g. less cultural variation, fewer geographical locations, less variation in customs, monuments, food, etc). Coordination between channels is also easier on the municipal level because there are fewer possible channels. This means that because there are fewer entities involved in the making of the municipality brand, its wanted features can be chosen and reinforced more efficiently on channels such as websites or social media, and the number of available channels such as social media accounts is fewer. Thus, at least in this study, it is believed that municipalities can be brands.

Municipality branding is a very scarcely researched topic. Since studies in the field of place branding usually focus on country branding or destination branding, municipalities are rarely mentioned in these studies, and when they are, they are placed under destination branding. The definition of a destination varies but many sources reference Leiper (1979, cited in Pike and Page, 2014 and 1995, cited in Pereira, Correia and Schutz, 2012) when defining it. Leiper defines destinations as places where tourists decide to travel to and stay at temporarily,

in order to experience certain features or characteristics. Based on this definition, municipality branding can definitely be placed under destination branding, however González et al. (2018) think that it can also be researched as its own term entirely. González et al. (2018: 24, 30) explain that municipality branding is a tool for comprehensive planning, which protects the identity of the municipality, and one of its goals is to foster territorial and endogenous development for the municipality. Another goal is to improve the quality of life of the residents by promoting local development through tourism. In González et al.'s (2018) explanation, the most notable difference to destination branding seems to be that municipality branding is recommended for entities that are located in rural areas and have a lower population density, whereas destination branding is not particularly meant for any specific places. However, most of the research on destination branding has been done on a nation or country scale (for example Winter, 2009 and Konecnik and Go, 2008).

## 2.2 Brand identity and image

In the previous chapter, the concept of *brand image* was briefly mentioned. Brand image is a central part of the concept of 'brand', however, a brand also consists of *brand identity*.

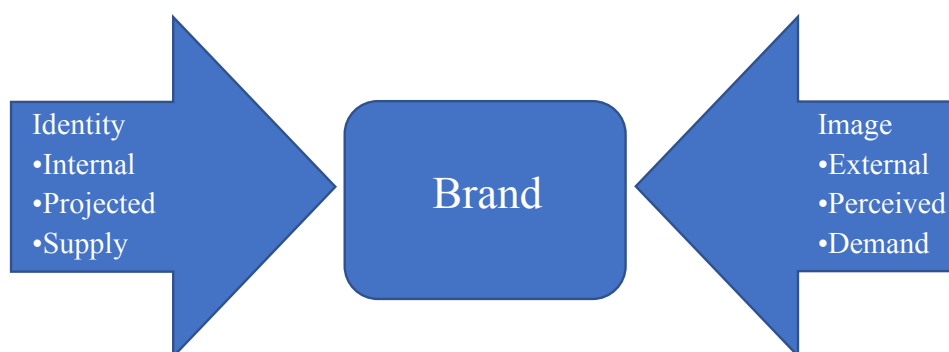


Figure 2. Identity and image

Saraniemi (2010: 53) explains that most researchers agree that the concept of 'brand' has both an *internal dimension* (i.e., identity) as well as an *external dimension* (i.e., image), as seen in Figure 2. According to Kotler et al. (2010: 426), brand identity is the way a company aims to identify or position itself, whereas brand image is the way the customer actually perceives this

aim through the company's communication. Researchers often speak of the *demand-side* (i.e., image) and the *supply-side* (i.e., the identity) of a brand, and they agree that the demand side has been more extensively researched (Saraniemi, 2010: 53, Yusof, Ismail and Ghazali, 2014: 2, and Konecnik and Go, 2008: 2). Konecnik and Go (2008: 2) explain that the vast majority of tourism destination studies have focused on the consumer-perceived image approach, whereas the owner/managerial perspective has been neglected. In many research papers, the concept of identity is barely mentioned, and the terms 'image' and 'brand' are used interchangeably (for example in Kotler and Gertner, 2002). This could be because both 'image' and 'identity' are images, only the perspective changes (i.e., self-image versus perceived image) (Yusof et al., 2014: 3).

It is not quite clear whether the action of building an image differs from communicating an identity. As stated earlier, 'image' is what the consumer perceives the brand to be, and 'identity' is how the company wants to be perceived. Thus, it would only make sense that the action of building an image and communicating an identity would be the same. However, what makes this confusing, is that often image building or image formation is talked about without mentioning identity (for example Kotler and Gertner, 2002 and Tasci and Gartner, 2007). Kotler and Gertner (2002) introduce recognizable slogans, events and deeds as possible promotional efforts that can build images. In their 2009 study, Tasci and Gartner now mention the concept of identity and list similar elements as Kotler and Gertner (2002) in positive image and identity maintenance. From this, it can be concluded that the actions are very similar and deploy similar elements and efforts, and the distinction between them depends on the researcher. In this study, identity communication is seen as essentially the same action as image building, because the goal of both of these actions is to make the customer see the brand the way the ones doing the branding want it to be seen.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1 Aim and research question**

As stated earlier, municipality branding has not been researched extensively, and research on the supply-side of brands has been neglected. This study too does not directly focus on the supply-side of a brand, for it does not take into consideration the opinion of the creators of the municipality's website. However, this study is not entirely consumer based either, for it focuses on uncovering the *identity* communicated by the municipality of Salla. Nandan (2005) explains that among other things, the identity of a brand includes the brand's values, culture, and presentation of its distinctive features, which are then reinforced through communication. In this study, I examine what these values, culture, and features are and how they are communicated, and based on that, gather an understanding of the identity of the municipality. The aim of this study is to offer more insight into how municipality brand identity has been communicated. The research questions in this study are the following:

What kind of an identity does the municipality of Salla's official website convey of Salla, and how is this identity conveyed?

## 3.2 Data and method

The data analysed in this study is a combination of textual and visual data (images) from the municipality of Salla's official website's main page. This website was chosen for the study because it differs greatly from other municipalities' official websites by communicating a clear identity, and thus it offers great insights into municipality branding. The data was collected on the 21st of October 2020 from the main page of the website. Screen captures of the images on the main page will be included in the analysis to exemplify points made. The right to use these images in this context falls under the citation right for public pieces of work in the 22 § of the copyright law (Finlex, n.d.).

The method of this study has been compiled of a variety of different elements. Most notably, this study will utilize multimodal discourse analysis. Identities can be researched through discourse analysis, and Hallet and Kaplan-Weinger (2010: 5) explain that tourism discourse is a discourse that constructs identities, uses promotion, and creates recognition and acceptance. The analysis will generally follow Fairclough's guidelines for critical discourse analysis (CDA), introduced by Blommaert (2005: 30). Fairclough states that CDA should make a progression from *description*, to *interpretation*, and finally, to *explanation*. In the description phase, the focus is on the textual-linguistic features of the material. In this phase, Durán Muñoz's (2011: 33-35) features of tourism discourse will be utilized. In the interpretation phase, I will examine how these linguistic features are used in discourse: what kinds of categories do these features fall under and what kinds of discourses do they form. In the image analysis chapter, I will also utilize some parts of Pauwels' (2012: 251-259) multimodal framework for analyzing websites, as it offers valuable insights into website image analysis. Finally, in the explanation phase the discourses found earlier will be placed in a wider social context.

Machin and Mayr (2012) explain the concept of multimodal critical discourse analysis as revealing ideas, absences, and taken-for-granted assumptions in multiple modes of communication, and it also aims to reveal power interests in them. However, they also state that not all multimodal discourse analysis is critical. Multimodal discourse analysis can be descriptive, aiming to simply document patterns (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 2). This study focuses more on this side of multimodal discourse analysis, and therefore the method of this study is not critical multimodal discourse analysis, even though it follows similar guidelines.

## 4 ANALYSIS

As described before, Fairclough's guidelines for critical discourse analysis were utilized in this analysis. In the description phase, the textual-linguistic features of the text on the municipality of Salla's official website's main page were studied. The textual-linguistic features were looked at in the light of Durán Muñoz's (2011: 33-35) features of tourism discourse, and it became clear that many of these tourism discourse features were used on the website. The most notable lexical features in the text were the use of positive adjectives, keywords centered around positive feelings and thoughts, and the careful choice of words. Some syntactic features were also present, however only imperatives were used more than once. In order to understand these features, especially the positive adjectives, keywords and careful choice of words, the explanation phase was essential. In the explanation phase, the features arisen in the description phase were linked to two types of Nordic tourism that seem to be central in defining the municipality of Salla's identity. The photographs on this webpage can also be tied into these two types of Nordic tourism, these types being nature and wilderness tourism and wellbeing tourism. In the interpretation phase, these types of Nordic tourism were linked to a wider social context.

## 4.1 Nature and wilderness tourism

According to Hall, Müller and Saarinen (2009: 130), nature has been one of the main attractions in Nordic countries, and it characterises much of the Nordic tourism experience. Even though the Nordic countries have a wide variety of ecosystems, habitats and landscapes, wilderness is, according to Hall et al. (2009: 130), one of the most dominant features among images of northern nature and landscape. Various types of tourism can be placed under the term *nature tourism*, including *ecotourism*, in which tourists get to know a given location's environment broadly as well as learn about its protection and care (Graja-Zwolińska and Spychała, 2014: 38). Hall et al. (2009: 139) explain that in advertising, positive images, such as experience of freedom and naturalness, are connected to the wilderness product.

The positive adjectives found on the webpage, 'ecological', 'pure', 'breath-taking' and 'beautiful', are strongly tied to nature. The keywords centered around positive feelings and thoughts, such as 'nature', 'wilderness' and 'ecological responsibility' were also heavily nature-based. There was also one instance of *linguaging*, which according to Durán Muñoz (2011: 33-35), means the use of made-up words or terms to induce a feeling of exotism. Instead of the four "standard" seasons, the webpage uses the term *eight seasons*. This is a term that is mostly used in a Nordic context and especially when talking about Lapland (Saari, 21.02.2019). These nature-centered adjectives and keywords, and the instance of linguaging, linked the content on the webpage to Nordic tourism, and especially nature and wilderness tourism.

These aforementioned positive adjectives and keywords fit the description of nature and wilderness tourism perfectly. The municipality of Salla emphasises its "beautiful wilderness", "pure nature" and "breath-taking experiences", but also mentions in more than one section that it is "an ecological travel destination" and is "committed to considering ecological matters". Nature and sustainability are most definitely things that the municipality of Salla wants to associate itself with, and thus they are a part of its identity.

Other keywords, that could not actually be counted as positive merely based on the descriptive phase were 'nowhere', 'space' and 'only'. However, in the light of nature and wilderness tourism, these words get a positive connotation. These words are connected to the image of freedom mentioned by Hall et al. (2009: 139). The slogan of the municipality, "Salla – in the middle of nowhere", also relates to this image. From this, the identity Salla desires for itself starts to get clearer. This wilderness aspect of the municipality is underlined by both

clearly stating that the municipality has “beautiful wilderness” but also by stating that even though Salla is the seventh largest municipality by area, it only has 3 500 inhabitants. This statement reinforces the idea of freedom, and the further statement of having “all the space in the world” gives more weight to this. In addition, the use of the imperative ‘imagine’ in the sentence “imagine living in the middle of nowhere with all the space in the world” encourages the reader to get fully immersed in the idea of wilderness and being in the middle of nowhere. As stated earlier, Adamiak et al. (2015: 13) explain that many rural municipalities, such as Salla, suffer from depopulation. By underlining their low population, natural resources such as the wilderness, and the amount of space they have, Salla is essentially turning its weakness, depopulation, into its main selling point. The municipality makes the notion of literally being in the middle of nowhere their identity by both having it as their slogan and by reinforcing this notion on their website with textual and visual cues.

## **4.2 Wellbeing tourism**

The other type of Nordic tourism that can be distinguished based on the textual and visual cues on the webpage is *wellbeing tourism*. Björk, Tuohino and Konu (2011: 29) define wellbeing tourism as “trips taken by people who temporarily relinquish the places where they normally live and work, for reasons of self-indulgence, health retreats, and their personal wellbeing, and the sum of phenomena and relationships arising there from”. Hjalager et al. (2011: 10) explain that branding is important to distinguish Nordic wellbeing tourism from other types of wellbeing tourism, and as stated in the background chapter, images are central in branding. Typical images of Nordic wellbeing are oriented around nature, outdoor experiences, healthy local gastronomy, local culture and cleanliness of air, water, and nature (Hjalager et al., 2011: 10). Björk et al. (2011: 31) bring up very similar images when talking about Finnish wellbeing tourism. They also add to the list peace and quietness and Finland’s distinct seasons. Björk et al. (2011: 31) note that Finnish people pursue wellbeing through physical activities, which is why many Finnish wellbeing companies’ offerings concentrate mainly on activities and sauna. The Finnish Tourist Board has listed the characteristics of a basic wellbeing holiday offering (Björk et al., 2011: 31). The list includes elements such as getting away from everyday routines, exploring nature, events related to Finnish culture, attention to the environment and sustainability, and consideration for the elderly customers and people with impaired mobility. Björk et al.



(2011: 31-32) also explain that in addition to these basic offerings, wellbeing companies are focusing on two target groups: health and fitness exercise, and pampering. Health and fitness holidays in Finland include activities such as Nordic walking, hiking, skiing, snowshoeing, swimming/winter swimming and golf, and the use of Finnish technology related to the theme of wellness. The pampering theme includes spa and beauty treatments, high-quality environment (e.g. accommodation, pool, treatment departments), special attention to quality food, personalized service experience, and additional programs such as shopping and cultural offerings. (Björk et al., 2011: 31-32).

Many of these features common to Nordic and especially Finnish wellbeing tourism can be spotted on the website. In the text, especially the nature focus becomes clear in the positive adjectives and keywords mentioned before. For example, the adjective ‘pure’ underlines the cleanliness of the nature, which is a common image. As Finland’s distinctive seasons are also a selling point in wellbeing tourism, mentioning the ‘eight seasons’ seems deliberate. The emphasis on the “being in the middle of nowhere” and having “all the space in the world” can also be seen as catering to the image of peace and quietness of Finland. The multiple mentions of sustainability and ecological responsibility seem to be catering to the basic offerings of a wellbeing holiday, which, as stated, includes the attention to environment and sustainability.

In the description phase, some interesting keywords and careful word choices that were not mentioned before, arose. For example, the links listed under the first picture on the page read ‘Children and Youth’, ‘Elderly’, ‘Special groups’, ‘Inverters’, ‘Travellers’ and ‘Job seekers’. These links are among the first things the gaze focuses on when entering the page. It is deliberate that these links are placed there, and most likely the reason is that the municipality wants to show that it caters to everyone, and the attention to the elderly and people with impaired mobility was mentioned as one of the basic offerings of a wellbeing holiday. Sports, which are also central in wellbeing holidays, are mentioned, too. Cultural services are mentioned as a link at the top and bottom of the page. This catering to all is further enforced by the frequent use of the word ‘all’; “all the space in the world”, “all eight seasons” and “activities for all”. The municipality strives to push the idea that they have services and activities for everyone. At the same time, as gathered in the nature and wilderness section, they want to communicate that they have an abundance of space, wilderness, and nature, and that there you can experience all distinct seasons. This creates a very desirable promise of value, where the

customer will essentially have all the peace and quiet they want away from other people, but they also have all the necessary services they can hope for at their disposal.

### 4.3 Image analysis

The analysis of the images loosely follows the guidelines for multimodal (critical) discourse analysis introduced in Machin and Mayr (2012). Parts of Pauwels' (2012: 251-259) multimodal framework for analyzing websites also served as guidelines in what to concentrate on when analysing images on a website. This framework was used because it focuses specifically on website design and images on a website, and the framework offered a plethora of aspects to focus on while conducting an analysis.

Table 1. Photographs on the main page

Photographs on the page	8
Nature as the focus or in the background	5
Nature shown only slightly	2
Taken during the winter	3
Taken during the summer	4

The images on the main page of the municipality of Salla's website support the points arising from the textual analysis. As Table 1 shows, there are eight photographs in total on the main page, and nature is shown either on the background or as the focus of the photograph in five of them. In addition, two other photographs have clearly been taken in nature during the winter, however, nature is shown in the photographs only slightly. Three of the photographs have been taken during the winter (including the aforementioned two) and four during the summer or the warmer months (no snow in sight). This depiction of nature obviously enforces the nature and wilderness tourism aspect mentioned in the textual analysis. When observing the photographs more closely than only focusing on what they denote, the idea of having all the space in the world is also reinforced by some of the photographs.

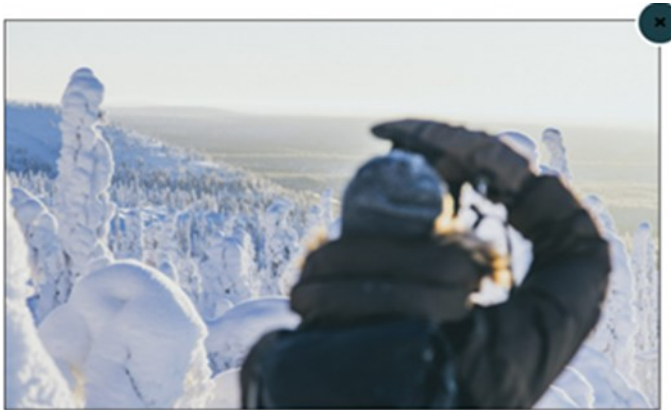


Image 1. Depiction of space. <https://www.salla.fi/en/>

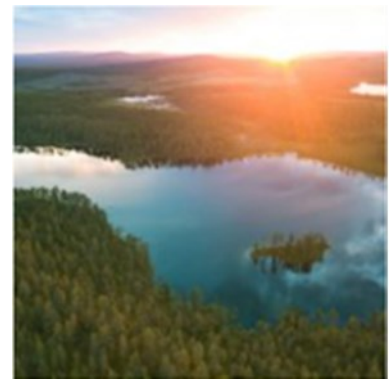


Image 2. Horizon in the distance. <https://www.salla.fi/en/>

As shown above in Image 1, a person is standing, their back facing the camera, taking a picture of the scenery. The person is out of focus, and the nature is in focus. There are no other humans, animals, or habitation in sight, only the horizon in the far distance. In Image 2, the horizon is also far away in the distance. This makes the photographs communicate a sense of isolation and reinforce the idea of having all the space in the world (Heard, 5.3.2018). In Image 2 this sense of distance and space is further conveyed through the high angle the photograph was taken from. According to Nashville Film Institute (NFI, n.d.), high angle can be used to describe the scale of the subject of the shot. Thus, the high angle of the photograph is used to show the vastness of the landscapes in Salla, and the image of having all the space in the world is reinforced.

This emphasis on being in the middle of nowhere with all the space in the world is also communicated through the map provided in Image 3, which is the only other image on the main page aside from the photographs and the logo of the municipality.



Image 3. Salla's location. <https://www.salla.fi/en/>

This map is there mainly to offer information about the location of the municipality and how to get there, however the mention of distances to near municipalities at the bottom of the map serves to concretize the actual distance there is to everything. In Lapland 65 kilometers is a short distance, but for many visitors that is quite a long distance to the nearest municipality and to the nearest train station.

The wellbeing tourism aspect cannot be distinguished as clearly from the images as the nature and wilderness aspect. However, as stated in the textual analysis, nature and outdoor experiences are a central part of the Nordic wellbeing tourism experience, and as stated, nature is certainly well depicted in these pictures. Other associations with wellbeing tourism in the pictures are the frisbee golf basket in Image 4 that can be tied to the focus on sports and outdoors in Nordic wellbeing tourism (Björk, 2011: 31-32), and the apparent health official in Image 5.



Image 4. Sports in wellbeing tourism.  
<https://www.salla.fi/en/>



Image 5. Health official.  
<https://www.salla.fi/en/>

The person in the image is wearing gloves, a medical mask, and safety goggles. These safety precautions communicate a sense of professionalism and of course the feeling of safety. Although, it ought to be mentioned that currently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these safety precautions, especially the improper use of the medical mask, are deemed as inadequate. However, the situation has changed quickly, and just a short while ago these precautions would have seemed professional and reassuring. In wellbeing tourism, the focus on health and relaxation is central, and this picture, in addition to the text included with it; “Salla provides urgent help when you need it the most.”, could be seen as assurance that while staying in the municipality, the visitor’s health is a priority, and they will be properly taken care of.

In addition to the nature and health aspects, Nordic wellbeing tourism is perceived to include local culture and gastronomy (Björk, 2011: 31-32). Some references to the local culture and gastronomy can certainly be found in the photographs. For example, in Image 6, the people pictured are eating salmon and rye bread, which are clearly tied to Nordic and Finnish gastronomy (Halonen et al., 2005). The other person in the picture is also using a ‘puukko’ to spread the salmon on the bread. ‘Puukko’ is often seen as one symbol of the Finnish culture (Halonen et al., 2005).



Image 6. Gastronomy and culture. <https://www.salla.fi/en/>

The articles of clothing also carry some cultural meaning. The wool sweater the woman in the picture is wearing is an Icelandic wool sweater, which have recently become very popular in Finland (Mikkola and Passoja, 22.10.2020). The use of the sweater in the picture could be to tie Salla tighter to the Nordic context, or just a stylistic choice. The hat the man

in the picture is wearing is a 'karvalakki', which is a common garment in any colder countries. Although the origins of the hat are unclear, it has been used in Finland for ages (Korhonen, 26.11.2009). In a separate image, a 'karvalakki' is also pictured on a woman with huskies. Huskies are an arctic dog breed that came to Finland during the 1960's (Kinnunen, n.d.). Huskies are used as sleigh dogs, and husky safaris are a very common activity for tourists to take part in while visiting Finland, especially Lapland (Kontu, 1.3.2018). These cultural garments, foods and activities are used in the pictures to create the association that Salla is a part of Lapland and Nordic countries, and, in Salla, visitors can have an experience that includes all the central parts of a wellbeing holiday.

#### **4.4 Wider social context**

In the final phase of Fairclough's (critical) discourse analysis, the themes arising from the explanation phase need to be interpreted. In the context of this study, the themes arisen, nature and wilderness tourism and wellbeing tourism, will be connected to a wider social context. As the Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries' (CBI) market information about the nature and ecotourism market indicates, the demand for nature tourism, which includes both wilderness tourism and ecotourism as well as many other forms of tourism, is high and will continue to grow. CBI explains the popularity of ecotourism as visitors becoming more conscious of their impact to the places they visit, and them wanting to support sustainable tourism. The emphasis on ecological responsibility on the municipality of Salla's website can be read as catering to this demographic. In addition to the sustainability trend, CBI briefly mentions that wilderness tourism has become popular due to the number of visitors that seek undeveloped land with minimal human imprints. CBI references Responsible Travel (2018) when it explains that more people want to reconnect with nature and other people, perhaps due to the current world order being increasingly digitalized, work-centric and materialized.

The municipality of Salla most certainly seems to cater to this demographic that wants to escape their technology filled, mundane city lives. The photographs on the main page support this assumption. There are no cars, modern habitation, roads, or powerlines pictured. There are no crowds of people in the pictures, some pictures have one person in them and at

most two people are pictured at the same time. The nature pictured on the page is undisturbed and the sceneries seem peaceful. The municipality of Salla is certainly identifying itself as a destination where people can take a break from their ordinary lives and experience nature in an authentic form.

Some newspapers have been writing about the sudden increase in population in rural municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pikkarainen, 10.10.2020 and Melamies, 21.09.2020). These newspapers list the possibility of remote work and longing for fresh air and nature as plausible reasons for the increase. These reasons, and the municipality of Salla branding itself as a place where visitors can be one with nature and away from big cities, could account for the slight increase in population in Salla. Haasova, Czellar, Rahmani and Morgan's 2020 study shows that during the pandemic, people have increasingly engaged in nature-related activities. These findings indicate that these trends caused by the pandemic can be beneficial to rural municipalities that are suffering from depopulation. People are now more interested in nature than before the pandemic, and they also have more time and freedom because of remote work. Many municipalities in Finland have, in fact, started to capitalize on this and are offering free remote work holidays in exchange for exposure (Mattila, 5.1.2021 and Mattila, 3.2.2021). These marketing efforts, including branding, can make indecisive people make the decision to move or travel to rural municipalities and, by doing so, help in reviving these municipalities.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to find out what kind of an identity the municipality of Salla conveys of itself and how does it convey it. In the analysis, it was discovered that the municipality of Salla wants to be strongly associated with Nordic culture and the Nordic way of life. The analysis also shows that the identity the municipality wants to communicate has multiple layers, which it communicates through textual and visual cues.

Firstly, the municipality wants to be seen as a place, where the visitor can be in complete solitude, one with nature and able to relax from the normal hustle and bustle of the cities. Secondly, the municipality wants the visitor to feel like the municipality has it all; the perfect promise for a wellbeing holiday. The website communicates that everyone is catered for: the young, the old, people with special needs, job seekers, etc. The possibility to have health care, do sports and experience food, culture and nature is highlighted. This combination of promoting the municipality as a place where one can be in solitude but at the same time have all imaginable services at their disposal is quite a hard thing to communicate, but the website does it seamlessly.

This seamlessness in its discourse made me consider studying this website in the first place. Compared to other official municipality websites, the municipality of Salla's website has a clearer message, their information is more easily accessible, the discourse is well thought out, and the images and the text are in correspondence. Perhaps other municipalities could find this study useful in deciding how to communicate their brand identity. The municipality of Salla could also benefit from the findings of this study because they will be able to compare these findings to the identity they intend to communicate, and they will be able to observe whether the perceived identity matches their self-image. Other possible entities



interested in the findings of this study could be marketing professionals, especially ones interested in municipality branding. The findings of this study are also beneficial in furthering municipality branding research; not much research has been done in this field, especially with a Finnish municipality as the focus of the study. Further research could be done into how Finnish municipalities communicate their identity in general to find out any common features, and perhaps, even some guidelines could be developed to assist municipalities in communicating their brand through their websites. Because branding can help rural municipalities with issues such as depopulation, these guidelines could prove to be quite beneficial to these municipalities.

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