Welcoming Online Communities

Social Sustainability of ESN Kalmar

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Abstract

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) plays an important role in the integration process of international students who spend their study abroad period in a new country. ESN community in Kalmar in Sweden has Facebook groups for every semester which spread the hospitality through the local ESN members, also called as ‘hosts’, for the new members who can be called either ‘guests’, ‘tourists’, ‘exchange students’ or ‘freemovers’.

The previous literature in tourism regarding social life online has emphasised the user-generated content on travel-related online communities on social media and ‘mobility turn’ that is an emerged topic in social sciences and has put social into travel and has thus forced researches to come up with new mobile methods to study online communities. Despite the fact that the word ‘social’ seems to be everywhere, social sustainability has been somewhat overlooked research area particularly in terms of online communities. This thesis project aims to fill this gap in the tourism literature and seeks to find out what social sustainability means in a context of online communities. Social sustainability forms the conceptual framework of the thesis and discusses the hosts and guests paradigm connecting it to online environments.

The empirical material was collected by using qualitative methods including online survey distributed on ESN Kalmar Facebook groups and netnography concerning the ESN Kalmar online communities on Facebook. In addition to a theoretical contribution, the thesis project makes a methodological addition since netnography is still underutilised method among tourism scholars. These methods provided comprehensive data both from subjective and objective perspectives. The data was analysed by thematic analysis under the themes of social support, well-being and friendships, which were found to be connected to socially sustainable communities in the literature.

The results found that online communities benefit from offline meetings that make the relationships between the community members stronger and thus create trust among the members. The role of the hosts and their local knowledge in the online community was proven vital in making guests to feel welcome, cared and supported during their study abroad period. However, the socially sustainable online community requires interaction and hospitality from both parties. Social sustainability of an online community can be disrupted if the community members are not cooperating and being open enough.

Besides the local importance of the study in developing ESN Kalmar’s online community dynamics by emphasising the role of social sustainability, the results can be applied to discussions of internet behaviour in general. Also, the study provides help for communities where the roles between the hosts and guests are constantly “on move”.

Keywords: Social sustainability, online communities, hosts and guests, mobile methods, social media.
# Contents

1 Introduction 1

2 Literature review in previous tourism research 5
   2.1 Social media in previous tourism research 5
   2.2 Interactive mobility 7
   2.3 Mobile methods 10

3 Social sustainability of online communities 13
   3.1 Social sustainability 13
   3.2 Online communities 16
   3.3 Hosts and guests online 20
   3.4 Social support, well-being and friendships online 22

4 Methodology 25
   4.1 Social constructivism and constructivism 25
   4.2 Methodological positioning 27
   4.3 Methods for collecting data 28
   4.4 Ethical considerations 31
   4.5 Analysing the data 33

5 Analysis of social sustainability of ESN Kalmar 35
   5.1 Social support 35
   5.2 Well-being 40
   5.3 Friendships 44

6 Discussion 47

7 Conclusion 51

References 56

Appendixes 65

Appendix 1. Online survey on “Online Communities – Social Sustainability of ESN Kalmar” 65
1 Introduction

“On behalf of the ESN Board, we would just like to say a big WELCOME to the ESN Kalmar - Spring 2018 Facebook page! We are looking forward to you all coming and joining us in the lovely city of Kalmar! We will keep you updated with upcoming news and information soon. Any questions please do not hesitate to contact us. See you all very soon!”

This is how international exchange students and freemovers are welcomed by the hosts for study abroad experience to Sweden and to Facebook page of ESN Kalmar online community. The exciting fact in this online community is that the roles between hosts and guests are constantly ‘on move’ since the roles change every semester. Some international students who stay abroad for a longer time instead of only one semester become hosts for the next exchange students. On the other hand, some hosts who finish their studies leave the community and simultaneously “lose” their roles. Despite the fact that the roles are temporal, the online community as a platform per se sustains and there is a continuum in the idea of a welcoming online community. Emily Höckert (2018; see also Germann Molz and Gibson 2007) discusses about the moving character of the roles between hosts and guests by arguing that the roles between the self and the other become constantly negotiated. Therefore, it is interesting to consider the social sustainability of online community in a context of exchange student networks where the roles between hosts and guests are mobile and fluid.

Through the hospitality, tourism researchers have sought to understand the way travellers relate to people and places while on the move (Germann Molz 2012, 84). What comes to modern hospitality and social interactions, nowadays, the word ‘social’ seems ubiquitous, especially when it comes to online spaces and social media, social networking, social capital and other relevant concepts. Despite the fact that social life is all around us, the ignorance of the social pillar of sustainable development literature seems contradictory. (Munzel, Meyer-Waarden & Galan 2018, 24.) In addition, a further study about the interaction between hosts and guests in online communities has been suggested (Chung and Buhalis 2009, 142). This thesis project contributes to these missing pieces by concerning the social sustainability in online communities and reflecting the hospitality paradigm in terms of the relationships of the community.
members. The online community that will be studied in the project is Erasmus Student Network in Kalmar.

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is a non-profit international student organisation working both on local, national and international levels (Erasmus Student Network). The project focuses on a local level and thus handles the ESN activities in Kalmar, Sweden. The mission of the ESN Kalmar is to represent international students of Kalmar and provide opportunities for cultural understanding and self-development under the principle of “Students helping Students”. In addition to improving the social and practical integration of international students, ESN encourages students to take part in mobility programmes and contributes to the improvement and accessibility of student mobility. ESN Kalmar offers help for current exchange students in their reintegration process mainly through local activities including cultural and social events such as trips to different places within and outside of Sweden, movie nights and culture nights. (Erasmus Student Network.)

ESN Kalmar’s work has a strong relation to tourism since it arranges trips to Swedish Lapland, Russia, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. Also, it organises and/or promotes local activities and events such as bus trips to Öland Harvest Festival, introduction week with city and castle tours in Kalmar and festivals by the beach in August. The organisation helps exchange students and freelancers to integrate to the Swedish culture and country and provides help for students in building intercultural relationships and a socially sustainable international community in Kalmar. The author of the thesis joined ESN Kalmar in Fall 2017 and was elected as an IT & Communications Officer in ESN Kalmar Board for Spring 2018. Her main responsibilities are to manage and update ESN Kalmar’s webpage and social media channels on Facebook and Instagram. ESN Kalmar has a separate Travel Coordinator who promotes and informs the members about the trips arranged by ESN Kalmar and cooperated with Scanbalt. As an IT & Communications Officer, the author of the thesis is interested in ESN Kalmar’s social media communication and content production and as a Tourism & Sustainability Master student, she is enthusiastic in both mobility, hospitality and social sustainability approaches of the organisation.
Keeping in mind, this thesis project handles the ESN Kalmar community members as ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ from the perspective of providing hospitality for the new international students arriving to Kalmar. The characteristics of the ESN Kalmar online community are mobility and offline contacts in addition to online contacts. Since ESN Kalmar community uses the Facebook group in daily communication, it plays an important role in the interaction and could be called as a “virtual home” of the international students. In the group, people can share their experiences, recommendations and photos or ask questions and thus use the group as their social capital. Since Erasmus students, ‘guests’, are non-institutional travellers, especially regarding the aspects of accommodation and host-guest relationships, trust, interaction, and co-creation with the ‘hosts’ (Chung & Buhalis 2009; Luo & Zhang 2016 in Schuckert, Peters & Pilz 2018, 220), the local students, ‘hosts’, who have lived in Kalmar before the new Erasmus students’ arrival, play a vital part of the host-guest relationship in the hospitality network of Erasmus students.

Taking into account the importance of the modern sociality and changing amount of strong and weak ties of relationships, the literature review of the thesis project discusses the previous research made in tourism regarding social life online handling the importance of social media in tourism today, interactive mobility and methods used in this new research area. Social sustainability forms the conceptual framework for the study and it is handled through the community members’ overall well-being (Deiner 2009; Phipps & Slater 2010; Black 2016; Vallance et al. 2011; Woodcraft 2015; Munzel et al. 2018) built friendships (Hsu, Chiang & Huang 2012, 83) and received social support (Hsu et al. 2012, 83) during the study abroad period. The main concepts handled in the conceptual framework in addition to social sustainability are online communities and host-guest relationships online.

The purpose of the thesis is to look into a welcoming online community from the perspective of social sustainability, which is somewhat overlooked, but current research area in tourism studies. The main research question of the thesis is: What means social sustainability in a context of online communities? In addition, there are three sub-questions, which are divided into concerning methodological aspect of online communities, conceptual framework about hosts and guests paradigm and lastly the case study of ESN Kalmar online community including the aspect of sustainable
development. These sub-questions assist to give an answer to the main research question and are as follows:

RQ1. What kinds of methodological approaches are suitable for studying online communities?

RQ2. How do hosts and guests shape the social sustainability of online communities?

RQ3. In which ways can ESN Kalmar enhance its social sustainability online?

The study will be conducted as a qualitative research by using mixed methods. Firstly, the method that will be used in the research is a qualitative online survey that will be conducted for the ESN Kalmar members to explore more members’ subjective thoughts about the social potentialities of an online community. Secondly, an online netnography, which is hardly conducted by tourism scholars will be used as an additional method. The online netnography will utilise the Facebook groups of ESN Kalmar from Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 as data sources to analyse the posts and comments of the community. This thesis project is locally important in enhancing the the online community social sustainability among the international students in Kalmar. Even though the importance is mostly local, it can also be stretched out to consider hospitality related non-profit online communities and internet behaviour in general. Moreover, the communities of Erasmus Student Network represent interesting territory for further research in tourism, particularly given its capacity to meet international students’ demands for authentic experiences in tourism through the “insider experience” of local people who are part of the ESN community.
2 Literature review in previous tourism research

The literature review handles the previous research made in tourism regarding social life online. In tourism, previous research has focused on the socio-psychological views of social media use such as online communities. Online communities call into question interactivity and mobility, which will be the two of the main concepts in the literature review in addition to social media. Social life online challenges the traditional research methods and thus researchers interested in online communities have to consider other methods too which some of them are introduced in the literature review and later applied in the research of the thesis project.

2.1 Social media in previous tourism research

There has been paid a lot of attention to the fundamental changes in the global tourism system related to the development of information technologies and especially to the rise of social media. Social media as a concept refers to a large range of technologies such as social networks like Facebook (Högberg & Olsson 2018, 270). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 61) explain social media as “a group of 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”. They also make the difference between social media, Web 2.0 and user-generated content. Web 2.0, which is referred to “Travel 2.0” in tourism (Schmallegger & Carson 2008, 104), is a platform for content and application creation and modification by all users in a participatory and collaborative form (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 61). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 61) consider Web 2.0 as the platform for the development of social media. Instead, user-generated content can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media. User-generated content needs to be published either on a public website or on a social networking site, it needs to show a sense of creativity and it needs to be created outside of professional practices. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 61.)

Internet is used by tourists for evaluation and advises (e.g. Ayeh 2015; Munar & Jacobsen 2014; Sparks & Browning 2011 in Gössling 2017, 1024) and for communication of travel patterns to build a social connectedness and social capital (Germann Molz 2012; Gössling & Stavrinidi 2015). Users of social media can directly interact with peers, build communities, and target people in their own individual interest.

Social media enables users to attend and interact within many different communities online, whereas each group handles a specific topic (Carpenter et al. 2016 in Groth 2018, 190). The main nature of social media is the idea of collaborative creation and content sharing (Westerman, Spence & Van Der Heide 2012 in Zhang, Ito & Liu 2018, 210). Zhang et al. (2018) handle the concept of social capital and connect it to social media networks. According to them, online networks act as a social capital that help travellers to achieve some goals and solve problems by information searching and sharing on social media. (Zhang et al. 2018, 210–211.) In travel and tourism, past research has focused on the socio-psychological outlooks of social media use such as online communities (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra 2004; Wang & Fesenmaier 2003; Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier 2002). Thus, there is an increasing linkage between tourism, social connectedness and network capital. The rise of social media platforms have become relevant in the linkage since they allow continuous co-presence creating new shapes of network capital. (Germann Molz 2012.) Mobility forms are mechanisms and expressions of society (Bauman 1998) and lesser travelling in comparison with others (Gössling & Nilsson 2010) can reduce network capital or worsen social status. (Gössling & Stravrinidi 2016, 724.) Gössling et al. (2016, 6) discuss the concept of tourism as connectedness and claim that virtual travel and meeting other tourists on social media or web travel forums are opportunities for connectedness in contemporary individualised society that still yearns for belonging.

Xiang and Gretzel’s (2010) study of the role of social media in online travel information search confirms the increasing importance of social media in the online tourism domain. They argue that there are two mega trends that have emerged on the internet and can significantly impact the tourism system. Firstly, user-generated content supported by social media platforms such as online communities and social networks have gained
considerable popularity in online travelers’ use of internet (Gretzel 2006; Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts 2007 in Xiang & Gretzel 2010, 179) Hence, social media has become an important channel for touristic communication and user-generated content is even more trusted than official channels (Han et al. 2017, 1; Veiga et al. 2017, 605–606). Many of these social media platforms assist people in posting and sharing their travel-related comments, opinions and experiences to provide information for others. Secondly, since there is a lot of travel-related information available online, searching has become a leading mode in travelers’ use of internet. (Xiang & Gretzel 2010, 179.) Cohen, Prayag and Moital (2013) argue that social media is an important influencer of tourism behaviour (Gössling & Stavrinidi 2016, 724).

Facebook is one of the largest social media platforms for facilitating self-presentation and social status management by allowing to publish photographs, status updates, ‘likes’, groups and comments (Marder, Joinson & Shankar 2012 in Gössling & Stavrinidi 2016, 726). In 2010, Facebook implemented a new possibility to “check-in” at places to allow users to geo-tag locations they are visiting. These kinds of functions allow for ‘interactive travel’ (Germann Molz 2006, 378) meaning that tourists can be on the move online, use smart phones to upload travel stories and pictures when physically travelling at the same time (Germann Molz & Paris 2015). In Facebook, self-presentations have to follow specific rules in order to result in admiration among peers. This may include for example engagement in mobility practices, which is seen as socially admirable, innovative or brave (Cohen & Gössling 2015 in Gössling & Stavrinidi 2016, 726). Gössling and Stavrinidi (2016, 729) found that Facebook profile owners refer to mobility by posting about future travel plans, transit travel, being in the destination, returning home, imaginative travel and travel philosophy. Next chapter will take a closer look into the impact of interactivity to mobile lives.

2.2 Interactive mobility

Urry (2003, 157), Germann Molz (2012, 5) and Sheller and Urry (2006, 157) discuss the ‘mobility turn’ that has spread into the social sciences, going beyond the dichotomy between transport research and social research, putting the social into travel and linking various forms of transport with social experience conducted at-a-distance. It has been argued that every part of our lives is now connected to or formed by mobilities (Germann Molz 2012, 5; Germann Molz 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006). Urry (2007) states
that mobilities form and define social identities both through physical and virtual travel (Gössling & Stavrinidi 2016, 723). Thus, Sheller and Urry (2006, 157, 209) bring up a ‘new mobilities’ paradigm which emphasises that all places are tied into at least thin networks of connections and mean that nowhere can be an ‘island’. The contemporary mobile lifestyles include not just physical mobilities, but also a variety of digital and virtual mobilities (Germann Molz & Paris 2015, 174). Germann Molz (2012, 6) argues that connectivity lies at the heart of mobile sociality and interactive travel combines social, spatial and digital connectivity. Fundamentally, internet has reshaped the way tourism-related information is distributed and the way people plan travels (Buhalis & Law 2008 in Xiang & Gretzel 2010, 179).

The State of the American Traveler (2017) survey shows that over the past years, leisure travellers have grown increasingly attached to mobile devices and 68.0 percent of American active mombile phone users use the device for travel planning. Today’s everyday aspects of a travelling lifestyle include logging into Facebook, emailing home, uploading photos or texting friends (Germann Molz 2012, 3). Locative technology enables more active interaction and opportunistic occasions to meet (Dickinson et al. 2017, 165). Urry (2003, 168) comes up with a term of ‘network capital’ referring to a networked society in which there are no ‘strangers’, only possible members of people’s ever-expanding networks. Because of mobile network sociality, shared common history is less important between the members than quick information exchange and active production of trust (Wittel 2001, 67–68) which produces the concept of network capital (Urry 2003, 168). Recent studies propose that digital technology improves sociability and network dynamics, and there is a shift towards “communicative sociability” (Fortunati, Taipale & de Luca 2013).

Interactive travel tells a lot about the changing social world and how social life has brought close to technologies of moving and communicating (Germann Molz 2012, 7). Many national and international studies have noticed changes in the mobility behaviour of youth (e.g. Ifmo 2013; Frontier Group 2012 in Konrad & Wittowsky 2017, 1). Germann Molz (2012, 6) refers to Elliot and Urry (2010, 5) who describe that the central to the mobile lifestyles are the information and communication technologies that people use to arrange life on the move. Nowadays, youth are increasingly using sustainable and alternative forms of transportation such as bicycles, public transport or
car-sharing systems instead of the dominance of private cars. One reason for the change has been noted to be the increasing use of ICT and the increasing availability of travel information which is concerned to make the new forms of mobility more attractive and convenient for example by making a use of travel time by socialising and communicating. (Konrad & Wittowsky 2017, 1.)

As now, social networks extend and move across geographical space, social life includes various forms of co-presence established through physical travel, online interactions and mobile communications (Larsen, Urry & Axhausen 2006b). Many people have social networks around the world and travelling has become an essential for maintaining these relationships (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert 2009 in Gössling & Stavrinidi 2016, 725). Zumkeller (1997) has found a positive correlation between the number of travels and the number of virtual contacts. He argues that telecommunication smooths the coordination of activities and allows to maintaining social contacts over long distances and eventually can result in more long distance travel to visit these contacts. Van den Berg, Arentze and Timmermans (2012) have shown that ICT allows and facilitates social contacts over long distances and these contacts mostly become face-to-face meetings although there are less likely face-to-face meetings when the distance is longer. (Konrad & Wittowsky 2017, 3.) However, Konrad and Wittowsky (2017, 7) found that virtual mobility does not only increase the number of travels but also the travel distances. They conclude with saying that ICT seems to strengthen communication and provide new activities and opportunities for travel planning.

Even if there is a positive correlation between the number of travels and the number of virtual contacts (Zumkeller 1997), some social scientists argue that mobility undermines the quality of connections (Albrow 1997; Cresswell 2002). Also, Putnam (2000) argues that mobility weakens communities and social capital (Larsen, Axhausen & Urry 2006a, 262). Conversely, Larsen et al. (2006a, 262) argue that travel often creates social capital, connections between people. Beck-Gernsheim (2002) stresses that there are more ‘beginnings’ and ‘farewells’ which also need more keeping-in-touch through recurrent long-distance communication and intermittent physical reunion (Larsen et al. 2006a, 262). Mobile lives call into question strong and weak ties in social networks. Sociologists argue that social networks in mobile times are individualised meaning that weak ties are more common than strong ties that are usually short-lived. (Giddens 1992,
1994; Beck 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 2003 in Larsen, Axhausen & Urry 2006a, 262.) Urry (2012, 26) has noted several reasons why networks today seem to be less coherent. This is because people’s residences and hobbies, families and friends are more geographically dispersed. This dispersal has happened due to different interdependent reasons such as general growth of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) in tourism, internationalising of higher education and business, growth of budget airline model, tendency to retire abroad and growing numbers of weak ties caused by new communication modes. (Urry 2012, 26.) However, Larsen et al. (2006a, 262) show that nowadays not only weak ties are dispersed but also strong ties. New types of relations, communications and mobility behaviours require also new research methods, which will be discussed next.

2.3 Mobile methods

Interactive mobility which emerges according to Büscher, Urry and Witchger (2010, 5) out of the corporeal travel of people; the physical movement of objects; imaginative travel enabled by different media; virtual travel; and communicative travel, causes a challenge to traditional social scientific methods that have relied on desk techniques. Online communities that are on the move between physical and virtual settings make to think how to study practices that are invisible. (Germann Molz 2012, 18.) Larsen et al. (2006a, 266) claim that mobile methods should be able to study how people simultaneously hold their local lives and retain distant ties, how they sustain ties through online and imaginative travel as well as through face-to-face interaction. Thus, Germann Molz (2012, 18–19) introduces her approach to ‘mobile virtual ethnography’ method that she used for ‘moving with’ interactive travellers across various junctures of tourism and technology. Ethnography began from anthropological method for studying distant cultures and communities. Traditional ethnographies used to be highly localised in their scope and researchers focused on interactions within a single restricted community rather than paying attention to the ways in which those communities were linked by travel and communication to the rest of the world. Ethnographic techniques include sustained participation in communities of practice, in-depth-interviews and observations of physical, digital, social and material practices. (Germann Molz 2012, 18–19.)
The ‘fluid’ rather than ‘fixed in place’ understanding of the ethnographic field was a gift for Internet researchers as well as researchers who had become interested in the online communities in the mid-1990s (e.g. Rheingold 1993). Concepts like ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2000) and ‘cyberethnography’ (Gajjala 2002) were developed to adapt ethnographic techniques to Internet studies and computer-centered social interactions. (Germann Molz 2012, 20.) Germann Molz (2012, 20–21) envisioned the field as a series of places but also in terms of networks and connections that draw distant places together and produce certain places. Büscher et al. (2010, 10) mention methods that explore texting, websites, multi-user discussion groups, blogs and emails but claim that communication in virtual spaces is often not easily available to the researcher. Germann Molz (2012, 36) argues that mobile technologies and social media are reconfiguring the main theoretical and methodological paradigms in tourism research. As technology is connected with tourism practices in new ways, tourism scholars must engage mobile methods to follow these emerging forms of moving socialibility in ways that traditional methods cannot.

Netnography is one of the newest research approaches and it takes advantage of the changing online landscape of tourism (Munar, Gyi móthy & Cai 2013 in Mkono & Markwell 2014, 289). Kozinets (1998) defines netnography as a written story followed by studying the cultures and communities that emerge from Internet-based communications, where fieldwork and textual interpretation are methodologically used by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology. Netnography differs from the ethnography by its time taken to obtain data, degree of involvement of the researcher in the “field” and the nature of the researcher partaking in the online community under study. Usually tourism researchers have used a passive approach in carrying out netnography, which ensures that community members remain unaware of the researcher’s activities and continue interacting in uninhibited manner. (Mkono & Markwell 2014, 289–290.) However, Mkono and Markwell (2014, 290) suggest an active approach in netnography to direct the flow and content of communicative actions online. Brotherton (2015, 154) argues that simply using a passive approach by accessing text from existing sites produced by other people would be secondary research, but an active approach where a researcher specifically generates new material and interacts in an online environment for the research project may be regarded as an empirical design.
Mostly, netnography in the hospitality and tourism fields has been concerned with communities of consumers and the marketing implications of these, especially the nature of the hospitality or tourism consumer’s experience. Monitoring of social media and customer review sites, such as Facebook and TripAdvisor, is today common, as is organising Market Research Online Communities or Online Community Panels that are established by companies. These new research designs and techniques are often suggested to be cheaper, quicker, consistent and more realistic than traditional ways of conducting this kind of research. (Brotherton 2015, 154.) Netnography is usually used as a part of a mixed or triangulated methodology but it can also be used on its own methodology. Netnography is still in its infancy among tourism scholars but it will likely to increase with more publications of netnographic studies in high profile tourism journals. (Mkono & Markwell 2014, 290–291.)

To sum, the literature review pointed out that since individuals have made online spaces their work and living places and engaged with social interactions online, researchers have had to cope with this change in modern mobile lifestyles. Despite the fact that social life has taken new forms online, social sustainability studies still lack research concerning online communities. Instead, social sustainability studies have so far handled urban communities. In the following chapter, social sustainability will be connected to concern online environments forming the conceptual framework of the thesis project.
3 Social sustainability of online communities

The importance of the social aspects in the sustainability debate has been recognised but social sustainability has still been widely ignored in the studies until today (Eizenberg & Jabareen 2017; Vallance et al. 2011; Munzel et al. 2018). The discipline began the discussion on social sustainability in urban development and it seeks to propose sustainable work and living spaces for citizens to enhance individual and collective well-being (Vallance et al. 2011; Woodcraft 2015 in Munzel et al. 2018, 24). However, individuals today spend a plenty of time online by engaging in social interactions with peers and making virtual spaces such as Facebook their work and living places. Thus, studies on sustainability should also include online places in addition to physical places and their contribution to growth and well-being. (Munzel et al. 2018, 24.) As a matter of fact, only few scholars have focused on the question of social sustainability of online environments per se (Gobinda 2013, 607).

This chapter provides an outlook on what has been studied on social sustainability so far generally speaking and from the perspectives of digitalism and communities. Social sustainability will be used as a framework for the study of online communities. The conceptual framework handles the different aspects of online communities and how they work in increasing mobile world in digital age. It discusses the evolution from physical communities to modern online communities, which support individuals’ everyday life both in travelling and social belongingness. The main concepts of the framework are social sustainability, online communities and host-guest relations. The chapter clears how social sustainability is understood by the author of the thesis in this specific study including the aspects of well-being, friendships and social support. These aspects of social sustainability will be used in the study in figuring out what social sustainability means in a context of online communities.

3.1 Social sustainability

In the literature, there has been much debate on the aspects of ecological sustainability since the late 1980s. The Brundtland Report (1987), also known as “Our Common Future”, made the world aware of the urgency of making progress toward economic development that could be sustained without using up natural resources or damaging the environment. The Report suggested that social equity, economic growth and environmental maintenance are simultaneously possible but in order to achieve it world
requires technological and social change. (United Nations 1987.) Social sustainability is often defined as comprising many different dimensions of social and cultural change as represented by UNEP and UNWTO’s (2005, 11): “Respect the socio-cultural authencity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance”. According to Max-Neef’s (1991, 18) concept of sustainable development, social sustainability is an integral part of a community in which the “universal human needs” of its members are satisfied. Åhman (2013, 1155) states that social sustainability is a vital part of sustainability and a society should strive towards that goal.

The aspects of social sustainability have seen an increasing interest during the last decade within different fields including sociology, urban planning and tourism studies (Åhman 2013, 1153; Munzel et al. 2018, 15). Even though there have been efforts to summarise this growing literature (Koning 2001; McKenzie 2004; Colantonio 2009; Vallance et al. 2011 in Åhman 2013, 1153), the concept of social sustainability is still under-theorised (Weingaertner & Moberg 2011 in Åhman 2013, 1153; Eizenberg & Jabareen 2017, 2) and most of the literature rather discuss the core themes by which social sustainability is operationalised instead of theoretical definitions. The themes of social sustainability in the literature include “basic needs and equity, education, quality of life, social capital, integration and diversity, and sense of place”. (Åhman 2013, 1156.) Gössling (2017, 1029) generated four major themes based on the material subsumed under social sustainability including “glamorization of travel and tourism”; “traveller identity”; “social status and competitive travel”; and “social connectedness”. However, Manos et al. (2011) states that social sustainability will unlikely ever find an agreed-upon definition of the concept (Åhman 2013, 1158).

In addition to the core themes of social sustainability introduced in the literature, Vallance et al. (2011) identifies three different perspectives on social sustainability: bridge, maintenance and development. Bridge social sustainability as a perspective sees people as instruments in relation to ecological goals but research that is more recent still supports the fact that social sustainability should be treated as a goal itself. Maintenance of social sustainability is about maintaining society in the face of change and sustaining the present way of living. However, this perspective is only helpful for those who benefit from the present system and thus it is not obvious that sustaining the present life
style is a goal worth striving for. In this case, scholars refer to a developmental aspect of social sustainability. Munzel et al. (2018, 15) emphasise that work and living places as well as social networks can be developed, maintained, and leveraged to reach higher levels of well-being not only in physical spaces but also in virtual spaces online.

The existing literature on sustainability recognises several physical factors with social sustainability. However, physical settings are insufficient for addressing the capacities that communities need to become sustainable. Thus, literature provides a list of non-physical factors equivalent to social processes and structures, which are still more difficult to account than physical factors since social processes and structures are dynamic, impossible to anticipate, difficult to enforce and control in non-dictatorial ways and are not appropriate for everyone. (Eizenberg & Jabareen 2017, 3.) Although the importance of information for sustainable development has been acknowledged, there has not yet been a research agenda to discourse the social sustainability of information services with specific focus on digital information services that form the base of a knowledge society and digital economy (Gobinda 2013, 604). Still, there is a significant amount of studies that have taken place in user research and human information behaviour (Wilson 2009; Bawden 2009 in Gobinda 2013, 606). Hence, social sustainability is often connected to urban development and the literature rather focuses on the development of physical spaces that improve the well-being of individuals (Munzel, Meyer-Waarden & Galan 2018, 14). In a context of hospitality literature, the hosts and guests are expected to care for each other’s well-being (Höckert 2018, 15). However, the idea of providing physical spaces to promote citizens’ well-being can simply be transferred to online spaces on social media. With Web 2.0 technologies, individuals can develop and maintain social relationships online within dedicated social spaces including Facebook. (Munzel et al. 2018, 14.)

The goal for the social sustainability of digital information services is to guarantee a fair access in order to build a well-informed and healthy society. Increasing use of modern information and communication technologies dealing with digital content has consequences for social sustainability of digital information services for example in terms of changes in the users’ information behaviour, culture and social presence. (Gobinda 2013, 605–606.) IT and sustainability interrelationships are always complicated since changes initiated by IT are complex and they may have implications
for social sustainability. For example, a sharing site such as Couchsurfing.org may promote social sustainability as it facilitates meaningful connections between guests and local hosts; yet, it may also reduce social sustainability when free accommodation and sociality are provided in non-reciprocal relationships. (Gössling 2016, 1036.) Gobinda (2013, 617) concludes with stating that sustainability is a significant issue for any organisation, and since information forms an essential part of every development and innovation, sustainability ought to become a mainstream research topic within information studies. In the following chapters, the dimensions of social sustainability will be discussed and connected to online communities.

3.2 Online communities

A community as a concept is contested and does not really have a universally agreed meaning (Popple 2000, 2–4; Richard & Hall 2006, 302). Traditionally, community is conceived of place related and physically built near to a group of individuals, who engage in mutual arrangements (Putnam 1995 in Dickinson et al. 2017, 165). Also, community is represented as a place of warmth, intimacy and social cohesion (Popple 2000, 2). Community can be divided into two kinds of social relationships: one is based on friendship and affection, the other on the division of labor and contractual relations between remote individuals (Tönnies 1955 in Höckert 2009, 88). Community can also be defined in geographical, social, political, psychological and economic terms and vary in size, structure and organisation (Cole 2006, 89). In tourism literature, community is often agreed as a population living in local area, which has mutual social characteristics and goals (Richards & Hall 2006, 302).

Untraditional way of conceptualising a community is a temporary place consisting of tourists who come together through a common activity focus and a degree of proximity existence. Since society’s sense of community is changing from one less fixed in place, tourism spaces provide an opportunity for people to create a place related community, at least on a temporary basis. Conceptualising tourists as communities has provided a new insight to analyse tourism. Tourism provides a space in which communities can develop and be strengthened. This contributes to sustainability through developing social capital and thus access to resources both during tourism and after the tourism experience. It is apparent that tourists are reconfiguring their own actions through sharing both on- and offline. Through this, tourists are recapturing a sense of place related concern that leads
more meaningful and localised tourist experiences. (Dickinson et al. 2017, 169, 177.) Social network structures have seen an evolution from door-to-door to place-to-place and now person-to-person communities thanks to communication technology (Wellman 2001 in Gössling, Cohen & Hibbert 2016, 4). The evolution demonstrates the shift from localised, place-based communities, to more individual centered communities (Gössling et al. 2016, 4). Individualism, however, leads to changes in the quantity and quality of social networks (Bauman 2007; Baumeister 1986; Giddens 1991 in Gössling et al. 2016, 5) and it is argued that these changes result in competition and social comparison focusing on self-conception and individualisation. In today’s societies, the paradox is that we are both encouraged to be individuals, while at the same time we desire to socially belong. (Gössling et al. 2016, 5.)

Online or virtual communities have become the new form of socialisation platforms for fulfilling needs in such as social belonging as well as providing or receiving information and sharing experiences. Today we see many social groups trying to support their strategies with some kind of an online interactive platform. (Seraj 2012, 209.) However, studies have hardly discussed the role of online communities in bringing distant social networks together (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin & Backman 2010, 400–401; Chung 2017, 3179). The location of the online community, although not physical, is essential since it forms the online ‘place’ where the members meet (Ridings, Gefen & Arinze 2002, 273). Rheingold (1993, 7) has given the most cited definition of virtual communities as follows: “social aggregations that emerge from the net when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks”. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002, 3) further emphasise the communication process in the digital environment that allows forming and sustaining the groups. The interactive nature of online communities separates them from a random virtual encounter of users. When members become slowly aware of each other, through coherent interactions, a community starts to emerge. (Navarro et al. 2018, 73.)

Wasko and Faraj (2005) found that knowledge sharing in online communities is motivated by the expectation of building a reputation, enjoyment in helping others,
reciprocity with others’ help and commitment to community (Xu, Li & Shao 2012, 347). However, Xu et al. (2012, 347) claim that motivation for contribution may reduce after enough reputation has been gained, and there is no guarantee that individuals who use knowledge provided by other members will ever return the favour. Seraj (2012, 213) discusses how online communities create value and become irreplaceable for their members and points out the importance of “intellectual value” by co-creation and content quality, “social value” by platform interactivity through social ties and “cultural value” by self-governed community culture. Online community identification is defined by Hsu, Chiang and Huang (2012, 75) as “a sense that people come to view themselves as a member of the online community and feel emotionally connected with other participants in the online community”. They also found that interactions between the community members are beneficial to increase community identification and community trust derived from the mutual identification plays an important role for individual members’ contributions in the community (Hsu et al. 2012, 82). Trust in an online community is required in both an individual-to-individual relationship and regarding technology (Tan 2010, 367). However, Germann Molz (2012, 109) argues that online networking technologies help creating trust among strangers.

Howard (2010) introduces a RIBS-model to understand how online communities work in their best and how to create a sustainable online community. “RIBS” stands for remuneration, influence, belonging and significance. Firstly, “remuneration” basically says that members of an online community have to obtain a clear benefit and value for being a part of the e-community for example by satisfying some basic, psychological or emotional needs (Howard 2010, 54–55). Secondly, Howard (2010, 82) argues that “influence” contributes most to the sustainability and overall well-being of an online community. Influence exists in a community when its members believe that they can control or shape the policies and topics to persuade others in a virtual community (Howard 2010, 82). Thirdly, “belonging” means the techniques that help community members to develop the sense of “social presence”, a sense that they belong in that community, identify with it, and share a bond with its other members. Belonging in a community is created through shared mythologies, stories of origin, symbols and cultural codes embedded in the symbols. (Howard 2010, 130.) Finally, to be able to even attract people to become a member of a community, they have to believe that the community is “significant” for them and somehow exclusive for example by providing
them a first-hand information (Howard 2010, 167–168). Also, Kunz and Seshadri (2015, 1823) claim that relationship building and information exchange play as primary motives for online community membership. Wu and Chang (2005) add that interactivity and trust are the most important drivers of community flow experiences.

Travel-related online communities attracted tourism scholars’ attention early on (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra 2004; Wang & Fesenmaier 2003; Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier 2002). Online tourist communities such as LonelyPlanet and IGoUGo, where tourists can exchange opinions and experiences, have been around since the late 1990s, and many scholars have researched their roles and impacts in travel context (Xiang & Gretzel 2010, 180). Online travel communities have represented a growing trend (Bialski & Batorski 2007 in Kunz & Seshadri 2015, 1822) and prior research has focused on the relationships among the online community members. Armstrong and Hagel (1996) indicated four different values that are provided by online travel community: transaction (e.g. ticket purchase), interest (information and experience sharing), fantasy (hedonic features such as an event) and relationship (travel companion finding).

Besides the studies related to online community members’ relations, there is not much of studies how online relationships might lead to offline relationships (Kunz & Seshadri 2015, 1822). The online relationships are often characterised by words “airy”, “fragile”, “mobile” and “inchoate” as opposed to offline relationships. The offline relationships normally involve the concept of community that are seen to be consisted of endurance, face-to-face and communitarian connections. Because of this dichotomy, online communities are often claimed not to be ‘real’ communities. (Urry 2007, 67, 71). However, Urry (2007, 67) argues against such dichotomies since all relationships in all societies have always included diverse connections which are more or less intense and mobile. Kunz and Seshadri (2015, 1822) found that community reputation, online communication behaviour and similarities between travellers play important roles in building potential offline relationships. Wang, Yu and Fasenmaier (2002, 409) note that the term online community often includes community networks that are formed by physical communities to link and support community members. According to social presence theory, the presence of other members complemented by offline interactions, may strengthen the bonds of community members in their online communities (Short, Williams & Christie 1976). The study of Lin (2007, 132) supports the theory by stating
that online social bonds among members are only sustained with strong offline interactions. Hence, when there are both online and offline interactions, community members’ sense of belonging and information exchange should be improved (Lin 2007, 132).

3.3 Hosts and guests online

Valene Smith (1989, ix) legitimatised the American study of tourism by publishing a book called ‘Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism’ (1977) that provided a preliminary theoretical perspective of the impacts of tourism. She argued that tourism usually includes contacts between hosts and guests and thus, the interactions between the parties may result in economic or cultural differences. The host-guest framework has focused on the relationship between the tourists and the residents, the impact of tourism on local communities and the locals’ attitudes toward tourism development. It has been acknowledged that the close contact between the hosts and guests in community-based tourism creates opportunities to open intercultural exchange and common understanding, which rarely exists in general mass tourism. In the best situation, tourism can play a valuable tool for sincere exchange of cultural understanding and enjoyment. (Höckert 2009, 106.)

What comes to hospitality in local communities, Höckert (2015, 111–112) analyses what does ‘welcome’ mean in a context of hosts and guests, or self and other, and refers to Levinas’ (1969) work who uses the word ‘welcome’ as the first gesture towards the guest. On the other hand, Derrida (1999) has interpreted the idea of welcome as consciousness and attention towards the guest, as saying yes to the guest, which is a way of speaking the language of goodness, friendship and hospitality. However, Höckert (2015, 112) presents the Levinasian philosophy where the roles between hosts and guests are changing meaning that both self and other are hosting and being a guest. In this respect, hospitality and welcoming cannot be seen only as the ‘duty’ of a host, but as a common virtue in ethical encounters. Levinas emphasises the thought of being very open towards the other despite the role. This idea is very different from the modern idea of a free and independent self that challenges to face the very question of social life itself (Höckert 2018, 17). In the study of participatory tourism encounters in the Northern Highlands of Nicaragua, Höckert (2015, 120) approaches hospitality with allowing the disruption of the roles to opening up spaces for more ethical encounters.
This approach underlines the importance of a continuum in hosting and guesting – welcoming the guest and being welcomed by the guest. As mentioned in the introduction, Höckert (2018, 16) has argued that the roles become constantly negotiated between the self and the other. This approach joins the work of Jennie Germann Molz and Sarah Gibson (2007) who have ‘mobilised hospitality’ by calling for a dialogue and mobility between discussions of hospitality in order to explore how applying a concept in one disciplinary context may provide outlooks in other fields. According to these scholars, ethics in mobile relations is one of the strongest threads that tie together the discussions of hospitality and welcoming. (see Höckert 2018, 16.)

Despite the offline encounters of hosts and guests, host-guest relationships derived from online have mostly only been studied from the perspective of couchsurfing (e.g. Germann Molz 2012 & 2013; Schuckert, Peters & Pilz 2018; Chung & Buhalis 2009; Tan 2010). The studies have hardly discussed the role of online communities in bringing dispersed social networks together (Arsal et al. 2010, 400–401; Chung 2017, 3179). As a matter of fact, Larsen, Urry and Axhausen (2007, 245, 247) indicate that people tend to stretch their social networks by hospitality that is given on online communities and state that studies have largely ignored issues of sociality and co-presence and disregarded how much tourism is connected with (re)producing social relations. Consequently, research on what brings people to online communities and how they behave there is worth doing (Chung 2017, 3179; Germann Molz 2013, 211).

Hospitality is a key paradigm through which tourism researchers have sought to understand the way travellers relate to people and places while on the move (Germann Molz 2012, 84). Social life of people who travel and people who stay at home, is increasingly consisted of ‘strange encounters’ (Ahmed 2000 in Germann Molz & Gibson 2007, 2). This has brought the central dilemma of hospitality – how to welcome a stranger – back to the centre stage, reframing it against the contemporary concerns of mobile world (Germann Molz & Gibson 2007, 2). Emerging forms of online social relations and cybernetic encounters have also been studied in a context of technological forms of hospitality and belonging online (Aristarkhova 1999; 2000 in Germann Molz & Gibson 2007, 2). Chung and Buhalis (2009, 137) claim that Web 2.0 has made the communication easier between the travellers and locals at the destination. The hospitality networks have evolved since 1949 when the first member-based hospitality
network, Servas, was established. Nowadays, online communities bring the tools to enable the practice of hospitality and reorganising and redefining the social relations between strangers in the process. New forms of sociality and exclusion have become possible when online connections are translated into face-to-face connections. (Germann Molz 2012, 86.) Empirical data based on a virtual community of Couchsurfing.com, an online hospitality exchange network, shows that the opportunity to develop relationships between potential tourists and locals has increased (Chung & Buhalis 2009, 137).

Arsal et al. (2010, 409) found that local people play important role in providing destination information to tourists online and contributing their “insider’s aspect” of the destination. Travel is thus about being co-present, enjoying food, drink, music and sharing a physical place with full of life and affect, with important faces, being their guests and receiving their hospitality and possibly enjoying their knowledge of local culture (Urry 2012, 26). Over the last two decades, many scholars have sought to revise the hospitality paradigm for more fluid definitions of the host and the guest, and for practises of hosting and guesting (Sherlock 2001; Duval 2003; Bell 2007, 2009, 2011 in Germann Molz 2012, 89). From a methodological perspective, Chung and Buhalis (2009, 142) suggest a further study about the interaction between travellers and locals using for example netnography as an alternative methodology to understand the nature of online communities. Evidently, the concept of hospitality poses practical and theoretical questions that span disciplinary boundaries (Germann Molz & Gibson 2007, 2).

3.4 Social support, well-being and friendships online

A socially sustainable community have connective qualities including responsibilities as well as personal benefits to well-being that are entailed through the connectivity (Black 2016, 172). However, social sustainability does not only handle societal qualities in the present, but it also forms societal structures that guarantee these qualities for future generations (Partridge 2005 in Åhman 2013, 1156). Boström (2012) and Davidson (2009) propose that before developing socially sustainable communities it is first needed to define what kind of society we want to sustain (Eizenberg & Jabareen 2017, 2). Socially sustainable community may be summarised as a community in which most of the members experience a sense of well-being, a positive intellectual evaluation and
assessment of life (Deiner 2009; Phipps & Slater 2010 in Black 2016, 172). Mental well-being relates to “psychological” sustainability, an aspect of social sustainability, which has received growing acknowledgement in recent years, also in the context of the use of information technologies and in particular social media channels (Gössling 2016, 1029). In other words, online community managers should emphasise not only the content but also encourage friendships and social support in order to build a socially sustainable online community (Hsu, Chiang & Huang 2012, 83).

According to Ridings and Gefen (2004), reasons for joining online communities include social support, entertainment and making new friends. Creating personal relationships in online communities lead to more participation in online community activities (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra 2004, 344). Chung (2017, 3186) suggests that online friendships are more likely to succeed after a face-to-face meeting than only through online interactions with complete strangers. The study also found that tourists usually extend their friendship networks only via locals; in other words, when the locals and the tourists build relationships in an online community, a host plays the key role in the complex relationship (Chung 2017, 3186). Wellman (2001, 228) states that social networks provide sociability, support, information and a sense of belonging. He also emphasises the importance of communication both in physical and virtual communities to maintain supportive relationships (Wellman 2001 in Dickinson et al. 2017, 165). Social support arises from social networks and social capital. Social support provided by tourist communities informs more sustainable tourist choices by revealing localised opportunities and sustainable travel options. (Dickinson et al. 2017, 167, 177.) There is no universally accepted definition of social support but there is a consensus: social support is a multi-faceted construct (Cohen & Wills 1985; Cutrona & Russell 1990 in Chiu et al. 2015, 506). Cutrona and Russell (1990) have united five major dimensions of social support which are emotional (an ability to receive comfort and care), network (a sense of belonging), esteem (others’ support in a person’s sense of self-esteem), tangible (instrumental assistance) and informational (providing advice). With the growth of internet, online communities have become significant alternatives to face-to-face support groups. (Chiu et al. 2015, 506.)

A tourist community seeks to achieve a sense of well-being where people can recapture a sense of neighbourhood and build the social capital needed for emotional and physical
support in their daily lives. This is stretched by new technologies enabling sociability. In this way, tourism contributes to social cohesion more broadly and meets a basic need. (Dickinson et al. 2017, 177.) Flora (2004) suggests that community well-being is constructed of different dimensions. These dimensions include cultural (values and symbols), social (features of social networks, e.g. trust, reciprocity and cooperation), human (capabilities, skills, knowledge and health of community members), political (ability to access political decision-making processes), natural (landscape, environmental systems, green spaces and conservation areas provided by nature), financial (income, savings and access to funding for investment) and built capital (physical facilities and infrastructure that communities have available to use). (Moscardo et al. 2013, 534.) These aspects can also be connected to concern online communities that have face-to-face encounters in addition to online interaction.

To sum, based on the literature, socially sustainable online community is understood by the author of the thesis as a community in which the members experience a sense of well-being (Deiner 2009; Phipps & Slater 2010; Black 2016; Vallance et al. 2011; Woodcraft 2015; Munzel et al. 2018) that can be achieved by creating possibilities for friendship building and providing social support (Hsu, Chiang & Huang 2012, 83). The purpose of the forthcoming analysis is to discuss how online community of ESN Kalmar is based on friendships and affections (Tönnies 1955 in Höckert 2009, 88) and how social support, well-being and friendships should be emphasised in online community environments in addition to content. The thesis project sees social sustainability as a goal itself which should be strived either by the perspective of maintenance social sustainability or developmental social sustainability as delivered from the conceptual framework (Vallance et al. 2011). Drawing upon these insights, the purpose of this study is to look into the welcoming online community from the perspective of social sustainability by using methodologies relevant for hospitality related communities that work in online environments.
4 Methodology

Before starting to conduct the study, the author of the thesis will consider her philosophical worldview as a researcher that she brings to the study, the research design that is related to this position and the specific methods that translate the approach into practice. Making explicit the larger philosophical ideas an author espouses, helps to explain why the author chose either qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods approaches for the research (Creswell 2014, 6). Therefore, this chapter seeks to present the methodology of the research by firstly acknowledging the perspectives, approaches and paradigms to provide a clear outlook of the methodological positioning of the research in relation to social sciences. In addition, the chapter will give a comprehensive presentation of chosen qualitative methods of the study. Firstly, previous literature will be reviewed and concepts will be demonstrated, secondly, the qualitative method of open-ended online survey and netnography, including executing, will be presented, followed by the structure of the analyse. Lastly, some ethical considerations will be discussed.

4.1 Social constructivism and constructivism

For introduction, constructionist thinking has been dressed as a “paradigm”. All paradigms include three components (the ‘ologies’) that have quite important influence on how people design and conduct research and therefore develop knowledge. These components are as follows: ontology which touches the nature of reality, epistemology which is about the nature, origins and limits of knowledge, and methodology which includes the strategies that help to achieve the goals set out in a research project. Methodology is better understood as an approach while methods refer to the tools, techniques and procedures for collecting and analysing data. (Brotherton 2015, 26–27; Creswell 2003, 4–5; Pernecky 2012, 1121.) Hollinshead (2006, 44) suggests that constructivist methodologies should have a greater place in a widened research vocabulary for tourism studies in terms of their value in local or particular settings, where there is a need to explore for example particular social differentiations of value.

The constructionist / constructivist turn is a rejection to ‘objectivity’ and it emphasises that meaning is not hidden and discoverable but ‘constructed’ socially by human beings as they engage with the world they are mutually conscious of (Crotty 1998, 43;
Hollinshead 2006, 47). Constructionism has various combinations, most commonly condensed by the term social constructionism, constructivism and constructionism. Tourism scholars who have referenced to constructionism and its variants can be divided into two clusters. First, there are conceptual thinkers and commentators and second there are scholars who apply constructionism in the study of tourism. (Pernecky 2012, 1117–1118.) Since Hacking (1998) argues that constructionism depends on the notion that meaning is created out of collectivity, the social element is often embedded in this epistemology (Pernecky 2012, 1121). Also, Fish (1989) claims that reality is the result of the social processes and knowledge is intelligible and debatable only within a particular context or community (Schwandt 1998, 241).

Tourism scholars are guided to use correct terminology when pitching in constructionist study (Pernecky 2012, 1132) since there is inconsistency in terminology of constructionism and it is common to see tourism scholars to use the terms (social) constructionism and constructivism interchangeably. This used to be a concern to Crotty (1998), who suggested a distinction between the terms constructionism and constructivism. Constructivism’s roots in the social sciences lay in the earliest philosophical arguments over a rational foundation for knowledge (Schwandt 1998, 236). Goodman (1984) is the philosopher most responsible for defining the constructivist theory of reality and cognition (Schwandt 1998, 238). He argues that world making is remaking and it always starts from worlds already on hand (Goodman 1978, 6). Constructivists emphasise the world of experience as it is lived, felt and experienced by social actors. They are committed that knowledge and truth are generated, not discovered or found by mind. (Schwandt 1998, 236.) The constructivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it (Schwandt 1998, 222).

Instead of focusing on epistemological considerations about individual minds and cognitive processes, the attention is turned to the world of intersubjectively shared, social constructions of meaning and knowledge which is labelled as “social constructionism” by Gergen (1985). Social constructionism more effectively reflects the view that the world created by people in the process of social exchange is a reality of its own kind. The social constructionist approach assumes that knowledge is one of the many coordinated activities of people and is subject to human interactions such as
communication, negotiation, conflict and rhetoric. (Schwandt 1998, 240.) Contrary to the constructivism’s meaning-making activity of the individual mind, the focus of social constructionism is on the collective generation of meaning, which language and other social processes form. (Schwandt 1998, 240; Crotty 1998.) Despite the attempts to make the distinction between the terms constructionism and constructivism, the inconsistency continues to remain unaddressed and authors use the terms without making a difference in the field of tourism studies. (Pernecky 2012, 1120–1121.)

4.2 Methodological positioning

There are four major worldviews including postpositivism, transformative, pragmatism and constructivism (Creswell 2014, 6). The position that will be taken in the thesis is social constructivism since it supports the theory of social media by addressing the processes of interaction among individuals (Creswell 2014, 8) and social media channels are powerful tools in the construction of touristic realities (Pernecky 2012, 1130). The concept constructivism / constructionism is a part of the development of ‘soft science’ or qualitative research views such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnography, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, sociolinguistics, feminism and postmodernism (Denzin & Lincoln 1994 in Hollinshead 2006, 47) that supports the qualitative outlook of the thesis research about online communities. A great part of what constructionism can do for tourism is to bring new insights of how something becomes touristic. Hence, constructionism adds a cherished dimension to tourism by enabling new constructions to emerge. (Pernecky 2012, 1132.)

The study of the thesis is qualitative that uses open ended questions and analyses texts through netnography, which supports the position of social constructivism. Also, tourism is connected to an increasing list of social problems including sustainability which is according to Pernecky (2012, 1130) socially constructed problem. According to Creswell (2003, 8–9; 2014, 8) constructivist researchers focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work and researchers recognise that their own history shapes their interpretations and thus they “position themselves” in the research to admit how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and historical experiences. The goal of a constuctivist study is to rely on the participants’ views of the situation being studied. The questions are broad and general that enable the participants to construct the meaning of a situation. (Creswell 2014, 8.)
When discussing about constructivism, Crotty (1998) identified three assumptions. First, meanings are constructed by human beings as people engage with the world they are interpreting. This is why open-ended questions are used to allow respondents to express their views in qualitative research. Second, since humans engage with the world and understand it through their historical and social perspective, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context of respondents by visiting the context and gathering data personally. Third, meaning is always social and arises from the interaction with a human community. The process of the research is mostly inductive and the researcher generates meaning from the data collected in the field. (Creswell 2003, 9; Creswell 2014, 9.) The central point of constructionism is the claim that tourism is socially constructed since it has been built on the meanings given to objects such as airline ticket, passport and souvenir. Also, it has been built on the meanings given to places such as tourism destination, resort and travel agency and roles that we have assigned to each other such as hosts and guests. Tourism is dependent on the structures and systems that create and sustain tourism and it cannot stand on its own and maintain itself since meanings are inherited, maintained and shared through activities, traditions, languages and symbols. (Pernecky 2012, 1128.)

4.3 Methods for collecting data

For introduction, social science research in context of tourism is carried out using the methods and traditions of social science. Social science is different from physical or natural sciences in that it deals with the behaviour of people as social beings, and people are less predictable than non-human phenomena. People may know about the research that is conducted and are not therefore only passive subjects because of their ability to react to the results of research and therefore they can change their behaviour. The social world is altering all the time and thus it is not possible to produce exact replications of research findings at different times or places. (Veal 2017.)

The study about online communities uses qualitative approach by mixed methods including both unstructured online survey with open-ended questions and online netnography. Mixed- or multiple-methods have become more popular nowadays and they are often referred to combining approaches and methods that are used to collect empirical data. Using mixed-methods enables a researcher to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The key issue in selecting an empirical design is that it constitutes
the best way to obtain the data to answer the research question. In some cases, singular method has the advantage of focus but sometimes it is necessary to combine aspects of different singular designs to produce one appropriate mix. (Brotherton 2015, 158–159). This chapter will tell how the methods will be applied to support the theory, conceptual framework and results so they correspond each other. Relevant literature of the research methods will be used to support the text.

The qualitative online survey was built with open-ended questions to SurveyMonkey online survey platform. There were three questions where respondents answered with their own sentences (Appendix 1.). The questions were based on the maintenance sustainability and developmental sustainability aspects. They were developed to be as wide as possible and seeked to receive responses from the aspects of social support, well-being and friendships. The questions of the online survey were as follows:

1. What kind of importance ESN Kalmar Facebook group has played to you during your study abroad period?
2. In which ways ESN Kalmar community has inspired or influenced the way you travel?
3. What would you have wished more from the ESN Kalmar Facebook group?

The survey was descriptive in its nature. The aim of descriptive surveys is to find the characteristics of sample, in this case the characteristics of an online community, and relate these to their preferences, attitudes or actions to discover similarities or differences (Brotherton 2015, 137). The survey was electronically distributed to two Facebook groups called “ESN Kalmar - Fall 2017” and “ESN Kalmar - Spring 2018” during April 2018. The sample excluded Swedish ESN members (‘hosts’) and included only international ESN members (both ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’). The response rate of the survey was 46% with 69 responses that shows a high engagement to ESN Kalmar community. The survey was anonymous and all the questions were mandatory to answer.

Survey design as any other research design includes various sources of potential errors that can falsify the data received from a survey questionnaire. Some of the potential errors are introduced here. Firstly, the error that can occur is not using a randomly selected sample when bias may be designed into the sample itself. Secondly, systematic
errors such as interpreting a question in a different way than meant by the respondent can guide him/her to a wrong direction and invalidate the data related to that question. Thirdly, respondents may not complete and return the questionnaires or they may leave some responses blank. Thus, it is important to obtain as high response rate as possible to decrease the degree of non-response error. (Brotherton 2015, 138–139.)

Unstructured, open-ended form of questionnaire enables flexibility, in terms of what is asked, what is pursued further and how the data is recorded. Also, with open-ended questions more in-depth responses are obtained which are crucial in the collection of qualitative data. The unstructured approach with open-ended question design and implementation can be concerned to be the most suitable for small-scale, perhaps exploratory, research studies and/or those where in-depth information is essential to create a ‘rich’ picture of the questions being investigated. The respondents are allowed to provide own sentences and use their own terms in open-ended questions, which rises the truthfulness, accuracy and/or validity of the study in some sense. However, for some reason respondents do not always give truthful responds but instead over- or understate certain issues. Hence, a researcher has to be somewhat sceptical when analysing the qualitative data rather than simply taking the responses for granted. (Brotherton 2015, 165.) The study of online communities seeked to gain knowledge from the aspects that respondents mention or contrarily hold back. The study did not want to limit respondents too much in their responses but allow thinking comprehensively. The wide open-ended questions allowed creating a rich picture of the issues concerning social sustainability in an online community. However, the open-ended questions also created many responses that did not contribute to the results and overall the responses were positive sided which challenged the researcher in seeing “behind” the phenomenon.

As an additional method, online netnography was conducted by exploring the appearances of liking, commenting and posting in Facebook groups. Netnography is a branch of ethnography and has risen its popularity with the expansion of the internet. It is concerned with the nature of online groups and communities. Greater internet availability, collectivism, functionality, usage and the potential for more interaction has given rise to online communities that demonstrate many characteristics and behaviours of physical communities. The increasing centrality of the online has opened up new avenues of research in this respect. (Brotherton 2015, 153–155.) Although Kozinets
(1998) created the term of netnography, some scholars refer to digital or online ethnography or Investigative Research on the Internet (IRI). There may be some issues regarding sampling, validity and reliability in terms of internet based research. For example anonymity of online community members and their possibility to create ‘online personas’ that may be very different from how these individuals think and behave in the real world and that members do not automatically create valid samples are all threats to validity and reliability. As argued earlier, netnography may be concerned as a secondary research but it has the potential to include new, empirical elements. (Brotherton 2015, 153–155.) In this particular study, the researcher has been an active member in the Facebook groups and generated content instead of passive approach but other members have still been unaware of the research and the researcher’s participation has thus not had an impact to the members’ interaction in the groups. Mkono and Markwell (2014, 290) have suggested the active approach in netnography for directing the flow that Brotherton (2015, 154) regards as an empirical design.

4.4 Ethical considerations

In the twenty-first century, there has been an increasing interest in research ethics in terms of increasing ethical regulation of social research. Especially ethnographers of the qualitative researchers have contested the appropriateness of ethical regulation in social research. They have argued that qualitative research gives minimal risks to participants and that ethical review of research is unnecessary and harmful to social science research. (Atkinson 2009; Dingwall 2008; Hammersley 2009 in Wiles 2013, 1.) However, the alternative view suggests that social science research is never risk free and that systems of ethical review inspire researchers to think about ethical issues and to develop their ethical thinking (Boulton et al. 2014 in Wiles 2013, 1). Especially when working with international online communities, ethical issues can prove to be quite problematic because researchers, group admins and editors, and research subjects may come from very different sights on research ethics (Kantanen & Manninen 2016, 94). Therefore, the ethical considerations are extremely important to acknowledge in the thesis project.

Wiles (2013) explores three key issues in qualitative research ethics including informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality and risk. Informed consent involves giving the
participants a clear information what the research is all about and letting them decide whether to participate or not. Naturally, participants need to be informed how confidentiality and anonymity will be handled in the research; what will happen to the data, how it will be reported and whether it will be possible for them to be identified from the data. Wiles (2013, 51, 54) notes that there is an increasing trend in research that participants are identified rather than anonymised. Also, visual data, such as photographs and videos, presents challenges for anonymity that is only possible by altering the image in a way that an individual’s identity is disguised (Wiles 2013, 55).

The greatest risk that may occur in social research is that the researchers’ or participants’ emotional and psychological well-being is hurt. The most common experience in qualitative research is that the participant becomes upset or distressed, particularly on so called ‘sensitive’ topics. Participation in a study should mean that participants leave the research process feeling no more unhappy or distressed than they did when they started it. (Wiles 2013, 58, 60, 67.) These risks were taken into account when conducting the online survey and netnography for ESN Kalmar.

McKee and Porter (2009, 141) have claimed that ethics based on internet research is challenging but still not impossible. Easy availability of data on social media has raised ethical questions such as what is public and what is private (Kantanen & Manninen 2016, 86; Wiles 2013, 36). Kozinets (2010, 147), the developer of the concept of netnography, has stated that “netnographers should never, under any circumstances, engage in identity deception”. The ethical questions of the study of ‘Online communities – Social Sustainability of ESN Kalmar’ include questions of citing, anonymising, and crediting. Can the specific Facebook group names of ESN Kalmar be mentioned in the thesis? Do the members own copyright over their input in the group? If so, does the author need to be added as a reference for all cited input? And, if all identifiers (names and affiliations) are deleted to protect the members’ privacy, how the credit is given to those who contributed innovative posts in the group?

Bruckman (2006, 91) argues that disguising names and sites is one of the most difficult problems. She is considering how the researcher should balance the anonymity of the research participants with the need to give credit for their inputs and uses the metaphor of “amateur artists” of user-generated content on the internet (Bruckman 2002, 229) who deserve credit for what they have created (Kantanen & Manninen 2016, 92).
Bruckman (2002, 230) proposes different levels of disguising, from no disguise at all, to light and moderate disguise, to heavy disguise. In the study of ‘Online communities – Social sustainability of ESN Kalmar’ light disguising was used. Light disguising in this case means that the exact Facebook group names were used, names and faces of the members were censored and word-for-word quotes were used even if an individual could be identified from the quotes. Also, in light disguising group members themselves may be able to guess who have taken part in the discussions, an outsider could probably figure out who is who with a little investigation and details that are harmful to individual are omitted. Light disguising was decided to be enough in the study because the issues discussed in the ESN Kalmar online communities are not very sensitive. Also, because the groups are ‘closed’, not anyone could get access to the groups and track the original source of the posts. Bruckman (2002, 218) argues that being too careless in ethics may violate the rights of community members, or disrupt the studied communities, but on the other hand, being too strict, not enough knowledge may not be gained to understand the communities. However, the importance of the research is not on who wrote what; rather, the interest is on the types of input, such as questions, experience sharing and reflections (Kantanen & Manninen 2016, 93).

4.5 Analysing the data

For the data analysis, thematic analysis was applied meaning that the online survey responses and posts of the Facebook groups were divided into different themes to help to find out what social sustainability means in a context of online community. The themes were identified with the help of theory used on the conceptual framework of the thesis. Thematic analysis is an excellent method in understanding and unpacking a body of rich and descriptive media text on social media. Also, thematic analysis can be successfully used with visual material, taking intertextuality into account to allow a well-balanced analysis of underlying cultural meanings. (Walters 2016.)

First, the online survey responses were thematically analysed under the aspects of social sustainability and their sub-topics. Also, all the Facebook posts were copied and necessary posts and comments that had relation to social sustainability from the aspects of social support, well-being and friendship building were saved for the thematic analysis. Sub-topics of social support include emotional, network, esteem, tangible and informational dimensions from which each aspect was found to be related to the studied
online community. Sub-topics of well-being included cultural, social, human, political, natural, financial and built capital dimensions from which all the other dimensions except financial (non-profit organisation) were recognised to be related to the studied online community. The respondents’ narratives in online survey and the evidence on Facebook groups were combined, which revealed the connection between respondents’ comprehension of social sustainability and their exact behaviour in online community. After the thematic analysis, results were reflected to the literature and conceptual framework of the thesis project to create discussion and conclusion by answering to the research questions.

During the data analysis, the hospitality paradigm in the studied online community started to receive more attention than first planned when the author started to analyse the roles of the community members. Another finding from the online communities was the difference between the fall and spring groups. Fall group members seemed to be more active in generating their own content, being more engaged with the group and more open for discussion from the very beginning of the semester or even before the semester start but spring group members started to make contributions only after a while after the semester start. This might be because fall group members had a longer introduction week together than spring group members and thus fall group members became closer to each other faster. This supports the argument of Navarro et al. (2018, 73) who state that community starts to emerge after coherent interactions and slow awareness of each other. The differences between the interactions of online communities show that every community is different and that they develop in different time cycles depending on whether they are able to arrange offline meetings to strengthen the friendships. Keeping these insights in mind, the next chapter introduces the rest of the findings of the study about the online communities of ESN Kalmar from the perspective of social sustainability.
5 Analysis of social sustainability of ESN Kalmar

This chapter introduces the results of the research, which was made by using mixed-methods. Firstly, the results of the qualitative online survey distributed on the Facebook groups are presented with the help of citations of the responses. Secondly, the online netnography results of the Facebook groups are presented with the help of screenshots of some noteworthy posts published on the groups. The results are divided under the themes related to social sustainability: social support, well-being and friendships.

5.1 Social support

The first question of the online survey asked what kind of importance ESN Kalmar Facebook group has played to the international members during their study abroad period. Most of the respondents think that ESN Kalmar Facebook group has played a high importance. Almost everyone mention the informational importance of the group to be able to stay updated regarding entertainment such as parties, events, activities, trips and sports. Many respondents use the word “help” to describe the online community’s importance. They experience that they have been able to both receive and provide help in an online community. In addition to giving an emotional or intangible help, instrumental help is provided through the groups. This means that people offer their physical/tangible help for people who are asking for it. (Figure 2.) Some respondents feel that they receive information from the group regarding Kalmar itself, safety, weather and university. Only a few respondents feel that the Facebook group has played only a moderate or a low importance during their study abroad period.

“ESN Facebook group’s importance has been significant in this period. It covered all the events and without it I wouldn’t have even known about them.”

“Very helpful because you are always updated on the events in Kalmar or if there are any special events or accidents, for example when the snowstorm was.”

“The people of ESN always try to remember the exchange students when anything is going on in Kalmar.”
“The group was not crucially important for me because it does not provide much information regarding studies and university. However, it was helpful especially in the beginning of my studies to get information about what’s going on in ESN community and in Kalmar in general.”

Figure 2. Asking and providing tangible help

At the beginning of the semesters, many informative posts were shared that provide help and advice regarding for example accommodation, bike rental, banks and internet access. Members are introducing themselves and people want to get to know each other by inviting people to have offline meetings. (Figure 3.) Local people of the community and ESN Kalmar Board members are happy to help the new students which is seen through their friendly answers, used emojis and pressed ‘likes’. People are sharing their hints considering ESN membership, spots in Kalmar, where to go and what to see. The informative posts are mainly provided by the local members of the groups in the beginning of the semesters but when the semesters go further also the ‘guests’ start to share their experiences and hints.
In addition to positive emotions, members share their misfortune when they have lost their property or are unable to join events because not feeling well. Other members give their support by commenting encouraging texts or advice. Not only text is used but also emojis to show support and sympathy. (Figure 4.)

Members are grateful for each other’s support in different occasions for example in sports or having a DJ set. Members thank each other in the group, show their emotions and care by posting about the events in a grateful sense. They also support a person’s
sense of self-esteem by telling how good work has been done during the introduction weeks and by craving for more DJ sets from a group member. (Figure 5.)

Figure 5. Gratefulness and social support

The second question of the survey asked in which ways ESN Kalmar community has inspired or influenced the way the members travel. First, majority of the respondents feel that they have gotten a lot of travel related information and ideas through the community. Many respondents have been inspired to travel to places and countries that they would have never thought of. Members have gotten many word-of-mouth recommendations from their peers through offline meetings which has inspired and influenced their travel planning.

“They provided various trips to interesting cities/countries, so it influenced me a lot since I travelled with them to Helsinki, Tallinn and St. Petersburg. They were well prepared, offered city trips and recommended good places to visit, which I usually would have never booked.”

“ESN Kalmar community is my guide in travelling. If you have a question, you can just ask them. They are there for you and for your travel.”
“Meeting people from all over Europe, I have had people recommending me to visit places that I otherwise would have never thought to go.”

The third question about what members would have wished more from the ESN Kalmar Facebook group sought to receive the maintenance and/or developmental aspect of social sustainability of an online community. Many respondents seem to be pleased with the current state of the Facebook group but the survey also succeeded to receive some development suggestions. Quite a few respondents would have wished for more local information and experience about Swedish culture and “insider” hints about Kalmar.

“More interaction with "local communities" through e.g. parties. Discounts for local restaurants and support for study related issues.”

“Not much, maybe they could have given us more tips about where to go, what to do, where the cool spots are etc.”

“More information about holidays in Sweden or national food days etc. would have been nice, but all in all the Facebook group offers a lot of useful information about trips and events.”

People have recognized the importance of open discussion and they would have wished more interaction between the members through posting about their own plans to create new relationships or to deepen the existing ones. The Facebook group seems to play an important tool for members to communicate with each other but they still need more encouragement from the ESN Kalmar Board to become more welcoming towards each other.

“Maybe more posts about people's lives in Kalmar, more stories, maybe a more detailed planning of activities (instead just one or two days before). But overall the FB group was pretty well organised and managed.”

“There could be more information about unofficial events and parties. ESN Board members could encourage new students to post on the group and inform more about their travel plans and social events.”
“I would have wished more engagement from the members to post what are they doing and asking other people to join them to create new friendships and trust among the members.”

“I am satisfied with the group at a high level and I hope we maintain the connections we have created even beyond our study period here in Kalmar!”

Some respondents give practical suggestions on how to develop the communication through the Facebook group. Some of the ideas would expect more pictures and visual elements to be published in the group. Also, more information about social events and hints for settling down in the beginning of the period are emphasized in the responses.

“Create a monthly newsletter, a summary of the month’s activity and what is to come in the following month. Also a shout out when it is someone’s birthday. It is very difficult to think of improvements because the Facebook group is brilliant!”

“It would be fun to see a few pictures from the events or to have pictures from the welcome week. Maybe another thing would be to inform the exchange students more about the Swedish culture during the year. But all in all, the group is really good!”

“Maybe a somekind of introduction sheet with a map, where you can buy bikes, which grocery has what and how expensive it is, where Systembolaget is, location of all the university offices etc.”

5.2 Well-being

Well-being and especially the aspect of local knowledge seem to gain a lot of engagement in the Facebook groups. International students are informed about Swedish culture regarding for example time change, national food days and weather conditions (Figure 6.). The position of the local members or members who have stayed in Kalmar for a longer period is significant in the content creation of the groups especially in the beginning of the semesters (Figure 7.). Community members are grateful of the shared information which is seen through their comments and pressed ‘likes’ and ‘hearts’. Members are seeking for help about different things regarding their stay in Sweden for
which local members and members who have stayed for a longer period in Kalmar (‘hosts’) are able to answer for example where is the best car rental company to travel to Öland.

Figure 6. Informative posts about Swedish weather and culture

Figure 7. Local knowledge about Kalmar and Swedish holidays

Some common cultural symbols are used in the posts and comments for example green heart emoji to value the color of the organisation or using phrases such as “Dear Greenies / ESNers”. There are more and more emojis used by the members the further the semesters go. In addition to pictures, there are some videos shared from the ESN
events where people are having fun time together. (Figure 8.) Also, trust factor of well-being is mentioned on the online survey responses.

Figure 8. Cultural symbols

“The Facebook group is more trustworthy for me and I am more willing to help the ESN members.”

Regarding the second question about in which ways ESN Kalmar community has inspired or influenced the way community members travel, some respondents mention the cooperation with Scanbalt. They feel that the cooperation with Scanbalt is efficient and convenient. They have been pleased with the travels that they have made with ESN Kalmar community and cooperation has made travelling easier during the study abroad period. Travelling with other international students have made them feel more comfortable than arranging travels by themselves. Some pictures from the offline meetings and general pictures of Kalmar are shared in the group, which shows the active mobilisation of the members and influence for other members’ mobilisation. Natural resources available for the community members in Kalmar seem to play an important part of the members’ every day mobility. (Figure 9.) Since Kalmar is a new town for most of the members, the locations are shared via Google Maps or using pictures of the meeting points. (Figure 10.)

“ESN works together with Scanbalt and so a lot of travel possibilities were offered to us, like a Lapland trip, a cruise to Riga and a trip to St. Petersburg.”
“Travelling seemed more an ordinary activity thanks to this community: with discounts and partnerships everything has been simpler.”

“I feel more comfortable with international people, easier to travel and meet new places and new people.”

Figure 9. Pictures of Kalmar
5.3 Friendships

A majority of the respondents experience that the Facebook groups have helped the community networks to stay in touch and made the socialisation process easier. Some respondents mention that through the groups, they have created bonds and the groups have helped with creating and maintaining a team spirit. The respondents think that the Facebook groups have had an impact on their social life, friendship building, meeting new people and keeping up the community spirit. The Facebook groups are described to create a linkage between the exchange students and ESN Board.

“The Facebook group makes you feel that you are a part of a bigger group that helps you feel like at home.”

“I think without ESN, I would have had a harder time to make friends. The Facebook group helped me with any questions I had.”

“It provides a platform for exchange among international students, to make friends and acquire new cultures. It really enriches everyone’s study life.”
“If I didn’t follow the group, I would have missed out a lot of social life and would have not met many amazing people.”

As the relationships get deeper during the semesters, the posts include more “inside jokes” which can be understood only by the community members. To deepen the jokes, members use GIF-videos as their comments. Also, when people are starting to leave Kalmar back to their home countries, sad emojis are used to show the feelings. Members react to each others’ comments by likes, sad emojis, laugh emojis and hearts. (Figure 11.)

![Figure 11. Event invites with inside jokes and emotions](image)

Many respondents mention the importance and inspiration of travelling with a group of international students. Respondents experience that they have made many friends during their study abroad period which has influenced the way they look at other cultures. After getting to know people from other countries and talking to them, respondents are willing to visit their peers in their home countries after the study abroad period and some of them have already visited their friends or have planned to do so. Respondents mention the trips they have been to, how fun times they have had and emphasise the
new friendships. Some respondents who have not been that active in ESN related activities have not felt any influence or inspiration in the way they travel. Also, some respondents had already visited the places offered by ESN by themselves so they did not feel the community had any influence in the way they travel.

“I have become more interested in travelling with a group instead of by myself. I try to be more active and meet new people when I travel. Earlier, I was more just by myself.”

“I made really good friends here in Kalmar and will for sure visit them in their own countries as well as I invited them to come and visit me in Austria.”

“Unfortunately, I have not yet travelled outside of Kalmar through the ESN platform but I hope to do so soon as I have friends in many countries now.”

“Normally, I don’t really like to travel in a huge group because you don’t have that much time to see everything. However, I really enjoyed the Lapland trip because we managed to see a lot although we were so many people. Also, I really enjoy traveling with our group by a car. We had such great times during many weekends we traveled together. ESN inspired me to do trips (Lapland) that I would have never thought about doing.”

To sum, there are seen some factors that are repeated and emphasised in the data collected. These factors include the importance of information provided in the online community, getting connected with other members, local knowledge of hosts, arrangements of offline meetings and openly shared emotions. When going through the data, social belongness stands up both from the shared content in the groups and survey responses. The factor that can be noticed behind the Facebook posts is trust to other members. In the following chapter, these aspects are reflected to tourism literature and conceptual framework of the thesis project.
6 Discussion

The research question of the study was “What means social sustainability in a context of online communities?”. This question can be explored by first acknowledging the relevant themes; social support, well-being and friendships, and then analysing the data collected from ESN Kalmar online communities. In the study results, there is found a lot of similarities and supporting evidence with the previous literature in tourism research about social life online, online communities and host-guest framework, which will be reflected in the discussion.

Social support in a context of online communities based on the study means the social interactions that create supportive networks between the online community members. It means that you can trust to other members, both hosts and guests, to provide you up-to-date information and share your emotions, both positive and negative, openly and again trust that other members give you the virtual comfort and care you need in that particular moment and that other members are happy for your success. Social support in a context of online communities means that other members have a positive effect to your self-esteem by encouraging you in the exciting life events. Social support has a strong relation to offline contacts in addition to online contacts because of the aspect of tangible support, which requires physical actions. Besides the informational support that online communities can provide virtually, tangible support is as valued or even more valued since it requires more hospitality than virtually provided support. What comes to the dynamic roles of the hosts and guests, there is a linkage between social support and guests’ willingness on constructing community sustainability in the future. When the guests have sensed acceptance that is generated by social support, it might influence to becoming hosts for next semesters.

Well-being in a context of online communities means respectful behaviour toward each other and trust in community members even though there might not be created a personal relationship to everyone. The high level of trust can be explored for example by the facts that members openly invite each other to get-togethers their homes and they can trust to receive help in various situations from the community members. This confirms the argument of Germann Molz (2012, 109) who states that online networking technologies help creating trust among strangers. Well-being in online environment means knowledge sharing about mutual interests and that community members’
capabilities and skills are in hand if needed. These findings are corresponding with Wasko and Faraj’s (2005) statement that knowledge sharing in online communities is motivated by the expectation of creating a reputation, desire in helping others, reciprocity with others’ help and commitment to community (Xu et al. 2012, 347). Physical aspects such as natural resources and built capital that enable offline meetings also create online community’s well-being.

New friendships that community members have built during their study abroad period are emphasised in the responses. Offline meetings play a critical role in maintaining and deepening these relationships (Short et al. 1976) which improve community members’ sense of belonging and information sharing (Lin 2007, 132). The Facebook groups have an enormous impact on building new relationships and keeping in touch with new acquaintances when people make suggestions on offline meetings for members to know what other international students in town are doing. This can be reflected to Chung’s (2017, 3186) suggestion that online friendships are more likely to succeed after a face-to-face meeting. The online environment gives more value for offline meetings in order to extending and continuing the conversations happened offline. However, this can also exclude some members who have not participated in offline meetings but see these conversations online.

Hosts have a key role in friendship creation by encouraging guests to join the ESN events and by starting discussions and informing guests especially in the beginning of the semesters. Hsu et al. (2012, 83) have noted that online community managers, the hosts in ESN Kalmar case, should emphasise friendships and social support in addition to content in order to build a socially sustainable online community. Another argument in literature that emphasises the host’s part is that a host plays a key role in online community’s friendship building since tourists usually extend their networks via locals (Chung 2017, 3186). The interesting part of friendships in a context of ESN Kalmar community is the matter of continuity: when the international students travel back to their homelands, how friendships are maintained in the future? Some of the former ESN Kalmar members have come back to Kalmar to meet their friends which also indicates their feelings of well-being and togetherness with the community. In short, friendships in a context of online communities mean that hosts encourage friendship building in online communities by creating chances for frequent offline meetings besides the online
interactions to generate stronger bonds that are extremely important in a case of international student community and create continuity in the relationships in the future.

What comes to the linkage between tourism, social connectedness and network capital (Germann Molz 2012), mobile network sociality sees quick information exchange and active trust building more important than shared common history (Wittel 2001, 67–68), which can be reflected to the case of ESN Kalmar online community in which information exchange and trust play an important role despite the short time of awareness of other community members. The online community of ESN Kalmar on social media platform shows its relevancy in the linkage of tourism, connectedness and network capital by allowing continuous co-presence with creating new shapes of network capital in a study abroad destination. The term ‘mobility turn’ (Urry 2003; Germann Molz 2012; Sheller & Urry 2006) that has put social into travel can be connected to concern exchange student networks who are on move but simultaneously create a bunch of friendships and social contacts during the study abroad period. The lives of international students are connected and formed by mobilities (Germann Molz 2012, 5; Germann Molz 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006).

Since the exchange students can be described as being tourists in the study abroad destination, travelling has created social capital, connections between people, during their time abroad (Larsen et al. 2006a, 262). Urry (2003, 168) refers to a networked society that does not consist of any ‘strangers’, which can be reflected to the case of ESN Kalmar online community that includes over hundred members who are first completely unknown of each other but slowly begin being aware of other members. After, they start to become possible members of people’s ever-expanding networks with the help of the Facebook group. The phenomenon around the social sustainability of online communities in a context of exchange student networks supports the fact that Beck-Gernsheim (2002) stresses by saying that there are more ‘beginnings’ and ‘farewells’ which can be seen in the relationship development in the ESN Kalmar online communities. After the study abroad period, the strong ties built abroad may get weaker again and in order to sustain them it is required to keep in touch with recurrent long-distance communication and intermittent face-to-face meetings that also community members mention in their online survey responses. (Larsen et al. 2006a, 262.) The study
of Lin (2007, 132) supports the theory by stating that online social bonds are only sustained with frequent offline interactions.
7 Conclusion

The objective of the thesis was to look into, explore welcoming online communities where the roles between the hosts and guests are mobile from the perspective of social sustainability and thus contribute to tourism literature. In the data collection process, netnography, which is still underutilised method in tourism studies, was utilised in addition to qualitative online survey to collect as comprehensive data as possible both from subjective and objective perspectives. The ethical considerations of the data collection and analysis was taken into account to protect the community members’ privacy and cultural backgrounds which is important in case of netnographic study. The main research question of the thesis was: “What means social sustainability in a context of online communities?”. Now, after discussing about the online community results from the aspects of social support, well-being and friendships, and deepening into relevant literature, an answer to the research question can be found. Social sustainability of an online community has different dimensions depending on the view and thus it cannot be defined only by one sentence which corresponds with the claim of Manos et al. (2011) that social sustainability will unlikely ever find an agreed-upon definition of the concept. However, this chapter provides insights how social sustainability can be explored through welcoming online communities.

Before answering to the main research question, there are three sub-questions which need to be explored first. The first sub-question was method related and asked: “What kinds of methodological approaches are suitable for studying online communities?”. Since modern life is highly mobilised and relationships are more dispersed, researchers have to adopt with new methods instead of normal desk studies (Germann Molz 2012, 36). After conducting a qualitative online survey distributed on Facebook groups and online netnography, I can recommend these types of methods for studying online communities. Online survey, which is easily accessible by mobile phones and fast to fill out, proved to be an excellent method to study the social sustainability of an online community. The high response rate showed how engaged the group members are with ESN and how interested they are to further develop the activities for next generations. It also showed how effectively people are reached through the online communities.

The online netnography proved to provide a lot of research data and through the posts it was interesting to see how relationships develop in an online community that has offline
contacts in addition to online contacts. In online netnography, researcher is not only studying the text but also photos, videos, emojis and geo-tags providing a comprehensive outlook of the online community. Netnography provides data that community members have self-created while on the move. The study found that the content of the groups differs from community to community depending on the trust relations and openness but also on the cultural differences and their different habits on using social media and sharing their lives. Studying online communities required that the researcher took ethical considerations into account since there could have been some sensitive data and it was about “amateur art”, which may have caused some copyright questions (Bruckman 2002, 229).

Only by using online survey, the study would have lacked information of the relationships of the community members, the development of the community from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester and transformation of the community members; from strangers to friends – from weak ties to strong ties – from guests to hosts. Utilising two kinds of approaches created comprehensive and rich data for analysis. The literature review referred to Larsen et al. (2006a, 266) who claim that mobile methods should be able to study how people simultaneously sustain ties through online as well as through face-to-face interaction. Combining qualitative online survey and netnography made it possible to receive data from different perspectives and showed how ties are sustained both online and offline in a context of exchange student network. However, because the study sample excluded Swedish local ESN members, it did not receive the opinions of Swedish hosts of the community about their feelings in hosting and providing help and knowledge for international guests.

The second sub-question was theory related and asked: “How do hosts and guests shape the social sustainability of online communities?”. There is seen a strong connection to host and guest relationship in the online communities of ESN Kalmar. The importance of hosts in activating the guests both online and offline is high during the semesters. The guests are emphasising the need for “insider” aspect and local knowledge and their appreciation for the received hospitality can be seen through their reactions (likes, hearts and comments) on Facebook posts. This finding is coherent with the finding of Arsal et al. (2010, 409) who claim that the role of local people in providing destination information online is important. An online community’s communication needs
interactions from both parties to work fluently which is in coherence with the Levinasian philosophy that emphasises the mutual responsibility of hospitality and welcoming of hosts and guests (Levinas 1969 in Höckert 2015, 112; 2018, 15). Hosts are shaping the atmosphere of the online community and how welcome guests feel before their arrival to the destination and during their stay in the destination. On the other hand, the guests are shaping the way the hosts feel about their importance towards guests by showing gratefulness of hosts’ help, knowledge and care. Besides the welcoming role of the hosts, also the guests are welcoming towards each other by keeping their doors open for offline meetings. This supports the fact that the welcoming roles are ‘on move’ without being necessarily related to the locality (Germann Molz & Gibson 2007).

The third sub-question concerned ESN Kalmar online community and asked in which ways its social sustainability can be enhanced. I suggest that the hosts take more responsibility in the content creation since their engagement to the group inspires the guests in mobility, educates them about the local culture and makes the community members more active in interacting with each other. In addition to text, group members should be more active in posting visual elements such as videos and photos either from their individual experiences or offline group meetings and trips together to share their lives more openly and to generate community trust among the members. The study shows that without the openness in an online community, the social sustainability of an online community can be disrupted. When there is a lack of openness in an online community, enough content might not be created affecting to the lack of offline meetings which again may result in weak relationship building that leaves the friendships “airy”. Without enough open interactivity and trust, the community flow experiences may suffer, as noted in the conceptual framework of the thesis project (Wu & Chang 2005; Hsu et al. 2012, 82). Therefore, this may disrupt the social sustainability of online community.

Now, I experience that the data that I collected was able to provide enough information to answer the questions posed in the beginning of the study. Social sustainability of an online community means collectivism – it is collectively created, maintained and developed. To creating, maintaining and developing it, it requires active participation and content creation from the community members. Social sustainability of an online
community means high level of trust; members need to trust to each other to be able to ask, receive and provide help and to be able to arrange offline meetings, which are important in personal friendship building to create strong ties instead of many weak ties. Social sustainability in an online community means a sense of belonging; making everyone feeling welcome and being a part of a group where their self-esteem can be improved and they can share their emotions and important life events openly. In order to create a socially sustainable online community, it requires offline meetings for generating strong bonds among the members. To sum, the most emphasized findings in the study of interrelations of social sustainability and online communities are the importance of trust, reciprocity in hospitality, fluidity in host and guest roles, openness in interactions and in context production and offline contacts in addition to online contacts.

The results of the study can be applied to discussions of internet behaviour in general. The online community of ESN Kalmar is a good example of a community that cherishes interactions in a positive sense with welcoming everyone. Despite the fact that the general appearance of the ESN Kalmar Facebook groups is welcoming, there are always some members who are not that active in content production or do not participate in the offline meetings which can lead to feeling excluded from the community when seeing other members posting pictures and jokes from offline meetings. This can call more questions for online community ethics, hospitality, responsibility and inclusion. Hence, it would be necessary to continue to explore how the notions of welcoming and hosts and guests can promote responsibility, well-being and sustainability online.

As this thesis project is now finishing, also the semester is ending, meaning that the international students, the guests and hosts, are returning to their homelands. ESN Kalmar will have their final farewell dinner where the new friendships will be cheered and memories looked back. The online community of ESN Kalmar will get quieter as members get dispersed and the strength of the newly built relationships are now weightened. In order to sustaining the connections, members should keep long-distance communication and arrange physical reunions. A new group for ESN members of Fall 2018 has been established and therefore the new welcoming online community starts to emerge during the Summer when the guests join the Facebook group and begin being
aware of each other. The new hosts will have to work a lot again to welcome the new students to town, mobilise them and create a socially sustainable community that works fluently online and in which members feel a sense of well-being, can receive and provide social support and build strong friendships. Drawing upon these insights, the ‘moving’ aspect of the hosts and guests in a welcoming online community gives fluidity for the roles and refreshes the hospitality paradigm to concern other online environments in addition to couch sharing sites.
References


Appendix 1. Online survey on “Online Communities – Social Sustainability of ESN Kalmar”

Dear ESNers!

This study aims to explore social potentialities of an online community. The social potentialities are handled through the community members' overall well-being, built friendships and received social support during the study abroad period.

The study focuses on ESN Kalmar Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 international students. All responses are confidential and anonymous. All questions are open-ended and it takes 5-10 minutes to complete the survey. Your experiences are valuable and enable the further development of ESN Kalmar community.

Thank you for your contribution, every response counts.

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1. What kind of importance ESN Kalmar Facebook Group has played to you during your study abroad period?

2. In which ways ESN Kalmar community has inspired or influenced the way you travel?

3. What would you have wished more from the ESN Kalmar Facebook Group?