

ANIMAL
TOURISM
FINLAND

ANALYSIS OF USER-GENERATED SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

related to animal-based tourism activities in Lapland

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Dear reader,

This report is one in a series of reports, guidelines and videos related to responsible consumption and animal-based tourism services in Lapland published by The University of Lapland, Multidimensional Tourism Institute, as part of the project “Animals and Responsible Tourism: Promoting Business Competitiveness through Animal Welfare”. The main aim of the project is to look into animal welfare as an essential part of responsible tourism business in Finnish Lapland.

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1. Introduction

Animals have become a very important part of tourism and leisure experiences around the world and are used in tourism in many different ways. They can be seen in captivity (e.g. wildlife parks, zoos), in the wild (bird watching, wildlife safaris), as entertainment (aquariums and marine parks) and as part of tourism activities (horse riding, dog sledding) (Fennell, 2012). The picture of animals or human-animal encounters has become common in the marketing and promotion material of many travel destinations. In fact, it can be argued that destinations without any kind of animal encounters are exceptions rather than the rule in today's society.

While many tourists feel that close interaction with animals is an exciting way of spending a holiday, they have also become more aware of the negative impacts that tourism can have on animals (Fennell, 2012). For instance, global tourism firms, such as TripAdvisor, TUI and Thomas Cook, have taken concrete actions to promote animal welfare in the tourism industry (e.g. Coldwell, 2015; Fruen, 2017; Rushby, 2016). This development shows that animal welfare is becoming a part of consumer values, which are publicly addressed, including social media. In this sense, social media channels are a valuable source of information for both consumers and businesses (Li, Lin, Tsai & Wang, 2015).

Indeed, millions of travellers share their experiences through social media (Lee et al., 2011). The data left by online users can take various forms, such as comments, reviews, blog posts, tweets, pictures, videos, vlogs and other forms of uploaded material. This type of data is usually referred to as word of mouth, user-generated content or traveller-generated content. For the purposes of this study, we use the term "*user-generated content*", because gathered data includes not only footage by the tourists visiting Lapland but also responses of the companies and possibly comments by local residents using the services (this is especially the case for horse riding activities).

The study aims to gain a deeper understanding of tourists' views on animals working in tourism. To that end, we take up the task to look into user-generated social media content and discussions related to animals and animal-based tourism services in Lapland. The user-generated content included in the study is both visual (video, pictures) and textual (comments, reviews, discussions). The study focuses on user-generated content created during 2016, 2017 and January 2018. The content used in the study is related to 84 Lappish tourism companies.

The data, which were systematically collected from Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor and YouTube, were publicly available. Data analysis was conducted by using content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). The study was conducted by Dominika Klos, a Polish graduate student from the Master's Degree Programme "Tourism, Culture and International Management" (TourCIM), University of Lapland, under the close supervision and advice from Senior Lecturers PhD José-Carlos García-Rosell and PhD Minni Haanpää.

2. The study

This section offers an overview of how the study was conducted and the decisions that led to the results presented in the subsequent sections. The study was conducted in two stages during January and February 2018 by following a systematic approach. *The first stage of the study was focused on collecting user-generated social media content related to Lappish tourism companies producing and/or selling animal-based activities. The second stage was focused on the analysis of the gathered material.*

2.1. Data collection

The starting point for data collection was a list of 158 animal-based tourism service firms operating in Lapland (Bohn, García-Rosell and Äijälä, 2018). The list was created in the project “*Animal Welfare in Tourism Services*” – a project funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. From this list, only the companies which offer animal-based activities involving sled dogs, reindeer and horses were considered in the study. We also added Destination Management Companies (DMC) that sell animal-based activities to this group due to their significant presence in social media. Reindeer owners were excluded from this research, because their main business activity is not related to tourism. Furthermore, they would rarely have a website or any other tourism-related social media channel, which would be necessary for the purposes of this study. Similarly, to narrow the scope of the study, we did not include companies involved in fishing, hunting and wildlife-watching activities. By focusing on sled dogs, horses and reindeer, the study was implemented according to the scope and objectives of the project “Animals and Responsible Tourism”.

A total of 84 Lappish tourism companies were present in social media channels. Although many small companies limited themselves to keeping a Facebook page or a website with some basic information and contact details, they were often tagged by their customers in channels such as Instagram. This material was also included in the sample. It should be noted that only pictures and videos that had comments related to animals, animal welfare and the living or working conditions of animals were included in the sample. Each, out of the 84 companies identified were studied separately. The official websites of companies (if there was one) were checked for direct links to social media channels. Data comprise online content generated during 2016, 2017 and January 2018.

In the study, we focused on four main social media channels: **Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor and YouTube.** As a popular travel community website, TripAdvisor hosts a large variety of reviews and images related to destinations, hotels, attractions, activities, restaurants and airline services. Facebook offers a space to share comments, pictures, videos and reviews of any business that is present on that channel. Instagram is a channel for sharing images or videos and comments on them. Similarly, YouTube is used to share videos and comments. Twitter is also a channel with growing popularity. However, it was excluded from this study due to its limitations when it comes to the length of post (140 characters allowed), and because it is not commonly used to share travel experiences. In Table 1, we explain how data was collected from the chosen social media channels.

Social media Data collection	
TripAdvisor	Companies were checked whether they have established a review page on TripAdvisor by looking for a direct link on a company's website or using the search box on TripAdvisor. Once the company was found, each review was analysed separately. In case of reviews in languages other than English, Finnish, Polish or German, an online translator was used to investigate whether the review contains data relevant to the research. In the case of DMCs, if the number of reviews was higher than 300, search phrases was used to extract the reviews relevant to the project. We used the following search phrases: " <i>husky safari</i> ", " <i>dog</i> ", " <i>reindeer</i> ", " <i>reindeer safari</i> ", " <i>horse</i> ", " <i>animals</i> ". This was a necessary action with major DMCs, which had hundreds of reviews, and also since they offer activities not involving animals, the research of all reviews would be time-consuming.
Facebook	Each company was checked whether they are present on Facebook, either through the company's website or directly on Facebook's page. In this case, we looked at the pictures and videos uploaded by the company or by the customers. Each item was coded, and comments were gathered for further analysis.
Instagram	Each company was checked whether they are present on Instagram, either through the company's website or directly on Instagram's page. We looked at the photos and videos uploaded by the company as well as at those uploaded by the customers. Each item was coded, and the comments and discussions were collected for further analysis. Additionally, hashtags related to animal welfare were collected for analysis.
YouTube	Each company was investigated whether they are present on YouTube, either through the company's website or directly on YouTube's page. We looked for videos left by the companies and by the customers. Each video was coded and comments were collected for further analysis.

Table 1. Data collection from four social media channels

2.2. Data analysis

Content analysis, a method for an objective, systematic, quantitative and qualitative description of empirical data, was used in this study (see Bengtsson, 2016). The analysis was performed both quantitatively and qualitatively. While the quantitative approach to content analysis helps determine the frequency of certain content in the data, the qualitative approach focuses on the words and themes, making it possible to draw interpretations from the data (Bengtsson, 2016). Furthermore, the analysis was based on the latent and inductive approach to content analysis; that is, our focus was on describing the meaning of the text (Bengtsson, 2016). From this perspective, we analysed the data with an open mind to find meaningful subjects that answer the research question. These methodological choices help us get insight into the views of Lapland tourists on animal welfare and the use of animals in tourism services.

A total of 351 items were found relevant to the study, including pictures, videos and reviews. Each item was manually coded according to the scheme discussed later in this report. Microsoft Office Excel was used to collect and organize data. Firstly, the analysis of pictures and videos are introduced together with the findings, while the analysis of written data (comments, discussions and reviews) is provided separately in the following chapter. Prior to data collection, we familiarized ourselves with a data sample and created a draft document for analysis with the identification of core categories. This was followed by a trial run of data collection, which helped establish more categories and develop the scheme; thus, the categories were established inductively – in relation to collected data. The guidelines for data collection and analysis of both visual and written material were guided by studies conducted by Dincer and Alrawadieh (2017), Bengtsson (2016) and Edelheim (2007).

In this study, it was rather challenging to establish the demographic profile of commenters and reviewers. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube make it possible for users to protect their privacy. Only TripAdvisor discloses basic user profile information which can give an overall picture of a reviewer's place of origin and, thus, help get insights into user demographics. During data collection, each item received a code, which was a combination of

letters referring to the company name and the social media channel. However, for the purposes of this report, the codes were changed in order to avoid making associations with any particular company. The report uses neutral codes that help preserve the anonymity of the companies in the data.

2.3. Ethical considerations

The study was performed with consent from the University of Lapland and in accordance with the general principles of research ethics and good scientific practice established by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity. During the entire process of data collection and analysis, we stayed true to the data; none of the information was changed, manipulated or taken out from the context in order to fit a certain pattern. Also, the visual material was not downloaded or stored, and the process of data collection did not neglect the copyright of the authors. Collected comments and reviews were not assigned a name or username out of respect to user privacy. Similarly, none of the comments used in this research were assigned to any specific tourism business or DMC; the list of companies and social media channels from which the data was gathered is accessible to the research team only.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the research and categorization processes, some scholars suggest the codes to be examined by a third-party (external) researcher (Berg, 2001; Kassarian, 1977 in Dincer & Alrawadieh, 2017). Therefore, in this case, one may question whether the standards for assuring reliability and validity in research have been met, since only one researcher carried out the whole process. Even though the first author of the report worked on the research independently, she had been in constant contact with research supervisors, who assisted with guidelines and suggestions on how to carry out the process, thus, the necessary level of research validity and reliability was assured.

3. Findings: Visual material

The analysis of pictures and videos are quantitative in nature. The following charts introduce a numerical juxtaposition of different elements occurring in the visual material, in order to investigate the context in which tourists, locals and tourism companies engage in the discussion about animals and animal welfare.

3.1. Type of content

193 reviews and 15 reviews with pictures were collected from TripAdvisor, while the rest was collected from other social media channels, which includes 113 pictures and 30 videos (Figure 1). This shows that the leading social media channel for discussions about animal welfare was TripAdvisor. In their reviews, the customers of tourism companies shared their overall experience and often commented on the quality of life of working animals in Lapland. The second major scene for discussion was pictures uploaded through various social media channels, where several people could leave comments and engage in discussions with other users. While the video material had a relatively small share in the discussion, there was a significant number of videos on Instagram and much fewer on YouTube, but they were not frequently commented on in relation to animal welfare or responsible tourism.

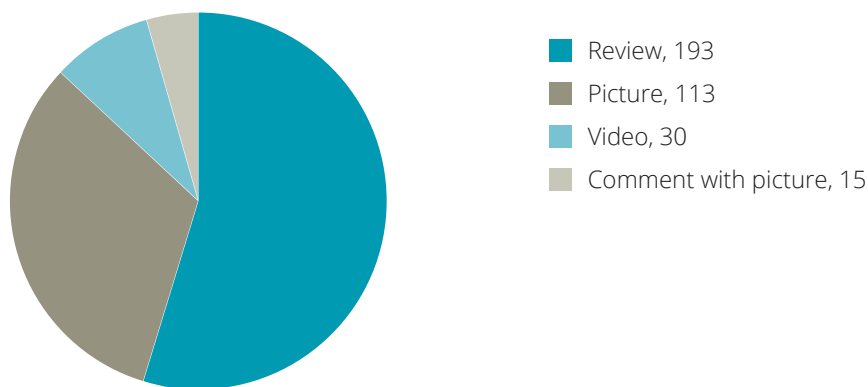


Figure 1. Types of content

3.2. Content creator

We looked at the creator of the content included in the sample. According to the findings, most of the content, that is 228 items, was uploaded by tourists. Animal-based tourism companies were responsible for the creation of 120 items, and only 3 items belonged to DMCs (Figure 2). This shows that content creation was mostly dominated by tourists, and that social media channels of DMCs were not a common area for comments and discussions regarding animals.

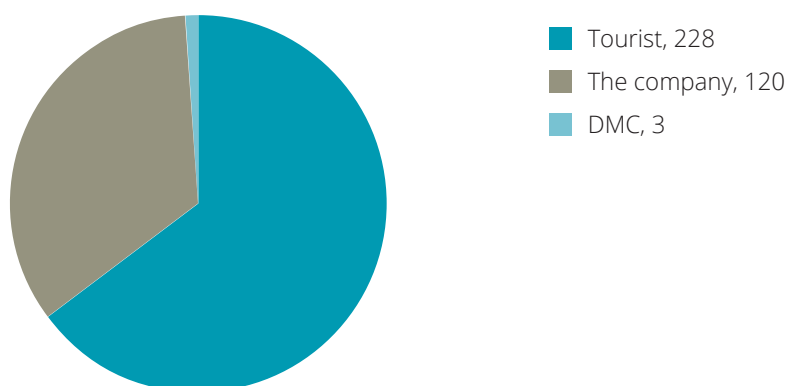


Figure 2. Content creator

3.3. People included in visual material

We also looked into the presence of people in the pictures and videos included. We wanted to find out who were in the images (tourists, workers etc.) and which group prevailed in the visual material. The analysis showed that 72 items did not portray any people. Tourists were present in 41 items and workers (including owners, guides and other company staff members) – in 19 items. Furthermore, 25 items included both tourists and workers. In 3 cases, it was not possible to identify the person in the image. This was due to poor quality of the material or because the person was too far in the background, making it hard to assign them to any particular group (Figure 3). The visual material including people slightly prevails over pictures without people. It is an important point to notice that workers could have been captured in pictures and videos due to their active role in animal-based tourism experiences.

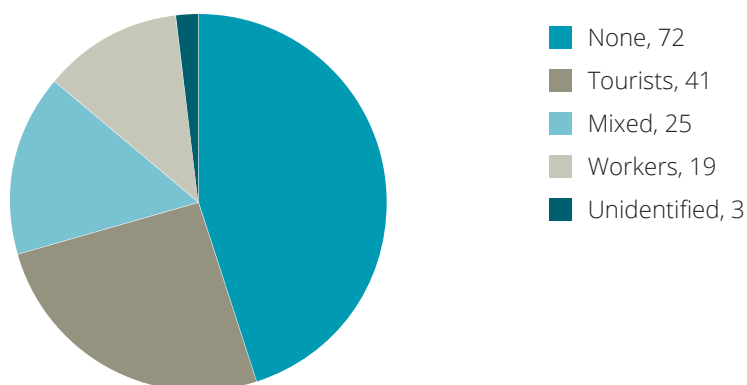


Figure 3. People included in the visual material

3.4. Animals included in visual material

It was also important to examine which animals were included in the visual material, and which species triggered most discussions and comments. Sled dogs clearly took the leading role in the content included in the sample. We identified a total of 312 items related to sled dogs, while 28 items were related to reindeer. Horses were only represented in 9 items. One picture captured a mix of animal species, and one did not include animals (Figure 4). The discussion about animals was usually related to the animals portrayed in the visual material. The pictures of the kennel without animals did not trigger a discussion about animal welfare.

The findings show that tourists were genuinely concerned about the life and living conditions of dogs, which surely comes from the attachment people have to dogs as pets. Reindeer, which are semi-wild, did not raise as much concern as dogs. They occurred in many pictures, but there was simply no discussion or comments around that material. It raises the question of whether reindeer are considered an attraction and an integral part of the Lappish wilderness, which does not raise many concerns about their well-being. In the case of horses, it is clear that they are not the main reason to visit Lapland, and services such as horse riding are mainly used by locals and national tourists. Although horses, similarly to dogs, often raise animal welfare concerns among people, they played a minimal role in this study.

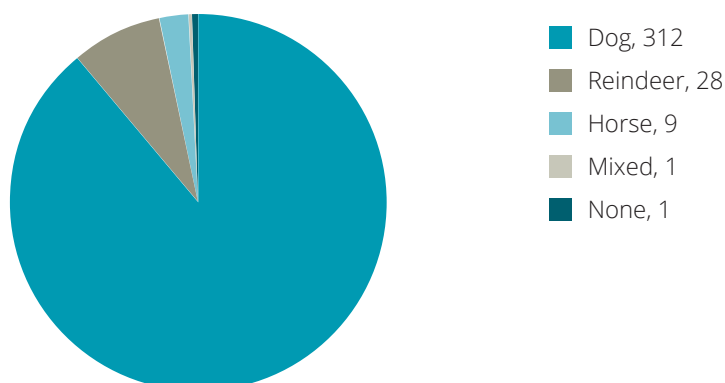


Figure 4. Animals included in visual material

3.5. Active and passive nature of the visual material

Next, we explored whether the pictures and videos had an active or passive character. By active character, we mean one that represents some sort of activity, dynamism and movement. Active pictures included ones showing husky safaris, playing with the animals or feeding them. In contrast, a passive character refers to static situations, such as posing for the picture or animals in static situations like sleeping or resting. As a result, in this research, the division between active and passive is nearly equal; there were 77 active items and 80 passive items (Figure 5). 3 items were identified as mixed, which were usually cases of several pictures combined into one, a feature on Facebook or Instagram. There was a clear balance between active and passive pictures.

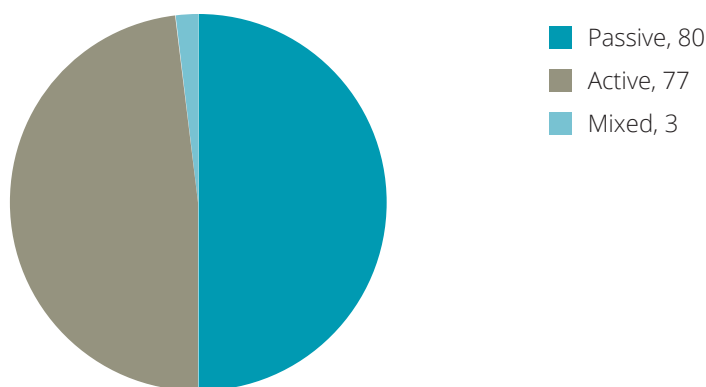


Figure 5. Active and passive nature of the visual material

3.6. The surroundings

By paying attention to the surroundings, we identified four categories: outdoor in nature, outdoor within the farm and fenced area, outdoor mix of activities in nature and within the farm (that was the usual case for videos, which can capture more than a picture) and indoors. The results show that 73 items portray an outdoor area around the farm and fence, 71 captured the natural surroundings of Lappish wilderness, 9 items included a mix of farm and nature, while 7 pictures and videos were taken indoors (Figure 6). Clearly, the outdoor surroundings in both the farm and nature took a leading role. As most of the companies give their customers time to spend with dogs as a part of the experience, it is understandable that the number of pictures taken within the farm and fenced area is relatively high. The pictures taken indoors were generally posted by the companies and portrayed new born puppies or some emergency situation like nursing an ill or injured dog.

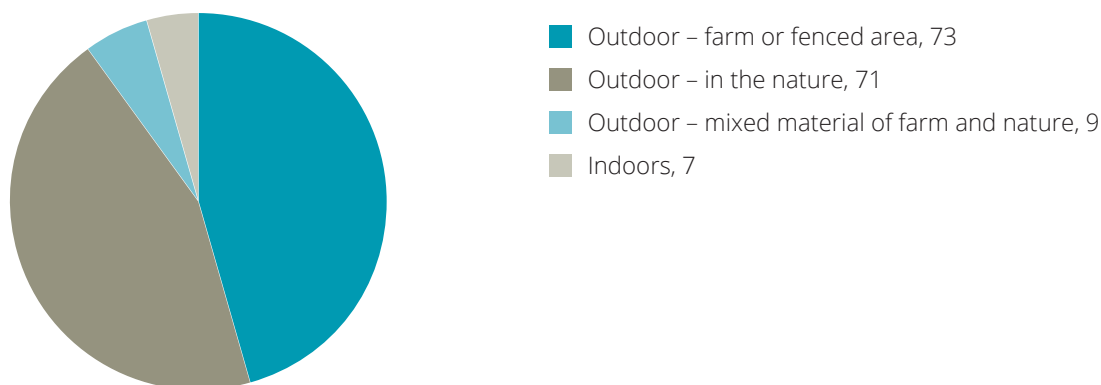


Figure 6. The surroundings

3.7. The seasons

We also considered seasonality in the study. We decided to focus on three main seasons: winter, summer and autumn, while spring was excluded from this category. The reason was that four generally classified seasons do not apply to the Arctic latitude. We also needed to consider that the upload date of a picture or a video did not

always match the season captured, making it difficult to determine the season. Often during the spring months of April and May in the Arctic, there still is a winter-like aura, while in the autumn, in October and November, the winter season may have already begun.

Thus, for this research, the decision was made for the winter category to be applied as a clear representation of the winter aura, snow and frost in the surroundings, while the summer category applied to the months with green surroundings, usually from June to August, and autumn was categorized for the ruska season, September to October. The analysis showed that the majority of the material applied to the winter season, with a result of 124 items, followed by the summer season with 21 items and autumn, pictured 6 times. The unidentified season relates to pictures taken indoors and occurred in 9 cases (Figure 7). The dominant season for visiting Lapland was winter, which is showed in the data.

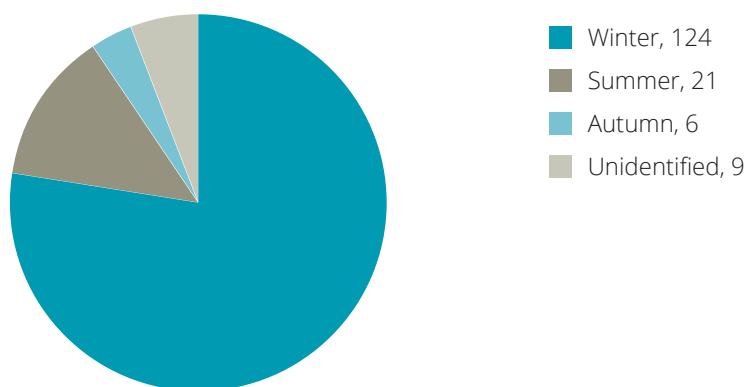


Figure 7. The seasons

3.8. The activities

In the study, we also examined the activities and situations captured in the visual material. We identified eight types of activities or situations. The most common type (with 76 items) was visual material, in which animals were at the centre of attention without any form of human-animal interaction. The second most common type (with 56 items) was the driving or riding activity such as dogsledding and horse riding. The third most common type (with 12 items) was taking a picture together with the animals. This was particularly related to pictures where people were posing with the animals, making it a meticulously planned and staged activity. In this case, the interaction of people with the animals was purely for taking a memorable photo.

In addition, there were pictures capturing the training of animals (8 items), and people playing with animals (3 items). Two items showed animals being fed, and a mix of activities was seen twice in video format. One picture captured images of the company premises, but without the presence of animals (Figure 8). It could be noted that pictures and videos of activities and situations involving animals or their interaction with people clearly triggered discussions and comments regarding the animals and their life in company premises.

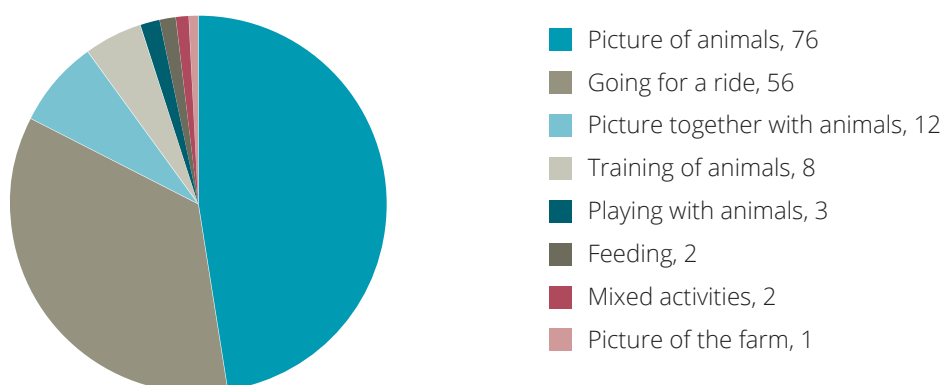


Figure 8. The activity captured in the visual material

When analysing the material on Instagram, the researcher also put special consideration into the hashtags used to describe pictures and videos with animals. The ones which related to animal well-being, animal rights or responsible tourism were noted. The most often used hashtags were #happydog #huskylife #adoptdontshop #retiredsleddog #adoptme #supporthumanemushing #getsleeducated #dogswithjobs #retirement #workingpets #musherlife. They emphasized concerns about adoption, dog retirement and animal working life, with a strong dominance of dogs over reindeer or horses.

4. Findings: Textual material

A total of 344 comments, discussions and reviews were collected. By carefully reading through the data, we were able to identify two core categories: animals considered in the comments and animals omitted in the comments. Each core category was built from specific categories related to the subject of discussion and were described as follows (Table 1):

Animals considered in the comments		
Category	Nature of the comments	# of comments
Animal welfare	The focus of these comments were on the general living conditions and treatment of animals. Positive comments included such as <i>happy, healthy, well-fed, well-taken care, treated with respect, having enough outdoor space, have a shelter, clean</i> . Negative comments included such as <i>stinking, dirty, hungry, injured, shouted at, beaten up, unhappy</i> . These comments also included issues such as <i>animal health, ethical considerations, use of chains, retirement and adoption plans</i> .	331
Superficiality	Comments describing animals as <i>cute, pretty, adorable or ugly, hideous, dull</i> etc. The focus was on the appearance of the animals.	45
Animal behaviour	Comments focusing on the behaviour of the animals. Words such as <i>nice, friendly, playful or scary, frightening, violent, biting</i> etc.	37
Education	Comments describing the opportunity to learn about the animals and their life or about the cultural tradition, (e.g. reindeer herding).	15
Animals omitted in the comments		
Category	Nature of the comments	# of comments
Experience evaluation	Comments related to the experiences and services, words such as <i>having fun, great adventure or bad experience, unprofessional guide</i> .	19
Weather conditions	Comments focusing on the weather such as <i>cold, freezing, sunny, snowy</i> .	3
Landscape	Comments such as <i>beautiful surroundings, beautiful nature, beautiful picture</i> .	3
Dream fulfilment	Expressions such as <i>"my dream came true", "it looks like a dream"</i> .	3
Safety	Comments related to the safety of the activities (dogsledding) or in Lapland in general.	3

Table 1. Textual material categories

4.1. Animals considered in the comments

4.1.1. Animal welfare

As the largest category identified, animal welfare covers a wide range of issues related to the life and treatment of animals. We divided this category into eight sub-categories: Care, Health, Love, Work, Chains, Animal facilities, Ethical considerations and Retirement and adoption (Figure 10).

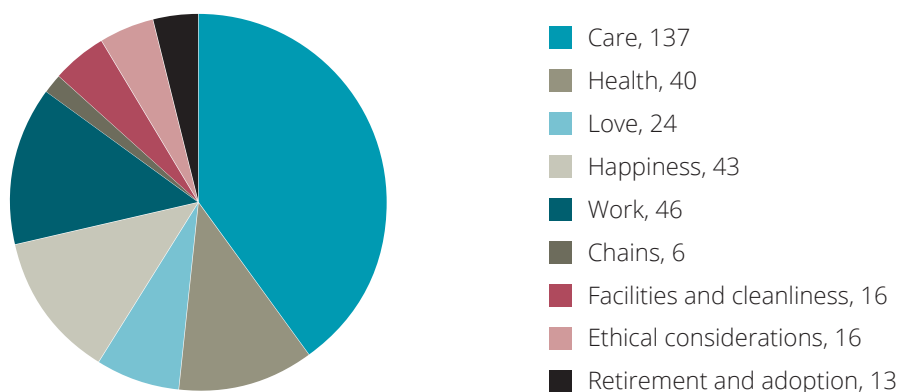


Figure 9. Sub-categories of animal welfare

Care: The category contains such expressions as *the animals are well taken care of; the animals are well looked after; they care about their dogs; the animals are treated well; the animals have good living conditions; the dogs are treated like family members*. Tourists using animal-based tourism services pay a lot of attention to animal welfare. For example, in the comments, they were concerned about whether the animals were well-fed, protected from the cold with appropriate clothing (capas for horses and dogs, socks for sled dogs etc.) or if the animals had enough free time to recover after the rides. Tourists who were more concerned about how animals are treated and taken care of contacted the companies directly. They did careful online research before booking the service. There were 137 comments related to the caring for the animals.

“My main concern with any ‘tourist attraction’ that involves animals is how they are cared for and that they are not exploited. At XX it is very clear to see that this is not the case” (BXXTA44).

“I was a bit sceptical of these kinds of things (re: animal’s quality of life), but XX really opened my eyes to the world of sled dogs. These beautiful dogs love what they do and they are properly cared for and very much loved” (BXXTA23).

“I chose XX because of their working philosophy of taking the best care for the dogs” (CXXTA38).

“We looked at many different husky safari tour options before choosing XX mainly for their values on lifetime care for the dogs” (CXXTA35).

The comments in this sub-category express a very strong concern for the welfare of animals. In particular, when tourists are making decisions about which horse riding tour, husky or reindeer safari to book. These concerns needed to be addressed by any company selling animal-based tourism services. There are currently few companies that provide information about animal welfare or their animal care philosophy in social media or on their websites.

Health: Animal health related aspects were the subject of comments and discussions 40 times in total. Apart from the general concern about the health and condition of dogs, reindeer health was also frequently commented on. People were curious about reindeer antlers, specifically, whether it hurts when reindeer lose the skin off the antlers (when they noticed blood and loose skin). For some, seeing a reindeer with one antler or with loose bloody skin on it was an alarming sign, but this natural condition was usually explained by the reindeer owners.

“Reindeer (females and males) shed antlers every year, and every year, the antlers grow back a little bit bigger again” JXXFB1.

In general, people tended to leave comments about the condition of dogs; strong and healthy dogs were a sign that the owners were doing their best for the animals.

“The [personnel] is always making sure that all of them are doing well and staying healthy” CXXTA24.

In some cases, the companies shared the recovery process from an injury or after surgical operations to make their customers aware that the animals are absolute priority. Showing animals receiving necessary help when sick or injured is a favourable practice to raise awareness of animal welfare in tourism business.

Love: Treating the animals as part of the family and expressing love to them was another common attribute stressed in the data (24 times):

“They clearly love the dogs and you could tell the dogs felt it” BXXTA3.

If animals received a lot of attention from the staff, on top of basic care like feeding or health checks, the customers expressed their gratitude for professionalism in taking good care of the animals.

Happiness: In addition to love, happiness was another virtue that was noticed often (43 times). Happy dogs that were excited to see people gave off a good impression that the animals were well cared for:

Customer’s comment: *“the dogs seem very happy, and that farm takes very good care of them.”* Company’s response: *“it means a lot to us that you could see that the dogs are all very happy, since we try our absolute hardest to fulfil all of their individual needs”* (CXXTA19).

Animals being loved and happy are the proof that the company is not focused on just making profit but values the wellbeing of their animals.

Work: It was noticed that dogs, reindeer and horses are working animals in contrast to house pets (46 times). Working animals serve as help to people with different tasks; they have to be trained and prepared physically to do their job properly without any harm to their own health. Some people raised concerns whether it is right to use animals for working purposes:

“I wasn’t certain I’d enjoy this (don’t like the idea of animals suffering in any way), but from the start, you just know this is what the dogs live for!” TXXTA10.

Many companies stress that husky dogs are a breed raised for work. As a result, thanks to their strength and proper training, they are not only able but enjoy running and pulling the sleds. Although this information is key to avoid misunderstandings and criticism regarding the use of animals, the data shows that some customers will still be critical.

Chains: There were 6 comments related to the use of chains. The attitude towards dogs in chains differs to a greater extent. Customers who received information about why chains are used tend to become more receptive to this practice. In cases where information was not given, people expressed their concerns about the use of chains and whether it was necessary, appropriate or even ethical. These are the examples of comments where the customers were most likely not given any explanations about the use of chains in the kennel.

“Also, I wouldn’t waste your money on the husky farm. It’s just all the dogs chained to concrete” KXXTA4.

“All huskies are chained separately all day and night, whether it is minus 35 or not, [they] are only out of their chains to be harnessed to the sleds, when they finish their jobs, they are back at their slave pens” HXXTA1.

The comment below is an example of a situation where the customer was explained the use of chains.

“They were chained to their kennels, however, the owner explained it was to stop any fighting amongst the dogs” HXXTA4.

Although some comments may indicate poor treatment of the dogs, in some cases, it could be a result of misunderstandings. If the husky farm needs to use chains in some cases, they should give a clear explanation of the reasons behind it, preferably face-to-face with their customers as well as on their social media channels. Nevertheless, it should be noted that chains are very sensible due to the association of sled dogs with house dogs or pets.

Animal facilities: The condition of the kennels and the cleanliness of facilities for animals came up in the discussion about animal welfare (16 times). For the customers, it seemed important that the animals live in clean and well-maintained spaces:

“The place where all the dogs are staying is really clean as well. Everything looks well-maintained” HXXTA6.

The customer: *“I have read about many other tours where customers find the dog smells unpleasant – not a problem here at all.”* The company: *“We are happy to hear that our efforts to keep the kennel clean are noticed”* BXXTA52.

The fact that the living spaces for animals are clean and spacious, that the kennel is regularly renovated and improved gives off an impression of a good company that really cares for their animals. It was noted that some companies shared the kennel renovation progress on Facebook and Instagram. Although they did not receive plenty of comments, their effort was praised by a significant amount of “likes” given by the users. The results show that communicating any efforts made by the company to improve the quality of life of their animals, is seen as a positive and are welcome by the customers.

Ethical considerations: There were 16 comments that associated animal welfare with ethical treatment of animals and showing respect towards them. People seem to be concerned about animal rights and the exploitation of animals for entertainment purposes. For example, some people chose animal-based tourism companies based on their own ethical values. Indeed, they were willing to take extra effort to contact different companies to gain information about the companies’ ethical attitude towards animal rights.

“I did a lot of research into which husky safari to choose and wanted to book with one which had good ethics and clearly cared for the dogs. From the moment I started corresponding with XX at XX, I knew that this was important to him and the farm also” (TXXTA16).

“My primary criteria was ensuring that the company I chose had strong ethics at its heart by focusing on dog welfare and was able to offer a hands-on experience” (CXXTA40).

“Their no-kill policy convinced me to choose this farm” (CXXTA48).

The strong voice of the negative comments referred to an economic approach towards dogs such as exploiting them or euthanising the ill:

“Firstly, please understand this is a business, so like most businesses, the focus is on profits to the extent that animal welfare is not a priority” (HXXTA1).

All these comments send a strong message that ethics in animal treatment is not a subject to be ignored. The fact that most of these comments were from 2017 shows that the trends toward the ethical treatment of animals in the tourism industry is a growing concern in the public discussion.

Retirement and adoption plans: Customers of tourism companies in Lapland were curious about the senior years of working animals, mostly relating to dogs. In response to the interest, some businesses put a transparent policy into action regarding retirement and adoption plans on their websites and social media channels. It has been noted that people express deep concern about the life of dogs once they are no longer able to pull the sled. There were 13 comments related to this aspect.

“We were really impressed about (...) the ethical standards (older and sick dogs are on the farm even if they don’t run the sledges anymore)” (CXXTA32).

“Paddy is retired (and up for adoption), while the little ones will be working in the near future to pay the expenses of his retirement. Dog Service Retirement System” (CXXIN2).

“The farm also takes in local rescue dogs and has a policy of never euthanizing a healthy dog. Retired dogs are often walked by guests and there are also sponsorships and adoption programmes” (CXXTA23).

“I love that XX continues to look after the older dogs” (AXXTA1).

Several companies created adoption profiles on social media for their older dogs which were up for adoption; this way, they were able to describe the character of the dog in detail and tell stories from its life. The announcement was made once the dog found a new home. Such actions received a lot of attention from social media users; the posts were widely commented on, shared and followed. Thus, people are not indifferent when it comes to an animal’s fate; they want to know that the animals will have a comfortable life in the future. Tourism companies are encouraged to make clear statements about their policy towards animal retirement to gain customer trust.

4.1.2. Superficiality

Comments related to animal appearance and superficial features occurred 45 times. People most often tended to notice that the animals are beautiful, cute, adorable and wonderful. Generally, pictures of husky puppies triggered emotional responses, while comments about reindeer and horses occurred only a few times. Showing images and videos of animal behaviour and how approachable they are may trigger new potential tourists to book their trip to Lapland.

“Really nice video! It shows how adorable and nice they are!” (KXXYT1).

4.1.3. Animal behaviour

References to animal behaviour occurred 37 times. In these comments, animals were described as friendly. Many sled dog companies allow their customers to interact with the dogs after the run. The dogs enjoy attention from people, while the tourists appreciate the time to play with them and to take pictures. It seems that interaction with the animals is a crucial element of the experience, since it seems to prevail in the comments.

“I was little scared of dogs, but those huskies have really amazing characters and I g[o]t [a] lot of new husky friends” (BXXTA31).

4.1.4. Education

Another category emerging from the data was related to the educational aspect of the interaction with animals (identified 15 times). Tourists appreciated the storytelling, including stories about a dog’s life cycle and training for dogsledding as well as about reindeer herding and Sami traditions:

“Our children particularly enjoyed feeding and touching the reindeer, and I enjoyed meeting with our guide and learning about reindeer life in a farm” (LXXTA2).

In the educational context, reindeer were mentioned as often as dogs. Reindeer are indeed an essential part of life for people in Lapland, as much from the historical point of view as it is nowadays. Thus, bringing up the stories about humans and animals living in Lapland was a key element in the tourist experiences. People, who are visiting Lapland should be given information about the relations with reindeer, because some may misunderstand why animals are also killed for meat production. This subject is further elaborated in the next section dedicated to the negative comments found in the social media research conducted in this study.

4.1.5. Negative responses

We decided to examine negative responses separately in order to get a clear understanding of the main reasons behind customer dissatisfaction and concerns regarding the use of animals in tourism. In the data sample, we identified 20 opinions and concerns with a pejorative tone. While some comments were clearly a result of a lack of knowledge about the animals or misunderstandings, some draw attention to animal abuse and mistreatment.

“The reindeer aren’t overly friendly and aren’t too keen on posing for photos with you” (LXXTA4).

In this comment, as in other similar ones, the customers did not understand that even though reindeer live on a farm, they are still wild animals that do not behave like a pet or a sled dog. If the workers are able to give information about the animals and their behaviour, similar feedback can be avoided in the future.

Customer’s comment: *“Offers lovely tours with reindeer, but you’ll quickly discover that they offer to kill a fox for 70€”*. Company’s response: *“We do not offer or promise to kill any animal for fun, neither on the website nor orally”* (KXXTA1).

In the above example, the company explained the hunting activities, animal protection and the lifestyle of people in the North. It seemed very important for the company to make it clear that they have no bad intentions towards animals and wanted to clear up the misinterpretation on the customer’s side. This was a good example of how a company could handle complaints to avoid spreading negative opinions. However, in some of similar cases, there was no response from the service provider, which can lead to negative outcomes. Following one’s own social media channels should be a part of marketing and management strategies, because it is one of the most direct ways to hear and respond to customer feedback.

In addition, unpleasant smell and noises also triggered negative comments. This could be rooted in the preconceptions tourists have before visiting a sled dog company. In the pictures of husky safari companies available online and in the brochures, all people see are happy friendly dogs and tourists having the time of their lives. While in reality, when a person arrives at the spot, he/she sees dogs in cages, sometimes chained up, loudly howling and barking. Safari companies usually have from several dozens to a few hundred dogs. So, these places can sometimes be noisy and have a particular smell. Customers could be made aware of this experience. Finally, some comments were linked to animal mistreatment.

“Their huskies are kept in horrible conditions and look sad with ribs sticking out! Anyone who has a dog knows what a happy dog looks like! This was a HORROR SHOW!” (KXXTA3).

“The dogs are not well served by the company, seeing as they make so much money, the dogs are poorly housed, not well fed enough (too thin for working dogs) and too many of them have bad cuts, bites and injuries. It’s a shame” (HXXTA6).

Comments and reviews left online are not always the best source of information when making a judgement about a company or any particular service, because one cannot know what the intentions of the writer were. However, when a company receives several similar bad comments, the reader may come to the conclusion that the place is not worth visiting. Thus, the worst kind of feedback is one left without any answer from the part of the company, as in the examples above.

4.2. Animals omitted in the comments

Here, we briefly discussed the categories with comments where animals were not considered at all.

4.2.1. Experience evaluation

In total, there were 19 comments where people wrote about their experience using animal-based tourism services in Lapland. In these comments, people talk about having a great time or expressing their gratitude to the company for the organization of the safari, the professionalism of the guides and the whole staff. Some tourists emphasized that the husky safari was the highlight of their entire holiday in Lapland.

“That trip with the husky was for us the absolute highlight of our holiday in Lapland” (HXXFB4).

There were also comments reflecting that the husky safari was the experience of a lifetime. In order to give such feedback, the experience must have exceeded the expectations of the customer.

“Dog sledding with you guys was one of the best experience in my life. We really had a lot of fun!” (SXXFB3).

Although the majority of comments were related to the husky safari, some also referred to reindeer, especially feeding them.

“Feeding reindeer is [a] wonderful experience” (LXXFB1).

Tourists generally tended to write that riding reindeer sleds was not as exciting as dog sledding, usually because of the speed. Activities in reindeer sleds lead by a guide lacked the element of speed, raising the level of adrenaline. However, meeting, touching and feeding the reindeer was a much-appreciated experience. Because reindeer is a semi-wild animal in Lapland, it is more approachable by people than other wild animals.

4.2.2. Weather conditions

The comments regarding weather in Lapland during safaris occurred very rarely, only 3 times in total (Note: only pictures and videos with animal presence were considered in this study). It seemed that other aspects of the experience were more important than the weather. People more likely reflect on weather conditions in different circumstances, for instance, while taking pictures of nature. Regardless, tourists paid attention to the cold and beauty of winter in Lapland:

“Looks like winter, beautiful and cold” (PXXFB2).

4.2.3. Landscape

The qualities of landscape of the Lappish wilderness, including animals, were not directly related to the animals considered in the study. Three comments were included in this category.

“Idyllic landscape like as a postcard” (LXXFB1).

4.2.4. Dream fulfilment

For some people, spending their vacation in Lapland was a dream come true (3 times). They expressed their gratitude for making the trip special and memorable:

“You make so many people’s dream come true, I still get emotional when I think of our husky experience” (CXXFB4).

For some people traveling from outside Europe, visiting Lapland was a once-in-a-lifetime experience:

“It was definitely an once-in-a-lifetime experience” (BXXTA25).

Thus, tourism providers should fulfil their promises towards customers at all times and be at their best behaviour at work, since word-of-mouth is one of the strongest marketing tools, as the possibility of receiving tourists from far places around the world is growing with each year since Lapland is getting more recognition.

4.2.5. Safety

The general safety of the activity involving animals was mentioned 3 times. People made it clear that the activities were appropriate for families with children and emphasized that the safari began with safety instructions.

“The hus[k]y safari is clean, great and safe, highly recommend for family with children” (BXXTA21).

During each activity, the guides make sure that everyone is safe and prevent tourists from making any dangerous moves where they could harm themselves or other users; thus, those activities are generally also safe for children or seniors. The comments regarding safety did not mention Lapland as a safe travel destination, at least in this context.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate what the themes of discussions are in social media channels regarding animals used in the tourism industry in Lapland. To that end, visual material (pictures and videos) and written material (comments, reviews and discussions) were collected from Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TripAdvisor and analysed accordingly by using the content analysis method.

The research revealed two main groups of discussions: one considering animals in the comments and one omitting animals in the comments. In each group, specific themes were identified and analysed. Most of the data belonged to the group considering animals in the comments. In this group, the following categories were identified: Animal welfare, Superficiality, Animal behaviour and Education. The animal welfare category was further subdivided into eight sub-categories: Care, Health, Love, Work, Chains, Animal facilities, Ethical considerations and Retirement and adoption plan. As sled dogs, reindeer and horses are working animals, it was important that working conditions, the quality of animal facilities (fences, kennels) and ethical treatment were considered in the discussions.

The results show that people tended to have strong opinions on the use of chains and expressed deep concerns about the retirement of working animals (Retirement and adoption plans). The topic of animal welfare was clearly dominating over other themes, which leads to the conclusion that people are genuinely concerned and interested in responsible and ethical use of animals in the tourism industry. We also noticed that not many companies share their animal welfare philosophy or policy. This study shows that it is of extreme importance that companies communicate their animal welfare values and philosophy to their customers by using their website and social media channels. This contributes to the promotion of transparency of their operations and helps avoid misunderstanding or confusion among customers. Indeed, we identified a wide range of negative comments in the social media channels included in this study.

The majority of negative comments were clearly misunderstandings and misinterpretations related to working animals in Lapland. Fortunately, in many cases, the companies themselves responded to those comments to clear up the confusion. It should be noted that not all tourists visiting Lapland understand the historical and cultural relation between humans and animals living there. Thus, tourists need to be informed and educated concerning the animals, their cultural meaning and the way they live and work within a tourism context. Putting the information on websites, in the brochures and using storytelling during visits to the farm would certainly be a way to increase awareness and knowledge among tourists. There was also a category where animals were omitted in the comments. The comments were related to the following themes: experience evaluation, weather conditions, landscape, dream fulfilment and safety. However, these groups represented a minority of comments in the study.

We made also some interesting observations related to the animal-based tourism services in Lapland. First, most concerns, comments and discussions were related to sled dogs and only few to reindeer and horses. Most of the comments related to horses came from Finnish customers. Most of the comments on animal welfare issues were made directly on the social media channels of the animal-based tourism companies. The discussions related to the tourism experiences, where animals were treated as an element of the service, took place on the social media channels of tour operators and DMCs.

The results also show that tourists use the social media channels of tour operators and DMCs to express their concerns with Lapland becoming a mass tourism destination. Tourists are expressing their dissatisfaction of being put on trips with several dozens of other people, that there is no personalized service, and the uniqueness of the experience is not being delivered as promised on the websites. The following comment from TripAdvisor serves as an example.

“An organization designed to cater to large groups of tourists, with packaged and totally uneventful activities.”

English was the prevailing language on social media channels used in this study. It was followed by French, German and Spanish. There were almost no comments in Russian and Asian languages. One reason could be that tourists from these regions used their own region-specific social media channels. The exception were comments from users from Hong Kong and Singapore, who mainly wrote in English.

To conclude, this report indicated that there are growing concerns about animal welfare and the responsible use of animals in tourism among Lapland visitors. There was a group of tourists that book animal-based tourism activities after doing a carefully and extensive research of companies prior to their visit. For them, the ethical treatment of animals was an absolute priority. This is proof of the changing views regarding responsible tourism and the role of animals in society.

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