

Developing Kuusijärvi nature-based experience area - the stakeholders' perspective

Karin Ruotsi



Author(s) Karin Ruotsi	
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<p>According to the Vantaa city strategy issued for the years 2018-2021, Vantaa is planned to be developed as an international airport city that is attractive to inhabitants, as well as businesses and visitors. In addition, the city strategy includes the development of the the Kuusijärvi nature-based experience area, which has been identified as a <i>vitality destination</i> in the city.</p> <p>This study is commissioned by the City of Vantaa and Avia network. This study aims to explore the stakeholder's view of the current and future possibilities of the experiences around the Kuusijärvi area, as well as their views on its future development as a part of the airport city development. The stakeholders invited to take part in the study were comprised of the following: tourism and aviation related businesses among the Avia Network, the City of Vantaa representatives, Café Kuusijärvi, nature-based businesses operating in the Kuusijärvi area and Metsähallitus.</p> <p>The theoretical part introduces the airport city concepts, sustainable nature-based tourism and nature-based experiences. Those themes are then interlinked in discussion of the nature-based experiences as a part of an airport experience. A qualitative case study was used as the research strategy and data was collected through semi-structured theme interviews. The results are based on eight theme interviews of different stakeholders.</p> <p>The results of the study indicated that the current Kuusijärvi experience consists of experiences in the nature-like area and being a gateway to Sipoonkorpi national park. Also, Café Kuusijärvi was mentioned as a part of the experience. The area was viewed interesting with its offering of all-year-round activities to visitors. The interviewees described the experiences currently being offered in the area and considered Kuusijärvi to have potential in developing nature-based experiences further. As key challenges of the development the interviewees named the lack of working and storing premises for the nature-based businesses to expand their business in Kuusijärvi, extending existing cooperation and networks between businesses in the area, improve the role of the city as an enabler of development, the lack of an organization specializing in marketing and selling tourism products in Vantaa and the current limited digital accessibility of nature-based experiences in the area.</p> <p>For the future the interviewees envisioned the Kuusijärvi area being an all-year-round hub for activities in the areas of Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi and concentrating in offering unique nature-based experiences through different mediums e.g. sauna and food.</p> <p>Based on the findings this study provides the commissioner with insights on how the Kuusijärvi area is currently experienced by the interviewed stakeholders as well as their future visions for the area. In addition, the study offers the commissioner suggestions for the City of Vantaa and Avia Network to facilitate the future development.</p>	
Keywords The Kuusijärvi area, Vantaa, airport city, nature-based experiences, sustainable nature-based tourism	

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The commissioner of this thesis is employed by the City of Vantaa and organizes the airport area cocreation network, the Avia Network. The thesis process was started in February 2020 when the commissioner expressed their interest to research the current and future potential experiences of the Kuusijärvi area as part of the airport city development. The Kuusijärvi development was considered a current topic that could be interlinked with the airport city development. Since the Kuusijärvi area has not been developed in the recent years, the commissioner wanted to research the Avia Network members' and other stakeholders' view of the possible experiences in the area. Those findings could be taken into consideration when developing both the Kuusijärvi area and the airport city Aviapolis.

This study aims to explore the stakeholders' view of the current and future possibilities of the experiences around the Kuusijärvi area, as well as their development views. The stakeholders invited to the study comprise of the tourism and aviation related businesses and organizations among the Avia Network, the City of Vantaa representatives, businesses in the Kuusijärvi area such as Café Kuusijärvi and nature-based businesses, and Metsähallitus. The members of the Avia network that were invited to participate in the study were representatives of the hotels, the airlines, Finavia, and Business Finland/Visit Finland, as they most likely have the best knowledge of the tourists visiting Finland and their possible interests. The stakeholders were chosen based on their field of industry, location and their assumed interest in participation of developing tourism destinations in Vantaa, such as the Kuusijärvi area.

According to the Vantaa city strategy issued for the years 2018-2021, the city is planned to be developed as an international airport city that is attractive to inhabitants, as well as businesses and visitors. The Kuusijärvi area and the airport city Aviapolis are among the key development areas of the *vitality development program* of Vantaa for the years 2019-2021 (*Vantaan elinvoimaohjelma- ja vetovoimaohjelma in Finnish*). In the city strategy, Vantaa is described as an international, unique, brave and relaxed city. The Vantaa *vitality program* supports the city strategy and contains actions and development projects for the years 2019-2021. According to the *vitality program*, the proximity of the nature and forests are a part of the Vantaa identity. Therefore, developing the Kuusijärvi area for the locals as well as domestic and international tourists has been initiated (Vantaa 2019a). This development coincides with nature-based tourism and sustainability being key themes in

Finland's tourism strategy for the years 2019-2028 and action plan for years the 2019-2023.

Kuusijärvi is an outdoor recreational area situated about 8km east of the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. The area comprises of a lake, a large sandy beach, trails, and public smoke saunas. The area offers possibilities for various activities all-year-round. Café Kuusijärvi operates the restaurant, meeting- and sauna facilities in the area. Since December 2019 the Kuusijärvi area has functioned as a gateway to Sipoonkorpi national park after a pedestrian bridge was opened and connected Kuusijärvi to the national park. (Vantaa 2016; Vantaa 2019a.) The number of visitors has increased due to the new pedestrian bridge during the years 2019-2020.

In 2016 and 2019 the City of Vantaa published development plans for Kuusijärvi. The plans aim to enhance the area's usability and to extend the activities throughout the park to serve the visitors and the businesses better and to create new opportunities for activities the area. The plans will be explained in more detail in chapter 3.1. For decades the area already has served as a recreational area for the residents of Vantaa and its neighboring cities. In addition, due to its proximity of the airport, it could be an ideal destination for short term visitors from the airport to get a taste of Finland. (Vantaa 2016; Vantaa 2019a) This is supported by the growth of the passenger numbers in Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. In 2019 Helsinki-Vantaa Airport reached over 21 million passengers, from which 38,6% were international transfer passengers (Finavia 2020c.)

Due to the lack of resources the Kuusijärvi area has not been developed during recent years. During peak months the area is in very intensive use and the current facilities do not support the growth of tourism nor the growth of the number of recreational visitors. To cater to the growing needs, development projects are ongoing. Those will attract visitors to various activities in a wider area and allow for smarter use of the space and facilities to handle the growing number of visitors. The development projects in the area are planned to materialize during years 2019-2030. (Vantaa 2019a.)

1.2 Research objective

This study is written as a commissioned project for the City of Vantaa and the Avia network. The aim is to examine and analyze the possible Kuusijärvi nature-based experiences from the stakeholders' point of view. Furthermore, the aim is to understand the needs and wishes of the stakeholders operating in the Kuusijärvi area, and companies and organizations belonging to the Avia network in order to develop the area from the

tourism point of view. Thirdly, this research aims to find out the Avia Network's views for developing Kuusijärvi in expanding its nature-based experiences. With the results of the study, the commissioner will have a better understanding of the stakeholders' views in order to prioritize and execute the future development projects in the Kuusijärvi area.

The research aims to answer the following questions: *How is the current state of Kuusijärvi nature-based experiences from the stakeholders' perspective? What are the stakeholders' views on the future development of the Kuusijärvi experience? What are the possibilities of the Kuusijärvi experience in 10 years?*

1.3 Scope and limitations

The study has the focus on the future development and therefore aims to look beyond the Covid-19 pandemic that surfaced in early 2020 and which at the time of writing the thesis showed no sign of a definite end. According to Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2020) the recovery time of tourism and aviation industries is uncertain but strongly linked to the opening of borders, lifting the travel restrictions to and from Finland, and assessments of air traffic resuming. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2020.) In addition, the consumers' feeling of security is an important aspect when considering the recovery time of tourism. For example, Finnair estimates that air traffic and tourism will recover within two to three years to the levels of 2019 (Lentoposti 2020).

The project includes researching the stakeholders' point of view on the current and future development of the Kuusijärvi area. After interviewing the stakeholders of the Avia network and the businesses in the Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas, the results are analyzed. The thesis closes with suggestions how to improve the area based on the findings of the study. This study does not include designing or creating experiences or services in the Kuusijärvi area, but rather gives suggestions based on the findings. Instead, the study aims to find out how the stakeholders perceive the area and its possibilities, as well as their wishes regarding the future development. The study excludes any consideration of the current local visitors, but rather focuses on the business stakeholders such as the Avia Network and the local businesses and organizations operating in the Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi area.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 introduces the Vantaa airport city stakeholders relevant to this study such as the City of Vantaa, The Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, and the Avia Network. Furthermore, the airport city concepts such as the *Aerotropolis* and the *Airport Urbanism* are introduced in the chapter. Chapter 3 focuses on the case study destination, the Kuusijärvi area, and its future development plans. Also, the greater area of Sipoonkorpi national park is introduced. In addition, sustainable nature-based tourism as well as nature-based experiences are discussed in the chapter.

Chapter 4 familiarizes with the method used in this study and the process of the qualitative case study and its analysis. Chapter 5 introduces the results of the study by themes: elements of a nature-based experience, the current Kuusijärvi experience, developing and managing the Kuusijärvi experience, Kuusijärvi as a part of the airport city experience, and the future Kuusijärvi experience. In the final chapter 6 the thesis process and the results of the study are evaluated and discussed. In addition, development suggestions are given in the end of the chapter based on the study.

2 Vantaa Airport City

According to the city strategy issued for the years 2018-2021 the City of Vantaa is developed as an international airport city that attracts both inhabitants and businesses. In addition, the strategy identifies both domestic and international tourism as key development areas. In addition, the strategy emphasizes the importance of network development based on the regional needs, as well as for aligned business concepts with companies, vocational schools and universities. According to the strategy, the future Vantaa will be known as a city of events. Events are the *vitality* factors of the city and bring significant income to tourism related businesses and enhance the visibility and image of the City of Vantaa. As an example, Hakunila and Myyrmäki districts are developed with a focus on sport event venues from which Hakunila is a neighbour district to the Kuusijärvi area. (Vantaa 2017.)

In 2019 the City of Vantaa introduced a *vitality program* that implements development actions from the city's strategy set for the years 2018-2021. The program is especially targeted for businesses and organizations as well as a guide for the city's organization work. Even though the strength of Vantaa is the airport and the excellent connections between the world and the rest of Finland, without strategic development Vantaa may remain in the shadow of its neighbouring cities. Therefore, Vantaa is investing in the *vitality program* to market and strengthen the Vantaa identity among its residents and operators via cultural and recreational services and experiences. The programme targets to attract and retain residents and aims to strengthen Vantaa city's image as an interesting, fun and functional place to live. Even though the most of Finland's air traffic passenger flow goes through Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, the visitors have not fully discovered the possibilities of Vantaa. Therefore, the airport city Aviapolis is developed together in cooperation with networks and businesses to offer services both in temporary and permanent concepts. (Vantaa 2019b.)

The City of Vantaa highlights tourism as a growing industry due to the growing demand of air traffic, increasing numbers of visitors and Vantaa's shopping possibilities as well as the growing supply and demand of accommodation services. During the years 2007-2017 the overnight stays in Vantaa have increased by 74%. (Vantaa 2017.) In fact, during 2019 the overnight stays increased by 11,4%, while Helsinki in the same period reached to 7.7% and Rovaniemi 11,3% growth rates. The year 2019 was record-breaking for Vantaa as it rose past Tampere as the second largest destination for the overnight stays with 1 243 424 stays, from which two thirds were domestic travellers. Measured by the number of foreign overnight stays, Vantaa holds the third position in Finland (437 953) after Helsinki (2 078 045) and Rovaniemi (479 072). (Visit Vantaa 2020.) Even though the number

of overnight stays has increased in Vantaa, the average duration of stay in 2018 remained at 1,5 nights for the domestic segment and 1,4 for the international segment. (Virtanen, 8 March 2019.) A challenge for Vantaa is seen in the lack of an event arena to host large-scale concerts, meetings and exhibitions. In addition, according to the strategy the city is working actively to advance stop-over tourism development and to bring businesses of different domains together. (Vantaa 2017.)

In 2019 the research agency *Taloustutkimus Oy* studied Finnish domestic travel and the image of 37 cities and counties as a travel destination among the Finns. In the report Vantaa reached position 36 out of the 37 cities studied. Although, the differences in the grades were small as Vantaa received a score of 7,37, Espoo 7,39 and Helsinki 8,39. According to the study, Vantaa gained the best reviews for accessibility by public transport, shopping possibilities, county's traffic connections and the availability of accommodation services. The weakest reviews were given to the city's attractions and the common amenities in the city. In addition, according to the research the amount and versatility of events offered were not considered to be enough. (Vantaa 2019c.)

Helsinki-Vantaa Airport was built in 1952 for the Olympic games held in Helsinki. The airport is located in Vantaa and managed by the Finavia airport company, which develops and maintains the passenger terminals and the infrastructure needed by the air traffic in Finland. In addition to managing the long-distance and transit hub Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, Finavia also hosts a network of 21 airports around Finland. Finavia's vision is to offer the best connections between Northern Europe and the rest of the world as well as to promote Finland as an attractive and an easy-to-reach destination. (Finavia 2020a.) According to Finavia (2020b) during 2019 altogether 21 861 082 domestic and international passengers travelled through Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, from which according to Finavia (2020c) 38,6% of the airport passengers were international transfer passengers. Table 1 illustrates the growth of the air traffic during years 2014-2019. According to Airports Council International's (ACI) *Airport Industry Connectivity report in 2018*, Helsinki-Vantaa Airport was the best-connected airport in Northern Europe. In total, 320 million people are in reach of Helsinki-Vantaa Airport as it takes for example 8 hours to Beijing, 8 hours to New York and 3 hours to Brussels. (Finavia 2018.) During the years 2014-2023 the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport is going through an extensive expansion project allowing the airport to serve 30 million passengers annually (Finavia 2020d).

Table 1. Helsinki-Vantaa Airport domestic, international and transfer passengers per year in 2014-2019 (Finavia 2020b.)

Passengers per year in Helsinki-Vantaa Airport	Domestic total	International Total	Transfer passengers	Total
2014	2 507 123	13 441 715	2 492 245	15 948 838
2015	2 591 724	13 830 542	2 569 418	16 422 266
2016	2 679 885	14 504 542	2 663 043	17 184 427
2017	2 731 454	16 160 932	3 066 308	18 892 386
2018	2 955 100	17 893 649	3 709 794	20 848 749
2019	2 929 779	18 931 303	4 186 239	21 861 082

2.1 Airport cities

Airport cities have started developing around airports and are becoming more contextualized and reflective of their environment. In the past, there was very little difference between airports throughout the world. Once regarded purely as an infrastructure needed for air transportation, airports are now becoming more integrated to their surroundings and offering new experiences for the passengers as well as for the non-passengers. (Skift 2013.) Today, airports offer a variety of services and experiences from dining, shopping, and dancing, to accommodation, socializing, entertainment and weddings. Airports, especially in Asia and Middle East, are more integrated to the cities and airports host public events and entertainment, layovers, and business meetings. Airports are becoming more reflective of the local environment and cities are being planned and built around air travel accessibility. (Skift 2013.)

The driver for such developments has been the shift from aeronautical revenue to non-aeronautical revenue as the essential part of the airport business model. In addition, the realization of airports' significance for the regional economy has influenced building new districts to the airports as well as turning airports to multimodal mobility hubs. (Hirsh 2020.) The shift from the aeronautical to non-aeronautical revenue has made airports compete for the customer loyalty with unique experiences and shift their focus towards a sustainable mix of revenue from different non-aeronautical revenue streams such as retails, duty free shops and entertainment. In order to compete for the passengers and simultaneously maximizing the revenue from each passenger, the airports are investing in branding, design, technology and experiences. There is a big opportunity in the non-passenger segment, for example the employees, the surrounding community, and people who meet or drop off flight passengers, which at times may even outnumber the flyers.

Therefore, by providing entertainment, retail, and conveniences for the non-passengers the airports that can reduce the financial risk of decreased passenger volumes. People travel through an airport because of necessity, but they spend money at the airport only out of choice. Therefore, airports are creating individuality to differentiate from competitors and aim to participate in the passengers' mind space. Although, sometimes the new additions to the airports focus more in branding and publicity rather than with customer experience, for example temporary residencies at airports. (Skift 2013)

There are two known models behind the airport city planning. John Kasarda introduced the aerotropolis concept, where an airport becomes the center of business, work and amusement (Skift 2013) as in contrast to the past, when the airports were pushed to the outskirts of the cities. Aerotropolis is a metropolitan subregion centered around an airport. It has a similar shape to the traditional metropolis such as a city commercial center and its surrounding commuter-linked suburbs. (Kasarda 2019.) Some examples of aerotropolis can be found in South Korea Sengdo, Singapore, Hong Kong and Amsterdam. (Skift 2013) In contrast to the aerotropolis concept, the airport urbanism (AU) is a people-focused approach in designing airports and the planning of the areas around the airport based on existing structures and assets. The latter focuses on the needs and desires of frequent users of the airports and its surroundings such as residents, passengers and employees to reach long-term benefits to the airport and the city. (Hirsh 2020.)

2.2 Aviapolis

Aviapolis is the airport city district located around Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, central of the Uusimaa metropolitan area, and about 20km north of Helsinki city centre. The greater area of Aviapolis comprises of the airport and the suburbs of Viinikkala, Ylästö, Veromies, Pakkala and Tammisto. It is the hub for international cargo and passenger traffic in Finland. In addition to cargo and passenger traffic, Aviapolis is a fast-growing business and employment area. In fact, between the years 2009-2015 67% of all new jobs in the Helsinki metropolitan area were created in Vantaa, from which the majority was created in the Aviapolis area. Aviapolis is responsible for more than 36 000 jobs. In addition, it is the second most popular business location in Finland after Helsinki city centre with a fast-growing business district, significant centre for wholesale and retail commerce and notable logistics hub. (Peltomäki 2018; Vantaa 2018)

Aviapolis area is in the junction point of international, national and local traffic flows (figure 1). It is accessible by Ring Rail line from Helsinki city centre connecting to Tikkurila, Pasila

and Helsinki Central railway stations, which themselves are central hubs for the long-distance trains to rest of Finland and to Russia. The Ring III highway runs through Aviapolis and connects it to the European E18 route from Belfast to St. Petersburg. In addition, the Aviapolis area is easily accessible from country's international ports. (Peltomäki 2018; Vantaa 2018)



Figure 1. Map of connections to Helsinki-Vantaa Airport and Aviapolis (Ruuskanen 10 May 2019). The Kuusijärvi area is located close to the road E18 and the Hakunila district.

To serve the expected population and visitor growth, the future Vantaa city is developed around centres, out of which Aviapolis is being developed as the core of an attractive airport city and an international centre. The area is planned to be a lively, urban and versatile environment for living, working and to offer versatile services. Vantaa is expected to interest residents and businesses which appreciate versatile and attractive business and residential areas, excellent accessibility, a safe and resource-wise environment and excellent connections to the rest of the world. The area of formerly logistics and in industrial purpose is being developed into to a city which is walkable pedestrians and favours bicycling. Aviapolis, which also hosts a train station, will be built as a centre that combines the nature, city life and the airport. The area between the Aviapolis train station and the shopping and entertainment complex of Jumbo and Flamingo is identified as *the circle of interest* and will be developed further to offer a route with diverse services and experiences inviting people to spend time. (Vantaa 2017; Vantaa 2018.) In addition, the connectivity from the airport via Tikkurila to eastern Vantaa including the Kuusijärvi recreational area will improve with the future tram connection which is planned to proceed to building phase in

2024 and is estimated to be ready by 2028. (Vantaa 2020a.) By 2025 Aviapolis will house 20,000 residents and 40,000 – 60,000 jobs. (Vantaa 2018.)

2.3 The Avia network

The Avia network was founded on in June 2017 in cooperation between the City of Vantaa and the Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council. The network aims to develop and promote the competitiveness of Helsinki-Vantaa airport compared to the best airports in the world. The network comprises of companies, cities and municipalities, municipal corporations, universities, lobbying organizations, ministries and state-subsidized organizations as listed in table 2. (Ruuskanen 2020.)

Table 2. The companies and organizations belonging to Avia Network (adapted from Ruuskanen 2020.)

Companies	Cities and municipalities	Organizations	Universities and Applied Science Universities
Finnair	Helsinki	The Finnish Freight Forwarding and Logistics Association	Helsinki University
Finnair Cargo	Espoo	The Federation of Finnish Enterprises	Aalto University
Nordic Regional Airlines	Kerava	Finland Chamber of Commerce	Haaga-Helia UAS
Finavia	Vantaa	Helsinki Business Hub	Laurea UAS
VR	Tuusula	Finnish Innovation Fund	Metropolia UAS
ANS Finland	Järvenpää	The Centers for Economic Development	
Hotel Scandic Airport		Transport and the Environment (ELY Centers)	
Hotel Clarion Aviapolis		The Finnish Business Travel Association	
Sokos Hotel Vantaa and Flamingo		Association of Finnish Travel Industry	
SRV		The Ministry of Transport and Communications	
LAK Real Estate		Business Finland	
		Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council	

The Avia network's vision is to advance the development of the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport to be the most sustainable, attractive and accessible airport infrastructure by 2030. Its mission is to be the platform for developing the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport ecosystem in cooperation with the network's member organizations to reach that target. The network's key focus areas are the development of transportation chains and smart transportation. (Ruuskanen 2020.)

The Avia network operates by lobbying and supporting airport and airport area projects. The network arranges international and national seminars to increase its visibility and promote the advocacy work of projects that are important to the network. The network participates in international cooperation networks and seminars such as Airport Regions Council (ARC) and Sustainable Airport Areas International Seminar (SAAIS). Information, benchmarking of international airports' sustainable development projects and good practices are shared to the member organizations. The Avia Network promotes sustainable growth and advances the sustainable development projects related to the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, including experiences and accessibility. With its ecosystem it supports and promotes the awareness for sustainable development, growth and the visibility of the region being a forerunner in digitalization and co² neutrality. (Ruuskanen 2020.)

2.4 Airport cities and nature-based experiences

Finland's goal is to be the number-one tourist destination in Northern Europe by 2025. In 2014 the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland introduced a new roadmap for growth and renewal in Finnish tourism for 2015-2025, where nature-based and wellbeing tourism were emphasized. In addition, the roadmap introduced strategic projects for the years 2015-2018. The roadmap included Visit Finland's strategic growth programs *FinRelax* aiming to turn Finland into a top country of wellness tourism and *Finland Stopover*, making Finland a leading stopover country. (Työ-ja elinkeinoministeriö 2015, 25.) The term "stopover" is applied for foreign air passengers, that are connecting flights and spend between couple of hours to few days in Finland exiting the airport before their onward flight to their final destination (Fintra Oy 2015). Even though both strategic projects have ended, they produced guidelines that are available for benchmarking for businesses operating in the wellbeing and nature-based tourism. According to Visit Finland's *FinRelax* product recommendation, a wellbeing holiday may comprise of Finnish sauna traditions, natural waters, forests, overnight stay in a cottage, and light nature-based activities, (local) food and silence. The activities offered should be multi-sensory and light that stimulate mental and physical wellbeing. (Business Finland 2015.)

The primary focus of the air passengers on transferring flights are a convenient flight, short connection times as well as the airport experience during the transit. In contrast, a stopover tourist is looking for a location that has an established and unique sense of place, interesting attractions and a supportive visitor infrastructure. (World Travel & Tourism Council 2018.). According to a study commissioned by the City of Vantaa and conducted by Max Hirsh (2018b), Aviapolis will be the place where future visitors get their first taste of Finland and of the Finnish culture. Therefore, it is important to invent and imagine creative ways to curate memorable first and last experiences. Hirsh states, that the airport hotels are popular among Asian tourists on layovers before continuing to other European cities but convincing them to spend time in Vantaa is the next step. He states that, similar to other airport cities in the world, the element of missing in Vantaa is the element of fun. Hirsh states that urban development of an airport city is not only about providing jobs, housing and infrastructure but, it is also about creating opportunities for recreation for both residents and visitors. (Hirsh 2018a.) Hirsh (2018b, 7-8) sees a strong potential for stopover and layover tourism in Vantaa. He defines stopover visitors as staying 1-2 days, while the layover visitors staying for 3-12 hours. He recognizes the Kuusijärvi area, the Fazer visitor centre and Backas manor as potential destinations for a future expansion of tourism. Though he states that there are barriers in tourism becoming a lucrative industry in Vantaa and named three key challenges. The first challenge was the lack of information, or reliance on ineffective communication channels such as printed brochures. Hirsh identified the absence of point-to-point transportation between the airport and nearby attractions limiting the growth of the destinations. Hirsh added that even though the distance to the destinations mentioned are physically short, it feels longer because of the difficulty in reaching to those with existing public transportation. As the third challenge Hirsh stated that the airport city is lacking attractions where Asian tourists can quickly experience the things that draw them to Northern European destinations such as fresh food, nature and Scandinavian design. (Hirsh 2018b, 8.)

As stated earlier, many large airports throughout the world are becoming destinations themselves. For example, Munich Airport has been awarded as the first five-star airport in Europe offering various activities in the airport area such as the annual Christmas market, sports activities, dining and one of the first breweries in an airport area. In addition, airports are investing in new nature-based experiences both in the airport as well as in their surroundings attracting visitors that comprise of passengers and non-passengers. (Skift 2013). As another example, in addition to landside airport operations, retail offerings and hotel facilities, Singapore Changi Airport is a creative destination offering stories and experiences to its visitors. It houses indoor and outdoor gardens, walking trails, innovative hotels, world's largest waterfall that transforms into a light and sound show in the night,

events as well as leisure attractions. (Future Travel Experience 2019.) In addition, Singapore has been one of the forerunners in stopover holidays, and by being the gateway to rest of Asia, it has strengthened its position as a destination. It is worth noting, that the process has been aided by having the central authority control over operations and production with well-designed and well-implemented air transport policies and strategies in order to develop tourism. Not only having a dominant state-owned airline within the respective airport, also many of the companies operating in the airport are subsidiaries of the state-owned airline and have strong links with the tourism organizations. (World Travel & Tourism Council 2018.) Using a different approach, Zurich airport is located within the largest contiguous nature conservation area in canton of Zurich. The airport promotes the experiences that are possible in the airport area from guided airport tours in various areas of aviation operations and guided ranger tours in the conservation area, to independent bicycle and inline skating around the airport area. The airport offers sports rentals ranging from bikes, inline skates, and Nordic walking poles. (Zurich Airport 2020.) As a last example, Arlanda airport is situated between Stockholm and Uppsala in Sigtuna county and is building its own Airport City Stockholm with a focus on meetings, creativity and technology (Airport City Stockholm 2020). The airport offers wedding packages as an airport experience. As the airport is situated in Sigtuna county, the oldest city of Sweden and rich with nature reserve areas, it has possibilities to offer nature-based experiences in the vicinity of the airport. (Destination Sigtuna 2020.)

3 Kuusijärvi – the nature-based experience near the airport

3.1 Kuusijärvi – a gateway to Sipoonkorpi national park

Kuusijärvi is situated close to the medieval mail road called the King's Road that connected Turku and the Russian Vyborg castles. In the Middle Ages, when Finland was a part of the Swedish kingdom, the road was the primary route to the east not only for Swedish royalty, nobility and clergy, but also for armies and merchants. Old manors, churches, guesthouses, and some of Finland's oldest cities and towns are located along the road. Kuusijärvi is a part of the Kuninkaanmäki district, which was named after the Swedish king Gustav III. It is said the king was traveling from Helsinki to Porvoo via the King's Road and the entourage stopped for a lunch during which the king ate his lunch on the bare ground. The area was marked in the maps in 1777-1778 and the district received its name as the *King's Hill*. (Vantaa 2019a, Kuninkaantie 2020.) In the past the Kuusijärvi lake used to function as a source of ice for year-around needs for the area's villages. Before the common use of the refrigerators, ice was used to keep milk cold in the summer months. The ice was sawn into blocks and covered with sawdust to last until the next winter. (Vantaa 2019a.)

Today the Kuusijärvi area is a popular all-year around outdoor recreational area among residents and offers activities such as swimming, sauna and walking trails. During winter there are possibilities for cross-country skiing and ice swimming. The Kuusijärvi area is owned and maintained by the City of Vantaa. It is managed by Café Kuusijärvi, which provides restaurant services, group bookings for meetings and events, sauna facilities as well as the arrangement of small-scale events in the area. In addition, there are canoe and sup-board rental services by a third-party operator in the area during summer months. (Vantaa 2016.) Café Kuusijärvi is a part of Minttiravintolat Oy, which operates several restaurants in the Vantaa area. In addition, the group also operates the Tixitaxi transportation company and the Tixi Travel tour operator. (Minttiravintolat 2020.)

The Kuusijärvi area hosts two annual triathlon competitions and the Sipoonkorpi Trail Run event. In addition, Café Kuusijärvi participates in some of the national and international theme days such as the Baltic sea day. (Café Kuusijärvi 2020; Sipoonkorpi Trail 2020.). Kuusijärvi is one of the rare public outdoor swimming places in Vantaa and one of the few places that offers public smoke saunas in the Uusimaa area. Therefore, it is a very popular destination, which causes challenges for peaks in visitor numbers during summer and winter months as illustrated in figure 2. The core area of Lake Kuusijärvi consists of the lake and the sandy public beach and its surroundings, parking lots as well as the area's

recreational trails. A congested and worn waterfront and its direct environment, as well as poor forest and coastal vegetation recurrence are the biggest challenges in the Kuusijärvi area. (Vantaa 2019a.)



Figure 2. Waterfront of the Kuusijärvi lake during a summer season. The building visible in the picture houses the restaurant services. (Vantaa 2016).

In 2009 Metsähallitus studied the composition of visitors in the wider area of Sipoonkorpi national park excluding the Kuusijärvi lake. According to the findings, 95% of the visitors lived in the capital region either in Vantaa Helsinki, Sipoo or in Kerava. The visitors arrived in small groups, mostly as a family, and the average time of stay was three hours. Most of the people arrived by car, and some by bicycle or by walking. The most popular activities in the area were walking (63 %), mushroom picking (44 %), observing the nature (36 %), berry picking (34 %), walking the dog (24 %) and hiking in the nature (24 %). The study identified that 13% of the interviewees visited other parts of the national park area such as the Kuusijärvi area (63%) and the Hakunilan urheilupuisto (Hakunila sports park) (20%). 60% of the respondents were very satisfied with the services in the Sipoonkorpi area. 58% of the respondents viewed that the Sipoonkorpi national park should be developed for recreational use and its number of services should be increased. (von Boehm 2010, 21–32; 37-39, 44)

According to the Kuusijärvi visitor research conducted in 2013-2014 by Vierikko, Kristjankroon & Yli-Pelkonen (2014 in Vantaa 2016, 14) the area is popular among residents of Vantaa and Northern Helsinki. Most visitors arrived in groups and stayed in the area for 1-3 hours. Most of the visitors (73%) arrived by a car. According to the study one fifth of the visitors were very satisfied with the current services in the area. One third of the respondents only visited during the summer season or occasionally. During summer the area is mostly visited for swimming, sunbathing and enjoying the weather. The visitors used the restaurant services and appreciated the child-friendly area. The summer visitors appreciated the lake, the sandy beach, and the surrounding nature. The autumn and winter visitors' motives for visits were exercising, sauna and ice swimming. They appreciated the nature, saunas and the restaurant services in Kuusijärvi. The visitors named masses of

people, trash, services and infrastructure, the behavior of other visitors, the wild animals and the noise as disturbing factors. (Vantaa 2016, 14.)

Based on the research there were nine different visitor profiles identified: 1. swimmers, 2. sunbathers, 3. ice swimmers, 4. sauna visitors, 5. sport visitors, 6. hikers, 7. business customers, 8. tourists and 9. other visitors. Based on these profiles, there were different needs identified such as marketing, accessibility, signs/signposts, sauna reservation system etc., of which majority of them were included in the Kuusijärvi development plans in 2016 and 2019. In addition, the City of Vantaa conducted a study in 2015 for nature-based businesses operating in Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi national park areas, that aimed to find out the area's potential as a recreational and nature tourism destination. (Vantaa 2016, 14).

The entrance to the Kuusijärvi area is situated between the roads Vanha Porvoontie and Lahdenväylä. The distance between the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport and Kuusijärvi is 8km, which makes it an attractive destination for a daytrip from the airport area for example for international tourists. (Vantaa 2019a.) Today, Kuusijärvi functions as a gateway to Sipoonkorpi national park. In November 2019 the pedestrian bridge was opened enabling increasingly diverse outdoor and sports opportunities between the two areas. In 2014 Kuusijärvi was recognized as an important area of recreation by the City of Vantaa. As a part of the Kuusijärvi development program the area is being developed for residents as well as domestic and international visitors. (Vantaa 2019b.) The development plan and schedule are described in table 3.

Table 3. The ongoing and future development projects in Kuusijärvi (Vantaa 2019a). The enhancements are divided into short- and long-term projects, which did not have target year of completion at the time of writing.

Ongoing and future enhancements	Year
signs/signpost development	2019-2020
Kuusijärvi area trail route development	2020-2021
additional parking spots	2022
development of nature tourism-oriented businesses	2020
improvement of campfire sites	2020-2021
relocation of the sled hill	2020-2021
accessible trail around the lake and enhancements to the vegetation	2023
improvements of lightning and surveillance	
development of the public beach, additions to toilet facilities	
new buildings will be built step by step	estimated to be completed the earliest in 10 years
new multifunctional spaces: café, restaurant, meeting rooms and sauna facilities	
enhancements to the area to be able to host outdoor events	

According to the Kuusijärvi development plan the pull factors of Kuusijärvi are comprised of the lake, the forest, and its unique location and its function as a gateway to the national park. The Kuusijärvi area is being developed to be the nature-based and recreational highlight of Vantaa. The role of Kuusijärvi as a gate to Sipoonkorpi will be enhanced and the arrival to Kuusijärvi area will be improved with a new larger parking area by 2022 (top left “*uusi pysäköintialue*” in figure 3). The part of the brown building in brown next to the parking area will be utilized by businesses providing for example nature-based offerings in the area (*yrittäjien tilat*). The planned buildings will reflect the hilly landscapes of the area and form a curved strip-like-structure in the lake landscape (figure 3). The main building (*uusi päärakennus*) hosting restaurant and terraces will have a panorama view to the lake. The smoke saunas will stay in their current location by the beach path (*savusaunat*). The future enhancements and services in the area include creating lighting to extend the nature experience to the dark months and create feeling of safety in the nature for those that are not used to being in the nature. In addition, adding sounds and soundscapes of nature will complement the nature experience. On the northern side of the area, space is available that could be used for a forest adventure park. (Vantaa 2019a.)



Figure 3. A visualization of the future Kuusijärvi area (Vantaa 2019a). The central area of the future Kuusijärvi comprises of curvy shaped buildings hosting versatile functions, the beach, lake Kuusijärvi and its piers, as well as the smoke saunas on the right-hand side of the piers. A larger image is attached as appendix 2.

3.2 The value of the Sipoonkorpi national park

Kuusijärvi forms a larger area together with the Sipoonkorpi national park (figure 4). The Sipoonkorpi national park was founded in 2011 and is situated in the Helsinki, Sipoo and Vantaa municipalities and has the area of 23km². Together with Nuuksio national park, it is one of the remarkable natural unbuilt areas in the proximity of the capital region. Sipoonkorpi has an important role in the conservation of the biodiversity in forests. It is also a *Natura 2000 area*, that aims to protect the habitats of wild fauna and flora and to halt the loss of biodiversity within the European Union territories. The Sipoonkorpi national park is a fragmented area and has a variety of forests, swamps, open cliffs, wilderness and cultural landscapes, being a home to various species. (Halinen 2013.) The map of the Sipoonkorpi national park can be seen in figure 4. The entrances to the national park are Kuusijärvi in the western part, Flatberget/Tasakallio and Knuters in the southern part, Byabacken and Källangen in the northern part, and Bakunkärr in the southeastern part. (Metsähallitus 2019.)

Sipoonkorpi national park is still young and its services are limited. Metsähallitus is developing Sipoonkorpi national park and its facilities to handle the growing visitor numbers according to the Sipoonkorpi management and utilization plan. The plan is a manuscript which controls the recreation and other use of the park as well as the protection of the natural and cultural environment in the area. The national park is developed primarily as a day trip destination and the trails and services are being developed mainly to serve the day visitors. (Halinen 2013.) In addition, Metsähallitus has taken part in the development project of Kuusijärvi. (Vantaa 2016). The visits in the Sipoonkorpi national park have continuously increased during years 2018-2020. In 2018 the Sipoonkorpi national park had a total of 98700 visits and in the year 2019 reached 110 000 visits. Furthermore, during 1.1.-31.7.2020 Sipoonkorpi received a total of 128 510 visits compared to the previous year's time period of 76 518 visits. (Metsähallitus 2020b; Metsähallitus 2018.) The opening of the pedestrian bridge between Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi is reflected in the visitor numbers of the year 2020.

The national parks and recreational areas in Finland are important to the local economies, not only because of the nature, but also because of the commercial benefits. The state funds the national parks and recreational areas, and the money invested yields income for the society through local entrepreneurship and employment, e.g. in the tourism business sector. For example, in 2019 the effect in revenue of Nuuksio national park was 3,9 million euro whereas in Sipoonkorpi national park the similar figure was 0,6 million euro. In 2019 Nuuksio had 330 600 visitors and Sipoonkorpi 110 000 visitors. The return of the investment is averagely larger in areas where the national park is the main purpose of visit, where the visitor spends averagely longer period and where the broader selection of services is available. For example, when comparing the number of visitors in Nuuksio (330 600) to Koli (201800), Koli had the greater effect to the local economy of 19,5 million euro compared to Nuuksio with 3,9 million euro. (Metsähallitus 2020a.)

According to Metsähallitus' study in 2009 (introduced in the chapter 3.1) the visitors that participated in the study were asked to estimate the amount of money they spent in the Sipoonkorpi area. Out of 252 participants, 20% responded to spend 2 euro on average in the area. The total direct and indirect revenue effect in the region was 36 844€. (Von Boehm 2010, 33-34.) The revenue effects are calculated using the MGM2 model that utilizes visit data, visitor spending data, and coefficients describing money circulation in the local economy. (Metsähallitus 2020d.)

In contrast to only increasing the visitor volumes, the national parks are finding ways to also prolong the stay of visitors. This can increase revenue with a lesser increase of emissions from transportation. In order to do so, the national parks and their surrounding areas should consider offering services such as activities and accommodation. The national parks are part of the offerings of a larger destination area, and therefore cooperation with stakeholders such as municipalities is important. (Metsähallitus 2020e.)

When comparing Sipoonkorpi national park to Nuuksio national park, it should be noted that the latter was founded in 1994 and comprises of an area of 55km² and houses about 30 lakes. Nuuksio national park is situated in the Espoo, Kirkkonummi and Vihti municipalities. The gate to the national park is the nature center Haltia. Other starting points are Haukkalampi, Högbacka, Kattila, Siikaniemi, Hotel Nuuksio, and the Nuuksio northern gate. The nature center Haltia offers equipment rental, a restaurant, a museum and a visitor center. Nuuksio offers a wide selection of activities and services for different types of visitors, from activities such as kayaking, fat biking, experiences of Finnish folklore and nature, to food and beverages by campfire, and local food. In addition, Nuuksio offers accommodation in a luxury villa, a traditional wilderness cabin or even under the sky in the tentsile village. It also houses a reindeer park, which accommodates guests in two Ig-luhuts made of shingles and offers the chance to observe and feed the animals. (Lu-ontoon.fi 2020; Kultanen Ribas 10 April 2020.)

Companies in Nuuksio such as *Jotuca Oy* have taken part in Visit Finland's *Sustainable Travel Finland* program. Sustainability is reflected in their operations, communication and marketing. In addition, *Jotuca Oy* is launching a "one day in Nuuksio" package for stop-over passengers in Helsinki-Vantaa Airport targeting especially the Chinese, Japanese and South Korean markets. The packages include elements from the company's existing offerings such as campfire cooked food, wine tasting in the forest and an overnight stay in a tentsile. (Huttunen 6 September 2020.)

Sustainability is an important value to Metsähallitus, and, in the future, a sustainability program will be required from all companies cooperating with Metsähallitus. Currently, participation in a sustainability program is seen as a competitive advantage for the businesses in the cooperation. In addition, sustainability is expected to be the main criterion for the end-customer in choosing their travel destinations and activities. (Jansson 6 September 2020.)

3.3 Sustainable nature-based tourism

Nature tourism is a category defining visitor desires, experiences and activities. The term is not commonly used by the visitors but rather inside the tourism industry. In the broad definition, nature tourism involves experiencing natural places and environments, as well as outdoor activities that are sustainable in their impact to the environment. (Tourism New South Wales, 2013.) Nature-based tourism can mean anything from experiencing a walk in a park to recognizing entire ecological system of the earth and leaving a minimal impact on the environment. (Chen & Prebensen 2017, 108.)

Finland is known for its lakes and forests, the high contrast between its four seasons, mid-summer sun, sauna, space and silence. Finland's attractions are based on nature and increasingly on experiencing the Finnish way of life and culture. Many of the Finnish everyday related activities such as walking in the forest, berry and mushroom picking or relaxing after sauna are the core of the nature-based are wellbeing tourism. (Business Finland 2020.) In nature-based activities the role of nature varies from crucial to the visitor experience to only enhancing the visitor experience. (Tourism New South Wales, 2013.) In addition, studies have concluded that nature, especially forest environments, are beneficial for the human wellbeing. For example, Metsähallitus conducted a study of the impact of visiting a nature preservation area to the visitors' social, psychological and physical well-being. Visits were found to improve the mood, enhanced the psychological well-being and were perceived to help recovery from stress. The study also pointed out that the benefits of psychological well-being lasted longer for those visitors that stayed one night or longer. (Kaikkinen et al. 2014.)

In 2018 Visit Finland completed a study identifying six potential tourism customer segments from Finland's main geographical markets of Germany and United Kingdom in Europe and China and Japan in Asia. The identified segments among the markets were the following six: the activity enthusiasts, nature wonder hunters, nature explorers, city breakers, authentic lifestyle seekers and comfort seekers. All the groups mentioned are connected by the desire to experience the nature in some form. (Business Finland 2018.)

The growth of tourism during recent years has had significant impacts on various destinations on economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects. For example, the growth of tourism contributes to the climate change by the growth of air traffic. Sustainable nature-based tourism includes the protection and development of natural, social, and cultural resources. These resources should be managed to meet the needs of future generations. Increasingly more attention is paid to how tourism impacts has an impact on local cultures

such as traditions, quality of life, local services, and how the locals perceive their own community. In the best scenario, tourism can support the vitality of an area, but for example in some mass-tourism destinations, locals have been set aside for financial benefits of multinational companies. (Konu, Pesonen & Reijonen 2020, 76.)

Sustainability is named as the future basic requirement in Finland's Tourism Strategy 2019–2028 and Action Plan 2019–2023. According to the strategy, tourism industry and its organisations must invest in developing sustainable and responsible tourism, not only from the environmental side but also from the social, cultural and economic point of views. The future development has an emphasis on a low-carbon and resource-efficient global economy, for example in terms of food production, water consumption and waste minimization, as well as to consider the social and cultural wellbeing of residents. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2019, 21.) In 2019 Visit Finland introduced the *Sustainable Travel Finland* (STF) certificate for tourism companies and destinations in Finland, that offers a seven-step development program. The companies that have successfully gone through these seven steps get a Sustainable Travel Finland certificate. It encourages cooperation between different stakeholders and offers different development tools and visibility through Visit Finland's marketing channels. (Konu, Pesonen & Reijonen 2020, 78.)

According to Pasanen (2020) tourists in general have a positive perception of the environment and destination's sustainable and responsible efforts, but very few explicitly choose a sustainable product. Pasanen (in Konu 2020) clarifies that for many the responsible choices in everyday life do not apply when making holiday plans or choosing a destination. Therefore, the sustainability of the destination is not the most important criterion in choosing the destination, but it may offer additional value and it may be a part in decision-making process between two similar destinations. Tourist segments that prioritize responsibility and sustainability are a yet small but a growing segment. During last years the tourism industry has understood that the key to sustainable growth is to educate tourists about responsibility and sustainability as well as to promote those aspects in marketing and attract the attention of the consumers. Increasing awareness and interest of the consumer is an important step in changing the consumer behavior. One way of doing so is to increase communication about responsibility and sustainability, that can also be a differentiator factor from the competition. (Konu, Pesonen & Reijonen 2020, 76-77.)

In general, tourists that favour sustainability spend more time and money in the destination than the average (Konu, Pesonen & Reijonen 2020, 76-77). According to the Skift

Megatrends (2020) at the time of mass-tourism and over-tourism, the holy grail of sustainable and lucrative tourism is that also residents and local stakeholders are “feeling good about it”, i.e., actively supporting that tourism profile of that destination. Therefore, the destinations that intend to remain competitive and attractive for the future will have to start protecting their communities and cultural capital. Some of the best examples in improving the management of destinations that suffer from over-tourism are from smaller emerging destinations that look beyond the visitor numbers and define their success by average length of stay, amount of money spent, and the guest satisfaction. (Skift 2020.)

3.4 Experiences in nature-based tourism

Today’s customers, also outside of tourism industry, expect experiences that raise emotions, rather than only a functional benefit of a product or service. As an example, a visit in a modern café is not only about getting a coffee but rather spending time in an extended public living room and a lifestyle choice. Therefore, companies aim to get the customers to spend time interacting with their experiences the maximum amount of time. (Pine & Gilmore 2020, xi-xii.) This can also be seen in destinations and individual tourism businesses paying increasingly more attention to the customers’ experience from the overall experience. Experiences are always subjective and therefore the individual’s qualities, needs and preferences affect in the overall experience. An experience may include different service modules, that together form the final experience. For example, those modules can comprise of the material and immaterial elements such as the food offered by the restaurant and enjoying and socializing. (Konu, Pesonen & Reijonen 2019, 32, 35.) Nature-based experiences are often designed to be hedonistic bringing and increasing enjoyment and pleasure, and/or eudemons, which relies on motives of self-development and spiritual growth. These motives, when fulfilled, create a deep and meaningful experience. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2016.) Even though experiences in general lack tangibility, people often desire them because of the value of the experiences that remains with them long afterwards e.g. in form of memories. In addition, according to studies, buying experiences makes people happier than buying goods. (Pine & Gilmore 2011, 19.)

Pine & Gilmore (2011, 45) state, that companies should stage experiences for their customers not only by adding entertainment to their existing offerings but instead actively engaging them as part of the offering. An experience may engage on any number of dimensions illustrated in Figure 5. The first dimension in the horizontal axis corresponds the guest participation between active and passive. Active participation happens when customers affect the performance of event that yields an experience. An example of active

participation could be skiing, where participants take part in creating their own experience. In passive participation customers do not directly affect or influence on the performance, for example in a symphony concert where customers experience the event as pure observers or listeners. The vertical dimension of experience describes the connection and the relationship of the customers with the event. Absorption occupies a person's attention by bringing the experience into the mind from a distance whereas immersion makes the person become physically part of the experience itself. For example, by watching the TV the person is absorbing the experience, but on the other hand, when playing a virtual game, the person is "going into" experience and therefore is immersed in the experience. (Pine & Gilmore 2011, 45-46.)

Experience realms

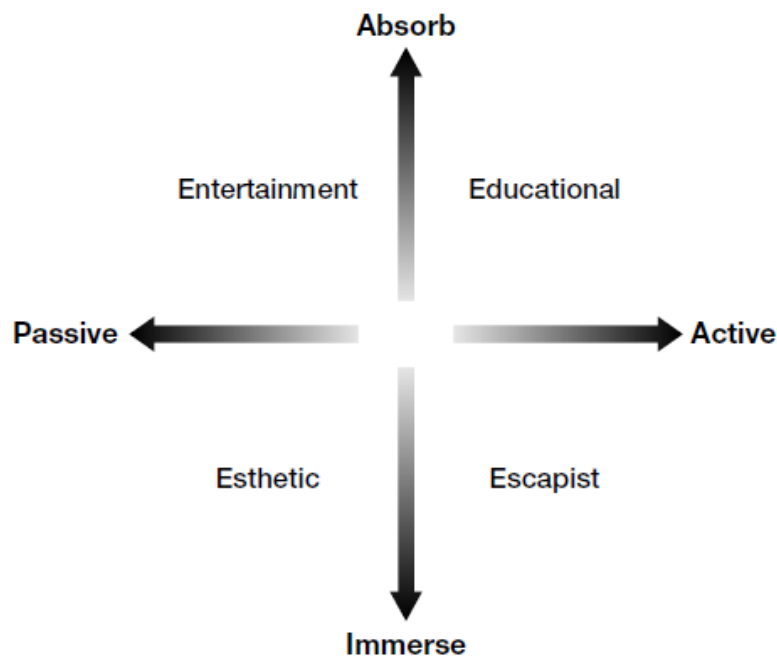


Figure 5. Four realms of an experience (Pine & Gilmore 2011, 46.)

Accordingly, a nature-based experience not only provides memories but is often a potential catalyst for many life changes. In the context of experience economy those are called transformations, such as when visitors learn about keeping the planet safe and sustainable. (Chen & Prebensen, 2017 111.) Experiences may be a way a person finds a new hobby, a new way of thinking or new resources within themselves. LEO, Lapland's experience economy development center, has created a model to describe an ideal experience (Figure 6). Companies may use the model to analyse and find ways to develop experiences. Also, it is a tool to find the critical or missing elements of the experience. The model examines the experience from two angles: the elements of the product and the

level of the customer. Below the triangle, there are factors that influence the experience of the customer. Though, it is impossible to guarantee the success of the experience of a customer, it still increases the likelihood of a successful experience by including these elements. (Tarssanen 2009.)

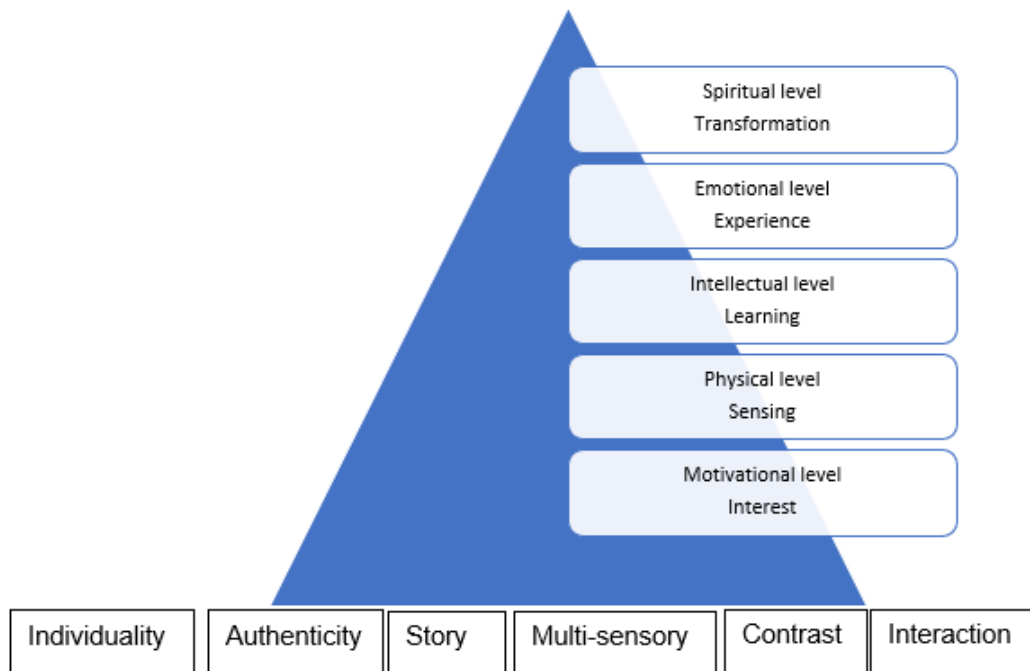


Figure 6. The Experience triangle (adapted from Tarssanen 2009.)

Individuality aspect applies to the uniqueness of the experience, that it cannot be found anywhere else and that no one else experiences it the same way, i.e. customization according to the customer's preference. Though, customization is challenging as the price usually rises the more customization is made. Therefore, there is a trade-off between personalization versus creating a product that may be duplicated. *Authenticity* describes how believable the product or service is. At the simplest form, it is an existing way of life or culture. Authenticity in man-made places such as amusement parks is another interesting aspect. There mainly the customer decides if it is believable. *Story* ties the experience elements together and gives the product and the experience social meaning and content. Story also justifies the elements and the order of the experience.

Multi-sensory elements can be used to enhance the experience by including the five basic human senses: taste, smell, vision, hearing and touch. In addition to those five senses, also memory and imagination are important senses as the memory looks back and the imagination seeks for the future. (Tarssanen 2009.) According to Tarssanen (2009) and *Sauna from Finland* (2020) the five basic senses can be used in different ways. *Vision* can

be engaged by for example beautiful views of the nature, photos aligning with the experience, and contrast can be created by darkness and light. *Hearing* on the other hand can be engaged by the sounds of water, nature, meditative music, silence, and the sounds of *Löyly* (evaporating water on the sauna stove). *Touch* can be engaged with the contrast of warm and cold, textiles, cosmetics, as well as different materials. *Taste* sense can be engaged by food, snacks and drinks. Lastly, *smell* sense can be engaged by the smell of smoke sauna, the smell of the forest, the birch whisk, oak etc.

Contrast means the difference from the customers point of view as the product should be different compared to customers everyday life. Experiencing something new, exotic, and different from the ordinary. Seeing something new and different enables seeing oneself from new angle free from everyday constraints and habits. *Interaction* describes the balance between the experience of individuality and experiencing together as a part of a group, family and community, as well as the experience in context with the staff, other participants, the product and its producers. (Tarssanen 2009.)

According to Henna Konu (2016) many of the ordinary things for the Finns are the most exotic things for international tourists, such as laying on their back on a rock, local food, looking at the sunset, listening to the sounds of nature, laying in a hammock or hiking. Also, yoga and art combined in a nature-setting often can enhance experiences and memories. For example, the tourists from China might be interested in the symbolic meanings of the stories of humans and nature instead of biology or scientific information. Konu adds that in an international scope *digital detoxing*, where people refer from using digital devices and instead prioritize other means of activities such as spending time in nature, is popular in form of travel packages and retreats. (Yle 2016.)

Nature-based experiences are intimately linked to all aspects of the visitor's total experience of a destination such as food, culture, relaxation, health, accommodation and transport. All these aspects complement each other and together form the basis of the visitor's overall satisfaction of their experience. Not all visitors are interested in same activities in nature, but common to all visitors is that everyone has the need to eat at some point. As mentioned, food is an important aspect in the total experience. According to the *Hungry for Finland* culinary travel strategy, more and more visitors are looking for culinary experiences during their travels. For some, it is a criterion to choose a destination, but not necessarily for everyone. When designing culinary experiences, the food and local experience should complete one another. In nature experiences combining the location and the food experience, the visitor could participate in gathering the food from nature such as by fishing, berry picking, mushroom picking or harvesting potatoes, and then participating in

cooking the gathered ingredients or donating it to the local restaurant. The visitors want to experience the local food culture and experience the destination from the local point of view. Food can be a way to offer visitors traditions, history, culture, and activities related to traditional food production. (Havas & Jaakonaho 2020.) For example, Vantaa is rarely considered as a culinary destination even though many of the large and small players of the food producing industry are from Vantaa. In addition, it is the logistical center of food and beverage. The city initiated a cooperation with some local operators to promote products and restaurants from Vantaa, and the cooperation resulted in a signature three-course Vantaa menu served in some of the city's restaurants to celebrate the Vantaa day. (Business Vantaa 2020.)

3.5 Stakeholder cooperation in nature-based destinations

The tourism development roadmap of Finland for years 2015-2025 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2016.) as well as the strategy of Vantaa (Vantaa 2017a.) emphasize the importance of cooperation and cooperation networks. Regional tourism organizations are important in developing tourism in their areas such as a city, municipality or a county. The regional organizations act as promoters for digitalization, monitors of service quality, and implementers of regional development strategies. The regional organizations act e.g. as a forum for cooperation between tourism operators, the intermediary for information between Visit Finland and the local businesses, and provider of tourism advising. The organizations coordinate and assemble larger marketable product offerings in cooperation with the businesses in the region. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2019, 34.) The role of a tourism business is to manage their product development and service design, developing their skills and participating in the costs of the business development measures. In addition, the businesses are responsible for the sales and marketing of their services. The businesses should also participate in the activities of the tourism network in their own area. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2019, 35.)

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, nature and nature-based activities are part of the most important attractions in Finland. Wellbeing and health have been recognized as growing trends that increase the demand for nature-based activities. As the demand grows, the quality of the nature-based activities is being reviewed closely. Visitors require destinations that offer experiences and are easily accessible, and that are situated close to accommodation, transport, equipment rental, and restaurant services. To meet that need, cooperation and networking are needed among the industry and the businesses. This is important as typically, the companies offering nature-based services are often

small companies, and services are often offered part-time or as a side-job. Therefore, to offer versatile services, those small companies must cooperate. The motives of individual entrepreneurs may also be standing in a way for growth of a business or a destination when big risks and investments are avoided. (Lassila 2019.)

4 Method

This chapter introduces the chosen methods and describes the used analysis tools. The research method chosen is a qualitative case study. The data collected with semi-structured theme interviews. The data was analyzed by using thematic analysis. The process of the study is described in sub-chapter 4.3.

4.1 The research approach: qualitative case study

In qualitative research the exact nature of the phenomenon studied is often unknown, which the research aims to understand and explain. Qualitative research often answers to the question *what is it about?* In addition, the data is often collected by interviewing or shadowing. (Kananen 2019, 75.) Exact questions cannot be asked as the phenomenon is not understood enough. By discussing with the interviewees and by obtaining material through theme interviews information can be obtained, based on which understanding of the phenomenon can be built through analysis. In qualitative research, the researcher asks and discusses with the interviewees about the phenomenon and asks additional questions when needed. Based on the answers, the researcher should get an overview of the phenomenon, the structure, the factors and the connections. (Kananen 2015, 34-35)

Case studies aim for deep and versatile understanding of the phenomenon that is researched (Kananen 2015, 39) and therefore a case study was chosen as the research strategy in this work. A “case” can apply to a person, a group, an organization, association, a change process, an event etc. A case study is often used when the boundaries of the phenomenon being studied are not clear. In addition, understanding the context is fundamental to case study research. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 198-199.)

A research interview is a *purposeful interaction* between two or more people, during which precise questions are presented by the interviewer who listens and observes the interviewee answering them. By listening carefully to the interviewee, the interviewer can detect points of interest, as well as clarify and confirm meanings. Therefore, it is a helpful method to gather valid and reliable data that is relevant to the research questions and objectives. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 434-435.)

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for data collection over structured and unstructured interviews as it gives a clear structure, and in addition, the freedom to differ from the predetermined set of identical questions. This allowed flexibility in the topics of the interviews with different stakeholders and asking targeted questions in case a new

aspect appeared. According to Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2019, 437) semi-structured interviews start with a pre-determined list of themes, and possibly some key questions related to the themes which guide the conduct of each interview. The stakeholders interviewed represented different industries, and therefore not all pre-determined questions would have been relevant to all the interviewees as such. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews enabled the required flexibility. Semi-structured interviews based on an inductive approach were followed by an exploratory and emergent course of action and allowed the interview themes to evolve depending on what emerges from the analysis of data. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 438.)

Data collection and data analysis are ongoing processes in qualitative research. Analysis is done during the collection of the data as well as after it. Such analysis helps shaping the direction of the data collection. It helps to recognize important themes, patterns and relationships during data collection and analysis. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 640-641.)

Qualitative research interviews are often audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. For the interviewer it is also important to not only listen to what the interviewee said but also to how they said it. Therefore, transcribing is time-consuming. It is estimated that for an hour of interview it takes about 6 to 10 hours of transcribing. Therefore, it is advisable that the interviews are transcribed as soon as possible after they are conducted. Transcribing the data allows for familiarity. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 644-646, 652)

4.2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis involves the researcher to code and structure the qualitative data in order to identify themes or patterns for further analysis related to the research question. It offers a systematic, flexible and accessible approach to analyze qualitative data. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2019, 651.) According to Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2019, 651) it can help to:

1. comprehend often large and diverse amounts of data
2. integrate related data drawn from different transcripts and notes
3. identify key themes and patterns from a data set for further exploration
4. produce a thematic description of the data
5. develop and test explanations and theories based on thematic patterns or relationships
6. draw and verify conclusions

Coding data is used to categorize data with the same meaning. It involves labelling each unit of data such as a transcript with a code that either symbolizes or summarizes the exact meaning. As qualitative data derived from interviews is large, without coding the data, it may be difficult to comprehend the meanings in the data. Therefore, it is an important tool to manage data and to rearrange and retrieve it under relevant codes. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 653.)

In the inductive approach, as used in this study, research themes are found in the data, for example, occurrence and reoccurrence of themes. The approach often entails analyzing, collecting them and going back over earlier data, as well as analyzing to refine the way to code and categorize for analytical themes. In thematic data analysis it is important to look for meanings, recurring themes and patterns in the data. Without familiarity, it is not possible to engage in the analytic procedures that follow. Therefore, producing transcripts and data familiarization are important elements in analyzing data. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 652.)

An important part of data analysis is frequently referring to the research questions, research aim and research objective. Analysis involves searching for patterns and relationships in long list of codes to create a short list of themes that relate to the research question. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 652.) Thematic analysis offers a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis, and because of its flexibility, it allows the researcher to move between deductive and inductive approaches. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2019, 660.)

4.3 Planning and implementation of the study

The process of this thesis started in the end of year 2019 when the author of the thesis contacted their thesis supervisor to discuss about potential topics in the aviation industry. As an outcome of the discussion a potential topic was discovered within the airport city development in the City of Vantaa. The thesis process was initiated when the representatives in the Avia Network expressed the interest to research the Kuusijärvi experience among the Avia Network members and some of the other key stakeholders in the Kuusijärvi area as a part of the airport city development. The research problem was defined together with the research questions. The research questions comprised of the following: *How is the current state of Kuusijärvi nature-based experiences from the stakeholders' perspective? What are the stakeholders' views on the future development of the Kuusijärvi experience? What are the possibilities of the Kuusijärvi experience in 10 years?*

The thesis process is illustrated in figure 7. Theme interviews were chosen for this study with a semi-structured interview frame (appendix 1), which allowed to propose additional questions and, if needed, to depart from the predetermined themes and questions. The interviews were divided into following themes: the current Kuusijärvi experience, nature-based experiences, the airport city, cooperation and development, and the visions of the Kuusijärvi experience in 2030.

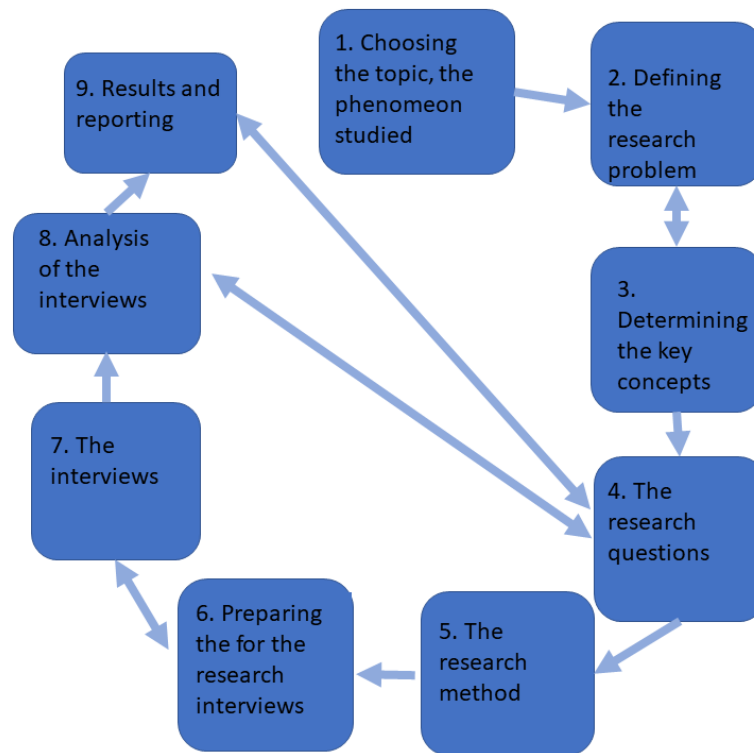


Figure 7. The process of the thesis (adapted from Kananen 2017, 52). The process allows to revisit the research questions during the ongoing analysis of the interviews.

The aim of the research was to find out how the considered stakeholders such as businesses operating in the Kuusijärvi area and members of the Avia network regard the current Kuusijärvi experience. Secondly, the aim was to find out if there are any missing services or activities in the area. Thirdly, the aim is to understand how the stakeholders view the Kuusijärvi experience possibilities in the timeframe of 10 years. In addition, the research aimed to find out what kind of expectations and possible recommendations they have regarding the future development of the area. Lastly, what is their interest in developing the area.

As the perceptions of the Kuusijärvi area are subjective and all the possible ideas that might arise need to be captured, the qualitative case study research confirms to be a fit-

ting research method. Determining the interviewees was straightforward. Out of the members of the Avia network the representatives of the hotels, the airlines, Finavia airport operator, and Business Finland were invited to participate in the interviews as they most likely have the best knowledge of the tourists visiting Finland and their interests. In addition, the companies and organizations mentioned are the experts of the Airport city Aviapolis area and have insights and ideas that might have not been considered yet. In addition to the Avia network members, the following stakeholders in Kuusijärvi area were invited to the study: Café Kuusijärvi, nature-based companies in the Kuusijärvi area and Metsähallitus.

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams or Skype to ensure the safety of all participants. In case an interviewee requested for it, other methods such as via phone call or other internet-mediated application would have been considered as an alternative. Microsoft Teams or Skype were the chosen applications as the desktop sharing function enables sharing of images if needed in addition to the video and audio. The risk with the online interview was that not all non-spoken cues could be seen or interpreted. The goal was to get a permission from the interviewees to record the discussion which enabled full concentration to the interview. The interview audio recordings were transcribed into separate documents and named with individual identifying information such as H1_interview_2000401.

The first interview H1 was conducted as a background interview to the topic with a representative of the City of Vantaa. The interviewee provided useful background information that otherwise would have been challenging to find such as the development plans of the Kuusijärvi area. In addition, they were very helpful to recommend further interviewees and materials to use in the study. After the interview the frame of semi-structured interviews was drafted, and further interviewees were contacted.

Initially, a focus group interviews were planned for the Avia network hotel operators, as it was assumed that they most likely know each other via the network, and they might be interested to discuss their views about the topic. After sending the interview invitations it became evident that the focus group interview was not regarded attractive after all. The strategy was then changed to individual semi-structured theme interviews. After the strategy changed it became easier to reach the network's hotel operators.

During the interview process it was at times challenging to reach the right people. Some did not regard themselves as the right person to participate because they did not represent or work in the Vantaa area, or they had very little knowledge of the Kuusijärvi area or

nature-based tourism in general. In addition, since the Avia network comprised of so many different businesses and organizations, not all of them were necessarily interested in developing the Kuusijärvi area. There were delays in replies or no answers at all. When reaching out to the tourism and transportation businesses, some of the contact persons were declining interview invitations due to busy schedules, because of temporary layoffs and/or reduced working hours due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In general, it was easier to reach people from the governmental/public organizations compared to the tourism, hotel and transportation businesses.

There were altogether 19 interview invitations sent out, from which eight persons were interviewed using the semi-structured theme interviews. The original focus was on the Avia network members, but the focus had to be modified as only three member organizations of the network agreed to the interview. In the end the research comprised of following interviewees in the table 4. The code H1 etc. refers to the Finnish word for interview *haastattelu*.

Table 4. Interview coding

Code	Organization	Date	Length (Min)
H1	Governmental/public organization, background interview	1.4.2020	60
H2	Governmental/public organization	4.6.2020	35
H3	Avia network member organization, Hotel	10.6.2020	50
H4	Local business in the Kuusijärvi area	22.6.2020	60
H5	Avia network member organization, Hotel	2.7.2020	60
H6	Avia network member organization, Governmental organization	20.7.2020	60
H7	Governmental/public organization	21.8.2020	120
H8	Governmental/public organization	3.9.2020	60
H9	Local business in the Kuusijärvi area	21.9.2020	90

The theme interviews of H2-H9 were conducted in Finnish and transcribed from recordings afterwards. Finnish was a natural choice as all the interviewees were native Finnish speakers. If conducted in English, some of them might not have agreed to an interview, or there would have been a risk of misunderstanding or not discussing so extensively about

the themes. The audio quality varied during the interviews depending on the internet connections of the interviewee and interviewer. During one interview there was echoing but it was solved by closing the microphone of the interviewer when the interviewee was talking. In the end, it did not affect the overall quality of the interview nor the recording. The transcribing process was slow but yielded plenty of material. First the transcribed interviews were individually summed up to an excel sorted by the questions and themes discussed in the interviews. Each transcribed interview was coded by applicable key words such as “the airport city”, “nature-based experience”. Then, every coded and segmented paragraph from the interviews was gathered on a separate excel sheet categorized by following themes: nature-based experiences, the current Kuusijärvi experience, cooperation and development, the future Kuusijärvi experience and the airport city. The thematic analysis allowed to gather the data under similar categories and to distinguish between different themes that were reoccurring in each interview. Also, the research questions and the interview themes were mapped to transcribed material and guided the thematic analysis and eventually the result reporting.

4.4 Quality of the research

The target of the research is about completing its different phases correctly in order to get reliable and credible data. According to Kananen (2013, 115) the quality of the research can be evaluated with the applicability of the research design (validity) and the data collection and analysis (reliability). Validity in research means that the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings. Reliability, on the other hand, means the repeatability of the results. (Kananen 2013, 115-122). In other words, that the results can be repeated by interpretation of another researcher or even by another research method. The interpretation of the data from theme interviews can be challenging as sometimes various interpretations can be made. The data can give several views when changing the angle of analysis and research questions. Though, the different views should give same answers to the research questions.

The analysis of reliability and validity differs between qualitative and quantitative research. As the reliability and validity were first introduced in quantitative research, they are often criticized not being applicable to qualitative research. A case study is always unique and therefore the traditional analysis of reliability and validity cannot be applied. In qualitative research, such as this work, the reliability and validity depend on the quality of the other research parameters: confirmability, evaluability of the documentation, interpretation, and saturation. (Kananen 2013, 122.)

Saturation, another measure of the quality of a research, means that the data obtained from the interviews is starting to repeating itself and is a reliable way to confirm the study's credibility (Kananen 2013, 95; Kananen 2017, 179.). For example, in this study the interviews were continued until they were not producing new data but rather repeating the data already gotten, in such case the saturation was achieved.

Objectivity on the other hand means that the interview and the interpretations reflect the opinions of the study participants, rather than the researcher's own opinion. Achieving objectivity can be a challenge in qualitative research, as the researcher decides the themes, questions asked and the depth of the discussion during the interview. The presence of the interviewer might affect the outcome as the interviewee might want to please the interviewer with their answers. (Kananen 2017, 107,176). When reporting qualitative data, it is important to pay attention to what to include and exclude. Also, it is important how the opinions and emotions of the interviewees are described. It is therefore crucial for the interviewer to self-evaluate and to be transparent on how the results were achieved.

During the study, the author did her best to remain objective, truthful and transparent, despite of the fact that in a role of the researcher, one must make subjective decisions. The author aimed to take a passive role during the interviews and not to lead the discussion more than necessary. When participation in the discussion was needed, the author asked further questions aiming to get deeper into the topic discussed or continuing following the themes and questions in the interview structure. The themes of the interview were predetermined and derived from the literature of nature-based tourism, the experience economy and airport city concepts as well as the studies and material of the Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas. When analyzing the interviews, the author was careful to reflect the data to the research questions to determine which data to include in reporting.

Out of the 19 persons invited to participate in this study, eight persons were interviewed using the semi-structured theme interviews. The study was not successful in getting the airport operator nor the airline views of the Kuusijärvi to be interviewed. In case of getting the airline and airport operators to attend the study, the results might not have been different. If their unavailability could be interpreted that they are not currently interested in the development of Kuusijärvi, or if they were unavailable due to the Covid-19 outbreak could not be answered in this study.

All in all, the thesis is a trustworthy study, although it only represents the views of eight interviewees. The participants of the study represented different industries and organiza-

tions and their motives for the Kuusijärvi development were different. Therefore, the stakeholder view of this study is versatile and represents views of businesses in the Avia network, the City of Vantaa as well other businesses and organizations in the Kuusijärvi area. In case this study would be conducted again in the similar scale, the results of the study are expected to be similar.

5 Results

In this chapter the results of the interviewees H2-H9 are discussed and quoted according to the coding in table 4. The chapter is divided according to the themes of the interviews. The questions and their themes on the other hand are enclosed as appendix 1. The themes discussed were the same for every interviewee, but the respective questions were asked based on relevance as well as the organization, industry and position in the company represented. The themes were identified as key items within the interviews, they consist of the following: elements of a nature-based experience. the current Kuusijärvi experience, developing and managing the Kuusijärvi experience, Kuusijärvi as a part of the airport city experience and the future Kuusijärvi experience.

5.1 Elements of a nature-based experience

When talking about the elements of a nature-based experience, the interviewees identified several different important aspects from the elements found in the Finnish nature and culture to the whole user experience when consuming a nature-based offering. The interviews listed different ways to experience the nature. In this sub-chapter those elements are discussed further.

The interviewees agreed that while Finland is a nature-based destination, the primary motive of international tourists arriving and staying in the capital region is not necessarily the nature nor the nature-based activities. The interviewees mentioned that even though Lapland receives the majority of the tourists arriving to Finland for the nature-based experiences, also the capital region offers natural destinations and landscapes that resemble some of the Lappish sceneries. Some of the interviewees described how the Finnish nature as well as the culture can be experienced both through an activity as well as by simply slowing down the pace of the every-day and observing the nature.

According to the interviewees, the nature-based experiences based on observation can be for example walking and listening to the silence, or the sounds of one's own steps. For some visitors, it might be enough to walk around the lake of Kuusijärvi, and to snack the blueberries found on the way, as there are not many places in the world where one can eat what is found along the path. The interviewees concluded that the nature offers various possibilities to create nature-based experiences from being in the forest and observing the surroundings either independently or as a part of a guided tour. As an example,

the interviewee H6 suggested that personal hobbies can be extended to a nature environment and that the nature can act as an inspiration for hobbies like as photographing and painting.

The interviewees named the following activities as more active ways of experiencing the nature: hiking, fat-biking, stand-up-paddling and kayaking. One interviewee illustrated their idea of a successful nature-based activity by sharing a hiking experience in Mikkeli. They experienced a nature conservation area in the middle of the forest with fell landscapes that reminded them about the national parks in the USA. The interviewee shared that a positive aspect of the hike was that the info area offered the information and possibility to choose a route according to their preference of duration and length. The interviewee added that a nature-based experience should be arranged so that no extra equipment needs to be rented but could be as an option to enhance the experience.

The interviewees considered the element of water, such as a lake or the sea, in nature as important to the experience. When combined for example with a sauna experience, many considered a swim in nearby water as a nature-based experience itself. In addition, the interviewees stated that when combining the sauna experience to dining, that may create a memorable experience.

The interviewees perceived sustainability as an important part of nature-based experiences. Three of the interviewees mentioned the cleanliness of a destination, as well as the appearance that the nature is taken care of, as an important element. The interviewees highlighted the importance of providing dedicated areas for campfires with complementary firewood, toilets and trash cans in order the surrounding nature to remain as untouched as possible.

As a part of any nature-based experience the vast majority of the interviewees mentioned the importance of visitors finding their way autonomously. The respondents viewed that clear trail signs and finding the way to and from the activity is important. Additionally, when offering nature-based experiences the different levels of visitors' fitness and level of confidence in nature should be taken into consideration.

When it comes to the selling of experiences, the interviewees emphasized, that the end-customer should feel that they have gotten what they paid for, and preferably, the expectations should be exceeded. Four interviewees pointed out the importance of a thorough overall process behind the experience product. This process goes from digital or physical

accessibility, sales, usage to the feedback of the customer. Once again sustainability is important for the production process of the product.

The customer's willingness to pay was mentioned when discussing about different segments such as the domestic and international tourists. Similarly, nature-based experience expectations might vary depending on the customer segment. An example mentioned in the interviews of a nature-based experience attractive only for a narrow target group was yoga in the forest. Some would value that as a memorable and unique experience, while others would not even spend money on it.

Interviewee H5 gave a memorable example that shows how some of the described aspects combined can create a simple, unexpected but through nature-based experience. A Middle Eastern tourist group in Finland approached them and asked where to take a walk to enjoy the rain. The surprised interviewee reminded them that it was raining and asked if they were sure about going outside in such unpleasant weather. For the group it was an experience to walk and enjoy the rain. According to the story, for them the weather here was one of the reasons for the trip to Finland and the rain was an experience for them as they reportedly have not seen the rain in years. The interviewee concluded the story with acknowledgement that instead of always inventing new and exciting experience offerings, it is equally important to remember the small things that are often taken for granted by locals, or things that might seem unpleasant such as the rain. While for others those might just be the memorable experiences.

5.2 The current Kuusijärvi experience

All interviewees except for one were familiar with the Kuusijärvi area and perceived the area mainly positively. According to the interviewees the current Kuusijärvi experience consists of several aspects. Kuusijärvi is perceived as a gateway to the Sipoonkorpi national park. In addition, Kuusijärvi is a nature-like place situated next to a national park. According to the interviewees its all-year-round activities such as the smoke sauna and swimming in the lake make the destination attractive. In addition, the restaurant Café Kuusijärvi was mentioned in the discussions with the interviewees. These aspects are discussed more in detail in this chapter.

Some of the interviewees shared their connection to the Kuusijärvi area outside of their professional life:

Interviewee H3: *“I visit there many times in the summer there, my kids love the place... It is not a nature-experience to drive to a crowded parking area, walking 200 meters to the beach to find a tiny area [in the crowded beach] to fit your towel... and [to sit and] watch over the kids”*

Interviewee H6: *“My parents still live in Vantaa and I have also attended school there. Therefore, [I carry] lots of personal experience from the area, especially from the eastern part of Vantaa.”*

Interviewee H9: *“I have experience from the area long before working. As a child I lived in Jakomäki and played a lot in Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi.”*

Kuusijärvi being the gateway to Sipoonkorpi national park was considered a good strategy put into action by the City of Vantaa and Metsähallitus. The opening of the pedestrian bridge in the end on 2019 that connects Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas was considered a good effort that has given both areas more versatile use and increased the visitor numbers in both areas. Before the bridge it was challenging and time-consuming to cross between the two areas. According to the interviewees, it has changed the role of Kuusijärvi to being perceived as a part of the national park. The interviewee H8 stated that Kuusijärvi is an area that has the possibility of being developed more heavily compared to a national park, for which the future development is more regulated. The development ideas of the future Kuusijärvi experience are discussed in the sub-chapter 5.5.

As stated in the previous sub-chapter, the Finnish nature and forest were viewed as valuable elements by the interviewees, and according to interviewee H8, those can be sensed in Kuusijärvi as well as and even more so when transiting into the Sipoonkorpi national park. The interviewee H9 added that the strength of the Kuusijärvi area is its nature-like state. But that interviewee also emphasized that to them instead of the Kuusijärvi area, the nature, vegetation and wildlife in the larger area of Sipoonkorpi is the source of the feel of the authentic nature-based experience. To them the forest can be sensed with different senses such as vision, hearing and smell, and experienced whether through observing or by an activity. The interviewee added, that most important to them in an experience is that the customer is touched on a deeper emotional level and leaves with a memory, either by learning or by experiencing something new.

The interviewee H6 considered Kuusijärvi as an interesting destination as it offers all-year-round activities and expressed their wish for the area's value and the potential to be understood by the City of Vantaa and for the area to be developed further. From the all-year-

around activities the interviewees mentioned the all-year-round possibility to experience the sauna and swimming in the lake. The smoke saunas were appreciated among the interviewees and they mentioned that the saunas attract big volumes of visitors to the area. The interviewees also added that during peak months the demand is so high that the saunas have not even been marketed in several years. The interviewee H6 mentioned having worked with various sauna projects in the tourism industry in Finland and described the experience of a first timers' smoke sauna and ice swimming as an often empowering experience. Afterwards the calmness and peacefulness were sensed among participants, and when being part of a bigger group, the experience created a group spirit between the participants.

One of the interviewees spoke about the offerings of the restaurant *Café Kuusijärvi*. The interviewee viewed that the restaurant would have the possibility to utilize the natural surroundings and expand its offerings to support the nature-based tourism by the offerings of the Finnish inspired cuisine. The suggestions of the interviewees are explained more detail in the sub-chapter 5.5. When being asked about the possible missing services in the area, the interviewees listed several ideas and insights of what could be developed in the area in the future, for example a forest adventure park in the northern side of the Kuusijärvi area and accommodation somewhere in the outskirts of the Sipoonkorpi park area. One interviewee did not consider any offerings missing as those would be outside of their own company's business model. They added that activities such as common hiking tours could be developed together with partners, but they did not want to be the main organizer. Another interviewee considered that an information center is missing in the area and viewed that Metsähallitus from the national park's side should take part in it. One interviewee stated that the Kuusijärvi area buildings currently reflect the time of the 70's and 80's and need to be updated to present the current time.

All in all, Kuusijärvi in its current form was described as a versatile all-year-round destination that serves different visitor segments such as the locals, as well as domestic and international tourists. The interviewees described the experiences already being offered and considered Kuusijärvi has a lot of potential in developing nature-based experiences further. The interviewees highlighted Kuusijärvi being primarily a recreational destination for the locals as it is valuable recreational location for various residential areas. The respondents viewed that the need for such recreational areas will be growing in the future as number of inhabitants in the capital region is expected to grow in the future.

5.3 Developing and managing the Kuusijärvi experience

In this sub-chapter the development needs and issues of the Kuusijärvi experience as discussed with the interviewees are introduced. The interviewees named different barriers for the nature-based experience development in the Kuusijärvi area. Firstly, the high number of visitors in the peak months of summer and winter stress the sustainability of the nature and the quality of the lake water. Furthermore, there is often trash left behind from visitors, which affects the nature experience in the area.

When discussing about nature-based experiences in general as well as in the context of Kuusijärvi, most of the interviewees eventually mentioned infrastructure and development needs in the Kuusijärvi area. This includes the inadequate amount of parking spaces and the low accessibility via the public transportation to the area especially from within Vantaa. In addition, the interviewees also mentioned a too small number of toilets and shower facilities in the Kuusijärvi area, insufficient capacity of the Café Kuusijärvi restaurant premises and the lack of office and storage space for nature-based businesses' needs.

Therefore, it can be stated that the barriers mentioned are currently standing in the way of the full potential of developing Kuusijärvi nature-based experiences. Some of the infrastructural matters are planned to be improved by the Kuusijärvi development plan introduced in sub-chapter 3.1. This sub-chapter on the other hand focuses in topics of cooperation between businesses and networks, the role of the city as an enabler in the development, as well as digital accessibility regarding the nature-based experiences.

Cooperation and business networks

All interviewees emphasized the importance of cooperation and business being part of networks. For example, the interviewees mentioned that after the opening of the bridge between Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi stakeholders such as Metsähallitus have become increasingly important partners. In the context of Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi, the cooperation between stakeholders and the continuing development and maintenance of a shared vision was considered important.

The interviewees agreed that cooperation is important, especially for small companies, which most of the nature-based companies in Finland are. The interviewees stated that players from small to large should support one another via e.g. cooperation and marketing. Cooperation between businesses should be utilized by linking together different matters such as promoting a destination and transportation by different parties. This allows to focus on the bigger picture: getting visitors to spend time and to consume the

services in the Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas. Often, thinking outside of boundaries was experienced difficult in the public sector, since responsibility being limited to municipality borders and project funding of projects being set for only certain timeframes. Furthermore, the nature-based companies should not compete against one other, but rather against alternative activities such as potential visitors staying in their homes, movie theatres and restaurants or destinations like Tallinn or the rest of Scandinavia. Therefore, the fact that one additional customer visits to the national park of Nuuksio or Sipoonkorpi is what matters, instead of from which company the visitor has bought an offering from. When creating experiences for potential customers, it is not necessary or even feasible that only one business offers all the products, but instead businesses could by cross-selling form the final offering of the different products available in the whole destination.

Another interviewee stated that many of the nature-based businesses in the area are small companies and have no reserve of staff for seasonality. Cooperation between those companies is already in place and when selling a product where additional guides are needed; they rely on other nature-based companies in the area. Also, when companies specialize in different themes such as wild food, wild animals, and mushroom picking tours, cooperation allows for a larger selection to create broader product packages for the end-customers visiting the destination. Many of the nature-based companies operate in broader areas around the Kuusijärvi area and Sipoonkorpi national park. Therefore, it is important not to compete between the destinations or municipalities, but instead, to plan the nature-based offering with an outlook of what is missing in the greater capital region.

According to the city strategy and the *vitality program* introduced in chapter 2, the City of Vantaa aims to develop the Kuusijärvi area according to the Kuusijärvi development plan (introduced in sub-chapter 3.1) and targets for the year 2020 to attract nature-based businesses to Kuusijärvi. While the city's role is to enable the development of a destination, three of the interviewees mentioned that the city itself is not always successful in doing so. Currently, according to the city there is no space in the Kuusijärvi area for the nature-based companies to settle in. Neither have the applications for permission of placing temporary structures, e.g. containers, by nature-based businesses been approved by the City of Vantaa. Even though it is not currently possible, it was discussed that the city should give the nature-based companies an opportunity to settle in Kuusijärvi. The nature-based companies in their turn can increase the destination's attractiveness, and in the end the city's image and attractiveness among the residents and the visitors.

The current city strategy includes Kuusijärvi to be developed as a destination. The development is currently an ongoing process in the city planning and at the time of writing the

thesis is pending for the final approval from the council. For now, the tourism organization in the City of Vantaa does not actively promote the Kuusijärvi development until there is something new to communicate about. According to two interviewees, the city could do more for the tourism development, but understandably, the limited resources are allocated to the efforts of advancing other parts of the city's strategy. Those parts include enhancing the Vantaa image, promoting conference travel, and promoting Vantaa as an event destination. In addition, the marketing efforts for tourism have currently been targeted to the domestic segment. With the limited resources the city is concentrating on its strengths. Tourism is not a basic need, and its funding for advancement is often competing with other basic services required by the law that the city must provide to its inhabitants.

In the end, the development of a destination within Vantaa is not only up to the city or the companies in the region, it often needs partners such as the neighbouring cities, as well as the airport and airline operators. By this day there has not been an organization within the City of Vantaa that would concentrate on purely in marketing and selling the tourism products, and therefore, the business networks play an important role in Vantaa. The business networks the interviewees mentioned are the following: the local tourism network under the City of Vantaa, Sipoonkorpi Nature Entrepreneurs Association (*Sipoonkorven luontoyrittäjät Ry*) and the Avia Network. According to the interviews, the agendas and motivations for participation in the networks were different, for example exchanging experiences and passing on information about the industry's current topics both by the businesses and on behalf of the organizer of the network in question.

Digital accessibility

According to the interviewees the Kuusijärvi area is an approachable destination for a domestic visitor, but for the international segment the offerings need more development. The interviewees named digital accessibility as one of the current challenges of Kuusijärvi. According to the interviewees, the access to information and purchase of the offerings in the area should be as easy as possible. The interviewees suggested that the information and relevant offerings in the area should be gathered under one internet page, and suggested key entities such as *Café Kuusijärvi* or *Visit Vantaa* being appropriate owners of the internet representation. The Interviewee H9 mentioned, that a platform allowing the cross-selling between the different companies in the Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi area is needed, and in turn would offer a seamless purchasing process to the end-customer. The interviewee mentioned that the nature-based companies should consider choosing a common sales platform such as *Johku* to support cross-selling.

5.4 Kuusijärvi as a part of the airport city experience

Two interviewees found that Vantaa has not yet reached its potential as a destination. Even though it has an international airport, it is not necessarily considered as a destination by the visitors. During the interviews it was discussed if Kuusijärvi and its offerings could increase Vantaa's attractiveness. During the discussions, some interviewees focused on describing their view on the current situation of Vantaa as an airport city and a tourism destination.

The interviewees agreed that Vantaa's strength as a destination is its accessibility and proximity of the airport and airport hotels. The interviewee H3 gave an example how accessibility can increase the perceived proximity of destinations in Vantaa to the airport city. They stated that the current airport city already extends further than Aviapolis to Tikkurila. Since the airport train connection was opened in 2015, the Tikkurila area is perceived closer to the airport, both physically and mentally. The interviewee stated that within 20 years the areas of Aviapolis and Tikkurila will be grown even tighter together forming a large centre in Vantaa.

The interviewee H3 was particularly interested in the domestic and international touristic groups and their motivation to visit Vantaa and illustrated their opinion of the city's need to develop attractive points of interest in Vantaa. From their main customer segments they named the Asian groups, especially from China as they extend the summer season for the leisure visitor segment, as they typically travel all-year-round. The interviewee stated that they personally have observed that for example the Chinese groups do not generally use other services in addition to the accommodation services in Vantaa and their itineraries are often fixed beforehand. In order to convince those tourists to stay and use the offerings in Vantaa, the interviewee had planned a guided tour product with themes of science, shopping and nature for the Chinese segment. The interviewee mentioned that they have been planning to offer a half-day tour package for visitors as a local alternative that combines the themes mentioned in the Vantaa region. The interviewee admitted that at the time of considering the destinations for the tour, they did not consider Kuusijärvi.

During the interviews it was also discussed, if a local stopover product could be developed around Kuusijärvi. Some of the interviewees suggested that the Kuusijärvi area could serve the stopover segment as a half-day destination offering relaxation in the nature, a sauna experience and a dinner before returning to the airport. The interviewees emphasized the challenge of committing to some of the required conditions of a stopover product such as guaranteed departure times and commitment to carry out the excursion no matter

how few participants. Many of the interviewees mentioned that there is cooperation needed of between both larger and smaller stakeholders, such as Finavia and Finnair, when stopover products are considered. The interviewee H7 pointed out that when promoting the stopover offerings, the potential customer should have the information beforehand of what possibilities the destination offers instead of finding it out at the airport only. If the information is left to be discovered at the airport, it might be too late for the potential customer to decide to participate. The other challenges mentioned in developing the stopover products were the destination's current limited digital information and its physical accessibility via public transportation, as well as the current limited capacity of the area.

The three Avia network members interviewed were each of different opinions for future Kuusijärvi nature-based experiences as a part of the airport city experience. The interviewee H6 considered Kuusijärvi having potential to be developed as a destination to provide nature-based experiences for the airport city needs, for example, through a cooperation with the airport area hotels. In case a hotel does not have a sauna, the Kuusijärvi sauna offering could be combined with a nature-based experience.

The interviewee H3, on the other hand, highlighted the need to develop attractive destinations that will be the motives to travel and experience Vantaa, but did not consider the capacity of the Kuusijärvi area being large enough to host a large number of visitors from the airport area without compromising the area's sustainability. The interviewee H5 represented an airport hotel where guests stay only a short period of time and according their experience, guests do not inquire for information of the activities in the destination. The interviewee did not consider there to be a need to develop nature-based experiences for the airport city's needs.

The Avia network interviewees H5 and H6 emphasized the importance of the hotels' staff in recommending attractions to visitors. They discussed that therefore the awareness of the attractions and activities in Vantaa area should be increased among stakeholders such as the hotels in the area. Interviewee H5 mentioned that for example the hotel employees are from all over the capital region and do not necessarily recommend regional attractions unless having a personal experience. The two interviewees also mentioned that the brochures are not up to date anymore, but still in use in many of the tourism businesses, Café Kuusijärvi included. Instead of the brochures, the information should be passed through alternative ways such as personal recommendation in the hotels and through digital channels. When being asked about nature-based experiences being a part of the Avia network strategy the respondents stated that it could be an aspect for future development of the airport city but did not give further suggestions of possible initiatives.

5.5 The future Kuusijärvi experience

The interviewees viewed Kuusijärvi as being the future hub for activities in Kuusijärvi and in Sipoonkorpi national park. The interviewees envisioned Kuusijärvi offering products that enhance the nature-based experience, such as picnic baskets. They viewed Kuusijärvi having the potential to develop a profile as an all-year-round destination and attracting visitors also in the dark months. In addition, the interviewees considered Kuusijärvi suitable for offering experiences focusing in enhancing the unique sauna experience with additional offerings. Those aspects were interlinked with each other in different variations among the interviewees. After illustrating the mentioned items, some examples of ideas from the interviews are described.

One interviewee elaborated how a combination of different elements can use the full potential of Kuusijärvi. They suggested that it should be developed as an all-year-round hub for activities in the area including Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi. Various activities could start and end in Kuusijärvi, include a sauna experience, versatile food, and a possibility to go climbing in the adventure park which is currently planned in the north of the Kuusijärvi area. The interviewees envisioned Kuusijärvi offering straightforward culinary experiences in the nature like picnic packages, sausages for grilling, ingredients for preparing pancakes in the campfire etc. In addition, the interviewees explained how they see Kuusijärvi as a winter destination. Possible experiences are husky-sleighs, skiing, visiting the national park and stopping by at a campfire for a snack and returning to Kuusijärvi for a smoke sauna. Interviewee H2 mentioned that they see potential for simple, short-lasting and affordable experiences missing in the nature-based services offerings, which could be implemented in Kuusijärvi.

Multiple interviewees identified the climate change as a threat but also pointed out that “the five-month November” with darkness and slush could be a possibility to utilize the darkness and to bring out the possibilities of it as well as to extend the season of other activities which are not possible for the winter months such as fat biking. The interviewees stated that part of the forest is still green and magical all-year-round. The interviewees also highlighted the attractiveness of the nature’s quietness, cleanliness and its possibilities for relaxation in the darker months.

One interviewee described their vision of a future Kuusijärvi to offer an embodied sauna experience that includes for example food, sauna singing, swimming in the cold water,

herbal foot bath and sauna whisks of juniper, which could be picked and made by the customer. Understandably, this would require more sauna capacity, and a separate reservable sauna where this sort of program could be arranged. According to interviewee H4, additional sauna capacity is already needed due to high demand.

When asking explicitly about the possibility of the future Kuusijärvi being a future culinary destination, the interviewees agreed that it would be a way to enhance the authenticity aspect of the destination. The interviewee H8 stated that rather than attempting to make Kuusijärvi a purely culinary destination, it should be a part of the nature-based experience offerings but did not see being the primary reason to visit the area. Seven out of eight interviewees agreed that Kuusijärvi should develop and increase its restaurant offerings but also mentioned the challenging aspects of seasonality. Question that was raised during interviews was if there be enough demand outside of the summer months. The interviewees suggested food trucks and other moveable temporary structures, which would be easy to add and remove once the season is over.

The concept of the *Vantaa menu* was introduced in sub-chapter 3.1. In short, it is a menu made of the ingredients of local food producers in Vantaa and it is served in some of the restaurants in Vantaa participating in the project, including in a couple of subsidiary restaurants of the *Minttiravintolat Oy*, which is also the parent company of the Café Kuusijärvi. When asking the interviewees about the possibilities of creating such concepts in Kuusijärvi, there were different opinions if it the concept would be received well. Majority of the respondents viewed it as a great way to enhance the authenticity of the area as well as it being a step towards sustainability. There was also opposition, that the product does not belong to the business idea and most likely there would not be enough demand for it compared to the marketing efforts it would require.

When discussing about potential of local cooperation in creating nature-based experiences, three of the interviewees mentioned restaurant *Tila* in the outskirts of Sipoonkorpi national park as a potential. One interviewee mentioned it being a culinary destination which receives visitors from all over capital region even though situating in a remote location. Another interviewee described how the restaurant have managed with their partners to combine the restaurant experience with offerings of art courses in the nature. A third interviewee mentioned seeing a potential cooperation possibility in offering the restaurant *Tila* as a part of the nature-based activity such as fat biking from Kuusijärvi to the restaurant. In general, the cooperation development between different businesses in the area of Sipoonkorpi area was mentioned as a potential next step from multiple interviewees.

Two of the interviewees mentioned that for a company operating in the natural surroundings to strengthen its position for the future, the sustainability aspect should be developed by, for example, using locally produced products and raw materials as well as emphasize the sustainability efforts in marketing and communications. By developing the restaurant offerings that enhance the nature-based experience in the area, for example, utilizing the local ingredients as berries, mushrooms and wild food from the Sipoonkorpi forest could be an approach to combine experiences with sustainability. Those could, for example, be donated by the groups attending to the mushroom and wild food tours arranged in the national park.

The interviewees agreed that the future segments will be the same as the current ones: the local recreational visitors and the domestic and international tourists and with the latter likely to grow after the number and quality of the offerings in Kuusijärvi will be increased. The offerings should be targeted based on the carefully chosen segments. Another interviewee mentioned that even though the masses bring income in the tourism industry, they see them being out of the question in Kuusijärvi as they were not convinced the Kuusijärvi area would be able to host such masses of people, when the area is already overcrowded at times.

When being asked about their future views of Kuusijärvi, the interviewee H3 suggested to benchmark towards the restaurant and sauna venue *Löyly* in Helsinki and making Kuusijärvi an interesting sauna and restaurant complex with large multifunctional terraces and enhancing the surrounding nature with lights and points of interest. The interviewee suggested extending its offerings to evening program such as small-scale concerts, events, dancing etc. Due to its remote location, there should be public transport from Tikkurila to allow the venue to grow and develop, for example a branded and themed Kuusijärvi bus.

As the city's strategy aims to be known as an event city, two interviewees suggested that Kuusijärvi could host about two or three large-scale events a year such as the Kuusijärvi day or a market etc. The interest and attention could be created through successful execution of events. Consequently, the events bring income to several industries in Vantaa such as the hotels and restaurants, and in the end, enhance the image of Vantaa.

The possibility for rental equipment was discussed with all the interviewees. People are continuously more willing to share, borrow and rent over owning, including the domestic segments. Interviewee H7 shared that while they do not see themselves paying for a

guided forest excursion, they could see themselves renting for example a fat bike and exploring the trails of Sipoonkorpi on their own.

Sustainability was viewed as an important value in all the aspects of development. Interviewees in general were pondering, if the area and its capacity is enough for the growing demand, if the lake remains in good condition and if the area can be extended for the growing business and visitor numbers. They expressed their concerns over the impacts of growing visitor numbers in the core area of Kuusijärvi such as the beach, the lake and the surrounding forest paths. When the visitor numbers grow, there are often new paths created, which would compromise the forest-like feel in the Kuusijärvi area.

Interviewee H6 emphasized that the Kuusijärvi area should find its own path in sustainability as it is becoming an increasingly important criteria among different stakeholders as well as among the customers. According to the interviewee, people are becoming increasingly aware and demanding of sustainability efforts by companies they choose to buy offerings from, and for example paying attention in visible sustainability actions such as not using single-use-plastic etc. Sustainability programs and certifications were discussed with two interviewees. Even though there are currently no studies confirming that participating in the sustainability program is a criterion the customers choose their products based on, the companies that choose to participate in those certifications are those that are already far along their sustainability journey and see it as a way of differentiation.

6 Discussion

The City of Vantaa is investing in the development of the Kuusijärvi area in the future years to come. The commissioner of this thesis sees a strong potential in the Kuusijärvi development and wanted to explore the current and future Kuusijärvi development from the stakeholders' point of view, which this thesis aims to achieve. In addition, the City of Vantaa and the Avia network share a common goal: Helsinki-Vantaa Airport and Airport City Aviapolis to be more than an airport bringing income to the city, but to grow the vitality and interest for Vantaa by offering memorable experiences with its existing attractions such as the Kuusijärvi area.

The Kuusijärvi lake is one of the rare outdoor swimming places in Vantaa and offers a possibility for a public smoke sauna experience, which is a rare specialty in the capital region. In addition, the area houses many of the elements considered valuable and attractive in the Finnish culture and nature. With its location next to a national park and the proximity to the airport, the area is the future point of interest for both the domestic and international visitors. The interviews with the different stakeholders concluded that development is needed in the area currently and in the years to come.

The theory underlying this work was deducted from the airport city concepts and studies, literature about experience economy and nature-based tourism, which supported the theme and the research questions of the study well. The original focus of the study was to research the Kuusijärvi experience from the experience economy point of view, but the study revealed many development and cooperation challenges, therefore the focus of the study was extended to also investigate those challenges.

The aim was to study possible Kuusijärvi nature-based experiences from the stakeholders' point of view. Furthermore, to find out what are the needs and wishes of the stakeholders operating in the Kuusijärvi area, and companies and organizations belonging to the Avia network in order to develop the area from a tourism point of view. Thirdly, this research aimed to find out the Avia Network's views for developing Kuusijärvi in expanding its nature-based experiences. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: *How is the current state of Kuusijärvi nature-based experiences from the stakeholders' perspective? What are the stakeholders' views on the future development of the Kuusijärvi experience? What are the possibilities of the Kuusijärvi experience in 10 years?*

All in all, the author considers the goal of the thesis achieved and the research questions were successfully answered. Nevertheless, the original focus on the Avia network was not

achieved, which was beyond the control of the author. The additional interviews with the Avia Network would have broadened the airport city perspective of the study and added valuable views of those stakeholders. The airport and airline operators could have added insights of the developing airport city and the development of a local attraction in the area. The airport operator Finavia and national airline Finnair could have been a valuable source to gain insights of the stopover passenger segments that have been discussed in the study, since those companies hold the data of, for example, number of those transfer passengers that are categorized as potential stopover customers. As mentioned in chapter 2, Finavia is developing the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport terminals to serve 30 million passengers, and therefore, it would have been valuable to hear their views of airport city and Kuusijärvi area development. With the unavailability of those stakeholders the airport city view is narrower than originally planned. The author adapted to the challenge and focused the interviews to other important stakeholders such as local businesses in the Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas. The current state of the Kuusijärvi experience and its challenges such as large visitor numbers and the sustainability matters around the lake water quality are known challenges to the City of Vantaa. Even though the author was not able to necessarily uncover completely new information about the current situation of the Kuusijärvi experience, the author believes that this study succeeded in collecting the information and putting it into context. The findings confirm the need to solve those challenges in order to develop the area.

6.1 Findings

When discussing the elements of a nature-based experience, the interviewees identified aspects such as the Finnish culture and nature and the element of water important. Many of the interviewees described the elements already found in the Kuusijärvi area, for example the nature and the element of natural water especially combined to a sauna experience. Many of the interviewees were frequent visitors of the area themselves and shared personal experiences of their visits, which confirmed the aspect of being a cherished local recreational area.

The current Kuusijärvi experience consists of the area being a nature-like place and the gateway to the neighboring national park, offering versatile all-year-round activities and services. The area was experienced to have rich potential for further development, but the interviewees named various barriers such as infrastructural challenges standing in the way of Kuusijärvi being yet in its full potential. In many interviews, when describing the experiences that Kuusijärvi already offers, infrastructural and development needs eventually

surfaced. Therefore, it can be assumed that those infrastructural and development are already barriers for existing experiences in the area.

All in all, Kuusijärvi in its current form was described as a versatile all-year-round destination that serves different visitor segments such as the locals, as well as domestic and international tourists. Nevertheless, the interviewees highlighted Kuusijärvi being primarily a recreational destination for the locals as it is a valuable recreational location for various residential areas surrounding the Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas. The respondents viewed that the need for such recreational areas will be growing in the future as number of inhabitants in the capital region is expected to grow in the future

The study revealed a lot of development requirements in the Kuusijärvi area. Additionally, to those already known beforehand, and identified in earlier studies of the area, the author learned about new challenges unknown to her. Those include for example the need to further develop the cooperation between different stakeholders to develop the destination as a whole, increase the awareness of what the other businesses in the area are doing, as well as the city's role as the enabler of the development for example in different permission processes. In addition, many of the interviewees mentioned the digital accessibility as another future development area.

In general, the interviewees saw potential in developing the Kuusijärvi area for the future and in the position of Kuusijärvi as the gate to Sipoonkorpi being strengthened further. The interviewees suggested the Kuusijärvi area to be developed as an all-year-round hub for activities and experiences for both Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas, including the dark winter months. The interviewees identified possibilities to expand the offerings such as to the embodied sauna experience, the culinary offerings, and the current offerings to equipment rental in the Kuusijärvi area. From the perspective of the interviewees, the future experience offerings could be developed to be personal and engaging to the different senses and combine the different offerings with the raw materials found in the area. This is supported by the Experience Triangle Model by Sanna Tarssanen (2009) as presented in the sub-chapter 3.4. It is a versatile tool to consider all the aspects of the different experiences offered by Kuusijärvi. It was suggested that the experiences offered in the area could be enhanced by creating a sauna experience including food, sauna singing, swimming in the lake water, herbal foot bath and sauna whisks made of juniper etc. The raw materials used for such experience could be collected in the areas of Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi by the customer themselves, which enhances the learning aspect of the nature-based experience. In addition, there are several possibilities to develop the culinary offerings in the area to enhance the authenticity aspect of the area, such as by utilizing

seasonal and local ingredients and participating in local business initiatives such as the *Vantaa menu*. When considering Sanna Tarssanen's (2009) experimental elements of the product from the angle of individuality, authenticity, story, multisensory, contrast and interaction, many of the elements of the model are found in the future experience offering suggestion of the sauna and culinary experience.

Sustainability was an important topic that surfaced as a part of developing a nature-based destination. All the interviewees mentioned sustainability in some form, either as a current challenge in conjunction with the lake water quality and the growing visitor numbers, or the aspect to be considered when developing and expanding the area, as well as the benefit of obtaining a certification or belonging to a sustainability program such as Visit Finland's *Sustainable Travel Finland*. In addition, the interviewees in general were pondering, if the area and its capacity is enough for the growing demand in the future, if the lake remains in good condition and if the area can be extended for the growing business and visitor numbers. They expressed their concerns over the impacts of growing visitor numbers in the core area of Kuusijärvi such as the beach, the lake and the surrounding forest paths. During the interviews, it was discussed that Kuusijärvi should find its own path in sustainability, if not yet ready to participate in sustainability programs or certifications. This is in line with the Finland's tourism strategy. Sustainability is named as the future basic requirement in Finland's Tourism Strategy 2019–2028 and Action Plan 2019–2023. The strategy emphasizes that the tourism industry and its organizations must invest in developing sustainable and responsible tourism, not only from the environmental side but also from the social, cultural and economic point of views (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2019, 21).

The stakeholders' views of the future Kuusijärvi confirm that the area should be developed further as the gate to Sipoonkorpi national park and as a starting point for activities and excursions. The author considers the development needs described in sub-chapter 5.3 and the future views presented in sub-chapter 5.5 the most valuable information for the commissioner and to the continuing development work in Kuusijärvi. The author learned that there will be a dedicated position within the City of Vantaa taking over the coordination of the Kuusijärvi development and hopes this study will give tools and ideas for the future development. The Kuusijärvi area development is a gradual process, where the renewal of the buildings are among the last steps of the development. The author considers development of experiences for different customer segments to be the next step. The future experiences offered in the area could be co-developed with the targeted customer segments, which have the possibility to design experiences matching to their preference and the nature-based companies to obtain direct feedback from their potential customers.

6.2 Conclusions

The development of Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas are important investments for the future, as they are the potential points of interest not only for the residents but also for the domestic and international tourists. All the businesses operating in the area affect the overall image of area, and therefore developing and maintaining a shared vision among key stakeholders is important for what Kuusijärvi and the neighboring Sipoonkorpi national park will be in the future. The businesses in those areas should continue cooperating and combining each other's offerings in creating experiences for the desired customer segments. A common website including the relevant destination information and easy purchasing options were found needed and suggested by the interviewees to be either hosted by Café Kuusijärvi or Visit Vantaa.

The Helsinki-Vantaa airport brings income and employment to the Uusimaa region. In Vantaa's case the points of interests are not yet developed for the wider international tourism purposes. In addition, the passengers passing through the airport do not often acknowledge the airport region nor its attractions. As Vantaa aims to be attractive also for the international tourists, it is important to focus on the development needed. Even though Vantaa is an airport city, it is not a primary destination of travel but rather a city to pass through in conjunction with air travel. This was confirmed when reflecting the average duration of stay in the hotels of Vantaa through interviews and literature in chapter 2. According to the city strategy Vantaa aims to develop also as a tourism destination, therefore the means to reach that aim need to be considered. Currently Vantaa is concentrating in strengthening the city's image among the residents as well as concentrating the marketing measures for the domestic segment. Taking into consideration the current pandemic, the domestic segment is currently the only active segment supporting the destinations, and the year 2020 will make a good reference year to compare the sufficiency of the domestic segment using the tourism offerings in Vantaa. The author considers this time being important to start developing strategies of how to attract the desired international segments once the pandemic passes and the international segments return.

Therefore, decisions need to be made about what are the segments the future Kuusijärvi will attract in addition to the local recreational visitors. With its growing local visitor numbers, it will unlikely be a destination for the masses of domestic and international tourism, but instead for small groups of people interested in the Finnish nature and the offerings a nature-based destination may provide. The study suggests the need for short and affordable nature-based offerings for the international segments. Those could be targeted to the

Finland's main geographical markets of Germany and United Kingdom in Europe and China and Japan in Asia introduced in sub-chapter 3.3. The airport stakeholders such as the airport hotels could be included in the project to share the cost and the risk. The need for such experiences was confirmed by an interviewee who had been planning half-day tours themselves to be offered to Chinese visitors.

Another suggestion that rose from the study was the need for transportation to the destinations of interest. It was discussed in conjunction with the accessibility to Kuusijärvi as well as Sipoonkorpi, that the existing public transportation is not sufficient. In addition, a similar suggestion was also made by Max Hirsh (2018) regarding the accessibility via public transportation to other attractions in Vantaa such as the historical Backmas manor and Fazer factory. The Backas manor is developing to host an indoor Moomin theme park that is planned to open the earliest in 2023 (Yle 2020). As the attractions in Vantaa are increasing and developing, the accessibility to the attractions needs to be evaluated for the time before the future tram connection, estimated to be opened in 2028, will resolve the transportation barrier. By eliminating the barrier of transportation, the attractions could reach higher visitor numbers. If not by increasing the public transportation, a joint effort with the city, and the airport area stakeholders could be considered to offer a transfer service until the tram is in operation. That solution could be designed with the concepts of experience economy.

Many of the stakeholders considered the stopover concept as promising and suitable to Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi, but also pointed out its challenges and requirements such as guaranteed departure times, as well as needing partners from various industries such as the city, the destination businesses, and airport and airline partners. Nevertheless, this is a matter that should be advanced for the development on Kuusijärvi and Sipoonkorpi areas. In addition, the city of Vantaa has several business networks, some mentioned in this study, that should be utilized to develop the attractiveness of Vantaa further, including advancing the stopover tourism.

6.3 Learning experience

Completing the thesis was a challenging yet interesting project as the learning of the topics and themes was continuous and every interview gave a different angle on the topic. At times the author experienced keeping focused challenging because of the broadness of the topic and the amount of material the qualitative interviews provided. Though the reflection to the goal and the research questions helped to keep focus.

Throughout the thesis process there were challenges to overcome and to learn from. As most of the materials and literature used was in Finnish, it was a challenge to translate different terms and meanings to English without losing the original meaning of the text translated. This also applied to the interviews, transcribing and eventually to reporting of the results.

Each case study reflects its time and so does this. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was at times challenging to reach the interviewees. Especially many of the originally planned key stakeholders of Avia network were not available for interviews. Out of the total 10 member organizations invited to the study, only three member organizations participated. In addition, the study did not reach the airport or airline operators. Nevertheless, in the end this was not a problem as through interviews the author got suggestions of further interviewees.

The author acquired new perspectives of tourism and aviation industries and learned a lot of new skills and discipline through the study. In addition, participating in a development work of a destination as well as meeting experts of different industries was interesting and motivating during the process. It was a challenge to write the study and to work full time as the active thesis process ended up taking about seven months to complete, but after all was a successful and a valuable learning experience.

The author believes that the timing for this case study was ideal despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which is still not showing any signs of ending at the time of writing. Even though the pandemic affected industries such as aviation and tourism heavily, it has been noticeable that the outlook by these industries is positive and the focus is in the future, in the time the air traffic and tourism is able to resume again. The similar feedback was given from the businesses and organizations interviewed. Many of the interviewees considered that even though the pandemic is ongoing, this is the time to plan and to innovate in creating more sustainable offerings for the recovery of the international tourism. In addition, many tourism businesses are working on ways to change the industry more towards sustainability than before.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview themes and questions

Theme 1: The current Kuusijärvi experience

Millaista kokemusta/taustaa sinulla on Kuusijärvestä?

What is your experience of Kuusijärvi and its offerings?

Miten kuvailisit Kuusijärven aluetta?

How would you describe the Kuusijärvi area?

Onko jotain mitä voitaisiin tehdä alueella eri tavalla?

In your opinion, is there something that could be organized differently in the area?

Theme 2: Nature-based experiences

Millaiset elementit kuuluvat laadukkaaseen kokonaisvaltaiseen luontoelämykseen?

What kind of elements are a part of embodied nature experience?

Millaiset aktiviteetit kuuluvat laadukkaaseen kokonaisvaltaiseen luontoelämykseen?

What kind of activities are a part of embodied nature experience?

Millaiset ovat mielestäsi Suomen luontomatkailun mahdollisuudet?

What kind of possibilities do you see in nature-based tourism in the future in Finland?

Puuttuuko mielestäsi Suomesta jotain luontomatkailun elämyksiä? Can you think of any nature-based experiences that are missing in Finland's offerings?

Miten Vantaa voisi kilpailla luontoelämyksillä muiden pääkaupunkiseudun kaupunkien kanssa?

How could Vantaa compete with other regions such as Helsinki or Espoo in nature-based experiences?

Theme 3: Airport City Aviapolis

Millaisia luontoelämyksiä pitäisi olla tarjolla lähellä lentokenttäkaupunkia?

What kind of nature-based experiences should be offered close to an Airport City?

Millaisia kokemuksia sinulla on työsi kautta (kansainvälisten) matkailijoiden luontoelämyksistä?

What kind of experience do you have through your work of nature-based offerings targeted to (international) tourists?

Theme 4: Avia network

Miten näet luontoelämykset osana Avia-verkoston toimintaa?

How do you envision nature-based experiences being a part of the Avia Network's agenda?

Theme 5: Cooperation

Millaisena näet yhteistyön merkityksen eri toimijoiden kanssa kokonaisvaltaisten elämysten luomisessa? (esim. yritykset, oppilaitokset, verkostot yms.)

How do you regard the value of cooperation with partners when creating embodied nature experiences? (For example, companies, universities, business networks etc.)

Voisiko mielestäsi Kuusijärvellä luoda elämyksiä yhteistyössä eri yritysten kanssa?

Could Kuusijärvi offer nature-based experiences through cooperation with other local businesses?

Theme 6: The Future Kuusijärvi experience

Kuvaile, millainen paikka Kuusijärvi voisi olla 10 vuoden päästä?

Please describe, how would you envision the Kuusijärvi area in 10 years from now?

Minkälaisia oheispalveluita siellä voisi olla?

What kind of offerings would you envision there?

Millaisia matkailijasegmenttejä Kuusijärvellä voisi olla 10 vuoden päästä? (esim. Kansalaisuudet, segmentit kiinnostuksen kohteittain, ikäryhmät jne.)

What would be the tourist segments potentially interested in the offerings in the Kuusijärvi area? (Nationalities, segments by interest, age groups)

