

Digital Rovaniemi: contemporary and future arctic tourist experiences

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate tourists' representations of the Arctic through the lens of the photo-sharing social network Instagram. The study focuses on the particular tourist experience of crossing the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi, Finland, as in tourism, it represents the "official" entry to the Arctic. The study also aims at drawing assumptions about the future experiences of crossing the Arctic Circle, with the development of new technologies such as augmented and virtual realities.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were gathered with netnography methodologies on the Instagram social network. The first stage was the observational part and consisted of "lurking" at specific hashtags and locations, both referring to the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi. Data were gathered in December 2018 and consisted of images and descriptions of Instagram posts published by users between June 1, 2018 and December 31, 2018, so data collection encompassed both summer and winter seasons. The second stage was the analysis part and involved interpretive understanding, and especially phenomenological sociology.

Findings – Results show that three dominant representations of the Arctic emerge when tourists cross the Arctic Circle. The region is either seen as a frozen fairytale wonderland due to the close proximity of the Christmas industry, as a far and northern destination participating in the realization of the self, and as a territory where summer weather conditions are not necessarily synonymous with the Arctic. In addition, the study acknowledges the future challenges of conceptualizing "Arctic tourism" due to the development of virtual reality technologies that could provide immersive Arctic experiences outside the region.

Originality/value – The paper investigates connections between social media studies and tourist experiences in the Arctic context. It also questions the future of Arctic tourist experiences with the development of new technologies enhancing experiences and, thus, potentially threatening the exceptionalism of the Arctic and what makes the region a unique tourism destination.

Keywords Instagram, Social media, Tourist experiences, Arctic tourism, Future tourist experiences

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In recent decades, a significant number of publications have acknowledged the various changes the Arctic is facing regarding social, cultural, economic and environmental dimensions (Gerhardt *et al.*, 2010; Hall and Saarinen, 2010a; Hjort *et al.*, 2018; Hovelsrud *et al.*, 2011; Keskitalo, 2008). This includes tourism that has seen a tremendous growth in the region in terms of visitor numbers, as well as public visibility and interests (Maher, 2017). In parallel, the Arctic has also entered a digital revolution, especially in tourism, with the development of social media and photo-sharing social networks such as Instagram, which are seen as having notable influences on tourists' experiences and on how tourists consume and picture the Arctic as a destination. Nevertheless, the Arctic is a vast region, composed of various climates, societies and landscapes (Johnston, 2011). The region also distinguished itself by a strong seasonality that offers a wide range of experiences that cannot be completed in a single trip. For example, northern lights and the midnight sun are phenomena that can only be seen in winter and summer, respectively. Therefore, several trips in various locations are necessary to fully experience the Arctic (Saarinen and Varnajot, 2019; Viken, 2013). As Viken (2013, p. 41) notes, "there is no doubt that tourism in the Arctic is different from tourism in other areas." The reason

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for such a statement finds its origins in a form of exceptionalism as “very few other geographical regions are labeled as a concept in tourism” (Saarinen and Varnajot, 2019, p. 3). However, little is known regarding the relations between the Arctic as a unique region, social media and tourists’ experiences. However, because the Arctic offers a variety of experiences due to its diverse geography, this study cannot deal with the whole region. Instead, it will focus primarily on Rovaniemi, Finland, a major tourist destination in the circumpolar North. Within Rovaniemi, particular focus is on the tourist experience of crossing the Arctic Circle, which is seen as an inescapable ritual when visiting the city for the first time (Grenier, 2007). The Arctic Circle is the only Arctic border that is celebrated by landmarks and these painted lines, globes or road signs have become tourist attractions (Varnajot, 2019), where tourists stop, take photos and sometimes shop. It is also often treated as the common border to delineate the Arctic region (Viken, 2013), although Arctic tourism can be experienced far south of the Circle, as discussed Varnajot (2019) and Grenier (2011), with icebreaker tours in Kemi, Finland or polar bears safaris in Churchill, Canada.

This research paper aims to analyze how the Arctic is experienced while crossing the “magical” Arctic Circle through the lens of the Instagram social network. In order to report these experiences, the study will present how the Arctic has been portrayed on Instagram posts. The rise of the most popular photo-sharing social network is relatively recent, and its relation with tourists’ experiences in the Arctic still needs to be investigated. Thus, the study involves netnography methodologies in order to explore tourists’ representations of the Arctic in Rovaniemi, at the specific moment of crossing the Arctic Circle. In addition, in the last decades, tourism in the Arctic has been globally growing in terms of tourist numbers (see Maher, 2017; Hall and Saarinen, 2010b). In Finnish Lapland, tourist overnight stays increased from approximately 2,000,000 in 2005 to slightly under 3,000,000 in 2018 (Statistics Finland, 2019), including 665,000 in Rovaniemi, representing 22 percent of Finnish Lapland market share (Visit Rovaniemi, 2019). Tourism in the Arctic is expected to keep increasing in the future considering that more and more people have the disposable income to travel (Maher, 2017). Forecasting this growth, as well as how Arctic tourism experiences might change in the future, becomes necessary to anticipate potential challenges for Arctic environments and societies. A number of studies have acknowledged the benefits of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) as promising tools in order to enhance the tourist experience (Chung *et al.*, 2018; Jung *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Han *et al.*, 2019; Raptis *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the paper is also an attempt to draw assumptions about the role of AR and VR in the future evolution of social media such as Instagram and the implications for Arctic tourism experiences. Moreover, the study does not aim at generalizing to the whole Arctic region, but rather to better understand tourists’ practices and representations in Rovaniemi. Section 2 seeks to connect existing literature and discussions of photography and social media to the context of Arctic tourism. The following section presents the research methods and the results are examined in Section 4. The future of social media and AR and VR in relation to Arctic tourism is then discussed in Section 5.

2. Social media, photography and Arctic tourism

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define social media as “internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (see also Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). They include blogs (Blogger), business networks (LinkedIn), collaborative projects (Wikipedia), enterprise social networks (Yammer), microblogs (Twitter, Tumblr), photo-sharing (Instagram, Flickr), products and services review (TripAdvisor), social bookmarking (Pinterest), social gaming (World of Warcraft), social networks (Facebook), video-sharing (Instagram, YouTube, Vimeo), virtual worlds (Twinity) and other forums (Gaia Online) (Aichner and Jacob, 2015). Although there is a wide diversity of social media, they all present three common characteristics (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). First, they are online-based services that allow users to construct a public profile, to connect with other users and to interact with them (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Second, they started as peer-to-peer communications and interactions between users (Patel, 2013), whereas now some of them have evolved to become tools to communicate destination images and promote travel products and services by the tourism industry (Huang, 2011;

Thelander and Cassinger, 2017). Third, they create virtual communities (Li and Wang, 2011). As of October 2018, the most popular social media in terms of active users were Facebook (2.2bn), YouTube (1.9bn) and WhatsApp (1.5bn) (Statista, 2018). Nevertheless, the distinction between types of social media has become intricate as applications add new functions transcending the above-mentioned categories. For example, Facebook, a social network, allows the sharing of photos and videos; Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing mobile application, allows private chats between users, etc. Furthermore, in contrast to the static Web 1.0 where users have minimal interactions, in Web 2.0, also known as the social web (Tavakoli and Mura, 2018; Weber and Rech, 2010), contents are “produced by consumers to be shared among themselves” (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010, p. 180). According to Tavakoli and Wijesinghe (2019, p. 49), “this characteristic has proved to be a valuable tool for both customers and providers in the tourism industry,” to such an extent that Leung *et al.* (2013) considered social media as a “mega-trend” that has significantly affected the tourism industry. In line with this, users have become the “media” themselves via collaborations and sharing, and thus social media has empowered consumers as they can create, post, comment and form online communities (Li and Wang, 2011; Pan *et al.*, 2007).

The rapid growth of social media has implications for many aspects of tourism. Indeed, social media increasingly influences how tourists are planning their trips, especially in the phases of information search and decision making (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017; Lo *et al.*, 2011; Yoo and Gretzel, 2011). However, the use of social media among consumers for travel planning created competition with destination management organizations (DMOs) and private businesses (Lo *et al.*, 2011). In order to cope with this issue, social media platforms also became marketing tools (Chan and Denizci Guillet, 2011; Huang, 2011; Munar, 2010; Thelander and Cassinger, 2017). Across the Arctic, there are many examples of DMOs using Instagram for promotion, such as Travel Yukon, VisitSweden, VisitGreenland, VisitRovaniemi or the Northern Norway Tourist Board. On Instagram, DMOs usually work with reposting users’ photos and videos. For example, on their respective home pages, the Northern Norway Tourist Board and Visit Greenland indicate “tag @northernnorway to give us permission to repost on our [...] channels” and “use #GreenlandPioneer or #VisitGreenland to get a chance to be featured!.” Some private tourist companies also use Instagram as a marketing tool like Iceland Travel, offering tours in Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, Ilulissat Adventure, providing tours in the Disko area, or SantaPark and the Santa Claus Office, both of them based in Rovaniemi, Finland. Additionally, in parallel, the role of social media in tourism emerged as a research topic with the first publications appearing in 2007 (Leung *et al.*, 2013; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Nevertheless, the Arctic region was left out of these studies. In their review of social media in tourism publications, Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) found that the most examined regions were Western Europe (Spain), Asia (China), North America (mainland USA) and Australia.

Instagram, originally designed as a mobile application, allows users to post photos and videos on their profile gallery, which can be edited with filters and organized with hashtags and location information. The essence of the app is thus intrinsically linked to “the visual,” which is the core of John Urry’s theory of the tourist gaze (1990, 1992; see also Urry and Larsen, 2011; Dinhopi and Gretzel, 2016). According to Lo *et al.* (2011), photography and travel are connected from a historical perspective as photography and mass tourism emerged approximately at the same time (Urry, 1990), and because photos both document and shape the tourist experience (Haldrup and Larsen, 2003; Larsen, 2008). Instagram, and other photo- and video-sharing applications, such as Snapchat, Vine or TikTok, emerged from the development of digital photography, characterized by relatively new technologies (smartphones, numeric cameras connected to Wi-Fi services, digital storage, etc.), by social network sites, and by instantaneous, mobile and consumable images (Belomenou and Garrod, 2019; Gretzel, 2017; Murray, 2008; Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008; Urry and Larsen, 2011). The digitization and internetization of images is considered as “the latest moment in this history of tourist photography” (Urry and Larsen, 2011, p. 180). In the Arctic, tourism is dominated by nature-based activities (Maher *et al.*, 2014; Johnston, 1995, 2011; Saarinen, 2005; Saarinen and Varnajot, 2019), including sightseeing (on cruises or snowmobiles, by helicopter, during treks) and fauna safaris. Maher (2010) examined that experiencing iconic Arctic landscapes (icebergs, pristine vistas, national parks, etc.) and animals (birds, whales, polar bears, etc.) are predominant motivations among cruise tourists

in the Canadian archipelago. Other Arctic phenomena such as the northern lights or the midnight sun are also on the bucket lists of tourists visiting Arctic regions (Heberlein *et al.*, 2002; Mathisen, 2017). Photography is thus intrinsic to sightseeing and wildlife viewing (Markwell, 1997; Valentine, 1992; Wood *et al.*, 2013), showing again the intertwined connection between tourism and photography.

In addition, Gretzel (2017, p. 116) noted that photographs are also “important in relation to communicating the essence of one’s travel identity.” In other words, photographs and social media posts construct narratives and are presentations of the user, the traveler (Bosangit *et al.*, 2015; Lo and McKercher, 2015). In parallel, Maher *et al.* (2003) and Eijgelaar *et al.* (2010) found that tourists visiting the Polar regions can come back as ambassadors. Maher *et al.* (2003, p. 208) defined this “ambassadorship” as the process of advocating the preservation of the continent (by) those who have been to “the Ice” and so have a first-hand experience of the values [being sought] to protect.” This ambassadorship process leads to the ethical transformation of the tourist (Eijgelaar *et al.*, 2010; Weaver, 2005). Being an ambassador of the Polar regions becomes part of travelers’ identities, and social media, like Instagram can be used as a tool for users in order to present themselves as such. Nevertheless, no empirical studies have been done on the role of social media in polar tourist ambassadorship processes. However, Vila *et al.* (2016) raised concerns about the virtue of having been to the Arctic, and more generally to the Poles. Ambassadorship is a positive effect, but how can we be sure tourists do not act as “mere voyeurs scrambling to get a last peep at a vanishing paradise?” (Vila *et al.*, 2016, p. 452). Indeed, the Arctic is attracting tourists for its vanishing landscapes and wildlife, in a trend known as last-chance tourism (Lemelin *et al.*, 2012). The growing media attention regarding climate change impacts on the vulnerable Arctic environments has become the reason many tourists visit the region before it is irrevocably changed (Hall and Saarinen, 2010c; Lemelin *et al.*, 2010; Eijgelaar *et al.*, 2010; Johnston *et al.*, 2012). Behind this trend is the motivation to immortalize features of the Arctic via photos and videos, and potentially sharing the last polar bear, the last glacier or the last iceberg on a users’ Instagram before they are gone. Although this presents ethical issues (Dawson *et al.*, 2011), they are beyond the scope of this paper.

3. The research method

To examine tourists’ experiences through the lens of Instagram, I conducted netnography, a “qualitative method designed specifically to investigate the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the internet” (Kozinets, 1998, p. 366; see also Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019). Designed by Robert Kozinets in the late 1990s, netnography is the use of adapted ethnographic techniques to study virtual communities on online platforms (Whalen, 2018). In this study, netnography was conducted on the mobile phone photo- and video-sharing social network Instagram. Created in 2010 (Hu *et al.*, 2014), it is today the fastest growing network site (Gretzel, 2017; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016), as showed a video posted on June 20, 2018 on the official Instagram account, celebrating 1bn active users (Instagram, 2018). The application “provides users an instantaneous way to capture and share their life moments” (Hu *et al.*, 2014) with other members through pictures (and videos since 2013). More recently in 2016, new functions were added allowing users to share their contents differently with “stories” and live videos. Stories are pictures or videos that can be modified with effects and layers, and added to user profiles, whereas live videos allow users to broadcast themselves live. Contrary to classic photos or videos posted in a user’s gallery, stories and live videos are not permanent. Live broadcasts and stories disappear immediately after ending and 24 h after posting, respectively. The methodology was partly inspired by Gretzel’s study of travel selfies (2017), where the observational part of the study was “lurking” at specific hashtags and locations (see Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Data were gathered in December 2018, following these specific hashtags: #arcticcircle (200,000 posts), #santaclausvillage (45,000 posts), and #rovaniemi (380,000 posts), as well as specific locations: “Rovaniemi,” “Santa Claus Village” and “Arctic Circle – Lapland.” Nevertheless, the selection still represented around 600,000 posts to analyze. In order to scale down the selection, for each hashtag and location, I did not consider the numerous posts that were not directly connected to the study, including videos. For example, when “lurking” at #arcticcircle, posts were not only referring to the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi but to all locations

around the circumpolar North where the Arctic Circle is marked on the ground, or to places located far north or far south of the actual landmarks. In addition, Arctic Circle landmarks had to be seen on the studied posts. Following Gretzel's methodology, "interactions with Instagram users were not initiated and the data collected was therefore comprised of photographs" (Gretzel, 2017, p. 119), including their descriptions, when available. I also limited the analysis to the posts concerning the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi posted from June 1, 2018 to December 31, 2018. This timeframe is beneficial for covering both summer and winter seasons and examining potential seasonal differences. During this period, Lapland experienced warm temperatures during the summer, sometimes reaching +30°C, while the beginning of the winter particularly suffered from the lack of snow, to such an extent that British tabloids renamed Lapland as "Crapland." In the end, up to a hundred posts were analyzed and the most relevant were captured via screenshots.

Analysis of the data involved interpretive understanding, and especially phenomenological sociology, to use Schwandt's terms (2000). Phenomenological sociology aims at interpreting our own and other's actions in order "to understand how social reality, everyday life, is constituted" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192), which brings a sense of collectivity. Varnajot (2019) demonstrated that the performance of typical practices that he called "border-crossing postures," while crossing the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi, originates in a collective sense that typical practices must be performed at certain sites (see MacCannell, 1999). Therefore, the analysis aimed at understanding collective and global trends relating to representations of the Arctic, when tourists are at the "exact moment of entering the Arctic" (for further discussion about tourism and borders of the Arctic, see Varnajot, 2019).

4. Crossing the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi reported on Instagram

Traditionally, the tourist experience has been defined as a linear and temporal process (Craig-Smith and French, 1994; Jennings, 2006) divided into three phases, namely the pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip phases (Gretzel *et al.*, 2006; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017; Leung *et al.*, 2013), and each of these phases is characterized by their own functions. During the pre-trip or anticipatory phase, tourists are preparing, planning, making decisions, expecting, anticipating, looking at Instagram posts regarding the up-coming journey or excursion (Huang *et al.*, 2010; Tussyadiah *et al.*, 2011). The during-trip or experiential phase naturally refers to the time spent at the site of the vacation, during which tourists take part in activities, taste new food, visit sights, take photographs, shop, or cross the Arctic Circle when visiting the Santa Claus Village, etc. (Cohen, 1979; Wang *et al.*, 2012). In the post-trip or reflective phase, tourists are documenting, reminiscing and sharing their trip with relatives or on social media (Pan *et al.*, 2007), which will potentially be used by other tourists planning a trip to the same destination (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017). Nevertheless, some scholars (Botterill and Crompton, 1996; Jennings and Weiler, 2006; Uriely, 2005; Urry, 1990) have argued that the tourist experience is more complex due to the inherently personal and reflective character of the experience, but the linear process still represents the basic structure of the tourist experience. Although "sharing" has been traditionally associated with the post-trip phase of the tourist experience, the growing use of smartphones, as well as the development of technologies and available Wi-Fi services, allows users to post their photographs while still on-site (Wang *et al.*, 2012). New technologies and new functions of social media applications tend to modify and reshape the basic structure of the tourist experience, and now one can share his or her own experience in both the during-phase and the post-phase of the trip (Gretzel, 2010). Therefore, whether the different analyzed Instagram posts were published during or after the trip cannot be determined.

It is now well established that taking pictures has become a common practice for tourists (Batchen, 1999; Edensor 2001; Haldrup and Larsen, 2006; Larsen, 2005, 2006). In line with this, Varnajot (2019) has acknowledged the close connection between photography and crossing the Arctic Circle and has developed the idea of "border-crossing postures" that are actually poses aimed to be photographed with regular cameras or smartphones and potentially posted on Instagram. Although every post on the application is unique, three main trends emerged from the analysis of posts referring to the Arctic Circle in

Rovaniemi: it is perceived as a magical line; its crossing is an achievement of being North. In addition, other posts referred to unexpected weather conditions while in Rovaniemi, especially in summer.

The Arctic Circle is seen as a magical line

In a tourist magazine about Finnish Lapland (Kuznetsov, 2018, p. 30), the Arctic Circle is promoted as “a gateway to the world of fairytales and stories,” anyone crossing it becomes younger and this is the secret of Santa Claus’ old age. If these lines were purposefully written for the sake of the mystery of Christmas, similar thoughts can be found on Instagram from tourists’ posts, associating the Arctic Circle with magic (Figure 1). This can be expected due to the unmissable presence of Santa Claus, the enchanting atmosphere around the Arctic Circle and the intertwined local history between the Arctic Circle and the establishment of the Christmas industry (see Pretes, 1995; Rusko *et al.*, 2013; Tervo-Kankare *et al.*, 2013). Although in Rovaniemi the Arctic Circle was turned into a tourist attraction before the establishment of the Santa Claus industry, nowadays the primary reason for international tourists to visit the city, and especially the area of the Arctic Circle, is to meet Santa Claus and to enjoy the Christmas spirit (Varnajot, 2019). Santa Claus has become a powerful brand for Rovaniemi (Hall *et al.*, 2008; Tervo-Kankare *et al.*, 2013), overtaking tourists’ interests in the Arctic Circle. To use Dean MacCannell’s words (1999), the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi has entered the “enshrinement” phase of the sight sacralization process, where the primary attraction becomes secondary. This is also showed in the Instagram post of some visitors (Figure 2): “we made it to Santa’s Village in Rovaniemi, Finland, which meant crossing into the Arctic Circle.” In addition, the association of the Arctic Circle with Santa Claus can be seen through the Christmas-related hashtags associated with posts mentioning or showing the Arctic Circle (Figures 1 and 2). The most common of these were, for example, “#santaclausvillage,” “#christmas,” “#xmas” or “#santaclaus.” In the context of Rovaniemi, this evidences the close and intertwined connections of the Arctic Circle with the Christmas industry as well as the location of the place, namely the Santa Claus Village.

Crossing the Arctic Circle is an achievement

The second trend regarding the perception of the Arctic Circle is the realization of self and this can be observed through three types of Instagram posts. First, crossing the Arctic Circle makes some tourists realize where they are on the planet, especially how north they are, sometimes with references to latitudinal coordinates. Figure 3 illustrates this transformation of the self: “it is easy to understand that a trip to this part of the world gives you sort of an impression of being at the end of this world,” although Bruner (1991) mitigated this self-realization among Western tourists and according to him these hyperbolic descriptions would be the consequences of exaggerated commercials in promotion discourses. Rojek (1993) and Galani-Moutafi (2000) went further

Figure 1 The Arctic Circle as a magical line

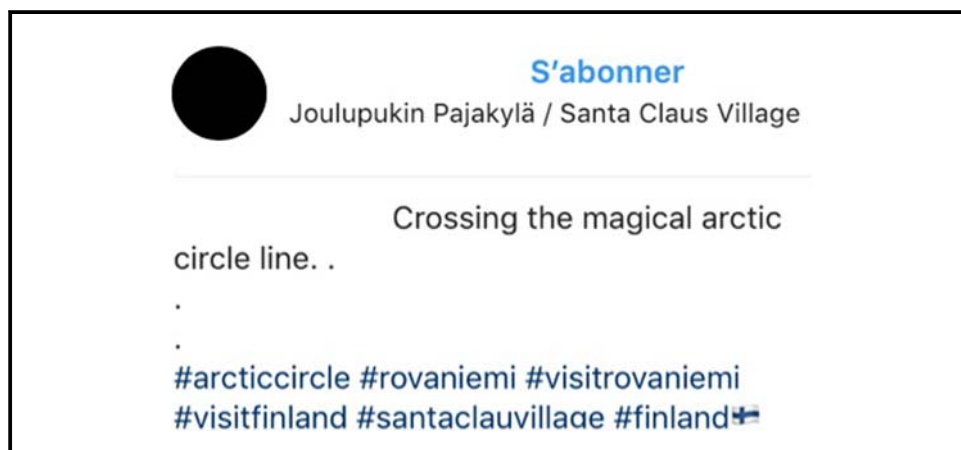
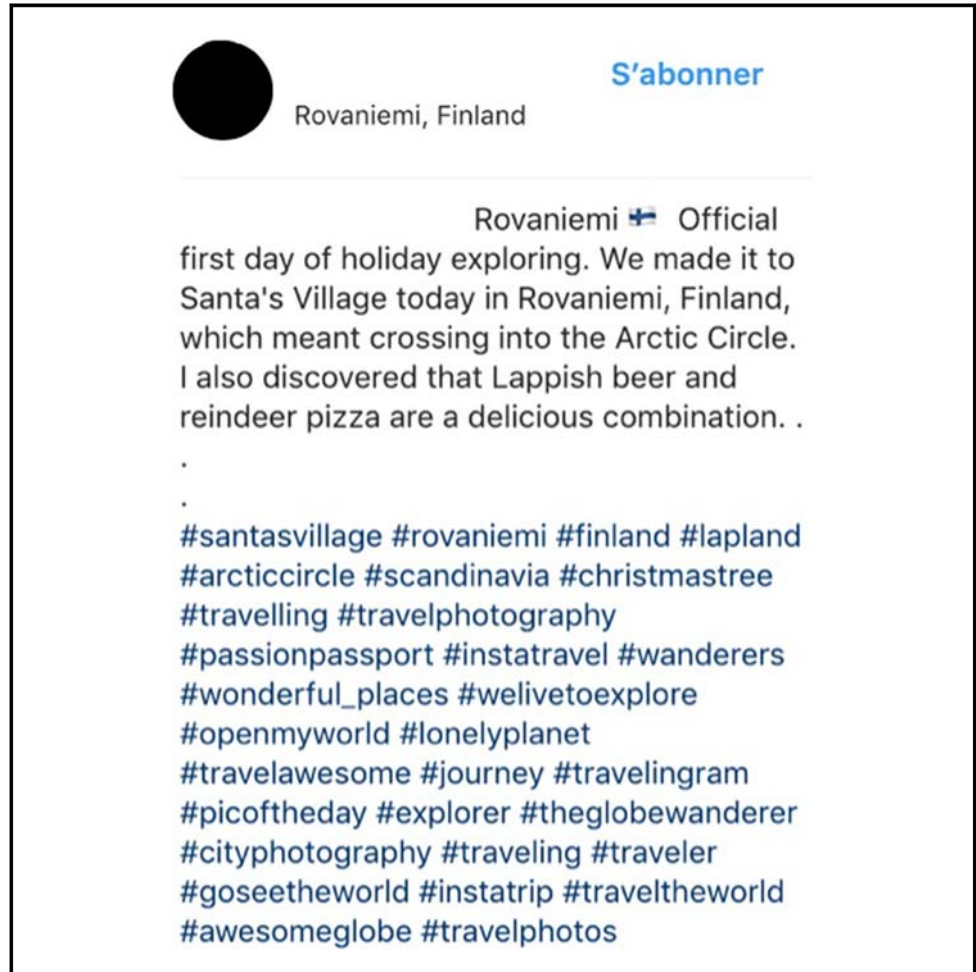


Figure 2 The Arctic Circle associated with Santa Claus

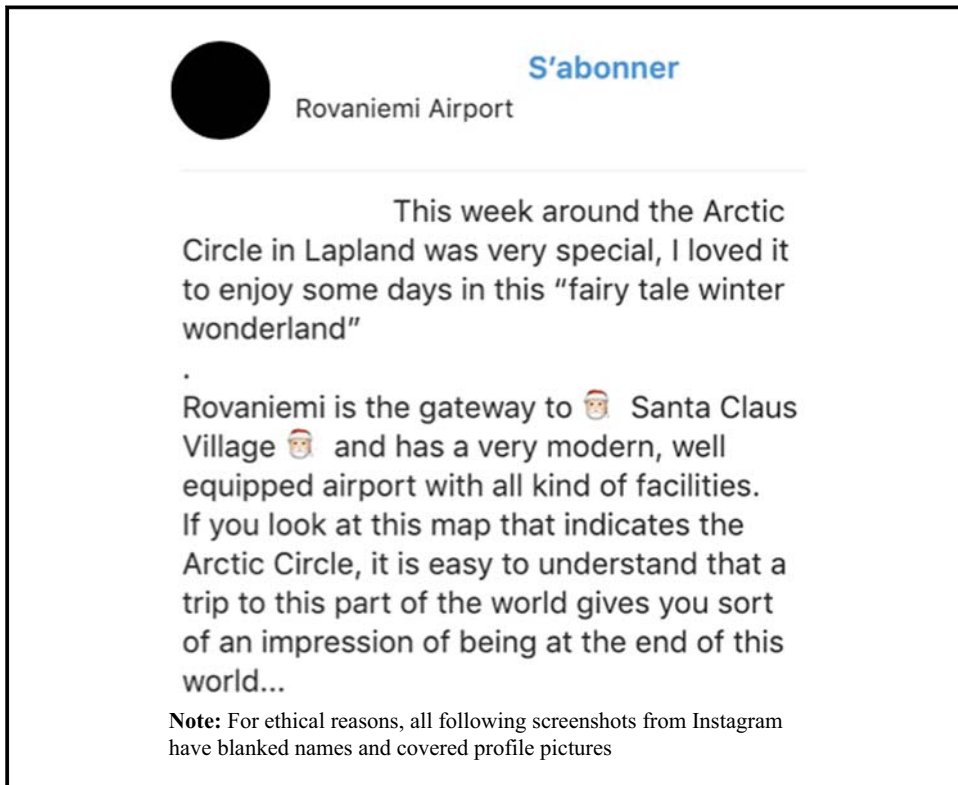


and argued that tourism was confirming one's view of the world, rather than transforming it, implying a realization of prejudices and preconceived thoughts. Second, crossing the Arctic is seen as an experience to collect as Figure 4 shows. According to Timothy (1998, p. 126), "collecting places refers to a process whereby locations visited are enumerated and wherein there is a desire to visit additional places." This is also known as bucket list tourism (Thurnell-Read, 2017). In the context of the Arctic Circle, other geodetic lines, or ghostly lines as named by Ingold (2007), like the Equator, the Tropics or the Prime Meridian can be other elements of this particular bucket list. In both cases of the realization of the northern location and bucket list tourism, crossing the Arctic Circle is seen as an achievement. Nevertheless, sometimes, the realization of the self might lead to disappointment, although this situation does not represent the majority of the analyzed Instagram posts. Figure 5 shows the lack of excitement in crossing the Arctic Circle from north to south: "after Nordkapp – an Arctic Circle in a way back is not such an amazing experience." Indeed, the crossing of the Arctic Circle is only portrayed as a heroic deed when performed from south to north. It is supposed to depict the entry to the purposefully misrepresented hostile and uncivilized Arctic (Varnajot, 2019).

Unexpected weather at the Arctic Circle

Finally, the third trend that emerged from the analysis is the reference to weather conditions while at the Arctic Circle. A thermometer showing the current temperature is located near the line symbolizing the Arctic Circle and tourists often take photographs of it, especially when the temperatures are extreme. If it might be assumed that tourists want to prove they have endured rather cold temperatures in winter on the one hand, in summer, on the other hand, posts on

Figure 3 The Arctic Circle seen as the end of the world



Instagram tend to present the stupefaction of experiencing warm temperatures “above the Arctic Circle,” as Figure 6 shows. This was especially the case in summer 2018, due to relatively warm temperatures. These reactions indicate the assumption that a warm Arctic does not fit with tourists’ representations and expectations of the circumpolar North. Indeed, the Arctic is often portrayed by outsiders and for outsiders (Viken, 2013) as a cold and frozen region with a white environment, rough climatic conditions as well as wild, uncivilized, untouched and pristine landscapes (Hall and Johnston, 1995; Hall and Saarinen, 2010a). These representations find their origins in popular adventures and heroic stories reported on TV shows, myths and all sorts of narratives such as the exploits of Roald Amundsen, the tragedies of the Brusilov and Franklin expeditions, or the recent survival movie “Arctic” starring Mads Mikkelsen (Fjellestad, 2016; Sæþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2011). In other words, from the point of view of some tourists, the term “Arctic summer” might appear as an oxymoron (Saarinen and Varnajot, 2019), because warm weather does not fit with outsiders’ preconceptions of the Arctic. Although strong seasonality is intrinsic to the Arctic, its reality is often excluded from these mental pictures. As a result, in Rovaniemi, the Arctic Circle is pictured (and promoted) as the gateway to the Arctic, and is therefore supposed to be the border between the “temperate zone” and the necessarily cold Arctic.

5. Discussion: the future of Arctic tourism experiences

Although the relatively new functions of social media, including allowing live sharing, are still expanding among users, it is rather possible to predict the near future of social media in tourists’ practices and how it will look in the years ahead. The population with disposable income to travel will continue to increase, as will the number of tourists visiting the Arctic (Maher, 2017), and they will potentially keep sharing their experiences via social media. However, drawing on assumptions about the further future becomes more intricate without falling into science fiction. In parallel, technologies like AR and VR are expected to

Figure 4 Crossing the Arctic Circle as a bucket list item

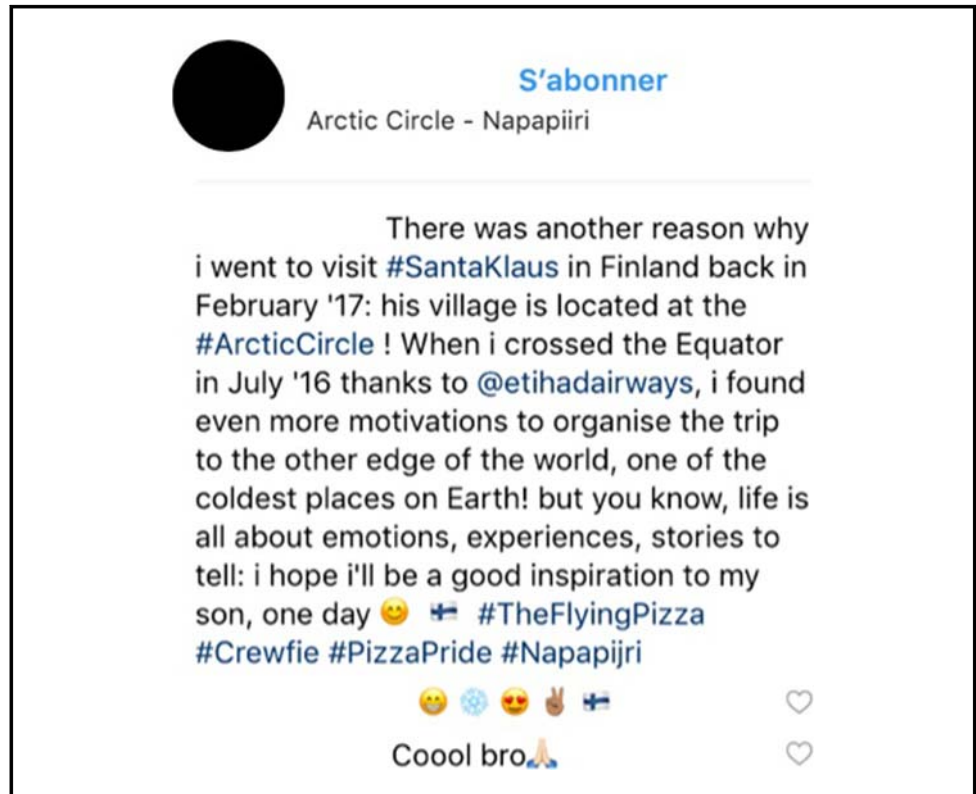


Figure 5 Crossing the Arctic Circle from North to South is not so exciting

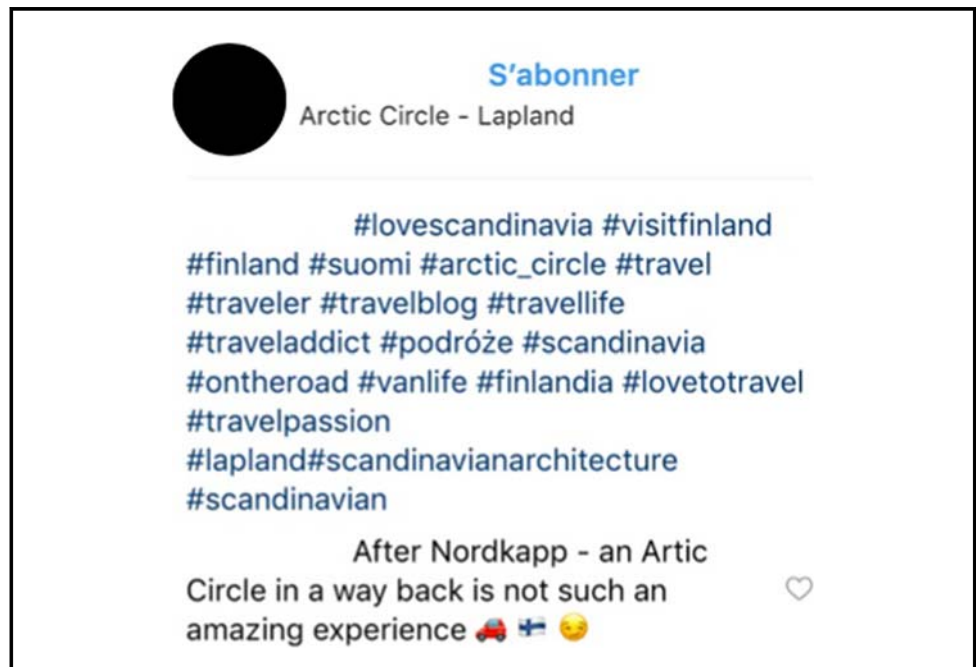


Figure 6 26°C at the Arctic Circle



develop in tourism and open new opportunities to enhance and reshape tourist experiences (Han *et al.*, 2019). While AR already exists at some Arctic Circle landmarks, VR has not yet reached its full potential. Indeed, when one crosses the Arctic Circle at SantaPark, a Christmas-related theme park located in Rovaniemi, cold wind and sound effects are triggered to emphasize the entrance to the Arctic (Varnajot, 2019). In that context, AR “uses fixed installations at certain locations such as theme parks and retail outlets, enabling virtual augmentations for on-site users” (Han *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, VR produces virtual environments that can be reproduced anywhere and being on-site is not necessary. According to Kim and Hall (2019, p. 237), “VR can be defined as an interactive digital-generated medium that enables participants to experience simulated environments.” Then, what could happen to Arctic tourist experiences when social media and VR merge? According to Kaku (2011), by 2100 we will be able to use brain sensors or internet-connected eye lenses; artificial intelligence and telekinesis will be part of our environment and daily life (see Yeoman, 2012). Nevertheless, this remains hypothetical.

As mentioned earlier, social media currently belong to Web 2.0, wherein users (tourists, tourism boards and companies) can share experiences and promotion materials. With the development of synergies between humans and computers, social media from Web 2.0 could merge with Web 5.0, which is a sensorial and emotional web (Benito-Osorio *et al.*, 2013) resulting in complex interactions between human beings and computers. The combination of both webs would result in a “social Web 5.0,” wherein tourists could interact with connected Arctic Circle landmarks for example, and share more images and live videos, but also temperature sensations, scents, tastes and all other kinds of immersive experiences via advanced social media platforms and devices. In addition, such advanced VR technology would provide adaptive and personalized features (Raptis *et al.*, 2018) based on users’ representations and preferences, in order to reach their respective ultimate experience. For example, if one would want to experience the crossing of the Arctic Circle in the Yukon with real-time winter conditions (light, snow, whiteness) but would prefer summer Mediterranean temperatures at the same time, it could be possible to personalize the parameters and create a unique crossing of the Circle. Tourism entrepreneurs and boards could also take advantage of such VR technologies by offering promotional experiences as marketing tools. For example, Bogicevic *et al.* (2019) analyzed how VR can be used to deliver integrated tourist experiences prior to their stay at hotels. In line with this, marketing through VR technologies could be used for promoting tourist activities or destinations (Kim *et al.*, 2019) and could adapt at different scales.

It seems difficult to predict the implications of these technologies on tourists’ representations of the Arctic. As the data analysis showed, crossing the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi is perceived as a magical action for some tourists. Whereas the Arctic Circle is a natural phenomenon and has objectively nothing magical, the presence of the Santa Claus industry turned the line, into a magical boundary, via promotion materials that have influenced tourists’ representations (Varnajot, 2019). Manipulation as a marketing strategy through advertising has been well studied over the last decades (see Campbell, 1995; Danciu, 2014; Hildebrand *et al.*, 2019;

Jin, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 1986). By virtually reproducing sights, landscapes or cultural visits, VR could become another tool for manipulating tourists' imaginaries regarding the Arctic, especially if the virtual Arctic world is reproduced by outsiders. In line with this, the data analyses also showed that crossing the Arctic Circle could provide feelings of achievement among tourists. Nevertheless, how would it be possible to reproduce these feelings when the user is aware he is not physically entering the Arctic? The same challenge occurs regarding the magical feeling. Indeed, the feeling of being in a magical place when crossing the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi comes from a general atmosphere provided by music from hidden speakers, the feel of walking on snow, the architecture, decoration of the surrounding buildings, etc. The feeling of magic comes from a combination of different parameters that might be challenging to reproduce for VR experiences. These two examples show some of the future challenges VR will have to face regarding the existential authenticity of the self (see Wang, 1999). Furthermore, other challenges will appear at larger scales. Indeed, as Gretzel (2010, p. 1) noted, "technology transforms the relationship between the traveler and the traveled space, as well as the experience of time." The Arctic is usually perceived as a far, remote and often inaccessible region (Fjellestad, 2016) and this is what probably makes tourism in the Arctic unique (Saarinen and Varnajot, 2019; Viken, 2013). Switching on a button and finding yourself sailing in the Ilulissat Icefjord in a few seconds, for example, would certainly affect this uniqueness. In addition, Gretzel (2010, p. 17) continues arguing that "real adventure is where the mobile phone won't work." In other words, adventure tourism takes place in remote and wilderness areas, characterized by a lack of common means of transportation and no connections to main networks, which makes survival increasingly difficult (Castells, 1996) and which includes risks (Rantala *et al.*, 2018). The Arctic is known for hosting various adventure tourism activities such as kayaking in Svalbard or glaciers hiking in Iceland. In the future, these activities could be reproduced virtually and transform tourists in "virtual adventurers." Although the term "virtual adventurer" is by definition an oxymoron because of the lack of risks, VR could still offer immersive Arctic adventure experiences. However, this questions the definition of Arctic tourism. Indeed, can activities taking place in a virtual Arctic environment, but really happening in Paris or Tokyo, still be considered as Arctic tourism? In the context of Rovaniemi as well, similar questions can be raised. For example, if visiting the Santa Claus Village, where the main Arctic Circle landmark is located, becomes virtually possible, can virtual visitors claim to have "officially" entered the Arctic? This calls for new considerations about the future of the concept of Arctic tourism, about its nature, its actual and virtual geographies.

6. Conclusion

Social media is evolving rapidly and has greatly influenced the tourist experience in terms of preparation and anticipation, behaviors on-site, but also when sharing with relatives and followers. Social media, combined with the development of new technologies, now allows tourists to share and instantly document their experiences. Functions of the during-trip and the post-trip phases have merged under the umbrella of photo- and video-sharing networks such as Instagram, creating online communities. Although these communities are virtual, they exist as they share information, ideas or prejudices and participate in the building of individuals' representations. The study of Instagram posts revealed that, at the moment of crossing the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi, three main trends were revealed in tourists' representations of the Arctic region. First, the Arctic is perceived as magical; second, entering the Arctic is seen as an achievement allowing the realization of the self; third, the region in summer does not fit with the popular social construction of a cold and frozen Arctic. These three main representations are not illustrative of the whole Arctic, but instead aim at understanding what makes Rovaniemi "Arctic" from the tourists' perspectives.

Sharing experiences has always been an intrinsic aspect of tourism. It first started with relatives and friends via photographs and now with unknown followers via posts and hashtags on photo-sharing networks such as Instagram. The future developments of AR and especially VR promise more immersive experiences for users. In parallel, applications and devices that can allow the sharing of such future tourist experiences are also expected to adapt to the transition from the current social Web 2.0 and a potential social Web 5.0. Modes of sharing

experiences already adapted to the “digitization and internetization” of the history of tourist photography (Urry and Larsen, 2011, p. 180) and the next transition should be no exception. The rapid rhythm of innovations in tourist experiences leads to new challenges for researchers as they need to follow these new technologies and constantly adapt their methodologies. In the late 1990s Kozinets developed netnography (1998, 2002) in order to study relatively recent online communities. Following the growing amount of data created online, as well as increasing interactions between computers, human beings and communities, Kozinets *et al.* (2018, p. 1) acknowledged that “netnography must change” and adapt to these transforming technologies. They offer a glimpse of what future online research might look like with the development of “auto-netnography,” “netnographic sensibility” or “more-than-human netnography” (Kozinets *et al.*, 2018). However, according to Tavakoli and Mura (2018), these new forms of research will bring the issue of lack of authenticity in online data gathering, compared to traditional ways of collecting empirical data and they suggested that these new forms of netnography should be complemented with classic ethnographic methods for triangulation of data (see Kozinets, 2002). Nevertheless, in regard to the Arctic context, netnography presents some advantages over traditional ethnographic studies. In the context of limited research funding, netnography considerably reduces the costs of research, especially in the Arctic, where some remote areas are still expensive to access and to live in for the time of the fieldwork (Whalen, 2018) and where some populations are still difficult to reach (Mkono, 2013; Wu and Pearce, 2014). Additionally, netnography is less time consuming than traditional ethnographic fieldwork methods, as information is readily accessible (Whalen, 2018).

Future Arctic tourist experiences enhanced by VR will provide new ways of “experiencing the Arctic” and this will question the future of Arctic tourism as a concept. Defining Arctic tourism is an almost impossible task (Maher, 2007) due to the diversity of the region in terms of landscapes, climates, societies and available tourist activities. New discussions and framing are needed for better conceptualizing Arctic tourism. These evolving Arctic experiences can provide some clues for a future conceptualization of Arctic tourism, primarily based on experiences rather than on a spatial perspective.

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