



Enhancement of Regional Sport Tourism network management

Case Rauha-Ukonniemi

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Abstract

The sports tourism industry, consisting of all the people, places, and things that support, impact, or are impacted by sports tourism, is one of the fastest-growing sectors in tourism. Regional Sports Tourism (RTS) Network means geographically connected actors who interact to provide a regional sports tourism customer experience.

Imatra Base Camp Oy, a subsidiary of the City of Imatra, commissioned the research. The study aimed to determine how the local sports tourism network management should be developed. The regional sports tourism is focused on the Rauha-Ukonniemi area, crossing the cities of Lappeenranta and Imatra, where the research was delineated. Imatra Base Camp Oy is responsible for the sales, marketing, and development of sports tourism offerings in Imatra. The company will use the research to evaluate and develop these actions related to sports tourism.

The qualitative research was conducted through eleven semi-structured, recorded expert interviews with the area's judgmentally selected sports tourism industry stakeholders. Nine interviews were conducted online, two at the responder's office. Transcribed interviews were further analyzed by coding and categorizing them into themes from the theoretical framework and the research questions. The analysis aimed to find if the network has a common view on the topic or if there are apparent differences in the opinions of different stakeholder groups.

The results showed that sports tourism is essential for all stakeholder organizations, and the public sector's role is crucial in creating operating conditions for sports tourism. Despite that operating conditions have been well built, the stakeholders recognize that area is facing multiple challenges, and the cooperation between actors is low, unorganized, and lacking strategy. Increased, organized, and coordinated cooperation with a defined strategy and goals were seen as ways to enhance the future of sports tourism in the area.

The research presents a five-step road map to develop the Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism network based on the results and literature. Shared vision from both cities, a coordinative central actor with an adequate mandate and an organized RST network, were listed as cornerstones of development.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Sports tourism, destination management, sports tourism management, regional sports tourism networks, Rauha-Ukonniemi, Imatra, Lappeenranta, Imatra Base Camp

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Virhe. Kirjanmerkkiä ei ole määritetty.

1 Introduction

The sports tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors in tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2021). Broadly defined, sports tourism means traveling from one's primary residence to participate in a sports-related activity. This definition involves both actively participating in sporting activities and passively spectating sports events. (Hudson, 2003 p.1-3.) The sports tourism industry consists of all the people, places, and things that support, impact, or are impacted by sports tourism (Knott & Swart, 2015 p. 420). Wäsche and Woll (2010) describe Regional Sports Tourism (RST) as geographically connected (=region) actors who interact to provide regional sports tourism offerings. The tourist region is not tied to the administrative borders of municipalities; it should be considered more through cultural and economic aspects as perceived by clients. (p. 196.) To benefit socio-economically from Regional Sport Tourism and avoid negative impacts, the provision of sports tourism must be managed systematically. The Challenge of managing RST is that the stakeholders are highly heterogeneous (private companies, municipalities, tourism organizations, non-profit sports clubs, etc.), with various interests. (Wäsche & Woll, 2013 p. 404-407.) The developmental potential of sports tourism destinations is determined by their existing sports and tourism resource and infrastructure base. These overlapping resources of sports and tourism should be developed and planned coordinatively. (Hinch & Higham, 2004 p. 122.)

Tourism is important to South Karelia as it generates over 1 800 man-years and 516 million euros of income yearly for the region (Saimaan Matkailustrategia 2021-2025, 2021, p.12). Tourism is listed as one of the strategic choices of smart specialization in the regional program of the South Karelian Council (ETELÄ-KARJALAN MAAKUNTAOHJELMA 2022–2025, 2021). The City of Imatra has also noted tourism, especially the Ukkonniemi area, as one of the cornerstones of its strategy (Energinen Imatra 2030 –strategia Ohjaa Tekemistä Ja Investointeja, 2022). The region's sports tourism is focused on the Rauha-Ukonniemi area, located on the shores of Lake Saimaa, in the territory of both municipalities Imatra and Lappeenranta. It can be considered a sports tourism destination or a sports tourism resort area. Within a few kilometers, it has a comprehensive sports activity offering varying from golf courses to adventure parks and multiple modern sports venues, complemented with modern tourism infrastructure reaching to bed capacity of 4 000. In 2019 sports training camps and events generated 30 000 overnight stays in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area, 7% of the total overnight stays 417 000 in the area (Holm & Tynnilä, 2020 p.2-3; TAK Research, 2022). These training camp and event participants can be considered tourists whose primary motivation

has been participating (actively or passively) in sports activity, and thus the figures are missing the tourists who are motivated to travel to the area by the combination of sporting and non-sporting attractions; or by the non-sports attractions, including destinations sports experiences/activities (Higham, 2006 p.109).

This thesis aims to research the regional sports tourism network in this area to find out the status of destination management from a sports tourism perspective as well as to give suggestions to enhance the management and development of sports tourism in the region. To reach these goals, a qualitative study will be conducted using a theoretical framework of sports tourism and destination management presented in Figure 2 to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of regional sport tourism management in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area..



Figure 1. The theoretical framework of the study

The study is commissioned by my employee, Imatra Base Camp, the marketing company of the City of Imatra, also assigned to sales, marketing, and development of the sports tourism offering in the City of Imatra. The company will use the study to evaluate and develop its sports tourism actions. The thesis will also provide helpful information on sports tourism in the region for the decision-makers and officials in the municipalities of Imatra and Lappeenranta. The topic is current in

Imatra as sports tourism development issues were under active political discussion in 2021-2022, and the implementation methods of the new strategy for the city are under labor. The Covid pandemic and war in Ukraine have challenged sports tourism in the region since the traditional target market, the Russian tourists, seems to be missing for a long time. There is a need to find managerial implications for sports tourism to find new target markets and survive in the competition. Sports tourism in Finland is still a marginally researched field. This thesis will extend one new perspective to the field. It will also provide a helpful example of how destination management is organized at the regional level for other Finnish municipalities or sports tourism destinations. The study is personally interesting as it is related to my everyday work and will support my growth as a sports tourism expert.

The sports tourism industry in Rauha-Ukonniemi

The sports tourism industry consists of all the people, places, and things that support, impact, or are impacted by sports tourism (Knott & Swart, 2015 p. 420). The scenery nature of Lake Saimaa and two big spa hotel resorts, with bed capacities of over 1000 and 2000, form the heart of the Rauha-Ukonniemi tourist area. Both resorts have comprehensive service offerings, including their own sports facilities and activities, complemented by services and activities from smaller service providers surrounding these resorts. The City of Imatra has centralized most of the municipality's sports infrastructure at Ukonniemi Sports Center, located between the previously mentioned spa resorts. The sports center has venues for tens of different sports disciplines in different seasons in addition to the vast network of tracks and routes in the surrounding nature in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area (Figure 1). The overall sports tourism offering is enriched by the smaller accommodation and service providers in the area and the local sports clubs hosting events. In conclusion, it is safe to say that sports play a significant role in the tourism experience in this area, and the same can be seen from the statistics presented previously.



Figure 2. Map of Ukonniemi Sports Center (Imatra Base Camp, 2022)

As described, the range of the supply-side stakeholders in the local sports tourism industry is vast and heterogeneous. A visitor's overall sports tourism experience is a multidimensional combination of services and products (Wäsche & Woll, 2013 p. 405-407), as listed in the previous paragraph. In the Rauha-Ukonniemi area, this experience is usually a combination of elements from private businesses, public sports infrastructure (venues and nature), and possibly events organized by local sports clubs. For most of these stakeholders' sports tourism is not in their core business. For instance, the sports clubs' primary focus is on organizing their daily program for the local population; for the accommodation providers, sports tourists are just one customer segment among many. Nevertheless, each stakeholder's input into the sports tourist's customer experience is crucial. Thus, it is vital to understand the complexity of the area's sports tourism product to find suggestions to enhance the management and development of sports tourism in the region. The area's key stakeholder groups from the supply side will be introduced in the following paragraphs.

Public sector organizations are vital stakeholders as most sports infrastructure (venues and nature) is owned, operated, and maintained by the City of Imatra. Imatra and Lappeenranta are the principal shareholders in the regional organizations of Etelä-Karjalan Virkistysaluesäätiö and Saimaa Geopark, both linked to sports tourism as they develop outdoor activities and infrastructure in the region. The municipalities are also the main shareholders in the destination marketing company of the South-Karelian region, GoSaimaa Oy. GoSaimaa executes the international brand marketing of the whole region under the brand of "Lake Saimaa – purest Finland" and operates as the central organization of the regional tourism industry for its shareholder companies and municipalities. Imatra Base Camp Oy (the author's employer and commissioner of this thesis), a subsidiary of the City of Imatra, operates in sports tourism as the actor gathering the area's sports tourism offering in a marketable form. However, the municipality border challenges the company's mandate to promote activities on the Lappeenranta side of the area. All in all, these public organizations are crucial in creating a suitable environment for sports tourism. Some also have a significant role in marketing the area's sports tourism offering.

The local sports club are essential stakeholders in local sports tourism, as they organize the majority of the sports events in the area. They also represent the local population's voice in the discussion over the negative impacts of tourism, such as competition over common resources (sports venues). There are 39 sports clubs in Imatra (Etelä-Karjalan Liikunta ja Urheilu ry, 2022), but a few active clubs and key personnel organize the most notable sports events in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area. The future of major sports events relies highly on the activity of these key volunteer workers, creating a risk to the destination's sports tourism. There are roughly ten annual sports events that considerably impact tourism (Imatra Base Camp, 2022), varying from mass-participation grassroots sports events to elite international competitions, with participation rates from 100 to few thousand. Besides yearly events, the clubs and the City of Imatra are constantly bidding to host National Championships or similar category events in different sports. Besides local sports clubs, some commercial operators and sports federations organize training camps and other sports events. Still, they are usually based elsewhere and occasionally operate in the area.

Essential sports tourism stakeholders from the business sector are the accommodation providers. As told, the two big spa resorts, Imatra Spa and Holiday Club Saimaa form the core of tourist services in the area. They are located on different sides of the municipality border, leaving most of

the sports infrastructure between them. Besides accommodation, both resorts and their surroundings offer a wide range of sports activities, such as golf, bowling, action parks, rope adventure parks, outdoor equipment rental, and many more. There are six registered accommodation providers in the area, with a bed capacity of 3000 (TAK Research, 2022). Besides registered operators, smaller operators, holiday villas, and cottages rented through various platforms raise the area's total bed capacity to 4000. Restaurants and cafes, activity operators, tour operators, private sports facilities, adventure parks, sporting goods stores, rental and maintenance operators, and coaching and performance testing services are also important sport tourism stakeholders in the business sector. There are 12 restaurants (Imatra | Kansallisihme, n.d.) and over 20 other service providers (Imatra Base Camp, 2022) in the area.

2 Sports tourism

Throughout history, the sport has been a big motivator for travel and tourism. Sports environments have stimulated people to journey to satisfy their needs. (Hudson, 2003.) Nevertheless, terminological chaos in the literature on sports tourism can be found as it presents many definitions and sub-classifications for sports tourism (Mokras-Grabowska, 2016). Van Rheenen, Cernaianu, and Sobry (2017) found 30 distinct definitions for sports tourism in their meta-review of literature published from 1993-to 2014.

Broadly defined by Hudson (2003, p.2), *“sport tourism includes travel away from one’s primary residence to participate in a sport activity for recreation or competition, travel to observe sport at the grassroots or elite level, and travel to visit a sport attraction such as a sports hall of fame or water park.”* Hinch and Higham (2003) describes *sports tourism* as sport-based travel away from the home environment for a limited time, with sport being a significant travel activity and factor in decision-making. Gibson (2006, p.2) defines sports tourism and different sport tourism types as *“leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activity (Active Sport Tourism), to watch physical activities (Event Sport Tourism) or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities (Nostalgia Tourism).”*

All the above definitions are constructed sharing common elements. Van Rheenen et al (2017) found five distinct paradigmatic dimensions underlying different definitions of sports tourism. The dimensions and their presence in different definitions are illustrated in Table 1.

Dimension	% of presence in different definitions
Sport as motivation for travel (type, level, and extent of sports activity)	90 %
Space (encompassing travel away from a home environment)	70 %
Time (the duration away from a home environment)	36,67 %
Participant experience of the sports tourism activity	33,33 %
Economic motivation (a reference to the development of an economic sector or niche market)	13,33 %

Table 1. Dimensions underlying the definitions of sports tourism and their distribution. (Van Rheenen et al, 2017. Adapted)

Based on previous paragraphs, it is safe to say that sports tourism is a complex multidimensional phenomenon that can be reviewed from various perspectives, but the element of the sport is always present as a motivation for travel. World Tourism Organization (2021) sees sport as interrelated and complementary as sport usually involves a significant amount of traveling to play and compete. However, sports tourism is more than a simple combination of sport and tourism or just a niche segment in the tourism market (Weed, 2007; Hinch & Higham, 2003). Hinch & Higham (2003) sees sports tourism as a market consisting of multiple niche markets varying in intensity, involvement, and type of sport. Each niche may differ in motivations, needs, socio-demographics, travel behaviors, and destination impacts caused. Weed (2015) describes the dimensions of sports tourism as *“a social, economic and cultural phenomenon arising from the unique interaction of activity, people and place”* (p. 235).

2.1 Sports tourism industry

The sports tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors in tourism (World Tourism Organization 2021). The sports tourism industry consists of all the people, places, and things that support, impact, or are impacted by sports tourism. Components of the sports tourism industry are

people, places, and activities, referring to an assortment of businesses, institutions, resources, and people serving sports tourists. (Knott & Swart, 2015 p. 420.)

People

In the sports tourism industry, the *people* refer to both the host residents and the tourists. Sport can be the tourist's primary motivation to travel to a particular destination (e.g., participation in a sports event). Sports can be a secondary or supplementary motivation as activities can only be part of the tourist's vacation plans. (Knott & Swart, 2015 p. 420.) These sports tourists can be involved in the sports activities actively (physical involvement) or passively (spectating, observing) in a competitive or non-competitive way, and they can be further divided into diverse segments by numerous approaches (Hinch & Higham, 2004 p. 34-39). According to Higham (2006), sports tourists may be motivated by "1. A particular sports attraction; 2. A combination of sporting and non-sporting attractions; 3. Non-sports attractions, where destination experiences/activities include sports" (p.109). This is similar to how Hinch and Higham (2004) present Gammon and Robinsons (1997) conceptualization of *sport tourism* and *tourism sport* based on tourists' motivation towards involvement in sports, underlining the difference in the seriousness of the engagement in sports activities. The primary reason for travel in *sport tourism* is sports, with other tourist activities as a secondary part of the experience. As in *tourism sports*, sport is a secondary or unplanned part of the tourist experience. These typologies can be further delineated into hard and soft participation, as presented in Table 2 below. (Gammon & Robinsons, 1997, as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004 p. 35-38).

Sport tourism	Individuals and / or groups of people who actively or passively participate in competitive or recreational sport while travelling. Sport is the prime motivation to travel, although the touristic element may reinforce the overall experience.
Hard definition	Active or passive participation in a competitive sporting event. Sport is the prime motivational reason for travel.
Soft definition	Active recreational participation in sporting / leisure interest.
Tourism sport	Active or passive participation in competitive or recreational sport as a secondary activity. The holiday or visit, rather than the sport, is the prime travel motivation
Hard definition	Competitive or non-competitive sport as an important secondary motivation that enriches the travel experience.
Soft definition	Competitive or non-competitive sport or leisure as a purely incidental element of the holiday experience.

Table 2. Conceptualization of sport tourism and tourism sport. (Gammon & Robinson, 1997, p.10-11 as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004 p. 37.)

Hinch and Higham (2004) also introduced Maier and Weber's (1993) classification of sports tourism demand groups (Table 3), highlighting the differences in destination's resource requirements in order to serve these different segments.

Demand group	Visitor demands & resource requirements
Top performance athletes	Efficiency as main aim. Access to competitions and suitable training facilities as priority. Suitable accommodation and dining (e.g. dietary requirements), performance related services.
Mass sports	Health & fitness as main aim with individual performance targets. Accessibility of holiday region and quality of sports facilities are important.
Occasional sports(women)	Preference for less demanding recreational sports. Sport activities equal priority as other touristic activities.
Passive sport tourist	Focus on mega-sport events and notable sports venues. Includes coaches, attendants of athletes, and media. Requires vast capacity to accommodate large numbers in sports events.

Table 3. Sport tourism demand groups and resource requirements. (Maier & Weber, p.38 as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.35. Adapted.)

Places

The tourism industry can be positioned as a business of selling places through marketing (Higham, 2006, p. 109). Unique experiences of sports places are critical elements of the competitiveness of a tourist destination (Hinch & Higham, 2009, p. 215). Sports tourism *place* refers to environments or settings where sports tourism activities occur. These settings can be man-made (sports venues, museums), natural (lakes, mountains), social (bars, restaurants), economical (trade shows, conventions), or cultural (bullfights, rodeos). (Knott & Swart, 2015 p. 420.) Sport tourism development and many sports are closely tied to the local geography of the destination, taking advantage of the value of the physical environment, such as the sea (surfing, diving) or the climate (golf). The

potential of sports tourism development at a destination is related to existing sports tourism resources and infrastructures. The resource base for sports tourism development combines the resource requirements of both the sports and tourism sector, including Natural features (parks, scenery, geographical features, open amenity spaces); Facilities & infrastructure (transportation, accommodation, sports venues, dining); Built amenities (public toilets, parking, signs, shelters); Tourism & sports services (visitor information, booking & ticketing, coaching, sports equipment related, training facilities, injury & medical); Tourism & sports organizations (destination management & marketing, sports clubs, volunteers, facility development, administration, marketing); Transport services (road, rail, air, sea, tourism routes, scenic journeys); and Entertainment & activities (attractions, cinemas, shopping, nightlife, sports venues, golf courses, sports museums), just to mention a few examples of each category. (Hinch & Higham, 2004 p. 118-123.)

Activities

Sports tourists engage in different *activities* from the supply side, categorized as *attractions, cruises, resorts, tours, and events* (Knott & Swart, 2015 p. 420; Hudson, 2003, p.3). Hudson (2003) describes sports tourism *attractions* as “destinations that provide the tourist with things to see and do related to sport.” *Resorts* are seen as well-planned tourist complexes with sports and health as their primary focus, with facilities and services available for sports tourists, such as spas, golf resorts, and snow sports resorts. *Cruises* refer to all boat trips that have sports activities or sports as their primary marketing strategy. Sport tourism *tours* are packages including travel services (transportation, accommodation) and sports-related services (game tickets, ski lifts) that are needed to visit a sporting event, facility, or destination. Tours include, for example, fan trips to sports enthusiasts, ski tour packages, and companies that serve sports teams, arranging all their travel and accommodation needs. *Events* refer to sports activities that can attract a substantial number of participants and/or spectators and have the potential to attract nonresident media and technical personnel (coaches, referees) besides participants. Sports events can have a significant economic impact on the host destination. (Hudson, 2003, p.3-13).

Sports tourism activities can also be categorized as *event-based activities, active participation, and nostalgia-based sports travel*. *Event-based activities* typology concentrates on the spectator aspect of different scale sports events. *Active participation* refers to the tourists' physical involvement in sports activities like golf or skiing. Nostalgia sports tourism refers to those who travel to

sports museums, halls of fame, heritage events, and sports reunions. (Gibson, 2006, p.12-13; Hinch & Higham, 2004 p. 48-49.) Hinch and Higham (2004) also presented Standeven and Deknop's (1999) sport tourism activity classification illustrating the diversity of sport tourist markets.

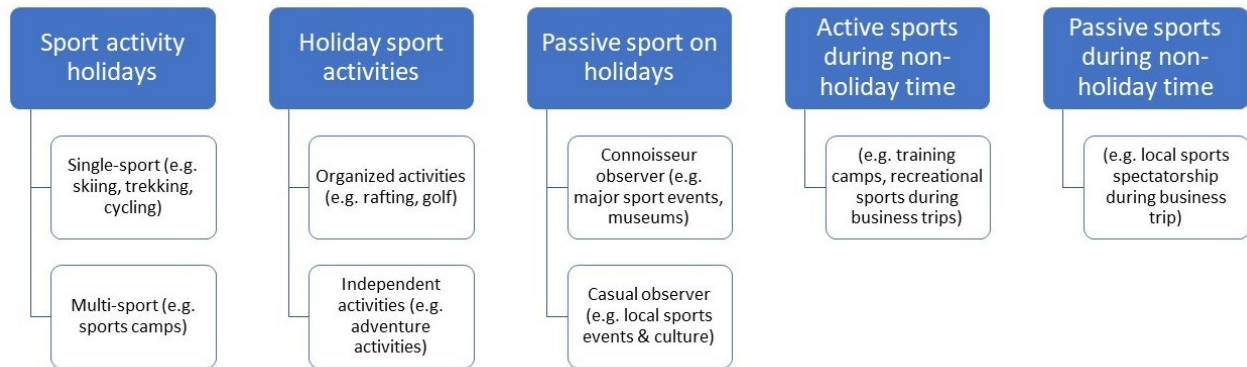


Figure 3. Sport tourism activities classification. (Standeven & Deknop, 1999, as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.25. Adapted.)

2.2 Sport as a tourist attraction

Hinch and Higham (2004) see sports as a unique type of tourist attraction (p.29). Both Hinch and Higham (2004) and Gibson (2006) interpret sports as a tourist attraction through Leiper's (1990) tourism attraction system, which is defined as *"a system comprising three elements: a tourist or human element, a nucleus or central element, and a marker or informative element. A tourist attraction system comes into existence when the three elements are connected."* (Leiper, 1990, as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.24 and Gibson, 2006, p.13.)

The human element consists of the persons traveling away from home with leisure-related motivational factors, and its nature can be interpreted with the following five assertions. Touristic behavior involves a search for satisfying leisure (away from home). Touristic leisure requires a search for attractions (the nuclear element) suitable for personal experience. This process depends on the individual's attributes, such as needs and ability to travel. Markers have a crucial role between the individual and the nuclear elements. The process can be functional or dysfunctional,

depending on how the needs of the individual are satisfied. (Leiper, 1990, as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.24-25 and Gibson, 2006, p.13.) In sports tourism, the human element can be seen as the sport tourists (Gibson, 2006, p.13) and their specific motivations to travel, as described in the typologies in section 2.1, People.

The nucleus element refers to the actual place where the tourist experience is produced and consumed (Leiper, 1990, as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.25 and Gibson, 2006, p.13.). In the sports tourism attraction context, it can be seen as the attributes of the sporting activity (Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.25), similar to elements of sports tourism *places* and *activities* described in section 2.1. Some nuclear elements play a more significant role in influencing visitors' decision-making than others. Primary attractions are powerful enough in themselves to influence visitors' travel decisions. Secondary attractions the visitor recognizes before the visit but are not crucial in decision-making. Tertiary attractions are unknown to the visitor before the holiday, although they may serve as entertainment during the stay at the destination. (Leiper, 1990, as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.25.)

The marker element consists of items of information phenomena that are potential nucleus elements (Leiper, 1990, as cited in Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.25-26 and Gibson, 2006, p.14). Typically in sports tourism, attraction markers take place in advertisements featuring destination-specific sports activities and events or in elite sports broadcasts in recognizable destinations (Hinch & Higham, 2004, p.25-26; Gibson, 2006, p.14).

Seeing sports as a tourism attraction can give a tourism destination a competitive advantage. Sports can provide more authentic tourism experiences than many other tourism experiences. Corresponding marketing to the attraction hierarchy's primary, secondary, and tertiary levels is likely to be efficient. (Hinch & Higham, 2004,p.28.)

2.3 Regional Sports Tourism

Wäsche and Woll (2010) describe Regional Sports Tourism (RST) as a network of geographically connected actors interacting to provide regional sports tourism offerings. The tourist region is not tied to the administrative borders of municipalities; it should be considered more through cultural and economic aspects as perceived by clients. (p. 196.). Sports-related experiences are a

significant element of almost every tourist region's offering and an essential part of regional socio-economic development. In regional sport tourism, the network of actors or stakeholders creating the overall sports tourism experience (e.g., transport, lodging, sports facilities, sports services, natural surroundings) is heterogeneous, multi-layered, and border crossing with different organizational cultures, interests, and goals. This creates critical challenges in managing regional sport tourism. (Wäsche & Woll 2010, p. 197-198. ; Wäsche & Woll 2013, p. 404-406.)

Wäsche and Woll (2010) created a conceptual framework of Regional Sport Tourism Networks to provide a theoretically grounded perspective on the organizational structure of regional sports tourism. The urge to understand the organizational structure of regional sports tourism was raised from sports tourism literature, where many authors describe the deficient linkage and coordination between the actors in sport and tourism, that should exist to benefit sports tourism's development. (p. 191-194.)

According to Wäsche and Woll (2013), RST networks are structurally complex and fundamentally different from traditional organizations. They are heterarchical networks based on voluntary, possible unofficial membership. RST networks can be described through the social network theory concept of inter-organizational networks (IONs). The authors describe their framework as based on an assumption:

“The system of RST can be understood as a social network between organizations (an ION) in which shared values, reciprocity, and trust among the network actors are the normative basis to establish and maintain cooperation.” (p. 407-408.)

2.3.1 Regional Sports Tourism as an Interorganizational Network

A network can be seen as a planned structure for coordinating interactions between organizations. Networks act as intermediaries, passing values and social norms to individuals. Through interaction, networks can turn into social institutions over time. According to Wäsche and Woll (2010), *“a group of related actors can be considered a network from the moment the existing linkages among the actors define the social character of this group of actors.”* There are three essential functional

elements behind the operation of networks: *cooperation, emergence, and innovation*. (Wäsche & Woll 2010, p. 199-204.)

The mechanism of social *cooperation* refers to interactions and exchange of resources repeated over time conduces to a stable and interdependent affiliation between actors, which can be considered a structuring process. Cooperation in networks can be recognized as a mechanism of social capital, resolving joint problems efficiently. Trust-based cooperative relationships establish a normative network helping members to achieve their goals. (Wäsche & Woll 2010, p. 202.)

The mechanism of *emergence* depicts the network's systemic characteristics as an autonomous organization. It describes the self-generation of a new social structure through the stabilization of collective actions based on cooperative relationships between members. It is based on the temporary stabilization of social order based on the interaction of members in the network. The network's code of behavior and norms can be developed unnoticed by the involved actors. (Wäsche & Woll 2010, p. 202.)

According to Wäsche and Woll (2010), the mechanism of *innovation* refers to “*the fact that this emergent structure persists only if it is subject to a process of evolution.*” This evolution process enabling the network's survival is based on the creation of mutual knowledge to inspire innovation within the network.

Interorganizational Networks (IONs)

There is no clear and commonly agreed definition of *interorganizational network (ION)*. It can be a metaphor for very different forms of interorganizational collaboration, or it can mean a structure of social relationships between organizations explored through network analysis. (Bergenholtz & Waldstrøm, 2011.) Wäsche and Woll (2010) present IONs like networks depicted earlier, but the actors of a group are represented by social organizations. IONs can occur in various forms, such as political networks, strategic networks, regional networks, and innovation networks. These different types of IONs differ from each other in their operating principles and power structures. The

structure can be asymmetrical or hierarchical networks with an unequal balance of power. It can be symmetrical or heterarchical networks characterized by equal relationships based on the normative trust mechanism. (p. 204.)

To be effective, networks need governance and control functions, although they cannot be characterized as hierarchical forms of organizations. Three different types of network governance can be identified: *the shared governance network*, *the lead organization network*, and *the network administrative organization (NAO) network*. *The shared governance network* has various organizations working in collaboration, without a recognized governance entity. *The lead organization network* has vertical relations between the lead organization and other network affiliates. *The network administrative organization (NAO) network* has one separate administrative organization, usually a non-profit or a governmental organization, acting as a coordinator of activities and primary decisions. (Wäsche & Woll 2010, p. 205.)

Special Features of RST Networks

Wäsche and Woll (2010) present the RST network as “*a specific set of linkages between regional actors involved in sports tourism*,” where a stable network emerges through the interrelationships between single actors through the functional mechanisms of cooperation, emergence, and innovation, as described in previous chapters. (p. 206.)

RST networks have a symmetrical structure with equal partnership among autonomous actors. RST networks are usually formed on voluntary bases, not based on formal contracts, from the need for coordinated cooperation with other actors in the same industry. Collaboration is based on mutual trust, with informal structures and low-grade threshold levels. The partnership is usually coordinated by a focal public actor, who tends to be neutral without conflicts of interest. They are capable of creating and managing a network and its activities strategically. RST networks can be seen as NAOs, as there is usually a local tourism organization in charge of coordinating the sports tourism activities in the area. Even though RSTs have horizontal structures and voluntary bases, the power

may be unevenly distributed among actors. Typically, a cluster of sports tourism key players wields the most authority. (ibid., 206-207.)

One fundamental characteristic of the RST network is the ability to integrate several different stakeholders. The mixing of public (territorial) and private (financial) interests is also typical for RST networks. As the name suggests, the RST network is a regional network. Sport tourism services are produced in a common area. Operators are dependent on common regional resources, such as transport (streets, railway stations, airports, etc.), sports facilities (marinas, ski lifts, stadiums, etc.), as well as the use of public space (mountains, lakes, coastlines, etc.). Knowledge is also a shared resource, enabling mutual learning and innovations, which are the lifeblood of surviving in the competitive and dynamic tourism market. Innovations play a critical role in the stability and long-term survival of the network. (ibid., 206-207.)

To conclude, an RST network is an organization with the primary purpose of integrating all relevant stakeholders - who are autonomous but interdependent - and coordinating regional sports tourism in formal and informal relations. A focal actor is needed to coordinate the network's activities, preferably a public-sector organization, to avoid conflicts of interest. (ibid., 207.)

2.3.2 Regional Sports Tourism Management

According to Wäsche and Woll (2010, p. 207-208), the operation of the RST network is dependent on three fundamental procedures:

1. Through cooperative relationships, common benefits must arise for the members of the network, so that individual members want to take part in the operation of the RST network.
2. Frequent interaction between members creates a voluntary network between independent actors. In order for the network to be legit and sustainable, it needs a central actor to coordinate the interactions.
3. Constant process of evolution is essential to keep mature RST networks lasting.

Wäsche and Woll (2013) also present a theoretical management model (Figure 5). The foundation is the *normative frame* that provides the circumstances for trust-based long-term cooperation between the network actors, where common norms and values enable the development of the *strategic concept* for the network, which defines the common goals of the actors affected by sports tourism in the region. (p.409-410)

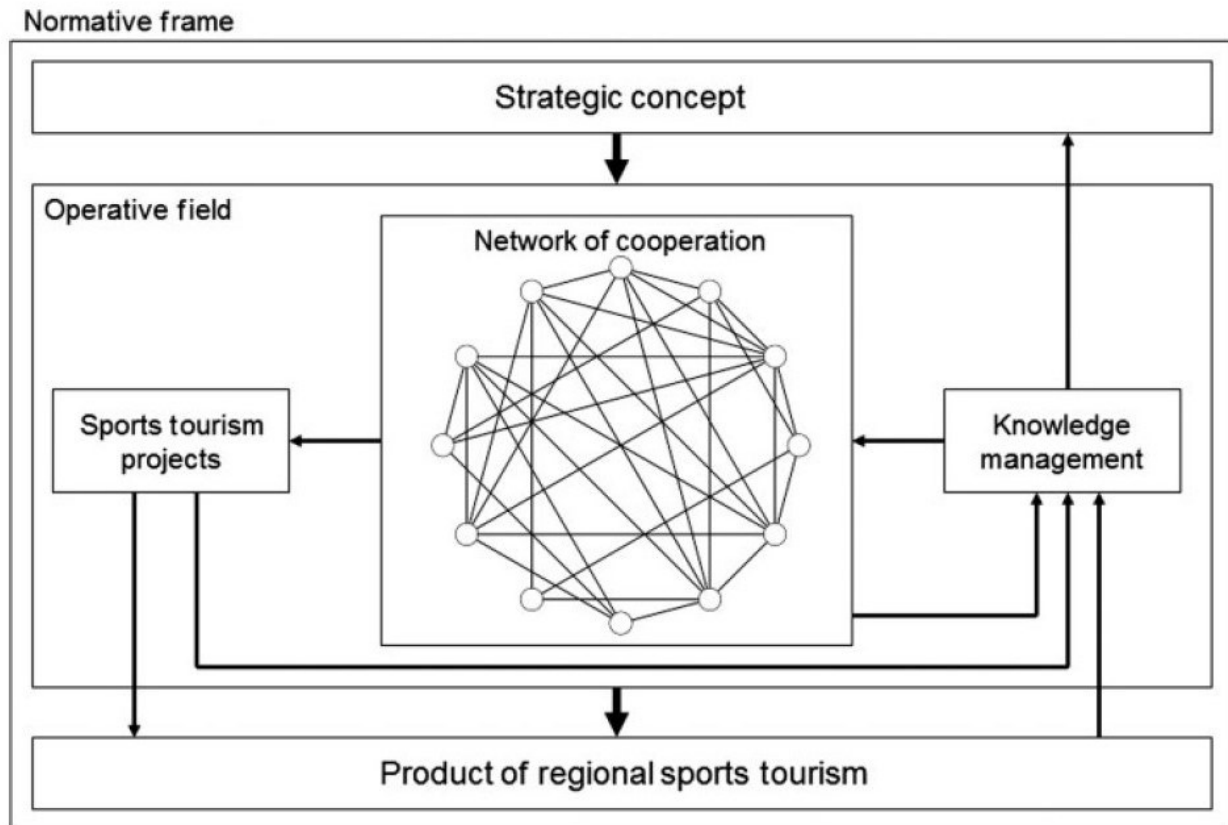


Figure 4. Management model of RST networks. (Wäsche & Woll, 2013, p. 409)

The *network of cooperation*, including all network members and the focal actor coordinating actions, forms the heart of the operative field in the model. This field of sport tourism management involves actions, such as product development, the coordination of marketing activities and different interests of stakeholders, and conflict resolution. *Sport tourism projects* and their management play a significant role in the operation of the RST network. In addition to various development projects (such as new products and development of processes and structures), sports events that are important for sports tourism and appear as temporary projects are included in the model as sports tourism projects. The model's *knowledge management* refers to continuous evaluation, adaptation, and innovation through knowledge sharing. It is an important piece that enables the survival and competitiveness of the RST network. The sum of the abovementioned parts together creates the *product of regional sports tourism* that sports tourists can consume. (Wäsche & Woll, 2013, p. 410)

Based on this theoretical model, Wäsche and Woll (2013) conducted a study on regional sports tourism network management, presenting several findings and managerial implications for RST management. These findings also correlate to the three fundamental mechanisms of RST presented earlier.

The study revealed that traditional managerial instruments of hierarchical organization do not work in the RST-network context. A critical management task is to build trust in the network and maintain interaction between members. Since the network structure is loose, this is achieved through formal and informal intensive communication between members; however, excessive meetings and obligations to network members should be avoided. Members contribute to the network only if they get a clear return for it without too much effort. Apparent common interests and obligations for network members create a basis for how strongly individual organizations commit to the network's activities. Trust is an essential condition for the flexible structures of the network and the sharing of decentralized expertise between members. (Wäsche & Woll, 2013, p. 413-423.)

The role of the focal actor was emphasized in the study, especially from the point of view of mutual communication. The focal actor was responsible for external communication (sports tourism marketing) and internal communication within the network, such as defining common goals, regular information exchange, and conflict resolution. The role of the focal actor was also emphasized in sport tourism product development and the coordination of the use of the actors' common resources. That highlighted that RST actors depend on the focal actor's actions. In various projects (such as sports events), the role of the focal actor appeared to be supportive - flexible management was emphasized, especially with volunteers (sports clubs). (ibid., p. 413-423.)

From a managerial point of view, this highlights the importance of joint communication structures and processes because intensive communication (formal = strategic goals and plans, and informal operational) is a prerequisite for the operation of the network. A central actor is needed to coordinate this cooperation based on communication. The management of separate communications (f2f, phone calls, e-mails, meetings) is the most crucial operative task of the central actor in a dynamic and informal RST network. The functions of the focal actor must also include joint marketing, development and maintenance of the network, conflict resolution and search for consensus,

and building mutual trust. All of these require a lot of different communication methods to be successful. (ibid., p. 413-423.)

In conclusion, it can be stated that in regional sports tourism management, the focal actor's (NAO) role in coordinating all actions is the most crucial factor for RST-networks functions. Strategic planning (shared goals, sustainable development, joint marketing) plays a vital role in the success of the RST network and stakeholder commitment, even though the common goals may partially conflict with the goals of individual actors. Product development and marketing cooperation seem to bring a satisfactory return at a strategic level. At the operational level, the most critical management task is coordinating cooperation. Resolving conflicts and building consensus in an informative manner is also an essential working task. Knowledge management and evaluation should also be part of RST's management for the sustainable success and survival of the RST. (ibid., p. 413-423.)

3 Destination Management

A local tourism destination is a physical place where a visitor can stay and utilize its cluster of products and services provided by a network of operators (World Tourism Organization, 2019, 10). It has physical and administrative borders to determine its management and marketing aspects. Still, the scale can vary from a whole country level to a village or an independent tourist center. The destination has several basic elements to attract visitors and satisfy their needs, as presented in Figure 5. These elements influence the visitor's decision to travel. (World Tourism Organization, 2007, 1-2.)

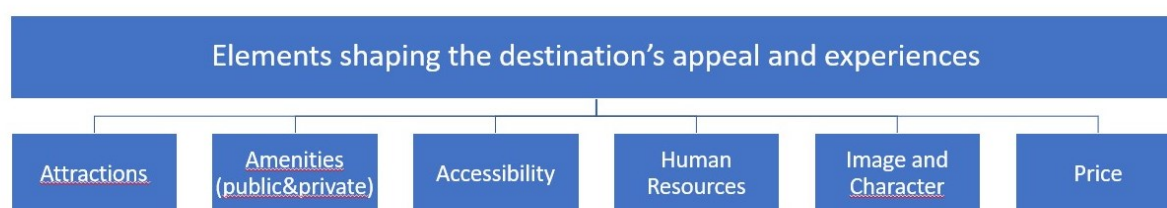


Figure 5. The Basic Elements of the Tourist Destination. (World Tourism Organization, 2007. Adapted)

Destination management is the coordinated management of these elements that make up a tourism destination (attractions, amenities, access, marketing, and pricing). Destination management takes a strategic approach to link these elements for better planning. Destination management organizations (DMOs) are the leading organizational entities encompassing all relevant tourism stakeholders in a partnership, working towards a shared destination vision. They do not control the activities of destination stakeholders, but their role should be to lead and coordinate activities aligned with the destination's strategy to pursue common goals. (World Tourism Organization, 2019, 10-12; Guerreiro, 2022, 49) The foundational activities of destination management can be divided into 1. Marketing; 2. Delivery on the ground, and 3. Creating a suitable environment (World Tourism Organization, 2007, 4).

Creating a suitable environment is the foundation of destination management. The right social, economic, and physical environment to develop tourism must exist before marketing actions, or the visitors' arrival can occur. Suitable environment creation incorporates elements such as planning and infrastructure; human resource development; product development; technology and systems development; and related industries and procurement. *Destination marketing* is outwards focusing action, aiming to attract visitors by promoting the most attractive sides of the destination to potential visitors. Principal activities in marketing include destination promotion and branding; campaigns to drive business; information services; operation/facilitation of bookings; and customer relationship management. Managing *delivery on the ground* refers to ensuring the quality of the visitors' experience at the destination. The focus of management is inward-looking, including functions such as product start-ups; events development and management; attractions

development and management; training and education; business advice; strategy, research & development. (World Tourism Organization, 2007, 4-6.)

According to Fyall and Garrod (2020), destinations are notably challenging to manage due to the high amount of heterogeneous stakeholder groups and a wide range of external and internal forces influencing action. Traditionally, destination management focuses on managing resources that increase competitiveness, i.e., improve the tourism experience. However, the direction is increasingly sustainable issues. (p. 165-166.) In the tourism industry, both the public and private sectors add value to the tourist experience. Companies do not take risks until a suitable environment is certain to exist. Therefore, public investments in the operating environment and the creation of cooperation between companies are vital. In the industry, the success of one company (e.g., a hotel) often fuels the success of other smaller ones as well. The public administration should have a system that helps companies grow. (Rašovská, Kubickova, & Ryglová, 2021, p. 778-790.)

3.1 Destination management organizations (DMOs)

In destination management research literature, DMOs were initially related to destination marketing, but current literature highlights both marketing and management. DMOs can be seen as coordinative central actors in the stakeholder network, creating cohesion and guiding them toward a process of shared development. (Beritelli, Buffa & Martini, 2015, p.27) The governance structures and functions of destination management organizations vary from national to local and are handled differently in different destinations (World Tourism Organization, 20, 12). There are various governance models for DMOs, as presented in Figure 7. All destinations do not even have a DMO. Their key role and functions include coordinating and managing activities like strategic planning, policymaking, branding, marketing, and tourism development. Traditionally DMOs have been marketing-oriented organizations; now, the role is becoming broader. The DMO appears as the focal actor in developing and managing tourism at the destination level. It needs to have all acting stakeholders' support and be considered the legitimized entity to lead tourism management in the destination. An appropriate governance model stands as a critical element in achieving this. (World Tourism Organization, 2019, 12-13.)

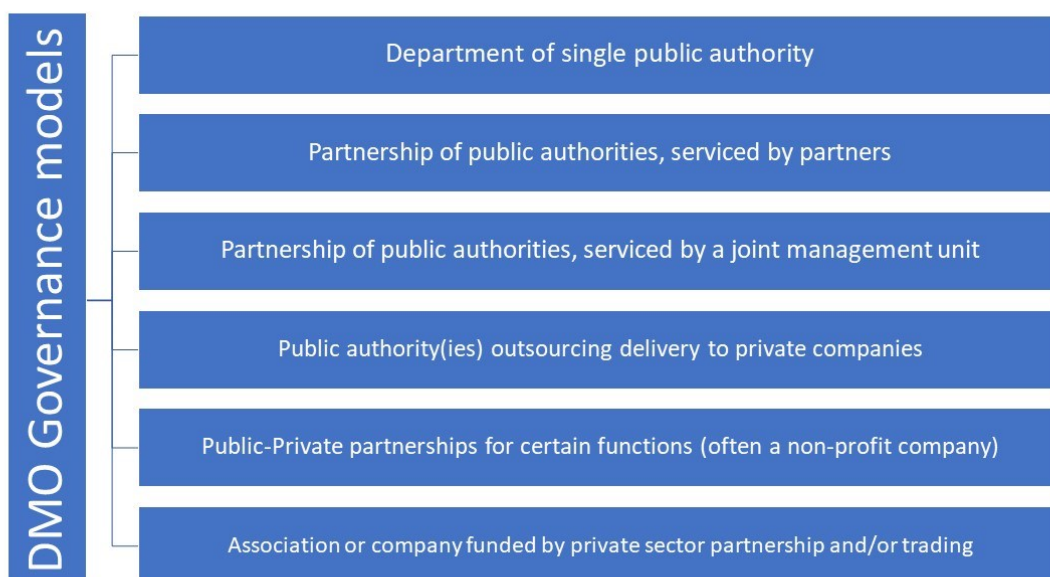


Figure 6. The DMO governance models. (World Tourism Organization, 2007. Adapted)

The awareness of the need for sound and planned management of tourism destinations has risen due to several challenges and paradigm changes. There is an ongoing change from traditional marketing-oriented DMOs to a model where the DMOs are leading organizations holistically responsible for the destination with broader mandates. The change is motivated by the urge to find the optimal management structure, where one leader organization coordinates all relevant stakeholders' operations to ensure the sustainability and competitiveness of the destination. (World Tourism Organization, 2019, 6-7.)

The common goal of all destination stakeholders should be to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of the destination in the long, medium, and short terms. It is generally acknowledged that destinations effectively managed in coordination with DMO are more capable of ensuring their competitiveness in all conditions. The World Tourism Organization has highlighted eight advantages that can be achieved through effective destination management. (ibid., 13-15.)

1. A competitive edge can be established through solid and unique positioning and delivering an exquisite tourism experience with excellent value for money.
2. Ensuring sustainability with proper planning and management ensures that the destination maintains its economic viability and environmental, cultural, and social integrity.
3. DMO can strengthen institutional governance by gathering all stakeholders under the leadership of an organizational entity and aligning efforts.

4. Overlapping can be avoided and gaps identified by the leading entity DMO
5. DMO can create a favorable framework to spread the benefits of tourism to local businesses, communities, and residents in the destination.
6. DMOs can build tourism culture in the destination by engaging local communities in tourism planning.
7. Tourism yield can be increased by coordinated tourism development and targeted marketing.
8. A strong and vibrant brand identity can be built by constantly delivering excellent value.

World Tourism Organization (2019, 16) lists *Strategic Leadership*, *Effective Execution*, and *Efficient Governance* as the key performance areas in destination management. Destination stakeholders may have various, even divergent interests. *Strategic Leadership* means considering all these different interests, harnessing all stakeholders' efforts toward the destination's vision, and mapping a strategy to achieve the vision. The DMO should lead the destination's coordination, policies, values, and vision. DMOs should *Effectively Execute* their destination managerial responsibilities that they have been given a mandate from other organizations. The scope of the DMOs mandate may vary between destinations; thus, clarity on inter-organizational responsibilities is crucial to effective execution. Unambiguous responsibilities, sufficient resources, and a strategic plan complemented with special operations plan that - systemizes all management area activities- lays the foundation for effective execution. *Efficient Governance* of the destination management system provides knowledge and guidance on quality to the industry, promoting sustainable tourism values, practices, and transparent corporate governance. The continuous growth of the social phenomenon of tourism underlines the importance of destination governance. (ibid., 17-21.)

These mentioned World Tourism Organization's key performance areas can be associated with Beritelli's, Buffa's, and Martini's (2015) study stating that DMOs are important institutions in destinations, capable of coordinating complex stakeholder networks. They also highlight the constitutional role of individuals involved in the board or management of the DMO, as their individual actions linking different actors with each other in a network of influence strongly define the DMOs coordinative role. (p. 24, 34-36.) The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the tourism industry heavily and has forced DMOs to rethink operations, expand the scope and position themselves more strongly as leaders of destination change processes within the tourism stakeholder groups (Guerreiro, 2022, 54).

3.1.1 Operating models of Finnish tourism organizations

According to Visit Finland's study in 2019, various organizations are promoting and developing tourism in Finland, and their operating models vary greatly. There is a high regional variance in the number of organizations, how they operate, and their key responsibilities. The study scoped regional tourism organizations as organizations responsible for promoting certain areas (region, municipality, destination) tourism. (Visit Finland 2019, 12-13.)

Regional organizations

Regional tourism organizations' organizational structures and ownership models vary heavily from associations, companies, and municipality-owned companies to a combination of these. Organizations' average turnover is 1,5 million euros, and the municipalities and their members fund them. Municipalities' share of the funding is, on average, 50% of the total, but it varies from 10% to 100% of the total. The share is greater in areas with only a few large tourism enterprises. Project funding also plays an important role. It is used for international marketing and innovation projects that cannot be done with primary funding. (Visit Finland 2019, 12-16.)

The regions with a common tourism strategy, conducted in cooperation with all relevant tourism stakeholders, followed the strategy in their planning and operations. In other cases, the owner's (municipality or company) strategy was mainly driven by planning and operations. Generally, organizations' planning was perennial, replenishing with yearly action plans. The planning was adequately based on knowledge (reports, statistics, or research). (ibid., 16.)

Brand management through marketing and sales actions was reported as the critical operation of all regional tourism organizations. These actions were done by planning, organizing, conducting joint marketing actions, and finding effective partnerships. Other operations vary between different organizations. On average, 48 % of the operations are aimed at international markets, but the variance is 0 to 100 % between different organizations. Thus, the input in domestic markets is rising. (ibid., 16-19.)

The organizations have many different models and practices for cooperation with local tourism businesses. Some regions involve all local tourism businesses in their operations, while others only with companies that are members committed to joint operations with investment (financial and

laborious). The previous model is the most common. Membership models vary heavily between organizations, and they can be based on shareholding, membership fees, marketing packages, or joint project funding. Businesses can influence the organization through boards or different workgroups; this depends on the organization's operating model. Nevertheless, in all organization types, members have the potential for influence if they are willing to be active partners. Communications between an organization and its members are handled by newsletters, meetings, tourism forums, board meetings, member meetings, social media channels, phone calls, and personal meetings. Role of communication is crucial to ensure practical operative work. Organizations' communications should concentrate on filtering information to prevent important information from drowning in communication overflow. (ibid., 19-23.)

Member businesses are heterogenic. Most members are micro-companies, although some can be large corporations with entirely different business environments. Organizations face the challenge of conducting operations that benefit both types of businesses. Another challenge is the limited human resources of the organizations and many of the member companies. The challenge escalates in peak seasons. Also, the competence among member companies is heterogeneous, including their product offering and how to enhance it. This causes challenges, for example, how to benefit digital platforms. Trust, transparency, and community are the fundamental elements in successive cooperation between member companies and regional tourism organizations. The organization's level of activity and value added to members also determine the cooperation's success. (ibid., 22-23.)

Other organizations in tourism development

Public development companies (regional or municipality level) also operate in tourism development mainly through tourism company support and development actions, not through marketing actions. Although, some development companies operate as DMOs in their area. Cooperation models with tourism companies vary greatly between development companies. Regional councils' role in tourism development is to operate as regional development authorities, funders, and supporters. Another vital role is to coordinate regional strategic planning and build cooperation between different tourism stakeholders in the region. Educational institutions provide research, development, and innovations to tourism development. Their role is also to secure the availability of skilled labor in the region. Educational institutions' tourism development and innovation

operations are mainly publicly funded projects aligned with regional or ministry-level tourism development strategies. The report also listed other institutions and organizations developing tourism at a regional level, such as Metsähallitus, which is responsible for nature parks, and Pro Agria & Leader developing rural tourism. Besides, several regional or local marketing companies co-owned by municipalities, educational institutes, and companies also operate in the tourism marketing sector. (Visit Finland 2019, 24-30.)

Analysis of current operating modes

In conclusion, it can be stated that tourism promotion and development in Finland are conducted in various models, organizations, responsibilities, and resources in different regions. The report found that there are as many membership models as organizations. Clearly defined and elementary cooperation models were usually more effective and long-term than vaguely defined and complex models. A clear contract as the base for cooperation brought rigidity to operations. (Visit Finland 2019, 38-46.)

At the regional level, the distribution of labor and responsibilities among stakeholders is fragmented. Aligning different operations and enhancing strategic management are seen as developmental goals. Tourism development deteriorates if developmental responsibilities are scattered in different organizations. In the worst case, this can lead to rivalry and distrust between these organizations. In the model of coordinated tourism development, the coordination of all essential supporting and developmental operations is concentrated in one organization, as in World Tourism Organization DMO guidelines. (ibid., 38-46.)

Currently, it can be obscure who is the regional tourism organization if there are many organizations with overlapping responsibilities. In general, clarification of roles is needed because of vague inter-organizational cooperation. In some cases, these organizations might not even know what their equivalent is doing. (ibid., 38-46.)

In general, long-term strategic planning is also vague. Regions with long-term plans and active cooperation have a well-functioning value chain of sales, marketing, and development. Currently, there is an ongoing change from a traditional marketing-oriented regional tourism organization to a model where the tourism organization is holistically responsible for coordinating the strategic

planning of the regional tourism value chain. The change is motivated by the urge to find the optimal management structure, where one leader organization coordinates different stakeholders (public and private) operations to be aligned with regional strategy. Some regions already have this model in use; some are changing. (ibid., 38-46.)

4 Research Implementation

4.1 Research Objectives, Problems and Questions

The objective of this thesis is to research the regional sports tourism network in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area to find out the status of destination management from a sports tourism perspective as well as to give suggestions to enhance the management and development of sports tourism in the region. Thus, the primary research question is:

How should the management of Rauha-Ukonniemi's sports tourism network be developed?

Additional questions helping to find answers to the main question are:

1. Who are the key stakeholders in the sports tourism network in this area?
2. How is the sports tourism network currently managed?
3. What elements should be improved to achieve better management of sports tourism?

The selected research questions wish to highlight different stakeholders' perspectives on the current state of the network and management level and to find improvement needs. The sports tourist customer experience in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area consists of the sum of many different organizations operating with differing ambitions. The number of stakeholders involved is high, and assumably cooperation between them is not coordinated. The administrative boundary crossing the area potentially creates challenges for the activities that are the public sector's responsibility. According to World Tourism Organization (2007), destinations should be able to provide the best possible customer experience and be prepared to develop it to compete in the industry. Destination management and development require coordinated cooperation of various stakeholders.

(World Tourism Organization, 2007.) Supposedly, Rauha-Ukonniemi wants to be a competitive sports tourism destination. In that case, the sports tourism industry stakeholders need to cooperate in a coordinated manner, and the cooperation needs to be managed and developed in some way. Therefore, it is essential to find answers to the presented research questions to enhance the area's competitiveness as a sports tourism destination.

This thesis is commissioned by Imatra Base Camp oy, a non-profit marketing company owned 100% by the City of Imatra. The company's mission is to increase Imatra's vitality by enhancing its brand awareness. The municipality defines the company's responsibilities and budget. One of these responsibilities is sales, marketing, and developing sports tourism offerings in the city to boost the utilization rate of city-owned sports facilities and the local tourism industry. The company will use this study to evaluate and develop these actions related to sports tourism. I have worked for Imatra Base Camp since 2017, responsible for sports tourism actions. Through my work experience, I possess an extensive understanding of the local sports tourism industry on an applied level.

4.2 Research design and process

The research design refers to the basic structure formed from the research problem(s), research methods, empirical data, and analysis methods. Theoretical framework can also be considered part of the research design, and research design should be a continuum to the theoretical groundwork. (Vuori, n.d.a; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006.) This thesis research design was constructed to support a factual description and evaluation of the phenomenon on the local stage through the selected theoretical framework presented in Figure 7.

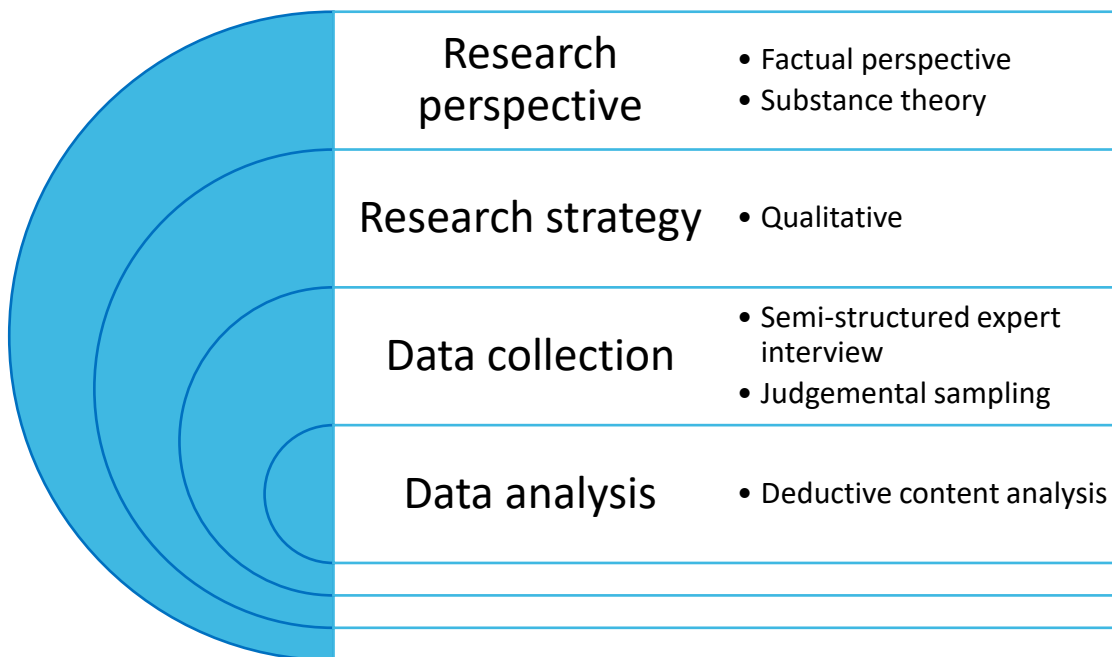


Figure 7. The research design of this study

Jokinen (n.d.) describes that in the factual research perspective, the author is interested in facts, and the gathered data works as a way to observe reality. The Factual perspective usually relies on substance theories to interpret phenomena through the objectively gathered data, seeing subjects as informants, and arguing from evidential bases. (Jokinen, n.d..) In this thesis theoretical framework of regional sports tourism networks and destination management is used to interpret the phenomenon on a local level through data gathered in relevant stakeholders' expert interviews.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this thesis as it allows gathering a large amount of detailed information about a few subjects, in this case, the local sports tourism industry stakeholders. A qualitative approach to research is typically concerned with information in the form of words. It is based on the belief that people personally involved in a specific phenomenon are the best to explain and describe it in their own words. (Veal & Darcy, 2014 p. 38-39; 251-252)

Qualitative study relying on substance theories is deductive; it starts from theories and uses them as a framework to interpret the gathered qualitative data. Substance theories are theories that are directly connected to the studied phenomenon. Theories are usually presented in the first sections of the reports, used in the analysis, and revisited in conclusion, as shown in Figure 9, presenting the research process of this thesis. (Juhila, n.d.a.) A comprehensive selection of research work

from various viewpoints on sports tourism and destination management was available. Therefore, it was reasonable to use this information as a base to study the phenomenon on a local level.

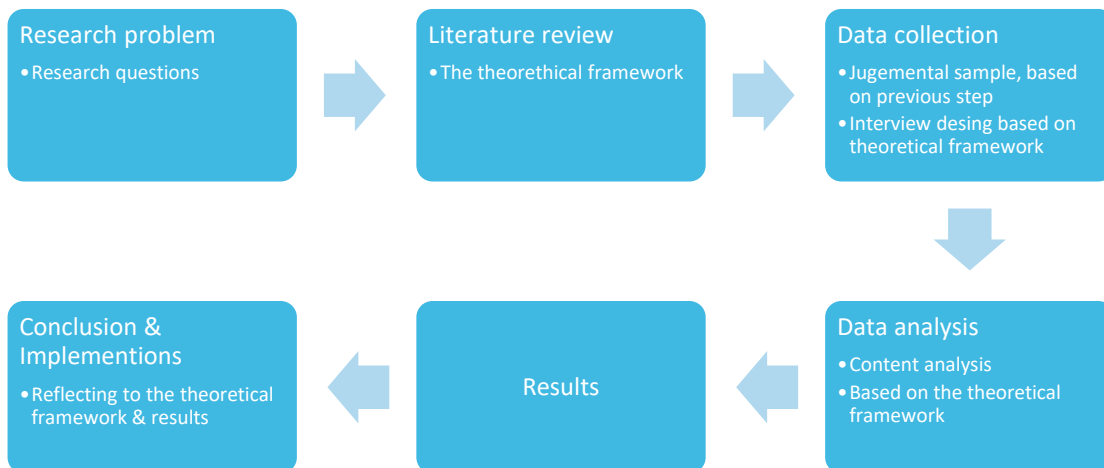


Figure 8. The research process of this study

As the thesis strives to describe the local sports tourism network and how it is managed, semi-structured expert interviews were selected as a data collection method because expert interviews aim to provide a factual representation of the phenomenon (Hyvärinen, Suoninen & Vuori n.d.). Mayo (2014) finds a research interview as a systematic interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee to gather information to answer the research questions (p. 156). In an expert interview, the interviewees are individually selected for a specific phenomenon; they are professionals in their field and represent an organization, in this case, a local sports tourism industry stakeholder organization. The aim of the interviews was to gather their expert knowledge relevant to the research questions. (Anttila, 2014; Long, 2007 p. 84-86.)

In a semi-structured interview, the questions are composed in advance, they are asked in roughly the same form, but the format of answering is independent. The order of the questions may vary, and additional questions are typical. The interviewer encourages the interviewee to explain their answers in more detail. A semi-structured interview is justified when it is assumed that the content received from different interviewees can vary greatly and needs to be warranted so that each

interviewee can talk about their specific point of view on the topic, like in this study. (Hyvärinen, et al, n.d.; Veal & Darcy, 2014 p. 256-257.)

Qualitative research is likely to select respondents carefully and intentionally because of their background. Judgmental sampling is described as selecting responders carefully and intentionally based on their expertise or position relevant to the research questions. (Mayo, 2014 p. 128-129.) Eleven experts were selected for interviews to represent different stakeholders and stakeholder groups of the sports tourism industry in the area.

Content analysis was chosen as the data analysis method to create a clear wordy expression of the researched phenomenon, focusing on what the responders say about it (Vuori, n.d.b). Content analysis has also been described as a fundamental method suitable for all qualitative studies (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009 p. 91). A deductive approach to content analysis was chosen as the thesis relies on a theoretical framework and concepts that describe the phenomenon. Therefore, the analysis is based on this framework, and the analyzed categories are conducted from it. The aim was to find descriptive expressions from the gathered data to fit these categories. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009 p. 97-98; 113-115.)

4.3 Data collection

A qualitative study needs only the amount of data essential to answer the research questions; there are no rules on how many interviews are needed (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2009 p. 48-50). To answer the research questions, the research data was collected by 11 semi-structured expert interviews with judgmentally selected local sports tourism industry stakeholders representing all different stakeholder categories, more precisely described in the results chapter. The sampling was done based on the description of the local sports tourism industry, selecting persons from relevant organizations' executive positions. A carefully chosen judgmental sample relevant to research questions will contribute to the study's validity (Mayo, 2014 p. 129). The sample size of 11 responders was chosen to include more than one representative from each stakeholder type or sub-stakeholder group. The sample size was also influenced by the fact that sufficient representation from both sides of the administrative border was wanted. According to Veal (2014), there are no strict rules on sample size in qualitative science except for budget and time restrictions (p. 404). Eleven interviews were on the upper limits of the time available but still feasible. During the

data collection process, the data saturation was evaluated. It can be considered that the study has enough data when new interviews do not create additional further information relevant to the research questions (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2009 p. 50-51). Although saturation appeared early in certain questions, each interview produced new information. In particular, the differences and similarities between the different types of stakeholders supported that all the planned interviews were worth carrying out.

Although Long (2007) describes that the recruitment of experts requires special attention (p. 85), the recruitment process was easy in this study. As the author was familiar with the industry's key stakeholders, the chosen experts were contacted personally, explained the purpose of this study, and arranged an interview time. All interviewees agreed to the interview and felt the topic was important. They also wanted to influence the development of sports tourism in the region by participating.

The interviewer's delineation, design, and style of the questions significantly impact the answers and material obtained from the interviews (Hyvärinen, et al, n.d.). Chosen questions were conducted from the literature review and operationalized in a researchable form (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2009 p. 56). The first interview questions and design were conducted in March 2022. With that design, a trial interview was executed, and it was used to test the interview design and get an outline of the interview duration (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2010 p. 72). After the test interview, the research problem and questions were adjusted, leading to adjustments in the interview design. The test interview revealed a few essential flaws in the first version, which improved the creation of the current questions. The trial also revealed insights regarding interview techniques. These insights were utilized to enhance the style of asking questions in actual interviews.

The influence of the interviewer on the course of the interview also affects the collected data. Thus, the researcher needs to justify choices, the extent to which the questions are planned, the interviewer's activity in the interview situation, and how the situation is organized. (Hyvärinen, et al, n.d..) In these semi-structured interviews, questions were pre-planned and arranged in three main themes, complemented with a list of additional questions. Questions were occasionally asked in a different order than planned, according to the dynamics of the interview situation. During the interviews, I did my best to lead the conversation, maintain a pleasant conversational

atmosphere, and encourage respondents to share but avoid taking a stand or influencing responses. (Veal & Darcy, 2014 p. 258-261.) In factual perspective research, the interviewer's neutral role and non-leading questions are stressed to ensure the responder's honest descriptions (Jokinen, n.d.). My neutral and objective role as a researcher was highlighted during the interview process because the respondents knew me from my position at Imatra Base Camp. I emphasized in interview situations that I am a neutral researcher, not representing my employer or any other organization.

Nine interviews were arranged online via Microsoft Team -application. Two interviews were conducted live at the responder's organization's premises, in a quiet place, ensuring a private and relaxed atmosphere. The duration of a single interview varied from 29 to 67 minutes, leaving the average length of the discussions at 44 minutes. All interviews were recorded, and the responders were informed about it in the privacy statement they received before the interview. The privacy statement was iterated at the beginning of each interview. Data in the study is presented anonymously, using pseudonyms "R1 (=responder 1)", "R2", and so forth, created during the interview process in chronological order of the interviews.

A well-planned and executed beginning stage of the interview creates a trusty and relaxed atmosphere and underlines the confidentiality of the meeting (Mayo, 2014 p. 164). The discussions started with pre-words, where the purpose of the study was re-introduced, and the study's fundamental concepts (sports tourism, RST network) were defined to ensure that all responders spoke about the same subject. The interviewer's role as a neutral listener was highlighted, and the responders were reminded about confidentiality. The responders were given an opportunity to ask questions regarding the interview before the recording started.

4.4 Data analysis

In the data analysis, four steps of content analysis described by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, p. 91-93) were followed:

1. Decide what in the data is relevant
2. Sift the data, underling interesting parts and leaving out the rest, sort the interesting sections apart.
3. Categorize the data

4. Write a summary

The research questions determine the relevance of the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009 p. 92). I focused only on the data providing input to the research questions in the content analysis. Factual perspective research focuses on “what is said,” leaving “how it is said” out of relevancy (Jokinen, n.d.). Thus, the focus was only on the wordy factual content, excluding the styles of expression from the analysis.

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009) clarify step two with the terms transcribing and coding (p. 92). Juhila (n.d.b) describes coding as combining and separating different parts of a material according to some properties, classifying similar elements together. In theory-based coding, scientific categories and concepts are included, and the researcher makes choices from the material (Juhila, n.d.b; Vuori, n.d.b). However, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009) state that coding can be done precisely how the researcher sees it as the best, remembering most essential functions like acting as notes and structuring what the researcher thinks about the material; helping describe the text; serving as a tool to search and review points in the material (p. 92).

Microsoft Word’s automatic transcribe tool was used to transform recordings into a written format to save time. Afterward, the tapes were listened to get in-depth knowledge of the data and necessary corrections were made to the automatically created transcription. After transcription, the material was coded, collecting the relevant sections according to the themes of the interview, simultaneously reducing the material by cutting away information that is irrelevant to the research questions (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009 p. 108-109).

In the third step, the data was categorized into different themes and subcategories, conducted from the interview design and research questions. Categorizing by themes means cutting the data into smaller units and reorganizing it by emphasizing what has been said about different themes (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009 p. 93). The themes emerged deductive from research questions and theoretical framework and in an inductive way from the data, as usually both ways can be present (Veal & Darcy, 2014 p. 431). As Juhila (n.d.c) describes categorizing by themes was used as a method to raise relevant cases and common features from the data.

After all the reduced data were categorized, the analysis aimed to find repeated issues in the answers (and bundle them) and to mark which topics are repeated by which stakeholder group. Individual responses that differed were also observed as valuable findings. The aim has been to find if the network has a common view on the topic or if there are apparent differences in the opinions of different stakeholder groups.

4.5 Ethics and Trustworthiness

JAMK's (2018) ethical guidelines provide a sufficient ethical backbone for a master's thesis. The ethicality of a study also concerns the quality of a study. Thus, the researcher must carefully conduct all steps in the research process with high quality. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2010 p. 127.) These notes were kept as a guideline during the research process to secure the quality and thus, the ethicality of the study.

Qualitative research is always subjective, and Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2010) point out that there are no ready-made lists to check a study's trustworthiness (p. 140). Veal and Darcy (2014) see the trustworthiness of qualitative study consisting of internal validity (methodology) and external validity (the applicability of the findings beyond the researched subject) (p. 267-268). Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2010) state that a qualitative study's trustworthiness should be assessed as a whole, emphasizing its internal coherence. The trustworthiness can be increased by clearly describing and justifying the subject and aim, the researcher's relationship to the subject and informants, and all used methodological choices; all in internal coherence. (p. 140-141.) In the research report, the researcher should provide to the reader the needed instruments to assess the validity of the research (Kiviniemi, 2018 p. 86). I have done my best to describe and justify all these matters in this paper.

5 Results

As it became clear in the literature review, the customer experience of sports and exercise tourists is always produced by a network. In order to develop the region's sports tourism and destination management, it is first necessary to understand how the network currently works and who the key players are.

The research goal was to find out the key stakeholders of the sports tourism network in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area, map the current state of cooperation and management, and find answers on how the management of the network could be improved in the future. The research was conducted as expert interviews with 11 sports tourism actors representing various stakeholders of the region's sports tourism industry from both sides of the municipal border. In the interviews, I look for similarities and differences in the answers to create an overall picture of the network's experts' views on the topic.

In the first paragraph, I present the background information of the interviewees and the stakeholder classification, which I used to analyze the results. In the following sections, I present the results in the order of the research's sub-questions, using direct quotations to bring out the respondents' direct views on the topic alongside my comprehensive interpretation. In the last paragraph, I condense the most important findings of the interview into a unified view in my own words.

5.1 Background information

Eleven decision-making representatives from different organizations participated in the interviews. Two people represented one organization in the interview, but their answers were treated as one respondent. Organizations were selected to be interviewed to comprehensively correspond to the various stakeholder groups of sports tourism operators presented in the introduction. The interviewees represented three types of primary stakeholder groups, some with more detailed subgroupings below. The types of stakeholders and the number of interviewees were divided as follows:

1. Public sector / governance (n=4)
 - 1.1. Marketing company (solely or largely owned/funded by public authorities) (n=4)
2. Sports clubs (n=3)
3. Businesses (n=5)
 - 3.1. Small company (less than 10 employees) (n=3)
 - 3.2. Large company (more than 100 employees) (n=2)

Some of the interviewees also had double roles. Some entrepreneurs were involved in municipal politics and/or sports clubs; correspondingly, sports club members had experience from the business side of the topic. In the interview, the responders strived to represent the organization

whose representative they had been selected for the research. Still, roles in other organizations have certainly also influenced the interviewees' view of the subject.

Nine of the interviews were conducted online as a Microsoft Teams meeting, and two as face-to-face meetings at the premises of the organization being interviewed. In both cases, the interviews were recorded. The following table presents the interviewees with pseudonyms (R1, R2, etc.), the organization's stakeholder group type, interview time, -method -and duration.

Responder	Stakeholder group	Date	Interview type	Length
R1	Public sector (Marketing company)	5.8.22	Online	65 min
R2	Business (Small company)	8.8.22	Online	40 min
R3	Public sector	11.8.22	Online	34 min
R4	Public sector	13.7.22	Online	43 min
R5	Sports club	15.8.22	Online	36 min
R6	Business (Small company)	16.8.22	Online	49 min
R7	Business (Large company)	22.8.22	Online	44 min
R8	Business (Large company)	23.8.22	Meeting	38 min
R9	Business (Small company)	23.8.22	Meeting	29 min
R10	Sports club	24.8.22	Online	34 min
R11	Public sector (Marketing company)	26.8.22	Online	67 min

Table 4. Interview coding

5.2 Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism network stakeholders

In general level, all responders brought up that the backbone of sports tourism networks is formed from the comprehensive sports infrastructure, which is mainly managed by the City of Imatra and its subsidiaries, but also privately owned sports venues were identified. Other essential elements of sports tourism were identified as accommodation services - whose versatility and the vast number of beds were brought up in several answers - as well as sports clubs and service entrepreneurs, such as program services, gear rental, and restaurants. A large part of the respondents (n=8) also brought up the entities that market the area (the municipalities, IBC, goSaimaa). Among the marketers, the importance of IBC was emphasized, and some respondents also highlighted IBC's coordinative role in the region's sports tourism. A small part of the respondents (n=3) also raised other entities to be part of the network, such as those related to transportation, project funding, and ELY centers.

In general, the views of the network actors differed very little between the different groups of respondents. However, the actors of the public sector saw the field as slightly broader and more multifaceted than the companies and sports clubs. It is noteworthy that none of the respondents mentioned EKVAS or Saimaa Geopark, which have built trails and hiking infrastructure in the area, and market these in their channels. It is assumed that parties outside of public activities see the achievements of these organizations as part of the infrastructure provided by cities. Concerning sports infrastructure and city entities, the role of Imatra was highlighted, as 10 out of 11 respondents separately mentioned the City of Imatra and its subsidiaries as crucial players in the network.

The key players in marketing

All responders named public sector organizations and businesses as the most critical players in marketing the area's sports tourism. The public sector's marketing role was described as focused on general place marketing of the sports tourism offering, and the companies' role concentrated on their products. Several (n=4) respondents especially emphasized the role of the area's two large spa hotels as part of the area's sports tourism marketing. The marketing actions of sports

clubs' for their events and the regional marketing implemented through events and marketing work in their own sports community were also widely identified (n=9). Three respondents particularly emphasized the role and effectiveness of events in marketing.

"Events are the biggest cause of visibility. And through that, when people get to visit there, it's the best marketing.... there will be a good experience of the area."(R10)

Among the public actors, the role of IBC in the regional marketing of sports tourism came up in every answer, either directly or through the marketing work of Imatra. Several respondents emphasized IBC's good work and focus on marketing sports and exercise tourism and bringing together the offer. Several respondents also mentioned GoSaimaa's broader tourism regional marketing, but its marketing measures and impact directly on sports and exercise tourism were unclear.

"That's why IBC will be the first, as they focus on this and do a very good job in this field. Then both cities come second, but then, in my opinion, it's these companies and clubs that also work directly with stakeholders and other interested people. Then Go Saimaa, which can help in creating the image that we are a very interesting place for sports and exercise." (R1)

The answers did not show significant differences of opinion between different types of stakeholders. The sports clubs did not recognize the role of goSaimaa in sports tourism marketing. Still, the public side saw the part of goSaimaa more clearly, emphasizing its roof-level activity as an image builder rather than tactical sports and exercise tourism marketing.

The creators of suitable sports tourism environment

The respondents considered sports-related infrastructure as the basis for the operational conditions of sports tourism, as this was emphasized as the first factor in every response. All respondents felt the most critical stakeholder in creating an environment suitable for sports tourism to be cities (n=5) or specifically the city of Imatra (n=6), primarily through public sports venues and other general infrastructure. Sports infrastructure was also seen as necessary for the residents, and therefore the public sector's responsibility was emphasized.

Of course, it's the city or the city subsidiaries that ensure that the infrastructure - the sports facilities - are in an attractive condition. When these conditions exist, then it allows acting. (R10)

The cities are probably central in that sense because not the individual venues are terribly profitable, but it is the whole. And then, of course, in some facilities, you should also think about the fact that it's not just that it's for sports tourism, but then they're also for municipal or urban residents (R8)

Some respondents pointed out Lappeenranta's minor role in creating operating conditions; they questioned whether the LPR city is interested in developing tourism and events in the area. In general, the answers emphasized that the public sector creates the foundations on which companies build more operating conditions. Of these, the area's private sports infrastructure and Spa hotels stood out, especially regarding the operating conditions for sports and sports tourism (n=5). The club and entrepreneurial field also recognized the importance of sports clubs as a creator of operating conditions through the expert and development role of sports infrastructure.

The service providers

The concept of the public side building the foundations on which companies create services was also emphasized when asked about the most important stakeholders for the service provision. The whole of sports venues, accommodation, meals, and other services (such as activities, equipment rental, and transportation) was repeated in the answers. The majority (n=8) named companies as key players in the destination's service offering. Small entrepreneurs and sports club members also clearly highlighted the role of clubs as creators of service offerings through events (n=5). Only one of the public actors highlighted clubs, and neither of the representatives of large companies brought up clubs in this context. Three respondents also emphasized the IBC's role as an assembler and coordinator of the overall sports tourism service offering.

For example, the large spa hotels are essential because they can offer everything else, there you can find accommodation and dining and gyms and that type, that is, in principle, pretty much the basic package, except for these special sports venues. (R8)

Operating environment

Almost all respondents expressed that sports tourism is important or significant for their organization. Only one public actor stated that sports tourism is not considered important in her

organization. The clubs justified the importance by saying that the organization of events - one of the core elements of sports tourism - is one of their essential core functions. The companies' answers emphasized the growth potential of sports tourism and the customer flows it brings, the opportunity to expand the customer base, as well as the positive image. The public sector highlighted the existing regional strengths of sports tourism and the USPs they bring.

"It is fundamental, especially because this geopolitical and world situation is challenging our region enormously. We are forced to find our new distinguishing factors and new USPs. So, in my opinion, it is a great strength of our region that we have such a wonderful Rauha-Ukonniemi tourism and sports tourism area."(R1)

It is important. For us, since we have been in Ukonniemi, it has clearly brought more customers that come here, for example, because of the first snow ski tracks. Of course, Imatra has already been known for its spa, and now there is also Holiday Club there, so tourists come there, then they come here and maybe rent equipment or buy some supplies (R9)

When asked about the challenges of sports tourism in the region, there was much deviation in the answers. However, a few clear upper-level challenges, as well as operational challenges at a very local level, could be identified from the responses.

Among the top-level challenges, the challenges brought by the Covid-19 and especially the changed geopolitical situation caused by the war started by Russia (n=4) were highlighted. These challenges were recognized especially by public actors (n=3/4). Russian sports tourists have traditionally been an important target group in the region, and now that target group seems to be out of the game for a long time.

Our automatic traffic from Russia is excluded. The exhaustion of Russian sports clubs and tourists means that we have to look for new targets, which will not be possible if there are insufficient resources.(R11)

Well, the challenges are probably such that, of course, there has been quite a lot of marketing, and we have received customers from Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and similar countries, which are now, so to speak, out of the game due to this war situation. So that's one challenge now. (R8)

Another generally recognized top-level challenge was the area's low brand awareness or lack of marketing (n=5), which emerged in all stakeholder groups. The challenge in low brand awareness was highlighted as the lack of a unified brand and low general recognition of the Rauha-Ukonniemi region compared to Finnish sports colleges, which were perceived as leading domestic competitors.

This is perhaps one of those things: do we know how to market this area as a whole? Yeah, we don't actually do that.... this is perhaps one big challenge, branding. (R3)

I see it as a challenge that, if we think about sports institutes, we still have a lot to do to build brand awareness. (R11)

More local challenges at the operational level were identifiable, especially in connection with network activities. The lack of coordination and a central actor or its insufficient mandate, unclear responsibilities between actors, lack of a shared vision, poor cooperation, and the like emerged in the responses of each stakeholder group (n=6).

For example, in a company our size, the product could be even better if operators cooperated. Which means it would also be more attractive in the market. In other words, every local operator probably does their best and tries to serve customers in such a way that the customer would come again. But that product could be even better, broader, and more comprehensive so that this customer would return as often as possible. (R6)

The coordination should be someone's responsibility, and a concrete model should be built with clear duties and mandates for the coordinating operator. (R1)

The competition for the same small public resources among operators, as well as the personal and financial risks associated with club events, came to the fore. Three respondents also raised the challenge of the municipal border crossing the area; for example, in terms of accessibility – public transport from Imatra does not extend to the Rauha area.

At the local level, I still consider the fact that Rauha Ukonniemi is in the area of 2 municipalities to be a challenge. (R1)

The answers of one club official emphasized the substantial personal risks related to club events across the board in connection with the fact that they are already operating very thinly with a few

key players. Also, the financial impossibility of taking risks concerning events was perceived as a challenge and a direct obstacle to organizing more events than currently.

As I said before, these involve labor risks. I can list five people; if everyone leaves at the same time, then what happens to events? They who do those events now, there aren't many of them anyway. The financial side and labor risks are the risks involved in growing and developing.

When asked how sports tourism in the region should be developed, there was a lot of deviation in the answers. However, the development of network cooperation emerged as a clear theme (n=5), which was especially emphasized among public sector actors (4/4). The development of the network's collaboration was referred to, among other things, as the development of a common strategy and action plan, the need for coordination of cooperation, and the need for a region-wide mandate for the coordinating body.

Well, primarily, we need to create a network of people sitting on it. Get them all together to create a common goal and vision of what we want to be. Then break it down into smaller pieces, where we want to get next year, and so on... (R1)

I could see that probably increasing the cooperation between different actors... That maybe structuring this cooperation more would probably be an essential thing. (R3)

Among the business representatives (4/5), public infrastructure development was highlighted, especially the new sports hall planned for Ukonniemi, which has been in discussion for a long time in Imatra. Developing familiarity and branding the area was repeated in several (n=3) responses. The recognition of the region's unique strengths and the stronger focus of marketing on them, as well as the corresponding target group choices, came to the fore. Securing the future of events through public resources also came up (n=2) on the sports club and business side.

Of course, a sports hall is needed. It's a significant lack at the moment because these facilities are always required (R6).

5.3 Current level of cooperation, management and development in the network

Everyone described the cooperation as case-specific when asked what kind of cooperation between the previously described stakeholders in the network. The level of collaboration was also described as low (n=4). The partnership was recognized to take place either between individual actors in small circles (n=3) or so that it was seen to take place through the IBC (n=5). Several (n=3) actors highlighted the events as a manifestation of cooperation. One club representative highlighted the lack of human and time resources as a limiting factor for increasing cooperation.

Honestly, I can't think of any forum where it would be a select group gathering purely around sports tourism. (R1)

I would see it being very, very little or almost non-existent. That, if you think about the wider network, you have the impression that mainly those conversations are the event and the accommodation or general arrangements related to the event. (R5)

There is probably cooperation, but here we come to the same thing; time, resources, and more. There is no time for cooperation when everyone is very much involved in their matters. There's also the lack of time, if we think about clubs, for example, that we could plan and do more together. That it does require organization from above or human resources. (R10)

A common view was that the cooperation of the network for the entire region was not organized. However, several respondents highlighted Imatra Base Camp (n=7) as an actor that tries to act as a link between actors and gather different parties to cooperate.

Everybody works in small circles. If you think about the stakeholders that I listed to you at the beginning, most of them run in their own little circles. For example, clubs and others are in very close cooperation with each other. The companies that are strongly related to this are in their own circle. Of course, they do some smaller collaborative projects, but it is not as extensive and not as professionally constructed as it could be. (R1)

Imata Base Camphan has certainly done a lot to gather actors. But as I mentioned earlier, maybe the joint action between the clubs could be even stronger in the future. But, is there a common interest? (R2)

The responses also revealed that smaller-scale cooperation between individual actors has often arisen by itself and shaped over time into a more permanent way of operating, the basis of which is the mutual benefit that can be obtained from it. Smaller companies especially emphasized this.

Responses also revealed that a lot of untapped potential could still be seen in a collaboration like this.

In my opinion, cooperation between companies works just fine when both get something out of it. But perhaps we are still in our infancy in the cooperation in Imatra and the Rauha area. (R2)

None of the respondents were aware that a strategy would guide the network's operations. Some referred to the City of Imatra's strategy, where the Ukonniemi region's development has been on display, and some thought that IBC plans sports tourism operations strategically. However, it became clear that even if there is a unified strategy for the region in the background, there is no common awareness of it within the network.

I don't think there is any clear strategy. And probably, if there were a clear strategy here now, then it would be more organized in advance. (R9)

Well, there's nothing else to rely on than the city strategy. However, Ukonniemi is high in the city strategy, and I know it's top level. There is a desire to invest in it. How it materializes and trickles down, that's a different story. (R10)

When asked if anyone leads or coordinates the network's activities, the answers emphasized that even though there is no clear leading or coordinating actor for the whole region, the role of IBC as a gathering and coordinating actor was highlighted by a large part (n=7) of the respondents. IBC's activities were seen to be focused on coordinating sports tourism marketing and activities happening clearly on the side of Imatra. However, in the same answers, the central actor's lack of a clear mandate, the limited opportunities for influence, and the challenging management of actors operating with different interests were also emphasized. The answers also highlighted the need for a solid coordinating body, as well as the emphasized role of cities in this regard. The views on cooperation were strongly divided among the various stakeholder groups, and no clear common feature emerged for any specific group, except that the companies brought out the gathering and coordinating role of the IBC more than other actors.

Well, maybe the marketing of sports tourism is managed by IBC in some way. But overall, it can be that no one has it very well. (R8)

IBC can, but I wonder if it has or will get a firm hold or if everyone is doing their own thing. But it has improved. Better all the time. (R10)

The strategy currently does not guide the actions... ...the operations are so fragmented, its basis has not been created sufficiently, and no one has been responsible for this issue with a mandate for the entire region.... ...Imatra's side has been organized through IBC. But if we are talking about the Rauha-Ukonniemi area, then the border between the municipalities runs there between Rauha and Ukonniemi, it probably causes a certain kind of friction in the politicians' opinions. I believe that such a thing could occur on both sides in both cities. (R1)

There are so many different actors here, and people are working with diverse interests; organizations, tennis clubs, private padel companies, and everything. It is extremely difficult to manage it in any structured way... ... it's more like that that there should be a certain kind of coordination... ...But we probably have to take a stance on that. And yes, the cities probably play a significant role in that, maybe this area could be boosted more strategically. (R3)

When asked if the municipal border crossing the region brings challenges to the operation, the answers were divided between the various stakeholders. The small entrepreneurs felt that the municipal border had no meaning for the operations and the customers. However, the different attitudes of the cities towards the development of the area came to the fore.

At least I don't see it from an entrepreneur's point of view that it doesn't matter to us whether we are at Holiday Club or in the Ukonniemi area. (R2)

Here, I emphasize that there is no physical border. In other words, you probably won't notice it in functionality. But if we are talking about the contribution of the cities, I don't even know for Lappeenranta who or in what way and at what level would be interested in the development of this area. Because Imatra clearly shows that they care about the development of this area. (R6)

Public actors and large companies, as well as one sports club actor, on the other hand, brought up several concrete issues where the municipal boundary brought challenges to operations. The most considerable difficulties that emerged were the allocation of public resources and related policies, as well as the accessibility of the Rauha area. Even in these answers, the point was emphasized that the municipal border is not essential to the customer, and they may not even know its existence.

A good example, if I remember correctly, is that the buses from Imatra don't even go there to Holiday Club; they only go to the Imatra Spa. So there is no public transport from the Imatra train station to there... ...These little thing has been shaped over time, and we should just get over them and always get to that "customer in the center" way of thinking.

When asked if the network currently lacks operators, a few (n=3) operators pointed out that the area needs an explicit DMC operator selling tourism products, who would be welcome to also sell and package sports tourism products, especially to international customers. A large part (n=5) thought that the network was not missing any essential actor. However, the same respondents also raised the need to strengthen cooperation between current operators.

We should have something like a DMC and not just like a DMO that markets but a DMC that would sell the whole thing (R4)

There's already quite a lot of coverage there, You just have to get them to rock those things together. It's about organizing and goal-setting. Resources and management. There is so much more to be gained from that group of operators and infrastructure, but it certainly requires management, organizing, and resources. It won't happen otherwise. (R10)

How sports tourism is been developed currently?

When asked whether sports and exercise tourism in the region is currently being actively developed, most (n=8) pointed out that it is being developed by the City of Imatra or city companies. Development work was seen to manifest among business operators and sports clubs, especially through continuous infrastructure development (n=4). Events and marketing emerged as other manifestations of the development work, which appeared in different stakeholder groups (n=5).

The answers also revealed that the development pace has slowed down or stopped in the last two years due to the Covid-19 and changes in the geopolitical situation. Some responses (n=3) also revealed the fragmentation and sporadic nature of development activities without a longer-term vision or strategy. Insufficient communication between different organizations was raised as a reason for this fragmented developmental work.

Yes, at least a lot is talking about it. Probably it is being developed. Well, Basecamp does a lot of things all the time. But I would hope, at least from an entrepreneur's point of view, that things would progress faster. Recently, the development of the Ukkonniemi area has been too slow. (R2)

Well, certainly, with the available resources. But it could be good to stop and think again about what we want and then what we have. What works for us here, and who makes it happen here? And to support their work even more strongly so that there would be events that would create a flow of people even more strongly to Ukkonniemi.

But we keep coming back to the same thing. That is the organization and resources, human and financial. (R10)

Yes, it is being developed, but in a fragmented way. When each subject belongs to a different organization, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. (R1)

The respondents (n=9) estimated that the results of the development work are monitored for individual operators and individual projects but that no common/general set of indicators has been set for the network's operation or the whole of sports tourism in the region. In the answers of business and sports club representatives (n=6), it was emphasized that they are not aware of measuring the results of development work, even though they thought that individual things are measured, i.e., the results are not communicated to stakeholders actively.

Well, yes, they are probably evaluated at the city level. We are an operator here on the Imatra side, so I know they are evaluated. To at least calculate quantities and usage rates and so on. So, if we talk about tourism. (R6)

5.4 How to manage the sports tourism network in the future?

When asked how the network and the area's sports tourism should be managed in the future, the most apparent unifying theme (n=6) emerged: cooperation between operators must be increased, and shared goals and strategies must be built for it. The need for a central coordinating actor was also emphasized in several responses (n= 5). A cooperation group or Advisory Board to be established around the topic was also brought up as a future organizational option and a tool for creating common goals (n=3). Those answers that emphasized cooperation themes also emerged the opportunity for all stakeholders to have their voices heard in decision-making, the participation of both municipalities, and the need for a strong mandate of a possible central organization, as well as an independent, neutral position among stakeholders.

Well, I think the starting point could be that all the actors working in that area would be brought together. Then we would think together about what should be done, what has been done, and how we should act in the future so that we can get even more people moving and make everyone visible... ..It's at least one such thing that the region needs. (R2)

It would be good to have a coordinating body that understands the possibilities of sports tourism and would coordinate what is done there. (R4)

It must be organized so that there is a mandate from the representatives of both municipalities to move things forward. And then there must be a strategy that practically leads to the goal we are going to. But that strategy consists of intermediate steps when we always check whether we are going in the right direction. And for that, we need a council or advisory board or whatever, which can then check where the direction is going and whether we are getting there. (R1)

In general, the answers also emphasized the actors' broad spectrum and different interests, as well as the demandingness of managing a network-like operation when the number of stakeholders is large. Here, too, it emerged that sports clubs, who are the critical actors in the events, need more resources and a motivator to participate more actively in network activities, even though they see it as necessary for the region's sports tourism. Otherwise, the answers had no significant differences between the stakeholder groups.

You can't squeeze any more juice out of us actors by adding more events or activities. Other than by giving the actors additional resources. Nothing else can solve the matter but money. And still, external leadership and external organization are needed... ..It's a matter of course that otherwise, we won't necessarily be able to operate at this level if we don't have the resources. And I don't really see it being solved with anything other than money. (R10)

When asked who should coordinate the network's activities, most actors (n=6) directly mentioned IBC. Some of these respondents clarified that IBC is currently coordinating work at a certain level but with an insufficient mandate. IBC was particularly emphasized in the responses of small entrepreneurs; otherwise, the answers were evenly distributed between different stakeholder groups. The answers also featured an unnamed independent central actor, which, depending on the respondent, referred to independence from the goals of individual companies or a single municipality. A separate organization built around the topic also came up in the reflections of several (n=3) respondents. A working group or advisory board built around the issue was also proposed (n=3) as a central actor or a structure leading the coordinating organization.

Of course, in this case, the management and organization could be under Imatra Base Camp. (R10)

Now, if you think about Imatra Base Camp, for example, it has taken care of things in every direction on behalf of the city. Having them as an actor in it has been a pretty

good system here, in my opinion. That there is one like this who pushes a bit in every direction. (R9)

I would have created an organization consisting of stakeholders and direct beneficiaries. But it should have been entirely independent of the public sector. That is, it could receive a certain kind of support and even a financial contribution from public actors, but it should be independent so that it could serve from the point of view of both cities. There would have been no conflicts of interest, but it would have been a genuine operator in both areas. It would be an organization operating according to market conditions, meaning it could sell those services. It would be able to collect them as a package and utilize the foundations that the public sector creates, that is, what I was talking about earlier. That Advisory board would consist of the board, represented by representatives of sports clubs and other areas. And it would have a clear company strategy that would have started to move it forward. (R1)

When asked how the municipal border should be taken into account in the network's operations in the future, everyone pointed out that it should be erased in one way or another because it has no meaning for the customer. Several respondents (n=6) pointed out that the cities of Imatra and LPR should find a common understanding of the area as a unified tourist destination and a view of its development or that both municipalities should participate in financing the network's operations. The need for mutual understanding between cities was emphasized, especially in the responses of public sector representatives. These responses also raised the issue of a more significant impact with pooled resources and avoiding overlapping in public organizations.

The municipal border should be forgotten. It has no significance in the area's development, whether it is on the Lappeenranta side at the Holiday Club or in the Ukkonniemi area. When people come to that area, they don't think about the municipal border, whether it's Imatra or Lappeenranta, but they think about where it's good to stay and find pleasant and easy things to do. Somehow that unity should be found through the fact that it doesn't matter at all on the municipal border in between. (R2)

Well, we should probably think with Lappeenranta that we should just organize our activities so that there is as little harm as possible. Probably nothing else. To see it strategically, that it is a common area. (R3)

When asked about the challenges of future network management, many of the same issues as in previous reflections came up. The focal actor's broad mandate and neutral position emerged in several responses (n=4), as well as finding a shared vision of the cities (n=4). These withdrawals are also strongly linked together. Commitment to the network's operation and common strategy, as well as the intersecting interests of the actors, were also seen as a challenge. Linked to this is also the challenge brought up by the limited time resources of the actors to participate in joint

activities, brought up by two respondents. Funding for organized activities was also highlighted as a challenge (n=4) in public actors' and large companies' responses.

In my opinion, cities need to cooperate more closely. I think we have to remember that from a further perspective, we are just a drop in the ocean. When everyone's resources are small and each one of us squabbles and struggles and fights for existence and our place under the sun, that's the challenge. Management is made possible only if we have a clear responsibility, i.e., it is dedicated to an organization and given the mandate to move forward, concentrating resources and helping people cooperate more closely with each other. But it won't happen, as I said before, if we are all in different organizations and everyone has their tags on their eyes. (R1)

Well, one clear thing is that the politicking must be gone. It doesn't work if the decision maker doesn't have a single strategy to follow but instead aims to serve 2 cities or some strong stakeholder group. It's quite straightforward. Management must start from the strategy of the region, which is formed on the basis of the strategy of these municipalities. That must be a strong backbone, but after that, it must not be political anymore. (R5)

When the respondents thought about how the network's operation would be effective, the same themes emerged again, such as the importance of organization and clear responsibilities, the need for a coordinating central actor, and the importance of a common strategy. Communication to all stakeholders in a variety of ways also emerged as a means of achieving efficiency.

5.5 Summary

The respondents to the interview acknowledged that sports tourism was important for their organization and saw the key players in the region's operator network in much the same way as they were presented in the introductions of this study. Public sector actors (especially the City of Imatra with its subsidiaries) were seen in an important role as creators of operating conditions and as marketers. The public sports infrastructure took center stage in the responses of all actors as the basis for the operating conditions of sports and sports tourism. On the other hand, companies and sports clubs were seen as critical actors in service provision and in a significant role as marketers through their products and events. The operating environment for sports tourism created by the public sector, which companies and sports clubs can use in their offerings, was also highlighted as the backbone of the service offering.

The results showed that the operating conditions for sports tourism had been created well in the area, and the infrastructure is developing steadily. However, there is a lack of a clear development strategy, and the results of the development work are not comprehensively communicated to stakeholders. The area's marketing and brand awareness are lagging and are identified as development challenges. The changed world situation and the disappearance of the Russian market challenge this even further and emphasize the resources needed for marketing. Actors recognize that cooperation between actors is low, unorganized, and has no strategy. The majority feel that the IBC tries to coordinate collaboration, but it does not have a mandate for the entire region.

The ways to manage the future of sports tourism in the region and its operator network were seen as increasing cooperation between operators, defining a common strategy and goals, and organizing through a central operator with a strong mandate. Imatra Base Camp or an organization guided by an Advisory Board made up of stakeholders to be established separately for the purpose, was proposed as the central actor. The idea that the region must be seen as one marketable body, which currently lacks a recognizable brand, was strongly emphasized. Reaching this will require a discussion between the cities, how they see the region's future together, and the related responsibilities and resources.

6 Conclusion

As described in the literature review, sports tourism is a complex phenomenon, more than just the combination of sport and tourism. It involves a high number of stakeholders providing together the tourism experience for many different types of sports tourists. All these different aspects must be considered when striving to figure out how sports tourism management could be improved at the local level. Sports tourism and destination management literature reviewed both highlighted the importance of management for destinations to be competitive. Therefore, for the Rauha-Ukonniemi area to be competitive in the sports tourism market, it is essential to find out how it is currently managed and how it should be managed in the future. Since many separate actors with different interests are responsible for producing the tourist's service experience - and the number and diversity of actors are even more emphasized in sports tourism - the examination of the network delivering the customer experience and its management has been chosen as the way to examine the management of the destination.

The study's results will be reflected in the theoretical framework to answer the research questions in the following chapters. Based on this reflection, in the final chapter, a concrete roadmap will be presented on how the management of the sports tourism network should be improved.

6.1 Who are the key stakeholders in the sports tourism network?

A practical guide to tourism destination management (2007) has listed Marketing, Delivery on the ground, and Creating a suitable environment as the foundational activities of destination management. In the interviews, the respondents were asked to name the most critical actors in these activities in the area's sports tourism.

The destination management literature review highlighted the public sector's role in creating a suitable environment, as A practical guide to tourism destination management (2007) states it as the foundation of destination management. This correlates well with the results that highlighted critical Imatra's role as the creator of suitable conditions for sports tourism through sports infrastructure. Results showed that network stakeholders were satisfied with public sector work creating operation conditions for sports tourism. Nevertheless, the responders questioned Lappeenranta's interest in developing the Rauha area's sports tourism conditions. This creates a challenge to the future of the area's sports tourism because a destination nor an RST network is not tied to municipality boundaries but to how the customers experience it, as described in the literature review. Also, the responders brought up this challenge. To get this fundamental piece of destination management stabilized, the administrations of Imatra and Lappeenranta should see the Rauha-Ukonniemi area as a mutual strategic area and find a mutual understanding of how it should develop in the future.

Public actors, especially Imatra Base Camp, were named critical actors for areas of sports tourism marketing by coordinating and collecting the whole region's sports tourism offering. These results correlate with Wäsche and Woll's (2013) study, founding marketing as one of the fundamental activities of RST-networks focal actor. Joint marketing has also been listed as one of the key functions of destination management organization in the literature review's destination management section. Reflecting on these, IBC can be considered managing the network as a focal actor, at least from a marketing perspective. The results also highlighted the businesses' and sports clubs' role in marketing through their products and events. This finding offers an opportunity in the future.

Through more coordinated joint marketing operations, a clear marketing strategy, and a collective brand for the whole area, all marketing actors can be harnessed to build up the area's brand with a unified message.

In the results, businesses and sports clubs were seen as critical players for the delivery on the ground, but it was also highlighted that their service provision is built on the suitable environment made by the public sector. This correlates well with Wäsche and Woll's (2010) description that RST-network stakeholders are highly dependent on common resources and public infrastructure.

In conclusion, there were no surprises for the question "who are the key stakeholders in the sports tourism network" and how the responders saw different responsibilities divided between these operators. Both the results and literature highlighted the importance of public sector organizations for tourism in general and especially for sports tourism, where public infrastructure (sports venues) and common areas (nature, lakes) play an even more significant role. Rašovská, Kubickova, and Rygllová (2021) state in their study that public administration should have a system to create cooperation between companies and invest in a sustainable environment to get companies to take a risk to improve service provision. These facts should be considered when planning the development of Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism.

6.2 How is the sports tourism network currently managed?

After finding out the key players in the area's sports tourism, the research aimed to find out what kind of activity there is between the players in the network and whether these actions are managed in any way currently. Wäsche and Woll RST network was used as a theoretical framework for this, which they describe in their 2013 study as "a specific set of linkages between regional Actors involved in sports tourism," which is structurally complex and fundamentally different from traditional organizations. RST networks are based on voluntary, possible unofficial membership. The unique characteristics of the network include the ability to merge various actors with different interests. The actors have in common the dependence on shared resources, which in this case are primarily the general infrastructure maintained by public entities, especially sports venues, outdoor routes, and lake nature. Knowledge capital is also seen as a shared resource, the sharing of which can enable innovations and, through them, the region's competitiveness. (Wäsche & Woll, 2013.) The existence and current status of the area's network are reflected through the three

essential elements of the RST network theory described in the literature review (cooperation, emergence, innovation), the RST management framework, and the themes raised in the destination management section. According to a study by Visit Finland (2019), in Finland, generally, the manifestations of cooperation networks at the regional level in tourism and their effectiveness vary greatly. Although I talk about a geographically small area and a niche tourism segment in my research, I will use Visit Finland's study to reflect some results. I found similarities in the results regarding the operation of the cooperative networks and the challenges.

When looking at the Rauha-Ukonniemi region's sports tourism network through the results of the interviews and the fundamental procedures of the RST Network presented in the literature review, I can state that the network, in a certain sense, exists because it actively produces services for tourists and established operating methods were seen to have arisen between the individual actors, based on common benefit. Albeit on a broader scale, cooperation between actors in the entire region was not recognized. IBC is partially seen as a central actor whose existence is essential for the sustainable operation of the RST Network. On the other hand, the network is only partially emergent because the activities between its members were also seen as infrequent and uncoordinated. Wäsche and Woll (2010) name the Constant process of Evolution as one of the fundamental procedures of the RST network. The interviews' results do not support this process's existence within the Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism network.

I reflected on the results related to the network's management and sports tourism development through the RST management framework created by Wäsche and Woll (2013), presented in the literature review, and the findings presented in the destination management section. The interviews made it clear that the network did not have a common strategy, or the stakeholders were unaware of it. World Tourism Organization (2019) has raised strategic leadership as one of the key performance areas in destination management. Strategy is also the fundamental element in the RST management framework, building trust between different stakeholders, as the network's goals can occasionally be against the interest of a single stakeholder organization (Wäsche & Woll, 2013). The lack of strategy and coordination that emerged in the results correlates with Visit Finland's (2019) study on Finnish regional tourism areas, where strategic planning was also seen as vague, and the responsibilities between network actors were often confused, causing fragmentation. A large number of respondents experienced the IBC coordinating network partially, but the

answers emphasized the lack of a broad mandate for the entire region. The importance of the DMO's mandate for effective destination management was highlighted in the literature review. RST's fundamental procedures and management framework also emphasize the importance of a central coordinating actor for the operation of the network. Regarding management, the responses also raised the issue of different organizations related to tourism competing for limited resources. These findings correlate with Visit Finland's (2019) study, stating that at a regional level, responsibilities related to tourism management were scattered among different organizations, creating overlapping, distrust, and even competition between organizations. The combination of these findings and takeaways from the literature shows that there is a need for a strategy and a coordinative focal actor for the Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism network if the area wants to be a competitive sports tourism destination in the future.

The answers emphasized that the marketing of sports tourism in the Rauha-Ukonniemi region is perceived as vague, especially the lack of a unified brand for the entire area and, as a result, low recognition. Wäsche and Woll's (2013) study on RST network management highlighted the coordination of marketing activities as one of the most critical activities of the RST network's focal actor. Marketing is also stated as one of the fundamental activities of destination management (A practical guide to tourism destination management, 2007). Based on these facts, it is safe to say that also marketing-wise, the area needs a common strategy and clear responsibilities for how marketing actions are coordinated to raise brand awareness of the area.

In summary, it can be stated that the RST network operates in the Rauha-Ukonniemi area, but the cooperation is small and fragmented. The network does not have a unified strategy, and no one manages or coordinates its activities, although the IBC is partly seen as doing this with a weak mandate. The region's lack of a unified brand, inadequate awareness, and poor marketing was also seen as the moment's challenges. The importance of a neutral central actor operating with a strong mandate from the network operators, who coordinates operations and marketing in accordance with a jointly prepared strategy, is emphasized in the literature review. Therefore, Rauha-Ukonniemi needs a central actor operating with a strong mandate from all stakeholders to coordinate activities under a common strategy, one of which must be building awareness of the area through coordinated marketing.

6.3 How to achieve better management of sports tourism?

World Tourism Organization Guidelines for Institutional Strengthening of Destination Management Organizations (2019), written before the Covid-pandemic, emphasized the importance of the DMO organization as the general manager of the destination, in addition to marketing tasks. In addition, Guerreiro's (2022) study emphasizes that the rapid changes brought by the coronavirus to the tourism industry have further increased the role of the DMO as a leader of the destination's stakeholders. In Wäsche and Woll's (2013) study on RST network management, the need for the focal actor was seen as the most central factor for the network's success, and the coordination of activities was the most critical operational task. These also correlate well with the local network's views on how sports tourism in the region should be managed in the future.

Increasing cooperation between actors and organizing activities came out strongly in the results. As stated several times in this study, a sports tourism product is a sum of many different actors. If you want to develop and manage sports tourism, you must create and manage the network. The need for a common strategy and goals was firmly repeated in the responses as a concrete way to increase cooperation. The strategy was repeated as the basis of both destination management and RST-network management in the literature review, as already discussed in the previous chapter. The common strategy to be drawn up for the region can, therefore, confirmed by both the results and the literature, be raised as an essential foundation, which is required if the region's sports tourism is to be systematically developed.

The need for a central coordinating actor also came up in the answers, and many respondents suggested IBC. The responses also highlighted the focal actor's neutrality and a sufficient mandate from both regional cities. As already stated, the central coordinating actor in the RST network is the most critical factor for the network's success, and coordination of activities is the most vital operational task. Besides coordination through communications, Wäsche and Woll (2013) listed in their study other essential tasks of the focal actor: joint marketing, development and maintenance of the network, product development, coordination of shared resources, conflict resolution and search for consensus, and building mutual trust. These tasks correlate well with the practical challenges and development targets that emerged in the results. The importance of the mandate of the central operator, which appeared in the results, was also emphasized in the World Tourism Organization (2019) recommendations, emphasizing the importance of the DMO operator regarding

the destination's sustainable competitiveness. Visit Finland's research (2019) also revealed that generally, in Finnish regional destinations, there is a need to find one strong activity-coordinating body responsible for directing stakeholders in accordance with the strategy. I can therefore state that simply preparing a strategy is not enough. Still, its implementation within the network needs to be coordinated by a central actor with an adequate mandate, whose most important tasks are communication between the actors in the network and external communication in the form of coordinated joint marketing. Through internal communication, the central actor's most important tasks are to build trust between the actors and act as a neutral mediator in almost inevitable conflict of interest issues.

The need to perceive the Rauha-Ukonniemi area as a single entity, blurring the municipal administrative boundary, was also repeated in the answers related to future management. In the sports tourism and destination management literature presented in the literature review, the customer experience was seen as the defining factor of a destination. Blurring the municipal boundary and perceiving the area from the public administration's side as a single administrative entity is undoubtedly one of the most critical issues to be resolved to realize the area's full potential. With jointly targeted resources of the two cities, it is likely to get a better yield from the development measures than now.

6.4 A road map on how to develop the Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism network

Based on the previous chapters, the aim is to answer the main research question "How should the management of the Rauha-Ukonniemi area's sports tourism network be developed?" by offering a concrete roadmap based on the theoretical foundation presented in the literature review as well as on the stakeholders' view of the local network's operation and special features compiled from research interviews.

1. Imatra and Lappeenranta should seek a shared vision for Rauha-Ukonniemi.

Customers and operators see the area as a unified tourist destination, but according to interviews, the administrative border is perceived to bring challenges and make certain operations difficult. The results and the literature emphasize the role of the public sector as the creator of tourism

conditions and the development engine. Only with a shared vision of the cities, it's possible to achieve the region's full potential.

2. Imatra Base Camp to be appointed as a coordinative central actor for the Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism network with a mandate from both cities.

Since the importance and mandate of the neutral central actor were emphasized in theory and the results, both cities must align their support to the focal actor. The responses highlighted IBC, which was partly perceived as already doing this work. Therefore, I propose IBC as the central coordinator. According to Wäsche and Woll (2010), RST Actors depend on shared resources that the focal actor coordinates. From this point of view, IBC is a natural central player. It is responsible for managing the reservations of critical sports venues for certain products and events, as well as being a key player in public grants for events and doing regional marketing of sports tourism. An expanded mandate to affect sports tourism across administrative borders would further support this.

3. Inviting the area's sports and tourism stakeholders together. An opportunity for everyone to join Rauha-Ukonniemi RST network operations.

As stated in the results, the first step to increase cooperation is inviting all sports tourism stakeholders to discuss. Imatra Base Camp should present the idea of the RST network based on the following principles conducted from the three fundamental procedures of the RST network according to Wäsche and Woll (2010).

1. Through cooperative relationships based on joint marketing and the development of sports tourism products in the region, network actors benefit and want to participate in the network's activities.
2. The active interaction between independent actors coordinated by Imatra Base Camp creates a network based on volunteerism.
3. For the network to be sustainable, one of the goals of the network must be continuous product development and knowledge sharing, which IBC coordinates to avoid information overload.

4. Implement the RST network model to improve the management.

An organizational model should be created for the network among the stakeholders who want to participate. According to Wäsche & Woll (2013) RST network manager model should be based on

trust and long-term cooperation, which according to the results, already exists between the individual actors, but not between all stakeholders. Based on trust, shared values, and norms, a common strategy can be drawn up to guide the network's operational activities. Imatra Base Camp, as the focal actor, coordinates operational activities, including marketing and product-related actions, sports tourism projects (including events and new products), and knowledge management. The need for a structured organization model is also supported by a finding from Visit Finland's (2017) study, which stated that clearly defined and simple business models were the most effective forms of cooperation in Finnish tourism operator networks.

Because the network's operation is based on intensive communications between members, from a managerial point of view, it is crucial to agree on joint communication structures and processes. Since the participants commit to the activity only if they feel they will get genuine benefit from it without excessive commitment, common communication structures must be thought out, so they do not create information overload and excessive obligations to members. The focal actor's role in coordinating the communications will be essential. (Wäsche & Woll, 2013.)

A regional sports tourism strategy must be drawn up as a collaborative project of network members coordinated by the central actor Imatra Base Camp. The common strategy creates the basis for RST Network's normative frame and increases stakeholder commitment. According to RST research, product development and marketing bring the best yield at a strategic level. (Wäsche & Woll, 2013.) Stakeholders should be encouraged to take this into account in strategy work. The focus on marketing and product development is also supported by the interviewees' comments about insufficient recognition of the destination and the lack of a unified brand, as well as that the overall product offering could be more attractive if the operators cooperated more.

In the interviews, an advisory board of selected network members came up as one of the tools for managing the network. The board, together with the central actor, would examine the implementation of the strategy at an operational level through the intermediate stages and goals defined in the strategy. A similar mechanism would be needed in the background to guide the network's operation equally from the point of view of different stakeholders. However, the number of actors in the network is so large that strategic management cannot be the collective responsibility of the entire membership, or else it will paralyze the network's decision-making ability.

5. Keeping in mind...

To conclude this road map, needs to be highlighted that even though the road map presents a lot of ready-made answers on how the network's operation and strategy should be built, they must not be too ready-made in advance. Actors willing to actively commit to the network's operations need to be creating the network's operating methods and strategy from the beginning. Involvement in the creation process will increase the commitment to the network's activities and goals.

7 Discussion

The first part of this study introduced the Rauha-Ukonniemi region and its stakeholders from a sports tourism perspective. Sections two and three draw up this thesis's theoretical framework based on literature, previous research, and publications from relevant authorities in the industry. The research implication methods were introduced and justified in section four. Part five presented the results and findings of the study. The key findings were reflected in the theoretical framework in section five, including a concrete road map: "how to develop the Rauha-Ukonniemi sports tourism network."

The commissioner Imatra Base Camp oy will receive help and answers from this study regarding reorganizing job descriptions and policies in progress in the company. As a part of the reorganization, the actions regarding sports tourism will also be re-evaluated. Through the interviews and conclusions, it also became clear that the work also has value for the political and administrative management of Imatra and Lappeenranta. Because one of the key findings was that one of the biggest bottlenecks for the development of sports tourism in the region is that the cities need to see it as a shared strategic area. As the results showed, the changed global situation challenges the local tourism industry, and finding new competitive advantages and target groups is vital to surviving the competition. Sports tourism was perceived as an apparent strength and distinguishing factor of the region. Thus, investing in it even more in the future will create a competitive advantage for the tourism field of the entire region. Suppose the road map for the development of the area proposed in the thesis can be carried forward concretely on a practical level. In that case, the research will also truly benefit the entire area's sports and sports tourism operators.

As a future research topic, a study related to the branding of the Rauha-Ukonniemi area is suggested. In this study, it became clear that there is no unified brand in the area, and the region's recognition needs to catch up compared to competitors. Imatra is building its brand, and the Ukonniemi area sports tourism is one piece of it. Lake Saimaa – purest Finland is the umbrella brand for tourism in the Imatra and Lappeenranta regions. It would be interesting to find out whether it is worth building a unified brand for the Rauha-Ukonniemi region or whether it would serve the whole better to create a sub-brand under "Lake Saimaa - the Purest Finland" entity or under the brand work of Imatra. In this case, the municipal boundary that crosses the region will also play a role and demand consensus from the most significant marketing financiers, i.e., from both cities.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

As qualitative studies' results cannot be typically generalized (Veal & Darcy, 2014 p. 268), this study's results will be valid only in the specific setting described in this paper. However, it may offer perspectives to be reflected on similar destinations. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2010), the trustworthiness of a qualitative study can be increased by clearly describing the subject and aim, the researcher's relationships with the subject, and the responders. These matters have been described in the methodology section and will be highlighted again in the following paragraphs. Therefore it can be stated that this study has provided sufficient instruments for the reader to assess the validity of the research (Kiviniemi, 2018).

During the data collection, the ethical aspects were emphasized in accordance with JAMK's (2018) ethical guidelines. As this thesis was commissioned by Imatra Base Camp oy, and a contract between JAMK, the commissioner and the author were agreed. The anonymity of the responders was ensured by using pseudonyms and publishing only quotes that cannot be traced to a particular responder. Attention was paid to the translations of quotes, as the interviews were done in Finnish and reported in English. Before the interview, the responders were informed about the recording, the data protection protocol, and anonymity. The recordings and transcriptions were used in digital format and stored in the author's computer and personal account on JAMK's server, both protected with a password. Gathered data will be deleted after the thesis is published. The responders can request a copy of the data (recording, transcription) concerning themselves.

The researcher's relationship to the studied subject may be seen as an ethical and validity challenge, as it may create a biased perspective. The challenge was acknowledged throughout the research process, and the researcher's objective role was addressed during the process. Personal views and opinions on the subject were set aside during this project to ensure objectivity. This was highlighted during interviews as the responders knew the researcher from the position in Imatra Base Camp.

The sources used in this thesis were critically selected, mainly relying on peer-reviewed scientific studies and other trusted sources. The newest available publications were favored, when selecting sources. Source criticism was highlighted in the literature review, and the sources cited correctly with care.

The implementation of this study was successful as all selected 11 respondents were willing to participate in the research and felt that participating could influence the development of sport tourism in the area. The selected respondents represented the area's sports tourism industry described in the Introduction well. Both sides of the administrative border were represented sufficiently in the research, although most respondents were from Imatra. The number of responders was adequate, as data showed significant saturation, but there was a variance between different stakeholder groups' answers.

During the thesis process, I had the privilege to take a study leave from my position at Imatra Base Camp and truly take a neutral researcher role, looking at the phenomenon from the outside, thus raising the study's trustworthiness. The study leave has certainly positively affected the quality of this study as there has been a sufficient number of hours for both the thesis and family life. Conducting this study has certainly raised my level of expertise in sports tourism, especially in the Rauha-Ukonniemi context, as I have been able to review it from a broader perspective than I have been used to while engaged in operational activities.

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